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Operation Starlight: A Sigint Success Story

U.S. forces' first major victory over the Viet Cong—in August 1965—was touched off by a DF shot that showed the enemy in a vulnerable position

As the intelligence background of the First and Second World Wars, the Korean war and earlier conflicts is unveiled bit by bit, we discover that in more and more campaigns and battles, Sigint supplied all-important, often decisive information. Without the full story of the Sigint contribution in earlier wars on hand, comparisons cannot be made between them and the Vietnam war as to the importance of Sigint. Yet, it is unlikely that Sigint has ever played a more significant role in the day-to-day conduct of war than in Vietnam. Improvements in technology have made it possible for Sigint information to be a key factor in nearly all U.S. strategic and tactical planning in that conflict.

It is the nature of the war that makes U.S. commanders particularly dependent on intelligence information. As has so often been stated, it is a war without fronts. The enemy's forces are dispersed and he ordinarily keeps to his sanctuaries across the border in Cambodia and Laos, or in secluded base areas, where he can evade pursuit. From these bases he attacks selected targets at a time of his choosing and disperses when confronted by Allied sweep operations. His chief characteristics, therefore, are his flexibility and mobility. It is these characteristics that have made him a formidable enemy.

Effective military planning demands that the planners know where the enemy is. Even in a war of fixed positions, this is difficult. This, then, is one of Sigint's primary tasks in the war—telling the commander who and where the enemy is. For example, read what Lt. Gen. Arthur S. Collins, who commanded the U. S. 4th Infantry Division in the mountainous areas near the Cambodian border during much of 1966, had to say about its value to his command:

In our area . . . we couldn't possibly find the enemy physically if he didn't want to be found. . . . SI [Special Intelligence, a cover term for Sigint] was the best indication of his locations, especially to identify him in unexploited areas, against which we probed

and struck pay dirt in damaging contacts. There is absolutely no question as to its great value as a basis to enable the economical use of forces to gain effective contacts, as it provided solid indications of the enemy in the area.

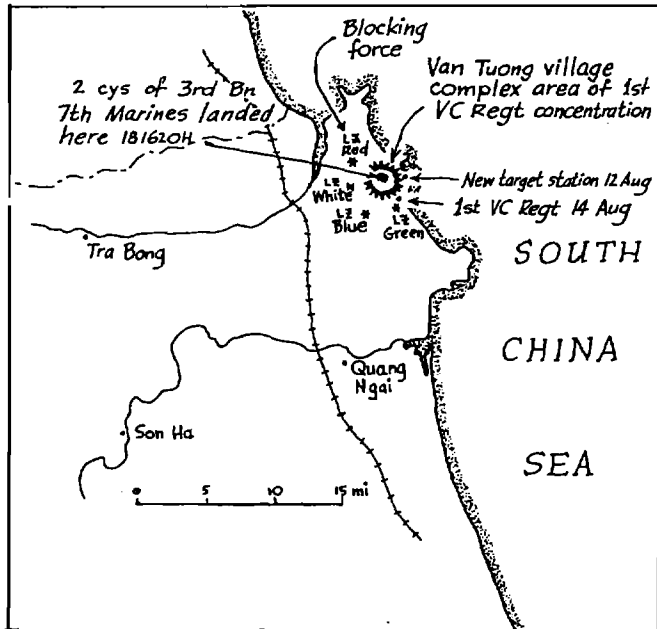
Sigint also provides advance warning of enemy threats, often enabling U.S. forces to frustrate his attack plans and in many cases destroy the threatening units. One outstanding example of this was Operation *Starlight* in mid-1965, in which U.S. Marines destroyed the 1st VC Regiment in the first major engagement fought by U.S. troops in the war. This is the story of that operation.

In 1965, the Communists apparently decided to launch an all-out effort to win the war quickly, before American aid, then being rushed to the war zone, could become effective. At the beginning of 1965, they sent a combat division down from North Vietnam to augment Viet Cong forces. In the late spring and early summer, elements of this division left their mountain bases in the Cambodian border area and joined Viet Cong units in striking savagely at several South Vietnamese administrative headquarters in the area adjacent to the Cambodian border. Meanwhile, on the coast, the 1st Viet Cong Regiment carried out a similar attack against a major town in Quang Ngai Province. Simultaneously a Viet Cong division attacked and overran several South Vietnamese towns in an area north of Saigon.

The cumulative effect of these simultaneous attacks was devastating. South Vietnamese troops suffered extremely heavy losses. The enemy seized huge quantities of weapons and consolidated control over large areas of South Vietnam.

Among the U.S. combat units flown into the area on the President's order were several U.S. Marine battalions, tasked with restoring governmental control over the coastal areas of a large part of central South Vietnam. Soon these Marines were to be tested in battle.

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In late July the 1st Viet Cong Regiment moved into the northeastern portion of Quang Ngai Province. Their aim was to organize an attack against the large Marine base at Chu Lai. In August the regiment positioned itself along the coast and pushed advance elements to within a few kilometers of the base.

