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The Move, or How NSA Came to Fort Meade

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Look around you! All you see are buildings – towering glass cubes, low-slung office buildings, modern brick and glass tech-park style structures. And cars – a vast ocean of cars surrounding the headquarters complex.

It wasn't always like this. NSA has called Fort Meade home only since 1957. Before that, the two cryptologic agencies of the Navy and Army were in the middle of the Washington metropolitan area. Both acquired and occupied former girls' schools in 1942/43. (We no longer fully understand what cryptologists had against women's colleges.) The original buildings were stately, historic old halls suitable for dormitories and classrooms, but unsuited to government offices. Early occupants of Arlington Hall, the headquarters for Army Security Agency (ASA; now INSCOM), had to put their filing cabinets in the bathtubs of the lavatories connecting the former dorm rooms; and they moved out the beds so that they could move in desks and chairs.

This was satisfactory as an interim measure, but there is only so much one can do with dormitories. So the Army built temporary office buildings, called A and B Buildings, in back of Arlington Hall, and the Navy added on to their facility on Nebraska Avenue, called Naval Security Station or simply NSS. And that was the way things were when World War II ended.

In 1949, as the result of efforts to consolidate the three service cryptologic efforts (the newly created Air Force, too, had an organization, called U.S. Air Force Security Service), the Defense Department established the Armed Forces Security Agency or AFSA. AFSA, the immediate predecessor of NSA, lasted only three years. But it was during its tenure that the hunt for new "digs" began.

AFSA was a tenant. It borrowed spaces at Arlington Hall and NSS. As a temporary measure, all AFSA COMINT operations were concentrated at Arlington Hall, while COMSEC was located at NSS. But AFSA was a separate organization, and it needed a separate building. In an appendix to the document that created AFSA, the JCS directed that AFSA prepare a plan consolidating COMINT and COMSEC into a single facility. After studying the problem, AFSA concluded that the two could not be consolidated into either Arlington Hall or NSS. In its September 1949 report to the JCS, AFSAC (Armed Forces Security Advisory Committee, the policy-making body for AFSA) pointed out that most of the buildings in use at Arlington Hall were temporary structures designed for wartime use.

In the autumn of 1949, with the explosion of the first Soviet nuclear device, atomic hysteria was sweeping Washington. Even the president was concerned, and the JCS

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directed that all DoD organizations start making plans to disperse their operations. It was at just that time that AFSA was making its bid to find a home, and the JCS told AFSAC to start thinking about investing in a standby location outside Washington. So Admiral Stone, the director of AFSA, established a committee headed by Commander Arthur Enderlin, to find a home, including the newly established requirement to provide for a contingency facility.

Enderlin and his committee were adamantly opposed to the alternate facility, which Enderlin regarded as a waste of money. The Joint Chiefs ordered him to come up with a recommendation – he refused. Stone ordered him, and he still refused. Stone fired Enderlin and appointed in his place Captain Thomas Dyer, one of the Navy's leading World War II cryptologists. Dyer was a known proponent of the alternate facility.

Then, just as Enderlin predicted, the problem of money intruded. A standby COMSEC location could be procured without exhorbitant expense, but COMINT was different. How could all those machines, all those files, all that communications, be duplicated and warehoused in a remote location and still hold the line on the cryptologic budget? And how could such moneys be justified to construct a facility that would be unused? The only rational course of action, Dyer concluded, was to make the so-called alternate site the primary site for COMINT, leaving a small COMINT and COMSEC effort at Nebraska Avenue.

