

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

TO : DIRNSA (D4)

Ser NFOIO-30/ 1 5 95

DATE:

30 JUL 1975

FROM : OIC, NFOIO

SUBJECT: Manuscript Review

(1) "The Gulf of Tonkin Incident" by Mr. R.A. MacKinnon, LCDR, USN (Ret.)

1. Request DIRNSA review of enclosed manuscript for acceptability for publishing. Specific objections by page and paragraph identification are desired. Recommended amendments or deletions on the copy provided will suffice.

M. D. Reich

M. D. REICH
By direction

Maj SHEARER 8-7172

*Commander McGann, NFOIO
8-7172*

Approved for Release by NSA on 12-05-2005 pursuant to E.O. 12958, as amended



5010-110

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The Chief of Information
Navy Department
Washington, D.C. 20350

30 May 1975

Dear Sir:

I am submitting the enclosed manuscript in accordance with paragraph 26 of NAVPERS 15891C. I request that it be given a security review.

I feel that all the substantive information has been previously related in the press, in various books, in television news coverage and in the 1968 Senate Gulf of Tonkin Hearings. There is nothing new in this nature that I could not locate usually two or more public sources to document.

I initially felt concern that I might be the first official spokesman to confirm this information. Since I have read Mr. McNamara's public testimony, this may not be the case. He confirmed much of the information. The Pentagon Papers are also recognized as unquestionable official reliability, and they too cover much that I discuss here. I have also been advised by your office on the telephone, that my position as a Navy officer in a position to know this information would not be a sensitive issue.

The only security information that I know is being revealed for the first time is that in regard to the handling of the North Vietnamese prisoners. The basic facts were made public again by Mr. McNamara. Additional information was released in an article I prepared for the Institute Proceeding in 1971. The article concerned the attack when these men were captured. It was not printed to my knowledge, but it was cleared for release at that time. The information I relate herein, I do not consider to be sensitive. It is personal interest type of information to give the flavor of the interrogation. Considering that it is now nine years after the events discussed, I do not believe that anything revealed here is still a security concern.

The enclosed manuscript is not complete. I am still working on the last chapter, but it is purely a summary and will contain no raw information. I would appreciate your earliest review of this manuscript, as it is almost ready to submit to the publisher. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully yours,


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INTRODUCTION

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed by the United States Congress on August 7, 1964 was the foundation for the war in Vietnam as it is remembered today. The story leading up to this Resolution has been probed by many, but the world has yet to know what really occurred. I am the only one who can accurately tell about the military events that led to this fateful legislative act. Sufficient time has passed without authoritative data being made available, that I consider it an obligation to the public and to future historians to relate the details of that epoch week.

The Resolution was passed in the wake of three days of military activity. The U.S.S. Maddox, a United States destroyer, had been attacked in the Gulf by three North Vietnamese PT boats. Two days later, there seemed to be another attack on Maddox and a sister destroyer, the U.S.S. Turner Joy. The United States retaliated by sending air strikes against North Vietnam's naval bases. The retaliation was viewed as a just response that would advise North Vietnam and the world, that the United States was determined to enforce the historic principle of freedom of the seas.

Was Congress intentionally deceived when they voted on this measure? This question has been asked before. Congress, in fact, asked it of themselves in the Senate Gulf of Tonkin Hearings in 1968. The answer, accepted now by most, is that they were not deceived, but perhaps they acted either prematurely or with misplaced trust. The Resolution definitely did not turn out as intended.

The Resolution was passed in great haste by Congressional standards. Public opinion overwhelmingly supported the Presidential action. Congress, the lawful representatives of the people, was anxious to show the world that they too could act quickly and near unanimously to endorse the

President. The Resolution was the vehicle for expressing this opinion.

The Resolution and the "intent" of the Resolution were two different things. This was not immediately apparent because of the U.S. domestic political situation. It was only after the President was elected in his own right for his first full term, that the disparity would become evident. The Resolution was, in truth, not a Congressional one. It had been prepared by the Administration for a different situation, but since it was readily available, it was adopted by Congress as an expediency. Now the loose, general wording could be seized by the President and cited as carte blanche approval for any and all action he might take in Southeast Asia.

There had been war in Vietnam long before August 1964, and even afterward, the war was to continue at basically the same level for months. This war, however, was a relatively low profile affair as far as the U.S. public and the U.S. press were concerned. The true extent of the situation was obviously known to the Administration, but there were varying opinions on how to handle it. There were no area specialists in key decision making positions, and there was a tendency for the decision makers not to adequately consult with such specialists. Consultations of this nature were considered in a sense to be deferring to a subordinate. As a result, the main decisions on our Southeast Asia involvement were made by men who had no intimate feel for the intricacies of the area. For the second time, in little over a decade, we embarked on a policy of attempting to apply Western solutions in an Asian environment. We should not have been so surprised when they did not work.

The Administration's drafters of the Resolution were not naive. They were activists who saw the possibilities. They pressed the President. Now secure in his newly elected status, he was in a position to invoke

the new authority granted him by the Resolution. The invitation, granted by the loose wording of the Resolution, was only begun to be appreciated. The President could now make sweeping commitments, and afterwards, request Congress confirm his actions by voting him the necessary follow up funds. Congress was caught in a trap. If they denied the funds, then they would rightly be accused of endangering the lives of American fighting men. They had to comply. The President was in the driver's seat and he knew it. The tenor of the war was about to change. The Resolution was a new charter. The "war" as the world knows it now, dates from the increased activity generated by the "authority" of the Resolution. Virtually every person on earth had an interest in this war. The effect included among many other things:

In North Vietnam - The war would be brought to them for the first time. No longer would it be a distant action in the South. Just about every section of North Vietnam would feel the effect of U.S. bombs. More of the North's young men would be sent off to war, never to return. The war swallowed these men, for none ever sent off had yet returned. Shortages of food and consumer goods, while they had occurred in the past, would require greater sacrifices in the future.

In the United States - We would send thousands of men to Southeast Asia. Many would die; others would suffer disabilities that would mark them for life. We would spend billions of dollars, collected from every U.S. taxpayer, to provide military and economic support to South Vietnam. We would suffer internal repercussions, as our nation became sharply divided between those that supported the war and those who opposed it. Riots and protests would reach every state in the union, and blood would be spilt on U.S. soil.

In South Vietnam - Their way of life would be totally disrupted by the war. Thousands of men would be called to war to die or be wounded. Thousands more civilians - men, women and children - would die or be injured, both as innocent and intentional casualties of the war.

Families would be separated, and hundreds of thousands of people would be displaced in the turning fortunes of battle. Businesses and farms would be destroyed. The economic base would shift drastically as the men of many nations came to help the South Vietnamese, and just as abruptly, left them.

In Communist Nations - There was much belt tightening as these nations, to greater or less degree, sacrificed their own internal goals, to supply their sister Communist nation of North Vietnam with the means of war, as well as with foods and goods for survival. The war was a massive drain on both the Soviet Union and China, the principle suppliers of the majority of the aid. Many of these nations would contribute men as well. Some would actually fight, some would serve as advisors, and many would come as complete military units to repair or install lines of communication, since those in North Vietnam were being disrupted by the U.S. air strikes.

In Allied Nations - There were many contributions. None were as major as that of the United States, but still, by the standards of these individual nations, they were making significant sacrifices. They sent fighting forces in many cases, and in others, they sent personnel to aid in the civilian sector or assist in the great medical need. They sent materiel as well.

In the Remaining Nations - These countries, many of them third world or developing nations, had to mark time. Most of them had economic or military requirements of their own. They wanted aid or trade with the major nations to keep up their development status. They could not get the major commitments that they wanted, for the nations which they were petitioning, whether Free world or Communist, were too heavily committed in Vietnam. These nations were stalled until the situation in Vietnam could be resolved.

Everyone in the world was effected by this war, whether they realized it or not. The Resolution and the events that elicited it are thus of interest to all. The military action that preceded the

Resolution has been extensively chronicled, but unfortunately by no one that has been privileged to have inside information. Many of the reports have been suspicious of the official account. Some have been close to guessing the truth, but invariably, they err in some aspect of their reports. Perhaps most significant, is the complete omission of the North Vietnamese point of view.

The following narrative is the only complete and factual one that can ever be written about the military aspects, for I was the only person that was in a position to obtain all the detailed information from the three essential sources - the U.S. operational side, the U.S. intelligence side and the North Vietnamese participants. This was purely a matter of circumstances, that went along with my job as an intelligence analyst on the staff of the Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Fleet. I was responsible for analysis of the North Vietnamese Navy. There were other analysts assigned this responsibility at other commands. They had entirely different situations. Staffs of subordinate commands did not have the time or the information to obtain the in depth knowledge available to me. Staffs at senior Washington commands were oriented to strategic briefings of senior government officials both military and civilian. They had no operational responsibility for forces in the field. The North Vietnamese Navy was a tactical threat to U.S. ships which were the Fleet Commander's responsibility, but certainly it was no strategic threat. As a result, analysts in Washington could be grouped in two distinct categories.

At combined commands, the analysts were usually country oriented, i.e. responsible for all forces in one nation - air, ground, para-military and naval. North Vietnamese analysts at these commands were normally Army or Air Force officers, since the air and ground forces were larger and obviously represented a greater threat. These officers could not be expected to acquire a detailed knowledge of the small Navy for which they were responsible. It was a minimal threat and it was not within the area of their expertise and career interest.

At naval commands, the Navy of North Vietnam was usually lumped

together with "other Navies." This was a category to be assigned to a junior, inexperienced officer or even a newly hired civil servant. Experienced personnel were assigned to the strategic threat, which was of course, primarily the Soviet Navy. These Washington commands did have a secondary responsibility to support the Fleet intelligence operations, by responding to their requests for information. In this capacity, they had an interest in day to day intelligence, as they were required to file incoming information so it could be retrieved at a later date. This was usually done on a source basis. One command would keep the information from one source, another would keep information from another source. No one command was a repository for all available information. Under these circumstances, no analyst, no matter how hard he tried, could hope to obtain a complete picture on his subject Navy. There was no desire by his superiors that he do so.

The analyst on the Fleet Commander's staff had to have all the information, so he could support the ships deployed under the Commander. This was necessary so that they could effectively and safely carry out their assigned missions. This information was available, although much of it had to be aggressively searched out.

I was not the analyst at the time of the attack in 1964. I came to the job almost a year after the fact. This was an advantage. I could objectively analyse the August 1964 incidents from the records available to me. I had a complete file of all the messages, both those in the operational channel and those in the intelligence channel. I reviewed all this information as a matter of course. I felt that I should know the complete history of this attack, so that if the North Vietnamese were to attempt it again, I could issue an appropriate warning. My research paid off. The PTs attacked again in July 1966, but the target ships were warned well in advance. The unexpected side benefit was that my knowledge of the 1964 affair enabled me to thoroughly question the PT prisoners about there

involvement in that attack. The information they provided was completely reliable. I could verify most all of it. In the Western world, we are reluctant to accept that this could be the case, but our frame of reference is entirely different. I have included a chapter to discuss these prisoners, for it is the information that they supplied that makes this account truly unique.

Inevitably, when writing about real events in the world of intelligence, all the details and source material can not be discussed. Certain of these sources still remain sensitive, and I have deferred to security requirements in this regard. The story is complete, but I have not attempted to document it. The documents would never be available to the public in any event. Additionally, I have not had access to my former files, while writing this. Many years have passed, since the events, so I have not attempted to include specific times and the names of the many people that were involved. I have read many other accounts of these August incidents. Some are quite scholarly. The authors had no way of knowing the mistakes they made. These accounts, however, contain times and names which for the most part are correct. They can be used as reference, but I have not repeated them for I can no longer verify that they are accurate. I have written this narrative, because I recognize that no one else will ever be able to tell the same story. I have told the facts in a general way, since there are many people interested in them, not just scholars and historians. I hope this work will set the record straight.

II

THE PTs SET FORTH

The roar of the three PTs starting their engines almost simultaneously, was like the initial crash and the prolonged rolling of thunder. It was guaranteed to wake the most sound sleeper, if indeed anyone were still asleep in this small Vietnamese naval base town. Custom dictated that the inhabitants would be up performing their chores by this time.

The fact that a division of PTs would be sorteeing at this hour was unusual. It had occurred several times in the past, but it was definitely not a routine occurrence. It was certainly cause for other work to stop, so that all could observe the departure.

It was not only the civilian townsfolk that were caught unaware by this unexpected event. Indeed, all the remaining naval personnel, with the exception of a few senior staff members and a few on the communications staff, were equally surprised. It was not customary for anyone, the other PT crews included, to have advance notice of a PT deployment. A few knowledgeable insiders appreciated that today was to be a landmark in the history of the North Vietnamese Navy. They watched the boats form in a column and ease out of the harbor with a very special feeling. The other observers were glued to the scene for its own inherent beauty.

The boats were an impressive sight. There were no others like them. They had no chopped up superstructure with a mass of lines and masts like civilian boats. Their most obvious characteristic was their long clean foredeck. This marked them unique among naval craft, as well. Few observers here would be likely to appreciate that distinction, however, but these PTs were the only naval craft that most had ever seen. Those who worked on the PTs knew that beneath the expanse of foredeck, throbbed two diesel engines. They were barely idling now at maneuvering speed, but at capacity, they could drive these light aluminum hulled boats at speeds up to fifty two knots.

This engine placement which had dictated the unusual hull design, was a unique feature in marine construction. Boats normally have their engines astern near the screws that they are designed to drive. This would not have worked on these high speed PT's, however, for there would be no forward weight to hold the bow down and give the boat stability at top speed. The heavy engines, positioned well forward, provided this necessary compensating weight to offset the upward thrust of the screws from astern and prevent the bow from being driven high out of the water.

The raison d'etre for this boat was its two lethal torpedoes. They were carried in tubes flanking the midships pilot or conning station. Each torpedo represented a potential destructive capacity vastly disproportionate to the size of the carrying craft. One torpedo, depending upon where it hit, could easily sink a destroyer or merchant ship, or heavily damage a cruiser or aircraft carrier. These are all ships many times larger and more costly than the lowly PT. This destructive power versus ship cost was, in fact, the original reason for the genesis of the PT.

At the outbreak of World War II, the arsenal of the allies, the well to do United States, could not meet all its desired naval construction requirements. The preferable torpedo launching platforms were destroyers and submarines. Both time and money were considerations that dictated against an instant mass production of these ship types. Yankee ingenuity, then seeing a deteriorating situation in the South Pacific island warfare, thought up the PT concept. The PT's could be produced quickly and in small boat yards, thus rapidly building a naval inventory at no sacrifice to major ship construction. The boats were intended as a stop gap measure until the tempo of war and the economy would allow more destroyers to be allocated to the Pacific Fleet. In no time at all, we had an instant inexpensive fleet of torpedo carrying craft.

In the United States today, we have long since replaced these small wooden hulled boats with more durable and larger destroyer type ships,

which have a greater all round weapons capability. The PT concept, was long ago adopted by many other nations. The speed and economy factors were very appealing to small nations, and to others as well. Not only are PTs still found in many Navies, but the basic concept has a follow-on in the form of missile firing small craft. The Mid-East conflict has been the proving ground for this new generation of small boat warfare. The results have been convincing. The Soviet Union has long been the leading advocate of small craft navies. They started initially for the same speed and economy reasons as did other countries, but today, in spite of the ability to build and support a Navy of larger ships, much of the Soviet inventory still consists of small craft variously armed with guns, torpedoes or missiles. They obviously have no intention of phasing them out.

Communist nations in general have led the way in endorsing the retention of combatant small craft as a permanent part of their Navies. As authoritarian states, they have a greater tolerance for risking life in combat situations without unduly upsetting their population. The United States and other Western nations can accept such risks only in a desperate situation. The PT record in World War II was glorious, but costly. The PT was vulnerable to the larger ships it was required to attack. The naval architect has to consider three features in Navy surface ship design - armor, armament and speed. He must sacrifice one to maximize the other. The PT was given the maximum speed possible, and as a result it could not have sufficient armor to sustain hits, or sufficient armament to fight off attackers after its torpedoes were launched. The casualties of World War II make the PT concept unacceptable to U.S. planners of today.

The North Vietnamese boats had only one self-defense weapon - a twin 25 millimeter gun mount. It was mounted astern of the conning station. It was by design, strictly conceived as anti-aircraft protection. A weapon, this light, was virtually useless against a

major ship target, and on any event, given its location it could not be depressed far enough to fire at a surface target except off the stern of the PT, i.e. when it was withdrawing from action. As an anti-aircraft weapon, its effectiveness could be considered only marginal at best. There was no radar tracking capability. All things considered, the guns' main function was psychological support. It would be reassuring to have the bustle of activity and the noise of the guns firing back, regardless of the chances for success in actually downing an attacking airplane.

The boats cleared the harbor and turned south. Their column formation gave way to their usual underway formation - the division commander in the lead with the other two boats off his quarter, or slightly astern and off each side, following his movements. They were almost instantly throttled up to forty five knots, which was the maximum cruising speed that could be maintained for any duration without overheating the engines. Forty five knots is an impressive speed at sea. It is nine or ten times faster than the average junk or local boat in this area; three or four times faster than the typical merchant ship; almost half again as fast as the ordinary destroyer; and within the same range as the more esoteric hydrofoil and planing type craft now being developed in many nations. The PT sailors reveled in this "racey" image. This set them apart from their "lesser" comrades of the sea.

The boats were now turning up a wake that slammed with bravado against the steep tropical foliated karsts that characterized this island area, all the way from the Chinese border to the vicinity of Hai Phong, where they would break out into the Gulf. Cruising at this speed was very self satisfying. They were the king of the water. This was a very un-communist metaphoric, but political doctrine can not control these inner feelings. Fishermen and coastal traders hit by the wake, would bob to the point of overturning. The PT men enjoyed being the source of their agitation. They felt that the world should move out of the way for them. They were heading into battle. This was no drill.

This phase of the deployment was familiar. They had made this trip before in practice. Today, they knew that there was an important difference. They would be in combat before they returned. This added another emotion and tension to an otherwise exhilarating experience. They knew from the past, that they could travel the length of their country in four and a half to five hours. Today, they would not have to travel the full distance. They were scheduled to rendezvous off Hon Me and await the arrival of their headquarters and communications van. The van had departed Van Hoa at the same time as they, but the trip overland would take twice as long.

There was no talk aboard the boats. The roar of the engines and the stiff breeze at this high speed, made conversation difficult at best. Each man was alone in his thoughts. They were acutely aware of their recent briefing. They had been told that they had been honored. Their division, out of the four North Vietnamese PT divisions, had been selected to be the first North Vietnamese Naval unit to engage an enemy in combat. They were certain to gain world wide recognition in this precedent setting action. They were told that it would be a relatively simple task. Just like in practice. They would move south to their operating area during the morning. They would wait, relax and cool their engines until the mobile headquarters or "forward command post" also arrived. They would then conduct the standard communications checks, and after dark, they would be directed into the attack by the forward command post. They had practiced all this before.

No one thought or would have dared to ask what "sin" this U.S. destroyer had committed. The Nuremberg principle notwithstanding, like military men the world over, these men were taught to obey the orders of their superiors. Had they sought to question an order, which would have been unthinkable, they would undoubtedly have been shot by their own side. They knew that the United States was helping

South Vietnam resist the unification of Vietnam under the banner of communism. They had heard, unofficially of course, that "raider boats" from the South were operating against their country. The rumors came from fellow PT men who had relatives in the areas that had been effected. It was recognized from the reports that these were harassment missions, and not large scale operations of any great significance. There was no attempt to link these raids to the activity of the U.S. destroyer.

