

ON WATCH 9/86

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PREFACE

(U) On July 17, 1984, Lieutenant General Lincoln D. Faurer, the Director of the National Security Agency, asked the National Cryptologic School to produce a "popular history" of the Agency aimed principally at new employees who perhaps were unaware of the past accomplishments of NSA. As the project evolved, the National Cryptologic School envisioned an informal collection of significant experiences from the Agency's past which stressed NSA accomplishments as the best way to make new employees aware of the unique history of NSA and United States SIGINT and COMSEC efforts. At the same time the History and Publications Division was asked to compile a more formal one-volume study of NSA, stressing its organization, structure, mission and evolution. The two products, one produced by the School and the other by the History Office, are complementary but separate. This is the National Cryptologic School's contribution. The History Office study is to be published separately.

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CHAPTER SIX
THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT
The DESOTO Patrols and OPLAN 34A

~~(S-CCO)~~ The clash between United States destroyers and North Vietnamese naval vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin in early August of 1964 was a pivotal incident in the deepening American involvement in Southeast Asia. For months, and even years afterward, the details of what happened on the fateful night of August 4, 1964, would be as controversial as any episode of its kind in United States history. But inside NSA, the picture was far from hazy. Intercepted North Vietnamese communications told a story that could not be revealed to the public although the evidence was persuasive enough to use as a cornerstone for a new direction in American policy toward North Vietnam. President Johnson's decision to use that incident to support the approach to Congress that led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was based principally on the SIGINT evidence.

(U) To set the scene, it will be helpful to go back and look at the evolution of two United States programs that contributed to the watershed events of early August 1964. The first was the deployment of Seventh Fleet destroyers along the coast of North Vietnam, and the second was a covert endeavor known as OPLAN 34A.

~~(S-CCO)~~ In late 1961 the United States began planning a series of naval patrols off the east coast of the People's Republic of China. Operating under the covername DESOTO, Seventh Fleet destroyers established American presence in international waters off the coast of China and serve as a minor Cold War irritant to the Chinese—while collecting SIGINT on [redacted]

~~(S-CCO)~~ The USS *De Haven*, with a SIGINT unit embarked, conducted the first DESOTO patrol in April 1962 in the Tsingtao area of the Yellow Sea, triggering [redacted] actions. Three, sometimes more, Chinese vessels bearing deceptive pennant numbers shadowed the *De Haven* and jammed her communications. During the seven-day DESOTO mission the Chinese also issued three "serious warnings" to the *De Haven* for violating territorial waters. Eight more DESOTO patrols were run in 1962, along east and north China and up the Korean coast as far as the Soviet Gulf of Tartary. Intelligence from these subsequent missions was [redacted]

~~(S-CCO)~~ In December 1962 the USS *Agerholm* made the first probe into the South China sea and the Gulf of Tonkin around Hainan Island. In April 1963 the USS *Edwards* circled Hainan island and then extended its course down the North Vietnamese coast. PRC reactions were limited to the now-familiar shadowing and "serious warnings." Since the Chinese had issued over 350 "serious warnings" for alleged United States air and sea violations, in addition to the DESOTO patrols, no special significance was attached to them. The *Edwards* did not record any North Vietnamese reflections of her presence.

~~(S-CCO)~~ In late February and early March of 1964, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam did react to the third DESOTO probe into her coastal waters. Radar stations tracked the USS *Craig* and DRV naval communications referred to her by hull number. Although the SIGINT from the *Craig's* mission wasn't voluminous, it did contribute new insight into DRV tracking station locations, equipment and capability.

~~(S-CCO)~~ The USS *Maddox* embarked on the fourth DESOTO patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin at the end of July 1964. Her mission was to observe the junk fleet suspected of transporting guerrillas to the south, obtain navigational and hydrographic data and acquire intelligence on the North Vietnamese Navy. The latter item is of considerable importance, first because the Geneva Accords of 1954 specifically prohibited the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from having a naval force and second because of SIGINT's role in detecting DRV naval activity.

