

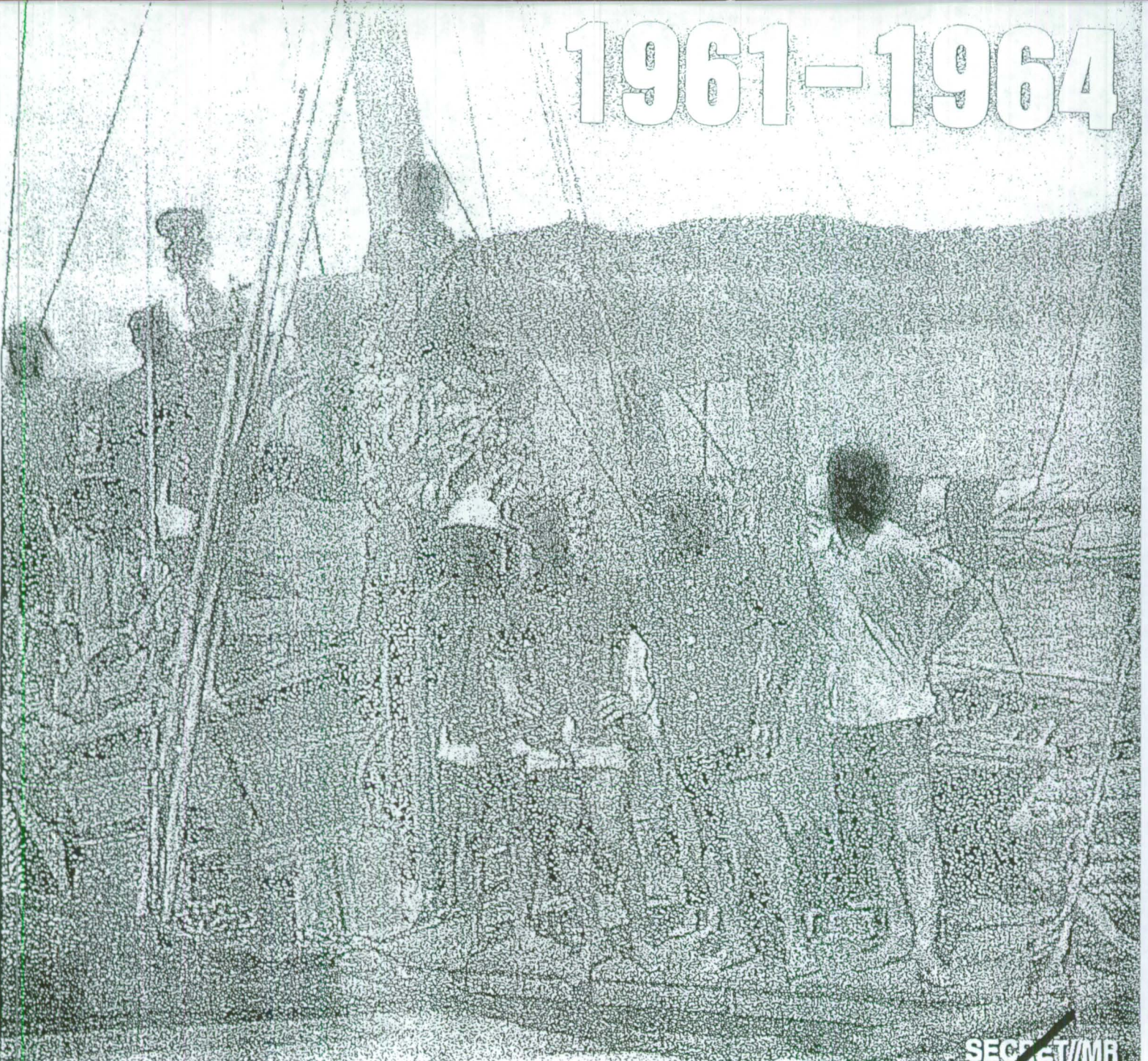
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The Way We Do Things:

Black Entry Operations Into North Vietnam (U)

Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.

1961-1964



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The Way We Do Things



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Other works of Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. published by the Center for the Study of Intelligence include:

Good Questions, Wrong Answers: CIA's Estimates of Arms Traffic Through Sihanoukville, Cambodia During the Vietnam War (2004,)

CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam
(1999,)

CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63
(2000,)

CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam (2001,)

The remaining unpublished book in this series will describe CIA's management of irregular warfare in Laos during the Vietnam conflict.

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The cover design, by of Imaging and Publication Support, shows the crew of a junk about to depart on a supply mission to an agent along the North Vietnamese coast.

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**The Way We Do Things:
*Black Entry Operations
Into North Vietnam,
1961–1964***

THOMAS L. AHERN, JR.



**Center for the Study of Intelligence
Washington, DC
May 2005**

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Introduction

This monograph completes a six-volume series on the contribution of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to the conduct of the Second Indochina War. Far from exhaustive, the series samples the major aspects of the Agency's participation. These include political action, intelligence, and pacification programs in South Vietnam; management of the contemporaneous war in Laos; the analytical controversy over the shipment of munitions to the Viet Cong through Cambodia; and the ill-fated program in which the Saigon Station inserted agent teams into North Vietnam.

Some of these activities were rewarded with success that still looks substantial even if, given the outcome of the war, it was necessarily transitory. Only two of the subjects chosen for the series represent outright failures. Their unhappy outcomes made the task of recording them a rather joyless prospect, but upon examination both of them turned out to embody the principle that failure is more instructive than success.

The lessons vary with the case under study. This one, the story of the agents and black teams inserted into North Vietnam, is offered as an object lesson in what happens when eagerness to please trumps objective self-analysis, when the urge to preserve a can-do self-image delays the recognition of a failed—indeed, archaic—operational technique.

To tell the story of covert penetrations of North Vietnam without tracing the influence on them of earlier such efforts in other locales would obscure their significance as a paradigm of the CIA approach to HUMINT collection against closed and hostile societies. True, the earliest correspondence about infiltrating intelligence and guerrilla operatives into North Vietnam makes no reference to this experience, which began in Europe during World War II. But in fact the program against Hanoi adopted agent infiltration by parachute as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) had practiced it in Europe during World War II. CIA then modified—one might say diluted—it, in deference to the impossibility of arranging the ground reception parties used by the OSS, in order to apply it against the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea. In this way, the covert infiltration of intelligence and covert action teams, mostly by air although occasionally overland or by sea, became an enduring facet of the Clandestine Service's approach to the problem of penetrating closed societies.

As applied by the OSS, the practice later known as "black entry" enjoyed its most notable success with the Jedburgh operation, which after D-Day inserted teams of American and indigenous nationality to mobilize local resistance movements against

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the Nazis. They armed French resistance fighters, including over 20,000 combatants in Brittany alone, and these cut rail lines, derailed trains, ambushed German road convoys, and cut telephone and electric power lines.¹ []

The respectable showing of the Jedburgh teams, coupled with the absence of promising alternatives, made it natural to apply the blind drop technique against the Soviet Union as cooperation against Hitler gave way to Cold War hostility. Both Nazi-occupied Europe and the Soviet Union suffered the abuses of a brutal dictatorship, and it seemed reasonable to expect the rise of a resistance movement against Stalin similar to those that Jedburgh had supported against the Germans. In any case, as Cold War tensions hardened, the Agency had to do *something*, and no better alternatives were at hand. Accordingly, between 1949 and 1959, CIA dispatched [] agents, mostly by air, into the Soviet Union under the aegis of the REDSOX program.² []

The effort enjoyed almost no success. Indeed, the chief of the Soviet Russia Division in the Directorate of Plans wrote in 1957 that it had been "strewn with disaster." More agents survived who were sent overland than those inserted by blind drop; of the latter, apparently some [] in all, only three ever managed to exfiltrate, and one of these was suspected of having been doubled. Meanwhile, the intelligence product of the program as a whole was "pitifully small, and the anticipated intelligence support apparatus, grafted on...underground resistance organizations, died aborning." Not even the overland operations produced anything substantial, involving as they did shallow, short-term penetrations of "largely uninhabited...border areas." The result was that "no REDSOX agent ever succeeded in passing himself off successfully as a Soviet citizen and penetrating, even briefly, into the Soviet heartland."³ []

In 1971, Operations Directorate (DO) historians attributed the failure of REDSOX to two factors. One was the "implacable and ubiquitous KGB." The other was the absence of the prospect of liberation that might have fueled resistance movements like those in Western Europe during World War II.⁴ []

The same factors that produced the REDSOX program forced a similar effort in China after Mao expelled the Nationalists in late 1949 and then, in mid-1950, sent the People's Liberation Army south to join the fray in Korea. With US forces in bloody combat there, CIA launched a frantic effort to weaken the Chinese intervention by infiltrating the mainland with guerillas and potential resistance leaders. Drawing personnel from Nationalist elements and also from non-Nationalists—the latter representing the seed of a hoped-for anti-communist Third Force—the Agency trained and dropped about [] teams of agents onto the mainland.⁵ []

¹ *War Report: Office of Strategic Services (OSS), History Project, Strategic Services Unit, Office of the Assistant Secretary of War, War Department, Washington, DC, 1959, 199–200.* []

² [] et al., *The Illegal Border-Crossing Program, Clandestine Service Historical Series (CSHP) 098*, July 1971, 142. []

³ *Ibid.*, 142–43. []

⁴ *Ibid.*, 145–46. []

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Hans Tofte, who ran the operations launched from [redacted] later said that communications intercepts reflected Beijing's belief that 50,000 guerrillas threatened its rear area; he therefore rated the program a success. But Agency management was not persuaded that these operations were in fact diverting any substantial Chinese resources from Korea. By late 1951, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Gen. Walter Bedell Smith was prepared to give up on them. The Agency could tie up more communist resources, he thought, if it turned to larger scale attacks and feints along the coast. Accordingly, CIA trained over [redacted] guerrillas, who conducted at least a dozen coastal raids. Whatever the results of these attacks—they may have been significant—the black entry program remained unproductive.⁶ [redacted]

Undeterred by this record of failure, the Agency employed the black entry tactic against North Korea. Drawing on the membership of [redacted] CIA trained and dropped at least [redacted] teams into the North during 1952 and 1953. The known product of the activity was limited to one team's weather reporting, useful to the US Air Force, before the team was overwhelmed in a surprise attack after about six weeks on the ground.⁷ [redacted]

Seeking to explain the paucity of results, a contemporary project review noted the poor quality of team personnel and the disruptive effects of a change of mission. Teams selected and trained for sabotage missions had abruptly been directed to create resistance movements, a task requiring a very different set of skills. If these were the operative factors, better agents and more coherent tasking would improve the program's performance. But the activity was canceled after the cease-fire of mid-1953, and the thesis could not be tested.⁸ [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] They were thus the only teams to meet a criterion established by William Colby, when later as Chief of the Far East (FE) Division he described the basis of the technique. "The rationale...springs essentially from World War II experience....The population was essentially passive to friendly, with at least a small element willing to participate in intelligence, sabotage, or resistance operations."⁹ [redacted]

⁶ Woodrow Kuhns, unpublished monograph, "CIA and China in the Time of Mao," Center for the Study of Intelligence, 9-14. [redacted]

⁶ Ibid., 10-11. [redacted]

⁷ Project Review, [redacted] undated, c. late 1953, History Staff files. [redacted]

⁸ Ibid. [redacted]

⁹ Kuhns, 14-15; William E. Colby, Memorandum to DDP, "Black Team Infiltration by Air and Sea Against FE Denied Areas—Cold War," 2 August 1963, quoted in Kuhns, 9. [redacted]

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Probably because it was so obvious, Colby did not make explicit the connection between favorable indigenous attitudes and the exactions of an occupying foreign power. He also left unmentioned a key element in the motivation of potential recruits for intelligence and resistance operations, namely, the prospect of expelling the occupation. [REDACTED]

There were other aspects of Colby's participation in OSS operations in Europe that might have provided a cautionary note as the Saigon Station looked for ways to penetrate communist-controlled North Vietnam. Colby had jumped twice, once into occupied France and once into Norway, which was still in German hands in early 1945. The French mission featured a wild mixture of mishaps and serendipity: dropped squarely into a town some 25 miles from the pre-arranged site, Colby's team escaped the occupying Germans only with the help of French civilians awakened by parachutists landing in their gardens.¹⁰ [REDACTED]

Serendipity took over after two nights of exhausted stumbling through the countryside toward the drop zone. Coming upon a farmhouse unaccountably still lit at two in the morning, Colby took a chance, and sent a French-speaking subordinate to the door. In a coincidence worthy of a John Buchan novel, the occupants turned out to be the very *maquis* cell that had waited in vain for the airdrop. The cell leader, inexplicably uncooperative, was later identified as a Gestapo informant. He had abstained from betraying the impending arrival of the OSS team only because the tide of war had already turned, and he was cautiously playing both sides of the street.¹¹ [REDACTED]

As Gen. George Patton's Third Army broke the German lines at St. Lô and began rolling east, Colby found other resistance leaders to receive the munitions that fueled the uprising now erupting in the German rear area. In Norway, too, in early 1945, Colby's determination and courage led to tangible results, as his team blew a bridge and sabotaged a length of railway on the route from Finland back toward Germany. Saved from pursuing patrols by the end of hostilities, Colby rode a train north over the tracks he had so recently sabotaged; he later recalled having been "chastened by the short time in which it had been repaired by Russian POW's."¹² [REDACTED]

Despite the derring-do mystique that still surrounds OSS activity in both Europe and Southeast Asia, it is clear that black entry operations, in Europe at least, made only a peripheral contribution to the main war effort. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It may be that results there encouraged William Colby and his Agency superiors to think that they had finally found the formula for success.

¹⁰ William E. Colby, *Honorable Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), Chapter 1. [REDACTED]

¹¹ *Ibid.*, [REDACTED]

¹² *Ibid.*, 50. [REDACTED]

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Whatever the considerations that led to its application in North Vietnam, no sign has been found that they conducted a serious search for an alternative. Indeed, there may have existed no such alternative, using either human or technical means. There are things that, in a given place at a given time, are simply impossible.

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North Vietnam: Administrative Divisions, Circa 1961-64



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Chapter One: When Your Only Tool Is a Hammer

For five years after the Geneva Accords of 1954 divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel of latitude, Ho Chi Minh in the North and Ngo Dinh Diem in the South concentrated on consolidating their respective regimes. For both of them, eradicating actual and even potential opponents at home became major agenda items, and neither gave much material support to his potential allies on the other side of the Demilitarized Zone. For Diem, these were the Catholics who had chosen to remain in the North instead of joining the migration authorized at Geneva. Ho Chi Minh, meanwhile, imposed a quiescent stance on the thousands of Viet Minh, non-communist nationalists among them, who had not regrouped to the north while Catholics were coming south.

For more than a year after Diem's accession as prime minister, the CIA in Saigon was preoccupied with helping him prevail over his mostly non-communist opponents in the South. His unexpected success encouraged the Eisenhower administration to repudiate the unification elections that the Geneva signatories (the United States not among them) had mandated for July 1956. Instead, Washington would support Diem as the leader of a new nation-state, one that faced a hostile Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) across the Demilitarized Zone. This long-term commitment would demand as much intelligence as possible on North Vietnamese and Viet Minh capabilities and intentions, and the station began trying to build Diem's nascent intelligence and security services into cooperative

partners in the intelligence war against the communists in both North and South.²

This bilateral approach seems to have been taken as a matter of course. And it is indeed hard to see how an independent CIA effort, based in South Vietnam, could have succeeded without Government of Vietnam (GVN) participation. To begin with, the station lacked adequate access to agent candidates for use against either the southern Viet Minh or North Vietnam. In addition, a unilateral program of any substantial size, whatever its prospects for success, would certainly have come to the attention of a very prickly Ngo Dinh Diem. The station therefore relied from the beginning on South Vietnamese partners to acquire agents and provide facilities and administrative personnel.

Operating with the GVN had its drawbacks. Like any authoritarian ruler, Diem fully understood the potential of his security services to be used against him by ambitious or disgruntled underlings, and he chose their leaders with attention more to personal loyalty than to competence. This order of priority certainly applied in the case of Tran Kim Tuyen, a physician whom Diem installed as head of the Service for Political and Social Studies, known by its French acronym SEPES. Not even a chartered intelligence organization, it was in fact only the intelligence section of the Can Lao, nominally a political party but essentially a cadre organization of Diem's functionaries. But Tuyen enjoyed the confidence of the president, and CIA began trying to cultivate a productive working relationship.

In what looked like a break for the station, Tuyen's deputy, an energetic ex-Viet Minh, displayed none of his boss's reserve toward joint operations. But things cooled abruptly during his visit to Washington in late 1955 when

¹ In *Vietnam: A History* (Penguin Books, 1984), Stanley Karnow gives a good survey of the French defeat in Indochina and the subsequent evolution of a divided Vietnam.

² For a more nearly comprehensive history of CIA relationships with Ngo Dinh Diem and his intelligence services, see the author's *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-63* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2000) (hereafter *House of Ngo*), especially Chapter 9.

