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IPLACE: SAB 2, T453

IVIEWER: FARLEY/JOHNSON

Farley Today is 22 December,1986. Our interviewee Mr [redacted] after service in the U.S. Navy Security Group in the early 1960's joined NSA as a Vietnamese linguist. He served in a variety of analytical elements as a linguist and was actively involved in translating intercept during the Gulf of Tonkin incident when the USS Maddox was allegedly attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in August of 1964. Mr. [redacted] continued working in the intelligence target area throughout the North Vietnam war. Interview is taking place in the T453 interview room, SAB 2, NSA at Fort Meade. Interviewers, Bob Farley and Tom Johnson. Mr. [redacted] desires that the classification of this single cassette be TOP SECRET codeword and this is NSA Oral History interview number 33-87.

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[redacted]

Farley What role did [redacted] have? Did they have any part of the mission at all?

[redacted] They had, if they had any, I'm not aware of it. Most of that was the [redacted] P.L. 86-36 [redacted] side of the house. Most of our mission was done at USN-27 at Subic or USN-9, and the intercept sites in country. The ironic part was that some of the units that were in country...like USM-626 was in Saigon...(1G)...they were the senior Army people. USM-808, USN-27J were collocated up there in those other sites up and down the country. The Group 125 infiltration, they had that assigned to the Army. The Army was the CMA for it even though Phu Bai was collecting most of it. So, anything that Phu Bai collected from the Army side, they had it wired down to Saigon, and they would publish it...that was all going on about the time of this incident. They were just getting into it.

Farley Good. Bill, did you know about this Desoto Patrol?

[redacted] Yes, sir. We were aware of that, plus I was aware of another; it was called OPLAN 34A. It had just like all the other nicknames, it was a KITKAT operations. And we were supporting that, it was a very close-hold information, and how we supported it, in fact it was MAC VSOG at MAC V headquarters at CHOLON was the focal point for that. They had their detachment up at Da Nang and they were, basically, most of the operations for the seaborne operations and stuff were operated out on the swift boats, and things. They would go out and run the missions up north and they'd...it was different, they were trying to either parachute or infiltrate agents and I don't think that, from what I recall, I don't think they were really having a successful implant of agents up north, either parachuting them in or dropping them in, they were mostly captured, they never got anything back from them. What the swift boat operation was, it was just harassment. And that was going on with the Desoto patrols, we started the Desoto patrols earlier on in '64. And that put a box about the size of this room here, on the back of a "tin can" or a destroyer. And with a couple of NSG linguists/operators onboard, and they were, would be plying the waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, they had set tracks that they would do. They were going after mainly, the naval communications, the coastal defense communications, the maritime patrols and things, and as this so happened, we had this Desoto patrol, they were aware of the KITKAT operation and we had...they would operate either in two's or three's or maybe more. But they had a specific mission that saturday night that all this happened, was going up and harassing a radar facility on, I think Hon May island, there was Hon May and Hon Mot off the coast there between Vinh and Thanh Hoa. And they had shelled that area did some things against that, and they were on there way back, and in fact, the Desoto patrols spotted the swift boats going past them, at a high rate of speed and then the whole thing kind of gelled down into the first incident on the 2nd.

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Farley Yeah. Bill, did the elements onboard the Maddox and the Turner Joy, did they do their

processing, did they have plain language? Is that all they were concerned with? Or was it low-level cipher?

[redacted] At the time, the Turner Joy was not there.

Farley Okay.

[redacted] It was only the Maddox.

Farley Alright.

[redacted] The Maddox was the one that had the Desoto patrol...the "box" onboard. The Turner Joy came on after that incident.

Farley Without any intercept people onboard?

[redacted] I'm not sure. All I know...

Johnson No they didn't have any

[redacted] The box was only on the Maddox, but the Maddox was by itself that night. When all this happened.

Farley Do you want any preliminary questions to this, Tom?

Johnson What I think we should do is just keep going the way we are and have Bill go through the thing. If he misses anything, we'll come back to it.

