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UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT ~~SECRET KIMBO~~

Memorandum

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TO : INR - Thomas L. Hughes DATE: October 1, 1964

FROM : INR/RFE - Allen S. Whiting

SUBJECT: De Soto Patrol May Have Fired On Vessels Assigned To Shadow It

Several items of information raise the possibility that De Soto patrol may have fired upon North Vietnamese naval vessels tracking the patrol as it entered an area beyond the limits of North Vietnamese coastal radar.

North Vietnamese Navy Command Orders Continuous Reporting On Patrol's Course

Shortly after the first North Vietnamese report of the USS Edwards and the USS Morton, then about thirty miles seaward of Dong Hoi on the morning of September 17, the North Vietnamese Naval High Command apparently alerted all naval stations and ships. This required some to maintain direct contact with naval headquarters at Haiphong and Haiphong ("K") apparently ordered tracking stations to report continuously on the course of the patrols. However, the North Vietnamese coastal surveillance stations probably were unable to cover the patrol vessels when they retired to sea after the conclusion of the first and second days' patrolling.

De Soto Patrol's Night Retirements Beyond Effective Coastal Radar Range

From the coordinates of August and September sightings of the De Soto patrol vessels reported by North Vietnamese coastal radar and lookout stations, it is possible to construct a tentative map showing probable North Vietnamese coastal surveillance capabilities in the general area of the September 18 incident. It appears that the De Soto vessels entered an area of little or no shore radar coverage as they put out to sea from patrol point "D" both on September 17 and September 18. Shore-based radar capabilities faded from thirty to forty miles offshore in this area. (See attached map.)

Declassified and approved for release by NSA on 02-14-2006 pursuant to E.O. 12958, as amended

North Vietnamese May Have Used Vessels To Guarantee Full-time Coverage

There is a good possibility that the North Vietnamese navy used vessels at various times throughout the patrol, especially at night, to ensure continuous coverage of the destroyers' movements. They had done the same in August.

At 11:18 AM September 17, an unidentified entity, described variously as the "T-520" and "520" reportedly began shadowing the patrol. The "shadowing" continued until 10:50 PM that evening when it reported that it had lost the destroyer. The times involved in 520's sighting reports do not coincide with any known radar station or lookout station sighting report; and the unit's apparent ability to follow the vessels well into the night to a point perhaps fifty miles offshore suggests that 520 may be a vessel and, from the speeds it might have been called upon to use, perhaps a Swatow PGM. At 6:38 AM on the 18th, the coastal lookout station at Hon Matt reported that it had turned the responsibility for "shadowing" the patrol over to 520. The patrol was then at point "D" beginning its day's patrolling northward. The distances involved between the vessel's locations at the time of this report and the preceding day precludes its having been tracked by a coastal radar station.

At 8:15 PM on the night of the 18th, following the patrol's initial sighting of unidentified vessels ahead of it and vessels' first maneuvers, a U.S. Navy pilot flying air cover over the destroyers reported what he believed to be two wakes paralleling the course of the patrol at a range of from 4-5 nautical miles at a bearing of 330 degrees true from the USS Edwards. At this time the Edwards reported that radar contacts one to two miles north of his position were to be taken under fire. The pilot said he could see the subsequent gun flashes, but that he could observe no evidence of hits.

Later, at 2230G, another pilot who was also flying cover for the destroyers sighted what he believed to be two wakes trailing the De Soto ships by an estimated 8-10 nautical miles. The pilot reported that the night was clear and visibility was excellent. He dropped flares but, he said, the wakes disappeared and he saw no vessels. The vessels may have stopped dead in the water to avoid observation.

There is precedent for the North Vietnamese mobile tracking of the destroyers. A North Vietnamese mobile (vessel) radar tracking station was highly active during the August De Soto patrol, passing sixty-six messages reporting the tracking of the patrol's course.

Nature of Encounter Argues Against Attack Motivation

The range and course details of the September 18 encounter albeit with questionable range determinations, raise the possibility that the unidentified vessels were maneuvering to avoid destruction while maintaining the ability to shadow the destroyers.

Shortly before 7:00 PM on the evening of the 18th, just after sunset, the patrol destroyers were proceeding toward the middle of the Gulf of Tonkin on a generally southeasterly course from the last check point of their day's patrolling. At this time they noticed an unidentified radar "blip" ahead on them on their port bow. After a few moments, as the range between the patrol and the blip contracted, the destroyers turned southward to avoid the unsighted "blip." At this time, the "blip" was about as close to the vessels as it got prior to the USS Edwards' first warning shot.

After the series of turns to avoid what appeared to be the accelerated approach of the first "blip," the destroyers' radar picked up a second "target" or "blip" ahead of them on their now southwesterly course. The destroyers again turned and slowed their speeds to pass between the two unidentified intruders. The "blips" then gained somewhat on the position of the destroyers, in all probability because they had not reduced speed. Thereafter the destroyers speeded up to outdistance the "blips."

It is significant, however, that the unidentified vessels apparently never attempted to get much closer than five nautical miles of the vessels, either paralleling the course of the destroyers or trailing them. This is borne out by the first air cover pilot's observations discussed earlier in the paper.