Dyer's board began work in the spring of 1950. The site selection criteria were developed over a period of months but generally focused on the following requirements:

a. Be within twenty-five miles of a city of at least 200,000

b. Have work space totalling at least 700,000 square feet

c. Possess a "reasonably equable climate" (whatever that meant)

d. Be suitable for complete physical isolation by fences and the like

e. Be accessible to mainline air, rail, and highways

f. Be at least twenty miles from the Atlantic Ocean

g. Possess dependable and secure water and electric power sources

h. Be accessible to commercial and military communications

The basic ground rule was that the location selected had to be on an existing military base. The move was to be completed by July 1955. One option the board looked at was to select a site that already possessed a building. (Like a hermit crab, AFSA could simply crawl in after modifying the shell.) Federal buildings in Kansas City, Tulsa, and St. Louis were considered. The other option was to build a new building on a military installation. The board looked at Fort Knox, Kentucky; Fort Meade, Maryland; Indianapolis; Brooks Air Force Base, near San Antonio, Texas; and Rocky Mountain Arsenal, near Denver.

In early 1951, the board sent AFSAC two recommendations – if the existing structure criterion were used, Kansas City should be the choice, and if a new building were wanted, Fort Knox was the way to go. This produced a great hullaballoo in AFSAC. Some argued

that Kansas City should be the choice because the expense would be lower, and it would be easier to meet the 1955 deadline. Others opposed moving into someone else's offices – that had already been tried at Arlington Hall and NSS, and it had not worked. Stone favored neither Kansas City nor Fort Knox – he wanted to select Fort Meade, and so did Major General Ralph Canine, who would soon succeed Stone as director of AFSA. Most other members favored Fort Knox, however, and the allure of building a first-class building from scratch carried the day. JCS approved the Fort Knox option in April, but only after another heated argument about the advisability of moving to a relatively isolated location. Many, including Stone and Canine, were concerned about the critical lack of housing in the Fort Knox environs, and some wondered if their civilians would go for the choice.

While orders were being cut and contract proposals were being written for the Fort Knox construction, AFSAC members argued vehemently over the functions to be moved. Dyer was the author of a plan to split COMINT into two parts – three-fourths of it would move to Kentucky, while some residual functions would stay in Washington, along with most of COMSEC and some liaison offices. He was opposed by Admiral Joseph Wenger, the most senior Navy cryptologist, who felt that splitting COMINT would be disastrous. Ultimately, Wenger won, and it was decided to leave COMSEC in Washington, while all of COMINT would move to Fort Knox, and Arlington Hall would be closed.

The board knew Fort Knox to be objectionable to some of the civilian employees because of its distance from Washington. The lack of housing was worrisome, as was the rigid segregation practiced in Kentucky in 1951. But AFSA pressed ahead with the selection anyway, until a startling thing happened. Someone decided to ask the civilians what they thought.

No one knows now who originated the civilian opinion survey, but by May of 1951 it was being circulated at Arlington Hall and Nebraska Avenue. The result was a show-stopper. Most of the civilians planned to resign rather than go to Fort Knox. The basic problem was one of organizational culture. As Dr. Louis Tordella, one of AFSA's senior civilians, articulated to the board, Fort Knox appeared to them to be an isolated location in rural Kentucky thirty miles from the nearest large city (Louisville). There being no suitable housing in the local community, they would wind up living on an army post. They had all been in the military during World War II and did not want to revert to any form of military discipline, even to the extent of living on a post.

The matter came to a head in October 1951. Deputy Secretary of Defense William C. Foster told Canine, the new director of AFSA, that he had a problem. AFSA's civilians were not in favor, and neither were AFSA's two most important non-DoD customers, State Department and CIA. Canine went directly to see General of the Armies Omar Bradley, the Army Chief of Staff. Bradley told him to meet with the JCS. At the JCS meeting in early December, the Fort Knox move was cancelled, and Canine was directed to appoint another site selection board.

There followed a series of hurried meetings in January and February to find a new site. Canine appointed a new selection board, still chaired by Dyer but having on it several

civilians. The new site had to be between five and twenty-five miles from the center of Washington. This placed it within the postulated blast zone of then-existing Soviet atomic weapons and thus violated a JCS stipulation that the new AFSA site had to be at least twenty-five miles from the Washington Monument. But Soviet atomic weapons were progressing all the time, and the twenty-five mile limit no longer made sense anyway. The JCS could have either atomic invulnerability or a skilled civilian work force, but apparently it could not have both.

