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DAILY ENTERPRISE



(U) HISTORY TODAY - 17 July 2015, LEFT BANK, Unusual ARDF Platform

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(U) The U. S. SIGINT System has a long history of providing direct support to military commanders in the field. The Vietnam War used existing methods of support from the initial involvement of U.S. troops. The nature of the terrain, however, as well as the need to support American forces at a lower organizational level than ever before, required SIGINT units to innovate in the methods used to support military operations.

(U) One of the new methods of direct support developed in the Vietnam War was airborne radio direction finding (ARDF.) The Army Security Agency (ASA) had a large ARDF program, involving several different types of platforms. One of the more unusual was LEFT BANK.

(U) Originally, direction finding was performed on the ground from vehicles such as light trucks or jeeps. However, there were many problems in collection, due to the jungle terrain, which required collectors to get relatively close to their targets. On December 22, 1961, Sp4 James Davis, returning from a DF training mission with South Vietnamese colleagues, was ambushed and shot to death.



(U) The Army Security Agency (ASA), the Army's SIGINT organization, accelerated programs to develop ARDF, and the concept was adopted using fixed-wing aircraft. The amount of collection and accuracy was better than for ground collection, and, though it was still dangerous, ARDF was somewhat safer than ground collection.

(U) LEFT BANK was unique because it used helicopters rather than fixed-wing aircraft as its platforms. Unlike other programs, LEFT BANK was under the direct operational control and tasking of the division that it supported. LEFT BANK was really a joint effort between the division, which supplied the chopper and pilot, and ASA, which provided the operator and direction finding equipment. For instance, the 374th Radio Research Unit supported the 4th Infantry Division.

(U) One operator who served with the 371st Radio Research Unit, which supported the 1st Cavalry, offered the following description of LEFT BANK support. He served both as a ground analyst and as an airborne analyst.

(U) The antenna was located on the front of the helicopter. The pilot would rotate the aircraft to find the strongest reading of the signal. Next the pilot would turn away from the signal to repeat the process to ensure that they had the right bearing. The information would be radioed back to the ground and taken over to the tactical operation center. Sometimes I heard artillery fire after the tactical operation center received the information. LEFT BANK delivered actionable SIGINT."

(U) LEFT BANK had its limitations, as all ARDF programs did. SIGINT intelligence analysts had to constantly remind tactical commanders that collection of a signal did not automatically mean that the enemy was at the same spot as the signal. The North Vietnamese were a savvy enemy who sometimes separated their troops from the location of the antenna.

(U) LEFT BANK missions usually lasted four hours, and the operator took bearings at a distance of three to twenty kilometers. Deployment of these missions was limited by the rugged terrain of the country and by weather conditions. LEFT BANK was dependent on visual reference points.

(U) LEFT BANK missions also were quite dangerous because they flew at altitudes between 3,000 and 5,500 feet. Load capacity prohibited the installation of any armament for self-protection. Some crews lost their lives. Specialist Gary David, whose name is on the memorial wall at NSA, was one ASA individual killed on a LEFT BANK mission. Specialist David and the entire flying crew were killed when the North Vietnamese shot down their plane in 1971.

(U) To discuss historical topics with interesting folks, visit the Center for Cryptologic History's blog, [History Rocks](#) ("go history rocks").

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