

UNCLASSIFIED

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A Response to "The SIGINT Hounds Were Howling"

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On 31 May 2006, as part of a second release of SIGINT material related to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, NSA included a short monograph penned by the Director of Policy, Mr. Louis Giles, titled "The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery: The SIGINT Hounds Were Howling." In the fourth paragraph of his article, Mr. Giles stated that its purpose was to refute some of the statements in my 2001 article, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964."¹ Specifically, he wanted to dispute my "assertion that SIGINT was mishandled, deliberately skewed, or not provided to the Johnson administration." We will examine some of his claims later. First, though, here are some general considerations about the article.

The appearance of "Howling" in the "Gulf of Tonkin (Release 2)" was something of a surprise since all other records released by the NSA Office of Policy as part of the declassification initiative regarding the Gulf of Tonkin consisted of material directly related to the incident. These records included SIGINT reports, memoranda, messages, reports, assessments, and selected oral histories of individuals who participated in the events, either directly or with some degree of direct knowledge. The second release added other historical writings on the subject from the 1970s to the 1990s that were held by NSA.² However, "Howling" is something quite different from all of the other writings released by NSA. It was composed in December 2005, and its stated purpose was to dispute some of my arguments.

"Howling" represents the first attempt to dispute the findings in the 2001 article I authored about SIGINT and the Gulf of Tonkin incidents that appeared in the Spring-2001 issue of

Cryptologic Quarterly. After reading "Howling," I realized that to let the piece pass without comment would be a disservice to both the public and the cryptologic workforce, both of whom have expressed considerable interest in the Gulf of Tonkin issue since the first publication of "Skunks" in 2001 and later with first release to the public on the NSA web site on 31 October 2005. I was concerned that any number of people might read "Howling" without reading "Skunks" and therefore would form an incorrect impression of the latter article. [Editor's Note: The "Skunks" article is included at the end of this CQ.]

Also, there is a general shortcoming with "Howling" that must be mentioned up front: the lack of any source citations for the evidence supporting its claims. This failure to cite sources subverts the validity of many of the claims in "Howling." In addition, this lack of citations makes any response difficult since one has to reconstruct the apparent sources used in "Howling." As for the article itself, I have chosen to respond to seven major points.

1. Did SIGINT or NSA contradict eyewitness evidence of the attack? "Howling" asserts that in early August 1964, "NSA was not in a position to contradict the eyewitnesses."³ This statement implies that I had maintained that the SIGINT from 4 August contradicted the eyewitness information. Actually, at no point in "Skunks" does this claim occur.⁴ Instead, "Howling" fails to mention that I DO note on two occasions that SIGINT reports were used to support the somewhat confusing and contradictory eyewitness and technical evidence. For example, on page 2 of "Skunks," I state that "Without the signals intelligence information, the administra-

UNCLASSIFIED

Page 9

tion had only the confused and conflicting testimony and evidence of the men and equipment involved in the incident." On page 26, I observe that "...[SIGINT] acted as factual bookends, propping up the other pieces of contentious evidence." Of course, this SIGINT "evidence" consisted of the warning Critic based on erroneous analysis of an intercepted partial message, as well as the controversial NSA translation, "T10." Still, the SIGINT was used to SUPPORT other sources of information about the purported attacks.

This issue points to a pair of major problems with the way "Howling" presents both the eyewitness and SIGINT evidence. First, the article assumes that all the evidence was unitary, i.e., all persons provided testimony that supported the claim of an attack that night. Secondly, it suggests that the SIGINT was singular in its contradiction of the eyewitness evidence. Both notions are wrong.

The body of eyewitness evidence was contradictory regarding the second attack. As discussed in "Skunks," the carrier Ticonderoga reported in a message to CINCPAC that its pilots saw no evidence of the North Vietnamese torpedo boats, although they could see quite clearly the two destroyers and their wakes extending a thousand yards behind the ships.⁵ This message contradicted the eyewitness accounts of a small number of sailors from the two destroyers who claimed to have seen torpedo tracks, "cockpit" lights and/or searchlights. The evidence from the eyewitnesses, as well as the information from technical sources such as radar and sonar, was so confusing and uncertain that the destroyer flotilla commander, Captain John Herrick, informed the Pacific command that he had doubts about a number of the contacts and sightings based on sonar and radar sources and suggested a search for wreckage on the morning of 5 August.⁶ It was this confusion and contradiction that the incorrect reports from NSA and the field site in Phu Bai, South Vietnam, propped up.