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Al Ulmer, FE Division chief, made an extemporaneous and unsuccessful effort to recruit him.³ []

The resulting boost to endemic Vietnamese xenophobia damaged the prospects of a collegial relationship with SEPES, but Diem was interested in it, in any case, more for domestic surveillance than for policy-level intelligence. Perhaps not yet recognizing Diem's intentions, and still hoping to turn Tuyen into a productive partner, the station bought him a motorized fishing junk to transport personnel and supplies for the nine agent nets he claimed to be running in the North. Case officer [] began noticing procedural anomalies in the radio messages purportedly received from these agents, and further investigation revealed that the agent nets were fictitious. The junk, it turned out, had been leased to a Japanese fishing firm.⁴ []

Diem and Tuyen had also agreed to a small joint program of minor harassment of coastal facilities in North Vietnam, but (assuming it was, in fact, separate from the putative agent nets) it produced no recorded results. Indeed, it is not clear that any such operations were ever launched.⁵ []

These embarrassments did not lead the station to cut its ties with SEPES. Beginning in 1957, however, it did insist on full access to agents and agent communications. This painful tightening of the ground rules took time to put into effect, and when President Diem proposed changing the SEPES harassment program to one of intelligence collection, Chief of Station Nicholas Natsios proposed to make a new

start, with new agent personnel. CIA would now work also with the second of the two services that reported directly to the president, an army unit first called the Presidential Survey Office and then renamed the Presidential Liaison Office (PLO).⁶ []

The PLO was headed by Lt. Col. Le Quang Tung, another Diem loyalist, whose deferential style tended to obscure his modest professional qualifications. US support to his organization came from both the Department of Defense and CIA, and was designed at first to equip Diem with a guerrilla cadre capable of operating behind the lines after a communist invasion of the South. Diem agreed in early 1958 to let Natsios and Tung proceed with this, but again there were no recorded results.⁷ []

A similar fate befell parallel efforts with the Military Security Service (MSS), charged with counterintelligence protection for the armed forces, and with the Sureté, the successor to the French internal security organ later called the Police Special Branch. The pattern established with Dr. Tuyen and Col. Tung repeated itself with the MSS, whose commander somehow never seemed to get word in his own channels of Diem's agreement with the COS for joint intelligence operations against the communists. Meanwhile, Diem accepted advisers and material support for the Sureté, but the reward in useful intelligence was insignificant. As late as 1959, the only police reporting reaching the station came from low-level, casual informants. If the Sureté had any penetrations of the communist military or political apparatus, it was concealing them from the station.⁸ []

³ *House of Ngo*, 60. []

⁴ Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andradé, *Spies & Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 19–20. No reference to this deception has been found in CIA records. []

⁵ *House of Ngo*, pp. 60, 118–19. []

⁶ Conboy, 20 [] *House of Ngo*, 119. []

⁷ *Ibid.* []

⁸ *House of Ngo*, 120. []

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The End of the Honeymoon

The GVN's suppression of the Viet Minh that began in 1955 eventually had the effect of unleashing a full-fledged, communist-led insurgency. In January 1959, answering appeals from the leadership in the South to save it from destruction, the Politburo in Hanoi revoked its prohibition on armed resistance. The southern communists now abandoned "political struggle" for a policy of "armed struggle." This would require, among other things, logistical support from the North. Accordingly, in May, the DRV created the 559th Transportation Group, the military organization that eventually built the tortuous supply line through Laos known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

But the desperate communists in the South could not wait for supplies and men to begin trickling in from the North. On their own, they launched guerrilla operations and terrorist attacks on Diem's officials that dramatically revealed the failure of GVN repression to destroy the Viet Minh staybehind organization.⁹

In January 1960, the first communist Tet offensive humiliated Diem's army and traumatized rural administrators, driving many of them to the security of military outposts. At this point, some of the younger officers in the Saigon Station were already persuaded that, without major GVN reforms, the influence of the Viet Minh would only grow. Indeed, a few Americans—Ambassador to the GVN Elbridge Durbrow prominent among them—had begun as early as 1957 to deplore Diem's indifference to winning the consent of the governed. But even

Diem's critics seem to have shared the prevailing inability to imagine spontaneous support for a totalitarian movement. GVN derelictions might make the peasantry vulnerable to mendacious communist propaganda, but the conventional mindset viewed the insurgency as having no local impetus; it was solely a creature of Hanoi.¹⁰

This perspective led, in turn, to the inference that the road to defeat of the Viet Cong, as the GVN began labeling the Viet Minh, ran through Hanoi. The insurgency would end when the cost of supporting it rose to a level unacceptable to the DRV.¹¹

Diem seems to have shared this view. Incapable of finding any flaw in his own governing style, he was naturally inclined to look for remedies that took the war to the enemy. But at least until late 1959, this orientation had coexisted with a stubborn aversion to joint covert operations with CIA against the communists in either North or South. At that point, it seems, the sudden, incendiary burst of insurgent energy persuaded him of the need to take help where he could get it.

Whatever Diem's precise motivation, CIA in Saigon now had the green light to work on a basis of full reciprocity with both SEPES and the PLO. The problem was that the GVN and its CIA advisers were now playing catch-up ball, especially when it came to operations against the North. Ho Chi Minh had had five years to consolidate the regimentation of his country, whose borders were almost hermetically sealed off from Western-oriented neighbors. The resulting dearth of the most basic

⁹ The most illuminating account of Diem's contest with the Viet Cong for control of the rural population is still Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). For descriptions of Diem's "Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign," see Race and the author's *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001).

¹⁰ The CIA perspective on the insurgency, and the Agency's contribution to the counterinsurgency effort later known as the pacification program, are described in *CIA and Pacification*.

¹¹ The term Viet Minh is a contraction of Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, the Vietnam Independence League, the front created by Ho Chi Minh in 1941 to resist the Japanese occupation of Indochina. In the late 1950s, the term gradually gave way to Viet Cong, i.e., Vietnamese Communists, a pejorative term coined by the GVN and applied mainly to the party apparatus in South Vietnam.

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operational intelligence—identity documentation and travel controls, and the organization and deployment of internal security forces, for example—meant that operational planning took place, at first, in something of a vacuum. The first, tentative step to fill that vacuum would come in the form of singleton agent operations across the Demilitarized Zone. []

It took a full year for the first jointly run agent to cross the Demilitarized Zone into North Vietnam. Code-named [] he paddled across the Ben Hai River on an inner tube just before midnight on 5 December 1960. His Vietnamese case officer, hidden on the south bank, heard the air escape from the inner tube as [] slashed it before burying it and setting off on foot toward the north. The documentation provided by CIA's [] [] got him through two police challenges, and he proceeded to the nearby town of Ho Xa before returning to South Vietnam the same day.¹² []

By the time agent [] conducted his first mission, South Vietnam was about to become the testing ground of a new US commitment to contain the spread of communism in the post-colonial Third World. John F. Kennedy had become president-elect after a campaign featuring Republican charges that the Democrats were "soft on communism." In January 1961, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev proclaimed his commitment to "wars of national liberation," and Kennedy promptly accepted what he interpreted as a direct Soviet challenge. Growing anxiety over the GVN's deteriorating position meant that South Vietnam would now become the laboratory for US experimentation with the new doctrines of counterinsurgency and irregular warfare. []

Only a week after his inauguration, the new president told the National Security Council that he wanted "guerrillas to operate in the North," with CIA his executive agent. In March, he inquired about progress, whether the North Vietnamese were getting a taste of their own medicine. They weren't, at least not yet, and Kennedy ordered the Agency to implement his "instructions that we make every possible effort to launch guerrilla operations in North Vietnam territory."¹³ []

Not everyone familiar with such operations thought the idea made much sense. At about the same time that Kennedy was pressing for results in North Vietnam, Robert Myers, then COS in [] visited Saigon. Briefing his fellow COS on activity in Vietnam, William Colby described the new program in which teams of Vietnamese were dropping by parachute into North Vietnam. Myers, who had watched the failure of such operations into China in the mid-1950s, told Colby it wouldn't work: Just as the Chinese civil war was over, and Mao firmly established in Beijing, Ho Chi Minh was now in charge in Hanoi. His Leninist regime would be proof against any interlopers wandering the countryside, collecting intelligence and/or fomenting resistance.¹⁴ []

Colby disagreed, arguing that suitable safe areas could be found, at least in lightly populated areas where black teams could set up reasonably secure bases. In retrospect, Myers thought this a projection onto Vietnam of Colby's OSS experience with the Jedburgh program: "he thought it was like Norway."¹⁵ []

Whatever the merits of Myers's objections, Colby's enthusiasm matched White House eagerness to challenge Ho Chi Minh's control in the North. Any challenge to the future of Project [] was being made on the

¹² FVSA 11886, 21 January 1961, [] Conboy, 24. []

¹³ Richard H. Shultz, Jr., *The Secret War Against Hanoi: The Untold Story of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (Perennial, 2000), 17. []

¹⁴ Robert Myers, interview by the author, Washington, DC, 24 May 2004. []

¹⁵ *Ibid.* []

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other side of the world, in the form of the ill-conceived operation to unseat Cuba's Fidel Castro. Approved by the Eisenhower administration and adopted by John F. Kennedy, it came to grief at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. Even though the burgeoning CIA-supported Hmong resistance in northeastern Laos was then beginning to look like a major success, the Bay of Pigs inflicted a grievous blow to the Agency's reputation for competence in irregular warfare.¹⁶

At the same time, hesitant to throw out the baby with the bath, the administration overcame its dismay over the Bay of Pigs sufficiently to leave CIA, for the moment, in charge of the nascent North Vietnam program. Indeed, the president expanded Project modest charter as he instructed the Agency to use its teams to conduct wide-ranging unconventional warfare. At the same time, he shrank CIA's overall responsibility with three National Security Action memoranda, signed in late June 1961, which transferred to the Pentagon much of CIA's authority to plan and conduct irregular warfare.¹⁷

Singletons by Sea, Teams by Air (U)

What the president found a frustratingly slow CIA response did not reflect any lack of attention to his demand for action against the DRV. In fact, by the spring of 1961, painstaking preparations for team operations had been underway for almost a year. These were to be preceded by singleton agents infiltrated into the DRV. The agents would collect information on the communists' security practices for use by airborne teams dropped near their villages

North Vietnam: Black Insertions, 1961-62



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and operating out of otherwise uninhabited safehavens.¹⁸

¹⁶ Conboy, 35, Shultz, 21.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sedgwick Tourison, *Secret Army, Secret War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 34. Subsequent recollections of Saigon officers like who interpreted the turn to airborne operations as a response to pressure from the new Kennedy administration, overlooked the tortuous logistics that preceded the first team infiltrations.

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Under tow is the sampan that [redacted] would use to land in Ha Long Bay. [redacted]

The station later detailed for Headquarters what this process entailed:

Preparations for each team included the procurement of sterile equipment, some of it authentic North Vietnamese items

[redacted] *the development of cover stories for various contingencies;...the planning of the bundles to be dropped with each team so that they would not be too heavy but would include everything necessary to the mission; the procurement...of old French Indochinese silver piaster coins [and of] target area currencies; the development...of reporting requirements given each team; the assignment of control signals (and other bona fides for use in case of*

eventual contact with other...agents inside the target area); the selection of zones of operation, base zones and general areas in which to choose drop zones, all of which had to be worked out as a function of the available intelligence of the area, the locations of the homes of the agents' relatives, and the views of the agents themselves.... Long before, of course, the process of spotting, developing and organizing the agent personnel for these missions had been accomplished and involved the selection of capable candidates [and] the matching of their personalities into compatible teams. In fact, this process was begun almost exactly one year before the first team was successfully dropped into North Vietnam.¹⁹ [redacted]

Much of the same work went into the parallel program of singleton penetrations, and on 26 March 1961, the Saigon Station once again launched agent [redacted] landing him by junk under cover of darkness near Dong Hoi, not far above the DMZ. This time, he stayed four days, observing communist police controls and "various minor military installations." Still using fabricated documentation, he took a bus south to Vinh Linh, then walked to the Ben Hai River, crossing back into South Vietnam, apparently again under cover of darkness.²⁰ [redacted]

The first airborne team was still waiting for a favorable conjunction of weather and moon phase when the station and Col. Tung launched the next and more ambitious singleton agent operation. Transported by a motorized fishing junk of the type common to the area, agent [redacted] was inserted into the North in early April 1961. He landed on the karst-studded coast of Ha Long Bay, east of the port

¹⁹ FVSA 12657, 24 August 1961, [redacted]

²⁰ FVSA 12181, 20 April 1961, [redacted] Nowhere in the meager correspondence about infiltration across the DMZ is there any description of the measures used to avoid discovery by DRV security. [redacted]

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of Haiphong, and set off to find his family's commune. There, he was supposed to recruit someone to operate the generator for his World War II-era RS-1 agent radio.²¹ []

Given the uncertainties created by the need for a second man, the station accepted that it might be weeks before the agent came up on the air. In fact, it did not have long to wait. Eluding discovery, [] cached his radio gear and made his way to his family's commune, where he persuaded his brother to help. After finding a hiding place for [] in the forest, the two retrieved the gear. They then dispatched the first of an initial series of 23 messages that inaugurated the longest and most prolific radio correspondence from any penetration of the North run either by CIA or by its successor, the Special Operations Group of the Military Assistance Command/Vietnam (MACV).²² []

In mid-June, [] suddenly fell silent. On the 17th, militiamen of the People's Armed Security Force (PASF), a rural internal security force under the Ministry of the Interior, arrested him and his brother for espionage. A fisherman's discovery of the undamaged skiff used by the agent to reach shore from the junk had led to a search of the area and the discovery of the holes he had used for temporary concealment of his RS-1 radio. A house-to-house search followed, concentrating on families with ties to the South or the French colonial regime. Reports from two villagers then brought the hunt to an end. One reported seeing a stranger, living in a beachfront house, who averted his face during an accidental encounter. The second reported seeing someone from the same house displaying a ballpoint pen, then a rarity in the DRV.²³ []

The interruption of radio traffic could have arisen from innumerable, mostly innocuous,

causes, and when [] came back on the air some weeks later, he offered a plausible story about DRV security measures that had forced him out of his safehaven. Accordingly, over the course of the next four months, the station and its PLO partners launched at least three more singletons by land or sea into North Vietnam. Expectations remained modest, with survival the agents' main goal. The intelligence targets for one such, [] were to "be assigned once the agent is in place depending on the access he turns out to have." Meanwhile, as this series of insertions began, the station moved in late May 1961 into the airborne phase of the program.²⁴ []

The first airborne team, dubbed CASTOR, had been selected primarily for its prospects of survival in a remote area populated by non-Vietnamese tribes; as with the singleton agents, its access to important intelligence had been a secondary consideration. But as it happened, by the time it was ready to drop into Son La Province, the neighboring kingdom of Laos had begun to crumble under communist pressure. By happy coincidence, the team would be located within range of Route 6, which ran southwest into Laos, and could be tasked to monitor DRV support of the insurgency there.²⁵ []

Near midnight on 27 May, a twin-engine C-47 with civilian South Vietnamese markings entered DRV airspace at a point chosen to avoid known antiaircraft emplacements. Piloted by Major Nguyen Cao Ky, the flamboyant Vietnamese Air Force officer who later became prime minister, then vice president, of the GVN, the intruder proceeded at low altitude, navigating by the light of the full moon.²⁶ []

²¹ FVSA 12181, [] Conboy, 25-26, []

²² Conboy, 26, []

²³ Ibid., 25-26, []

²⁴ Ibid., [] FVSA 12791, 28 September 1961, [] FVSA 12934, 9

November 1961, []

²⁵ Conboy, 37, []

²⁶ Conboy, 36, []

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Ky reported delivering Team CASTOR to the appointed drop zone, and the station waited with increasing anxiety for the first radio contact. Not until 29 June did the team break its silence, but it then came on the air with a reassuring account of early difficulties now resolved. A relieved Saigon Station accepted the rationale, and promised an immediate supply drop.²⁷ []

In fact, CASTOR had come under enemy control only four days after its 27 May landing. Its arrival had been compromised, first by a radar installation located under its flight path over Moc Chau District, and then by reports from alarmed villagers reacting to the unprecedented noise of an aircraft passing at night over their remote hamlets. The drop zone, furthermore, lay only a kilometer from one of these villages. Having quickly pinpointed CASTOR's location, the PASF needed only three days to surround the team, which surrendered without a fight.²⁸ []

Meanwhile, unaware of this disaster, CIA and the PLO launched Team ECHO on 2 June. This drop, well to the southeast of CASTOR, also went according to plan. The crew, confident of its navigation to the drop zone, saw all personnel and cargo chutes open, and the insertion looked like a success. But, as with CASTOR, the drop was followed by three weeks of silence, and, when ECHO finally came on the air, it provoked concern by using an improper call sign. Managers of the covert communications facility suggested that this "could be attributed to nervousness" at the first contact, but they wanted reassurance that the "crypto control signals" had been properly used. If not, the team's security was suspect, even though the message's "fist print"—an operator's characteristic style of operating the

key—indicated that ECHO's operator had in fact transmitted it.²⁹ []

The possibility that the operator was working under enemy control seems not at first to have been explicitly addressed. This omission delayed serious consideration of what turned out to be the fact, for DRV security had already taken Team ECHO into custody. Like Team CASTOR, it had landed near a village, in this case so close to it that the participants at a night political indoctrination session saw the C-47 silhouetted against the moon. Its first message, on 23 June, had been the only one not sent under enemy control. By that time, the team knew that it had been compromised; it was captured while fleeing toward the Laotian border.³⁰ []

By early July, Headquarters beginning to worry about the tardy first broadcasts from CASTOR and ECHO, and ECHO then provoked further worries with its silence, after the first contact on 23 June, for exactly a month. A third team, DIDO, had been dropped into Lai Chau Province in the northwest on 29 June, where it was to supplement CASTOR's anticipated coverage of traffic into Laos. Washington asked whether it, like the others, had been instructed to come on the air within three days of landing.³¹ []

Presumably it had, but Team DIDO had lasted only about four weeks before joining its compatriots in detention. Unable at first to find the bundle containing its radio, the team combed the hills looking for it until they encountered a PASF patrol and were captured. Thus, by the end of July, all three airdropped teams, as well as [] were in North Vietnamese hands.³² []

²⁷ Ibid., 36-40. []

²⁸ [] 19 September 1961. []

²⁹ [] 30 June 1961. []

FVSA 12657. []

³⁰ Conboy, 26, 38. Presumably either faulty intelligence or faulty navigation, or a combination thereof, accounts for the frequent drops—if Conboy's informants are correct—of black entry teams onto populated areas, but nothing has been discovered that illuminates this question. []

³¹ [] 5 July 1961. []

FVSA 12657. []

³² Conboy, 39. []

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Judgment by Preponderance of Evidence

Headquarters' query about DIDO (no answer to it has been found) may well have been provoked by the loss of the aircraft trying to drop supplies to Team CASTOR. On 1 July, it had entered DRV airspace, then simply disappeared. Subsequent correspondence between Headquarters and the station focused on the tension between the urgent necessity of supplying viable teams and the risk that such missions might send aircraft and their crews to destruction.