~~(S-CCO)~~ North Vietnamese naval communications serving an estimated 30 vessels had been identified in SIGINT in late 1957. Furthermore, SIGINT turned up evidence of a modern North Vietnamese fleet in 1959 during what was probably a [redacted] exercise [redacted] Among the North

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Vietnamese participants were 10 motor gunboats, a force that was continually augmented after 1959 until, by 1964, it numbered 100 vessels.

(U) Given that background, the importance of the *Maddox's* intelligence-gathering mission was clear as she took up station along the 17th parallel on July 31, 1964. At 1:00 p.m. the *Maddox* turned northward on a course up the coast, staying 12 miles off the North Vietnamese shoreline.

(U) At this point in the story it will be useful to consider another dimension to the events that were about to occur in the Gulf of Tonkin.

(U) On December 21, 1963, following Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's return from a two-day trip to Vietnam, he sent a "Vietnam Situation" memorandum to President Johnson praising a plan drawn up by MACV and the CIA's Saigon station. McNamara said the plan presented "a wide variety of sabotage and psychological operations against North Vietnam from which I believe we should aim to select those that provide maximum pressure with minimum risk." On the basis of McNamara's recommendation, President Johnson approved Operation Plan 34A, authorizing a program of covert air and naval operations against North Vietnam. They began on February 1, 1964.

~~(S-CCO)~~ OPLAN 34A was a clandestine program of coastal and air raids conducted against North Vietnam and was but one of several Johnson administration initiatives designed to pressure Hanoi into abandoning its support of the insurgency in the south. It is important to this story because of its attendant SIGINT Support Plan, known as KIT KAT, and the convergence of OPLAN 34A and DESOTO patrol activities in the Gulf of Tonkin in early August of 1964.

~~(S-CCO)~~ Once the president approved OPLAN 34A, CINCPAC directed an increase of 130 SIGINT personnel in South Vietnam to staff the KIT KAT SIGINT support program. Intercept stations at Saigon, Phu Bai and Danang were augmented with personnel from the Philippines and Hawaii, and Army Colonel Richard Gales, the NSA representative in Saigon, set up a Special Support Group—known as the SSG—to consolidate SIGINT reflections of OPLAN 34A raids. Located in the MACV II compound on Tran Hung Dao street in Cholon, the SSG pulled together all the KIT KAT SIGINT results from the intercept sites and passed them to SOG, the joint MACV-CIA Studies and Observations Group, nerve center for OPLAN 34A operations.

~~(S-CCO)~~ By the end of July 1964, OPLAN 34A MAROPS (maritime operations) were being launched almost daily from Danang. On July 30, South Vietnamese naval commandos staged a midnight amphibious raid on the North Vietnamese islands of Hon Me and Hon Nieu in the Gulf of Tonkin. At the time of the assault the USS *Maddox* was 120 to 130 miles away, heading north into the gulf on DESOTO patrol under sailing orders forbidding her to approach closer than eight nautical miles to the North Vietnamese islands in the gulf.

~~(S-CCO)~~ On the following night, North Vietnamese naval communications reported that the "enemy" had fired on Hon Me island. At about the same time this information was intercepted, the *Maddox* reported sighting North Vietnamese patrol craft in pursuit of several unidentified vessels. The *Maddox* made no attempt to investigate.