The PT division was assigned the task with no background explanation. They accepted the order as a logical and necessary fact. They did not try to justify it to themselves or relate it to the more general relations between North and South Vietnam. They had no concern or special interest in why the present moment had been selected for the attack. They had been given an order and they would obey it. For the PT crews, it was as simple as that.

The North Vietnamese leadership had selected the time. They knew that Maddox had just commenced her patrol, and therefore, with past experience as a guide, they could anticipate that she would remain in the area for at least the next few days. The attack decision was made in Hanoi on the thirty first of July, the day after these leaders had been upset by a raider mission of the previous night. The night of August second was the first opportunity the PTs would have to attack, given the internal structure for relaying orders down the chain of command. The system just took that long.

The men of PT division 3 were aware of the honor that had been bestowed on them. Their entire political philosophy and military training had lead them to anticipate this moment. The honor, however, would not be without risk. Now alone with their thoughts, as they sped south, they had a tendency to think more of the risk than the honor. They tried to suppress the unpleasant possibilities from their minds, and to simply enjoy the ride.

THE TARGET

U.S.S. Maddox, the object of North Vietnam's attention, was just getting used to her patrol routine. It was a departure from the norm. A destroyer's normal deployment is steaming with other fleet units. In group steaming, and particularly when operating with an aircraft carrier, the crew is very busy. Quite frequently they are required to stand port and starboard watches, that is four hours on and four hours off. While on watch, almost every member is required to be constantly alert. There is continuous activity. There are course and speed changes; there are visual and radio communications; there are warning watches on radar and sonar; and there are those that must plan for complicated maneuvers when the entire formation changes course. This routine soon becomes second nature, in spite of the standard grumbles about the long hours. It is part of the job, and in reality, the pressure is enjoyed. There is no time to get into trouble, or lose oneself in idle thought. Work... sleep...work...sleep...and before long it is over. The ship is back in port and the pressure of life at sea is forgotten with the contrast of life ashore.

The destroyer operating alone is a different story. The patrol in the Taiwan Strait was the closest thing for comparison to their present mission, but there were many significant differences. The Taiwan patrol consisted normally of three destroyers. At least two were on station at any given time. One would be north; the other south. They would not see each other that often, but they were communicating with each other and with shore stations. The object of the patrol was easy to understand. They would protect Taiwan from any possible threat from the Chinese Communists. This positive objective and the company, at least by radio, of other comrades, set this situation apart from Maddox's present mission. The one common feature was the greatly reduced tempo of operations. Relaxation and spare time are only welcomed, if there are alternatives for which to fill this spare time. At sea, there are few alternatives. There was plenty of time for idle thoughts.

Maddox's crew was ill at ease. They had been instructed that their mission was TOP SECRET. They could not talk about it when they returned, yet they themselves would not share in many of the secrets to be collected. They were essentially chauffeurs for the "black box" which was put aboard in Taiwan, and the men that had accompanied it. These men had the crew perplexed. They looked like sailors, they dressed like sailors, but they were certainly very different from the crew of Maddox. They did not talk about their work. They stuck together and did not socialize with the crew. They took up bunks and space at the mess table, but while inconveniencing the ship's company in this respect, they seemed to have nothing to offer in exchange. The crew of Maddox here-to-fore had been a single unified force brought together by the common experiences of shipmates. Now a thorn had been driven in their side and it was aggravating. It had to be endured. The crew knew that their visitors were involved in the "research" effort that was the reason for the patrol. Those more astute or more experienced could even surmise the precise nature of their visitor's work, but the fact remained, it would not be shared by those aboard Maddox. These outsiders were not greeted with much enthusiasm, nor the patrol likewise. It was a time to be endured, until they would return to port and start anew.

The destroyer division commander, embarked in Maddox, and the ship's captain were better informed, but they too lacked enthusiasm for the patrol, although for different reasons. Neither of them had previously been indoctrinated into the world of intelligence prior to this mission. This was a serious disadvantage, but not an unusual one for officers who had spent their entire career in destroyers. Their briefing was certain to have been an eye opener and an awe inspiring experience into the capabilities of our intelligence system. This was a two edged sword. The more one knows, the more there is to worry about. Unfortunately, the old adage, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, is very true.

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There were some familiar aspects in this new mission assignment. The requirements for visual intelligence collection were not new. It was a phase of operational readiness that all ships were trained in. To be sure, they would have to review their internal reporting procedures, the Fleet reporting instructions, and the intelligence photographs. The only unusual aspect of this was that they were now very likely to have an opportunity to report actual intelligence information, on these ships which were here-to-fore merely pictures in an intelligence folder.

The unsettling part of their intelligence indoctrination was that concerned with the "black box." They were told in generalities about the equipment it housed, and specifically what information they could expect to be provided to them for their own self-protection. There is a world of difference between the theoretical and the fact. These men had vivid imaginations. What they really needed was an instant education on all previous intelligence of this type collected from North Vietnam. This was obviously impossible, but only with such a background could they be in a position to properly analyse new information as it was received. All Asian Communist nations keep up a steady stream of bellicose propaganda. This is the "background." It must be continuously read and understood, so that when the "background" level is exceeded, it can be recognized as such, and a warning sounded. The officers of Maddox could not be expected to make this evaluation. That is not too surprising, but what does surprise most observers, is the fact that the team manning the black box was also not in a position to provide this evaluated intelligence. ✓

The officers and communications technicians that constituted the team were linguists and technicians. They were not charged with the substantive analysis of the information that they were assigned to collect. They were responsible only for its collection. In the process ✓

they inevitably performed a measure of analysis, but their motivation for this was to enhance future collection opportunities, rather than toward providing information upon which to base a command decision. Their evaluations were therefore incomplete and unreliable from a command standpoint.

This division of responsibility within the intelligence organization was justifiable in most cases. These shipboard collectors were merely a frontline processing and relay station. They forwarded all their information to shore stations for in-depth analysis. True, only a very few messages would be sent during the patrol for immediate analysis. Most would be recorded and sent after the ship returned to port. The processing could take weeks, months or even years before final disposition was made and the raw material was relegated to the files.

The information had to be analysed in two distinct areas. The first was the technical analysis. Men, computers, and other machines would examine all the technical parameters of the signal. The object would be to determine the sending and receiving station, the capability of the particular circuit and the intention of the North Vietnamese user. This would enable future collection efforts to isolate and select certain of the most productive target signals for additional collection. This analysis was similar to the on-board analysis in that it was directed toward enhancing the collection effort from a purely technical standpoint. The signal next had to be analysed for its content. Again men and machines would endeavour to make sense out of the information that was sent in a private system specifically to deny outsiders the benefit of any intelligence contained therein. This type of analysis was beyond the capability of the substantive analyst that would be the ultimate beneficiary of a successful technical analysis. The technical analyst on the other hand, could not necessarily appreciate the substance of the information that

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he eventually would extract and report. He was required to report his information, incomplete and imperfect if such was the limit of his ability, just as he received it, and with no comment on the intention or significance of the information derived.

The second phase of the analysis is the substantive portion. The technician that has handled the signal up to this point, is highly trained in his field. He has read as much, if not more, of the information from these sources, as the analyst to follow. His orientation and training, however, is strictly toward the technical aspect of this information. This is why he is precluded, and rightly so, from commenting on its meaning. The substantive analyst takes the input from the technician, and puts it with the bank of other information he has on the subject. This includes much information previously provided by this same technical source, but with one important difference. The material has been analysed by him and evaluated as to its precise meaning. He has many other non-technical sources that aid his evaluation. All sources are subject to error. Even a photograph can be misinterpreted. It is up to this analyst to put all available information together, and emerge with the one true picture.

Initially, the analyst will study a single signal against all previous signals from the same source. If it is inconsistent, he will try to determine the reason. If he accepts it as valid, then he must determine if it has added to the total body of information from similar sources, and if he can now determine more accurately the course of action being taken by the country he is analysing. He will then add to this, information from his other sources, such as photographs and agents reports. He will determine whether these are consistent with the total body of information he has received. If they are, it may not be anything earth shaking, but he will have gained a better feel for the operating procedure and the present events in that country.

Occasionally a signal may appear so threatening that the objective of the analysis is in effect reversed. The aim in such a case is to prove or disprove the validity of the individual signal. The same procedure is really performed, but at a greatly increased rate, then focused back again on the subject message. All the sources at the analysts disposal are assembled to determine the true meaning of the signal. This is perhaps one of the most crucial tasks of the analysts job. The signal in itself is seldom wrong. The error causing a crisis is most often the fact that the signal is being interpreted out of its intended context. The analyst here stands alone. He is the only one with the background knowledge of day to day operations, and thus the only one who can reliably say whether the message under scrutiny represents a true threat. He must have total recall, or at least the ability to locate in his files, all the information that bears on the issue at hand. Even then, it is not absolute. He can not hope to assemble everything to convince another person, because his analysis is based upon months of daily reading that gives him an intimate feel for his subject. This extra "gut" feeling can not be acquired by someone else on a crash study basis. The commander relying on this analyst must know his ability and trust his judgement.

Ideally, an analyst could ride each ship on an intelligence mission. This is unfortunately impossible, for the very fact that during the time that the analyst was traveling to and from the ship and while aboard, he would be out of touch with much of the necessary information he needs to make him a competent analyst. With all these time lapses, he would be forever trying to catch up on periods he had missed. Short of having an analyst on the ship, the next best alternative, is to have a ship's officer who at one time or another, had occupied a shore billet as an analyst. Such an officer can give those in command a greater appreciation for the complexities of the intelligence field. Occasionally this need can be filled by an experienced officer with the black box team, who ignores the rules of his agency. Such an officer, intimately familiar

with his team's capability, can, if he has a broad outlook toward his profession, provide the commander a greater understanding in the same sense as an ex-analyst. This will not give the commander a black and white answer, but it can suggest to him, caution, so that he does not over react to information of questionable value.

Maddox had none of this extra help. They were unduly unnerved at the start of their patrol by the intelligence that they were collecting. They had even requested that the patrol be canceled. Permission was denied. It was quite obvious from this, that they did not understand either the importance of the patrol or the true substance of the information that they were collecting. This lack of enthusiasm, lack of understanding, and nervousness would be important in events to come. At this time, the senior officers were primarily affected by this. The men were more relaxed, and they settled in to wait until the next opportunity to visit port.

IV
CONFUSION

The PT crews could see Hon Me Island on the horizon. Their destination now in sight, the adrenaline started pumping again with thoughts of the action to come. Admitted, it was to be a long wait, but never-the-less, it would be from here that they would begin their assault. The trip, so far, had been entirely uneventful, as had been predicted. Perhaps the attack would also be as simple as planned.

As they drew closer, they saw a Swatow class patrol craft at sea obviously waiting for them. This sent a surge of pride through the PT ranks. They felt very superior to this "second class" navy. They knew the Swatow crew would be envying the PTs' eliteness, and they also knew that this boat at least, would be aware that the PTs were scheduled for combat this very night. They were prepared to play the hero to an admiring audience. The PTs continued in at full speed to impress their less fortunate brothers-in-arms.

They were closing rapidly on the Swatow, but something was wrong. There was obviously great excitement aboard the gunboat, and it was apparently not just because they were greeting the boats scheduled for battle tonight. The Swatow captain was waving his arms wildly and shouting a continuous, but unintelligible message. The division commander now pulled within range, and the reason for the excitement was abruptly made clear.

The Swatow captain frantically told the PTs to attack now. He explained that his headquarters had forwarded these instructions for him to relay to the PTs. They had advised that the destroyer was leaving the area, so the attack had to be now or never. He gave the PTs an attack course. He then went into a frenzy over the non-responsive PTs. He expected them to obey, and immediately turn seaward.

This was a real dilemma. This was a radical departure from the plan. The PT commander was not about to take immediate action. He wanted to think this over slowly and carefully. He could not communicate with the patrol craft shore establishment directly. His radio equipment was not set up to match. Administratively, PTs and patrol craft were completely separate entities. The boats and personnel never mixed. Their support organizations were entirely independent. The boats were homeported in different places and any one port had only one type of boat therein. In the rare instance, that communication between the two type commands was necessary, it was not done directly, but via Naval Headquarters itself. For all practical purposes, they could virtually be considered two separate navies.

The complete separation was confirmed and accepted as absolute several months back. This followed an abortive attempt by the two boat types to work together. The Swatows had pressed to test this tactic. The PTs were not enthusiastic, but they were ordered to cooperate. The North Vietnamese officers had trained in China, and the Chinese had instructed them in combined operations for attacking a target ship. The PT officers listened to the Chinese instruction, but instantly discarded it as not applicable to the situation in their country. The Chinese did have tactical applications where this was a valid concept, and thus they taught it to all the foreign trainees. They did not tailor their instruction for any one country. The North Vietnamese PT officers sensed this, but the Swatow officers did not.

The Swatows were only half as fast as the PTs. They could do approximately 24 to 28 knots. Their main battery consisted of two twin 37 millimeter gun mounts. These were effective against small craft of similar size, but not against a warship as large or larger than a destroyer. A destroyer could have them vastly outgunned both

in the size and number of weapons. The Swatow captain had considered this in advance. The PT's only advantage was when engaging aircraft, but still the guns were not radar controlled, which would have been highly desirable for anti-aircraft weapons. In a combined operation with PT's and Swatows then, the PT's were being asked to forgo their speed advantage, to avail themselves of the "diversion" that could be created by the Swatows, and not really for the added assistance from this dubious firepower. The PT officers were unanimous in their opinion of this tactic, and never gave it a second thought. Their speed was sacred. They were not willing to sacrifice it. They felt that it, and it alone, could protect them from hostile fire. In spite of these strongly held opinions, the exercise was forced upon them. Predictably, they were vociferous in their after exercise objections, and the tactic was shelved for good.

The PT commander was presently mulling over his options. The Swatow captain was chaffing inwardly, but noticeably. He had nothing to lose, however. The complete separation of the two organizations and the fact that the PT's were the elite of the two, made the PT commander's decision all the more difficult. He would have no help in the decision. He could not lower himself to confide in the Swatow captain, nor even through him to the patrol craft shore organization. They were his inferiors, and they could not give him orders. He would have to appear to be above it all, and in command at all times. He worked out a logical excuse for this delay, which was purely to give himself more thinking time. He was sure of one thing. The information that the destroyer was leaving, was undoubtedly true. The patrol craft organization would not have fabricated that type of intelligence.

Additionally compounding his dilemma was the authoritarian nature of North Vietnam. He was not prepared to take action by

himself. He had never been required to do so before. He had always been able to simply follow orders conceived by someone above. Initiative was not a prized asset. Indeed, there was more risk in misguided initiative, than there was reward for successful action. The division commander was lost. His forward command post gave him all the guidance he required, but they would not be down for several more hours. The destroyer would be gone by then. A decision had to be made.

There seemed no way out of this unprecedented situation, but to make the fateful decision. If he attacked now, he would not have the cover of darkness. This had always been counted upon, as an added self-protection feature in the unescorted attack tactic adopted by the PTs. He tried not to think of this as a disadvantage. If he attacked now, the whole period of waiting and thinking over the potential consequences would be avoided. If he were not to attack, but rather wait until he had orders from the proper authority, and the attack order had been properly relayed to him by Naval Headquarters, but in the interim, the destroyer made a successful get away....he would really be individually in trouble. He could be accused of cowardice or worse, and the penalty was certain to be drastic and quick. An attack offered him company in his fate.

It had now been almost an hour and a half since the PTs had arrived at Hon Me. The excuse of having to cool his engines, had run out. From time to time, the Swatow was receiving bearing on the destroyer. It was coming south. There could be no more procrastination. The division commander gave the order, and the three PTs were headed seaward.

V
THE ATTACK

The sea conditions were the usual for this time of year - an occasional chop near the coast and further in the Gulf, there were some sizeable swells. This was as near ideal as could be expected, but the PTs were not convinced of that. They were headed nearly into the swells, and they appeared gigantic for these men had no experience in the open sea. Their normal operating area near Van Hoa was sheltered by offlying islands. When they had made their previous transits south, they had always stayed inshore, and of course, their practice days had been chosen for ideal weather conditions.

The boats had formed up in their steaming and attack positions in the more comfortable waters near Hon Me. Now, they were further seaward and proceeding at full speed. As in their transit, the two flanking boats were keeping station on the leader by "seaman's eye." They used no assisting devices - not radar, nor even compass bearings. Furthermore, they kept station without communications or any signal from the leader. This was not due to any modern appreciation that radar and radio communications would reveal their position, but rather it was an easy unsophisticated routine that all their forces could follow. The radar was, in fact, lite off. This was the procedure that the Chinese had taught them. The Vietnamese faithfully followed all the prescribed procedures and would not think to change them. They would never consider removing any equipment from a ship even though they never used it. The PT crews wrote off the radar as a "modern gadget," but since it was energized, it was acting like a beacon for their opposition to locate and identify them.

Station keeping in these swells was becoming quite difficult. In truth, it must be told, that the unaccustomed movement was

causing nausea and discomfort to many of the crew. This impaired their power of concentration. The lead boat was frequently disappearing completely on the other side of a swell. At other times, the action of the sea made it appear that the leader was changing course, when in reality, he was just trying to maintain his heading. The swells would lift his stern clear of the water, and leave him no control surfaces to guide his direction. His head would swing wildly in one direction or the other, until his stern was again in the water and his rudder could put him on the desired heading. The two flanking boats tended to over compensate for what they conceived to be a course change, or when their leader was out of sight. The result was a very sinuous course which was exasperating and annoying to all.

The following boats had additional difficulties in trying to keep station, but the lead boat was not enjoying a easy ride. The traditional method of navigation for the North Vietnamese PTs was by visual identification of landmarks or coastal piloting. Now that the division was heading to sea with no reference point on the horizon, they had to steer a compass course. The compass was familiar since it was installed on the PTs, but like the radar, it was there and never or nearly never, used. Now trying to steer by the wildly swinging compass for the first time, the division commander was experiencing great difficulty. He was not at all sure that he was headed in the proper direction.

All hands were getting very wet. The sea would crash into the side and the resultant spray was carried aft to wet the entire crew by the combined force of the natural wind and that created by the PTs speed for an effective wind velocity of near sixty knots. The boats trembled and shook with every pound. The men began to wonder how much torture their boats could stand. They had never experienced anything like this before. The total effect was one of extreme discomfort - they were leaving the familiar sight of land; they were nauseated and

wet; they feared for the safety of their boats; they were having trouble keeping station; and they were headed for an uncertain and hazardous attack.

They were forced by the elements to reduce their speed slightly, to keep themselves and their boats together. It was with great relief that the destroyer was finally sighted. It gave them an object for which to steer, instead of the uncertain and difficult compass course. It was comforting to know that they had successfully navigated to this intangible spot and located their prey. The information provided by the patrol organization had indeed been correct. The destroyer was heading south south east and apparently departing North Vietnamese waters.

The PTs pointed for the attack. Closing a ship in this manner is somewhat like aiming a gun at a skeet shoot, but at a much slower pace. If the target is not led, you invariably miss. This simple concept is often difficult for many people to grasp. The North Vietnamese had inordinate difficulty with it. This became apparent later in the war. Their anti-aircraft gunners habitually failed to lead the target aircraft. Planes lost to gunfire were more a matter of luck than skill on behalf of North Vietnam.

Today, in this ship versus ship duel, they made the same mistake. They aimed at the destroyer instead of assuming a lead angle. This meant a stern chase. Aiming where the destroyer had been, instead of where it was going, would circle the PTs around behind the target. The destroyer in turn, was making course changes to open the range and prevent the PTs from closing. This greatly lengthened the approach run for the PTs. There was never any question but that the PTs would eventually get in range of the destroyer, because of the great speed differential, if they persevered. On the destroyer, they were acutely aware of this.