The station, concerned not to abandon starving teams—and perhaps just viscerally reluctant to admit possible failure—wanted to employ a permissive standard for approval of supply missions. Responding on 25 July, Headquarters noted that Hanoi radio had revealed its possession of "much info re all teams." The field should, therefore, assume that the "enemy may be preparing apprehension ops." Nevertheless, having reviewed the available info on all three teams, "particularly CASTOR," Headquarters accepted the proposed criterion: in the absence of "conclusive evidence" of enemy control, all three teams should be supplied.³³

Headquarters may not have known, at this point, about the tardy second transmission by Team ECHO, on 23 July, the one that first gave the station "strong indication that the...team may be under the control of the opposition." The main object of Washington's attention was still CASTOR, as Headquarters noted on 28 July. Direction-finding (DF) analysis of CASTOR transmissions indicated its radio to be sited considerably northeast of the team's reported bivouac, and the station acknowl-

edged that, if the team was not doubled, it was certainly "extremely hot." But Saigon questioned the utility of resolving the issue of bona fides by demanding more intelligence reporting. The DRV could easily feed the team, without any significant damage to national security, any information it could reasonably be expected to collect. And if pressed for more, CASTOR's putative DRV handlers would have the team present the entirely plausible argument that its parlous security situation precluded more aggressive collection efforts.³⁴

The available evidence allowed continued hope that CASTOR was still viable, but Team ECHO was another matter. Its bona fides were now "dubious," at best, the result of continuing anomalies in its message traffic that suggested a surreptitious effort by the radio operator to indicate hostile control. In early August, the station proposed ordering ECHO to exfiltrate as a way of testing its freedom. But the fact remained that it had lost one of its four men even before launch, when he was dismissed after what the station called a breach of security. And the team had reported injuries to another as he hit the ground. The remaining two, hobbled by their injured comrade, would be able to do little. And even if it was still clean, the team was "almost as hot as CASTOR."³⁵

The station announced on 1 August that CASTOR would get a supply drop that night. Something must have prevented it, for two days later Headquarters proposed a moratorium on supply missions to that team while everyone stepped back to have a look at the whole program. Acknowledging the station's immense effort to do something about North Vietnam, Washington acknowledged a "strong reservation" about the utility of infiltration efforts, at

³³ [redacted] 21 July 1961, [redacted] The substance of the station's argument is implicit in Headquarters' reply, [redacted]

³⁴ [redacted] 28 July 1961, [redacted] FVSA 12657; SAIG 4120, 1 August 1961.

³⁵ [redacted] By mid-September, the station concluded that the ECHO radio operator had indeed consciously signaled having come under enemy control [redacted]

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least those by air. "In all probability ECHO is compromised. DIDO's status is doubtful because of [the team's] complete silence." Regarding CASTOR, Headquarters still saw just two alternatives: force it to produce positive intelligence or, failing that, order it to exfiltrate. The station should levy detailed requirements on roads, and ground and air traffic. The team should also be told that another try at a supply flight would have to wait for the next moon phase.³⁶

Saigon did not respond, apparently, to the invitation to evaluate the entire program. It did agree to send intelligence requirements, but told Headquarters not to expect too much from CASTOR, "due necessity avoid capture." Washington had at this point already suggested an alternative to insertion by parachute, telling the field of a "new approach" to North Vietnamese operations that would make use of the Hmong irregulars then being armed in northeastern Laos. These, under their charismatic leader Major Vang Pao, were now edging toward the border with the DRV's Son La Province, in which Team CASTOR was operating. If the Hmong could continue their progress, their forward locations might serve as launch points for overland infiltration of teams into the DRV's mountainous northwest.³⁷

Meanwhile, whatever the level of skepticism at Headquarters, CIA would continue to rely on air-dropped teams for intelligence on inland DRV targets. But by mid-August 1961, although DIDO had finally come up on the air, none of the three teams in place had produced any significant intelligence. Headquarters suggested forcing the pace, getting them to move into the planned second phase of operations by organizing and directing intelligence nets. Like Washington, the station implicitly accepted—at

least for the purposes of this discussion—the teams' freedom from enemy control when it again cautioned against expecting too much too soon. All three teams, "despite understandable difficulties," were just approaching the second phase. It was thus "premature to judge definitively either their value or loyalty."³⁸

In addition, Saigon felt obliged to "take exception" to Headquarters' proposed creation of "safe zones," in which the teams would organize a tribal resistance to incursion by DRV security forces. Such an effort would be "quickly mopped up." The station insisted, therefore, that teams "living clandestinely" conduct any active program of sabotage and harassment.³⁹

The debate continued, always under the tacit hypothesis that the three teams were free of hostile control. On 17 August, Headquarters noted that all had been chosen explicitly for parachute drop into areas that were home to friends and relatives, and wondered why contact with these people would be more secure after a month in hiding than after a few days. "It could be argued that the reverse is true since the longer the delay between arrival and contact the more the necessity for air resupply." And the suggestion about "safe areas" had assumed their location in "areas difficult for DRV forces to assault."⁴⁰

This cable, released by the acting chief of FE Division, revealed the pressures on the Agency to get results: "Would again emphasize interest very high levels [in Washington in] positive action realized thru [joint station-PLO team] ops North Vietnam." This pressure doubtless encouraged the station's eagerness to supply teams CASTOR and DIDO. DIDO had been assessed as the best of the three teams during training, and Saigon wanted to run the "calculated risk" entailed in supplying it

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with food and radio batteries. DIDO's second and third messages had provided a "reasonable explanation" for the team's six-weeks' silence, and the station thought other minor anomalies inconclusive. These included the strength of the radio signal and conflicting testimony about the initial drop: the aircrew had reported that all parachutes opened, while DIDO was now claiming that one cargo chute had failed.⁴¹ [redacted]

The request for a supply mission to CASTOR also looked at the bright side of things. The station and its Vietnamese partners had done a counterespionage analysis which "indicate[d]" that the team's security was "not compromised to date." Except for inconclusive DF results, the "commo aspects" of the operation were "favorable on the whole." True, if the crew of the downed supply flight had been captured, it could have given DRV security valuable information, but steps had been taken, by "changing the resupply route and team location," to neutralize this threat. The likelihood that the aircrew had pinpointed the CASTOR drop zone, and thus the vicinity of its operating base, was not addressed.⁴² [redacted]

The cable offering this rationale crossed with a message from Headquarters with more bad news about CASTOR. A "preliminary study" of its message traffic indicated that the team was not using the only source of power dropped with it, the GN-58 hand-cranked generator. If further analysis were to confirm this finding, CASTOR would have to be judged as almost certainly doubled.⁴³ [redacted]

Headquarters wanted its communications base in [redacted] to come up with a definitive answer by 21 August, but nothing in the

surviving record reveals what, if any, reply it received. One can only infer that the issue remained, at worst, unresolved, for on that day, Headquarters approved supply missions to both CASTOR and DIDO.⁴⁴ [redacted]

Father to the Thought [redacted]

Whatever the obstacles—mechanical, communications, or weather—these drops were not made. Meanwhile, Headquarters and the station were negotiating the terms of a progress report to the inter-agency Vietnam task force in Washington. One section was to deal with [redacted] team operations in the North, and Washington thought Saigon's upbeat assessment of their security too categorical: "Can we state with as much certainty as [you] indicate that all four teams [are] free of enemy control?"⁴⁵ [redacted]

The four teams, unnamed in Headquarters' cable, must have been the three infiltrated by air—CASTOR, ECHO, and DIDO—and [redacted] the singleton who had at this point reported the recruitment of several informants. As it had done with the first approval of supply missions, Headquarters now chose to give the task force the most optimistic possible interpretation of the teams' security. It changed the field's second submission, apparently still a little too rosy, but managed a reassuring tone for its inter-agency partners: "Lacking firm evidence to the contrary, all four teams appear to be free of DRV control."⁴⁶ [redacted]

The suggestion that only conclusive evidence could create even the appearance of enemy control defied FE Division's own analyses of the three teams inserted by airdrop. The kind of evasive logic-chopping to which Headquar-

⁴¹ Ibid. [redacted]

⁴² [redacted]

⁴³ [redacted]

⁴⁴ [redacted]

⁴⁵ [redacted]

⁴⁶ [redacted]

exchange has not been found. [redacted]

Saigon's side of this

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Map showing the geographical range of reported [redacted] agents, ca. 1962 [redacted]

ters resorted here invited a skeptical response even from readers unfamiliar with the operational correspondence, but there is no record that anyone accepted the challenge. With Agency officers and the policymakers both intent on getting results, a really cold-eyed look at events on the ground was not in the cards. [redacted]

Nevertheless, there were too many indications of trouble for the issue to go away, and the cycle of alternating doubt and optimism continued. On 7 September 1961, Team ECHO sent a clear-text message that said, "already arrested." It repeated the same message the next day. But the station made no mention of this when on the 18th it responded in characteristically ambivalent fashion to another expression of Headquarters' nagging doubts, this time about [redacted]. The station said it "fully concurs" that "neither [redacted] nor any [redacted]"

other...agent op is or has been above suspicion." It accepted Washington's criteria as "valid to consider in [a] balanced evaluation of agent performance and control"; as such, they were being duly "noted and...considered."⁴⁷ [redacted]

But the available information provided the basis, in the station's view, for no more than an "educated guess as to whether [the operations were] enemy-controlled or not." Even with ECHO, suspect from the very beginning, the station thought it proper to have given it the benefit of the doubt. Urging the team to exfiltrate and applying "other challenges and tests" saved time otherwise wasted in the "preparation and dispatch to Hqs [of] lengthy but premature and inconclusive CE analyses."⁴⁸ [redacted]

The station went on to defend what it again described as its "educated guess" that ARES remained free of hostile control. The agent himself, it noted, had reported events—like the DRV's discovery of the skiff in which he had landed—that suggested a compromise of security. It interpreted Hanoi radio broadcasts about this and other evidence of clandestine agent activity as incompatible with [redacted] having been captured and doubled. The real problem, as Saigon saw it, was the agent's reporting that he and his relatives were "hot." This meant not only the continuing danger of arrest but a support network crippled even if its members avoided capture.⁴⁹ [redacted]

The cable concluded with a pro forma—even patronizing—bow to Headquarters' concerns about team security:

[While we] appreciate Hqs frequently helpful reminders of points to consider, also hope it apparent we not neglecting [to] analyze these ops on continuing basis. Hope this can eliminate lengthy

⁴⁷ FVSW 7393, 12 April 1963, [redacted]

SAIG 4855, [redacted]

⁴⁸ SAIG 4855, [redacted]

⁴⁹ Ibid., [redacted]

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cable exchanges of CE and analyses and judgments [based on the] limited material available to date [in order] to permit full concentration on development of other ops. []

A marginal comment on this prescription indicated the sense of at least one Headquarters officer that the two parties were now talking past each other: "And that, 'dear Hqs.', is that!"⁵⁰ []

Under Enemy Control []

Headquarters did not ask whether it made good professional sense to launch new operations without first resolving security questions about the old. On 19 September 1961, just a day after hearing Saigon's complaint about excessive attention to the control issue, it approved a supply mission for Team CASTOR. It appears, however, that this reluctant decision was not carried out. Whatever caused the mission to be scrapped, the outcome was fortunate for the aircrew that would have flown it; as we have seen, CASTOR had come under enemy control only four days after its 27 May landing.⁵¹ []

In the ensuing two months, ambiguous—and sometimes not so ambiguous—signs of trouble had led the Agency to write off only Team ECHO as probably under enemy control. Even in the case of ECHO, the Saigon Station harbored some hope that the anomalies in its message traffic would turn out to be innocuous. Meanwhile, Hanoi began a meticulous counterespionage operation designed to convince the station and Col. Tung of the teams' bona fides. []

The public trial in November of the survivors of the 1 July supply mission to Team CASTOR meant that any DR effort to exploit that operation would challenge Saigon's credulity. Some members of the aircrew might well have known little about their destination, but as it happened, the pilot was among the three survivors, and he would necessarily have had full knowledge of the plane's destination and mission.⁵² []

At their trial, the survivors acknowledged their role in supplying guerrilla operations. But their published testimony said they had given as their destination a remote spot in Hoa Binh Province, far from CASTOR in Son La. The likelihood that all three, presumably interrogated separately, had managed to improvise a coherent story that satisfied their captors must even at the time have seemed remote. Nevertheless, whatever their residual doubts, CIA officers in both Saigon and Headquarters accepted CASTOR's credentials, and planning began for a second supply mission.⁵³ []

While deploring the loss of the C-47 and its crew, the station found cause for celebration in the resulting uproar about internal security in the DRV. Hanoi radio broadcasts were blasting "'reactionary' elements among ethnic minorities," and appealing to "mountain people" to cooperate with security forces. Saigon attributed all this to the information derived from interrogations of the surviving CASTOR aircrew personnel and of Team ECHO, whose capture Hanoi had now announced. Black entry operations, even when rolled up, were thus "exactly the type [of] harassment" by which the station was "seeking to force [the] DRV to dissipate its assets on [its] own internal security in remote areas [of North Vietnam] and thus decrease its subversive efforts in South Vietnam."⁵⁴ []

⁵⁰ Ibid. []

⁵¹ [] 19 September 1961, [] No reporting on either the planning or the cancellation of this supply flight has survived. []

⁵² Ibid., 43; Tourison, 44. Tourison says the 1 July supply flight also carried a team that was to have been airdropped elsewhere in a new operation whose locale he does not specify. []

⁵³ Conboy, 43-44. []

⁵⁴ SAIG 6562, 18 December 1961, []

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CIA in Saigon offered additional evidence to support its view of a Hanoi regime under stress. A British expert on Indochina, Professor P. J. Honey, had just evaluated its condition as "precarious," and a Saigon newspaper wrote about a 24 November piece in the communist daily *Nhan Dan*, which acknowledged for the first time that "enemy social foundations still exist, while ours are very weak." Hanoi

press and radio were pressing their campaign to mobilize the populace against Diemist spies and saboteurs, and a message from Team CASTOR indicated that it and other agent teams were forcing the DRV to divert resources to beef up internal security. As of late 1961, it looked to CIA as if its teams were operating on fertile ground.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ SAIG 6709, 30 December 1961,

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Chapter Two: A More Ambitious Agenda

It could have been argued—and later was argued—that airborne and maritime harassment operations, even if successful at the tactical level, might not deter the southern insurgency, but instead spur the Politburo in Hanoi to accelerate its campaign to annex the South, whence all the trouble was emanating. But the emotional climate of the moment did not encourage such speculation. On the contrary, it seemed a matter of common sense, both in Saigon and at Headquarters, not only to infiltrate more teams, but to assign them progressively more ambitious missions. Replying in early December to what must have been an expression of concern about insufficiently aggressive tasking, Saigon offered this reassurance:

*We [are] not locating, recruiting, training, dispatching and directing... teams [merely] to obtain low level or even high level [order of battle intelligence]. We certainly include OB in specific missions but... [we] have emphasized potential resistance, contacts with families to build up intel assets, examination of potential harassment targets such as roads, reports of political controls, attitude of population, etc.*¹

The station balanced this guarantee of an aggressive program with an acknowledgement that the teams' performance was up to that point "far from outstanding." It reminded Headquarters of earlier stipulations of the "limited results" to be expected from team operations,

and suggested that the only reason for pursuing them was the "absence [of] other means to approach [our] targets."²

The implication was that one used the means at hand to satisfy a policy requirement, however ill-adapted those means might be to achieving the objective. By this permissive standard, it was easy to justify a proposed air infiltration into Hoa Binh Province, in the mountains west of Hanoi, by another team of hill tribesmen. Dubbed EUROPA, the new team would use the usual modus operandi, parachuting to a safehaven from which it would emerge to contact trusted relatives and friends and evaluate the area's resistance potential. The station restrained its enthusiasm for this particular venture: "We cannot make [a] passionate plea for tremendous strategic potential [in the] EUROPA area." On the other hand, "we can [make such a claim] for our presently projected program of one team per month to give us general geographic coverage of North Vietnam." With more teams in place, the operation would move into Phase II, a program about which the station said only that it would be supplemented by leaflet drops presumably aimed at stimulating discontent with the regime.³

Headquarters was apparently hoping, at the end of 1961, that more rigorous targeting would help conserve scarce resources, but the station saw no immediate potential in a more selective approach. It saw itself as limited to the agent personnel, mostly drawn from the hill tribes, supplied it by Col. Tung, and these agents had reasonable prospects of surviving only where they could find sympathetic local contacts. Saigon was indeed "well aware of special areas and groups, and [was] following up all possible leads." But rather than await the

¹ SAIG 6285, 2 December 1961.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. This cable alludes to a dispatch outlining the station's program that, judging by its number, was sent in mid-August 1961. The cable refers to planned activity in three phases, the second of which included leaflet drops. The third presumably introduced some kind of organized resistance to communist rule. Also see Conboy, 45, reference to EUROPA as composed of "Muong," a possible rendering of the tribe called "Hmong."

