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UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

# Memorandum

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TO : INR/OD - Mr. Thomas L. Hughes

DATE: October 19, 1964

FROM : INR/RFE - Allen S. Whiting *new*

SUBJECT: Comments on the September Tonkin Incident

1. Night surveillance by DRV navy of DeSoto ships in the Tonkin Gulf appears to have taken place frequently during the August and September patrols. However, the coverage on the night of September 18 was atypical when compared to past shadowing activities.

a. The destroyers picked up the unidentified vessels on radar at close range (10 to 11 nautical miles), something reported previously only during the incidents of August 2 and August 4.

b. These DRV vessels stayed close to the destroyers even when the latter took evasive action. The distance between the two sides was halved in one instance, from 10 to 5 nautical miles.

c. This may have been a routine shadowing operation but such close coverage makes such an interpretation somewhat suspect. Gross inexperience on the part of the DRV crews is an unlikely explanation because they demonstrated in the August operations a fairly sophisticated patterns of maneuver as well as good control over the Swatows and MTB, ability to manage the complex directions of their different courses, and competence in maintaining desired and varied distances from the destroyers.

2. A sequence of DRV naval responsibilities to include (a) tracking, (b) preparation for combat, and (c) actual engagement or withdrawal has apparently occurred during past DeSoto patrols. Evidence that a tracking mission was in effect does not of itself indicate that this was the limit of the assignment.

3. The unidentified vessels were probably fairly fast combat naval craft. Otherwise they could not have maintained the speeds of 20 knots and higher, which they sustained for some time, under difficult conditions.

a. The ability of the first sighted "blip" to close the distance -- from 10 to 5 nautical miles -- indicates a capacity to sustain high speeds. This task may have been eased because the unidentified vessels were headed in the destroyer's direction,

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but this merely emphasizes how far the unidentified vessels departed from normal shadowing procedures.

b. The most critical statement was made by the MORTON's main battery office: on firing a warning round across the bow of a target, he observed that the target continued to close at 20 knots. The MORTON then opened fire. (Post Mortem message CTU77.6.6 19/1412Z.) Other statements generally corroborated this. It is difficult to attribute this estimate of the target's speed to DeSoto's failure to calculate its own speed (inferring that it approached a near-still target) for this would be too gross and simple an error. Besides, the targets were clocked at high speeds by both destroyers in several instances.

4. The exact type of DRV ships used is difficult to determine. Their exceedingly close approach to DeSoto (between 5 to 10 nautical miles) presents a markedly different pattern from the August experience, when enemy boats held off at about 12 to 14 nautical miles prior to commencing their pattern of engagement. In the August combat, the Swatows fell back to about 27 nautical miles and the MTB's then closed in to a distance of about 4 to 5 nautical miles.

a. The fact that the ships on September 18 never came closer than 4 to 5 miles distance therefore does not of itself indicate absence of interest to attack. In August, the US Navy believed that the DRV had a torpedo range of 4,000 yards (2 nautical miles) but the MTB attacks in some instances launched their torpedoes at from 4 to 5 nautical miles. On the basis of the August experience, the US Navy now holds that the DRV Navy, learning and developing a competence in Soviet tactics, has an estimated torpedo range of 8,000 yards or 4 nautical miles. It considers this to be a fairly sophisticated competence (#413194 DeSoto. DOD p. 15, Sept. 23, 1964). An effective 4 to 5 nautical mile range would enhance an attacker's security measurably.

In any event, a 4 to 5 nautical mile distance is exceedingly close for patrol and unnecessary for surveillance by Swatows. Even an 8 to 10 nautical mile range is close. Note that on the previous night (Sept. 17), DeSoto held two radar contacts at approximate distances of 40 and 25 nautical miles and the contacts held steady after the patrol changed course.

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b. The lack of reference to MTB's during the September 18 incident does not conclusively indicate their absence during the engagement. References to MTB's in traffic is slight. Between the aftermath of the August engagements and the September engagements, there was only one mention of MTB's -- but this, on August 28, placed two torpedo boats T 323 and 326 in Southern Fleet area, at Quang Khe. It is therefore possible that a combination of Swatows and MTB's may have been engaged in the operation, with communications between them maintained by VHF radio-telephone not subject to intercept. References to T 326 and T 323 have not yet appeared in post-engagement traffic.

Following the September engagement, on September 26, MTB Flotilla 135 was transferred to Southern Fleet command. This unit (T 333, T 336, T 339) engaged MADDOX in August at which time it lost T 339 and had T 336 damaged.

There is a serious gap in our knowledge concerning MTB's. The total available to DRV is not clear -- presumably 5 or 6. Their Fleet disposition is uncertain, though the above information would seem to place 4 of them currently in the Southern Fleet area. And the relation of MTB flotillas to Swatow sub-units is uncertain. Our current naval OB (prior to number changes that went into effect October 14) identifies a series of sub-units whose geographic responsibilities cover the entire DRV coast. All vessels accounted for in this structure are Swatows. Such a composition would suffice against raiders, but it seems that combined formations of MTB-Swatow groups are essential for a posture against potential incursions by destroyers and other large vessels.

5. Evidence that unidentified vessels were present is as follows:

a. USN pilots on two separate occasions reported seeing two sets of tracks, the first at 18/1315Z (4 to 5 nautical miles away from the DeSoto vessels) and the latter at 1530Z (8 to 10 nautical miles away from the US ships). Parenthetically, the DeSoto patrol reported that it fired on radar targets at 1219Z--1236Z, 1302Z--1325Z, and 1337Z--1408Z. If the vessels whose tracks were noted at 1315Z were hit, then it is possible that the later wakes were from two other vessels making at least a total of four. It is, however, at least equally possible that these four wakes came from the same two ships, which were not hit, but then drifted back to the 10-mile distance. In any

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event the later sighting of wakes (at 8 to 10 nautical miles distance) comes almost two hours after firing ceased. And in both instances the pilots saw tracks but no vessels.

b. Two sailors on the EDWARDS state positively that they saw silhouettes of vessels, but no mention is made in the reports of the number of silhouettes seen.

c. The surface radar of both ships and at least one battery radar on each ship (i.e., a total of 4 of the 6 radars on both ships combined) locked on and held the targets, and concurred as to the speed and course of the targets.

6. Questions to be raised:

a. (1) How many separate times did targets come onto and go off radar?

(2) How many targets were picked up each time?

(3) How many silhouettes were sighted?

b. (1) What is the range of detection of the destroyers' radars? And, did they report any radar findings around the time of the 1530Z pilot report of 2 wakes 10 miles' distance?

(2) What is the range of the Swatow radars? Is it beyond 10 nautical miles?

c. What pattern of position and maneuver did the DRV vessels follow: patrol and/or attack motive discernible?

d. What speeds did the DRV vessels move at? How did this relate to DeSoto speeds at the same times?

e. What OB exists on the MTB's?

f. What post mortem evaluations can we make of the DRV presence? E.g., why did the pilots on two occasions, two hours apart, sight wakes but no boats?

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