Aboard the PTs, they knew that they could catch up too, but the constant course changing of the destroyer was exasperating. They were headed directly into the swells by now, and the discomfort and wetness was upper most in their minds. They were opening the coast more and more, and they were alone. They knew that out here, there would be no help from other North Vietnamese forces, should it be required.

The chase ground on for hours. It was two hours after leaving Hon-Me that the destroyer first opened fire. This had been expected. After all, the PTs were trying to sink this destroyer, so it was logical that he should attempt to defend himself. The gunfire made them think of their instructions. They had been taught that the enemy gunfire would not be effective. The reasoning was that in the face of a determined assault, the enemy would be weak and afraid, and thus his aim would be erratic. The PT doctrine allowed them in this phase, to maneuver to avoid the enemy fire. Presumably, the enemy fire could be more accurate here in the early stages, before the PTs got really close enough to strike them numb with fear. The doctrine was to change as the range was decreased. The destroyer's fire at present, was so far removed, that the PTs did not maneuver. The gunfire was disturbing to these men never-the-less, for it was their first time under fire. It added to their general discomfort, and desire to get this whole day over and done with.

Eventually, they began to maneuver as a precaution. None of the destroyer's fire, now or later, was to come very close, but as the range decreased, they thought it best to keep the destroyer confused. If the fall of the shot was relatively near, they changed course immediately; if it were more distant, they changed when they heard the next volley. They were pleased that their tactics were apparently successful, and that their Chinese instructors had obviously been correct. There was just one shortcoming, that suddenly dawned upon them. This procedure was costing them time on their approach.

The boat on the starboard quarter was having his troubles all along, but now he was consistently out of his assigned position. The other two boats did not notice him. They were preoccupied with their own situations. The starboard boat was not responding quickly enough to the leader's changes. The course changes were most often in his direction. As a result, he usually found himself ending up astern of the leader. This required him to swing wide, and increase speed to regain his position on the starboard flank. The boats were at full speed, so this required the maximum strain on the engines to ease an additional ounce of speed from this unfortunate boat.

The destroyer's fire had now settled at a steady rapid pace. The course changes by the PT's were in accord. This set the PT division commander to thinking. They had been running a long uncomfortable time, under physical and psychological stress. The "final straw" that now obsessed him was the PT doctrine for the last four thousand yards. The "book" required him at this stage, not to maneuver. Again the rationale was the same. The enemy at this point, was supposed to be so unnerved that they were totally incapable of firing accurately. This is a theory much more comforting in a classroom than at sea. This magic range was coming up.

The ability to determine this range was the key to this situation. Radar was obviously the most definitive range source. The PTs, as mentioned earlier, scoffed at this device as a modern gadget, and so it was unmanned. The significance of this goes beyond the simple range determination required here. If the North Vietnamese officers had a minimum of mathematical understanding of the geometric problem for intercepting a ship or firing a torpedo, they would have appreciated the value of a radar range. This concept is elementary to virtually every seagoing officer, military and civilian, the world over. It is used many times daily. It was beyond the comprehension of the North Vietnamese. Now this failing could perhaps be turned to the advantage of the PT sailors.

This range concept was so difficult for them, that a "mistake" would not likely be identified. An error of a thousand yards or so would easily be overlooked. The error could be either short or long. The division commander, could for example, continue in to three thousand yards to get a better shot, and still maneuver for his own protection. If he were challenged later for maneuvering too long, he could claim that he was farther out, and there would be no proof to dispute him. He was not thinking of having the error this way, however. He wanted to hit the destroyer, that is true, but his real obligation was only the attack. He wanted to fire his torpedoes at the earliest possible moment, and head for home. The range would go unquestioned. He felt that given the deplorable sea conditions with the boats pounding apart, and the fact that they were under fire, all the PT men would be of a similar mind. They would all stand together and vouch for the valiant effort. The commander glanced at the political officer. He was obviously not in a mood to contest anything. He was perhaps the most miserable of all just from the elements.

The commander fired his torpedoes. The port boat followed suit. The range was most assuredly in excess of four thousand yards. There was little chance of a torpedo hitting the target. A torpedo, moreover, is a complicated weapon. It is not inert like a bomb or projectile. It is a delicate machine that must run properly, before it can have a chance to fulfill its assigned destructive mission. It has a miniature steam engine that is fed by pressurized fuel and air tanks. These tanks and the engine must function under the pressure of the external sea water, yet they must remain water tight to run properly. The torpedo must also have control mechanisms to drive it on a predetermined course at a given depth. It has a gyro compass to maintain its course, and its depth is controlled by a device that senses the sea pressure that corresponds to the desired depth. Course and depth are not one time evolutions. They are constantly being corrected during the

run, as external pressures tend to deflect it from its intended path. These are delicate and complicated parts that must function one hundred percent perfectly, or the torpedo is doomed to run erratically, and thus miss its mark.

It can readily be appreciated that a PT boat is the least preferable platform from which to fire a torpedo. The extraordinary pounding received aboard a PT, can easily break or detach fuel and air line piping, or mechanical control linkages. It can unseat valves and jam control linkages at their connecting points. To make matters worse, there is no space aboard a PT to perform on board maintenance checks. Most navies, for this reason, only load torpedoes on a PT just prior to a mission. In North Vietnam, they were carried for an indefinite period. They were only rotated or replaced, if a casualty was suspected.

The North Vietnamese torpedoman is not knowledgeable about the weapons under his care. His daily routine consists of wiping down the torpedo tube, and putting his ear to the tube to detect an air leak. He paints the tube when necessary, and weekly he removes the front cover to see if the torpedo has moved in the tube. If air is heard to be leaking, the torpedo would be exchanged for a new one from ashore. An air leak was a certain casualty. The shore technicians would attempt to determine the cause and then recharge the air flask. If the torpedo had been observed to move in the tube, it would also be replaced. This was apparently because of the presumption that if the pounding had been severe enough to unseat the torpedo, then there was likely to be something else jarred loose internally. There were, of course, numerous other casualties that could have occurred that would not be detected by these two casual inspections.

Navies that employ torpedoes normally engage in actual test firings. An exercise head is fitted to the torpedo, so that it can be

be recovered and fired again. One torpedo can be fired dozens of times, and still serve eventually as an actual war weapon with an explosive head. These exercise firings have a dual function. They prepare the combatant forces to have confidence in their ability to fire and hit a target; and they give the shore personnel experience in reworking the torpedo and making it ready for firing. Some torpedoes are inevitably lost, if this policy is followed aggressively, but they are charged off to the price of proficiency. Much can be learned by recovering a torpedo that has run erratically, and hopefully this knowledge can be put to work so that it does not happen again.

North Vietnam was not ready to pay the price of a lost torpedo. They were totally dependant upon the Soviet Union for their supply of torpedoes, and they apparently felt that the USSR would not necessarily replace their losses from practice shots. They had only held one practice firing in the entire history of their Navy. It was a grand affair. All the military and civilian dignitaries were invited. Fortunately for the Navy at that time, the firing was a complete success. This was perhaps short sighted, as thereafter, it was obviously presumed that all torpedoes would function exactly like the book description. This was a false sense of complacency. Indeed, it is almost impossible for a Westerner to comprehend the low state of technological comprehension by the North Vietnamese. This overshadowed many of their Navy's difficulties, for naval ships and weapons are very complicated in comparison to the average North Vietnamese citizens experience. North Vietnam fired six torpedoes in August 1964 and six more in July 1966. It would be difficult to prove that even one of these ran "hot, straight, and normal." Most were observed not to run at all, to run broached, or to circle.

The PT crews today had blind faith in their torpedo performance. Perhaps it would be more correct to say, that they just did not

think about it. They just wanted them launched, so they could head for home. The two boats that had fired turned immediately toward the northwest and home. They were aware that at least one torpedo dove immediately to the bottom, and that another was perhaps circling back at them. Their only thought was getting clear of the entire situation. The starboard boat at launch time was, as usual, out of position and astern of the division commander. He executed his standard maneuver of increasing speed and turning right to get back in position. This maneuver was not really necessary at this time, because the other boats in their turn for home, had maneuvered clear of him. He was too slow to realize this. He followed his automatic course and then turned toward the destroyer. He was now totally alone. His comrades had a good lead home, while he was flailing about. He finally fired and turned to catch the others. Again, he slammed the throttles into the stops in an effort to force that little extra that could enable him to catch up. His starboard engine froze and shut down. He ordered his port engine secured, and sent his engineman to investigate.

VI
SCARE ONE

On the bridge of Maddox, there was an air of utter disbelief. Here in mid-day, three North Vietnamese PTs were making a determined run at them, well out in international waters. It seemed insane, but there could be no mistake on a clear day like today. The boats were plainly visible to anyone who chose to look. ✓

The attack was not a total surprise. There had been indicators. Maddox had observed the three high speed boats come from the north and disappear behind Hon Me earlier that morning. The speed of their travel and the fact that there were three boats in company were firm indicators that the boats were PTs, even though Maddox had not sighted them visually. Maddox had been on edge for the whole patrol to date, because she was not really versed in the intelligence that was being collected. This PT movement to Hon Me was now viewed as particularly threatening. They theorized that Hon Me was a PT base. Their logic was faulty. If this was a PT base, there should have been less cause for concern. It would have been normal then for the PTs to be seen there. They made a double error in their analysis, which cancelled itself out and thus resulted in the correct conclusion that they were indeed threatened. ✓

Hon Me was not a PT base. An elementary intelligence analysis could have proven that. The physical characteristics of the island, and the fact that it was an island, indicated that it was suitable for nothing more than transient facilities at best. A knowledge of the North Vietnamese PT organization and its operating procedures would have made it clear, that Hon Me would be an unlikely stopping place for their boats. They had never stopped there before, and today it would have been extremely unlikely that they would be introduced to a new military organization for the first time. Their rendezvous

today had been in the lee of the island, but entirely at sea. The island had only one small pier for the use of supply craft. Maddox indeed had a right to be concerned by the presence of the PTs this far south.

If the appearance here of the PTs were a visit to an established PT base, Maddox should have not been concerned, but rather she should have been over joyed. That was, after all, the object of her patrol. They were supposed to collect intelligence on North Vietnamese Naval activity. Here, on only the second day of her patrol, it was all being laid out for their observation. They were more nervous than enthusiastic. No one aboard had a true appreciation of intelligence and their objectives on this patrol.

An hour and a half after their arrival, the PTs were observed by radar to emerge from behind the island and to be heading for sea and the Maddox. This was cause for concern, and Maddox duely reported the fact to all commands who were monitoring her mission. She also reported that she was changing course to open the PTs. Her orders definitely did not include getting in an engagement, so she was happy to increase speed and to open as quickly as possible. She would have been most happy to abort this whole mission and leave the waters off North Vietnam entirely. Most important of the addressees on her message, at least in her view, was the U.S. aircraft carrier **Ticonderoga**, which was operating just to the south off South Vietnam. It was an easy task for all stations to plot that the PTs would eventually engage Maddox, if they were intent on doing so. Assistance from **Ticonderoga's** aircraft would be most desirable.

Time was proceeding at a snail's pace. There was little to do, but to continue to stare in disbelief as the attacking boats continued on. Maddox's actions could only delay the inevitable.

They were getting increasingly concerned. It had been over an hour since their initial warning message had gone out, yet the aircraft they had requested had not made their appearance. They sent off more urgent messages. The PTs were getting closer. They were obviously not bluffing.

In despair, Maddox recognized that she may have to act alone. The PTs were at a range of nine thousand eight hundred yards and still coming. Maddox opened fire. The boats were well outside of torpedo range, but Maddox was not taking any chances. The question whether the first volley was a "warning" shot or not, is really academic. The shot did not hit, and given the extreme range and the target speed, it would have been most unlikely that it could ever have hit. The fact is that, in any case, the situation would not have been changed. If it had been a warning shot, then it went unheaded. If the shot had hit a boat, the other two boats would have certainly continued on. The division had orders to attack. If they broke off short of attack, just because one boat had been hit, then they would have been dealt with most harshly upon their return home. Such was the manner of the Northern regime. At any rate, Maddox continued to fire, and there was no question that subsequent shots were meant to hit.

This deficiency in Maddox's gunnery is immediately called to question. It is easy to criticize, but the fact is that this was the first time Maddox had ever tried to hit a small high speed target that was maneuvering all the while. Naval gunnery exercises against moving ship targets had, until then, been conducted by firing on a target sled towed by a fleet tug on a near straight course. This meant a target speed of about eight to ten knots. There was a world of difference between these two types of targets.

After this attack, the Navy instantly recognized this short coming,

and subsequently developed a high speed maneuverable target for its destroyers to practice on. All ships deploying to Vietnam were given time with this target, and their proficiency increased dramatically. U.S. Navy ships were not called upon to fire on PTs again during the war in Vietnam, so there is no actual basis for comparison, but they most assuredly ^{would} have accredited themselves well in any second go around. Maddox on her first attempt, can not be seriously faulted. Her performance was disappointing, but understandable.

The actual firing was relatively short lived. In the space of thirteen minutes from initially opening fire, the first two PTs had launched their torpedoes and turned away. The Ticonderoga's planes had finally arrived. The lone PT struggling for a firing position, was perceived by the U.S. forces as a fanatic trying to make sure of the kill. He was to receive the total attention of Maddox and the aircraft as well. They could not know that his position was attained out of incompetence, nor did they care. He was the only threat left. It seemed incredible with all the fire directed his way, but he was not hit.

Maddox was hit. Not by a torpedo of course, that would have been readily apparent, but by a bullet. No one aboard Maddox seemed to know it at the time, but subsequently the hole was located in the armor plate and the projectile recovered. Secretary of Defense McNamara would make much of this proof of our injury. He proudly displayed the projectile on his desk and even brought it to the Congressional Hearings in 1968. Unfortunately, he never delved into its origin.

The bullet could not have come from a PT while they were approaching Maddox. It should be recalled that the PTs had a single gun mount astern, and could not depress it in a forward position. They could have only fired on Maddox after they had turned

and were headed for home. At that time, however, both they and Maddox were opening rapidly. Maddox was only a limited threat to them. More immediate, was the threat from the newly arrived aircraft, that were diving on them. They were understandably firing on the planes and not Maddox. Even if they hit Maddox, their 25 millimeter guns would not have caused any serious damage. It could bring the aircraft down. This logic should be proof enough, but there is even more.

The U.S. Navy photograph of the shell hole on Maddox, measured against a ruler, reveals the ultimate truth of the incident. The hole is not large enough to accommodate a 25 millimeter projectile. It would be more consistent with a 20 millimeter weapon. The only 20 millimeters in use that day were mounted on the U.S. aircraft. It was certainly not the first time, and unfortunately not the last, that a U.S. ship would be hit by friendly fire.

After the torpedo attack, Maddox continued her move out of the area. This was the only sensible thing to do. The aircraft were on station, and they should have been able to easily handle the retreating PTs. The PTs with their torpedoes gone, were no longer a threat to Maddox, but Maddox was not certain of that. They suffered from a misconception. Unbelievable as it may seem, they believed that there may have been torpedoes "floating" in the area. With the exception of exercise torpedoes, which are harmless, torpedoes can not float. They could have been thinking of mines. Here again, it stretches the imagination to believe that they could have been so naive. Intelligence could have shown them that North Vietnam did not have mines of this type. Even if they chose to distrust that evaluation, it should have been readily apparent that using PTs in a frontal attack to launch mines was an unlikely concept. Mine laying could have been done much more effectively at night from many different types of craft, at no risk

to the laying craft. Mining the Gulf, however, would have been much more detrimental to North Vietnam than to any of her enemies. This was obvious to all concerned. Maddox, in any event, left the area, believing that she had at least damaged one PT with her gunfire, and confident that the aircraft would destroy the other two.

The aircraft, like Maddox, was experiencing their first shoot against small high speed targets. Again, like Maddox, they were missing the mark. The rocket and shell splashes in the vicinity of the PTs were an impressive sight. From the high speed aircraft, it is understandable that the inexperienced pilots could easily mistake the splashes for explosions and therefore hits. There was, of course, the natural tendency to read desire for fact. One boat had indeed stopped. This could have easily been interpreted as a result of battle damage, though it was not.

The aircraft had expended all their ordnance in less than ten minutes. There was nothing else to do but return to the carrier. They believed that one boat had been sunk and the other two heavily damaged. Perhaps, they should have stayed longer to verify these results, but one plane had experienced mechanical difficulties and this may have rushed their decision to return.

One boat had eventually been hit, but in no case could the damage have been considered major. The boat was obviously completely in tact, though moving at half speed, and eventually stopping. The authorities aboard Maddox and Ticonderoga had no way at this time to dispute the aircraft's damage claims. Based upon these reports, the retaliation for the attack seemed adequate. It

made no sense for Maddox to return to pursue the PTs. If they were damaged, the retribution was just, for Maddox, after all, had not been injured. Sending additional aircraft would have been hypothetical, since the first group of planes had reported the damage to be complete. No one believed that all the reports were wrong, and that two boats were happily headed for home and the third idly waiting for capture or destruction. All commands, both locally and as far away as Washington, believed that the defensive response had been adequate. The local commanders felt that it was now time to regroup and let Washington call the next move.

VII
WITHDRAWAL

There was a mixed feeling of relief on the first two PTs as they headed for home. They had fulfilled their commitment to attack and were momentarily out of immediate danger. They were aware that the destroyer was now firing solely at their other comrade. Regrettable as that may be, the relief in their own situation was the dominant feeling, and it was very welcome. The boats were riding much better on this new course, going with the swells. They were no longer being drenched, they were less nauseous, and they were out of the line of fire.

This interlude was brief. They spotted the approaching aircraft, and got ready for a new attack. The planes dove on their separated comrade. The firing with its resultant water spray was intense. How could he survive? They had no time to dwell on this, for the next thing they knew, they were under attack themselves. The planes dove at them firing their guns and rockets. The PTs opened fire in return. One gun mount immediately jammed and was to remain out of commission for the duration of the engagement. The action was only to last less than ten minutes from start to finish, and out of that, the time that the aircraft were actually firing could have been only a few minutes in all. Such statistics are for historians, however, and not for the men under fire. To them, it seemed like an eternity. They were completely exposed here at sea, and they had only one gun mount firing between the two boats. It was a defenseless feeling. The two planes that had broken off from the original formation of four, were making low passes and attacking them. The unfamiliarity of the crews with aircraft in general, added to their sense of futility and certainly their fear. The noise of the planes, the gunfire and the nearby splashes, led them to believe that they were doomed. Then the miracle happened. Just as everything appeared darkest, the aircraft flew away.

It was an uneasy calm. Certainly the planes would return. The crews were just now appreciating, that in spite of the sound and fury, they had not been hit. After the initial shock, the men began feverishly working on the jammed gun. They would need it for the next attack. This was a difficult task on a bouncing PT at sea. The division commander had jammed the throttles full open, despite the warning that this could cause his engines to overheat. He wanted to clear the area fast. They were literally surfing on the swells. They felt that they were nearly flying, and under the circumstances, this was a comforting thought. All of a sudden, the tension eased. No one could exactly say when, but there was a point where they suddenly realized that the planes had not returned, and it seemed unlikely that they would return. It was a most pleasant sensation.

Up until that time, the crews of these two boats were understandably preoccupied with concern for their own safety. Now they had the time to remember their missing comrade. Their observation of him had been brief, but certainly no one could recall any evidence that he had been hit. It seemed that he was still visible as the planes departed, but again, no one could be sure. They felt that there was nothing that they could do to assist him. They had no assurance that the planes or even the destroyer would not return and try to finish them off. The PTs considered themselves defenseless against either adversary, and they were essentially correct. They considered that it was suicidal to return and attempt to render aid. They sympathized with the plight of their friends, and kept heading for home.