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Infiltration junk Nautilus I [redacted]

results of a "definitive study," it was proceeding with the agent material at hand.⁴ [redacted]

Team DIDO, launched in late June 1961, greeted the New Year with two messages saying that it was transmitting under duress. Again, it appears that the station was too preoccupied with other business to pay much attention. While preparing new operations, it had also to service those agents and teams in place whose bona fides it saw no reason to question.⁵ [redacted]

One such effort involved [redacted] Inserted by junk, he would be supplied the same way. On the night of 14 January 1962, the junk code-named *Nautilus I* crept up among the karst islands sprinkled along the upper reaches of the Gulf of Tonkin. The crew was unloading the first of 27 cases of supplies into a dinghy, for deposit on shore, when a North Vietnamese patrol boat, apparently lying in wait, brought the operation to an end.⁶ [redacted]

The interruption of radio contact with *Nautilus I* and the junk's failure to return forced the station and its Vietnamese counterparts to consider the possibility that [redacted] was under enemy control. But it seemed to them more likely that the supply mission had fallen victim either to bad weather—it turned foul four days after the junk's departure—or to a routine coastal patrol. Nevertheless, when a replacement junk, *Nautilus II*, left Da Nang mid-April for another try, [redacted] was informed of the mission only after the junk was safely back in port. He subsequently radioed that he had recovered all 30 bundles from the cache site on a small, uninhabited island in Ha Long Bay. With the apparent success of this mission, Col. Tung's office—renamed the Presidential Survey Office (PSO) after the downed aircrew's trial exposed the PLO label—and CIA again accepted the agent's bona fides.⁷ [redacted]

Stepping Up the Pace [redacted]

Meanwhile, airborne operations had been suspended until the station acquired a more

⁴ SAIG 6562. [redacted]

⁵ FVSW 7393. [redacted]

⁶ SAIG 7080, 24 January 1962, retyped in undated draft memorandum, [redacted] Tourison, 47–48. Tourison bases his account of the 1962 [redacted] supply mission on a postwar interview with a *Nautilus I* crewman, who said he was visited by [redacted] in prison. Wearing a "fancy watch" and allowed to smoke, [redacted] said he knew the prison commander and was visiting by permission. The crewman concluded that [redacted] was a "traitor...one of theirs all along, a double agent." It seems more likely that [redacted] was operating in good faith until after his capture. (See Tourison, 49.)

⁷ Conboy, 27 [redacted] SAIG 9012, 29 April 1962, retyped in undated draft memorandum, [redacted] Seventeen DRV travel documents were fabricated for the supply mission, 16 for the junk and its crew [redacted] a revised Haiphong travel permit to be used with his Haiphong basic identity document. (FVSA 13283, 2 February 1962, [redacted])

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suitable aircraft. The limited range of the twin-engine C-47 required both a refueling stop at Da Nang, on the coast in Central Vietnam, and perilously direct routes to drop zones in the northwestern DRV. CIA officers attributed the July 1961 loss of the CASTOR supply plane at least partly to these factors, and additional supply missions and team insertions were, therefore, put on hold while CIA negotiated with the US Air Force for a four-engine DC-4.⁸ []

Nguyen Cao Ky, now a lieutenant colonel, recruited new South Vietnamese Air Force pilots, and when the first DC-4 arrived at about the end of December 1961, an Air America team trained them in nighttime low-level flying and navigation. When the crews were ready, the station and PSO chose to launch Team EUROPA before moving to supply CASTOR.⁹ []

The launch did not take place without still another policy hiccup over the proportionality between means and ends. On 11 January 1962, Headquarters informed Saigon that, in view of the "doubtful results this small effort can achieve," EUROPA was disapproved. The same cable welcomed a discussion of the rationale for all such operations during an imminent visit by COS Bill Colby, a visit that must have resulted in a change of heart, for a second cable on 15 February gave EUROPA the green light.¹⁰ []

Once again, Ky commanded the aircraft, relying on his ability to spot moonlit checkpoints on the ground as he navigated a circuitous route to the drop zone. All went well, it seemed to Ky, but in fact the area below was dotted with vil-

lages. According to Hanoi's published interrogation report of one member, the team was spotted while still descending. Within two days, the PASF had every man in custody. Having captured the agent radio along with its operator, the communists promptly launched a deception operation similar to those already under way with [] and CASTOR.¹¹ []

On 12 March, EUROPA came up on the air, assuring Saigon that the team was "safe and sound." An effort to drop supplies to the team had to be scrubbed when radio contact was lost, but the station assessed the communications failure as probably the result of bad weather. As of early June, it told Headquarters, the team's radio messages, including safety signals, were in order, and there was "no reason to believe [the] team doubled."¹² []

The apparent success of EUROPA encouraged the station to proceed with a supply mission to CASTOR. Ky and his crew having flown the last mission, a second crew manned the DC-4 for the flight to Son La. Once again, CASTOR and its North Vietnamese masters waited in vain. Caught in a rainstorm not far from the drop zone, the pilot lost his bearings and crashed into a mountain. But intercepted North Vietnamese communications gave no sign of an alert. The station inferred that Hanoi was unaware of the flight, and evaluated CASTOR's security as unaffected by the disaster.¹³ []

The station's faith in the bona fides of Team CASTOR was at this point fully restored, and plans were underway to reinforce it with another team, to be called TOURBILLON, that would give it a serious capacity for sabotage and harassment. Meanwhile, the station made

⁸ Ibid., 44 [] C-54 was the military designation for the Douglas DC-4, and is used in much CIA correspondence on the program. But the civilian nomenclature appears in some traffic, suggesting that the plane was configured to match the cover story under which it was leased to a South Vietnamese entrepreneur. []

⁹ SAIG 6562 [] Conboy, 44-5. []

¹⁰ SAIG 34570, 11 January 1962; [] 15 February 1962; []

¹¹ Conboy, 45. []

¹² FVSA 13612, 27 April 1962; [] SAIG 9993, 9 June 1962, []

¹³ Ibid [] Conboy, 45 [] The date of the attempted supply drop to CASTOR is not known. []

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the first use of Laotian territory to insert a team into the DRV. On 12 March, after reconnaissance by a small fixed-wing aircraft, the helicopter descended onto the drop zone on the Laotian side of the border, adjacent to the province of Nghe An in the southern DRV.¹⁴ []

The four members of Team ATLAS—apparently all ethnic Vietnamese—headed east toward their target, a village where they were to seek out two Catholic priests known for their anti-communist fervor. After four days of unobserved movement, they suddenly encountered a small boy, who upon seeing them disappeared into the forest. Soon thereafter, local militia arrived, and the team fled back toward Laos. One man was fatally shot, and another died when he stepped on a mine. The survivors managed to assemble their radio and report their plight, but were soon captured. Not until the two survivors' later public trial did the station learn that they had been in the hands of the PASF since 5 April.¹⁵ []

However powerful the urge to believe in their teams' survival in enemy territory, the station and its PSO counterparts did not ignore "repeated danger and/or duress signals" from Teams DIDO and ECHO. By early April 1962, both were assumed to be under enemy control, and Saigon concentrated on turning their enemy-controlled communications back upon the North Vietnamese. One ploy began with the assumption that both teams were still intact, even though controlled. Orders to them to head for the Laotian border would test the willingness of their handlers to move them west in order to prevent Saigon's RDF capability from revealing a failure to comply. If the teams got lucky, in this process—they would have to be very lucky—they might manage to escape.¹⁶ []

The second ploy also looked like a counsel of desperation. It had been launched with a message to DIDO that alluded to "friendly elements" in the border area and tasked the team to report on them. Later messages were to mention the team's proposed assignment, after exfiltration, to train new teams at project headquarters. The station seems to have been wishing for a North Vietnamese nibble at this offer of a penetration of the Saigon office, but stipulated that it had "no illusions about the likelihood of success in exfiltrating either team."¹⁷ []

With little hope for DIDO and even less for ECHO, the station concentrated on its plans for new insertions. On 16 April 1962, the six Black Thai tribesmen of Team REMUS parachuted onto a drop zone in Laotian territory some 15 kilometers northwest of Dien Bien Phu. The team landed unobserved, retrieved its gear, and crept across the border. Some of the food bundles dropped with the team were damaged, and REMUS almost immediately called for a supply drop. The station complied, but the team's gastronomic requirements caused some heartburn at Headquarters, which complained about the unrealistic expectations represented by a request for "chicken and duck 'done to a golden tint.'"¹⁸ []

An Appearance of Success []

With the insertion of Team REMUS, the station had what it considered four viable teams, including ARES, reporting from North Vietnam. It was now just over a year since President Kennedy had called for "guerrilla operations" there, and CIA was feeling the heat. It was not just the modest number of teams in place, but their failure to engage in any significant harass-

¹⁴ FVSA 13612. []

¹⁵ FVSA 13612. [] Conboy, 47. []

¹⁶ FVSA 13612. The idea looks even more fanciful in light of SAIG 6562 of 18 December 1961, in which the station had categorically described Team ECHO as "captured." []

¹⁷ Ibid. []

¹⁸ Conboy, 50. [] See [] 28 May 1962, []

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ment or sabotage, that suggested a major gap between mandate and performance.¹⁹ []

It was in this climate that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) Adm. Harry Felt visited Saigon in May 1962. In its sessions with them, the station found itself defending its modest progress in the DRV. Pointing to bad weather as the biggest deterrent to accelerating the pace of infiltration, Chief of Station Colby also justified the intelligence emphasis in the tasking of existing teams. They needed information on local conditions and targets, he said, as a framework for the "harassment and diversion" operations that remained their main charter. The station and PSO were preparing 15 more teams for insertion by the end of July; all of these would prepare the way for the subsequent addition of sabotage personnel and equipment.²⁰ []

McNamara expressed what the station called his "full support" for its activities and plans. But he drew a clear distinction between small-scale CIA-sponsored harassment operations and "possible larger efforts of [a] military nature." In so doing, he implicitly asserted the dominant military role in unconventional warfare that President Kennedy had assigned to the Pentagon after the failure at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. Against a background of frustratingly slow Agency progress, the prospect of Pentagon-run operations against the North was now, in the station's words, "more open."²¹ []

Meantime, military support to CIA operations would continue, and two admirals working for

Adm. Felt concurred with an Agency request for submarine reconnaissance of possible targets for a maritime raid on Swatow-class gunboats of the DRV's little navy. Also, having lost a team to enemy action along Route 7, leading into northeastern Laos, the station was pressing to get ready a new team of Hmong to parachute into the DRV near the Laotian border. Its members would recruit fellow Hmong in the Lai Chau area, then lead them out to Laos for training and eventual return.²² []

Teams TOURBILLON and EROS []

The COS had been right about the weather as an inhibiting factor. When he conferred with Secretary McNamara and Adm. Felt on 12 May, the aircraft carrying sabotage Team TOURBILLON, slated to join Team CASTOR, had already aborted three missions when it encountered heavy storms. Finally, in a DC-4 flown by a veteran aircrew of [] TOURBILLON's seven men reached the drop zone on the night of 17 May.²³ []

Waiting below was a company or more of PASF militia, who had set out the flame pots as specified in the instructions to Team CASTOR. But the descending guerrillas encountered strong winds that blew them away from the drop zone, and the PASF set off in pursuit. Their first quarry was the assistant team leader, caught in a tree on landing, who was shot and killed in his harness when he fired on them. The others were surrounded and captured within two days.²⁴ []

¹⁹ SAIG 9297, 12 May 1962, []

²⁰ Ibid. []

²¹ Ibid. [] National Security Action Memorandum of 28 June 1961 specified that any paramilitary operation "wholly covert or disavowable, may be assigned to CIA, provided that it is within the normal capabilities of the agency" (emphasis added). Any operation, "wholly or partially covert," requiring "significant numbers of militarily trained personnel, [and] amounts of military equipment," would "exceed CIA-controlled" capabilities, and would be run by the Department of Defense with CIA "in a supporting role." (See Schulz, 21.) []

²² SAIG 9297. []

²³ Ibid.; FVSA 17604, 6 July 1964 []

²⁴ Conboy, 49. []

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DRV security elected to conceal the capture while it exploited the team's radio operator and gear to launch another deception operation. According to one survivor, interviewed after the war, Saigon had ordered Team TOURBILLON to come up on the air within two days. Given its expected reception by CASTOR, it should need no time to find a refuge, and initial contact delayed for more than 48 hours would be taken as evidence of enemy control. In fact, according to the same survivor, it took the North Vietnamese 11 days to get the team's radio operator on the air with his first message.²⁵ []

The record is mute on this point, but it is clear that, despite the delay, Saigon accepted TOURBILLON's bona fides. The station reported the team's reception by the leader of CASTOR and the loss of one man, which TOURBILLON had called an accident. As of 20 June, Saigon accepted that TOURBILLON was scouting potential sabotage targets along Route 41.²⁶ []

Meanwhile, on 20 May, Team EROS dropped into Thanh Hoa Province, just east of the Laotian border in the upper panhandle. This insertion seems to have escaped PASF attention, and the five men—Hmong and Red Thai dropped into an area that was home to both tribes—set up a hidden bivouac. They were then supposed to contact tribal brethren, but lost their nerve, it seems, and when some Red Thai villagers stumbled upon their encampment, they fled north. The discovery of food cans with foreign brand names triggered a search by both PASF and army units. After two weeks, they had found nothing, and the hunt was suspended.²⁷ []

On 20 June, EROS reported fearing that it had been compromised. DRV security was covering the vicinity of the cache site, and the team was being, as the station reported it, "closely tracked." Short of food, EROS asked for supplies, which Saigon promised for July. No drop took place, and Saigon radioed the team that bad weather was to blame.²⁸ []

Left to its own devices, the team ventured out in a search for food. On 2 August, villagers spotted it once again. Security forces resumed their search, and a panicked Team EROS managed only to report the renewed pursuit before it went off the air. On 29 September, the PASF surrounded the team, killing one guerilla and capturing a second. Three others escaped to the border, where they joined a party of Lao hunters until their hosts betrayed them to the North Vietnamese.²⁹ []

Operation VULCAN []

Resident teams, living black, represented one of the two possibilities for surreptitious action against DRV military facilities. The other involved maritime hit-and-run raids, using techniques earlier employed against China, in the early years of communist rule there, and against the regime in Pyongyang, during the Korean war. President Kennedy's repeated demand for action against the DRV required exploiting all the resources at hand, and these included, in the spring of 1962, 18 South Vietnamese who had been trained in underwater demolitions [] For a target, CIA chose the DRV naval base at Quang Khe, which lay on the Gianh River some 40 kilometers north of Dong Hoi, the town nearest the DMZ.³⁰ []

²⁵ Ibid. []

²⁶ FVSA 17604; FVSA 13986, 27 July 1962, []

²⁷ Conboy, 49-50. []

²⁸ Blind memorandum, [] Operations, "Date of Info: 20 June 1962," [] FVSA 13986 [] Conboy, 50. FVSW 7393 says that as early as 21 August, the radio operator responded incorrectly to a challenge question. []

²⁹ Conboy, 50. []

³⁰ Conboy, 51. []

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Quang Khe was home to several of the DRV's Swatow-class gunboats, 83 feet long and carrying up to three 37mm cannon, four heavy machine guns, and eight depth charges. Although assigned to coastal security, they had not been encountered in the station's maritime infiltrations using motorized fishing junks, and their nearly continuous presence in port made them attractive targets for hit-and-run attack. Accordingly, PSO acquired four of the 18 frogmen, and the station commenced training and operational planning.³¹ [redacted]

CIA arranged with the Navy for a reconnaissance by the USS *Catfish*, a World War II-era submarine that had long been devoted to intelligence collection along the Asian littoral. It confirmed the Swatows' presence at Quang Khe, and on 30 June 1962 the program's third junk, *Nautilus III*, carried the frogmen and their limpet mines to the mouth of the Gianh River. They made their way in on a raft for a quick beach reconnaissance before returning to the junk. A small sampan would then take them upriver into the vicinity of the gunboats.³² [redacted]

Aerial reconnaissance supplementing the surreptitious observation of the junk confirmed just three Swatows, each to be attacked by one frogman, who would swim to it, attach limpets below the waterline, and return to the sampan. And indeed it appears that each of the swimmers reached his target—in one case an unidentified naval vessel larger than the Swatows—and planted at least one mine. How many of them detonated remained unclear, for one of them went off prematurely, with the swimmer already spotted and trying to escape. The explosion crippled the gunboat but killed the frogman; the station reported that it thought a second Swatow had also gone up.³³ [redacted]