[redacted] Like I say, I'm still very foggy on some of this stuff. I remember Sunday morning, I got up, we were on our way to church and a news bulletin came on that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin. And I commented to them, I said "Well, it looks like it will be a short church service today and I'll (be getting) very little sleep for a while." And that's exactly what happened, I get back home and we were called in. I started out with, I had three people working with me, [redacted] was acting section chief at the time. I had a Marine sergeant [redacted] who went on to get his mustang commission, and last I hear of him, he was a captain. And an army specialist fourth class [redacted] who I guess about a year after all this happened ended up being assigned to then one of the tactical units out of Bien-hoa with a PRC-25 on his back going out on patrols. Here's a kid who had sat working all the traffic in support of the destroyers and had a CAT III clearance and was out doing patrols out in the boonies. But we all got called in, like I say there was Lt Col., Air Force, Dell Lang, [redacted] I think Gaddy, Milt Zaslow and General Davidson, we kind of set up a little 24-hr watch. And the traffic was coming in and we were decrypting and putting out reports and doing the follow-up. The background of things before that, they had prior knowledge that was issued by either Subic or out of Phu Bai. And I'm not sure which one. I know at the time there was a gunnery sergeant [redacted] was involved along with two or three other marines. Very good linguists. They issued a heads up like, that was an indication that the North Vietnamese were going to attack a U.S. vessel, or U.S. forces in the gulf. They put the word out and there were some people I guess on Friday or Saturday that were a little skeptical of that. The next thing they were getting, they got a like a CRITIC in from the Maddox saying they were under attack from the North Vietnamese PT boats...and all that information was subsequently forwarded in and we reviewed it and along with all the other activity that was going on, we were issuing fol-

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low-ups and trying to advise the different people of what was happening. Fortunately, I guess the Maddox skipper and all took some very really evasive action because they did launch a number of torpedoes. They got within range that they could...when they made their made their high speed runs, it was PT squadron 333, 336 and 339 were the ones that made the attack. I think they came out of Thanh Hoa, area. They had a SWA-TOW squadron the 1-4 series. 142, 46 were like the support craft for that. We were reading their communications and most of it was Manual Morse. And they used the R607. They also had voice. Voice being line of sight, the R609 I think is what they were using. Its got like a 20 kilometer line of sight range, the Morse radio was like 500 kilometers. So, the bulk of our traffic then was HF Manual Morse, those vessels. We had them pretty well pinned down, we knew where Northern Fleet headquarters like K1 was at Bai Chai and K2 at Thanh Hoa, and it came on down the coast, the main headquarters being at Haiphong. There were some conversations between the major high speed runs and it was apparent they probably took all their Manual Morse radio equipment, so they could...they knew they had a long run to make, and it was, the weight I think of the equipment was a few hundred kilograms, so they took that off and loaded up and went on, so they had basically the Swatows doing radio relay along the coastal areas out...until they hit a point where they went out of range of the radios. So, basically the PT boats were on their own. After they got out near them, the Maddox. They made their runs, launched, they got air support in, the Maddox reported the thing, they took some rounds, they got torpedoes and machine guns, and that's all they had on board.

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Johnson In your view did the North Vietnamese feel that this was related to the KITKAT stuff and somehow...

[redacted] In hindsight, they just needed to show a lesson, because it was U.S. supported, U.S. operated, U.S. run, and the KITKAT operations had been going on and they were losing sites up and down the coast and these KITKAT operations became more frequent and more, I'd say, more daring. They were going closer in and shell and they'd run between some of the islands and they'd end up getting a cross-fire going between the islands and I think it was, they knew it wasn't the guy that did the operation, but since he was up doing the patrols, there could have been a feeling that he was command and control or something...

Johnson Some sort of a support vessel.

[redacted] Right. Since he warning off of his larger vessels, this was, "Hey guys, we're tired of it, so let's...". There may have been some second thoughts, but this is purely my own feeling of some of the messages that we were reading. And the longer you work the problem, the more that you see the hindsight. There was one message that the SWATOWs answered back to Haiphong, it was like "We were not able to call them in time." Like maybe the word came down from naval headquarters not to go out and do what they were planning, and since they did not have the Morse radios on board, they were not able to get in touch with them via the line of sight voice. That's my feeling. I never got published that way, I'm sure, you know I've looked at some of the things, that went back down to Congress and it kept coming up and kept coming up and kept coming up and that was the 2nd of August, there was no questions that that didn't happen. We got the communications, they've got the vessels that were out there, they hit one of them dead

in the water, on its way back in, it was limping back, it sank. A couple of the others got shot up. This was done by close air support, I don't know whether they came off the Ticonderoga, or which of the, there was a couple of others out there.

Johnson The Constellation I think was out there.

The Constellation was out there. That was, and we saw communications back and forth, talking about it. It was days later they ended up salvaging the PT boat that got hit and sank. One of there ocean going tugs BTB-2 or 2 came out of Haiphong with the equipment and all and salvaged it and towed it back in, because it went back into service later. The 4th of August which is what President Johnson got his Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed, and from what I recall we had nothing to indicate in SIGINT that an order had come out from anyone to go out and take on the vessels again. By then the Maddox was joined by the C. Turner Joy.