It was still light when the two boats put into Van Hoa. Their return caused as much, if not more, concern as their departure had done. Those who did not know of the attack plans were curious. Previous exercises had never ended this soon. Those who knew that the division was actually scheduled to attack a U.S. destroyer, were dumbfounded.

What had gone wrong that these boats, but only two out of the three, had returned even before the attack was scheduled to have taken place? They had not received word of any cancellation. The boats tied up, and then followed an evening of intense debriefing. The puzzle remained. One boat was still missing and they had no clues as to what had happened to it.

The missing boat was indeed having its difficulties. The engineman predictably could not diagnose the reason for the starboard engine casualty. North Vietnamese enginemen, like their torpedomen, were not schooled in the theory of the equipment over which they had charge. The PT engineman doubled as an electrician as well. He was armed with a roll of electrical tape and a ball-pene hammer. These were his only tools. If an engine or electrical casualty occurred, he would attempt to tape it or hammer it into working order. If these measures failed, he would call for assistance from a shore establishment specialist. Such an alternative at this particular moment was not really practical. Then the aircraft arrived.

In the face of this new threat, the captain started his one good engine, and headed west for the nearest coast. It was then that he felt the full attack of aircraft and destroyer. His gun mount opened fire and jammed. He was fortunate in that the jam was rapidly cleared. His luck held further, as the destroyer headed away, reducing their fire, and only one aircraft was actually attacking him. The other aircraft, unbeknownst to the PT, had suffered a mechanical failure, so it was now just circling over head. Then their luck ran out.

The aircraft made a strafing run approaching the PT from astern. One bullet found its mark. Their luck had now turned 180 degrees. This bullet slammed into the back of the captain, who on a PT is also the helmsman. It exited his chest, killing him instantly. It grazed the steering wheel and went on to penetrate the thin aluminium bulkhead

o the engine room. Its final energy was spent by holing the fuel line to the one remaining engine. The engine quickly lost fuel pressure, and shut down.

No one could have imagined this bullet path in their wildest dreams. One hit had left the boat both leaderless and powerless. Now the boat was to share the same good fortune experienced by their comrades. The aircraft for no apparent reason, just left. Again like their comrades, there was no immediate and total relief. They were certain that the aircraft would return, and for them since they were floating without power, there was the additional worry that the destroyer would return. The destroyer could safely stay outside the PT's range with their 25 millimeter guns, and shell the PT at will until it was sunk. Since they could not get underway, they were sitting ducks for retaliation.

The loss of their captain was disturbing. He was not exceptionally experienced to say the least, nor was he likely to be very decisive when left alone to make a decision, but with him gone, it just pushed down the ladder one step further, the officer who would have to get them out of this uncomfortable situation. The executive officer had never assumed any authority before, and now he was at a complete loss. His answer was to wait. Perhaps help would come to them. This was wishful thinking. The chances were about one in a million, but no one had the initiative to suggest anything else. It was just such a pleasant relief to be free from immediate attack, that there was no great inspiration to do anything but enjoy the quiet of the moment.

Time slowly ticked away. Fear returned with the thoughts of what could happen, but then, like their comrades before them, they suddenly realized that the destroyer and the planes were not going to return. Their fatalism removed, they were eventually stirred to

action. The engineman attempted to tape the holed fuel line. This attempt failed. It would not hold under pressure. Fatalism returned, as they prepared to drift until captured or rescued. Eventually, in desperation, they tried to start the engine that had shut down for no apparent reason. It started, to everyone's surprise. There was no miracle here. The engine had shut down due to the bearings overheating. By this time, they had cooled, so there was nothing really wrong with the engine. They were underway to the relief of all hands, and headed directly for the coast.

They arrived at an isolated section of the North Vietnamese southern coast, and beached their boat. They set out, while there was still light, to scavenge for food. They had little luck, and returned to their boat by sunset. The boat was a familiar refuge, and they were reluctant to leave it. They were in no immediate danger. They still believed that aid would come to them. They would wait.

The ^{day's} activity which had started out with such promise at Van Hoa, had now ended at sunset with two boats returned to Van Hoa and one beached on the lonely southern coastline. The PTs had immersed as a threat, but they had caused no damage. It was really unbelievable, that they, in turn, had suffered only one minor hit. One man dead and a fuel line ruptured. This was not an impressive casualty report, but the shock waves from this action were not predicated on the actual damage occurred. It was the act of the attack itself, that would cause it to reverberate around the world.

The news of the attack was greeted with incredulity in most nations of the world. Why should three small craft of the miniscule navy of North Vietnam, attack a destroyer of the powerful Navy of the United States? It seemed to be a suicide mission with little chance for success. Closer examination reveals it may not have been so crazy after all. It was not suicidal. All the boats survived and their injury was slight. In regard to success, a few "ifs" could have readily changed the outcome. If the PTs had continued in... after all no shells had even come close when they fired prematurely and headed for home. If they had stuck to their original plan and attacked under the cover of darkness...this too could have gotten them closer and with less concern for aircraft. Their national records would have shown that Maddox was not leaving for good after only the second day of her patrol. It was indeed fortunate for the United States, that the inexperienced PTs were suffering physical discomfort, and thus decided to fire at extreme range in order to be done with the action. They had six torpedoes or six chances. Only one hit would have been sufficient to cause serious damage or perhaps even sink the destroyer. The torpedoes of course would have had to run properly, and here again, it is unlikely that any did. In any event, all these "ifs" were correctible, so in theory, North Vietnam had a better than even chance for success.

The North Vietnamese leaders never considered that their men would not put out the ultimate to achieve success, nor did they ever consider that their weapons would be faulty. They believed that they would succeed in their objective of sinking the destroyer, when they ordered the attack. Why was it ordered? This is the question that so many have guessed at over the years, The North Vietnamese PT men directly involved in the attack, have given us their answer. It is reasonable to assume that it reflects the thinking of their superiors,

or on other occasions they provided similar information that could be proven correct.

To appreciate the decision to attack, it is necessary to first consider the North Vietnamese environment. The Navy is the most junior military command in North Vietnam. Even the para-military forces enjoy more status and better communications with the national leadership. The Navy has no representation in the capital city of Hanoi, except for the infiltration group. This group was in essence a Navy unto itself. This organization was responsible for infiltrating men and equipment into South Vietnam. Aside from the fact that this was done by sea, the basic mission was a familiar one to the nation's leaders. They had been directing infiltration for years over land, and the end objective was the same - support of ground troops in the South. This naval operation of the same type made them exceptionally nervous. They realized that a ship lost here, could mean the instant and total loss of very valuable and in many cases irreplaceable men and material. On land, an attack on an infiltration convoy would not claim the entire effort at once. It was for this reason that they took a direct and personal interest in this naval infiltration group. Only the highest priority men and equipment were authorized to be infiltrated by sea. The personnel in the group itself were specially selected, and the entire operation was shrouded in the utmost secrecy, even from the rest of the North Vietnamese armed forces. The group was technically naval, because it operated at sea, but its command line by-passed the Naval Headquarters entirely and ran directly to the High Command at Hanoi.

The combatant Navy consisted of the PTs and the patrol craft. It was commanded by an Army officer or in reality, a political officer. Communist military systems have a dual chain of command. One is the standard military chain as in Western nations; the other is a parallel

chain of political officers. The political officers are normally communist party members, who are responsible for the political education of those in the command they serve. This means the proper motivation of the men for their combat chores and the general service of the state. It is such a nebulous theory that the political officer can take all the credit, for nothing is possible without the proper motivation, or get all the blame, for lack of motivation will insure defeat. In theory, the unit's commanding officer and political officer make all decisions jointly. In practice, anyone who has been in the military service or worked for a large corporation knows that there can be only one boss. The dominant personality will prevail. The adroit political officer does a juggling act, taking the credit for successes and blaming his military counterpart for any failures. The leaders of the Soviet Union have almost all come from the ranks of military political officers, and they have been particularly successful jugglers.

The senior officer in the North Vietnamese Navy in August of 1964 had the rank of Captain, or more appropriately in Army fashion, Colonel. He was a political officer, and could look forward to being promoted and with a promotion, being returned to the Army, if he performed his temporary duties with the Navy in an acceptable manner. The comparable Naval officer, could rise no higher. He thus had little incentive except to keep the status quo and his own personal position untarnished. The political officer in these circumstances was bound to dominate. He was severely hampered in a Naval assignment by a total lack of Naval knowledge. He was not about to acquire much in the course of his duties. The boats of the Navy were small, so he did not keep his command at sea. In fact, the only sea experience he ever had was on a VIP cruise aboard an obsolete submarine chaser in the days before the U.S. bombing commenced.

The political officer was an Army man and owed his allegiance to his Army colleagues in Hanoi. They wanted "their man" in charge

of the Navy, but after that they chose to ignore the complex scope of Naval matters. No ideas were exchanged back and forth. The Navy was forgotten unless some peculiar circumstance dictated otherwise.

There was a circumstance here in 1964, that was of Naval concern to the leaders of North Vietnam. It was not their Navy so much, as a series of Naval incursions that were striking at their country. This leadership was totally ignorant of such matters and were not inclined to study the rational methods for combating the attackers. They reacted instead by unreasoned peaks of anger and frustration. It was in this aroused state, that they most frequently made their hasty and costly Naval decisions.

The North Vietnamese concern was for the harassment they had been receiving over the last few months. The operation was known to the United States as 34-A. The North Vietnamese referred to the intruders as "raider boats." The boats were not "Swift" boats as erroneously reported by Western journalists. Swifts were used within the organization, but only for support purposes. The actual mission boats were "Nasty" class wooden hulled boats of a PT design, but mounting only guns and no torpedoes. The boats were built in Norway and fitted with British engines. They were procured for this clandestine work, as they were "deniable," i.e. they could not be traced to the United States. It was obvious that the U.S. had transported the boats to Vietnam. It was also common knowledge that the U.S. performed any major repairs required on these boats. U.S. personnel had tested the boats for the tropical operating conditions, and they subsequently trained the South Vietnamese crews. The one cardinal rule was that no U.S. personnel would participate on any mission. The missions were to be entirely South Vietnamese, and the U.S., though aiding and abetting the program, could deny any participation.

The public attention given this program has been totally out of proportion to the realities. A typical mission would consist of two

boats. They would depart Da Nang around sunset and head north. They would harass fishermen by stopping and boarding their boats. Often, they would take off the Captain and bring him south. There, he would be treated like royalty and subjected to subtle political lectures, before being returned on the next mission to his home in the North. He would be given candy, cigarettes and a transistor radio. When he returned, the authorities would inevitably confiscate this prize loot (usually for their own personal gain), and ordinarily they would restrict him, at least for a time, from returning to sea. They feared that he could have been assigned an intelligence mission, and could be planning to be picked up by a raider again.

Other missions consisted of attacking military targets, such as communications stations and gun emplacements. It was not an overly ambitious program, nor was it ever intended to be. It was designed to keep the North Vietnamese on edge, and to signal to them that their country was just as vulnerable to attack from outside, as was South Vietnam. The theory being that they would recognize that the attacks could be stepped up, if that were ever desired. Concurrently, it was to plant the seed with the coastal residents, that their government was not invincible, and could not protect them in all circumstances.

The intelligence gathered by these operations was trivial. It was valuable in that it contributed to the overall economic and military assessment of the North, and could be correlated to similar information from other areas of North Vietnam. On a cost effectiveness basis, certainly intelligence alone could not justify these missions.

The missions succeeded, as we shall see, all too well in their objective of causing the North Vietnamese to be concerned with their vulnerability from sea attack. Militarily, the program was successful and cost effective. The criticism stems from ethics. The U.S. supported the South Vietnamese in an operation extending outside their country

and into another one. Can this be justified? Many people believe that this type of activity can never be justified on principle. Realistically, it should be considered on a comparable basis. North Vietnam was intruding into the South with hundreds of men and tons of equipment by land alone. Their sea infiltration program added to this total. The volume of "insult" was overwhelmingly in favor of the North, compared to these minor 34-A operations. North Vietnam was like the bully who can give but not take. They overreacted.

Two nights prior to the attack on Maddox, the raiders had bombarded a coastal gun emplacement for the first time. North Vietnam was incensed. They had indeed tried to strike the raiders with their patrol boat force. It was a most frustrating experience. Their lack of naval expertise was readily apparent. They tried the same tactic over and over again with no success. They never varied it in an effort to try and improve their luck. Two Swatows and occasionally three, would be deployed off the coast after it was reported that the raiders had passed by. They would wait for the return passage. Wait they did, until the raiders were due east on their way south. Then, they would sally forth. It would take no naval expertise to diagnose the error here. The slower Swatows could never catch the raiders. They always ended up running after them after they had passed. They were so far apart, that the raiders seldom even knew that they were being chased.

Elementary common sense would have seemed to dictate that they take an entire division of Swatows - four boats - and deploy them across the line of retreat of the raiders. After all, they know the raiders had to return south. Properly spaced, it would have been virtually certain that the Swatows would have gotten off at least a few rounds at the returning raiders. They never did this,

or made any changes at all. It was incredible that some where along the line, some change was not ordered, but perhaps the details of these activities were kept to the patrol craft organization alone. The Swatow's excuse, that they were too slow to engage the raiders, seemed to be accepted by senior commands without question.

The raids were an annoyance here-to-fore when they were limited to fishermen, but now an attack on a gun emplacement was intolerable. North Vietnam had to retaliate, hopefully in a way that would deter future raids. The leaders examined the possibilities:

Air - This would have been quite feasible and potentially effective. The major drawback was that North Vietnam did not have air superiority; and their leaders really understood air power. They did not want to expose their Air Force to a retaliation in kind. They wanted to save their air power for the ultimate defense of the homeland, and the raider annoyance was just not serious enough to risk this valuable asset.

Ground - This was the easiest alternative, but it was not that appropriate. It could very well be misunderstood. A major attack in the South could not be arranged on a moments notice, and since the objective would not be the raider boats, the source of the North's aggravation would not be directly avenged. Further, considering the time delay and a remote target, there was no assurance that the message the North wished to convey, would actually get through - i.e. more raider activity would mean more ground activity against the South.

Naval - This was obviously the most desirable alternative, but past experience had shown it to be ineffective. Ineffective that is against the raiders. It was then that Maddox appeared on the scene. This offered a new possibility. Here was a ship that their Navy, by touting their PTs, was admitting that they were capable of sinking. What was the risk? The Navy? It was considered an expendable appendage anyway. The war was a land war. The Navy could help them defend their coast, but realistically, if a major invasion was planned, their Navy would be rendered inoperative in the first few hours. North Vietnam

could afford to lose virtually their entire Navy, and it would have little effect on their war against the South. The other risk to consider was that Maddox was a United States ship and not a South Vietnamese raider.

There have been attempts to theorize that the North Vietnamese confused the nationality of Maddox, or that they believed that the U.S. was the perpetrator of the raider operations, or that they considered Maddox and the raiders linked. These are all wrong. They knew Maddox to be a U.S. ship. They knew that no U.S. personnel were overtly involved with the raiders. They never considered that there was any link between Maddox and the raiders. This reasoning was correct; other reasoning was not. They believed that an attack on Maddox could deter raider activity, since the South Vietnamese witnessing this would fear to send their boats North again. The decision was made in Hanoi - attack the Maddox with PT boats. It would take two days for the command machinery to filter this order down to the PT division selected to make the attack. This was subsequently confirmed as the typical execution time from the causing event until the action on the retaliation order.

North Vietnam aside, were the 34-A operations and Maddox associated? They certainly were not in the sense that the accusing journalists and inquiring members of Congress conceived it to be. Each operation stood completely alone, though each was aware of the other's presence. The U.S. authorities, primarily the Army command in Saigon which was technically the overseer of the 34-A operations, were concerned about mutual interference, i.e. that Maddox and the raiders could interfere with each others operations to the detriment of each. The Army also wanted Maddox to be available to assist the raiders, if this should be required. The Navy recognized that assistance was impossible. They would not be physically within the vicinity of the raider operations. More knowledgeable in these matters, they considered the raider boats

capable of sustaining significant damage, yet still being able to return under their own power. With two boats, one could assist the other. If both were damaged to the extent of requiring outside assistance, Maddox would have been a sitting duck when coming to the rescue. The U.S. Navy would not order their ship into such a trap.

The Navy also considered mutual interference unlikely, again because the forces would be separated. They erred slightly here.

Maddox did sight the raiders on the night her mission was to begin. Their reaction is evidence to the destroyer's inadequate preparation for their intelligence mission. They identified the raiders as P-6 class PT boats. There were no P-6 class PT boats listed in either the North Vietnamese or Chinese Navies in ports near the Gulf. The Swatow is similar to a P-6 hull, but Maddox reported PTs not gunboats. This could have been a fatal error, if it had occurred later in the patrol. From this point on, however, the two operations were never within each other's territory.

A theoretical advantage to the two operations being run simultaneously, was that Maddox could collect information on North Vietnam's reaction to the raiders. The error in this theory was again that the two forces were so far separated, that there was no unusual intelligence available to Maddox that was not already available to other intelligence collectors.

The intelligence that Maddox collected would in the normal course of events be analysed in Washington, and a small portion of it would be fed back to the field. It is quite possible that some of the intelligence could be used in planning future raider missions, and preparing them to defend themselves. At this stage, it could not be directly traced to Maddox or any one single intelligence source. This is at best a very indirect result, and hardly meriting the label that the operations were associated.

The other controversial discussion centers on the international waters theme. It is important to remember that North Vietnam had never claimed a territorial limit since her independence. Her prior status under French administration would, by assumption, indicate a three mile limit. It was only after the attack that they formally claimed a twelve mile limit. Considering the general lack of maritime interest discussed earlier, it is probable that no one was even conversant with international water limits until they were tutored after the fact by their allies.

The violation of territorial waters can be proved to be an after thought. The attack on Maddox was ordered in Hanoi well before Maddox had even approached any claimed limit. It was not qualified. The PT officers were told to attack Maddox. No one told them that they would go only if Maddox was to violate North Vietnam, nor were they told that Maddox was to be in any specific area before she was to be attacked. It could be argued that perhaps the North Vietnamese presumed that a violation of their limit was inevitable. This would be a very uncertain policy, but it was unlikely in any event, for none of the PT officers were aware of the international water limit even years after the attack. It is therefore most probable that the issue was never even considered.

Violation of territorial waters, even if considered by internationally recognized rules, would have been no cause or justification for North Vietnam's attack. Maddox would have violated the twelve mile limit, if it were in force, but the violation did not consist of any hostile actions. The last "violation" occurred well before the attack. Maddox was always well out in international waters from the moment they were first sighted by the PTs, and continued even farther off shore until well after the attack.

Maddox was a victim of circumstances. She was a target by default. The real objective was the raider boats, but North Vietnam could not successfully attack them. They were frustrated by the raiders, and overreacted to attack Maddox. The decision was a simple one born in rage and thus without complex thought of linking the 34-A operations with Maddox or consideration of territorial limits. North Vietnam's biggest mistake was that they never anticipated the potential consequences.

FIRST IMPACT

August second 1964 was a Sunday. Washington, D.C. and Vietnam were physically half a world apart. The time difference for practical purposes can be considered to be twelve hours, although there were actually two time zones in the Gulf. A twelve hour difference makes it easy to convert civilian time, as A.M. and P.M. are just reversed. The attack on Maddox occurred locally in mid-afternoon. In Washington, this was the middle of the night. In Hawaii, it was still Saturday, August first in the evening. In these two U.S. locations then, since it was a summer weekend and in off hours, the main decision makers were not on the job. They would have to be called in from home, or in some cases, from far away resorts.