~~(S-CC)~~ Whether the North Vietnamese associated the July 31 attack with the presence of the *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin is impossible to say. The DRV did protest to the International Control Commission that "American imperialists" had shelled one of their fortifications, but that was a constant DRV complaint and so could not be directly attributed to the presence of the *Maddox*. However, as the *Maddox* resumed her prescribed patrol route on August 1, putting her on a course past Hon Me island, SIGINT reported reflections of DRV naval awareness of the United States destroyer in the following end product:

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O 011635Z
FM USM 626J
TO GOLF ELEVEN/ALFA
YADOZKC/AFSSO CONAD
YADOZKC/AFSSO SAC
YADOZKC/AFSSO TAC
PLUS COMTAIWANDEF/COM/US
COMNAVFORJAPANRZ
ZEM

EO 1.4.(c)

~~SECRET KIMBO~~

2/G11/VHN/R01-64 RPT 1/G11/VHN/R01-64 SPOT REPORT ST 220 PROBABLE DESOTO PATROL MISSION LOCATED BY DRV NAVAL ENTITY. BEGINNING AT 1419Z, 01 AUGUST, DRV NAVAL VESSEL T146 UTILIZING A LOW GRADE CIPHER SYSTEM INFORMED VESSEL T142 QUOTE... TURN ON EQUIPMENT ((3GR/G)) ENEMY GOING ON A COURSE OF 52 DEGREES LOCATED 9 NAUTICAL MILES FROM HON ME ((19:21N 105:51E)) BEARING 134 DEGREES UNQUOTE AT 1422Z VESSEL T146 SENT QUOTE ENEMY LOCATED 9 NAUTICAL MILES FROM HON ME BEARING 148 DEGREES UNQUOTE. COMMENT: PROJECTED COURSE AND ORBIT OF DESOTO MISSION CORRELATES WITH THE ABOVE SIGHTINGS.

~~(S)~~ Shortly after DRV radar placed the *Maddox* near Hon Me Island, an intercepted North Vietnamese naval message stated that it had been "decided to fight the enemy tonight." The *Maddox* was so warned, more than 12 hours before the actual DRV attack. SIGINT stations were soon picking up continuous DRV radar tracking of the *Maddox*. In addition, they intercepted several North Vietnamese naval messages positioning warships for attack.

(U) A little after 11:30 a.m. Saigon time on August 2, the *Maddox* sighted five naval vessels—three PTs and two probable Swatow-class PGMs (motor gunboats)—and a large fleet of about 75 junks 10 miles north of Hon Me Island. The North Vietnamese vessels were apparently searching the seas for OPLAN 34A raiders. The *Maddox* changed course twice to avoid the DRV patrol boats, reached the northernmost point of her patrol track at 12:15 p.m., and headed south again.

~~(S)~~ Shortly after the *Maddox* resumed her southerly track, an intercepted North Vietnamese naval command message said that the time had come to close with the "enemy" and use torpedoes. The *Maddox* received this SIGINT warning some 50 minutes before the onset of aggressive actions.

The First Attack

(U) At 3:30 p.m., while the *Maddox* was 23 miles from shore, her radar showed three torpedo boats 20 miles away and closing at a speed of 50 knots. The *Maddox* increased speed to 25 knots and altered course to a southeasterly heading that would take her to the mouth of the Tonkin Gulf. The torpedo boats were now only 10 miles away, continuing their high-speed run at the destroyer. The *Maddox* requested air support and posted all hands at battle stations.

(U) By 4:00 the DRV boats were within five miles of the *Maddox* and still racing along at close to 50 knots. When they moved into column formation in preparation for a torpedo assault, the *Maddox* fired three rounds across the bow of the lead vessel. The warning shots failed to dissuade the North Vietnamese, and at 4:07 the *Maddox* reported that she was under attack.

(U) The PT boat formation split astern of the *Maddox*, two approaching the destroyer's right side and one coming at her from the left. The two boats on the *Maddox's* right side each launched one torpedo from a distance of 2700 yards. The *Maddox* swung hard apart to avoid the torpedoes, keeping the attacking craft under fire. Just as the third PT boat dropped a torpedo in the water, one of the *Maddox's* five-inch guns slammed a shell into her hull, scoring a direct hit. At that point, air support from the carrier *Ticonderoga* came screaming out of the sky and engaged the attacking vessels, allowing the *Maddox* to withdraw.