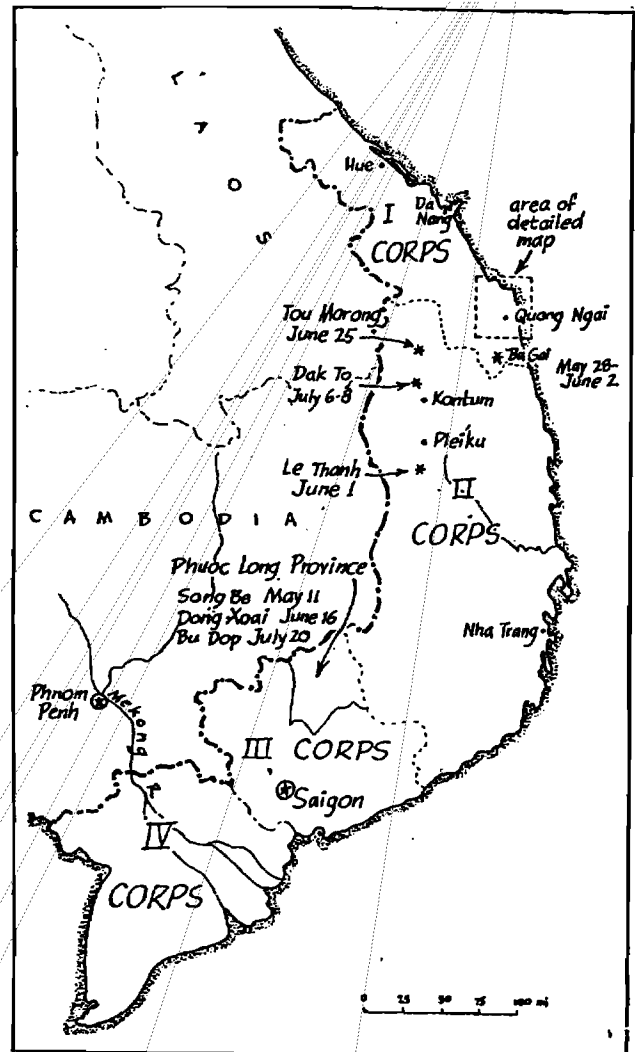
Marine intelligence officers sifted rumors and agent reports of a forthcoming attack against Chu Lai. According to the latest available intelligence, however, the main body of the 1st Viet Cong Regiment was still 30 or 40 miles away.

Then, on August 15, direction-finding information placed the enemy on the Van Tuong Peninsula, just a few miles from Chu Lai.

The first person to grasp the significance of this information was an analyst in NSA's Saigon office, NSAPACREP Vietnam, * [redacted]. Reviewing the information, he realized that it placed the enemy in an extremely vulnerable tactical position, affording the Marines a rare opportunity to trap a large force.

[redacted] and [redacted] another NSA civilian, alerted their chief, [redacted] USAF. That afternoon, [redacted] and the two analysts met with [redacted] USA, commander of the 3rd Radio Research Unit, the major Sigint unit in South Vietnam, and several of his subordinates. The 3rd RRU immediately published a report setting forth the information. In advance of the report, [redacted] called [redacted] an NSA representative on the

*The presence of an NSA unit in Vietnam, and its abbreviated name as well (NRV), are classified Confidential.



MACV intelligence staff, and explained the significance of the information. [redacted] briefed the Chief of the MACV intelligence staff, Gen. John McChristian, who acted immediately. The following day, General McChristian met in Saigon with Gen. Lewis Walt, U.S. Marine commander in South Vietnam. They reviewed the Sigint information and other available intelligence and from this Operation *Starlight* was conceived, designed to trap the 1st VC Regiment against the sea and annihilate it.

Starlight commenced on 18 August, under the operational control of the U.S. 7th Marine Regiment. The 7th Regiment assumed operational control of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, and the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, for the operation.

At 6:15 a.m. on 18 August, *Starlight* began with a preliminary barrage on three pre-selected helicopter landing zones, Red, White and Blue. At 6:30 two companies of the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment,

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stormed ashore at Landing Zone Green, south of the enemy force. Meanwhile E, G and H Companies of the 4th Marine Regiment's 2nd Battalion poured out of helicopters onto the three LZ's west of the enemy. An additional Marine force moved into blocking positions north of the 1st VC Regiment's emplacements in the Van Tuong Village complex. Two squadrons of Phantom II jets and five squadrons of Skyhawks pounded the enemy positions, and the Missile Light Cruiser *Galveston* furnished gunfire support. Marine reinforcements waited aboard the attack transport *Talladega* and the helicopter carrier *Iwo Jima*, which also provided the helicopter air arm of the entire operation.

The 2nd Battalion met heavy opposition from the trapped VC Regiment and at one point it appeared that H Company would be overrun by a larger enemy force. That afternoon, however, two companies of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, moved by helicopter into the area and linked up with the embattled 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines; at 6:40 p.m. The Marines had closed the trap.

The following day, Marine units swept through to the sea and began the task of mopping up enemy remnants. On August 20 the 7th Regiment's 1st Battalion replaced the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, and the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, as fighting slackened.

Although part of the enemy regiment managed to evade the trap, they left close to 1000 dead behind—well over half their force.

As usual with battered enemy units, the 1st VC Regiment remained inactive for several months, while being reconstituted. By the end of 1965, it was again aggressive, posing as large a threat as ever. But that fact does not detract from the significance of *Starlight*. It was this battle and the later battles of the 1st Cavalry Division near the Cambodian border that ended enemy hopes of winning the war quickly.

General McChristian and General Walt freely acknowledged the indispensability of Sigint in this operation. General McChristian called Sigint "the confirming catalyst which led to our decision to act"; General Walt termed it "a clinching factor in the decision to launch this operation."

Speaking from a historical perspective more than a year later, the late historian Bernard B. Fall termed *Starlight* and the 1st Cavalry Division battles the Vietnamese War's Battle of the Marne.

[redacted] traffic analyst and Sigint reporter, was introduced to Vietnamese Sigint via a year's duty (1965-66) at USM-808, Phu Bai, a city called by its Chamber of Commerce "The Garden Spot of Northern South Vietnam." [redacted] is now in B61, working on operational problems and participating in the recording of the history of cryptology in the Vietnam war. He has been in the Agency since shortly after his graduation from Rutgers University in 1957 and had seven years' experience in G before his Vietnam tour. He is taking graduate work in South and Southeast Asia studies at American University.

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