Gunfire from a pursuing Swatow killed the fourth frogman and wounded the captain of the *Nautilus III* before the gunboat rammed the junk and took the survivors prisoner. They missed just one, who hid in the half-submerged cabin and was overlooked by the Swatow's crew, who never boarded the sinking junk. The survivor drifted south of the DMZ on a piece of wreckage and was rescued next day by a South Vietnamese patrol boat. Col. Tung's PSO accepted the high casualty rate as just the fortunes of war, and the station seemed ready to proceed with more operations like VULCAN, whose results it summarized for Headquarters: "Mission successful, price heavy."³⁴ [redacted]

Soldiering On [redacted]

As of late July 1962, the station was preparing 28 new [redacted] teams, most of them to be given a sabotage mission, for infiltration into the DRV. The chief of the External Operations Section, [redacted] undertook to explain to Headquarters what it could reasonably expect from current and proposed operations. His dispatch, painfully honest yet spotted with wishful thinking, encapsulated the Agency's dilemma as it struggled to affect the DRV's war-making capability with the means at hand. [redacted] began with a starkly pessimistic judgment about the results to be expected from operations on the scale then projected: "The possibilities of any large diversion from the DRV effort against South Vietnam are remote. Our operations are at too small a scale and initiated at too late a date [in the course of the insurgency] to seriously affect DRV aggression against the South."³⁵ [redacted]

"Some effects," however, should be possible. Sabotage of targets like military facilities,

³¹ Ibid., 52-53. [redacted]

³² Ibid., 53-55. [redacted] SAIG 0546, 2 July 1962. [redacted]

³³ Ibid.; FVSA 13986. [redacted]

³⁴ SAIG 0546; FVSA 13986. [redacted]

³⁵ FVSA 13986; FVSA 13960, 24 July 1962. [redacted]

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roads, railroads, and crops would require a beefed-up militia to improve security; this, in turn, would burden not only the regime but also the peasantry being forced to supply the manpower. Operations against targets like locomotives and rolling stock would force the regime to spend scarce foreign exchange for replacements and parts. Meanwhile, an increasingly oppressed population might take heart from these examples of regime vulnerability, and itself engage in economic sabotage. This, in turn, would provoke another cycle of repressive measures that would exacerbate the alienation of the populace.³⁶ []

[] acknowledged certain risks in this approach, even at the level of activity then planned. Use of minorities might provoke the regime into "large scale repressive action" against particular ethnic or religious groups. Probably with events like the 1956 Hungarian revolution in mind, [] cautioned against "spark[ing] premature uprisings which we are neither willing nor able to support." This held true especially in the heavily populated coastal areas; it might be more practicable to encourage revolt among the "widely scattered mountain groups which would divert DRV troops into policing large areas of difficult terrain."³⁷ []

Having cited some salutary side effects—larger numbers of trained South Vietnamese, the accumulation of operational intelligence, and the refinement of operational techniques—[] went on to draw a measured but ultimately optimistic bottom line. He still thought it "unlikely that any major physical change in the scale of DRV aggression against South Vietnam will result." On the other hand, it seemed probable that the "material and economic damage as well as the engendered suspicion and confusion far exceed the relatively

small [investment in] the program." Pursuing this theme, [] invoked the prospect of creating more "tension in an already strained economy" with activity that demonstrated South Vietnamese determination even as it gave hope to restive Northerners that they did not "stand alone."³⁸ []

[] dispatch, released in the name of the chief of station, thus served to justify continuing the program even while he disclaimed its ability to achieve the stated purpose. With this piece still en route, Headquarters cabled the results of a comparable soul-searching, provoked by the conclusion in July of the Geneva Agreements on Laos. The agreements would allow the DRV to divert forces from Laos to South Vietnam, an advantage that the United States and the GVN must somehow offset. An effective program of harassment and sabotage in the DRV was more urgently needed than ever, but Headquarters was driven to the same conclusion as the station. Measured against stated objectives, "our record in [the] DRV [is] not good." Operations in the North had been costly in both men and materiel while leading to little harassment or sabotage. Operation VULCAN had succeeded, but teams like CAS-TOR, to be admired for their very survival, had done little or nothing.³⁹ []

Headquarters did not question the suitability of the operational technique, confining itself instead to some conventional cautionary advice. The station should avoid spreading itself too thin. It should apply rigorous standards to the selection of both agent personnel and targets and pay careful attention to the lessons of experience. And it should never "succumb to pressures from any outside organization, GVN or US Government," to launch operations about whose soundness it had any doubts.⁴⁰ []

³⁶ FVSA 13960. []

³⁷ Ibid. []

³⁸ Ibid. []

³⁹ [] 30 July 1962. []

⁴⁰ Ibid. []

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Potential US Air Force Targets in North Vietnam, Circa Early 1962

The single concrete recommendation concerned the scale and frequency of sabotage and harassment operations. Speaking for FE Division, Don Gregg urged "intermittent small scale harassments...[rather than] one or two larger scale ops against bridges or POL dumps." The success of Team TOURBILLON's planned bridge-blowing would be very welcome, but probably no more effective in influencing North Vietnamese behavior than a series of "smaller actions...against isolated convoys or camps which could be undertaken [by a] single team member" firing rifle grenades.⁴¹ [redacted]

The Department of State, and particularly its ambassador in Vientiane, Leonard Unger, were preoccupied with avoiding the collapse of the just-signed Geneva Agreements, and vetoed the supply overflight that the TOURBILLON sabotage operation would require. Washington turned down Saigon's appeal of this decision, but informed the field that the inter-agency covert action oversight committee was now reviewing the entire question of Laos overflights.⁴² [redacted]

Upping the Ante [redacted]

The impassioned debate over the competing goals of vigorous action against the DRV and the preservation of the Geneva Agreements raged until 23 August. On that day, Lt. Gen. Marshall Carter, the acting DCI, told Deputy Director for Plans Thomas Karamessines that the "highest levels in the Government"—i.e., President Kennedy—had just approved a "concept of intensified operations against North Vietnam." This decision did not, in fact, resolve the overflight question. But Headquarters counted on it to win reversal of the prohib-



ited TOURBILLON sabotage operation, and invited the station to identify specific targets and means of attacking them.⁴³ [redacted]

⁴¹ Ibid. [redacted]

⁴² [redacted] 15 August 1962, [redacted]

⁴³ Marshall S. Carter, Action Memorandum B-13, no subject, 23 August 1962, [redacted]

[redacted] 5 September 1962, [redacted]

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On 29 August, Saigon responded with an eruption of ambitious proposals intended, the station said, to "divert...DRV attention from external to internal matters and cause material damage to their expansionist efforts into [South Vietnam] and Laos." Proposed operations included destroying dredges and cranes in Haiphong harbor, blowing up the POL dump at Vinh, mining the channels at Haiphong and Vinh, blowing up a highway bridge in Thanh Hoa Province, and a 100-man commando raid against a "probable electronic site" on the Mui Doc promontory in the Vinh Son area. High-speed boats could carry other commandos in company-size raids on bridges, docked ferries, and isolated military outposts along coastal Route 1 as far north as Thanh Hoa.⁴⁴ [redacted]

Even more ambitious: a resistance effort in the northwest, modeled on the successful Hmong program in Laos and using some of the same tribes. The station also suggested cutting the rail line entering the DRV from China. Using enough 14-man sabotage teams, it could, it claimed, cut the railroad at five or even 10 places at the same time. Another team, scheduled for launch in December, would live in the mountains southwest of Lang Son, "constantly cutting the main rail line and Route One from China into the DRV." Two other teams then being prepared could hit vital roads into Laos, one of them operating along Route 7, leading into Xieng Khouang Province, and the other on Route 8, running down into Khammouane Province from Vinh. The latter team, BOUVIER, could recruit "local relatives for incendiary sabotage and harassment"; along with Team JASON, it could set up the reception of a "large guerrilla force."⁴⁵ [redacted]

The list went on, with more teams already in training slated to knock out bridges and mine roads, and even to ambush military convoys and raid storage depots. The heavily populated coastal area provided no refuge for resident teams, but furnished lucrative targets for hit-and-run attacks from the sea or down from the mountains. All of this would be supplemented by a massive psychological warfare campaign using leaflets and radio to pillory the regime for the draconian measures it would presumably take to combat the paramilitary campaign of harassment.⁴⁶ [redacted]

Almost as if abashed by its own grandiosity, the station accompanied this wish list with a dispatch, sent the same day, that responded to Don Gregg's call for more but smaller operations. It outlined in depressing detail the realities that inhibited speedy, secure, and effective action in the North. So different in tone from the operational proposal that it might have had another author, it identified the obstacles to the success of any kind of action program against the DRV.⁴⁷ [redacted]

This companion piece noted first the likelihood that more [redacted] operations would mean more casualties. The South Vietnamese had accepted with equanimity their losses in the VULCAN operation, but expansion would require a willingness to sustain many more. More limiting than this hypothetical problem was the lack of reliable, detailed target intelligence. A breezy reference in the operational cable to 800 targets then being "carded, plotted, and studied" was implicitly qualified in the companion dispatch. There, the station said it had "just begun assembling a target file," and it would take months to bring it into usable shape.⁴⁸ [redacted]

⁴⁴ SAIG 1952, 29 August 1962, [redacted]

⁴⁵ Ibid. [redacted]

⁴⁶ Ibid. [redacted]

⁴⁷ FVSA 14118, 29 August 1962, [redacted] It was common practice, at least at the time, for the field to send good news by cable, given wide distribution, and bad news by dispatch, normally seen only at branch level. One may infer that the station was implicitly asking for working-level understanding of the difficulties it faced in implementing a set of proposals it had formulated only under policy-level duress. [redacted]

⁴⁸ SAIG 1952; FVSA 14118. [redacted]

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Patience and hard work might fill the intelligence gap, but the suitability of agent personnel was not subject to CIA control. Agent quality had consistently been "very low," the result of an overstretched national manpower pool itself low in quality. "Not much can be done about this problem," the station concluded, but it took some comfort from the survival of Team CASTOR, not yet known to be under enemy control. CASTOR's disappointing intelligence reporting should be chalked up not to nonfeasance but to CIA's "miscalculation of the quality and quantity of information available" in its operating area.⁴⁹

Reminding Headquarters that it took four to six months to "locate, vet, train and launch" a team, and four-and-half months just to train a radio operator, the station cautioned that the full impact of the new program would not be felt until the end of the year. And that timetable assumed both renewed freedom to overfly Laos and the absence of significantly improved DRV countermeasures. Finally, the station raised the question whether the game was worth the candle. It noted that judging the human cost was up to the GVN. But only Headquarters could determine whether results justified CIA's investment in equipment and money. In the sole explicit reference in surviving correspondence to earlier infiltration operations, the station invited a comparison, for this purpose, with those against North Korea and China.⁵⁰

No Other Options

It seems unlikely, given the pressure to do something—anything—to shake Hanoi's confidence in the DRV's internal security, that anyone in Headquarters thought it worth the trouble to examine the historical record. Don Gregg later saw four mutually reinforcing influ-

ences as inhibiting the rigorous cost/benefit analysis that might have diluted CIA's commitment to infiltration operations.

First was the fierce pressure, dating at least to the beginning of 1962, not only from the White House but from State and the Pentagon. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was pushing both the military and CIA to bolster the South Vietnamese by raising the cost to Hanoi of its campaign to annex the South. At Defense, Robert McNamara was insisting that the Agency commit its paramilitary resources in support of combat operations in South Vietnam. The major bone of contention was the tribal militia program in the Central Highlands, which for CIA represented a means of expanding the GVN's authority over population and territory, but whose Strike Force units MACV coveted as another increment of firepower that could be devoted to finding and fixing the enemy's main forces. In this climate, the infiltration program provided, if not much else, at least a demonstration of the Agency's good faith.⁵¹

Reinforcing the continuing attachment to the team concept was a managerial mindset in the Directorate of Plans (DDP) that almost reflexively applied the techniques of World War II partisan warfare to denied-area operations in the Cold War. Gregg and other junior officers were aware of the slim results produced by the teams infiltrated into Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, in the early years of the Cold War, and then into China and North Korea, but they accepted this *modus operandi* as "the way we do things."

In Gregg's view, accidents of temperament also played a part. "Warrior-priest" Bill Colby had returned from Saigon in mid-1962 to become Desmond FitzGerald's deputy in FE Division. Gregg saw Colby's operational philosophy in much the same light as had Bob Myers:

⁴⁹ SAIG 1952.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Donald P. Gregg, interview by the author, Washington, DC, 22 October 2003.

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Renowned for his World War II exploits supporting partisan units in Europe for the OSS, Colby had not yet accepted the force of Myers' argument against trying to apply that experience in communist-controlled Asia. Instead, Colby focused on doing more, and doing it quickly.

Finally, as Gregg came to see the matter, the fast pace of operations, planned and conducted in an endemic atmosphere of crisis, militated against a serious look at the assumptions underlying the program.

In any case, whatever the variety of possibilities for operations in the South, it is clear that

in the North the options were limited, at best. As the Saigon Station had earlier pointed out, with sealed borders and practically no travel, either by officials going abroad or by non-communist legal visitors to the DRV, there really weren't any alternatives. The only question—explicitly addressed, as we have seen, by the station but apparently not at Headquarters—involved the prudence of adhering to a failed strategy. As of mid-1962, both Headquarters and the field concentrated on the practical obstacles to the exploitation of existing teams and the insertion of new ones.⁵²

⁵² Ibid. FVSA 14118.

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Chapter Three: A Hesitant Escalation

With the Geneva Agreements set to go into effect in October 1962, the administration still wanted covert action in North Vietnam, but it also wanted no flaps. It took presidential approval—given on 7 September 1962—to get a supply drop to one of the four teams still operating—or believed to be operating—in North Vietnam.¹

Passing word of this decision to the DDP on 7 September 1962, Acting DCI Carter noted that Roger Hilsman, of State's East Asia Bureau, "was not enchanted with dropping teams into mountainous areas where he said 'their effectiveness was nil—one wooden bridge in one year was not worth the price.'" To get around what he clearly saw as unproductive second-guessing, Carter urged Karamessines to get "overall approval along policy lines" from Assistant Secretary of State Averell Harriman for more insertions via aircraft entering DRV airspace from Laos. The Acting DCI wanted this as his "party line for all clandestine activities.... If higher authority wishes to get involved (such as the Special Group or the White House), then let this involvement be concerned with the policy decision and not with the minute operational details."²

Carter's drive for more operational autonomy had to contend with the administration's near-obsession to avoid blame if the Geneva Agreements collapsed. When these took effect on 6 October, the White House suspended all "provocative acts," including sabotage attacks even by teams already in place. The station

had its hands full, in any case, trying to arrange the exfiltration of Teams DIDO, CASTOR, and EROS.³

In the case of EROS, the station acknowledged, for the first time in the surviving record, that delayed team response to security challenges suggested enemy control. But Col. Tung's people disagreed, at least about EROS, and there was no conclusive evidence about either it or Team DIDO. Moreover, it was just possible that a team doubled by the DRV would be allowed to exfiltrate, its masters in Hanoi trying to use it to penetrate Col. Tung's PSO. Accordingly, the station intended to make a supply drop to EROS, using a drop zone several miles from the appointed spot. It would then radio the team, apologizing for the errant drop and giving its location.⁴

Unlike those of DIDO and EROS, CASTOR's bona fides were no longer in doubt. But CIA wanted the team out anyway, for debriefing and rest. Being in fact under DRV control, it found pretexts not to comply, including the claim that it lacked a knowledgeable guide to the Laotian border.⁵

Structural Problems

Even without the inhibitions of post-Geneva policy, the station entered the last quarter of 1962 facing an increasingly difficult operational climate in the North. Part of the problem was terrain. The station wanted to insert teams below the 20th parallel, farther south than earlier drops, and within striking distance of lowland targets. But it had found only a "distressing lack" of drop zones within an acceptable distance of proposed sites of team hideouts. With seven sabotage teams being

¹ Gen. Marshall S. Carter, Action Memorandum to Deputy Director (Plans), 7 September 1962,

This document does not identify the team, which was probably REMUS.

² Ibid.,

³ Conboy, 57.

⁴ SAIG.2562, 24 September 1962,

⁵ 29 September 1962,

Finally, the report took a stab at assessing the program's overall effect. It stipulated having only a few "hard facts" on which to base such an evaluation; one of these included intensified beach and coastal patrolling in the wake of the VULCAN operation. From this, it was "reasonable to assume that word went out to all DRV naval vessels and commercial ships to take precautions against frogmen and to be on the alert against strange junks and sampans." It could be "assumed further that a number of futile alerts have been sounded and more than one depth charge has been dropped" in response to a "strange sampan or an unusual noise." But the program had so far managed only two acts of sabotage, and the station thought its effectiveness more likely a function of the uncertainty about its scope engendered in Hanoi by the capture of several teams. Perhaps for lack of "hard facts," the report did not venture to guess whether this uncertainty had led the DRV to divert any significant amount of attention or resources from support to the southern insurgency.¹² []

Business as Usual []

Still waiting for authority to fly drop missions, the station took a look at teams on the ground. None of three singleton agents put ashore in May and June from CIA's little fleet of fishing junks had been heard from, but it seemed "premature to conclude" that any or all had been captured. They could have been used to supplement the mid-summer propaganda campaign with which Hanoi had exploited the seizure of Teams ATLAS and ECHO. The DRV's failure to include them, therefore, suggested that they had just gone to ground, for reasons yet unknown.¹³ []

The star reporter from North Vietnam, agent [] had filed 44 messages, from which three intelligence reports had been disseminated. The agent had once failed to use the prescribed safety signal, but when challenged came back, "apparently somewhat annoyed," with the correct response. The incident was not "considered an indication that he has fallen under enemy control," and planning was going forward to provide him a three-man sabotage team.¹⁴ []

The apparent progress of Teams TOURBILLON and EUROPA, like that of [] also gave rise in the station to a sense of having succeeded in a difficult assignment. Following a brief postponement after the signing of the Geneva Agreements, TOURBILLON reported having blown a bridge on 29 July. Saying it was back in its refuge, the team stated its readiness for a supply drop, which the station executed in late September. A supply flight had also gone to Team EUROPA, which reported finding all the parachuted bundles; another supply mission, with two agents trained in sabotage, was scheduled for it in November. Team CASTOR, its bona fides also still accepted, would again be ordered to exfiltrate through Laos once a long-delayed supply drop could be made.¹⁵ []

The station's practice of giving the benefit of the doubt to teams displaying occasional anomalous behavior did not apply, in the fall of 1962, to Teams DIDO and EROS. Agency people in Saigon saw both of these as enemy-controlled, but could not bring PSO to the same view. The Vietnamese impulse to look for innocuous explanations for security lapses meant that, in order to prevent disaffection among its liaison counterparts, CIA might have to authorize a supply drop, at least to EROS. But if it did so, the team would be informed of the DZ's location only after the fact.¹⁶ []

¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid.

