

The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery: The SIGINT Hounds Were Howling

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In his article, *Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964*, NSA historian Robert Hanyok reaches two conclusions - that the reported second attack by North Vietnamese PT boats on 4 August never happened and that "SIGINT information was presented in such a manner as to preclude responsible decision makers in the Johnson administration from having the complete and objective narrative of events of 4 August 1964."

As noted by Mr. Hanyok, many historians now believe the supposed attack by North Vietnam naval forces on the Desoto patrol on 4 August did not occur. Mr. Hanyok provides an even more convincing argument for this position based upon previously unreleased SIGINT. Evidence supporting the attack on 4 August is based principally upon eyewitness accounts, as well as radar and sonar data from the U.S. destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. Additionally, analysis of communications intelligence (COMINT) intercepted immediately after the purported attack appeared to confirm that such an attack did indeed occur and this COMINT was used by Secretary of Defense McNamara and President Johnson as supporting evidence to order a U.S. retaliation strike.

While later reports questioned the intensity of the attack, Captain Herrick as well as other officers and seamen were adamant then and remain adamant to this day that the ships were attacked. From an NSA perspective, however, it is important to note that the COMINT evidence was *supporting* evidence to justify the U.S. retaliation attacks. In testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations in 1968, Secretary McNamara responded to a question asking if he would have proceeded with the attacks without the COMINT by stating, "Yes, it was not the deciding factor, but it justified the decision." Thus, it is clear that the U.S. retaliation was based principally on eyewitness accounts from the destroyers on the scene, not from intelligence.

This article does not dispute Mr. Hanyok's ultimate conclusion - an attack did not occur. Nevertheless, while Mr. Hanyok's analysis of the available COMINT evidence is convincing, on its own, the COMINT does not prove that an attack did or did not occur. Unlike the 2 August COMINT where an actual attack message was intercepted, circumstantial evidence and the absence of a 4 August COMINT attack message cannot conclusively prove there was not an attack.

However, this article does dispute Mr. Hanyok's assertion that SIGINT was mishandled, deliberately skewed or not provided to the Johnson administration. In fact, the record shows that NSA performed magnificently during this period of crisis, providing all SIGINT available in a timely manner to a broad spectrum of customers. With only a few trained Vietnamese linguists at NSA Headquarters and field stations analyzing encrypted North Vietnamese communications, NSA still provided U.S. forces advance warning of possible intended attacks that quite likely prevented the sinking of a U.S. destroyer on 2 August.

NSA notified U.S. forces approximately twelve hours before the attack on 2 August and notified *Maddox* approximately 1800 local time on 4 August that the DRV navy had been ordered to make ready for military operations that night, possibly against the Desoto patrol. Mr. Hanyok correctly notes that the intercepted communications did not specifically state that the military operations were to be against the Desoto patrol and that the Marine SIGINT unit made this assumption. However, given the events of the preceding days, this was a prudent assumption by the Marine unit. Most commanders would prefer to obtain prior warning of a possible attack that later proves to be incorrect than to obtain no warning.

Mr. Hanyok principally uses the Delmar Lang chronology published on 14 October 1964 to support his argument that NSA purposely misled the Johnson administration. However, as noted by Mr. Hanyok in his article, the report received a very limited distribution and then only within the NSA community. As stated in the memorandum accompanying the report, the chronology was written per the direction of Chief B2 for internal historical use only. It was not intended to be a Department of Defense chronology nor an Intelligence Community chronology; such official chronologies had already been written by that time. This was confirmed by a recent conversation between this author and Milton Zaslow, Chief B2 at the time. Given this intent, Mr. Lang states, "In-so-far as the SIGINT aspects of the action are concerned the report is as complete as the need for documentation of SIGINT involvement appeared to necessitate."

Nevertheless, it is indeed curious that Lang would draft an internal NSA report in October 1964 that did not specifically address the general consensus of analysts at the time that the COMINT was, at best, inconclusive regarding the 4 August attack. In his oral history, Lang himself admits, "me and the guys had some reservations at the time about whether that attack had really occurred. And then there was no question that the second attack a couple of days later was not an attack."

While this is curious, it is not necessarily surprising. NSA was not in a position to contradict the eyewitnesses. Thus, while Lang in his chronology discusses the "attack" on 4 August, consistent with the official DoD position at the time, he appears careful to never state that COMINT supported such a conclusion. As Mr. Hanyok notes, there was no higher-level direction from his superiors at NSA to take a position, nor, according to NSA Director General Blake, no such pressure coming from outside of NSA. Certainly from a COMINT perspective, the NSA analysis that began to appear on 5 August and was consistently maintained afterwards – was that the COMINT was inconclusive.