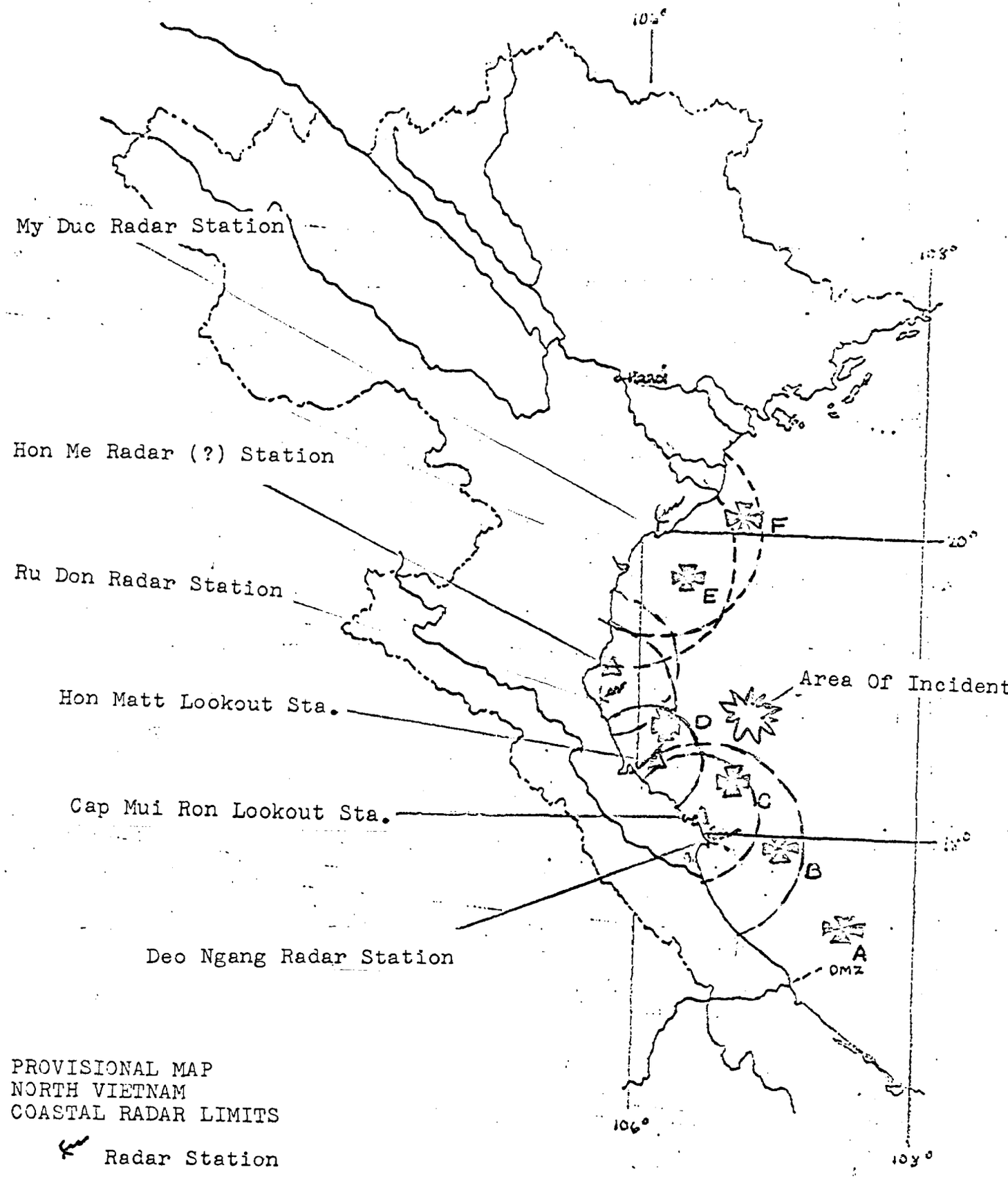
Furthermore, despite the shelling of the "blips" by the two destroyers, if the second pilot's are accurate, the unidentified vessels continued to "track" the destroyers after the encounter, but at a more respectful distance of 8-10 miles.

August Incidents Probably In Mind of All Concerned

It is probable that the events of the August De Soto patrol and its aftermath were in the minds of everyone involved in the September 18 incident, North Vietnamese as well as American. An apparent defensive concern was prevalent in North Vietnamese naval and merchant marine messages intercepted on the 17th and 18th, especially the fear that the destroyers might be unwittingly provoked. The North Vietnamese naval high command seems to have exercised considerable care lest this occur.

Considering the otherwise defensive tenor of the North Vietnamese naval traffic during the period of the patrol, one can speculate that what the De Soto radarmen saw on their screens may have been Swatow-class patrol boats picketed to pick up and shadow the patrols course. Thus, the unusual maneuvering phenomena might be explained by an attempt of the unidentified vessels skippers to pick up the patrol as it proceeded seaward and a tenacious attempt to shadow it while avoiding being sunk by the destroyers' guns.

September 18 - 19, 1964



PROVISIONAL MAP
NORTH VIETNAM
COASTAL RADAR LIMITS

Radar Station

Lookout Station

Patrol Check Points