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With regard to Team DIDO, the station took some satisfaction from indications that DRV security had taken the bait of a notional team that DIDO was to contact as it exfiltrated toward Laos. This contact having, of course, not been made, the ploy had run its course. Hanoi would now have to decide whether to cut radio contact with Saigon or let DIDO exfiltrate and try to use the team to penetrate PSO and the station. Meanwhile, the suspension of new operations, imposed when the Geneva Agreements on Laos came into force in October, remained in effect.¹⁷ []

Restrictive Policy, Ambitious Planning []

As 1962 ended and operations continued in the new year, Agency correspondence continued to display what in retrospect seem strangely inconsistent perceptions of the prospects for significant results in both airborne and seaborne operations against the DRV. When policy considerations, almost always in the context of the Geneva Agreements, prohibited operations near the Laotian border, Headquarters casually dismissed the "marginal benefits" these might have conferred. In late November, it recognized the imprudence of repeated attempts at supply drops when it prohibited a third to Team REMUS after two failures. But it persisted in urging the program's expansion, even reversing itself, in mid-January, to allow supply drops, urged by the station, both to REMUS and even—presumably as a sop to the Vietnamese—to suspect Teams DIDO and EROS.¹⁸ []

The station, in turn, responded with an expansion of the ambitious agenda it had proposed at the end of August 1962. Its proposal of January

1963 largely ignored the practical difficulties that had figured so prominently the previous August; there was just one passing reference to the shortage of drop zones that had up to that point bedeviled the airborne program. []

The station judged impractical only one of Washington's suggestions, the one for overland infiltration across the Demilitarized Zone. Otherwise, Saigon thought that Headquarters had presented a "realistic and factual presentation of [CIA] capability against [the] DRV under present operational conditions." It went on to identify 22 potential targets, including bridges and railroads, "coal producing, transporting, processing and loading facilities," power plants, petroleum storage facilities, and ferries. Finally, the entrance to Haiphong Channel would be closed, using commandos to sabotage the buoys that allowed ships to avoid going aground en route to the harbor.¹⁹ []

But most of this depended on an end to the suspension of flights through Laotian airspace imposed when the Geneva Agreements went into effect in October 1962. For the moment, not even those teams ready for launch could be dispatched, if insertion had to be made through Laos. For fear of demoralizing its liaison partners, CIA had not shared with them the policy basis for delaying such operations, but its reticence soon had the opposite of the desired effect. By January 1963, Col. Tung and SEPES chief Tran Kim Tuyen were chafing under what seemed to them arbitrary restraints. Some key Vietnamese personnel were looking for transfer back to their parent organizations in the military, and [] midway through his assignment as chief of external operations, warned that "stoppages

¹⁷ Ibid. [] The station may later have expressed some residual hope for DIDO and EROS, for Headquarters felt obliged, in late December, to put the burden on the field to supply the "clear indication" of their bona fides that would justify a drop to either of them. [] (See [] 26 December 1962, [])

¹⁸ [] 23 November 1962, [] 12 January 1963, [] The dispatch outlining Headquarters' suggestions has not been found. []

¹⁹ SAIG 4706, 8 January 1963, []

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and slowdowns" might induce the collapse of the entire program.²⁰ [redacted]

One exception to policy—its rationale probably the high priority attached to monitoring DRV compliance with the Agreements—involved Team TARZAN. The team was dropped in early January into the lower DRV panhandle, near Route 12, presumably from an aircraft that crossed from Laos. Trained as a sabotage team, TARZAN was instructed initially to report North Vietnamese road traffic across the border. In addition, the first SEPES-sponsored sabotage team, named LYRE, was put ashore from a junk on 30 December. But most of the inventory of teams trained and ready to go remained on hold. There were nine of these in January 1963, with 29 more in various stages of formation or training; new recruiting had been suspended.²¹ [redacted]

On the maritime side, some 50 candidates were to begin training at the program's Da Nang site in mid-January. Just two of the station's little fleet of fishing junks were judged capable of landing a team and its equipment on the DRV coast; two more of the same type were being fitted for team operations. [redacted] described his vessels as "slightly inferior to the ships used by Christopher Columbus...we are really hurting for a maritime delivery capability."²² [redacted]

The station and its partners were also hurting for a successful team insertion. Team LYRE had been put ashore from a junk at uninhabited Deo Ngang, where a gorge opened onto the sea about 25 kilometers north of the Swatow base attacked in the VULCAN operation. Four weeks later, in late January, the station fretted that the

team had yet to be heard from. It never would come up on the air, for it had been spotted almost immediately upon landing by an outpost on the coast. Five men were captured on the spot, and two others, fleeing south, were picked up within a few days. Better news came from Team TARZAN, now reporting from its vantage point over Route 12. It had promptly come up on the radio, and even though there were anomalies in the first three messages—procedural errors and the telltale preoccupation with the landing operations—it came up with the correct answer to a challenge question.²³ [redacted]

The first quarter of 1963 found the Agency continuing its attempt to balance two competing imperatives for its efforts against the DRV. First, reflecting growing evidence of the GVN's decline in the face of the Viet Cong insurgency, was expansion of the effort to distract Hanoi from its designs on annexing the South. Second, embodying Washington's determination to give the Geneva Agreements every chance to succeed, was the continuing moratorium on crossing the DRV border from Laotian airspace. In the background, affecting all planning, lurked the perpetual—though little-scrutinized—uncertainty about the status of teams in place, perhaps doubled, perhaps dead, perhaps working—if to little effect—as some reported they were doing.²⁴ [redacted]

The most dramatic evidence of growing Viet Cong military prowess came with the humiliating defeat of a numerically superior government force at Ap Bac, a hamlet in the Mekong Delta, in January 1963. The shock of this disaster, combined with increasingly aggressive communist moves in northeastern Laos against both RLG forces and anti-communist Neutralists,

²⁰ FVSA 14993, 30 January 1963. [redacted]

²¹ Ibid. [redacted]

²² Ibid. [redacted]

²³ Conboy, 58–59 [redacted] SAIG 5053, 24 January 1963. [redacted] FVSA 17604. [redacted] Tourison, 66–67, unaccountably has Team LYRE inserted by air. He also claims that two team members were killed resisting capture and the leader later executed. [redacted]

²⁴ For an account of the fraying of the Geneva Agreements, and the resulting relaxation of restrictions on covert operations in and from Laos, see the author's *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961–1973* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), Chapter 7. [redacted]

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began to reduce Washington's sensitivity to charges of violating the Geneva Agreements. The proscription on penetration of DRV air-space from Laos remained in effect. But the perceived need to take the war to the enemy was again operating to raise expectations of the covert program against the DRV. []

The pressure for results may also account at least in part for a recurrence of the perennial urge in Saigon to explain away indications of trouble with teams already on the ground. Commenting on RDF testing of agent radio traffic that placed team transmitters well away from their claimed locations, the station urged Headquarters not to overreact. Standard security measures were already testing team bona fides, and RDF testing did no more than to supplement these techniques. An "error of [a] few miles" in an RDF triangulation could actually give a false indication that a team had been doubled.²⁵ []

The station's description of its security precautions acknowledged, on the one hand, that the DRV would use the radio operator of any team it wanted to double. On the other hand, it appealed to favorable results of testing of a radio operator's identity—his "fist"—as one of three indicators of freedom from enemy control. The other two were the use of pre-determined danger signals and incorrect responses to challenge questions from the base. But both of these were subject to manipulation by DRV security once it had broken an operator's will to resist. The station thus seemed to be resorting to an act of faith to give its teams a clean bill of health; in late February 1963, it even suggested that the status of Team EROS, earlier written off as compromised, remained to be established.²⁶ []

Ambivalence at Headquarters []

Both Washington and the field had always harbored conflicted views of the value of agent—especially black—operations into the DRV. Having returned to Headquarters in mid-1962, Bob Myers ran FE Division's North Vietnam Task Force before becoming deputy chief when Bill Colby took over the division in early 1963. The debate continued, and Myers remembered persisting in his objections to Project [] Even if the thing were more successful than Headquarters had any reason to believe, he argued, there wasn't any sense in a program of covert pinpricks at a time of overt, if undeclared, warfare. But Colby's readiness to tolerate contrarian views was not matched by a willingness to change course, and his support for the program seemed unshakable.²⁷ []

At Headquarters, this ambivalence accommodated both the expansive planning mandated in January and a skeptical review of the program's results and prospects. Implementation of the planning began on 13 April 1963 with the insertion of six ethnic Tho agents onto high ground some 75 kilometers northeast of Hanoi. Their target: the railway running northeast from Hanoi into China.²⁸ []

While the station waited for the Tho agents—Team PEGASUS—to come up on the air, a Headquarters officer named [] was completing the survey of the program's results. Pouching the study to Saigon, Headquarters noted that the disadvantage of [] previous unfamiliarity with the program was "in part compensated [for] by the absence of any vested interest in the matter." The aim here was, presumably, to deter the station from protesting the study's carefully agnostic results. [] noted

²⁵ SAIG 5653, 27 February 1963, []

²⁶ Ibid. []

²⁷ Myers interview, []

²⁸ FVSW 7393, 12 April 1963, []

SAIG 6309, 28 March 1963, []

Conboy, 59 []

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that the priority given to intelligence collection in the effort's first year had yielded such disappointing results that the emphasis had been shifted to sabotage operations. Then, the restrictions resulting from the Geneva Agreements had prevented new insertions, and only two teams—TOURBILLON and VULCAN—had attacked a target.²⁹ [redacted]

Given the small number of operations, [redacted] hesitated to make categorical judgments about the program's accomplishments or future, although it was clear to him that results had "so far been rather unimpressive." Apparently concerned not to make adverse judgments that he could not definitively prove, [redacted] treated as viable all operational teams carried by the station. But he did a careful comparison of radio traffic from teams known to be or to have been under enemy control. He warned the station that a delayed first radio contact, [redacted]

[redacted] meant the prospect of "further trouble." Communications from doubled teams displayed other similarities, [redacted]

[redacted] In this context, the study noted the problem of doing something useful with a team known to be doubled. It could be [redacted]

[redacted] At best, [redacted] judgment, "the usefulness of this cat and mouse game is not immediately obvious."³⁰ [redacted]

Although he abstained from an explicit challenge to the team's viability, [redacted] noted that the RDF measurement of TOURBILLON's radio traffic indicated its transmitter—like that of doubled Team EROS—to be

located near Canton, in southeastern China. The readings were "as yet not definitive," but Headquarters noted that if TOURBILLON was bad, so in all probability was CASTOR, which had prepared its drop zone. Echoing the station's reservations about RDF accuracy, the study categorized it as only one of a battery of security checks which, even taken together, furnished "no sure answer to whether or not a team has been compromised."³¹ [redacted]

Almost as ambivalent as the station about the interpretation of inconclusive evidence, [redacted] was prepared to accept, at least tentatively, what still remained to be proved. The correct response to a challenge, after a series of anomalous messages, could be interpreted as meaning that a team at least "appear[ed]" to be "safe," and the study applied this standard to ITeam TARZAN, whose first three messages had raised concern. Only two months later did the team go off the air, and even then there was no way to know whether it had previously been under DRV control, or had suffered some sudden mishap.³² [redacted]

[redacted] treatment suggests that he made as favorable an assessment of reporting teams' security as the evidence allowed. If the choice was conscious, it may well have reflected a perception that division management would dismiss as biased a set of conclusions that emphasized indications of compromise. Such a perception might well have been valid, but it resulted in implicit acceptance of team bona fides until and unless definitive empirical evidence established the contrary.³³ [redacted]

This mindset led [redacted] to an uncritical evaluation of the late-1962 supply drop to Team CASTOR. He noted that the bundles hit

²⁹ FVSW 7393, [redacted] Conboy, 58, says that the North Vietnamese effort to use TOURBILLON for deception purposes included destroying the bridge that the team then reported having sabotaged. [redacted]

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. [redacted] No information supports the RDF indication of Canton as a radio base for DRV security. [redacted]

³² Ibid., FVSA 17604. [redacted]

³³ FVSW 7393. [redacted]

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North Vietnam: Black Insertions, 1963



the ground so far from the DZ that they were not found until the following week, but he did not mention the risk of their having been spotted, meanwhile, by villagers or security forces. Likewise, he seems entirely to have ignored the early communications anomalies that had—with good reason—cast doubt on several other teams, especially CASTOR. Like

other observers, both at Headquarters and in the field, he found nothing suspicious in the claimed survival of Team TOURBILLON even after it reported having lost a man in a firefight with DRV security forces.

took note of the paucity of information on team operations in the DRV. Of the 14 operations launched by early 1963, only VULCAN, with its dramatic dénouement, had been followed by a detailed report. Losses of aircraft had also engendered relatively complete reporting. But otherwise there was little to go on: "We have no recent analysis from the station on the causes of losses or successes." Consequently, the action demanded in the covering dispatch—it was released by FE Division Chief Colby—was confined to new reporting requirements. These included team composition at launch, analysis of failures, and the forwarding of numbered and dated translations of all team radio messages.

Staying With the Program

When Colby accepted as sufficient muted criticism and modest reporting requirements, he was, in his own words, "well aware that black entry operations against the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were found to be unfruitful." But in May 1963 he still saw "substantial differences in...FE denied areas" that included draconian limits on legal travel, the "difficulties of Caucasian access," and a "much more war-like relationship" between the parts of divided countries like Vietnam. These differences compounded the problem even as they reduced further the prospects for alternatives to the black entry technique. Colby was looking only at the absence of other approaches when he said that he had "continued to conduct a certain number of these black entry operations."³⁴

³⁴ William E. Colby, Memorandum to DDP, "Black Entry Operations Against FE Denied Areas—Cold War," 29 May 1963.