From the SIGINT reporting and discussions this author has had with several analysts present during that time, it appears that most analysts at NSA believed on 4 August that the COMINT indeed supported an attack on that day. The real time reports from the Navy destroyers coupled with field COMINT reporting shortly after the time of the encounter led analysts to believe they were seeing an after action report regarding an attack on 4 August.

Shortly thereafter, however, it appears that doubts began to arise at NSA concerning whether the messages in question were in actuality after action reports from the 2 August encounter rather than from 4 August. Subsequent NSA reporting used language such as "the actual attack on the 2nd" and noted that the ships initially thought to be involved in the attack, the T142, T146 and T333, could not have been. NSA suggested, based on "reports from the Maddox that it was under attack, " possibly naval units subordinate to the Southern fleet command at Ben Tuy were involved. It is clear that NSA analysts were trying to reconcile the SIGINT with eyewitness reports from the Maddox of an attack and were having difficulty doing so. *It cannot be emphasized enough that all of this reporting, unlike the Lang chronology, was distributed widely to NSA customers, including CIA, JCS and DIA.*

Mr. Hanyok carefully analyzes the action report issued by NSA, 2/O/VHN/T10-64, used by Secretary McNamara as evidence of an attack on 4 August, and provides a convincing argument that NSA combined two field reports into one and that the report was in actuality an after action report on the attack on 2 August. Mr. Hanyok provides an excellent discussion of this reporting especially on the phrase "sacrificed two comrades" as reported by the field versus "sacrificed two boats" as reported by NSA, noting that it is not clear why NSA opted for "boats" instead of "comrades". What is clear, however, as noted by Mr. Hanyok, was that the uncertainty was communicated ultimately to President Johnson. DoD chronologies written in late August 1964 also note the uncertainty of "boats" or "comrades". This episode alone makes it clear that NSA was not presenting information in such a manner as to preclude responsible decision makers in the Johnson administration from having the complete and objective narrative of events

of 4 August 1964. Instead, NSA was informing its customers of uncertainties in NSA analysis of even single words in the COMINT.

In this regard, Mr. Hanyok notes the “unexplained disappearance” of the original decrypted text of this translation from the NSA archives. While indeed, the original translation of this message does not exist, it is only one of many original translation of messages from this period that is missing. One explanation, as noted by General Blake in his interview with William Gerhard, is the information was destroyed because NSA did not have the capacity to store the volume of information being produced. In fact, NSA records disposition schedules, then, as now, allow raw COMINT material to be destroyed once the final report is issued. Another explanation, discussed in the Blake interview, suggests the raw material was not destroyed but was provided to DIA for a Defense chronology.

Further evidence refuting the claim that COMINT information was presented in such a manner as to preclude responsible decision makers in the Johnson administration from having the complete and objective narrative of events of 4 August 1964 can be found in the NSA review of Secretary McNamara’s testimony before Congress. NSA noted that McNamara systematically used overkill language with COMINT and that the COMINT surrounding Tonkin was “flexible for interpretation”. Again in 1972, as noted by Mr. Hanyok, NSA Deputy Director Dr. Tordella provided Senator Fulbright’s staff director Carl Marcy access to all NSA material relating to the Gulf of Tonkin and told Mr. Marcy that the intercept of 4 August could indeed refer to events that occurred on 2 August.

These facts make it clear that NSA consistently provided the Administration, as well as Congress, all COMINT information related to the events of 2-4 August. In fact, one NSA manager present during the August 1964 events has stated, “the folks downtown were provided all of the COMINT as they wanted to do their own analysis. They weren’t overly interested in what we thought.” Some would argue that NSA should have explicitly informed decision makers in formal SIGINT reporting that COMINT showed there was no attack on 4 August. However, the available COMINT could not support such a position. While some analysts did indeed come to such a conclusion, the COMINT itself, as noted by Dr. Tordella, was “flexible for interpretation”.

In the final analysis, it is clear that not only was SIGINT information **not** presented in such a manner as to preclude responsible decision makers in the Johnson administration from having the complete and objective narrative of events of 4 August 1964, but that all of the COMINT produced was distributed to CIA, JCS, DIA and other customers and that NSA uncertainties, even of single words, were made known to decision makers.

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