Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

Oscar Collins: A Successful Senior Executive

(U) Oscar Collins, like a Horatio Alger character, started his NSA career as a GS3 and rose to the SCES. He spent five years as assistant deputy director of administration. In this position, Collins used his influence to make significant changes to Agency policies. Collins was a strong advocate for equal opportunity. In 1990, Black Expressions selected him for its "Man of the Year" award, in recognition of his efforts to promote real equal opportunity at the Agency.

(U) Oscar Collins was born on 18 December 1928, in Washington, DC. The Collins family had deep roots in Washington as well as a long history of government service. Oscar's father worked for the Department of the Interior for 56 years. His mother had numerous careers. For a time, she was a domestic at the White House, and Collins would accompany her to work when there was no one to care for him at home. He has fond memories of playing with some of FDR's grandchildren.

(U) Collins credited his success in life to the excellent education he received from the D.C. public school system: "My teachers were excellent role models. The acquisition of good oral and written communication skills stood me in good stead for my Agency career."

(U) Another important influence on Collins's life was his military experience. In January 1951, he was drafted into the army. After training in Texas and Kentucky, Collins served in Germany as a supply sergeant. There he saw the effect of President Truman's 1948 executive order to integrate the military services. Collins commented that "Prior to Truman's order, all of the white soldiers did border patrol. After the order, some of them became bomb holders with the rest of us."

(U) Collins began his NSA career on 10 March 1955. He was hired as a traffic-processing clerk at the GSA level, and because of his skills he quickly moved from sorting traffic to cryptanalysis.

(U) When Collins began his career, NSA was still located at Arlington Hall, in Virginia. Although Collins worked in an integrated cryptanalytic area, he believes that there could have been segregated work areas in the Agency because so many blacks were placed in the keypunch operation area. "Segregation was never an Agency policy. However, the Agency was a microcosm of society. The social structure of the '50s fostered segregation." For

instance, Collins remembered having to go to lunch at segregated lunch counters in the neighborhood while at work.

(U) The Agency's move to Fort Meade, Maryland, in 1957 exacerbated the problems faced by black employees. Social and economic conditions prevented the blacks from moving their families closer to the Fort Meade area as the white folks did. Consequently, blacks did not have the same opportunity to attend night school as whites did because of their longer commute to and from work. As Collins explained: "Friendships and relationships that lead to better assignments did not develop between blacks and whites because there were no contacts outside of the workplace."

(U) During the first 14 years of his career, Collins was a noted cryptanalyst who worked on the Soviet problem. He was involved in both preliminary analysis and long-term research. However, Collins recognized that doing the same work for such a long time was not leading to career advancement. In 1969, one of Collins's mentors, Lou Green, helped him get the opportunity to diversify his skills. He joined the A5 staff and learned the budget process. Collins became professionalized in both cryptanalysis and resource management.

(U//FOUO) (U) Throughout the 1970s, Collins advanced to various budgetary and staff positions in A Group. In October 1979, as the chief of staff for A1, Collins obtained promotion to GS15. This promotion made it possible for him to achieve another important goal: He wanted to be a senior operations officer (SOO) in NSOC. Collins was the third minority employee to achieve this important position. (⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚ was the first African American to become (b)(3)-P.L. 86-36 a SOO.) He was the SOO when such memorable events as the Iranian hostage crisis and the attempted assassination of President Reagan took place. He considered this experience a high point in his career.

(U) After completing his tour of duty as SOO, Collins went back to A Group and held various key positions. In 1983, Collins was elevated to the SCES shortly after he became deputy chief of A3. In 1987, Collins became chief of A3, and in 1988 he was named deputy chief of A. In 1990, Collins became assistant deputy director of administration (ADDA), where he remained until he retired in 1994.

(U) Collins was never able to take a PCS assignment because of family circumstances. However, he felt that the Agency's record of equal opportunity in PCS assignments was abysmal: "The agency claimed that it did not send blacks to certain areas at the request of the host country. This was a cop out." To illustrate his point, Collins reported that Australia does not grant citizenship to non-Australians. This restriction, however, does not prevent non-Australians from visiting the area. Therefore, the Agency could have sent blacks to Australia if it had chosen to do so.

(U) During his tenure as ADDA, Collins expanded equal opportunity by initiating the strategic goal to increase minority hiring and participation at the Agency. He forced a realistic examination of personnel data that demonstrated that the percentage of minorities at the Agency remained constant despite higher hiring statistics in a given cycle. By looking at the numbers for both hiring and attrition, he ended the practice of creating a false impression of minority opportunity. Collins was not responsible for the congressional interest that his analysis attracted, but he felt that both blacks and the Agency benefited from this congressional scrutiny.

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