Farley Okay.

The C. Turner Joy's sonar man was the one who started picking up the echoes that torpedoes were coming, and that they had high speed runs happening. I don't whether it was later, and they've interviewed I don't know whether it was Jeremiah Denton was one of the POWs that made admiral, he was one of the ones who was up flying CAP dropping flare and said they saw nothing. We had nothing in our communications system, but they swore up and down that they were under attack. For the amount of torpedoes they had, that he said was in the water, there's no way either one of the vessels could have taken evasive action. A lot of this is hindsight but at the time, we weren't getting anything, this was reports coming from the vessel that they were under attack. And the reports went on up the chain of command. I had said something Tom, about one of the messages about I guess 146 was talking about...

Johnson Yeah, 146 was apparently in communications pretty much. Sporadically, throughout the evening and, as I recall, we picked up either from Phu Bai or San Miguel...not San Miguel...Subic Bay, a message that they were gonna go out on another operation and it was basically a TACREP to the Maddox saying, "Heads up." It looks like the same vessels involved in the previous attack are gonna go out again, didn't directly state that they were gonna go out after them, but we all know that what the reporting criteria stated, if we were not sure, you send it out to them anyway. So, that kind of gave the Maddox a heads up. I assume they passed that to the skipper of the Turner Joy, also, so people were looking for things. After the attack then, they picked some more communications from 146 and again these were also field reported. That they had fired at aircraft, that they had lost two vessels, and these are the messages that I was interested in because there was some controversy over whether the 146 was referring to the attack on the 2nd or maybe a post action report for an engagement on the 4th. As I recall from discussing it over the phone with you, you thought it must have been the 2nd.

Right, because the 146-class PGs they were using, had machine guns and they had deck guns, no higher than 40mm or 37. No torpedo capabilities. The one I remember, they did not go that far or venture that far out. The support, there was two vessels hit. One was sunk, one was damaged very badly, by PT boats. I think (XB) that 14-series

the SWATOW-class PGMs or PGs or whatever were acting as a communications relay and as the kind of the honchos for what the PT boats were doing. They had no Morse communications from the PT boats, so there very well could have been an after action report there was some aircraft shot at, they did shoot up the PT boats that had machine guns onboard, the aircraft that came in, in support of the Maddox did receive fire. That was all looked like, related back to the 2nd. But we had no activity that we could directly relate that they went out, and we had no PT boat squadrons active on the night of the 4th when all this was going down.

Johnson In terms of SIGINT, we had no SIGINT activity on those squadrons. In your review then, just recapping, that action would have had to included PT boats to have been any kind of effective action.

[redacted] Yes sir, affirmative action. For what the guy on the C. Turner Joy was picking up, he was getting screws and propellers in the water and torpedoes and there would have to be the PTs out in the area and there was none that we were aware of.

Johnson Well, you know that the reports from 146 went to the president and actually, physically, they went to McNamara, and McNamara decided this was the clinching evidence that would allow them to launch the strikes on North Vietnam. Once had you had got this traffic back to NSA because these TACREPS originally weren't going to NSA, as I understand looking at the file, once you got ahold of these, what did you think about them?

[redacted] Looking at hindsight, there was a lot of even controversy within the building here. When it came in, we were saying "Was this, or was this not?" You had to take them into the context they were. Hindsight, now, would probably, cooler heads, more of the cryp system recovered which that did happen, after that we would probably say that was the 2nd of August that they were referring to. At the time, you were working, and we worked for very long strained hours. People were, they put bunks in the area that we were working in. People would sack out. I know that like [redacted] and Lt Col. Lang spent time about mid part of the week when all this stuff was going down, at the Pentagon. They actually brought a fan in because Lang was briefing the JCS people actually put a fan blowing on him, away those people because he hadn't had a change of clothes in a while. We had a very small work force, they brought in more cryppies, like I said it was like three or four linguists mainly [redacted] myself [redacted] we were it (1G). So, we were working 24 hours a day, and we were 12 and 16 hours and break back and forth and we were getting stuff in. It was late, it wasn't as timely as we can now. They realized we had set up more procedures and forwarding quicker, and getting field support decrypts turning around and that all did materialize. But at the time the decision were made, you know, you flipped a coin and they said, "Okay" . It was the timeframe from when the Turner Joy went, so the feeling was, "You can't say it wasn't related to that" but you can't say really, definitely that it was. And I think it was as much feeling that that was in hindsight, that it was all related to the 2nd. But I remember getting in to you know, 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning after being there all day, getting into an argument with Uncle Milty. 2:30 in the morning about what we were putting out. Looking back, it was dumb, but youknow, a couple of people (b% pulled me aside) and said "Don't argue with the man." But he backed off realizing I guess we were all under a lot

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of pressure and I guess, you know from what he was saying "You're not putting it into good enough English for the people". What we were trying to do, was put it...exactly what was being said...in the best way we could interpret it. Knowing what was going on down in the high levels of the U.S. government. Not knowing what 10 years later would still be going.