The second problem is that "Howling" totally misses one of the main points in "Skunks": some

SIGINT reports contradicted one another, and the SIGINT reports that contained information that negated the notion that a second attack had happened were mishandled. A handful of SIGINT reports seemed to support the Navy's claim of a second attack. Much of the SIGINT offered no evidence to sustain or dispute the claim that there was an attack on 4 August.

Most importantly, though, some of the SIGINT contained conflicting information. For example, San Miguel (USN-27, Philippines) translated the same intercept, which the site at Phu Bai (USN-414T, South Vietnam) had interpreted as an attack order, as nothing more than instructions about refueling two of the torpedo boats.⁷ Then there was the Phu Bai (USM-626J, South Vietnam)⁸ report released three and one-half hours after the Critic that indicated that the boats, which the site had reported ready to attack the two American destroyers, in reality, could not get their engines started and would be towed to another base.⁹ And, of course, there were the significant differences between the two San Miguel reports and the NSA translation, both using the same intercept – the difference between "comrades" and "boats."¹⁰ Finally, the first Gulf of Tonkin Summary issued by NSA on 5 August contained two entries that conflicted with SIGINT from other sites. The first reported that the two American destroyers had been shadowed by two "presumably DRV aircraft." However, the original Vietnamese text issued by San Miguel indicated that the aircraft in question were two single-propeller planes investigating the DRV merchant ship Thong Nhat.¹¹ Secondly, the same NSA Summary reported that another intercept mentioned that "Khoai had met the enemy," interpreted as a reference to the second attack. However, the translation, as reported by San Miguel, read: "When ((you)) meet the enemy T333 (a DRV torpedo boat) must mobilize." This version clearly points to an alert order passed to the North Vietnamese early on the morning of 5 August to be prepared for any future clashes with the Americans.¹²

To sum up on this issue, the body of both eyewitness and technical evidence, as well as the SIGINT evidence, contained contradictory information.

2. "Howling" maintains that NSA analysts were "having difficulty" in trying to reconcile SIGINT with eyewitness reports from the Maddox. This was not so. The actual "difficulty" for the SIGINT analysts was this: The boats, initially reported at 1115Z by the Marine detachment at Phu Bai to be preparing to attack the Desoto mission, in reality, were incapable of doing so. Phu Bai further reported at 1440Z that all three boats were involved in towing to another port for repairs. These boats were nowhere near the two American destroyers; at least one of them could not start its engines!

So what was the NSA analysts' response to this "difficulty" posed by the Phu Bai reports? They countered the SIGINT fact reported by Phu Bai with nothing more than pure, unsubstantiated speculation placed in a report that amounted to this: The attack was conducted by unidentified craft from a naval base some seventy miles away from the scene of the action.¹³ There was not one scrap of SIGINT (or even collateral) for this. Instead, we have this scenario: NSA analysts trumped SIGINT fact from field reporting with unfounded speculation so as to harmonize the later SIGINT reporting with the earlier Critic.

3. "Actual attack" vs. no second attack? We need to address a particular detail that "Howling" tries to present as a "fact." This is the reference to the phrase "actual attack" as quoted in paragraph 5, page 2 of "Howling," which originally came from the "Summary of DRV Naval Communication Revealing Preplanned Attacks on USS Maddox," published midday on 6 August.¹⁴

"Howling" attempts to establish this: At the time this summary report was issued, during the 1600Z hour on 6 August – two days after the attack in question – NSA was equivocating on the issue of

an attack on 4 August. "Howling" avers that the "evidence" for this conclusion is that NSA reporters put the word "actual" in the text to discriminate between the attack on 2 August and the activity on 4 August. This claim is repeated four times in the article. But does this interpretation of the report's text hold up?

The evidence for this conclusion is contained in the highlights paragraph of the above Summary report, which is largely a chronology with a timeline. Specifically, there is the sentence that begins, "While the actual attack [my italics] took place at 0802Z on 2 August..."¹⁵ "Howling" wants the reader to believe that NSA used this phrase "actual attack" at this point in the Summary to distinguish the attack of 2 August from that on 4 August. The article further wants us to believe that by using this single adjective "actual" for the 2 August attack, the NSA reporters explicitly downplayed the reported attack of 4 August in the Summary because it does not use the adjective "actual."

Yet this is not what the author(s) of the Summary intended, "Howling's" curious interpretation notwithstanding. This phrase, that is, "actual attack," relates to the timing of the 2 August attack within the context of aggressive North Vietnamese intentions, which had been noted in SIGINT reports of the previous twenty-four hours, that is, back to 1 August. When the entire sentence in the Summary from which the expression "actual attack" is quoted, this interpretation is obvious: "While the actual attack took place at 0802Z on 2 August, DRV naval communications demonstrated their aggressive intent as early as 1627Z on 1 August" [italics mine]. Put another way: after a day of talking about attacking the American ship, the North Vietnamese "actually" attacked.