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Over the course of the next three months, as more teams disappeared into SRV jails, the weight of evidence overwhelmed even Bill Colby's native optimism. In early August, he wrote the DDP that "No intelligence of value has been, nor... is likely to be, obtained from such operations." The same applied to sabotage: "we have never been, nor in a cold war situation are we likely to be, able to conduct small team operations on a wide enough scale for [significant] cumulative results." Whether out of loyalty or out of fear, the populace could be expected to expose black entry teams to the communist authorities. Colby concluded that any potential in this technique lay in political and psychological operations; just how it would be realized he did not say.³⁵ [redacted]

There was nothing left to do but cut mounting losses by canceling Project [redacted] or at the very least suspending it until some breakthrough in tasking or techniques offered a real prospect of success. Colby did neither. Instead, he proceeded to deploy as many as possible of the 46 teams that, as of April 1963, were ready to parachute or infiltrate by sea into their intended hideouts in the North. Eighteen teams would be launched by air if "proper aircraft" were acquired, while 11 would go by sea; the means of insertion for the other 17 was still uncertain. What was not in doubt was the continued pursuit of the program.³⁶ [redacted]

It is hard to attribute the perpetuation of Project [redacted] to anything but bureaucratic inertia, coupled, perhaps, with a certain reluctance on Colby's part to accept the practical implications of his own admission of failure. Acting on this judgment would, moreover, have run counter to a can-do culture that insisted on the Clandestine Service's ability to do anything required of it. In any case, whatever the reasons for this gulf between perception and

action, it is clear that the only remaining uncertainties arose from purely technical considerations. [redacted]

Some of these considerations derived from the changing risk environment in DRV airspace and others from the relative merits of available aircraft. The DC-4 had the advantage of four engines, greater range and speed, and radar, while the twin-engine C-123 had a greater cargo capacity and electronic countermeasures (ECM) gear to foil radar-controlled anti-aircraft fire. It would also allow a drop to be made in one pass over the DZ, because men and supplies exited quickly through the rearward-facing ramp rather than taking turns at a door in the side. The greater experience of the DC-4 crews gave that aircraft the edge, for light-of-the-moon insertions, but as soon as DRV interceptor aircraft appeared on the scene, the C-123, with its ECM capability, and dark-of-the-moon operations would become standard.³⁷ [redacted]

Taking Off the Gloves [redacted]

Perhaps lulled by the defensive tone of [redacted] request in April, the station seems not to have taken very seriously Washington's desire for more reporting. Two weeks after inserting Team PEGASUS, also in mid-April, it finally answered a Headquarters query by summarizing the aircrew's description of the drop. The intervals between exits—four seconds from the last bundle to the first man, and two- to four-second intervals between men—suggested a dispersed landing and subsequent "difficulty [in] regrouping." As many as four men might have landed in trees, with an attendant increase in both recovery time and risk of injury. The "greatest concern" for the station was the possibility that the DZ had not been cleared before dawn. Nevertheless, it saw the "lack of radio contact

³⁵ William E. Colby, Memorandum to DDP, "Black Team Infiltration by Air and Sea Against FE Denied Areas—Cold War," 2 August 1963, [redacted]

³⁶ FVSW 7393, [redacted]

³⁷ Ibid; [redacted] 19 March 1963, [redacted]

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[as] not yet reason for concern," for experience had established that "no contact for [the] first three weeks [is] not abnormal."³⁸ []

Indeed, delayed initial contact had become almost the rule, and by 1963 there was ample reason to take this as a sign that the reporting team had been captured. In July, Hanoi confirmed that this had, in fact, been the fate of Team PEGASUS; its members were tried and sentenced to prison terms. But neither the team's silence nor subsequent news of its capture led the station to examine the reasons for its failure, or to explore the possibility that its silence had represented enemy control. Instead, it continued with the new round of insertions.³⁹ []

In May 1963, the Saigon Station conducted three overflights of the DRV. Only one resulted in insertion of a new team, when JASON parachuted into North Vietnam on the 14th. Two other flights had to be aborted, one because of bad weather at the DZ, and the other because the static line to which the ripcords of cargo chutes were attached tore away from a bulkhead as the bundles fell from the plane. Another flight, with supplies and two sabotage agents for Team EUROPA, was cancelled because of bad weather.⁴⁰ []

The aircrew carrying Team JASON reported, on return, that all chutes had opened. But the team did not come up on the air. The station's silence on this outcome matched its treatment of Team PEGASUS, and then of LYRE, whose capture Hanoi announced on 29 May.⁴¹ []

No after-action reporting, or at least none that survives, followed any of these developments. Had it been called to account at this point for its reticence, the station would likely have argued that the demands of an accelerated operations schedule precluded spending time on mere history. For as hostilities resumed in Laos and Ngo Dinh Diem struggled with massive Buddhist unrest in South Vietnam's cities, the case for bringing the war to North Vietnam became all the more compelling. The station now abandoned its insistence on using Laotian airspace. Entering the DRV from the Gulf of Tonkin, project aircraft continued deploying the reservoir of teams that had accumulated after the Geneva Agreements of mid-1962. []

During the first two weeks of June 1963, two DC-4s [] dropped seven teams into the DRV. Two of them landed on high ground overlooking the Red River valley and their target, the rail line running northwest from Hanoi into China. Another team was to hit bridges and an "elevated tramway" serving a coal mine north of Haiphong. Two more were supposed to hit bridges along coastal Route 1. The last two were directed at Routes 7 and 12, leading into Laos.⁴² []

Only one of the seven teams came up on the air. It did so 10 days after launch, reporting that it had landed some 10 kilometers from the intended DZ. But all members were safe, and all bundles recovered. The station challenged Team BELL, but, "probably because we have become too subtle" in formulating such queries, received no reply. But it had, in fact, been captured within three days of landing, and its

³⁸ SAIG 7013, 26 April 1963, [] "Headquarters does not feel that the reports requested either represent a useless increase in red tape or that they would impose an undue amount of extra work." []

³⁹ FVSA 17604, [] in the case of any single operation, the absence of a post-mortem might represent no more than the vagaries of the file retirement process. It is the near-total absence of station reviews of [] operational failures that suggests that the reporting gap on PEGASUS is no anomaly. []

⁴⁰ [], 7 June 1963, []

⁴¹ SAIG 7431, 15 May 1963, [] SAIG 7896, 30 May 1963, []

⁴² William E. Colby, Memorandum for Deputy Director (Plans), "Teams Infiltrated into North Vietnam," 14 July 1963, []

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radio operator coerced into full cooperation with DRV security.⁴³ []

Meanwhile, also in June, CIA attempted or completed a total of three supply drops to teams already on the ground. The first, judged successful, went to Teams CASTOR and TOURBILLON, operating in the same area in the northwest. Bad weather forced the second flight to turn back; it had carried an eighth new team in addition to supplies for Team EUROPA, long since under DRV control. Another try at delivering supplies and sabotage agents to EUROPA failed too, when the pilots could not find the DZ.⁴⁴ []

These moonlit airdrops alternated with dark-of-the-moon maritime operations. A slightly garbled station report indicates a June total of at least 10 maritime missions, aimed at inserting or supplying four teams, all of which failed to reach their targets. The reasons included bad weather, mechanical failure, and the unexpected presence of a North Vietnamese junk fleet at the site of one intended delivery.

[] maritime case officer at Da Nang, held out no hope of success as long as these operations relied for transportation on the small, slow fishing junks in service since the [] launch in April 1961. He intimated that the station was continuing its use of these junks only at Washington's insistence: it would "do all that is possible" with them, but warned Headquarters that it could "continue to expect only minimum results."⁴⁵ []

Minimum remained close to zero, as the 20 air and maritime missions conducted in June 1963 produced only two apparent successes. To reach even that modest success rate, case

officers and Headquarters managers had to continue dismissing the anomalous behavior of Teams CASTOR and TOURBILLON, presumed to be working together. But, as had become standard practice, rigorous CI analysis of teams in radio contact gave way to a search for technological and policy solutions to the difficulties facing the infiltrations of new teams, and support to those in place. []

And, in fact, there were, as we have seen, major obstacles in both the policy and technical areas. In mid-1963, the ban on overflying the DRV from Laos remained in effect, despite the declining fortunes of the Diem regime in Saigon and the resulting perceived need to distract Hanoi from its support of the insurgency. This restriction required all drop missions to defy the radar and anti-aircraft concentrated along the Gulf of Tonkin, and to forgo exploitation of what Headquarters called the "virtually undefended" border with Laos. The limited number of gaps in the coastal radar screen was forcing project aircraft to use the same few entry and exit points, and CIA expected the DRV soon to close even these loopholes in its defenses. Finally, entry from the sea deprived aircrews of the many reference points afforded by the mountainous terrain in the west, which also provided some defense against radar detection.⁴⁶ []

In the middle of 1963, the Agency seemed to harbor little hope of getting the moratorium lifted, for a Headquarters complaint about its deleterious effects was made only for the record. An information copy went to the designated liaison officer at the Department of State, but the memo was not addressed even to the chief of FE Division, its distribution being lim-

⁴³ Conboy, 59, 158 [] FVSA 17604; SAIG 9215, 12 July 1963; [] FVSA 16252, 1 August 1963; []

⁴⁴ [] 11 July 1963; []

⁴⁵ FVSA 16152, [] One of these teams, an ethnic Nung unit called DRAGON, finally made it ashore on 15 July. It then disappeared; the agents' beneficiaries were paid off in February 1964. (Conboy, 61).

⁴⁶ Blind memorandum, "Black Flights into North Vietnam and the Laos Overflight Restriction," 26 June 1963, []

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ited to the branch level. In any case, its rather timorous conclusion recommended merely that "the Laos overflight restriction be re-examined."⁴⁷ [redacted]

Better Aircraft but No Better Luck [redacted]

Logistical and technical problems were less intractable than those of policy, and efforts to remedy equipment deficiencies had begun to bear fruit in early 1963. In September 1962, 30 [redacted] airmen sponsored by CIA started training on the C-123 at Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina. In February 1963, five unmarked C-123s arrived [redacted]. Their crews, having finished the basic program in the United States, spent the next several months perfecting their techniques in low-level night flying and the use of the plane's ECM gear. The first operational deployment from South Vietnam took place on 2 July, with the insertion of Team GIANT at a DZ in the mountains west of the panhandle city of Vinh. The station and SEPES, which had supplied the agent personnel, waited for it to come up on the air, but it never did.⁴⁸ [redacted]

Meanwhile, with the [redacted] DC-4 crews reaching the end of their contract, the station decided to exploit their experience by dispatching that aircraft just once more, in a mission launched on 4 July. The plane carried one new team, PACKER, targeted at the same railway against which Team BELL was to have operated, and a two-man reinforcement party for Team EUROPA. Team PACKER's DZ was first on the flight plan, and the crew watched the agents floating down toward it. The DC-4 then proceeded toward EUROPA's DZ. It never returned to Saigon; judging by the absence of any reaction from Hanoi, Saigon concluded that it had not been shot down but had crashed into a mountainside on its low-altitude route to the

next drop. Meanwhile, as with Team GIANT, PACKER failed to come up on the air.⁴⁹ [redacted]

Two acts of faith, one in the bona fides of Team EUROPA and the other in the C-123's invulnerability to DRV air defenses, came within a whisker of producing disaster when the next supply and reinforcement mission to EUROPA took off on 10 August. The station, emboldened by a long series of missions with no mishap, had four months earlier declared that "careful planning and professional airmanship by flight crews can eliminate virtually all danger." But the North Vietnamese, apparently running out of patience with repeated overflights, had now moved 10 antiaircraft companies into the vicinity of the EUROPA DZ. Approaching the DZ, the supply pallets already lined up on the roller conveyor, the plane was suddenly buffeted by shells exploding on both sides. The crew and the new EUROPA agents fought to resecure the pallets so that the pilot could start evasive maneuvers. Meanwhile, the ECM gear worked well enough to stave off a direct hit.⁵⁰ [redacted]

The plane made it back to base, but according to one account, the captain was so traumatized by his brush with death that he took the next flight back [redacted]. His fellow pilots in Saigon, unwilling to accept his close call as mere coincidence, sent a back-channel message [redacted] to arrange a reconnaissance by a [redacted]. Over the EUROPA DZ, the instruments "went wild" with indications of at least four antiaircraft positions; in due course, this information reached the crews in Saigon. Meanwhile, Team EUROPA, claiming not to have heard the supply plane cross the DZ, had reestablished contact with the station. But the [redacted] had had enough; they refused further drops to it.⁵¹ [redacted]

⁴⁷ Ibid. [redacted]

⁴⁸ Conboy, 60, 64. [redacted]

⁴⁹ Conboy, 60-61. [redacted] 9 August 1963. [redacted]

⁵⁰ Conboy, 63-64. [redacted] SAIG 9232, 12 July 1963. [redacted]

⁵¹ Conboy, 65. [redacted]

FVSA 17604. [redacted]

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Instead, the pilots' commanding officer [redacted] complained to CIA about alleged "doubling of teams," which the station took as a reference to the EUROPA incident. The [redacted] may have chosen not to mention the overflight from [redacted] for the station's response did not address it. If [redacted] were right about EUROPA, the station said, the team had been "cleverly doubled," for it had rejected a proposed second supply mission, claiming inadequate security at the DZ. CIA therefore remained reluctant to write the team off: EUROPA, it argued, was "not necessarily doubled." On the other hand, perhaps it was, and the station did not propose to tempt fate. It had "no plans [to] resupply again at this time."⁵² [redacted]

Despite inferior navigational equipment on the C-123—in this respect, the DC-4 was better—its survival of the mid-August EUROPA drop proved the wisdom of the change of aircraft. The station recognized the C-123's limitations but, before turning the program over to MACV in early 1964, seems never to have tried to obtain the superior C-130, a four-engine prop-jet with sophisticated electronic equipment. [redacted] subsequent rationale for this apparent passivity noted that plausible denial would have failed with the C-130, then flown only by the US Air Force; he did not note that the same applied to the C-123.⁵³ [redacted]

Improving the Technology [redacted]

Agency management had recognized the new requirements in maritime as well as air transportation support imposed by the sabotage mission adopted in 1962. The search for a suitable replacement for what [redacted] called his "seven prehistoric junks" found an interim solution in a civilian craft called the Swift. Used to service oil drilling platforms in the Gulf of Mexico, it was big enough—50 feet long—and fast enough—up to 30 knots—to handle team insertions and supply missions. Modified with bigger engines and extra fuel tanks, and fitted with machine guns, rocket launchers, and electronics, it would make up in performance what it lacked in deniability. The DDCI approved the purchase of three Swifts in mid-November 1962.⁵⁴ [redacted]

According to William Colby, the Swift represented a stopgap measure, adopted partly on a competitive basis, to accelerate the pace of CIA operations at a time when the US Navy was preparing its own covert capability. Meanwhile, both the Agency and the Navy were acquiring the Norwegian-built Nasty, an 80-foot patrol boat whose two diesel engines drove it at speeds over 40 knots. In early 1963, CIA turned over its two newly acquired Nastys to the Navy for testing. Much more complex than the Swift, the Nasty required more sophisticated repair facilities that were to be built and staffed by Navy personnel detailed to CIA's base at Da Nang.⁵⁵ [redacted]

⁵² [redacted] Conboy, in an unsourced passage, says that CIA insisted on continuing to treat the team as viable. In his view, this decision constituted a "stunning underestimation of the North Vietnamese security services and a blatant disregard for the telltale signs of compromise...." In fact, the station may well finally have begun to treat EUROPA as suspect, for in December 1963 it instructed the team to exfiltrate through Laos; such orders had become a standard way of testing suspect teams. [redacted] See FVSA 17604. [redacted]

⁵³ [redacted] Clandestine Services Historical Paper 36, "Operational Program Against North Vietnam, 1960-1964," 36-37, March 1966, CIA History Staff (hereafter CSHP 36). [redacted] What might have been a rich source of fact and even interpretation of the North Vietnam program is, in fact, a protracted complaint about difficult operating conditions and about the elements that the author saw as having abdicated, to one degree or another, their responsibility to help him make the program work. These included policymakers, other CIA field stations, the author's predecessor in Saigon, Saigon Station management, and Headquarters. No individual operations are identified. An appendix by Da Nang maritime case officer [redacted] adopts a similar tone. [redacted]

⁵⁴ Ibid.; [redacted] Conboy, 70-71; draft memorandum for the DCI, "Request for Authority to Initiate Steps to Obtain Certain Vessels and Personnel Needed for Augmented Maritime Operations into North Vietnam," 5 July 1963, [redacted]

⁵⁵ Conboy, 67-70. The Navy unaccountably gave wide publicity to Nastys in US service when it sent one of the CIA's two boats up Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River to Washington, where the Secretary of the Navy and other Navy brass boarded for a half-hour's demonstration that was covered in the *Washington Post*. [redacted]

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U. S. Navy Photo

Faded newspaper clipping of patrol boat of the type intended for sabotage operations in North Vietnam. [redacted]

With an acceptable aircraft in the inventory and the Swifts and Nastys on the way, the Agency used the summer of 1963 to experiment with various technological fixes to the problem of inserting and supplying teams within striking distance of their targets. The scarcity of suitable drop zones, in particular, sparked efforts to deliver men and materiel with greater precision, in more difficult terrain, and in areas posing greater danger to the program's aircraft. Saigon wanted devices permitting low-altitude opening of chutes for supply bundles dropped from high altitude. It also asked for beacons, to be attached to cargo bundles, that could be

located with a small, standard radio receiver. Meanwhile, [redacted] an Agency proprietary at Marana, Arizona, was working on impact opening devices and on new "control lines" to drop parachutists and 500-pound bundles into stands of timber.⁵⁶ [redacted]

The station was also exploring using homing pigeons to establish an "immediate commo channel until [a] newly infiltrated team has opportunity [to] establish [a] safe area and start use [of] radio commo." A bird carrying a prepared warning message, released at the first sign of trouble, would foil any DRV effort to double a captured team. Meanwhile, the station would begin sending in two radios with each team, one in a supply bundle and a second whose components would be divided among team members.⁵⁷ [redacted]

The station proposed another refinement, in the form of vacuum packing of blankets and clothing, in order to reduce their volume and, therefore, the size of cargo bundles. On the tactical side, it thought to aggravate DRV worries about the scale of operations with deception ploys that included [redacted]

⁵⁶ SAIG 9086, 8 July 1963, and [redacted] SAIG 9842, 8 August 1963, [redacted]

⁵⁷ FVSA 16148, 8 July 1963, [redacted] SAIG 9322, 16 July 1963, [redacted]

⁵⁸ SAIG 9380, 19 July 1963, and SAIG 1309, 30 September 1963, [redacted]
[redacted] FVSA 16184, 16 July 1963, [redacted] With the exception of reporting on the [redacted] ploy, the record says nothing about the implementation of these ideas. [redacted]

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A Game Not Worth the Candle

The original intelligence mission of 1961, expanded that year to include sabotage, now included inciting popular resistance among the DRV's ethnic minorities. In May 1963, Headquarters sent Herbert Weisshart, a covert political action specialist, to Saigon to set up a notional resistance movement. Invoking Vietnamese mythology, it was to be called the Sacred Sword Patriots' League (SSPL). It would provide an ostensible sponsor for real teams on the ground and, if all went well, would provoke paranoia in the DRV hierarchy. The first team trained for this multiple mission included ethnic Hmong and Thai. Team EASY parachuted into the DRV, near the Laotian border, on 11 August 1963, and soon came up on the air.⁵⁹

Team SWAN had the same training and a similar multiple mission to spread SSPL leaflets

while collecting intelligence and hitting sabotage targets. But it had much less luck. Jumping on 4 September into the area of Cao Bang, in the northern reaches of the DRV, it was promptly seized by security elements. All the station knew, for the moment, was that it failed to come up on the air.⁶⁰

The same period brought word of what the station took to be welcome results of operations in late August. A team inserted in the northern DRV reported having laid explosives on the Hanoi-Lao Kay railway, after which it heard the sound of an approaching train, followed by a gigantic explosion, then silence. This team, not identified in the station's report, has to have been BELL, whose capture and doubling by DRV security was not yet suspected. Another team, also unidentified in the report, announced having destroyed a bridge.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Conboy, 75-76.