(U) When the smoke cleared, one North Vietnamese torpedo boat was dead in the water and burning; the other two had suffered extensive although not disabling damage. One of the *Maddox's* guns had sustained slight damage.

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(U) The next day, August 3, President Johnson ordered the *Maddox* reinforced by the destroyer *C Turner Joy* and sent both ships back to the gulf with instructions to stay at least 11 nautical miles off the North Vietnamese coast. Additionally, the aircraft carrier *Constellation*, on a visit to Hong Kong, was ordered to join the *Ticonderoga* as quickly as possible. By taking these actions, the United States made a clear public statement of its intent to continue the DESOTO patrols and issued a firm warning to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam that any repetition of the assault of the previous night would bring dire consequences.

(U) The DESOTO patrol resumed at 9:00 on the morning of August 3, and throughout the day both the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* picked up radar indications that made them believe the North Vietnamese were following their progress closely.

(U) Meanwhile, in Saigon, MACV SOG had ordered two more OPLAN 34A attacks for the night of August 3.

(U) Running up the coast under cover of darkness, South Vietnamese PT boats bombarded a radar installation at Vinh Son and a security post at Mui Ron, two protrusions extending from the North Vietnamese mainland. On the way back down to Danang, one of the attacking craft was pursued for an hour by a North Vietnamese patrol craft.

The Second Attack

~~(SCCO)~~ Captain John J. Herrick, commanding Destroyer Division 192 and operational boss of the *Maddox* and *C Turner Joy*, read all the SIGINT that was available to him aboard the *Maddox* and decided that the North Vietnamese were pretty stirred up by this latest OPLAN 34A shelling—the first against the mainland. At approximately 5:30 on the morning of August 4 Herrick cabled the following to his superiors:

EVALUATION OF INFO FROM VARIOUS SOURCES INDICATES THAT THE DRV CONSIDERS PATROL DIRECTLY INVOLVED WITH 34-A OPERATIONS AND HAVE ALREADY INDICATED READINESS TO TREAT US IN THAT CATEGORY.

DRV ARE VERY SENSITIVE ABOUT HON ME. BELIEVE THIS PT OPERATING BASE AND THE COVE THERE PRESENTLY CONTAINS NUMEROUS PATROL AND PT CRAFT WHICH HAVE BEEN REPOSITIONED FROM NORTHERLY BASES.

UNDER THESE CONDITIONS 15 MIN. REACTION TIME FOR OPERATING AIR COVER IS UNACCEPTABLE. COVER MUST BE OVERHEAD AND CONTROLLED BY DD'S AT ALL TIMES.

(U) The Navy was keeping a close eye on developments in the gulf, and during the morning of August 4 Admiral Thomas Moorer, Commander in Chief of the Pacific fleet, recommended continuing the DESOTO patrols. His cable to Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Pacific Commander in Chief, included this supporting explanation:

TERMINATION OF DESOTO PATROL AFTER TWO DAYS OF PATROL OPS SUBSEQUENT TO MADDOX INCIDENT . . . DOES NOT IN MY VIEW ADEQUATELY DEMONSTRATE UNITED STATES RESOLVE TO ASSERT OUR LEGITIMATE RIGHTS IN THESE INTERNATIONAL WATERS.

(U) Admiral Moorer recommended moving the DESOTO patrol 90 miles to the north to draw the North Vietnamese Navy away from the OPLAN 34A MAROPS area and also to eliminate any chance of the DESOTO patrol destroyers interfering with 34A operations. Moorer's suggestion to move the patrol track was unnecessary, however, since Seventh Fleet commander Vice Admiral Roy L. Johnson, following a MACV SOG recommendation, had issued an order to shift the DESOTO track north the day before.

(U) At approximately 10:30 that morning, five hours after Captain Herrick's warning, the *Maddox* and the *C Turner Joy* acquired a radar contact paralleling the path of the two destroyers. The carrier *Ticonderoga* reported its aircraft ready for immediate launch.