Interestingly, in reference to the attack on 4 August in the very same Summary there was wording that shows that NSA analysts considered the second attack "actual":

UNCLASSIFIED

Cryptologic Quarterly
Fall/Winter 2006

"... - 4 August 1559Z: Indications of DRV intentions to press the attack [my italics] were found in the following message: 'After the (Flotilla) 135 had already started to report to you, we shot down two enemy planes in the battle area, and one other plane was damaged. We sacrificed two ships and all the rest are okay. The combat spirit is very high and we are starting out on the hunt and (are waiting) to receive assignments.'¹⁶

But there is even more. The next entry in this Summary says this: "4 August/19HZ: Further confirmation of actual DRV involvement was found in a message that said, "Khoai had met the enemy." Here we see the use of the word "actual" to refer to the purported combat of 4 August.

It is apparent that when seen in its true context, the wording "actual attack" in reference to the attack of 2 August does not offer any evidence about NSA analysts' doubt concerning the 4 August attack in the text of NSA reports.

4. NSA, in accordance with records disposition schedules, destroyed "raw" COMINT material related to the Gulf of Tonkin. "Howling"¹⁷ postulates that the missing "raw intercept" from the night of 4 August, which was the basis for both reports from the navy intercept site at San Miguel, as well as the NSA translation "T10-64," was destroyed according to standard procedure. The article cites the Director, NSA, at the time, General Gordon Blake.¹⁸ "Howling" also cites General Blake from the same interview: "Blake...suggests the raw material was not destroyed but was provided to DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) for a defense chronology." It adds more support: "In fact, NSA records disposition schedules, then, as now, allow raw COMINT material to be destroyed once the final report is issued."¹⁹

But are these statements correct? To answer, we need to consider these three claims. (1) General Blake stated that the information was destroyed; (2) General Blake suggested the material was not

destroyed, but provided to DIA; and (3) records disposition schedules from the time (1964) allowed for raw COMINT to be destroyed.

Regarding the destruction of the material, the complete quote from General Blake's 1972 interview with William Gerhard (Mr. G) and Ms. Renee Jones (R) (with apologies for the poor original transcription with typos and misspellings) is this:

Gen B Of course I don't know eought [enough?] about what they say and don't say except (sic) that I recall sort of a general feeling that we couldn't possibly save everything or we would be inundated in a veryj (sic) short period of time. I recall a figure which may be inaccurate something like 790 [figure crossed out] 700 tons was digested through the digestion processes annually.

Mr. G [erhard] Were a real paper mill out there probably 700 thousand [sic]

GEN B so I don't know that I would be inclined to make a lot of the nonavailability of a particular collection of raw traffic.

It is obvious that General Blake is not discussing the destruction of specific records. He refers to a "sort of a general feeling" that the Agency could not "save everything." He further mentions that some 700 tons was destroyed and processed annually. This is not evidence that a specific set of records was destroyed. This is a far cry from the conclusion that "the information [from the Gulf of Tonkin] was destroyed."²⁰

"Howling" then suggests that the missing translation, or raw material - it is not clear which it is - was not destroyed at all, but was provided to DIA for a Defense [Department] chronology. First of all, this statement, purportedly made by General Blake, contradicts the article's earlier claim that Blake believed that the Agency destroyed the material because of a lack of storage space.

Yet "Howling" does not correctly quote General Blake on this matter. In fact, Ms. Jones made the statement about the DIA having Gulf of Tonkin material. Here is the extent of her comment:

R [ene Jones] "...we talked with Dr. Ber[l] don of the A [ir] F [orce] History office and in 67 he was asked by IDA (the Institute of Defense Analysis, Princeton, NJ), for which he worked at the time, to do a command and control study on Ton Kin... At that time he saw all the raw traffic down in DIA it had all the operator's comments, operator chatter, pen[c] iled in si [u] ppositions as to what the traffic might mean. In Sept of 67 [Senator William] Fulbright sent his first letter to DoD as [k] ing for all the documentation on Tonkin and Dr. Beldon was told to drop his project and consequently that the last he – ever saw of the raw traffic so we know at least one copy of it got down to DIA for some strange reason If it is out in the building its not being its not being proced, [my italics]"²¹

There is further evidence contradicting the "DIA lost it" theory. We can turn to a 13 December 1967 memorandum from the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Joseph Carroll, that has the following:

"All of the information concerning the attacks [note plural] came from manual morse intercept and was copied on a typewriter by the intercept operator as heard. All of the information was encrypted and there was no clear text voice traffic which could be associated with the attacks [again note plural]. The original intercepted traffic which is in storage at the National Security Agency Repository at Fort Holabird, Maryland, can be provided; however, permanent transcriptions of th[e] original cypher [sic] messages, together with the decryption and translation thereof, are immediately available."²²

So what we have here is a statement by the director of the DIA that the intercept was still available as late as December 1967 and was stored at the

then NSA records depository at Fort Holabird in Baltimore.