The board looked at several sites in suburban Virginia, including Fort Belvoir, some land along the George Washington Parkway inhabited by the Bureau of Roads (later to become famous as the site of the new CIA headquarters building), and Fort Hunt. In Maryland, it considered several sites within the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center, White Oak (site of the Naval Ordnance Laboratory), Andrews Air Force Base, and Fort Meade.

Of those, Fort Meade was the only one on the original list. It was twenty-two miles from the Monument, the furthest removed of any site considered the second time around. Despite the distance from Washington, transportation difficulties would be solved by a new parkway then under construction between Washington and Baltimore. There was plenty of vacant land on Fort Meade for construction of headquarters and life support buildings. It was the obvious choice, and on 5 February it became official. (Considering that Stone and Canine had both favored Fort Meade all along, the proceedings of the board may well have been window-dressing.)

Fort Meade, named for the Civil War victor at Gettysburg, inhabited a thickly wooded 13,500-acre tract precisely halfway between Baltimore and Washington. Originating as Camp Meade during World War I, it had been a training facility during both World Wars I and II. During World War II some 3.5 million men passed through on their way to Europe, and at the peak of the war 70,000 people inhabited the post. After the war it became a headquarters, first for the 2nd Army, and later (in 1966) for the 1st U.S. Army.

When Canine first looked at it, Fort Meade consisted of hundreds and hundreds of temporary wooden structures being used as barracks, offices, and training facilities, with only a few permanent brick buildings. The corner of the post that NSA proposed to use was uninhabited, but it was near the intersection of Maryland Route 32 and the projected Baltimore-Washington Parkway.

The new building would be a U-shaped affair with double cross"members," designated the center and west corridors. Entry would be in the middle of the west corridor, the portion of the building facing Route 32. At 1.4 million square feet, it would be the third largest government building in Washington, smaller only than the Pentagon and the new State Department building. But it was designed for the AFSA population in 1951 and did not take into consideration the growth that took place up to mid-decade, which left the new building critically short of space. The only solution was to leave someone behind, and that "someone" became the COMSEC organization, which remained at Nebraska Avenue until another building was completed in 1968.

In 1954 a contract was awarded to two co-prime contractors, Charles H. Tompkins Company of Washington, D.C., and the J.A. Jones Company of Charlotte, North Carolina. The contract price was $19,944,452. Ground-breaking occurred on 19 July 1954. When the building was completed, the total cost turned out to be $35 million, an overrun of almost 100 percent.

A few miscellaneous facts impressed the local community. It had the longest unobstructed corridor in the country, 980 feet long (center corridor). At its birth it had a German-made pneumatic tube system that could carry papers at twenty-five feet per second and could handle 800 tubes per hour. The cafeteria could seat 1,400, and the auditorium (later dedicated to Army cryptologic pioneer William Friedman), 500. As its new occupant, NSA would become the largest employer in Anne Arundel County. It was a far cry indeed from the quaint but antiquated Arlington Hall, the stately Naval Security Station, and the firetrap A and B buildings at Arlington Hall.

NSA handled the move in stages. There was an "interim move," which put parts of NSA's operation into temporary quarters on Fort Meade. This had the advantage of moving the operation gradually so that large parts of it were not shut down for any period of time. The new operations building would not be ready for occupancy until 1957, and so the interim move also had the advantage of placing cryptologists at the new location in advance of the July 1955 JCS deadline.

It began with an interim move to four brick barracks constructed for NSA use in 1954 just behind the proposed site for the main complex. The first to arrive, in November 1954, was a contingent of 149 Marine guards to provide security. The other 2,000 plus people taking part in the interim move included virtually the entire population of GENS plus enough communicators, personnel, and logistics people to keep them going. Heat for the operation was provided by an old steam engine which was brought in on the Baltimore, Washington, and Annapolis Railroad tracks and which was installed in a small copse of trees, which still exists between the present OPS2A and the barracks area. (In fact, the original barracks themselves, now converted to living quarters, also still exist.)