(U) Tension continued to run high through midday and into the afternoon, although no one reported any provocative activity. Buried in the mass of data surrounding events in the Gulf of Tonkin that day was a little-noticed report from the *Maddox* at around 3:00 p.m. of a "material deficiency" in her sonar. The

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patrol ended at 5:30 p.m., and the two destroyers proceeded to the middle of the Gulf, from where they would resume their patrol in the morning.

~~(S)~~ Toward the end of daylight, North Vietnamese naval communications alerted two Swatow-class PGMs to get ready for military operations on the night of August 4. Swatows are small patrol boats that do not carry torpedoes. They are armed with relatively light 37mm guns and for this reason do not normally challenge destroyers. The DESOTO units, then from 16 to 20 miles off the North Vietnamese coastline, were advised of a possible attack and headed for the mouth of the gulf "at best speed."

(U) Evening fell over a rough sea with two-to three-foot chops. *Maddox* Radarman James A. Stankevitz described it as "the darkest night I'd ever seen at sea."

(U) The *C Turner Joy* was at DEFCON 2, half her crew at battle stations in helmets and flak jackets. Tension filled the air, almost crackling like static electricity. Many of the *Joy's* crew not at battle stations were watching a movie. They would never get to see the last reel.

(U) Ensign John M. Leeman took the bridge watch at 8:00 p.m. Minutes later he spotted the first sign of trouble. "I saw, with my own eyes, five or more high-speed contacts approaching on the surface-search radar."

(U) At the time both the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* were close to the center of the Gulf, approximately 65 miles from the nearest land. Radar on both destroyers had the same contacts—30 miles away. Radar normally reaches only as far as the horizon—20 to 25 miles—but ionospheric layers can cause a phenomenon known as ducting, in which signals travel great distances and can give false or misleading returns to an unwary radar operator.

(U) "They kept a constant distance," said Radarman James H. Weinand, watch supervisor in the *Maddox* radar room. "We'd maneuver and they'd maneuver."

(U) At this point, Captain Herrick took a look at the surface search radar and saw at least five contacts 36 miles to the northeast. He said they were probably torpedo boats.

(U) At 8:36 the *Maddox* reported new radar contact with two unidentified surface vessels and three unidentified aircraft.

(U) Herrick radioed for air support.

(U) Seven planes catapulted into the night sky from the flight deck of the carrier *Ticonderoga*, some 200 miles away in the South China Sea. More planes shot into the air from the carrier *Constellation*, then en route to Southeast Asian waters from Hong Kong.

(U) Then the *Maddox* reported that the unidentified aircraft had disappeared from her radar screen and that the surface vessels were keeping their distance.

(U) At 9:30 the *Maddox* reported more unidentified vessels on radar, closing rapidly from the west and south at speeds in excess of 40 knots. The *Maddox* described their intentions as hostile.

(U) As far as *Turner Joy* skipper Commander Robert C. Barnhart Jr. was concerned, the blips on his radar screen indicated a torpedo run. "Ships don't approach somebody like that—at high speed—unless they mean trouble."

(U) When the blips registered 8000 yards, Captain Herrick ordered the *Maddox* to fire star shells in an unsuccessful attempt to pierce the blackness. At 4000 yards, Captain Barnhart gave the order to commence firing, and the *C Turner Joy's* guns opened up.

(U) Barnhart would later recall, "Things happened so fast that I don't know what the *Maddox* was doing other than the fact that she wasn't firing at some of the contacts that we were."

(U) At one point during a night so pitchblack that neither ship could see the muzzle flashes of the other's firing, attackers appeared to be approaching astern of the *Turner Joy*. Barnhart ordered depth charges dropped.

(U) Curiously, the *Maddox's* radar didn't show the same blips as the radar on the *Turner Joy*. For the remainder of the incident the *Maddox* was unable to locate the enemy on its radar. Ensign Richard Corsette, who directed fire from the *Maddox's* forward mounts, had an explanation. "I know from the way our radar was acting, my firm belief was that everything I locked onto was weather." He ordered his guns fired once during the entire night—to clear them of ammunition.