"Howling" also tries to buttress its claims by stating, "NSA records disposition schedules (RDS), then, as now, allow raw COMINT material to be destroyed once the final report is issued." This statement is true, but it is irrelevant to what happened to the missing material. How can this be?

There are two compelling reasons, each having to do with the nature of the material that NSA retained and ultimately released.

First of all, "Howling" ignores the exceptional nature of the Gulf of Tonkin event and that this importance forced retention of the relevant SIGINT material. Much material that ordinarily would have been destroyed was, in fact, saved. The NSA Chronology included a number of transcripts of so-called raw SIGINT, notably intercept text from field sites in the region. These intercepts have the decrypted plaintext Vietnamese values hand written beneath the code groups.

The second reason is even more compelling.

"Howling" makes the statement, "Mr. Hanyok notes the 'unexplained disappearance' of the original decrypted text of this translation from the NSA archives. While indeed, the original translation of the message does not exist, it is only one of many original translations of messages from this period that are missing."

The problem with this statement is that material I described as missing – the "original translation" – is not "original" or "raw" SIGINT as "Howling" imagines it to be. Instead, what is missing is serialized product. First of all, there is the serialized translation, T162-64, issued by San Miguel, which would have been issued on 8 August. It is missing from the NSA archives. This translation would have contained San Miguel's version of the disputed text regarding "two comrades/boats sacrificed." Secondly, the decrypted Vietnamese text – the

UNCLASSIFIED

Cryptologic Quarterly
Fall/Winter 2006

source for the NSA translation "T10" and the two San Miguel reports, "R38," and "R39" – would have arrived at NSA as Technical Supplements to the two reports from the field.²³ "Skunks" contains a quarter-page description of the nature and content of these technical supplements and the critical role they played in reporting. This type of product was sent as an attachment to serialized reports and translations.²⁴ There are other reports from this incident with their Technical Supplements. In fact, for both of the NSA Gulf of Tonkin releases, which occurred on 30 November 2005 and 30 May 2006, NSA released at least three reports that included their Technical Supplements – the same type of product that "Howling" claims was "raw" signals intelligence and would have been destroyed as a matter of course.²⁵

The point here is clear: the missing documents consisted of serialized product, not so-called "raw" intercept. The fact that the San Miguel translation and technical supplements to the critical intercept regarding "comrades" or "boats" are missing, and are the only serialized product missing from the records remains at the heart of the question as to how NSA handled the product from the Gulf of Tonkin.

At the same time, it must also be recalled that some "raw" intercept, i.e., cipher text, was saved and used in the Chronology. It is interesting to note that in the NSA Chronology, the "raw" SIGINT saved for the record is used to buttress the contention that there was a second attack, while what is missing are certain critical serialized product that would have settled the important translation difference (comrades vs. boats) between the San Miguel and NSA versions of the North Vietnamese traffic of 4 August.

5. What was the purpose of the NSA Chronology? "Howling" claims that the origin and purpose of the NSA Chronology of the 2-4 August events in the Gulf of Tonkin were totally different than explained in "Skunks," which categorized it as a postmortem of the attack intended for

the intelligence community. Here is the "Howling" take:

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 [Mr. Giles] 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."²⁶ [my italics]

In reality, the first sentence of the memorandum that accompanied the Chronology states, "The report forwarded herewith contains the events, in chronological order, surrounding the naval engagements on 2 and 4 August 1964 between the U.S. destroyers Maddox and Turner Joy and North Vietnamese Naval PT boats."²⁷ No mention that the Chronology was an internal history is found in the memorandum. Furthermore, the first sentence in the Chronology's introduction reads, "The following report presents the details, generally speaking in chronological order, etc."²⁸ The last paragraph of the introduction identifies the document again as "report."