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Johnson Did he want to change any of the substance of it?

[redacted] No, it was just, it wasn't a substance thing, it was just that my rendering of and other people's, we took it out of the dictionary knowing what the Vietnamese, and how they were referring to some of the things, he wanted another English word that smooth it out a little bit (sic).

Johnson As I recall the NSA wrap up on that while not saying it didn't happen, was very equivocal. It seemed to lean in the direction of maybe that wasn't quite the way it happened.

[redacted] Yeah, and that was looking you know, at a couple of more days of traffic afterwards and taking the context of the 146 report, and looking at exactly what did happen on the 2nd, because, like I say, one of the three I think went with only a few rounds in it. One of them was badly enough damaged that it did sink, and was returned. The third one did get hit pretty hard too. It was still functional. So, there was the two vessels lost.

Johnson Based on what you know about SWATOWS and their mission were there any possibilities that 146 was out there in the general area shadowing them on the night of the 4th or was also kind of a far out idea? This is one that the State Department came up with at one point.

[redacted] Anything is possible. At the time, we didn't have the tracking that the North Vietnamese what they were tracking, were unfriendly vessels. And I don't recall that we had tracks of placing, or of their vessels out near that area.

Johnson It may have been too far out for their radar, I don't know.

[redacted] The radar as I recall was able to pick up...they, the vessels out there. They had the CROSS SPOT radars, if I'm not mistaken. The Chinese radars. And they could go out at least a hundred kilometers.

Johnson Okay.

[redacted] Some of those points where they had these radars were promontories. So, they were higher up like cliff areas and things that were already detailed, on one of the islands there, so they could look out a little more extended than if they were just at sea level.

Johnson Okay.

Farley Bill Golden in his book made the statement that somebody supposedly in the communications van had intercepted a message ordering the North Vietnam patrol boats to attack [TR NOTE: Cut stops abruptly in the middle of this segment. NIL HEARD for 1 minute, then resumes.]...and then later on, they also supposedly intercepted a North Vietnam damage report. Is that (accurate)?

[redacted] This is the 2nd...

Farley Oh this is on the 2nd?

[redacted] Yeah.

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Farley Rather than on the 4th.

[redacted] Yes sir. They gave them the word for that on the 2nd.

Farley Okay.

Johnson On the 4th. Maybe Golden said that, I can't remember, but we queried the Maddox and they said they couldn't hear any VHF voice because of the ship's (own) comms. Constantly blocking them out, I guess the Maddox was sending status reports all the time. When that was on, they couldn't hear a thing.

[redacted] Well, then that the phenomenon on the 4th, that was everyone was thinking. It was a real...it wasn't a good environment for anything. They said, "it was just one of those phenomenons at sea that all the elements were there...that everything that they were using...that they were "coming" went to ground." Basically went into the sea, because of the...it was just like one of those Twilight Zone-type things. I guess that's the way you could really describe it. That's what they were saying and it has...something that happens more often than not, is that you get a return echo from your own screws and I think they were looking, and some of the things that happened on the 4th after they looked at it again, was that every time the Turner Joy would make its turn to evade, these runs would also make their turns, so whoever they were getting were also making the same kinds of turns, and basically at the same times that they were doing...so, but it...you know...the guy at the time, I mean, if you know what happened two nights before, yeah, they did see torpedoes. They've got the boats that shot them up. Two nights later, you get another destroyer in there...

Farley Again, Golden made the comment about the chaos, the confusion, the mix up whereby somebody by the name of Parks almost shot up the Turner Joy. There was such confusion and then he said that he had something in the crosshairs and they demanded to know where the Turner Joy was before he fired, and directed that the Turner Joy turn on their lights, and he said there it was big as life, right in the crosshairs.