(U) Overhead, Navy jet pilot Commander Wesley McDonald was also trying to find something to shoot at. Relying on information relayed from the *Turner Joy's* radar, McDonald swooped down low over the sea time after time. He never located a target.

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(U) Seaman Third Class David Mallow, manning the *Maddox's* sonar equipment, heard and saw hydrophone noises that he thought indicated a torpedo in the water. The *Turner Joy* got no torpedo hydrophone effects all night.

(U) *Turner Joy* gunnery officer Lieutenant (junior grade) John J. Barry spotted a radar return he thought was a boat closing at high speed, then he wasn't so sure.

(U) "The *Maddox* at that point reported a torpedo in the water," said Barry. "The contact was approximately 4,000 yards out on our port quarter, possibly even closer. . . . Then, I personally spotted the torpedo. The first thing I did was grab the enlisted man next to me, Seaman Larry Litton, to confirm he saw it too. I wanted to make sure he saw it too. I didn't even say, 'Look at the torpedo.' I asked him what he saw."

(U) According to Lieutenant Barry, the torpedo went skimming by just beneath the surface, like a thin pencil line visible in the fluorescent water.

(U) Litton estimated the torpedo's distance from the destroyer at no more than 60 yards and noted with a shudder that it was "the closest I ever want to see one."

(U) Aboard the *Maddox*, Seaman Mallow continued to call out torpedo warnings from his sonar gear. His calls resulted in both destroyers taking numerous violent evasive actions.

(U) Sealed off and isolated inside gun mount 53, Norman Leavitt complained, "They would tell us 'torpedo in the water' and then they never would tell us where the torpedo went."

(U) Gun Pointer Felix Nerio added, "They passed the word every couple of minutes to brace yourself, torpedoes coming, and I kept grabbing the gun. I grabbed it so hard the stone flew out of my ring." The stone landed on the gun mount deck next to Leavitt. Nerio squeezed the gun so hard that he crushed the ring so far out of shape that it later had to be cut from his finger.

(U) As the sonar reports began to multiply far beyond reason, doubts crept into the minds of officers on the *Maddox's* bridge. The *Maddox* reported 22 enemy torpedoes by sonar; the *C Turner Joy* failed to detect even one. North Vietnamese patrol boats carried two torpedoes each, with no provision to reload at sea. Since no one suggested that the destroyers had been attacked by anything close to 11 patrol boats, most of the sonar reports were obviously erroneous. Someone finally realized that each time the ship made a sharp turn, a torpedo report followed.

(U) "What we were doing, we were getting our own screwbeats very loud," admitted *Maddox* captain Commander Herbert L. Ogier. In his opinion, the first or second torpedo reports were probably legitimate, but the others were "the result of our maneuvering. Evaluating everything that was going on, I was becoming less and less convinced that somebody was there."

(U) The situation was no calmer aboard the *Turner Joy*.

(U) The high-speed maneuvering and the thudding vibrations from the guns were causing problems for Radioman Gary Stephens. "I had to watch one of my transmitters close because it had a tendency to switch off and I had to hit the reset button. Whenever we'd fire it would shake the ship pretty bad and had a tendency to knock us off the air."

(U) For more than an hour the destroyers relayed messages saying they had avoided a number of torpedoes, that they had been under repeated attack, and that they had sunk two of the attacking craft. One might argue that confusion about what was happening could be attributed to the "heat of battle," but when events were later sorted out, the explanations seemed to be more complex.

(U) A flash message saying the destroyers were actually engaged hit the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon at 11:00 on the morning of August 4. From that moment on, high-level government attention remained locked on the unfolding drama thousands of miles away in the Gulf of Tonkin. Ten minutes after the word reached Washington, Secretary McNamara convened a meeting with the Joint Chiefs in his third-floor conference room on the E Ring to discuss possibilities for retaliation. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy rushed over to join them. At 11:35 the two cabinet secretaries and Bundy left the Pentagon for a previously scheduled National Security Council meeting at the White House, where they would recommend reprisal strikes to the president.

