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(U) The TRS Program Part I: The Beginning

(U) During the 1950s, in an effort to satisfy an ever-growing list of collection requirements, the National Security Agency activated intercept sites at locations around the world. And although the fixed sites proved to be excellent data sources, it quickly became apparent that mobile units, such as vans, planes, or ships, were required to augment the permanent sites. Besides expanding collection capabilities, mobile sites could arrive in an international hot spot in a fraction of the time it would take to construct a fixed site. Further, if the presence of an intercept site became a problem or proved too dangerous for the crew, a mobile site could be moved fairly quickly to a safer location.

(U) In 1956, because the collection against the increasingly tense Middle Eastern targets was insufficient, the director of NSA asked the Navy to acquire a ship that would be able to sail in international waters of the Eastern Mediterranean and to intercept signals. Since there had never before been a ship with the sole mission of signal collection, the Naval Security Group was tasked to perform a study to determine the best ship for the job. It decided to convert a mothballed World War II merchant cargo ship (a "Liberty Ship"). The six million dollars required for the project was finally allocated in the FY60 budget and the first ship, the USS Oxford, was launched on 26 September 1961. A second ship, the Valdez, joined the Oxford that November.

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(S//SI ☐) The Oxford was officially known as a Technical Research Ship (TRS). Its initial mission was a training cruise ☐ This gave the crew a chance to familiarize themselves with equipment on board and to identify any problems with the newly refurbished, redesigned ship before traveling to the Middle East. Although several features were identified that required change or improvement, overall the test proved to be a great success. For example, the Oxford recorded ☐ frequencies and collected a large number of ☐ other transmissions. As the capabilities of the Oxford became clear, the list of potential targets for these ships quickly expanded to include countries all over the globe.

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(b)(3)-18 USC 798

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(U) In August 1962, as relations between the United States and the Soviet Union over Cuba grew increasingly tense, the Oxford was diverted to the Caribbean. Its mission was to collect the ☐ communications coming out of Cuba, used by both Soviet and Cuban entities. The Oxford proved to be the largest producer of SIGINT during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The ☐ communications it collected provided a great quantity of ☐ information which, when combined with the photographs from the U2 overflights, provided a very good picture of what was happening in Cuba.

(U) The Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated the value of the TRS program. During the next few years, several other ships were added to the fleet, including the Georgetown, Jamestown, Muller, Belmont, and Liberty.

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(C//SI _____) The Liberty is one of the most famous TRSs. It was ordered to the Eastern Mediterranean on 23 May 1967, tasked to collect signals related to the crisis that soon exploded into the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War. Arriving late on 7 June, the Liberty was attacked the following day by Israeli planes and torpedo boats. During the course of the assault, thirty-four men were killed, eleven severely wounded, and the ship suffered significant damage. While an after-action study concluded there was no SIGINT compromise, the event remains controversial because it has never been determined if the Israeli attack was deliberate. Convincing arguments have been made for both sides, but no definitive evidence has ever come to light to settle the question.

(U) It was only seven months after the attack on the Liberty that the Pueblo made its maiden voyage.

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