At the same time, "Howling" would like readers to believe that the Chief, B2, originally had ordered it for internal use only. This assertion is based on a "recent conversation" with Mr. Zaslow to which no one else has access. However, as the closest office-level manager to the element that generated the SIGINT product about the Gulf of Tonkin, it made sense for the Chief of B2 to oversee the report, especially since the author of the Chronology was chief of the staff-reporting element, B205.

"Howling" stretches the term "internal historical use" well beyond the conventional definition.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Cryptologic Quarterly
Fall/Winter 2006

For one thing, there were four NSA offices in the Pacific region that received copies – NSA, Pacific (NSAPAC); NSAPAC, Japan; NSAPAC, Vietnam; and the Senior U.S. Liaison Officer, Melbourne, Australia. More importantly, a report's distribution does not limit its dissemination unless there are overt restrictions or caveats. The distribution list in the Chronology merely lists the initial recipients. A claim that there was an "implied" restriction would be irrelevant; anyone with clearance could see it.

Aside from this matter of purpose, it must be pointed out that "Howling" ignored a critical piece of evidence, a 31 August 1964 memorandum, written by Del Lang for the directors of both the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency stating the "desire that a joint NSA-DIA Post Mortem of the Gulf of Tonkin Incidents (note the plural) be undertaken." Mr. Zaslowsky's office, B2, was to be the executive agent for the project, with DIA input on U.S. force information, i.e., the message traffic between the Maddox, CINCPAC, and the JCS. The project was to be completed in thirty to forty-five days, which would be approximately mid-October.²⁹ The NSA Chronology was published on 14 October 1964.

The statement regarding the origin of the Chronology ignores another critical piece of evidence – the NSA Chronology of the similar incident in the Gulf of Tonkin on 18 September 1964. If we accept the narrow explanation for the Chronology of the events of 2-5 August, that it was done only for that event, then why did NSA produce a second Chronology of the events of 18 September for the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB)?³⁰

"Howling" also neglects to mention that NSA personnel briefed the PFIAB in October 1964 about the three incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin. A script was prepared for the briefing and approved by the then Director of NSA, Lieutenant General Gordon Blake. In notes to an interview by William Gerhard with an NSA official who participated in the session, Lou Grant, the meeting degenerated into a

sort of "show and tell" about cryptanalysis. Mr. Gerhard's notes contain some provocative and cryptic entries suggesting that the NSA was "pitch[ing] [an] attempt to confirm [the] attack," and "we [NSA] were not sure of the 4th." Both statements appear to contradict one another, suggesting at least the reasonable conclusion that some NSA personnel attending the October meeting were to try to sell the idea that an attack had occurred on 4 August, while other NSA personnel were not sure and that there was "no physical (sic) evidence."³¹

The assertion that the Chronology was written for internal historical purposes does not hold up under the evidence that indicates it was written at the request of the directors of both the DIA and NSA and that the PFIAB also took an interest in the later reports and was briefed on them.

6. Was there "evidence" refuting my claim that COMINT information was presented in such a way as to preclude responsible decision makers in the Johnson administration from having a complete and objective narrative of events of 4 August 1964? For the author of "Howling," my conclusion about the manner in which SIGINT information was presented to the Johnson administration during the crisis and later is at the heart of the issue with "Skunks": "information was presented in such a manner as to preclude responsible decision makers in the Johnson administration from having the complete and objective of narrative of events of 4 August 1964."³² "Howling" refers to this statement four separate times. I will respond to two of them.

Here is the statement from page 3, second full paragraph, from "Howling":

Further evidence refuting the claim that COMINT [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] can be found in the NSA review

UNCLASSIFIED

Page 15

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."³³

For starters, "Howling" provides only part of the statement from "Skunks." Here is the complete quote from "Skunks" with the part that was left out set in boldface: "Beginning with the period of the crisis in early August, into the days of the immediate aftermath, and continuing into October 1964, 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."³⁴

"Howling" took the sentence about keeping SIGINT from the administration during the period from early August through mid-October 1964, dropped that initial qualifying clause and then connected it to testimony made by Secretary McNamara in February 1968. The reference to the defense secretary's testimony in 1968 does not apply to my original contention about withholding material in 1964.³⁵

The second version reads this way:

"It 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."³⁶

The first problem is that it is not clear to what the demonstrative phrase "This episode" in the middle of the quote is referring. Is it the "uncertainty... communicated to President Johnson, or in

the "DoD (sic) chronologies"? We will have to deal with both.

The article asserts that either episode demonstrates conclusively that NSA was indeed presenting the SIGINT in a clear manner to decision makers in the administration and that nothing was held back. Furthermore, according to "Howling," either President Johnson's briefing or the DoD chronologies illustrate the point that the "uncertainty" between "boats" or "comrades" was there for all to see. Actually, neither case supports the statement.