GENS and its support staff became an outpost, connected to the main headquarters by inadequate electrical communications. Most classified material was couriered back and forth four times a day – the electrical circuits were reserved for only the most critical and time-sensitive information.

To NSA's military population, the move to Fort Meade was a matter of routine. The military moved frequently, and the relatively cloistered atmosphere of a rural Army post was closer to the normal state of affairs. Family housing was of the two-story brick variety, constructed under the Wherry Housing Act. More would be needed, and over 2,500 new Wherry units were planned to accommodate the increased military population occasioned by NSA's move.

For civilians, however, it was an entirely different matter. The move to Fort Meade was initially contemplated nervously by a standoffish civilian population. Most lived in Virginia and Washington, and they faced a long commute over narrow and traffic-clogged

roads through the heart of a major metropolitan area. There was no beltway to take traffic around Washington – the trip north would have to be via Georgia Avenue, Colesville Road, New Hampshire Avenue, and other city streets. The only plus to this situation was the brand-new Baltimore-Washington Parkway, whose projected completion date was January 1955. That would take care of the drive north from Anacostia and would mark a very significant reduction in the driving time.

For those who did not own cars (a significant number in the early 1950s), there was public transportation. Although the old Baltimore, Washington, and Annapolis Railroad, which had a spur that ran across the street from the planned NSA facility, had closed its passenger service in 1935, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad still operated commuter train service from Washington's Union Station to Laurel. For $1.82 per day, one could travel round trip to Laurel and back in thirty-six minutes aboard one of the two trains operating each morning and afternoon. Once in Laurel the railroad operated a shuttle bus to Fort Meade for an additional round-trip fare of $.50; it required twenty-three minutes each way.

Unfortunately, the train and bus schedules did not synchronize very well, and there was no bus service at all for a commuter catching the late train. For the early train, the total one-way commuting time from Union Station to NSA was one hour and twenty-three minutes, not including the time required to get from one's residence to Union Station. Both Greyhound and Trailways offered bus service from downtown Washington to Laurel in just thirty-seven minutes, and at $.99 per round trip, it was a bargain. But neither service brought passengers to Laurel in time to catch the shuttle to Fort Meade, so commuters would be left high and dry in Laurel. For urbanites used to a short commute to Arlington Hall, this was not a happy prospect.

For most, this meant picking up the family and moving to the Maryland suburbs. To help with the move, NSA created the Mademobile, a trailer parked between A and B Buildings at Arlington Hall. The Mademobile carried information about Fort Meade and surroundings, including real estate ads, school and church information, and locations of shopping areas. On Saturdays NSA ran a special bus to Fort Meade so that employees could look over the area. For those who were still unsure, NSA announced that a move to Fort Meade would be regarded as a permanent change of station, and the government would pay to move household effects. For many, that was the decider.

The closest community of any size was Laurel. Housing prices in Laurel ranged from $8,990 for two-bedroom homes to $10,990 for three-bedroom homes with basements. There was also a supply of apartments which could be had for rents ranging from $79.50 to $112.50 per month. In the other direction was the waterside community of Severna Park, whose houses ranged in price from $6,000 to $16,000. Waterfront lots could also be purchased in the subdivision of Ben Oaks, but the lots alone sometimes ran as high as a finished house in other areas. A little farther afield was Glen Burnie, where housing prices ranged from $5,995 to over $10,000. South was the planned community of Greenbelt, in the Washington suburbs. This was originally built with government

subsidies, and a house there could be had for as low as $4,700. Single bedroom apartments rented for $51 and up. Columbia had not been built yet.

Whatever NSA did to entice civilians out to Fort Meade, it worked. Early estimates of civilian attrition by a panicky personnel office ranged as high as 30 percent, but the actual attrition rate was less than two percentage points higher than would normally have been expected had there been no move at all. By anyone's standards (except for the COMSEC population left behind at Nebraska Avenue), the move was a success.

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