

SECRET//COMINT//X1

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Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

~~(S//SI)~~ Operation Billy Budd: NSA and the U.S. Army's Secret [REDACTED] Operation, April 1970

~~(S//SI)~~ Since World War II, one of the key administrative efforts in the cryptologic community has been to realize complete operational control of all its assets. During the Vietnam War, NSA and the Service Cryptologic Elements controlled all SIGINT activities and resources in Southeast Asia. They provided strategic and tactical SIGINT support to the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Generally, relations between the commanders in Vietnam and the SIGINT elements were good. However, there were a number of officers who criticized SIGINT support both for a lack of timeliness and for the practice of not giving them "all of the SIGINT." The validity of both complaints varied from service to service and the type of operations involved. Part of the problem also rested with the cryptologic support staffs, who did not always explain to commanders the all-important limitations of SIGINT. Still, relations were considered good, which makes the story behind Operation Billy Budd all the more surprising. Billy Budd involved a renegade COMINT activity by a major U.S. field command in Vietnam. This secret operation originated because MACV did not trust the SIGINT elements in Vietnam to keep secret the impending invasion of Cambodia set for 1 May 1970. It also exemplified the tug of interests that SIGINT liaison officers can find themselves caught in.

~~(S//SI)~~ From the beginning of 1970, MACV had been working contingency plans for possible cross-border operations into Cambodia. The Nixon administration believed that a large portion of the Vietnamese communist supply effort came from Cambodia and that an assault across the border would hamper Hanoi's forces. At the same time, such an attack might help cover the American withdrawal. By March, General Creighton Abrams, COMUSMACV, had approved the plan and expanded the objectives and the number of allied forces allocated to the operation. Responsibility for the attacks was given to the American II Field Force, Vietnam (FFV). The II FFV was a corps-level organization designed to control multidivisional operations, much like a standard U.S. army corps. Its responsibility included the territory in South Vietnam that was north and northwest of Saigon from where the Cambodian incursion would start. The commander of the II FFV, Lieutenant General Michael Davison, had been ordered to prepare for the attack on 24 April. He was reminded to maintain total security about the operation and limit knowledge of it to only a few people. This order kept the entire NSA liaison group in Vietnam, known as the NSA Pacific Representative, Vietnam (NRV), out of the picture until only 72 hours before the attacks were to begin. The ASA headquarters in Vietnam, the 509th ASA

Group, also was left out of the loop. Yet, the planners on the II FFV staff were using SIGINT to determine objectives and fix communist units.

(U) About three weeks before the American attack, the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) began a series of limited attacks at various points along the Cambodian border. These attacks, part of operation Toan Thang (Total Victory) were meant to reconnoiter communist positions and test their reaction to further probes. Cooperation developed between the ARVN and the Cambodian military, known as the FARK (Forces Armees Royales Khmeres). The Cambodian defense minister, General Lon Nol, had just overthrown Prince Norodom Sihanouk and was anxious to strengthen ties with Washington and Saigon. The opportunity for Cambodian and Vietnamese liaison was good. In fact, MACV was encouraging the Vietnamese to develop joint operations with the Cambodians.

~~(S//SI)~~ Ten days before the American attack -- and recall that no one in the SIGINT staff in Saigon knew of the plan -- a representative from the headquarters of the Commander, Naval Forces Vietnam, showed up at the NRV offices in Saigon. He handed the staff a copy of a "secret message" that a naval intelligence liaison officer stationed near the town of Go Dau Ha at the Cambodian border had received.

EO
1.4.(c)

The only problem for the NRV was that the intercept did not come from any known U.S. or Allied COMINT facility.