The problem, as presented in "Skunks" and as I have reiterated earlier in this article, was not the "uncertainty" but the contradictory text between the two products – San Miguel said "two comrades" and NSA said "two boats." The difference in the two products was significant enough that the White House required an explanation. President Johnson recalled in his memoirs that he was told "by our experts" that the phrase "two comrades" had two meanings: "this meant either two enemy boats or two men in the attack group."³⁷ The Vietnamese word for "comrade" is DONG CHI, while the word for "boat" is TAU. These words are nouns with distinct meanings; there is no reasonable way in Vietnamese to get "comrades" to mean "boats."

The interesting thing about the president's recollection is the fact that the experts told him that the word for "comrades" (DONG CHI) could have two such meanings. It would seem that if there was an issue over the meaning of the word or the translation, then the simplest way to settle the issue was to refer to the intercepted text that would have been contained in the Technical Supplement from San Miguel. Yet note from the president's narrative that this does not happen. Instead, the "expert" relies on a curious (and incorrect) lexicological explanation that the word "comrades" could have two meanings.³⁸

Now it may just occur to the readers that by not referring to the text of the original intercept, and instead, by making a specious translation of the

UNCLASSIFIED

Cryptologic Quarterly
Fall/Winter 2006

word "comrade," the unidentified "expert" indeed was 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!

As for the DoD chronologies, we have a problem with this "evidence." For one thing, we are told little about these chronologies – How many there were, who produced them – only that they were written in late August, some three weeks after the events. To what chronologies are we being referred?

If we check the two NSA releases under the category of "Chronologies of Events," we find seven such items listed as Chronologies. But only one is from late August – "Lawrence Levinson's Chronology of Events," dated 28 August.³⁹ Yet this single chronology does not, in the words from "Howling," "also note the uncertainty of 'boats' or 'comrades.'" The Chronology does note the doubts about the attacks relayed from Captain Herrick aboard the Maddox.⁴⁰ It reiterates his doubt about "just exactly what went on."⁴¹ The Chronology mentions a "slight doubt" whether the destroyers were in fact attacked, and this statement is based on the Maddox-originated tactical messages.⁴² Finally, the Chronology notes that there is now evidence of an attack, based on an intercept that indicated that⁴³ "two of its PT boats were 'sacrificed.'" Nowhere in the Levinson Chronology is the "uncertainty" in the SIGINT over "comrades" versus "boats" ever mentioned.⁴⁴

7. Was the COMINT the deciding factor in the ensuing airstrikes against North Vietnam? "Howling" states that the retaliation against North Vietnam was based principally on the eyewitness accounts from the destroyers on the scene and not the communications intelligence. The sole proof for this is a response made by Secretary McNamara to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 1968 that "Yes, it

[communications intelligence] was not the deciding factor, but it justified the decision."⁴⁵

There are several problems with this evidence. We will first look at the quote and its context. Then we will look at the timelines of the decision-making that indicate the situation regarding the decision to retaliate was not as "Howling" would like us to believe; in fact there was serious consideration in the Johnson administration and the U.S. Pacific command structure to delay or cancel the retaliatory air strikes because of the weak evidence of a second attack. However, the NSA translation "T10" (sacrificed two boats) proved critical in the final decision to retaliate.

First of all, "Howling" gets the McNamara quote wrong. Here is the full exchange in the transcript of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings between Secretary McNamara and Senator Stuart Symington (DEM - MO):

SENATOR SYMINGTON: Well, tomorrow is future. I am probably the least informed. I just have not had the time, but is it fair to say that the actions were taken on the basis of this highly classified unimpeachable source information?

SECRETARY MCNAMARA: It was one of the major factors leading us to the conclusions that we came to.

SENATOR SYMINGTON: Do you think that you would have come to these conclusions without it?

SECRETARY MCNAMARA: Yes.

SENATOR SYMINGTON: That is an interesting answer. It was not the deciding factor, but it justified the decision. [my boldface]

SECRETARY MCNAMARA: It did.

SENATOR SYMINGTON: Is that correct?

UNCLASSIFIED

Page 17

UNCLASSIFIED

Cryptologic Quarterly
Fall/Winter 2006

SECRETARY MCNAMARA: It did.