(U) Within the hour, Admiral Sharp telephoned from CINCPAC headquarters in Hawaii to suggest bombing the North Vietnamese coastal bases for the torpedo boats. The JCS staff began selecting target options from a 94-target list that had been drawn up earlier in the year.

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(U) While all this was going on in the noontime brightness of Washington, facts were becoming more and more confused in the middle of the night in the Gulf of Tonkin. The two destroyers reported that, even though many torpedoes had been fired at them, they had taken no hits nor had they suffered any casualties. Aircraft from the *Ticonderoga* were said to be illuminating the area and attacking the enemy surface craft. Two enemy vessels were reported sunk and the *C Turner Joy* was said to have further reported being fired upon by automatic weapons while being painted by searchlights.

(U) The automatic weapons fire was later discovered to be the anti-aircraft barrage fired by the destroyers at what their radar erroneously represented as enemy aircraft.

(U) The *Turner Joy* then reported that one vessel was probably sunk. Another report said that a DRV PT boat may have sunk one of its own companions in the conflict.

(U) Soon after the destroyers quit firing into the night, Captain Herrick cabled CINCPAC:

JOY ALSO REPORTS NO ACTUAL VISUAL SIGHTINGS OR WAKE OF ENEMY. . . .
ENTIRE ACTION LEAVES MANY DOUBTS EXCEPT FOR APPARENT ATTEMPT AT
AMBUSH AT BEGINNING.

(U) Captain Herrick's reservations about what had actually happened were then unknown to the Washington planners. At 1:35 in the afternoon the director of the Joint Staff telephoned McNamara to say that the JCS had unanimously agreed on the targets. At a second NSC meeting that same afternoon, President Johnson ordered the reprisals, deciding to seek the congressional resolution immediately. At 3:00 McNamara returned to the Pentagon to approve the details of the reprisal air strikes. The Joint Chiefs of Staff prepared an execution order.

(U) At 3:35 on the morning of August 5—mid-afternoon of August 4 in Washington—Captain Herrick cabled these words of caution to CINCPAC:

REVIEW OF ACTION MAKES MANY RECORDED CONTACTS AND TORPEDOES
FIRED APPEAR DOUBTFUL. FREAK WEATHER EFFECTS AND OVEREAGER SON-
ARMEN MAY HAVE ACCOUNTED FOR MANY REPORTS. NO ACTUAL VISUAL
SIGHTINGS BY MADDOX. SUGGEST COMPLETE EVALUATION BEFORE ANY
FURTHER ACTIONS.

(U) Twenty-five minutes later, with Herrick's message in hand, Sharp telephoned McNamara to say that there was now confusion over whether an attack on the destroyers had actually taken place. McNamara told Sharp that the execution order would remain in effect, but that Sharp was to check and make certain that an attack had really occurred before actually launching the planes.

(U) At 4:49 p.m., although Admiral Sharp had not called back with confirmation of the attack on the American destroyers, the formal execution order for the reprisals was sent to CINCPAC. The order specified that the carriers were to launch their planes within about two and a half hours.

(U) Out in Hawaii, Admiral Sharp was still trying to sort out fact from fiction as messages flew back and forth between Seventh Fleet commander Vice Admiral Roy Johnson and DESRON 192 skipper Herrick.

(U) At 5:00 a.m. in the Tonkin Gulf, Herrick reported the original ambush "bona fide" on the basis of "positive visual sightings of cockpit lights or similar lights passing near the *Maddox*," and because the "*C Turner Joy* reported two torpedoes passed near her." Sharp phoned Herrick's latest conclusion to McNamara 23 minutes later. Sharp then asked the *Maddox* if she could "confirm absolutely" that she had been attacked and whether she could confirm the sinking of patrol boats. The clocks in Washington said 6:00 p.m. when Sharp called McNamara for the second time within an hour to report the attack genuine.