~~(S//SI)~~ The deputy NRV, [redacted] went to the head of intelligence for MACV, Brigadier General William Potts, and briefed him on the intercept. Potts agreed with a plan for a COMINT site to take over the activity. He provided a helicopter for a team to fly to the Cambodian border and find out what was going on. The next day -- and this shows how seriously the SIGINT command considered the incident -- [redacted] the commander of the 509th ASA Group, [redacted] and the commander of the 303rd ASA Battalion, [redacted] flew out to Go Dau Ha. After landing, they inquired about any special operations in the area. An American advisor to the local ARVN unit told them that there was an American officer working with some signal equipment in a building closer to the border. They found a two-story stucco building next to the border crossing. Inside were an American major and some ARVN radio operators working a bank of receivers. The three asked the major to come outside away from the Vietnamese so they could talk to him about his work.

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~~(S//SI)~~ In the field along the road to the Cambodian border, the four discussed what was going on. The officer identified himself as a [redacted] recently the advisor to the Royal Thai Army's 2nd Brigade. He was also a French linguist. In early April, the chief of operations of the II FFV had ordered him to set up a watch operation to intercept some

communications links of interest. Any intercept was to be sent by secure printer to the II FFV, the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, and the SSO II FFV. [] told the Americans that he used Vietnamese National Police radio equipment that was already at the border station. He had ARVN monitors, who did not understand French, listen for the link to become active. [] would then listen to the transmission or the tape recordings. He translated the conversations and then sent a gist or transcript to II FFV. [] had already sent about 30 such reports to the SSO.

~~(S//SI)~~ The three Americans decided that this rogue operation could not continue. They set up a project, which they named Billy Budd, after [] ("Billy") [] and [] "Budd" [] the NRV. They arranged for a team from the 175th ASA Radio Research Company to establish a monitoring team to take over []'s mission. [] notified General Potts, who agreed to the shutdown. Meanwhile, [] the commander of the 303rd ASA Battalion, was given the unenviable job of trying to convince the II FFV to end the operation. [] visited the field force's chief of operations, chief of intelligence, and chief of staff. He was told by all three officers that the mission had been sanctioned by no less than General Creighton Abrams, the commander of all U.S. forces in Vietnam. Of course, no one told [] the reason for the monitoring site: the impending invasion of Cambodia. He ran into a brick wall at II FFV. The chief of staff was particularly adamant about continuing []'s mission. He told [] that [] was doing a good job and would not stop. [] offered that if a regular ASA mission could deliver the same intercept, would he consider shutting down []'s operation?

~~(S//SI)~~ However, a more serious issue developed. The deputy NRV, [], after informing General Potts of the renegade operation, decided to cable NSA with details of it. At this point, General Potts ordered him not to do so. Potts told [] that both the American ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, and General Abrams were aware of the operation and wanted it continued without NSA being informed. [] had already alerted NSA to []'s operation, but had sent it none of the intercept. Potts told [] that NSA could not get any of the material and that this order came from Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams. Meanwhile, NSA ordered [] to transmit gists of []'s intercept. He was caught between the demands of both sides.

~~(S//SI)~~ [] delayed sending the material to Fort Meade, citing the commands from Bunker and Abrams. However, he kept "pestering" Potts for permission to send the intercept. Potts kept refusing. [] though, had an alternate plan. A team from the 175th Radio Research Company had located the radio link and began reporting it in COMINT channels to NSA and, ironically, to the SSO II FFV. With everyone satisfied with this "back door" plan, a crisis was averted. Eventually, the issue died down. [] sent the disputed transcripts to NSA. [] shut down his mission and returned to Thailand. Shortly after, American troops crossed into Cambodia.

~~(S//SI)~~ In retrospect, the incident illustrated the long-term problem that SIGINT

organizations have had [REDACTED] in being quarantined from planning stages of sensitive military operations. As eventually was learned, General Abrams was very nervous about any leaks of the impending Cambodian operations. The SIGINT elements in Vietnam were considered potential security problems when it came to "blue force" information. So the plans stayed entirely within MACV and II FFV. Billy Budd also illustrated the dilemma that liaison officers such as the NRV can find themselves in: whom do they really serve, the customer or NSA? In this case, the NRV found himself caught between the need to shut down the rogue intercept mission and orders from General Abrams to keep it secret. There was no simple solution, made no easier by the clash of vested interests for both sides over Billy Budd. Fortunately, the problem faded away.

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