These men and their key staff members arrived at staggered intervals at their respective places of work. They might have been slightly aggravated at this event having cancelled more pleasurable pursuits, but they were highly dedicated and knowledgeable men, who appreciated the significance of this attack. They had heard the news bulletins, and they were eager to get to their offices to learn what extra information was really known. There was little amplifying information available as yet. Maddox was attacked by three PT boats. Maddox had fired back and had been assisted by aircraft from the carrier Ticonderoga. The damage reports were confusing. At first, it appeared that two PTs were sunk. Then it seemed that only one was sunk, and the other two were damaged. Maddox and the aircraft had not been hit. This seemed to be an acceptable military response. Those at distant commands had no way of knowing at this time, that North Vietnam had not suffered the damage claimed, and that these same three boats would live to attack or attempt to attack a United States destroyer, two years later.

The bulk of information available at this moment was U.S. operational messages. Many of these were contradictory. Furthermore, there was the standard mushroom effect. Each major command getting a message would paraphrase it and send it on, perhaps with a few comments of their own. They in turn, were questioning the sources for more information. There was no lack of reading material, but it was all essentially the same, and there was little new intelligence in any of it.

The immediate concern was to determine the significance of the attack. Did it presage an intent by North Vietnam to drop all barriers, and attack whenever and wherever they might? Was it a diversion for a large scale move on the South? There were a myriad of possibilities. Each possibility seemed to have a person or group to support it. The one conclusion that seemed to gain the most advocates today, was that the attack had been a mistake. The theory went that some local commander had overstepped his bounds, and had ordered the attack unbeknownst to his superiors. This was popular because it was wishful thinking, and it did not require an in-depth background on Vietnam to understand. We know now that there was a mistake, of course, but the mistake was not the attack, but only the timing of the attack. The attack itself was intentional and planned days earlier in Hanoi.

The men called to work today were not Vietnamese experts by and large. They were for the most part senior officials who were general decision makers. Being that it was a weekend, there was considerable disorganization. The crisis was being handled by watch officers, and while they were effective in a "fire fighting" sense, they were not geared to locating the most knowledgeable expert to get intelligent in-depth advice on a relatively obscure subject such as the North Vietnamese Navy.

A knowledgeable analyst could have told them in a minute, that this attack was no mistake. The PTs had to be deployed from their remote Van Hoa base, all the way to Hon Me, and then out to Maddox. No local commander could have ordered that. It would take too long and would be known to many senior command echelons, who could have put a stop to it, if they so desired. To be sure, the most knowledgeable analyst could not have known for certain at this time, whether this presaged continuing activity of this kind. He could have indicated to those concerned, however, that there were certain warning signals that almost invariably would provide an alert in advance of another attack. This was not necessarily made clear to the cognizant decision makers. Precaution dictated, and rightly so, that general warnings be issued to all commands in the Vietnam area. This was perhaps the most obvious and most important post attack act that had to be achieved immediately on this summer weekend day.

Aside from military considerations, it was readily perceived in all government quarters, that there were political considerations as well. President Johnson was due to run for the Presidency in his own right for the first time, just a few months from now. His opponent had already been selected - Senator and Reserve Air Force General Barry Goldwater. The battle lines had already begun to take shape. The Senator loomed as a war hawk. President Johnson, as an advocate of progressive domestic policy, was viewed as untested in the international sphere. The attack was obviously going to be a crucial test. If he showed strength here, he was certain to attract many middle of the roaders, who feared that Senator Goldwater might be a little extreme.

Many years have passed and it is difficult, with all the emotions that have been generated about Vietnam, to recreate the naivete of the American public in August 1964. There were few Americans in that day who could have correctly located Vietnam on the map, and fewer still who could give an intelligent discourse on the history of the area.

War in Vietnam, as we know it today, was not an issue. The American public perceived only an insult to the American flag. This was still an era which began with President Kennedy's public warning that the United States would not be pushed around by any nation, large or small.

The public, in their ignorance of Vietnam, viewed this attack ⁿof a U.S. ship as an isolated incident. This was a violation of an issue sacred to Americans through out our history - freedom of the seas. In every war fought by the United States, this had been an issue. Indeed just nineteen years after achieving our independence from Britian, we were again at war with freedom of the seas being the primary issue. The school children of the U.S. learn even today, that the War of 1812 was declared because the British were raiding our ships and pressing seamen into the service of the crown. The seas have been good to the United States throughout her history. As late as the Second World War, it was these seas that kept our mainland free from the carnage that occured in Europe and Asia. Our sympathies in both the World Wars were directed, early on, to the allied side, because of what was viewed as the unprecedented horror of German submarine warfare. All Americans, landlocked or coast dwellers, learned these lessons in school and saw their effect by living through a war fought in the distance. They were conditioned to appreciate this issue. Public opinion would be the important ingredient in the President's decision.

There were many government officials knowledgeable about the true status of Vietnam. We were in a desperate situation even at this early stage. We had pledged to support the regime in the South, but after many recent coupes, we were still searching for effective leadership. The North Vietnamese were intensifying their invasion of the South, as they saw political instability prevail. A proposed congressional resolution had already been drafted to request Congress authorize the President to take all means necessary to protect South Vietnam and the U.S. interests there. The prelude justifying the

resolution was North Vietnam's general intervention in the South and their supplying men and equipment for the war therein. It was recognized by the drafters that this broad resolution would be difficult to "sell" on the hill. There were a number of influential congressional leaders, that could be counted upon to fight it. They would want reams of proof and justification, and then they would certainly amend the resolution to provide only limited and qualified support. Such was the political reality. The resolution had not yet been proffered for these very reasons. It would have had little chance for success. The attack on Maddox was seen as a potential blessing in disguise by the backers of intervention in Vietnam. The resolution was redrafted. Out came the generalities, and in their place, went the justification of North Vietnam's attack on a U.S. ship.

The other major shuffling on this summer Sunday, was rounding up contingency plans. Long ago, it was decreed that we would have contingency plans for any conceivable situation. We would never be caught unprepared. We were not now. There were plans, but on this weekend, there were few planners available. The men who had been recalled, rounded up plans from appropriate files and libraries, and were probably reading them for the first time. Which would fit? The plans ranged from declaring a full scale war, to doing nothing but remaining alert. Wading through all the possibilities in between was a long and tedious task.

All of these evolutions were being conducted at many locations and by many government officials both military and civilian. Each had its own vested interest in the ultimate decision that would inevitably be made. Since no one could argue knowledgeably with a total command of the facts, each could offer a convincing case for their own cause, whether that be for doing nothing or for immediate retaliation.

At all these different commands and locations, there were only advisors. The President would make the final decision. The President was a politician, and had been for his entire life. The politician's forte is the public consensus. It was this that would determine the course of action he would select. Public opinion polls, however, are not made instantaneously, nor are they made on summer Sunday afternoons. The President was inclined to wait, although it was readily apparent from the press and random public views, that definitive retaliation would be acceptable, if not welcomed by most of the public. The primary concern for those that held back on their support, was the Soviet and Chinese reaction. Analysis revealed that if the retaliation was directed exclusively at North Vietnam, announced to be in response to the PT attack, and kept to an appropriate scale, then the two major communist powers would not react with other than their standard verbal offensive. This could not be guaranteed, but it was certainly sound reasoning.

Retaliation seemed the logical political expediency, but... there were advisors that urged caution. The facts were not all in. The attackers had all been hit according to the reports. Was that not enough? The impromptu Sunday gave way to a normal workday Monday. Discussion resumed in earnest, now by the full staffs. This delay was denying them an opportunity to retaliate. Retaliation, if selected, should have been immediate or relatively so.

X
REFLECTION

The civilian and military leaders of North Vietnam were meeting on Monday August third. Not all of them had been previously advised that the two PTs had returned without their third companion, and that the attack had gone off prematurely. In today's discussions, they accepted that the reason they had not been successful was because the attack had been conducted in daylight. This lack of success just firmed their opinion that their Navy was useless, but this was not the prime concern today. They were dismayed at the U.S. damage claims that they knew to be untrue, and were trying to understand their significance.

Certainly one boat was still missing, but their radar network had assured them that it was still afloat after the action. They had not been able to follow it thereafter, but they insisted that it had not sunk at least immediately. No one was quite sure of what to make of this.

The leaders were being presented with summaries of news stories from around the world both from newspaper and radio accounts. The communist nations were holding back, probably waiting for instructions. The few communist nations that had reported to date, had nearly reported the facts or claims, and had no commentary. The free world press comments were not favorable to this act of aggression on behalf of North Vietnam. These Northern leaders were sensitive to world public opinion, so they were distressed by this turn of events. They had hoped that the press would champion their cause as the little nation taking on the giant who was the real aggressor. They had taken this public stand themselves in earlier news releases, hoping they would catch on. They also claimed to have destroyed the attacking aircraft. This was pure fiction, they knew, as the PTs had not reported this, but they manufactured it to counter the U.S. claims for propaganda purposes.

The PT group at Van Hoa had gone over the details of the attack again and again. Nothing new seemed to be forthcoming. The two returning boats had not seen the third boat hit or sunk. They knew he had momentarily stopped, but it did not appear to be from an external injury. The shore commanders supported the decision not to return and render aid, as they, too recognized the potential danger in this course of action. The PT group did not wish to forward their final report until more could be learned of the third boat. They could not go search for it themselves. Searching was the mission of their patrol craft units, but the PTs were reluctant to ask for their support. The PT group was very worried. No one had thought to advise them that the radar network had held their missing comrade after the action. They were just hoping that it was still alright, and just lost.

The patrol craft crews, at least some of them, had known of the attack. They had not learned of it through the news service. It was much too early for that. Domestic news of this nature would not be distributed for some time. Instead, it had been the one Swatow that had prematurely dispatched the PTs that spread the word to his fellow patrol craft sailors. The battle had taken place out of their view, so they did not know the outcome. All they knew for certain was that they had not seen the PTs again, but that would not have been unusual. Now they had been asked to be alert for a PT, and to actually patrol in an attempt to locate one. Was this curiosity on behalf of their immediate seniors, or was something actually wrong? They did not ask for clarification. That would have been out of place. They searched as requested, and found nothing. They sensed something was wrong.

The lone PT was still beached. It had no radio for normal broadcast channels, so it learned nothing about the attack from that source. The men felt safe where they were, although a little bit hungry. They

continued to search for food, but otherwise, calmly waited for help to arrive. They observed farmers off in the distance, but fraternizing with these of another class in North Vietnam had never been encouraged. The farmers would not question the activity of the PT boat, if the men thereon were not in evident distress. They would consider it a military maneuver, that they were better off not asking questions about. The PT men would not consider approaching the farmers for they knew them to be ignorant. They expected some assistance from other naval units or at least from some military organization that would arrive at any moment. At one time, there had been a suggestion that they refloat the boat and head up the coast. This had come at a time when the tide was out, so it was not an immediate possibility. When the tide was high, the idea was apparently forgotten. They were sure that help was enroute. They would wait.

In reality, aside from the prefatory Swatow search, there was no major effort to locate the lost PT. It was felt that it would turn up, if indeed it had not been sunk. No one could really understand why it was still missing. It was perhaps at a port, but because the fact that it was missing was intentionally not publicized, no one had bothered to report its whereabouts.

The Northern leaders were not really concerned with this. They were dismayed that the raiders had again been active on the night of 3/4 August and that the object of their attack, Maddox, had returned to her patrol station, along with a second destroyer. They had perhaps unnerved the United States by making her more cautious, but they had obviously not succeeded in their objective of reducing the raider activity. The press was reporting that the U.S. had renewed resolve to stand up to North Vietnam. This was distressing.

XI
SCARE TWO

Maddox had indeed resumed her patrol, and this time, in the company of a sister destroyer, the U.S.S. Turner Joy. The destroyer division commander had also requested that aircraft be continually overhead. This was considered a little extreme. The patrol, as scheduled, had several weeks more to run. The aircraft request would have worked a great and unnecessary hardship on the aircraft carrier and the aircraft crews. A compromise solution was worked out. It was viewed as completely adequate by all except perhaps Maddox. The aircraft would be on ready alert aboard the carrier. They could reach the destroyers in minutes, if required to do so.

The authorities, who had ordered Maddox to resume her patrol, knew that she was in no serious danger. Two destroyers with accompanying air support were certainly more than a match for any thing North Vietnam could choose to send against them. The destroyer division commander unfortunately was not as confident as his superiors. It must be remembered that this commander had requested the cancellation of the patrol because he had been upset by intelligence messages even before it had started. The attack by the PTs had only reinforced his desire to terminate this assignment and get back to more familiar duties. It can readily be appreciated that he was none too happy, following the attack, to be ordered to again place his ships in a position to be attacked. He now had extra support, and he would operate further to sea, but this was no great comfort. Two days ago, the nervousness was confined to a few knowledgeable officers, but now it had spread to the remaining officers and crew as well. Aboard Turner Joy, they had not been personally attacked, but they knew the details of the PT attack on Maddox. They could be described as a little more relaxed, relative to Maddox, but still their nervous anticipation ran high.

During daylight hours, the destroyer's sense of well being was infinitely greater than at night. True, many of the men working in interior spaces could not see the light of day, yet they took comfort in the fact that their topside shipmates could visually confirm or discount any contact reported by electronic media, at least those that were within a threatening range. Already on the fourth of August in broad daylight, radar had reported distant contacts. They were never visually confirmed, but they had not closed the destroyers either. Could it be another prelude to attack? The reports were just enough to keep the tension at its peak. After all, the attack on August second had occurred in mid-day.

What was still upsetting the destroyers was the lack of an explanation for the attack that they had just survived. No one had yet provided them or even attempted to provide them with an analysis of why it had been carried out. To them, it was a bolt out of the blue, and they did not know if it was a one time attack, or if it was to be a new and permanent policy of North Vietnam. Were they going to attack all U.S. ships off their coast each time they appeared? The answer to this question was of more than academic interest to the destroyers on the line. They could only guess at it themselves, and without any amplifying information, they naturally assumed that North Vietnam was preparing to attack again.

Day faded into night. The blackness seemed intensified as the weather also started to deteriorate. These were ripe conditions for imaginations to conceive the worst. Speculation among the crew even extended to the possibility that the Chinese might join with North Vietnam in a Korean type conflict. This would add a whole new dimension to the threat. Under the circumstances, it is completely understandable that the state of nervousness would be running high.

Predictably, it was not long after dark that another radar contact was reported - a group of high speed surface contacts.

The high speed designation indicated that the contacts were naval, and most probably, they were PTs. The next contact was of unidentified aircraft. This was a new dimension. The thought of a combined air and sea attack was really unsettling. The air contact was lost shortly, and the radarmen concentrated on the surface contacts. They began to proliferate all over the screen. They were being tracked at speeds of 30, 33, and 40 knots, but none were being held consistently.

This phenomenon, known as radar "spooking," was not new. It occurred in other areas of the world, but conditions here in the Gulf particularly favored this phenomenon especially at certain times of year and at certain times of day. Early on summer nights was one of these particularly susceptible times. In years to come, much more would be learned about this "spooking" which was caused by atmospheric conditions, but in 1964, the radarmen of Maddox were getting their initiation.

In corrective action, after this incident, the Navy immediately recognized that some action needed to be taken. They set up a training program to point out to radarmen, the inconsistencies in these "spooks" versus a bonafide contact. They researched methods to improve their radars to give operators a means of technically checking the validity of a contact with their radar set. It is very unlikely that a "spook" would confuse a Navy ship today, but in 1964, the experience level on Maddox, coupled with the high tension of the moment, made it completely understandable that these contacts were being reported without question.

The officers on Maddox could really have used a complete understanding of all intelligence available on North Vietnam. This, as explained earlier, was not possible. Still, they could have made better use of the intelligence that was available to them. They would certainly have fared better if their "black box" officer

r senior enlisted personnel were more experienced. Maddox had no appreciation for intelligence, nor did they have the initiative to request additional information. With an attitude like this, they could not be helped. They were destined to stumble blindly and unthinkingly, until they could get totally clear of the situation and the area.

Unfortunately, not all the available intelligence was correct. Intelligence is, at best, an estimate. A significant mistake at this time was the official speed estimate for the Swatow class gunboat. The boat had a hull that appeared to be exactly the same as the wooden hulled Soviet P-6 class torpedo boat. It was therefore presumed that the Chinese had merely substituted guns for torpedoes on the same hull. The speed was thus estimated to be the same as the P-6 i.e. 42 knots. It was subsequently learned that the Swatow, while an identical hull form, was actually constructed of steel. The speed estimate for the boat was thus reduced appropriately to between 24 and 28 knots. If this revised estimate were available in 1964, it would have been most significant. It would have enabled the destroyers to eliminate patrol craft from the list of possible contacts that they were plotting, as all contacts had speeds in excess of any North Vietnamese patrol craft capability. This meant that the only possible candidates that would fit the speed description were the PTs.

One positive and correct piece of intelligence that was available was that concerning North Vietnam's PT inventory. In the late fall of 1961, a Soviet merchant ship was observed and photographed delivering a deck cargo of twelve P-4 class PT boats to Van Hoa. The boats had subsequently been photographed on many occasions in North Vietnam. There was no question that there were in August 1964, twelve and only twelve PTs in the North Vietnamese Navy. No more and no less. The radar and later sonar reports from Maddox were very confusing, but it would appear that if they were to be believed, at least eleven

PTs would have to have been involved in this activity of the fourth of August. Now if Maddox had believed the damage reports of the action on the second, they would have to come to the conclusion that only nine PTs were available to be attacking them today. This would have given them pause to consider their contacts further, and recognize some of them as invalid. If the truth were known, in that only one North Vietnamese boat had been put out of action that first time, it still should have given the destroyers cause to reconsider their contacts. Eleven PTs would have been the entire North Vietnamese inventory. It would have been unlikely that they would or could, just from a mechanical standpoint, commit all their boats in a single attack.

Another intelligence indicator that should have set the destroyers to thinking, was the grouping of the contacts. The North Vietnamese were extremely consistent. They never varied from the "book" or their past performance. The "book" indicated that the North Vietnamese PT division consisted of three boats. The PTs moved by division, and never combined divisions to form a larger group. Thus, any radar contact on a group that was not in threes, should have been immediately considered suspect.

A detailed knowledge of the PT operating pattern would have cast a general suspicion on all the contacts. The PTs never operated at speeds less than maximum, except in local waters. Such was their flamboyant style. This would have indicated that contacts tracked from 30 to 40 knots in the open sea deserved closer scrutiny. Swatows could have been discounted, if the proper intelligence estimate had been available, but even based on the erroneous information, a knowledge of operating patterns would have revealed that Swatows and PTs did not work together. The only contact to fear was a group of three at a speed of 45 or more knots. If Swatows were being tracked, the destroyers should not have been overly concerned. It

would not have been logical to pit the smaller Swatons against the five inch guns of the destroyers. True the destroyer commander might still think it a possibility, but then he should have had enough faith in his ships' performance against such an inferior force, that he could calmly plot these contacts until they approached a firing range. The simple fact that the contacts were plotting so erratically, should have in itself, served as a flag of caution to the supervising officer, and caused them to order a deeper evaluation.