(U) Following the second call from Sharp, and after telling the admiral that we do not want to retaliate unless we are "damned sure what happened," McNamara was confident he was on solid ground. This is the point in the story where SIGINT played a pivotal role. As McNamara later testified, he had examined "all of the evidence, particularly the communications intelligence," and at 6:07 p.m. released the executive order calling for retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam. Certainly none of the information coming out of CINCPAC either before or in the hours following the execution order was sufficiently persuasive to support such a momentous decision.

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(U) At 6:45 p.m., just 38 minutes after McNamara released the executive order, President Johnson met with 16 congressional leaders from both parties and told them of the second unprovoked attack on the American destroyers. The sun was already coming up over the Gulf of Tonkin as the president informed them of his decision to launch reprisal strikes against the North Vietnamese and to ask for a congressional resolution.

(U) Shortly after 7:30 a.m. the *Maddox*, answering CINCPAC's request for "proof" of the incident of the night before, told Admiral Sharp that the first enemy vessel had "probably fired a torpedo at the *Maddox* which was heard [by sonar] but not seen" and that all subsequent reports concerning torpedoes "are doubtful in that it is suspected that sonar man was hearing ship's own propeller beat." As far as enemy losses were concerned, the *Maddox* reported "no known hits," adding that air support from the carriers *Ticonderoga* and *Constellation* did not locate any targets since there were "no stars or moon resulting in almost total darkness throughout the attack." This, of course, conflicted with a report that the *C Turner Joy* claimed to have sunk one enemy craft and damaged another.

(U) Sharp responded with another cable: "Can you confirm that you were attacked by PT or Swatow?"

(U) The *Maddox* didn't respond, but the *C Turner Joy* reported a North Vietnamese attack on the basis of visual sighting of a torpedo wake by one of her lookouts.

(U) The conflicting versions of what happened raised serious concerns in Hawaii, and at nine in the morning Seventh Fleet commander Vice Admiral Roy Johnson asked the *C Turner Joy* for the names of her witnesses and their reliability. Half an hour later COMSEVENTHFLT ordered both destroyers to search for debris. They looked for twenty minutes but found no sign of flotsam.

(U) "Those Chinese can clean up anything," said *Maddox* Boatswain's Mate Eusebio Estrada.

(U) Events in Washington would not wait for the *C Turner Joy* to answer the latest COMSEVENTHFLT cable. The proof that an attack actually took place came from four intercepted North Vietnamese ship-to-shore messages. Those intercepts played a crucial role in the Johnson administration's evaluation of the events in the Gulf of Tonkin.

(U) The first gave the position of the two American destroyers. The second reported the North Vietnamese making preparations to attack with two Swatow boats and, if it could be made ready, one patrol boat. The third message from the Swatows claimed one American plane falling and one destroyer damaged. The fourth cited the loss of two North Vietnamese vessels and two American planes.

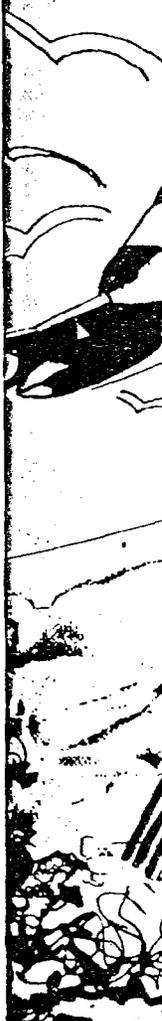
(U) At 10:30 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on August 4, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson went on television to announce: "Air action is now in execution against gunboats and certain supporting facilities in North Vietnam."

(U) The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed in the Senate by a vote of 88 to 2, and in the house by 416 to 0, and said in part:

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Congress approve and support the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression. . . .

Sec. 2. The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."

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