[redacted] Yeah, you know, there were things that were happening that night...and I want to say it's Denton and I've read some of his articles since then. You know he's swearing up and down they flew in the direction of where the guy said that the screws and stuff...to the azimuth that they were coming (from), and they dropped flare after flare after flare and there was nothing there. So, personally I can say, you know, we had the 2 August incident happened. And we know what PT boats were involved and the Swatow boats were involved...the 4th, I cannot say anything took place. Other than maybe you got the sonar guy on the Turner Joy was getting feedback. And that does happen.

Farley I'm gonna switch (tapes) (TR NOTE: Cuts out here, NIL HEARD for four minutes.)

[redacted] I mean you know, if you've got questions and stuff, I'll try to recall some of the things I did. Since the (B% college you paid) you know, and thinking back and there was so many things that went on. I look back and it's what 23 years?

Johnson Yeah.

[redacted] 23 years, and hopefully I've matured a little bit since then, when you look, you know you

don't fight two-star people and you don't fight...

Johnson Uncle Milty.

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[redacted] Yeah, is he on as a consultant or anything?

Johnson I don't know what his situation is.

Farley I don't think so. I see him in the hallway occasionally.

Johnson He's on (1G) but I don't know what status he is.

[redacted] Maybe some time when you get a chance you to get his recollection's of...

Johnson Yeah, we need to get Zaslow in here for a lot of different things.

Farley [redacted]s another name that I just read in this...

[redacted] [redacted]was our NCR Vietnam rep at the time. '64, '65. I never had the pleasure of meeting the gentleman, but I had the pleasure of using his orders getting on some aircraft in '65 when I was in Vietnam. He had orders cut, courier orders, for people...they were used very extensively.

Johnson What about the linguists aboard the Maddox? Did you have any feeling that this was another Pueblo situation where you had guys out there who could not...who never actually used line when you didn't know what was going on, or did you have any feel at all?

[redacted] I had feel at all. I had no idea the people where who went on the Maddox. The one who would know, retired here this summer; that's [redacted] He...I don't whether you could get him back to...

Johnson Oh, yeah.

Farley Is he in the area?

[redacted] Yes, he lives over in Odenton. And he was the one, in fact was the one who put the "heads up" out. That the attack was going to take place and issued a lot of those TACREPS during that period of time.

Johnson Did you have, do you have any comments about what was going on downtown? I know that you weren't personally doing that, but did you feel that Lang and Zaslow were being pressured to put out one story versus another kind of story?

[redacted] No, I don't think they were pressured on because having worked with these gentleman...they were telling us...as we knew to the best of our abilities and they were not going to swayed to be, you know, "here's what we're seeing happening or at least from the State Department or from the Defense Department side. Can you verify this?" Or whatever... and whatever we had is what they were giving them. From what I recall, from what [redacted]vas saying when they came back, things got testy at times, in the meetings (TR NOTE: cut ends abruptly here). Colonel Lang would be up briefing and then you'd have a one or two-star there starting to question "Why don't you have this, and why don't you have that?" and very matter of factly tell them, "If it was on the air, we intercepted it. You have it." and we did not have that.

Farley I guess McNamara was really on the pan. They were demanding that he produce those messages, those two messages that said that the patrol boats were ordered to attack

and then the battle damage report.

[redacted]

And like I say, you know, that...they became subject of a number of congressional hearings and that was I guess why I gave you [redacted] name, you know he was involved in the hearings later on. Just by virtue of he being a branch chief at that time, in that area. He and [redacted] - they all went down to these hearings and you know, those folders and stuff, I don't know what you have here, I'd be interested to take a look and see what you do have in the folder. A lot of those things made a lot of trips back and forth down that parkway over a period of time

Farley And you suggested that some of that material might have been destroyed after the hearings?

[redacted]

I heard rumor to that effect. Maybe that's...

Johnson We have very little dealing with the hearings until, the hearings in '64 were the cakewalk because very few questions were asked. In '68 were the tough times and we just do not have any files that I have found yet. That are in detail.

[redacted]

In '67 I went back to language school, I spent a year down at Captain University learning Thai and Lao and then when I came back in '68, I was in the (2-3G) forces, Laos. And that's what we were working then. So, I was out of the area where all the activity was going on. Because eventually they had, you know, we were able to read up to a certain point and they had some, I'm not sure if we had a defector, but we had a lot of the cryp stuff, charts and stuff and all of a sudden the North Vietnamese navy became unreadable after a period of time. But I never got involved in the congressional hearings at all. In fact I'm not sure that any of the ones of the names that I gave you were involved in it, were working the problem at the time. I made a mistake, I know for a fact that [redacted] were involved. And some of the more senior people.

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