An appreciation of these nuances of North Vietnamese behavior could not have been imparted by a pre-patrol brief, but would have to have been by way of a knowledgeable insider on board ship. Maddox unfortunately did not have such an individual on board. There was, however, a shipboard situation that should have signaled caution to Maddox's officers. Their radar had been suffering from various malfunctions until very recently. It had just recently been declared operational, but unexplainably, Turner Joy's radar was not detecting these suspicious contacts held by Maddox. This discrepancy should have obviously been investigated. It was being overlooked. It was obviously sound policy in this situation to err on the side of caution. The radarmen were correct in reporting all contacts. The ship's officers, however, should have recognized the situation and have suggested caution. The radar reports were not for the exclusive use of the ship's commander, but they were being sent by various systems to other control spaces and the Turner Joy as well.

The reports fueled the tense atmosphere when received at these other positions. Imagination was active. Sonar began reporting torpedo firings. Again this was a case of nerves and inexperience. The man on the sonar was trying, or perhaps even more appropriately, straining to do his part and issue warning reports as early as possible. He had been given no reason to doubt the authenticity of the radar reports. The man on watch was in a dark small room

undoubtedly calculating the prospects for survival should the ship be hit by a torpedo. He was justifiedly scared. He was new to the job. The experienced sonarman had volunteered to continue standing watch in the gun director, a position for which he had been meritoriously cited in earlier exercises. The cognizant officers agreed, for a good gun controller in this situation was essential, and sonar in this environment was of questionable value. No one was concerned with a submarine threat, and that was the primary function of a sonar watch. The sonar operators on a destroyer are trained primarily in active sonar techniques. This is the mode of operation similar to radar. A pulse (the familiar ping in motion pictures) is sent out, it strikes a target and returns an echo. The sonar today was not in the active mode. The ship was moving too fast for active sonar operations. The transducer on the ship at this speed would move out of the way, before the echo had a chance to return to it. Maddox's sonar was in the passive mode instead. This is the mode normally employed by submarines, who wish to remain silent and listen for the sounds of a surface contact. There are many sounds that can confuse a passive sonar operator. He is much more dependant upon experience to properly perform his job, than the active sonar operator. Fish and marine life can make sounds that mask the sounds of a ship, or in some instances, these marine biological noises will sound like a ship themselves. A prime criteria here too, is the speed of one's own ship. The water noise passing the hydrophone at high speeds, can render the sonar completely useless. So just as in the active mode, a ship must be operating at a reasonably slow speed if it expects its passive sonar to be effective.

Maddox was operating at high speed. No one was really concerned with enhancing the sonar performance. Speed was their best ally against a PT attack. As a result, the only noise that could be heard by sonar, was a noise that was very close aboard, i.e. emanating from Maddox herself. Constant noises are not likely to confuse even the novice. They can be easily recognized and filtered out. An intermittent

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noise is more troublesome. This is what confused Maddox's sonarman now. The sound of Maddox's rudder hard over during a high speed turn, sounded to the sonar watchstander, like a torpedo approaching. These course changes, it should be noted, were primarily due to a previous threat reported by radar. The sonarman had his concern for torpedoes heavily on his mind, just as a turn was executed. These sounds were, according to Navy procedure, taped for later reference. Shore experts knew immediately from the steaming conditions reported by Maddox, that the faint noise of a torpedo's screws approaching could never be heard by Maddox. The tapes, however were dutifully analysed after the action, and as suspected the only noise revealed was that which could be attributed to Maddox herself.

These were well intentioned, but erroneous sonar reports. They were significant in the events to follow. They were coupled with the radar reports and thus intensified the belief that Maddox was again under attack. Now it was the turn of the men in the "black box" to lend their intelligence contribution to this tense situation. They were receiving material from two separate sources, which they in turn were reporting to the division commander. Considering the tense environment, it is quite possible or rather even probable, that the source of the reports was being confused at times by these men, at times by the division commander, and at times by both.

Some reports came directly from North Vietnam to the on board team, and others were support messages provided by shore commands to Maddox for her information and self protection. The shore reports were originated in North Vietnam, but received and analysed at various U.S. facilities from Asia to Washington, then resent to Maddox. The shore reports were obviously delayed. It was necessary to send them, however, for the sake of completeness. Many reasons could have caused the ship on station to have missed a valuable piece of information. Duplication was therefore inevitable but

D.

acceptable. The actual delay time varied considerably, again for a variety of reasons. The delay could be a matter of hours or even days. This delay time was the source of confusion. The exact time of the original information could be determined for any message, but given the tense situation aboard Maddox, the fact that the division commander was not familiar with this intelligence information, and the fact that he could see but not keep the messages shown to him, could have easily caused him to overlook the exact message time and cause him to assume that most of the messages being shown to him were timely. It is thus not at all inconceivable that during the night of four August, that the team presented the commander with information that had been associated with the actual attack on the second, and that the commander confused this for threatening information that was just then being sent by North Vietnam. Maddox, in fact, could have been receiving information that related to the raider activity of the previous evening, the night of 3/4 August or even the raider activity at the end of July that had precipitated all these events. The traffic concerning the raiders was usually very bellicose and threatening. It could have easily been misunderstood to apply to the destroyers. It can not be stated that these mistakes actually occurred. It is now too long after the fact, and it could not be proved by records alone. Mistakes of this nature are common place, however. One thing that can be stated for sure, is that all this information was sent to Maddox, and that because of the system, it was being received at various different times. Indeed, if all of it was kept in an orderly perspective under the circumstances extant on Maddox, that would have been a miracle.

The interpretation of the intelligence itself was also a difficulty. The information was originated by North Vietnam. It was not meant for the consumption of outsiders. We could not very well ask them for a clarification of any part not understood. These

who read the information every day develop a sense of the "tone" of the information available. Those that were being introduced to it for the first time, the Maddox officers and many senior U.S. officials ashore, were likely to get an altogether different meaning from one message. Without an appreciation for the background, the new reader has no choice but to literally interpret the words he sees before him. This can cause grave errors in interpretation. Consider the report that a ship is "lost." Lost can mean - contact is no longer held; the ship is lost in that it can not be found; or it is sunk. Only the full message with identification of sender and receiver, taken together with much additional background information, will reflect which of these meanings applies in a given situation. Aside from pure semantics, another area for error is forgetting one's own Navy practice. It is common practice for Navy radar operators to track contacts and designate them if known as "friendly," and if unknown, as "hostile." Indeed these are the approved tracking terms that must be used in the interest of standardization. The operator, moreover, may give vectors to "attack" these hostile contacts. These attacks are, of course, only simulated. It is obviously never intended by the tracking Navy, that the target should ever learn that he is being tracked or attacked, even in an exercise situation. Now if the target knows, but has not been advised that this is for practice only, the words of the tracking operator do have a particularly sinister connotation. It is virtually certain that misunderstandings of this nature occurred both aboard Maddox and ashore when considering routine North Vietnamese tracking information. The reader of the message was basically taking it out of context and failing to appreciate that the United States Navy has the same routine.

The net effect on this night of four August was that radar, sonar and the intelligence team were reinforcing each other's

erroneous reports. Each taken separately could have been disproven, or recognized for their true meaning, but together, no one thought at the time to question any one source in depth. They were being rushed, and had no time or at least, they conceived that they did not have the time, to stop and question each report. They were geared to take avoiding action, to positively preclude the chance that they would be again attacked. It was not appreciated that one source was playing off the other, each enthusiastically seeking to prove the report of the other. Now it remained only for the fourth and final proof - visual confirmation. That was not long in coming. Just like the electronic reports before them, the topside personnel were straining to make their contribution, and to report all contacts at the earliest possible moment. They overheard the reports from radar and sonar, and they were being prompted to be especially alert by the ship's officers. They knew that these intelligence messages being sent up were disturbing to the division commander and the captain. They were convinced that a second attack was upon them.

The eye is not infallible. It often plays tricks. The desert mirage is a well known example. There were no such dramatic occurrences today, but the errors reported were for the same reason. The mind controls the eye. The desire to see something, can make the object appear. In mid-ocean peacetime steaming none of the spurious contacts reported this evening would have given a lookout a second cause for thought. He would have never have reported them, but rather waited to determine if he really saw what he thought he saw. Now, because of the imminent threat, everything was reported at once without a second evaluation. A distant whitecap, out of sequence with another, becomes a bow wave of a PT. A flash of light caused by a shooting star or a speck of dust on the observer's eye, becomes a searchlight or a gun flash. Once the seed is planted, the mind will strain to back up the conclusion, and even form the image of an on coming

PT. The observer in such an instance will be convinced of what he saw, and in fact, when other sources appear to support him, he will be even more adamant in the correctness of his vision.

The combination of these reports apparently reinforcing one another, led the destroyer captains to the conclusion that they were under attack. Maddox began to maneuver wildly to avoid torpedoes. Turner Joy began to maneuver, primarily to avoid Maddox. Then they opened fire. The contacts disappeared. Obviously the irony of this was lost in the midst of the flail. On 2 August, Maddox had fired in broad daylight on 3 PT boats for thirteen minutes, and scored by her account one hit. Now in the dead of night in poor weather, she fired a brief volley at a distant group of contacts held only on radar, and sunk them all immediately. This was a rather impressive gunnery improvement.

The aircraft had been requested earlier. They responded instantly this time. They searched to the best of their ability, but the only contacts they held were the two destroyers. They saw the gun flashes very clearly. It seemed obvious that a full battle was raging, but against whom, they could not be sure. The gun fire fed further reports. The North Vietnamese, far removed from the scene and just off their coast, could see and hear the strange events at sea. They naturally reported their observations to higher commands. It may even have appeared from these reports that the reporters were actually involved in the fray. Maddox, receiving such information, would use it as further evidence that they were under attack. Shore stations would subsequently add this to the confusing battle reports, and also erroneously assume that it confirmed the attack information.

The battle continued with little time to pause and reflect. Maddox was obviously getting the better of it. They had not been

hit and they were sinking the contacts with apparent ease. The "North Vietnamese" forces, however, kept coming. Suddenly, Maddox had the most solid radar contact of the night and it was close aboard. The order to fire was given. Now the most fortuitous event of the day was to occur. Maddox had paid for it in advance. Had the sonarman involved been at his sonar station, it is probable that the erroneous reports of torpedo firing would not have been added to the evidence that had worried the ship into this gun fight with phantoms. Here, at his gun control station, he was to play even a more important role. He refused to fire. He had lost track of the Turner Joy in the maneuvering, and he requested that she be ordered to turn on her running lights. This was an audacious act by a non-commissioned officer. The destroyers were running darkened. If they showed running lights, they would just be betraying their position to the attackers. His request was refused, and he was ordered again to fire. He persisted in his request. This was approaching mutiny. Frantically the division commander complied. Turner Joy did as ordered, and right in Maddox's gunsights was this understandably solid radar target. It was Turner Joy. Disaster had been averted by this unusual act.

This great mishap narrowly avoided, seemed to take the spirit from the battle. There was an abrupt subsidence of activity, as the evening returned to normal. The battle was over. There had been no casualties aboard either destroyer, and though the destroyermen would find it difficult to believe, there were no casualties to North Vietnam.

XII
THE INNOCENT INVOLVED

The fourth of August was just not North Vietnam's day. First, the night of 3/4 August had witnessed the return of the raiders. This was the very act that they had sought to curtail by attacking Maddox. Then Maddox herself with a second destroyer, was observed to be resuming its patrol. Finally, there was the battle in which they were not involved, but for which they would get the blame.

The patrol craft organization was perhaps the most upset. They recognized that the raider's return would mean that they would again be assigned to try to engage them. They had hoped that the PF attack on the destroyer would have changed this. It had not. They could not see the destroyers who were operating off the coast. They were way too far at sea, but they knew they had returned from the reports that they were receiving from their radar network.

The Swatows idly patrolling off the coast were taken completely by surprise at the fireworks display that they could see and hear out at sea. They knew it was a major battle. They were somewhat miffed that they had not been informed, but that was a rather standard oversight. It was a good omen to them. They were hoping that the PTs were ordered in for a second attack, as this might give them a reprieve. They were somewhat jealous of this combat assignment, and they began reporting their observations to their shore establishment. Inwardly, they were relieved that they were not the object of the destroyer's fire. They might have even colored their reports a bit, so that to the casual observer it would even seem that they were assisting in this far removed conflict.

Amidst the volume of information received during this period, one message is frequently cited by U.S. authorities to verify North

Vietnam's involvement. It purports to state that two North Vietnamese boats were lost and two U.S. aircraft were shot down. The first challenge to the veracity of such a message is an obvious one. How could we believe the first half, when we categorically knew the second half to be untrue. Aside from this, the many analytical difficulties with this source come in to play. To what time was this message actually attributed? What did "lost" actually mean? North Vietnam did claim to shoot down aircraft on the second of August, but they never made such a claim on the fourth. It would appear that this could easily have been a late message, that coincidentally arrived in the midst of the flail on the fourth, and was therefore mistakenly believed to be applying to the current situation. ✓

There would appear to be less stress at various shore stations than aboard Maddox. This, it would seem, would enable the shore command to pay more attention to detail, and to correctly arrange all message traffic in its proper chronological order. This unfortunately is wishful thinking. The shore commands were in a crisis situation as well, and the likelihood of a mistake was unfortunately almost as high as on the threatened ship. Duty officers and senior officials that normally did not read this "raw" message traffic, were concentrating on the very limited intelligence available, and searching every message for a shred of evidence to support Maddox's contention that she was under attack. They did not have a true understanding of the information that they were reading, for they did not have the necessary background frame of reference. They tended to take each message literally, and because of this unfamiliarity with the traffic in general, it's quite easy to conceive that they would misread a date and time on any particular message. ✓

North Vietnam did not "lose" two boats as the message states. ✓
This was not known definitely at the time, but shortly thereafter

it was confirmed. We obtained complete photographic evidence within days of the retaliatory strike, which positively accounted for every boat in the North Vietnamese Naval inventory.

What did intelligence from these messages really mean? Piece by piece, it was subject to gross errors in interpretation. Taken together, the competent analyst could use it with his many other sources to arrive at correct picture, but still many aspects would never be entirely explained. Intelligence from this source has been received, both before and since, that indicates extensive combat actions have taken place, yet it can be proved that no such actions actually occurred. This could represent communications exercise, true, but normally there are other indicators that enable the technical analysts to differentiate between exercise and actual traffic. Additionally, in this particular instance, with all the activity underway, it would have been a most unlikely time for North Vietnam to be holding exercises. Another possibility would be that North Vietnam could have been confused to the same extent as Maddox, and actually believed themselves under attack, when they were not. There are a number of other possibilities, but ultimately it is likely that we will never know what the cause of these mysterious activities really was.

There is a multitude of proof that North Vietnam was not a participant in an attack on the two destroyers on the fourth of August. In the final analysis, the PTs were the only units capable of the attack as reported by the destroyers. We know that at the time, there were eleven PTs at Van Hoa, and one disabled boat on the southern coast. Maddox did, in fact, report more than eleven, but that would have been impossible given the speed range also reported by Maddox. Now if all eleven PTs were deployed, that would have been an unprecedented event. It is unlikely that all the boats

could have been operational at any one given time. If they were, then a movement of this magnitude would have most certainly been reflected by the very reliable North Vietnamese tracking network. It was not. It should be noted that this would be no brief sortie. If the PTs deployed from Van Hoa to the scene of the destroyer, engaged them for some three hours, and then returned to their home port, this would have taken them at least seven hours. This would have indeed been a truly amazing feat for this small Navy, regardless if they had inflicted any casualties on the enemy or not. Considering the North Vietnamese leadership, it would have certainly have been a feat that they would have taken pride in boasting about. They made no such boast, in fact they denied being at sea at all. A multitude of reliable and proven intelligence sources were available concerning the North Vietnamese PTs. They all indicate that the PTs definitely were not participants in any event on the fourth of August.

For the sake of completeness, possible involvement by the Swatows must also be considered. There was no one first hand source that could give testimony here, but all the information available proves their innocence conclusively. The first thought has to be that it would just be illogical to place Swatows in a confrontation with destroyers. They could not be expected to cause any reasonable damage, yet they would be particularly vulnerable to the destroyer's firepower, especially at night. The next hurdle in considering the Swatows would be that Maddox would have had to make gross speed errors to have the Swatows qualify as the object they were tracking. This was not recognized at the time, of course, because the official intelligence estimate had misrepresented the Swatow speed as much higher than actual. It is true that speed errors are common in tracking a target by radar, but not in the magnitude that would have been required here.

The torpedo reports by Maddox have been totally discredited, so they need not be considered here. The fact that no torpedoes were detected merely opens the consideration of Swatows as opposed to PTs, but there were other considerations. The feat of assembling at least eleven boats or more in the case of Swatows would be considerably harder to accomplish here than in the case of PTs. The Swatows would have to be assembled from widely separated ports. The transit time for these slower units would be from three to four hours from port to the battle area; three hours in the area; and three to four hours to return. This meant a total underway time of from nine to eleven hours. The previous discussions relative to the PTs are pertinent here. This feat was not reported by the North Vietnamese tracking system. This would be all the more remarkable in the Swatow case, since not only was the time longer, but since the boats would be assembling from widely separated ports, more stations would be involved tracking them and it is just inconceivable that there should be no reflection of the activity. Again, as before if they had ever achieved such a feat, they would have been certain to boast of it. The Swatows we know, were all back at their bases come morning when the retaliation raids occurred. Considering their routine Naval performance, this would have been near impossible if they had been at sea for the entire night before.

The "battle" of 4 August took place some sixty miles off the coast of North Vietnam. This very fact would have struck terror into the hearts of the North Vietnamese sailors. They never intended to go that far to sea. They definitely had no part in the events of the fourth, but they were to be blamed for them. They were yet to appreciate what the consequences of this "phantom" battle would mean to North Vietnam.

XIII
RETALIATION

News of the second "attack" caught U.S. authorities with as much surprise as the first. It is important to consider that, when analysing the action of these authorities, they sincerely believed that there had been an actual attack. They were not privileged to have all the information that is known about it today. True, there were indicators that should have and did raise some suspicions, but these decision makers were under time constraints, which would not allow them the time for a leisurely evaluation. They had to act on the basis of the information at hand.

They were more prepared in many ways for this second attack. The plans had all been reviewed. All the retaliation options had been discussed. Each office had more or less a feel for what would ultimately be considered as an acceptable course of action. The public opinion poles were in, and they showed that the public was overwhelmingly behind an appropriate response to avenge the insult of an attack. Time had run out to make an appropriate response to the first attack. An untimely retaliation would not be an effective one. This second incident extended the clock. A retaliation could again be considered timely, and all the more appropriate after the insult of another attack. This was guaranteed to win over those of the public that may still have been on the edge of endorsing retaliation. It now appeared that North Vietnam was on a conscientious program of attacking our ships in international waters, and that they were not content with one brief show of force. Above all, this was politically the greatest present that could have been handed to the President. He could now effectively neutralize Senator Goldwater, by taking retaliation action here. He would show the public who were in support of such a move, that he could be as strong and resolute on the international

scene as he was known to be in domestic affairs.

The North Vietnamese were apparently being more considerate this second time around. This second action was by U.S. time, taking place on a weekday during normal working hours. The first team was in place. They were all prepared with plans and recommendations, which they were just about to shelve because the time had run out on the first round. These men, having just completed a detailed study of the plans, and having completed many sessions with their own and other agencies, were ready for action. They were, in fact, more ready than the President. He saw the political advantages, but he was not a man for quick actions in areas that were not familiar to him. He still had some influential advisors that were urging him to be cautious. The President accepted the analysis that the Chinese and the Soviets would not interfere, if the response was limited. He believed he could deliver an appropriate and limited response. He would attack North Vietnam's Naval bases, but not all of them.

The first base deleted from the target list for the sake of caution, was Van Hoa. It was considered too close to the Chinese border. It would have been a relatively simple task for an aircraft to unintentionally violate Chinese air space, in an attack on this northern most Naval base.