SENATOR SYMINGTON: I have no further questions, Mr. Chairman.⁴⁶

As we can see, Senator Symington made the statement, not McNamara. Symington employed an old trick used by friendly counsels of leading the witness with questions designed to get him out of a morass created by his own testimony. In this case, Secretary McNamara previously had been subjected to a line of hostile questioning from Senators Wayne Morse (DEM-OR) and Albert Gore (DEM-TN) that questioned the evidence – and this included the eyewitness and communications intelligence.⁴⁷ Senator Symington was offering a way for Secretary McNamara to get out of the straitjacket his earlier testimony had put him in regarding the validity and high importance of the COMINT.

Symington proposed and McNamara assented.

However, the even more serious problem is that “Howling” ignores the known chronology of the decision to launch the retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam. In February 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorized the Weapons System Evaluation Group under the Office of the Director of Defense Research and Engineering, to conduct a study of the command and control process during the Gulf of Tonkin incident of 4 August. As part of this study, attention was turned on the effect of intelligence on the command and control behind the handling of the response to the purported second attack – especially on how it affected the timing of the decision to launch a retaliatory strike. As such, the study’s author had access to all records of the event.

What the study revealed was this. Although a decision to launch a strike had been prepared for dissemination, and the carrier strike aircraft were ordered to make preparations, there were doubts as to the validity of all of the eyewitness, radar, and sonar evidence. The poor nighttime conditions, the conflicting radar and sonar operations, and the

confusing eyewitness accounts contributed to this indecision. By 1:00 PM in Washington, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, Admiral Ulysses Sharp had informed the JCS and Secretary McNamara that many of the reports were in doubt and that the commander of the two destroyers was requesting daytime reconnaissance to verify the attack. At around 4:00 PM, McNamara and Sharp discussed the “possibility that there had been no attack.”⁴⁸ The secretary did not want to launch a strike until what had happened was certain.

Admiral Sharp agreed that the execution order for the strike be delayed until he got word, which he believed would be available in a few hours, at least by 6:00 PM. McNamara ordered that the execute order remain in effect and crews be ready to attack, but that he would wait for a “definite report” from the CINCPAC.⁴⁹

About an hour and thirty minutes later, Sharp called the operations area where McNamara was and told him that, while he was still waiting for a report from the Turner Joy (the second U.S. destroyer), he had some additional information that satisfied him that a second attack had occurred. This was a report that the North Vietnamese had claimed they had “sacrificed” two ships. McNamara also was now satisfied and ordered that the carriers could execute the strikes.⁵⁰

In fact, the transcript of the telephone conversation between CINCPAC and the Deputy Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General David Burchinal, illustrates the importance of the COMINT. It reveals that the report from the San Miguel field site that mentioned the loss of “comrades” was part of the reason for the doubt about the second attack. But when the NSA version [T10], mentioning the sacrifice of two ships, was received, Admiral Sharp was now convinced. As Sharp tells Burchinal: “Now this is where they say they sacrificed two ships and the rest are okay...You ought to look at it because this

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Cryptologic Quarterly
Fall/Winter 2006

pins it down better than anything so far [my italics].⁵¹

In the end, "Howling" fails to refute the contention in "Skunks" that SIGINT was mishandled during the Gulf of Tonkin crisis. Nor does it supply a viable alternate narrative to events of 2 to 4 August 1964. Instead, it picks at minor points, perhaps hoping for a Perry Mason "moment," in which a particular thread or splinter of "evidence" is revealed that brings down the edifice of my case. However, I maintained in "Skunks" that there is no single piece of "smoking gun" evidence that indicates there was a purposeful mishandling of the material.

Instead, in "Skunks" I presented a compendium of questionable actions: missing serialized SIGINT product, unexplained changes in translations, contradictions of SIGINT fact with speculation, and a final effort, the NSA Chronology, to keep the majority of SIGINT product from being seriously and thoroughly investigated.⁵² Perhaps one or two of the items I cite might be construed as contentious or coincidental; but taken together they can be seen to be the result of an attempt, most likely deliberate, to make the SIGINT fit the other "evidence" of a second attack.

Notes

1. Louis Giles, "The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery: The SIGINT Hounds Were Howling." 31 May 2006, NSA website, www.nsa.gov, "Declassification Initiatives" Gulf of Tonkin Release 2. Hereafter referred to as "Howling." Also, see "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964," at the same site under Release 1, 30 November 2005. Hereafter referred to as "Skunks."

2. These were from Release 1: "The Gulf of Tonkin Incident," CRYPTOLOG, Feb-Mar 1975. And from Release 2: RA. McKinnon, LCDR, USN (Ret), "The Gulf of Tonkin Incident," 30 May 1975; "Chapter 6: The Gulf of Tonkin Incident. The DESOTO Patrols and OPLAN 34A," National Cryptologic School, Sep. 1986; American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945-1989, 1995.