The deletion of Van Hoa is particularly significant of course. It was the only base that harbored the actual North Vietnamese aggressors - the PT's. It was the PT's after all that had conducted the attack on the second, and at this time, the U.S. authorities also believed that the PT's had been the culprits on the fourth. A quick glance at the North Vietnamese Naval inventory would confirm that the PT's were certainly the only ships that presented a threat to the U.S. Navy. The patrol craft could be considered nothing more

than a nuisance value. These facts were well known at every Naval command level.

For some strange reason, this information was never comprehended by the senior officials. It was not only laymen, but experienced Naval officers as well, that referred to every boat as a PT. The wide disparity in the capability of a PT versus a Swatow was not appreciated. Indeed this tendency to view all boats as PTs lasted throughout the war. Public remarks by no lesser a figure than Secretary Mc Namara, himself, as well as several Admirals, prove that these men never grasped the error that was made in August of 1964.

The one appropriate target was deleted from the strike list. If this had been clear to the planners of this retaliation, then an appropriate plan would have been very difficult to come by. In their frame of reference, the deletion of Van Hoa was insignificant. There were four other Naval bases that still could be attacked. They each had four or more patrol craft as targets, and these were in the minds of the planners synonymous with the units that had attacked our destroyers.

The retaliation plan was now set. There was no more concern about it. The draft resolution to be offered to Congress whereby they could approve the Presidential action, had also been appropriately changed and was ready to submit. The way for action was clear, but the President still delayed. He was haunted by one question that no one had yet been able to answer. Why was North Vietnam taking this action? This was not all that pertinent to his decision, but it still left him slightly uneasy.

Now when the plans and decisions were essentially agreed upon, there started to surface some doubts about this second attack. Understandably, the doubt had to lag the reports themselves. Rather,

those most qualified to possess the most serious doubts were lower level analysts who would have to make their opinions heard all the way up through their chain of superiors. This would take time. The division commander aboard Maddox had brought the situation into the open, when he had reported that he was uncertain about his earlier reported torpedo firings. He did not mean to discredit the entire attack, just the torpedo reports. He suggested a thorough reconnaissance in daylight. This was not a practicle solution.

A daylight reconnaissance would be unlikely to prove anything. The North Vietnamese boats would have returned to port. There would be a chance, but only a small one, that wreckage would be seen adrift. That would be the only form of proof, if any. Moreover, the delay would again make any intended actions untimely. If search results were awaited, then the necessary decision making meetings held, an entire day would be lost.

Maddox was questioned extensively and independantly from all command levels. The division commander never backed down from his contention, that he had been attacked. He admitted only that the torpedo reports were suspect. Indeed, it would have been almost impossible for him to admit that after five hours of reporting, all his reports were wrong. This officer had just made the rank of Captain four months previously. His normal sphere of superiors was a small and relatively junior one. Now, he was the center of interest for the entire U.S. government, and he was communicating directly with senior Admirals, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretary of Defense himself. Could he report - ENTIRE ATTACK REEVALUATED AS MISTAKE. NO NORTH VIETNAMESE INVOLVED. REQUEST YOU CANCEL ALL MY MESSAGES FOR THE LAST FIVE HOURS. Such an acknowledgement would have been most unlikely. He had stirred the pot, now he would have to live with it. In fact, at this point, a very tired and nervous division commander, still honestly believed

that elements of his reports were true, and that he had indeed been attacked.

The shore stations had pressure of this nature too. They had accepted the destroyer's reports and recommended retaliation. They did not want to unconditionally admit that it was all a mistake. They were really in no position to pass such a harsh judgement and overrule the man at sea. They did not have all the information that the division commander had, but only his reports. Their view was therefore different. No Naval officer wanted to believe that another officer, commanding at sea, could fight a battle with phantoms for such a duration, without recognizing his mistake. Ironically, the very length of the battle made it suspicious. Considering the North Vietnamese Naval threat and the small size of their boats, it stretched the imagination that they could have kept the destroyers under attack for a full three hours.

The shore staffs could immediately recognize the torpedo reports as improbable. There were also various aspects of the "black box" information that could be perceived differently ashore than afloat. In summation, it all pointed to something amiss in the entire episode, but there was certainly nothing concrete to either confirm or deny it. The Admirals were getting upset. They had not reached their ranks by equivocation. Try as they might, however, they could not get a firm response from Maddox. They received back only qualifiers - "highly probable; officer's of good reliability; or torpedo firings suspect." The only firm statement they could get was that the commander still believed that he was attacked.

A firm decision had to be made. Maddox could not appreciate all that this implied. The various commands were being pressed for

information and recommendations. The President was poised for action. He was advised of some of the discrepancies, but he was assured that the basic fact that there had been an attack was true. Time was now becoming critical. The authorities took their stand. It was just inconceivable that after all this build up, that Maddox had not been attacked at all. Perhaps they were not attacked in the numbers reported, perhaps the torpedo reports being close by were erroneous, but certainly North Vietnam had been out there to harass her in some form or another. This was certainly what they wanted to believe.

The President was satisfied, but he was not completely ready to act. He wanted to confer with Senator Goldwater. Politics seemed to still be more important than the basic issue. He had difficulty contacting the Senator, who was on his yacht. Eventually, Goldwater came ashore and communication was established. The President got this one more important vote, and the planes were in the air even as the President was announcing the retaliation on national television, just at the end of prime time on the eastern seaboard.

Sixty four planes were to take part in the retaliation raids against the patrol craft bases. Two aircraft were lost. One pilot was killed and one was captured. North Vietnam lost a few fuel storage tanks, two Swatows were sunk and several others were slightly damaged. One of the Swatows that had been sunk, was subsequently raised only to be sunk again a little more than a year later. This second sinking was to be its last, as it was under tow by another Swatow that was taking it north for repairs. It was sunk this time in deep water. It is difficult to say who got the better of it in these reprisal strikes. The damage to North Vietnam was entirely insignificant, compared to their exposure. The United States lost two planes, one pilot and one pilot that would spend nine and a half years in captivity. This could probably be described as a stand off. It is interesting here to note, that for the first time, we actually had two North Vietnamese boats lost and two U.S. planes shot down. The exact damage reported in the North Vietnamese message that was claimed by Secretary McNamara to be associated with the phantom attack of 4 August.

Not surprisingly, the United States claimed victory. The damage reports that we published were greatly in excess of the actual fact. We listed the damage as occurring to the North Vietnamese PTs, still choosing to ignore the great distinction between the two types of boat. The public could not have appreciated gunboat, but a PT was a ship type known to all. The damage reports were published on the basis of pilot reports at the time of the strikes. It would have been nice to conclude that we had a momentary lapse after the ten years that had transpired since the Korean war, and that we had just forgotten to be skeptical of these raw damage claims. Such was not the case. We were destined to repeat these errors as the war went on, even in this day of photographic proof. We showed an unexplainable willingness to ignore both the facts and the past, and commenced to chart an unsuccessful strategy for bombing North Vietnam. A strategy proven invalid in two wars within the life time of the men that were presently planning this one.

In this area, one man or one document can be deadly, not only in the present, but in the future. In a government as large as ours, there are many places that the blame could be placed. Technically, it would seem to be a simple matter not to deceive ourselves, but such is not the case. There must have been hundreds of areas where this could happen. I know of many, but I will cite just one to illustrate the difficulty in stopping it and what it can lead to.

The Department of Defense Operations Evaluation Group was a product of Mr. Mc Namara's management scheme. It consisted of academicians who would study the effectiveness of the military at various levels. One such employee, assigned to the Pacific Fleet headquarters prepared a paper on how much ammunition was required to sink a North Vietnamese PT boat. A paper was required from all such employees during their tour of slightly over a year at a

command outside the Washington area. The topic was selected by the employee, and it just had to be completed before he returned to Washington. This particular young employee, as was typical from his academic environment, procrastinated until the last minute to compile his research. His subject was a commendable, but inappropriate one. Not one North Vietnamese PT had been sunk at the time he authored this paper. He was appropriately cleared, so that he could have verified this fact with an intelligence analyst in ten seconds if he had chosen to ask. He did not. Perhaps, he even knew the truth, but at this late stage it may have been too late to change his subject to a worthwhile one, and compile enough data to support it.

The report, as written, was very impressive in appearance. Data from pilot reports and after action ammunition expenditures, was placed on data processing equipment. The resultant compilation showed precisely how much ordnance was expended by type and size, versus the damage inflicted. The damage of course, was the rub. This was early in the war. At the time, pilots were forbidden to fire on any boat unless it was confirmed to be one from the North Vietnamese Navy. In the mean time, junks, sampans and all variety of "civilian" boats were firing on the planes. Planes had been lost to rifle fire from these boats. Understandably this provoked the pilots, when they were fired upon or saw their buddies fired upon, they naturally wanted to retaliate. They fired back, and in their after action report, the target was invariably a PT. Even the pilots missed the distinction between Swatows and PTs. The PT was a known commodity, thus anything that floated was liable to be labeled as a PT. In fact, the PTs seldom left the comfort of their home base, and if they did, you could be sure that the move would be at night. This practice was well known to the debriefing officers, and all the shore officials that received these PT reports. In shore, it was condoned because it was known that the pilots were being shot at, and

therefore deserved a break from the dictates of the more comfortable bureaucrats in Washington. Right or wrong, it was open knowledge that this was the way the game was being played.

The resultant study obviously was worthless. The author must have sensed this, for he never distributed it within the Fleet Headquarters, where it would have been immediately proven false. It was brought to the attention of the Fleet staff a year later, because a Washington Navy intelligence command had just received it and had written that it was an excellent study, the kind that they would like to receive in the future. This fortunately provided an opportunity to advise all the recipients that the study was completely without merit, and that they should destroy all their copies. This is wishful thinking. It is much easier to start something than to stop it. Chances are that there are several copies of the study still in existence, and that at some time in the future, they will be uncovered and considered as the bible for PT warfare. This could obviously be disastrous, if future planners were to rely on totally false "facts." This, it must be remembered was the work of one man. There were undoubtedly many other similar instances throughout this long war, that may be lurking in the shadows to trap us in the future, if we are not extremely careful.

In the retaliatory strikes of five August, there was indeed, one PT involved. This was an accident for both sides. The boat was our lone straggler, still beached on the southern coastline. They were surprised by the waves of attacking aircraft, just as much as the other North Vietnamese sailors at the patrol craft bases. They were relieved to see that most of the planes were passing them, but suddenly, and just as quick as it takes to tell, they were strafed by a lone aircraft that was apparently just returning from a run further north. The PT was not hit, but this was certainly sufficient motivation for them to take some positive action. They had been out

of touch with the outside world, since they had arrived here on the second. They did not know if there country was in a general war, or not. They floated the boat on the next high tide, and headed north on their one working engine. They put in to the first patrol craft base up the line. The personnel at the base were quite surprised to see a PT, but repairs were started immediately, in spite of the damage to the repair base itself. It was, after all, a simple matter for the more experienced shore side personnel, and the PT was able to continue its journey almost immediately.

It was indeed a joyous occasion, when the boat pulled into Van Hoa. At last all the boats were reunited, and after all, no serious damage had been done to any of them. They were just now getting the rumors of the U.S. air strikes on the patrol craft bases. This returning PT could give them some first hand information. None of them really knew what had caused the strikes. They theorized that it was a result of their attack on the second, They did not know of an attack or a claimed attack on the fourth, and they were wondering why they had not been attacked by the U.S. planes at Van Hoa. The potential complications that the U.S. might violate China in this event, were far beyond the understanding of these men. They were happy here tonight. The worst seemed to be over, and they, as PTs, were not likely to become involved again any time soon. That is how they felt, at any rate. Indeed it was true. It would not be for almost *two* years, that the services of the PTs would again be requested for hostile action. Then, as luck would have it, it would be the same division, the same three boats, and with one or two exceptions, the same men, that would again be sent against a U.S. destroyer.

XIV
RESOLUTION

The shooting was over, but the combat phase was just the preface to the real significance of these events - the U.S. Congressional Resolution. President Johnson was a product of Congress. In these days, just before he was to run for election as President for the first time, he was acutely aware of the necessity for congressional support. He had been consulting with his former colleagues, selected ones at least, right from the start of the first attack. He wanted their support. He was most encouraged that they had assured him complete bipartisan support to avenge these affronts to American dignity.

On the fifth of August, the earliest possible moment after the bombing, the resolution that had been drafted by the Administration was submitted to the Armed Forces and Foreign Relations Committees for a joint hearing on a priority basis. The combined committee heard from the Secretaries of State and Defense the following day. Their testimony and examination was brief, if not perfunctory. There was overwhelming support for a quick approval of the resolution. It was perceived by those concerned, that this Congressional action was being undertaken to show the world that the United States was ready to unanimously back the Presidential action that had already been taken. It was not intended that this be a license for future involvement in Vietnam, but rather only a warning to all nations that should they be foolish enough to try a similar act, the United States would endorse immediate retaliation as in this case. Senator Morse was the only discenter in the voting. He wanted further hearings, but he knew that his colleagues and the American public would not stand for such a delay. He did not press the issue.

On August 7, Senator Nelson, although appreciating the national mood for swift action, also sought to hedge the resolution by adding an amendment requiring Congressional approval before ground troops could be introduced into South Vietnam. He eventually was persuaded to withdraw his amendment in the interest of time. The resolution, the argument went, was set and had met the approval of virtually all who needed to approve it. It could be passed as it was with only a brief floor debate. The President at this time was in no position to abuse the intent of Congress and expand the operations in Vietnam. The election was pending, and he would be, as always, politically cautious. Few Congressmen were looking to the future and beyond the present aspects of the situation. Most members believed therefore, that no qualification was necessary.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed 88 to 2 in the Senate. The ten absent Senators indicating their approval. Senators Morse and Gruening were the two dissenters. The House vote was unanimous 416 to 0. The President was backed on his retaliation action, and although Congress had not intended it, he had been given authority to do virtually anything he desired to stop aggression in Vietnam.

It is difficult to recreate the public mood in 1964, after all that has transpired since, concerning our involvement in Vietnam. In those days we were unbeatable. We were prepared to stand tough in any situation originating from an external threat. The Kennedy spirit was still with the public, and many in the Administration were still Kennedy men. The public did not know a thing about Vietnam. They knew, or rather believed, that the U.S. Navy had been attacked on two separate and successive occasions. This was ample reason, they felt, to support and even demand a firm U.S. response.

If the public were naive on this issue, what about Congress? For the most part, Congress could be put in the same class. There were certain members of course, whose job it was to know such things as the goings on in Vietnam, and to advise their fellow members. These men possessed roughly the same facts as did the Administration. Their knowledge was, in fact, given them by the Administration. This made them in a way, privileged insiders, and as such they tended to back the Administration's views.

In reality at this time, no one had any particularly meaningful inside information on the attack itself. There can really be no criticism of the retaliation or the Congressional approval of the retaliation from the facts known to the decision makers at the time, in spite of the general unstable politics in South Vietnam and the ever growing U.S. attempts to assist them. There was nothing particularly devious in this U.S. strike on the North. An attack on our ships had completely changed the picture. This was willful aggression by North Vietnam against an entirely U.S. target. They must have realized that they would be subject to repercussions from such an incident.

Congress and the public viewed the Resolution as an approval of the retaliation action. They had not thought beyond that. The public can not be blamed for naivete for that, but perhaps Congress can. They were soon to become victimized by the Administration who would use this Resolution as justification for increasing our involvement in Vietnam. Senators Morse and Gruening were not clairvoyant on this issue, however. They were just following their own historic pattern of voting against outside involvements.

Passing any motion through Congress can be very difficult. If it were to be qualified by every man's views, it would take months of debate and reams of paper to produce. The Resolution in question was short, broad and general. It was desirable that it be passed

quickly and unanimously or nearly so, so that the world would properly perceive that we were solidly behind the President and against this insult. Congress rushed to pass the Resolution and trusted the President.

That trust, we now know, was misplaced. True, Congress was still not eliminated from decision making. Year after year, they voted funds to support Vietnam programs requested by the Administration. But they had been trapped by a President more skillful than they. If they had denied these funds after the nation had committed its men to battle, they would have been severely taken to task for letting them down, and even for causing a loss of life. True again, if they had denied the funds, the Resolution would have had no effect, but the President knew he had the upper hand and so he made the commitments, leaving Congress no choice but to follow. The Resolution now viewed in this context was a monumental occurrence. Much of the tragedy, we collectively refer to as Vietnam, can be dated from this Resolution.

Blame, then, if it must be placed, would be in this misplaced trust by Congress. It is an unfortunate state of affairs that the Nation's President could not be trusted. Congress can not really be held responsible for this. If the President had honored the spirit, as well as the letter of the law, we may not have developed the chasm between the Executive and Legislative branches that exists today. The Watergate affair greatly widened this breach, and made Congress all the more suspicious, but the basic break unquestionably occurred over Vietnam. Congress today has relegated much of their historic prerogative over our many pressing domestic issues, to the back burner, while they are delving into international concerns on an unprecedented scale. They are passing legislation severely restricting the options available to the Executive branch. We are in great danger of substituting too many controls for perhaps too few. In the fast pace of international affairs, and the necessary person to person diplomacy between heads of state, making decisions contingent upon the approval of a body

comprised of some six hundred individuals, all with varying degrees of interest and knowledge, is not a workable solution. Furthermore, like it or not, much international negotiations depend heavily on secret information. Other nations, both friend and foe, would undoubtedly refuse to deal with us if they knew that their discussions would imminently fall in the public domain. History has proven that the nation with the best intelligence has been the winner. No nation could function in this arena, if the product of their labor were to be exposed to all six hundred or so members of a body such as our Congress, not to mention all their multitude of staff members as well.

It is evident, more each day, that we are crippling ourselves by these new legislative restraints. This is the legacy of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Without it, the war in Vietnam would not have taken the form, as we know it today. Something may have come up later to have taken its place as an authority for the war, but that can only be conjecture. What happened, happened. The Resolution was seized by the President to establish the course of the war. It has since been repealed, but the repeal is only a slip of paper. The Resolution lives on, not only as a memory of a war now hopelessly lost, but as an example of the abuse of Presidential power, an event that Congress is determined shall never happen again. Only time will tell the ultimate consequences that were begun on this fateful day in August 1964.

SOURCES

It is not my intention herein to discuss the numerous sources of intelligence information that were available to me. There are many current books that discuss U.S. intelligence operations. The conclusions vary considerably. That is to be as expected, since their authors range from honorably retired officers to disgruntled former employees. Conclusions aside, however, the books are essentially accurate in their descriptions of intelligence methods and procedures. It would be redundant to go into them again here. Suffice it to say that no pertinent source was denied to me.

These routine intelligence sources provided information on the daily movements of the North Vietnamese Navy, their training exercises, the readiness of their forces, and to some extent, the intelligence that they possessed on our forces. This information was incredibly complete. It was certainly adequate for day to day assessment. There were two significant shortcomings. The information was not always timely. This meant that there was seldom an opportunity to warn a ship that an attack was underway. There was no way to correct this deficiency, given the short distances involved in the Gulf. Another area that could seldom be answered by conventional intelligence sources was the reasoning of the North Vietnamese leaders. Again, in the normal course of events, information in this category is usually not available. In regard to the attack of 2 August, we were luckier than could have been expected. We had ample warning. If there was any fault, it was on our end for not using this time to maximum advantage. On the second issue, it would be several years before we would learn the true motives of the Vietnamese leaders, but then in a most unique circumstance, we would learn this and a great deal more.

On 1 July 1966, North Vietnamese PT Division 3 was again put on the spot. They were, for the second time, assigned to conduct an attack on a U.S. destroyer, and this one was actually scheduled as a daylight run. The attack was the result of another hasty decision by the North Vietnamese leaders. Two days previously, U.S. aircraft had attacked fuel storage areas in Hanoi, the very home of these leaders. The war was suddenly real. The leaders demanded a response to this affront. Again, they obviously considered the Navy as the most likely to effect a rapid attack on a U.S. asset, but also they obviously considered it the most expendable of their military resources.

The PTs never got within range of their target, the U.S.S. Coontz. They were sunk by aircraft. They were not hit directly. Their paper thin aluminium hulls, after five years of tropical corrosion and corrective maintenance, easily parted from near misses by the aircraft bombs. The boats sunk slowly. In fact, the last one sank alongside Coontz, just before they could put enough lines on it. One or even two PTs could have been captured had the destroyer not been concerned that they might be booby trapped. As it was, nineteen North Vietnamese PT crewmen were captured. This was the complete crews of two boats. The third boat had not escaped. It was sunk, but had been able to make its way further inshore, so that its crewmen were rescued by North Vietnamese civilian boatmen.

This was a precedent setting event. These prisoners were taken in international waters, as a result of an action between U.S. and North Vietnamese forces. This put them in a category altogether different than ground prisoners captured in South Vietnam. On land, agreements between South Vietnam and the United States, assured that South Vietnam had a final claim to all prisoners. In this case, the prisoners ^{were} exclusively in U.S. jurisdiction, unless we chose to decide otherwise. We wanted to maintain our jurisdiction, for we

saw an opportunity to exchange these prisoners for U.S. airmen held by Hanoi. This was in the era, when they were making token releases of captured U.S. personnel. It was hoped that if we repatriated their PT sailors, that they would reciprocate with an equal release of our men, or at the least, that they would continue their token releases which were usually groups of three prisoners. In this respect, we were to be disappointed. North Vietnam was not anxious for the return of their men. In fact, they hostilely resisted our overtures made through neutral sources for the return of their seamen.

We had no way of anticipating this North Vietnamese reaction at the start, so we kept the PT prisoners entirely within U.S. custody to be sure that we would not jeopardize our jurisdictional claim. Another unique aspect in this situation was that the Navy was the sole agency in charge. Department of Defense directives had assigned the Army to be the primary agency responsible for prisoner handling and interrogation. This was logical on the grounds that they would be most likely to obtain the majority of prisoners in any extended combat situation. The directive was not an absolute right, but as is usual, it gave the other services an opportunity to participate, under the overall Army direction. The Air Force actively trained to participate with the Army, since it was practice to assume that there would be a number of enemy airmen that would fall into U.S. hands in a conventional war situation. The Navy's participation was only through the Marine Corps. The Marine situation was obviously comparable to the Army's, and the Navy in itself was obviously much different, if one ignores for the moment its air arm. When the Navy elected to remain out of this formal interrogation system, it did not abandon all its rights. There was a provision that the service that actually acquired the prisoners, could interrogate them to obtain "timely" tactical information. This was the clause that was invoked in this case. They wanted this opportunity for considerable information of

particular value to the Navy was expected to be available. This was the type of information that would not be familiar to the other services, and as such could probably only be gained in its entirety by an experienced Navy team. The Navy had no such team ready to go, and particularly, they had no trained interrogators. They required assistance in this regard from the Army and Marine Corps. These two organizations graciously responded by sending their best personnel. They were to serve under the direction of the Navy, which actually directed the questioning. The interrogation was underway.

The first misconception that must be corrected in regard to these prisoners, and the information they provided, is that they were like "stool pigeons" in the U.S. domestic criminal scene. This analogy was made by a U.S. Senator in the 1968 Senate committee hearings on the Gulf of Tonkin. Such a mistake may be excusable in a layman, but it shows in a Senator, that he did not bother to properly research the subject he was charged with investigating. He did not have a basic understanding of the communist military practices and procedures.

The cooperation of these North Vietnamese seamen was, indeed, the antithesis of that we would expect from similarly incarcerated U.S. military personnel. This is, however, an invalid comparison. We trained our men in the "Code of Conduct" for a specific reason. We recognized in the Second World War, and more so in Korea, that our men needed official guidance in the face of the threat of torture by their captors. Even the least knowledgeable of our men, we believed, had a wealth of knowledge that would be of value to the enemy. In our open society, it is questionable, exactly how much these men would know that was not already available to the efficient communist intelligence network, but certainly they could render a service by confirming the information that the communist services had already

obtained. Most importantly, we were searching for a standard of conduct that could be accepted by all in the U.S. military and help support them in the hostile and uncertain environment of captivity by the enemy. We were not particularly worried that our men would embrace the communist philosophy and elect to defect to the communist side. We experienced only a handful of such defections in Korea. They were disturbed men, most of whom subsequently requested to be returned to the United States. We thus had no program of education specifically directed against defection in captivity, but rather, we educated our men in the Code of Conduct instead.

The communists were confronted with an entirely different dilemma. They had witnessed mass defections or attempted defections both in the Second World War and in Korea. They were worried and rightfully so, that their men would refuse repatriation once they experienced the Western way of life, even if that experience was entirely within a prisoner of war camp. Quite understandably, they initiated a training program exclusively devoted to teaching their men not to become indoctrinated with the capitalistic way of life. They were not concerned that their soldiers would give away much information of military value. Their men were not privy to any information of great significance, or so their reasoning went. It was the foot soldier that was most liable to be captured, and he would know only a limited amount of information on his own unit. In any event, they weighed the two alternatives and determined that it was more important to prevent defections than to conceal information.

Our experience with the PT prisoners confirmed this analysis. The enlisted men, initially cooperative, would no longer talk once "political" topics had been introduced. Their definition of this taboo area was quite broad, and difficult to isolate. It could encompass a simple question such as "what do you think

of life in North Vietnam?"; or it might not be evidenced until they were asked a more blatant "wouldn't you consider living in the democratic South, as opposed to your regime up North?" The officers would remain cooperative after such questioning, and they would even politely respond to the question, but they made it plainly obvious that they preferred to change the subject.

This experience was not peculiar to these Naval prisoners. Our Army and Marine personnel reported many similar cases in their more extensive experience among prisoners taken in South Vietnam. They told of cases where their prisoners would give important information, and even lead U.S. forces back to their secreted headquarters, thus compromising their fellow soldiers and critical supplies. As with these PT men, the ground soldiers could be made hostile instead of cooperative, just by exposing them to a few political comments. When they revealed information or, as we look at it, betrayed their comrades, they were not shifting allegiance. Even after these acts, they remained devote communists and foes of the United States forces that they were seemingly aiding.

The fact that these PT prisoners provided us so much information is not surprising when considered in the context of this environmental background. This is the standard and the only standard that we should judge them by. They were Vietnamese, so must be compared to Vietnamese, and not Americans. Their cooperation was not entirely unconditional. They at first tried to confuse us by giving false names and ranks. They were quickly won over by excellent treatment. We made a special effort to obtain food that was familiar to them. They were well fed, given medical attention, clothing and a place to sleep. They were not confined in a jail, but rather they occupied officer's staterooms aboard a U.S. Navy ship. This was ostensibly better quarters than the U.S. enlisted crew. They were given extras that they were totally unaccustomed to - ice cream, candy and cigarettes. This was in stark

contrast to their normal style of life, which consisted of rationed food and sleeping on the open deck of the PT exposed to the elements. Aside from these luxuries, the most important "condition" to insure their cooperation, was our agreement that we would not turn them over to the South Vietnamese. They were exceptionally afraid of their Southern cousins. At one point, an officer prisoner was being interrogated when he saw through the open curtain, what he believed to be a Vietnamese. It was some time before the interrogator determined the cause of the officer's obviously changed attitude. He had actually observed a Filipino steward. We assembled several stewards in their U.S. uniforms. They showed the officer their identification cards, and even photographs of themselves with wives and sweethearts in native Philippine costume. The officer eventually acknowledged what we were saying, but I am not totally convinced that he believes it today. He remained cooperative, but not nearly as much as he had been prior to this incident. A similar incident occurred during a visit by the International Red Cross. They had promised not to include South Vietnamese in their visiting delegation, but in spite of this they did. When the prisoners viewed the Vietnamese representative they became quite hostile, with much of their rath centered upon us for a broken promise. They believed that this was just a prelude to being turned over to the South Vietnamese military. The Red Cross has no stature in North Vietnam, so it was impossible to explain this to the prisoners, let alone trying to convince them that these people were just checking on their welfare.

The daily assurances that they would not be turned over to the South Vietnamese plus the luxurious living conditions, kept the prisoners content and anxious to cooperate with us. In the beginning of the interrogation, there appeared to be some very suspicious information being provided. At that point, we anticipated this, any immediately set out to determine its cause. The fault was soon

evident. It was not with the prisoners, but with us. Our interrogators did not have the necessary Naval vocabulary. Consider for a moment such terms as torpedo, anchor, bow and stern. These are only a few words with no land counterpart. Once this deficiency was made apparent, we took considerable pains to correct it. It was not all that easy to correct, for we had no reference books for our interrogators use. Most often we had to resort to using descriptive language to elicit the correct term from the prisoner himself. The interrogators would then debrief each other, and make lists of these terms for future use with the other prisoners. Eventually we obtained a U.S. Marine with the appropriate North Vietnamese Navy linguistic qualifications. He was considerable help, even though his arrival was not until near the end of the initial interrogation period. The PW prisoners were impressed with our knowledge of their operations and equipment. We displayed just enough of this to insure their honesty, by showing them that if they were to lie to us that we would instantly know it. They recognized the interrogators as middle men, at least as far as peculiarly Naval topics were concerned, but they never tried to take advantage of that situation. In fact, they took pains to make a subject clear to the interrogator the first time, so that it seldom had to be asked again.

There were, of course, vast differences between the knowledge of the more educated officers, and the unschooled enlisted prisoners. An event that we thought initially to be laughable, but which turned out to be quite serious, was when the enlisted prisoners believed that we were canablers. They had been repeatedly taught that we were ruthless adversaries, and that they should expect any barbaric act from us, if they were captured. Indeed this is why the luxurious treatment was to ultimately make them so cooperative, but initially they must have considered it to be like fattening the lamb for slaughter. In the confines of shipboard living, we could not separate all the prisoners before interrogation. They would have been separated if held ashore, as this is the interrogators ideal. We were limited to segregating

only those that were to be interrogated, from those that had already been interrogated. In this process, we began to remove prisoners for questioning, one by one. The prisoners remaining elected to believe that we were executing and "eating" their comrades, one at a time as we removed them. They had no way of knowing what was really happening to them, as we never returned those that we had questioned to the group that had not yet been questioned. We did not wish to leave this impression that we were cannibals, of course, as that would be no way of encouraging cooperation in our interrogation. We solved the problem by marching a group of those waiting interrogation, passed a room where they could see that their comrades were well, healthy and jovial, yet we obviously would not let them talk to them.

The enlisted men, while not possessing any great general knowledge, were the most experienced in their particular area of responsibility. The North Vietnamese officers even referred us to specific crew men when we were asking for a detailed answer concerning a specific piece of equipment such as the radar or radio consols. The enlisted men were also very valuable sources for confirming experiences that the division had in common. Questioning them was an excellent check on the credibility of the officers, as well as on each other.

Understandably, the two most senior officers were the most knowledgeable. The division commander himself was by far the most knowledgeable of all. All PT officers had recently been demoted in a general reorganization of the PT group into what appeared on paper only, to be a larger and more formal organization - the PT Flotilla. This division commander had, in 1964, been the executive officer or the second in command of the entire PT group, now known as a flotilla. In that position, he had been responsible for determining the entire facts and circumstances surrounding the 1964 attack, and for submitting these findings to Naval Headquarters and eventually the high command in Hanoi. He was the most intelligent of all the prisoners. He was a

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mandarin" type by birth, who had been able to escape the purges of the upper classes by some adroit maneuvering and important connections. His wife was a medical doctor, and a professor of medicine at the University of Hanoi. He said she was fluent in Russian and English, and he jokingly apologized for not bringing her along. He said she could have helped to translate. He was fluent in French and conversant in Chinese, but initially he knew no English. It was his wife's connections that helped him, and enabled him to travel widely throughout North Vietnam. The other PT crewmen had not been outside the immediate area where their boat was assigned, except for their annual leave. During that brief two week period, some of them had been allowed home. Our senior prisoner was not the ordinary traveler. He was exceptionally alert and observant. In addition to his extraordinary powers of observation and the ability to remember what he had seen, he was privileged to have many friends or associates in high governmental positions. In idle conversation with them, he learned much of military significance that had no bearing what so ever on his Naval position. He had learned, for example, from an Air Force officer about a U.S. Air Force operation against the Thanh Hoa bridge. This had been a particularly troublesome target, that inexplicably we could never seriously damage. This specific operation concerned an attempt by the U.S. Air Force to drop photo-sensitive mines in the river. They were to float under the bridge, where the shadow of the bridge would trigger the explosion, thus damaging the bridge from below. The attempt was a failure. That we knew for our reconnaissance revealed the bridge had not suffered any damage. We knew nothing more, however, for the plane carrying the mines never returned. Our prisoner now told us that one mine had been recovered, and sent to Hanoi for exploitation. He told us an interesting story of their negotiations with the Russians who wanted to take it back to Moscow. They eventually settled for a joint exploitation in Hanoi with the Russians providing technical assistance and in turn, being able to keep the intelligence gleaned from the device. He went into considerable detail on the photo-sensitive trigger, which of course, we knew, but it showed

just how much "casual" information this man had acquired and could remember in detail. This, and much more information like it, was freely volunteered. We knew that he knew specific Naval matters, but we obviously had no way of determining this expanded scope of knowledge. We had to rely completely upon his voluntary recollection. We were not disappointed. Each time, in such cases, we were able to check, and every time the information could be verified correct.

— This prisoner stated that he would like to stay with us for a year, and then return to North Vietnam. He reasoned that in that period of time, he could become an expert on the United States. He believed that this knowledge would give him added status upon his return home. He was probably correct. I talked with these men for a month. In that time, this man had become remarkably capable in the English language. From later reports, I know he continued to improve linguistically, and from our earlier experiences, I am sure that with his powers of observation, that he was learning a lot more about us. Ironically, he was kept for just a little more than a year and then returned to North Vietnam, although this had nothing to do with his request.

The second most senior officer was a boat captain when he was taken prisoner, but in 1964, he had been the division commander of Division 3. We thus had a first hand account by the most knowledgeable officer present on the North Vietnamese side of that initial attack on the Maddox. He was almost as knowledgeable on general Naval matters, as our senior prisoner, but he did not have the outside exposure of non-Naval affairs. He was in no sense the intellectual equal of the senior man. He had to be prodded and reminded of many things, particularly those that had occurred a while ago, such as his training in China. This was expertly done, however, so we were not getting back our own answers. He freely provided the information, but some thing was usually necessary to jog his memory. Between these two men, there were very few questions that could not be answered about the North Vietnamese Navy and their training in China.

Eventually, the information from these men became so complex, and peculiar to Naval matters, that the ground oriented U.S. interrogators could not properly proceed with the questioning, comprehend the answer and immediately follow it up by another pertinent question. It was necessary to have a naval officer to naval officer discussion. This presented a problem because of the language difficulty. The senior officer was so willing and cooperative, however, and slightly frustrated by not being able to make himself understood, that I elected to speak with him directly. The discussion was a mixture of French and Chinese with the aid of diagrams, but eventually, I was able to learn all that I needed to about North Vietnamese Naval tactics.

The two senior officers stand out for their contribution of information, but that was to be expected considering the education level of the remaining crew members. The total fund of information can only be thought of as coming from all the men as a whole. The others were necessary checks to the information supplied, and in certain instances, they provided detailed or unique information, unknown to the two top men. The information provided was very valuable. True, much of it was known or suspected before, but our knowledge of it was from very sensitive sources that prevented us from freely distributing this necessary intelligence to the fleet units that needed it for their own self-protection. How we could provide this to all the U.S. ships, and not just as theory, but as hard intelligence information. There could be no question as to its validity. Ninety percent of it, I could confirm from personal recollection. Five percent, I could confirm when I returned to my files and checked, and five percent there was no way of confirming, but since all else had checked so completely, it was reasonable to assume that this small unchecked percentage was also correct.

This experience was truly unique. Never before had we had the opportunity to acquire such a mass of voluntary information from a first hand source on a Navy with which we were engaged in a "limited" war. There was almost

nothing we asked that could not be answered. Certainly, we were particularly fortunate to have this group, in that they were the very ones that had been involved in the 1964 Maddox affair. We were able then to obtain the full story from the North Vietnamese side, and learn their motives as well.

It is particularly important when evaluating the information provided by these men, that although they were exceptionally well treated, they were not being coerced into providing information. They talked freely, which we now know to be a national characteristic. They betrayed no confidence of their government, nor did they violate any oath to their country. They were never taught to conceal military information; It was as simple as that. They acted honorably by the standards of their government and military service, and these, after all, are the standards against which they should be judged.

Two of the prisoners had been injured when they were captured. The injuries were not of major significance, although in one case they were greatly aggravated by the prisoner's previous state of ill health. These men were given medical attention, and we immediately offered to repatriate them. It was approximately two months before North Vietnam would accept their return. The remaining prisoners were finally accepted by North Vietnam a little more than a year after their capture. We had been ready to release them much earlier, but again there was much reluctance on behalf of North Vietnam to accept the return of their sailors.

The value of the information from this interrogation, and the efficient method of handling the prisoners under less than ideal circumstances was recognized and praised by the highest levels of our government at the time. The U.S. Navy deserves much credit for this. They started with no prior experience in an enterprise of this sort, yet they compiled a detailed report that left virtually nothing unknown about North Vietnam's Navy; they learned a great deal about the Chinese Communist Navy and their training procedures; they learned facts here-to-

ore unavailable about the effects of U.S. air operations against the North; they learned to have a good feel for the decision making and thought processes of the North Vietnamese leaders; and they extracted and timely reported a mass of information of a geographical and physical nature that was vital to the targeting officers planning Air Force and Navy bombing missions. The prisoners believed that the United States was conscientiously attempting to strike military targets only and trying to avoid injuring the civilian population. They discussed one well known and well publicized mistake, but they recognized this for just that - a mistake. They were anxious to help us distinguish between military and civilian targets. Their help in this area, considering the many borderline targets, was of immense value, and could have been obtained from few other sources.

Considering the predominance of naval information in this interrogation, it is obvious that the Navy was the only agency that could have fully exploited these particular prisoners. The Department of Defense should be commended for recognizing this and trusting their remaining questions to what they would have considered as an "amateur" team of interrogators. Trust in this case, was well founded, for not only were specific questions of other agencies answered, but the Navy team, recognizing the need of others, provided much thorough information to these agencies without waiting for their formal requests. This was a unique and precedent setting event, that proved again that the Navy, if left alone, has the initiative and competence to do a task, that will greatly exceed the expectations of those located at far removed headquarters. No book could have been written on how to do this. The questions could not have been sent in from afar. It was something that had to be organized on the scene, and administered directly. This exploitation received little public attention, and for that matter, only a very limited exposure within the military, probably because of the potential embarrassment over the Tonkin events of 1964. This is unfortunate, because it was an important and well executed effort that deserves a place in the military history of our Vietnam involvement.

These prisoners, plus our routine intelligence sources, have enabled us to have perhaps the most complete intelligence available on any action in the Vietnamese war. It was most important that we obtain the full picture of those days in August 1964, for they resulted in the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which in turn involved into the charter for the entire war.