3. "Howling," 2
4. "Skunks," 10
5. Ibid., 25
6. DESOTO Action SITREP, 041754Z, August 1964
7. See 2/Q/VHN/TI28-64 041838Z, August 1964, and the Phu Bai Critic, 04115Z August 1964, reproduced on page 27 of "Skunks."
8. The host occupant of Phu Bai was the army (USM-626J). The Marines had a SIGINT detachment there notated as USN-414T.
9. 2/G11/VHN/R13-64, 041440Z, August 1964.
10. These were from San Miguel: 2/QNHN/R38-64, 041632Z August 1964; 2/Q/VHN/R39-64, 041646Z August 1964; and from NSA: 2/O/VHN/TIO-64, 041933Z, August 1964.
11. "Skunks," 42; 2/QNHS/R36-64, 031212Z, August 1964, and Technical Supplement to the same, 031236Z, August 1964
12. "Skunks," 42; 2/Q/VHN/TI54-64, 080328Z, August 1964
13. 3/O/VHN/RI-64, 4 August 1964, 3
14. 3/O/VHN/RO3-64, 061604Z August 1964
15. Ibid. The phrase "actual attack" appears once more in a chronological entry for 2 August 0802Z: "This is the time the actual attack commenced."
16. Ibid.
17. "Howling," 3
18. Blake interview, 3
19. "Howling," 3
20. Ibid., 3
21. Ibid., 2-3
22. Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense. "Release of COMINT Pertaining to Gulf of Tonkin Incidents of 2 and 4 August 1964," 13 December 1967. Miscellaneous memorandum and Notes, Gulf of Tonkin Release 1
23. 2/O/VHN/TIO-64, 041933Z August 1964, 2/Q/VHN/R38-64, 041632Z August 1964; and 2/Q/VHN/R39-64, 041646Z August 1964; Gulf of Tonkin Release 1, 30 November 2005
24. "Skunks," 53
25. They are Technical Supplement to 2/Q/VHN/R50-64, 090352Z August 1964, Gulf of Tonkin Release 1; Technical Supplement to 2/Q/VHN/R48-64, 061618Z August 1964; and Special

UNCLASSIFIED

Page 19

UNCLASSIFIED

Cryptologic Quarterly
Fall/Winter 2006

Technical Supplement to Critic 1-64 070912Z August 1964.

26. "Howling," 2

27. Memorandum, NSA "Chronology of Events of 25 August 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin," 14 October 1964, NSA.GOT Release 1

28. Ibid.

29. Memorandum from Lt. Col. Delmar Lang, to Lt. Gen. Gordon Blake and Lieutenant General Joseph Carroll, 31 August 1964, "Post Mortem of Gulf of Tonkin Incident," GOT Release 2

30. See "Skunks," 45-6, for the explanation for the second chronology. See also the "Chronology of Events of 18-20 September 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin," GOT release 2, 31 May 2006.

31. "Interview with Lou Grant," GOT Release I, 1

32. "Skunks," 3

33. "Howling," 3

34. "Skunks," 3

35. "Skunks," 44

36. "Howling," 2-3

37. "Skunks," 34; Lyndon B. Johnson, 114

38. The standard Vietnamese-English dictionary used by NSA translates "dong chi" as "comrade" in a political context, equivalent to the Russian "tovarisch." "Tau" can mean "boat," or "plane," other objects or even "China," depending on the context, which, in this naval context is "boat."

39. Lawrence Levinson, Chronology of Events Tuesday, August 4 and Wednesday, August 5 1964, Gulf of Tonkin Strike; 28 August 1964, Release 2, 31 May 2006.

40. Ibid., 14

41. Ibid., 17

42. Ibid., 18

43. Ibid., 21

44. Interestingly, "Howling" does not refer to a 10 August Chronology by a group under a Colonel Steakley that carried a notation in parentheses "(possibly two boats)" adjacent to "two comrades." However, there is no comment to this entry indicating any uncertainty. "Chronology of Events on Desoto Patrol and Incidents Involving the Maddox and Turner Joy," II

45. "Howling," 1

46. www/Vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/239/239040100ic.pdf. "Report of Proceedings Held before

the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Gulf of Tonkin," 20 February 1968, 107 (hereafter 'SFR')

47. SFR, (203) Gore

48. Ibid., 16

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 17

51. "Trancript of Telephone Conversations, 4-5 August 1964." Gulf of Tonkin Release 2, 31 May 2005.

52. "Skunks," 49

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