⁶⁰ Conboy, 80; SAIG T499, 8 October 1963, EVSA 17604.

⁶¹ SAIG 1499 If there was spot reporting at the time of these activities, it has not survived.

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Chapter Four: Moving Toward Military Management

The reported sabotage operations, modest even if authentic, came near the end of a tortuous process designed to comply with the Kennedy administration's June 1961 mandate to put the Pentagon in charge of most unconventional warfare. When complete, the process would transfer to Defense the entire program of air- and seaborne team operations against the DRV, as well as most of the unconventional warfare activity in South Vietnam.

These negotiations were taking place in an atmosphere of rising doubt, in CIA, about the capacity of its program to affect North Vietnamese behavior in the South. Bill Colby's deputy in FE Division, Bob Myers, was still arguing that the "totality of communist control" absolutely precluded, in the Sino-Soviet bloc, the kind of resistance operations conducted in Axis-occupied countries during World War II. Indeed, the so-called Jedburgh operations run by OSS had themselves, in Myers's opinion, enjoyed much less success than postwar myth gave them credit for.¹

The September guidance noted the inability of small sabotage teams to hit targets of any importance. To compensate for this, the station should prepare its teams for "political action and [psychological warfare] missions," which would include recruitment among the local population for both paramilitary and psychological harassment. Presented as if it were new—earlier work on the SSPL got no mention—this guidance did not specify just what form the new activity should take. Indeed, the cable has a rather pro forma cast, almost as if the

author—FE Division officer —was writing what he'd been told to write, and doing so with little conviction. In the event, both of the teams Headquarters nominated for this mission—BULL and RUBY—were captured on landing, one in October and the other in December.²

Meanwhile, the bureaucratic trend was running in the other direction. Despite having no guidance from the Pentagon, MACV had expressed what the station called a "general willingness" to take over the station's programs, on a phased basis and with CIA footing the bill until 1 July 1964. But it wanted to keep some CIA specialists for the "medium to long term." To this the station objected that Washington now wanted a "more bold and aggressive posture"; it implied that it expected MACV to forgo any further effort at cover or deniability.³

The question of detailing Agency personnel to a MACV-run program did not, it seems, come up at the conference on Vietnam sponsored by Secretary McNamara at Honolulu on 20 November 1963. At issue was the more basic question of the potential of team operations into the DRV. According to Bill Colby's later account, DCI John McCone assigned him to present the Agency's views to McNamara and the assembled military. Echoing the doubts he'd expressed to the DDP in August, Colby told them that most of the teams had been captured or killed. "It isn't working, and it won't work any better with the military in charge." Left to its own devices, the Agency would shut the program down by 1965, turning instead to psychological operations—including black radio and leaflet drops—"infiltrating ideas, rather than agents and explosives."⁴

¹ Conboy, 82-83; Myers interview; 9 September 1963,

² FVSA 17604,

³ SAIG 1747, 17 October 1963,

⁴ Conboy, 83-84,

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whatever the particular influences on his thinking, had not the imperative to contribute to the war effort ruled out such a drastic move.⁵

In any case, McNamara took none of these considerations into account. His reaction suggested to Colby a belief that, if the effort had failed, up to that point, it was just a matter of the Agency's being too small to run it. The Pentagon was already prepared with a plan, one that—given the military's disdain for the Agency's efforts—took the ironic approach of echoing nearly everything that the Saigon Station was already doing. Drafted for the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, the concept went to CINCPAC for expansion into what became MACV's Operational Plan (Oplan) 34-63.⁶

However unenthusiastic about devoting resources to a failed activity—one about to be run, furthermore, by somebody else—CIA management appears to have worked to give the military the benefit of its experience. Writing from Saigon in late December, Bill Colby told his people at Headquarters to do a study of recorded DRV and Chinese radar pickups of past CIA overflights, both coastal and from Laos. McNamara, whom he had accompanied to Vietnam, had just asked for it, and Colby wanted it ready upon their imminent return to Washington.⁷

A Valedictory Surge

Colby later attributed his change of heart to Bob Myers's persistent critique of the program. He may—indeed ought—to have been influenced also by a record of failure that, by the most optimistic measure, was nearly unbroken. As Myers later speculated, Colby might have canceled the program forthwith,

With transfer of management responsibility imminent, the Saigon Station wanted its stewardship to end with a bang, both literally and figuratively. In mid-October, it proposed two maritime operations. A Swift would carry a sabotage team to a coastal target. Just what this was is not recorded, but it was so difficult to

⁵ Tourison, 100; Myers interview.

⁶ Conboy, 83-84.

⁷ SAIG 3240, 20 December 1963.

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reach that the station calculated a round trip to it of some nine hours from the offshore launching point. Headquarters thought even nine hours too optimistic an estimate, and disapproved the operation as simply too risky. The second operation appears also to have been canceled, for neither the official record nor postwar accounts by captured agents mention it further.⁸ []

Meanwhile, unaccountably using one of the much-maligned junks, the station and its PSO counterparts launched what appears to have been the last singleton agent insertion before MACV took over management of the US role. Agent [] sailed north on 27 October 1963. At the launch point, not far from Dong Hoi, five of the 10-man crew paddled him to the beach in a rubber boat. The party then failed to return to the junk, and after two-and-a-half hours of waiting, its captain headed south in order to clear DRV waters before daylight. Two days later, the rubber boat and its five crewmen also reached South Vietnamese waters, somehow having eluded DRV patrols after landing the agent. Agent [] himself disappeared, and the station never knew whether he'd been captured or had simply gone to ground, somehow evading communist security.⁹ []

The last CIA-sponsored maritime sabotage initiative of 1963 reprised the VULCAN operation of 1962 against the North Vietnamese naval base at Quang Khe. A Swift, crewed by newly-hired [] mercenaries, brought the team to the launch point, from which Team NEPTUNE proceeded by rubber boat. A brilliant rotating light at the mouth of the river revealed two sampans, whose occupants challenged the team. The agents saw no way around the sampans, anchored in mid-stream,

and fled back to the Swift. Another try on 23 December met a similar fate.¹⁰ []

This effort inaugurated a cycle of new operational ploys that alternated with public trials of captured teams. On the 24th, Hanoi announced the trial of "another group of US-puppet spy commandos, the tenth since June this year." The six agents were sentenced to terms ranging from five to 16 years. Three weeks later, on 14 January, two Swifts, again manned by [] mercenaries, headed north. Team ZEUS would attack a target near Dong Hoi, while Team CHARON headed another 18 kilometers north to take out the Ron River ferry that served coastal Route 1.¹¹ []

The simpler of the two operations had the better success. Whether it was a desalinization plant, as survivors recalled, or a "Dong Hoi security installation," as reported by the station, it would be hit by rockets fired from the beach, and the hazards of underwater swimming would be avoided. A rubber boat took Team ZEUS ashore, where it succeeded in placing its package of six 3.5in rockets, timed for delayed firing. Having pointed the device as best it could, the team returned to the Swift. The station evaluated its effort as "probably successful."¹² []

Team CHARON never reached its target. Delayed by the [] captain's evasive maneuvers around a North Vietnamese vessel, it arrived an hour late off the mouth of the Ron River. Like the agents of Team ZEUS, its two pairs of swimmers left the Swift in a rubber boat. Leaving the boat at the mouth of the Ron River, two of the frogmen started upstream along the north bank while the other two proceeded along the south. One pair soon encountered a junk, and promptly did an

⁸ SAIG 1776, 17 October 1963, [] 5 December 1963, []

⁹ SAIG 2143, 2 November 1963, []

¹⁰ FVSA 16907, 24 December 1963, []

¹¹ Conboy, 72-73. The station's report says ZEUS was to hit a "Dong Hoi security installation," not further described. []

¹² Ibid; SAIG 3823, 16 January 1964, []

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about-face back to the rubber boat. There they waited in vain for the other two, and finally returned to the Swift. With only half his team back on board, the skipper was about to give up and return to Da Nang when he saw a flashlight blinking near shore. Braving the risk of discovery, he ran the Swift into the shallows, rescued the panicked frogmen, and headed out to sea.¹³ []

Tit for tat continued on 28 January, when Hanoi sentenced the six-man crew of a boat, sent to cache supplies for doubled Team [] to terms ranging from four to 15 years.¹⁴ []

Under Military Control []

That portion of official Washington devoted to covert operations against the DRV spent the month of January 1964 debating the program's organizational and command arrangements. Despite the Pentagon's two-year lobbying campaign for a greater role in these operations, it had at the turn of the year not formally asked for the lead role in Implementing Oplan 34A-64. The final version of that document, worked out by MACV and the Saigon Station, had reached Washington with no recommendation about future command relationships. Bill Colby looked at the endless quarrelling between State and Defense over the appropriate targets for an expanded program and concluded that CIA would be better off if it merely supported team operations while it continued to run covert psychological warfare. He urged this position on DCI McCone, who—judging by the outcome—adopted it in his final negotiations with the Department of Defense.¹⁵ []

On 1 February 1964, the management of irregular warfare operations against the DRV

moved from CIA to the Department of Defense. To run them, MACV created the Special Operations Group (MACSOG), to be commanded by Col. Clyde Russell. Despite the perceived inadequacy of the CIA effort, the military wanted to continue running any teams still on the ground, and it took over five CIA-supported teams the station thought had evaded capture. In fact, all five were under DRV control, and the military was in effect starting from scratch.¹⁶ []

The pressure for results that greeted Col. Russell was even more intense than that which had earlier encouraged CIA operators to short-change the counterintelligence side of the program. This resulted not merely from the policymakers' discontent with the CIA effort, but from the ominous decay of the GVN hold on the South Vietnamese countryside in the wake of President Diem's assassination. If Saigon's generals were failing to mobilize their people, something serious would have to be done to distract the DRV from its support of the insurgency. []

Unfortunately for Col. Russell, his new office was understaffed, and neither he nor any of his few men had experience in covert operations. These deficiencies were to be ameliorated, in the short term, by detailing to Russell some of the station officers who had been running the program. In the new organization, each unit had a chief from one service and a deputy from the other. Herb Weisshart became chief of the psyops sections, with an Army deputy; by one account, he also served as Russell's deputy. [] the station's maritime operations officer in Saigon, found himself deputy to the Navy commander now in charge of the equivalent section in MACSOG.¹⁷ []

¹³ Conboy, 73. []

¹⁴ William E. Colby, Memorandum for the DCI, "Kruslak Committee Paper on North Vietnam Operations," 4 January 1964, []

¹⁶ Tourison, 113; Conboy, 158, 197, 202; [] FVSA 17604. []

¹⁷ Shulz, 42-43 [] SAIG 4433, 12 February 1964, []

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It would appear that of the CIA officers detailed to the project, only Weisshart, running psyops, exercised any managerial authority. [redacted] remembered being called upon only for logistical support and for help in dealing with the Vietnamese. He could offer operational advice, but his Navy counterpart could and did ignore it, despite their cordial personal relationship. [redacted] was not surprised, given that the military saw their job as succeeding where CIA had already essentially failed.¹⁸ [redacted]

The inexperience of MACSOG's military contingent and the uncritical attachment of station officers to the operational status quo militated against a rigorous evaluation of techniques and operational resources. The official records and the tales told by survivors suggest a wide range of causes to suspect that these teams might be doubled. Team TOURBILLON, as we know, had provoked considerable suspicion before its responses to radio challenges soothed CIA and PSO into thinking that all was well. At the other end of the scale was REMUS, whose DRV handlers played a flawless game to convince Saigon of the team's viability. When in late 1963, for example, the team was ordered to mine a road near Dien Bien Phu, the North Vietnamese proceeded to block traffic with a simulated attack. Later, with the team under MACSOG management, the DRV responded to Saigon's demand for sabotage of a bridge by creating or simulating visible cracks in the structure for the benefit of US aerial reconnaissance.¹⁹ [redacted]

Hanoi's painstaking deception operations and the lust for results in Washington and Saigon combined to perpetuate the familiar operational routine. In February and March, the Da

Nang base, at least nominally under MACSOG control, tried twice more to hit the Swatows tied up at the Quang Khe naval base. Whatever the impetus for these raids—one account attributes it to the residual CIA staff at Da Nang—they employed the same tactics used against the same targets in 1962 and 1963. Nothing went right. A sudden wind capsized a rubber boat, Swatows were not berthed as expected, and foot patrols appeared along the shore. The frogmen in the February attempt succeeded at least in getting back to the Swift, but the four swimmers involved in the March foray all wound up in captivity.²⁰ [redacted]

Following the March attack, CIA in Saigon summarized for Headquarters what it called MACSOG Da Nang's "speculative comments" on the results. "Everything went very close to plan." Although all four swimmers had been lost, there remained a "good possibility" that the mission had succeeded. Two more operations in March 1964 reflected this resolutely positive spirit, as MACSOG targeted bridges well north of Quang Khe. Both of these raids failed, each with the loss of two swimmers.²¹ [redacted]

In April and May, Hanoi's Vietnam Press Agency announced the capture and trial of Teams RUBY and BULL, dropped into the North in late 1963. These operations had, of course, preceded MACV's assumption of command over penetrations operations into the DRV, and the revelation of their fate did nothing to deter new efforts. Indeed, aided by the arrival of the Nasty patrol boats newly refitted at Subic Bay in the Philippines, MACSOG accelerated its planning for more, and more ambitious, operations.²² [redacted]

¹⁸ Shulz, 43; [redacted] interview. [redacted]

¹⁹ Conboy, 97. [redacted]

²⁰ Conboy, 101-5. [redacted]

²¹ SAIG 5127, 13 March 1964. [redacted] Conboy, 106-8. [redacted]

²² Robert J. Myers, Memorandum for the DDP, "FBIS Squib on the Capture of Seven Commando Spies," 8 April 1964. [redacted]

[redacted] FBIS transcript of [redacted]

~~SECRET//MR~~**An Uneasy Partnership**

Despite cordial relationships with CIA at the working level, the military rightly sensed an Agency reluctance either to invest people in an advisory capacity or to leave the psywar element, being masterminded by Herbert Weishart, even nominally under MACV direction. As of early June 1964, Bill Colby was proposing to "withdraw the CIA complement from joint operations with [MACSOG] against North Vietnam." The military side would be left entirely to MACV, while the Agency ran a "unilateral ... political and psychological program." And in fact, according to a study done for the Pentagon, CIA did finally decline to assign a senior officer as permanent deputy to the MACSOG commander; instead, it would detail a relatively junior man with the vague title of "special assistant."²³

The Pentagon persisted in its demands for more Agency support, and succeeded in getting the attention at least of the DDCI. Only four weeks after Colby urged withdrawal, DDCI Carter asked the DDP to assure him and the DCI that the Agency was doing "everything it can and should to render maximum support and assistance" to MACSOG. How much CIA could or ought to do remained a matter of debate, and the military seems to have concluded that the Agency's help was half-hearted, at best. Its disappointment with the level of Agency support may have arisen in part from surprise that CIA had turned over so little in the way of going operations. Bob Myers thought that MACSOG had indulged a paranoid sense that CIA was holding out on the military, keeping its best operations for itself.²⁴

The military's continual appeals for Agency expertise suggest some self-doubt about

MACSOG's ability to succeed where the civilians had failed. What expertise the civilians actually had to offer is a different question, for the station remained in the defensive crouch that had always marked its assessments of the program's security and results. In mid-July 1964, when Headquarters asked for a security review, the station insisted that Team TOURBILLON and a reinforcement element—Team COOTS—dropped to it in May were still "free and uncontrolled in our best judgment." For one thing, the station had independent confirmation of some team reporting. And if the team were controlled, the DRV had abdicated an opportunity to shoot down the plane that supplied the team in May. For the station, this reinforced the absence of any positive "indications of capture or control." The possibility that all three indicators represented merely a well-run communist deception operation was not addressed, even to dismiss it.²⁵

With One Hand Tied

The disagreements between State and the Pentagon that Bill Colby cited in his staffing recommendation to the DCI implicitly recognized a paradox that had afflicted the decision-making process from the beginning. As the Saigon Station had theorized early on, Hanoi might conceivably be intimidated by penetrations of its borders into scaling back its support of the Viet Cong insurgency. On the other hand—and more likely—it might react in just the opposite way, eliminating the nuisance by going to its source with an accelerated campaign to absorb the South.²⁶

As long as success was measured in pinpricks—even the claimed accomplishments of doubled teams like TOURBILLON and

²³ William E. Colby, Memorandum, "Saigon Station," 3 June 1964, Conboy, 95, cites a study done for the Pentagon in 1980 by the BDM Corporation,

²⁴ Gen. Marshall S. Carter, Memorandum for the DDP, "Operations Under 34-A Plan in SVN," 30 June 1964,

²⁵ SAIG 7469, 14 July 1964,

²⁶ FVSA 13960 Schultz, 39-40,

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REMUS were nothing more—the risks were manageable. As the number and size of operations rose, under military management, the risk-benefit calculation would become more delicate.

In particular, two of the proposed programs might call into play the law of unintended—and unwelcome—consequences. As the station had observed as early as mid-1962, the stimulation of resistance activity in the DRV could, at least in theory, lead to a reprise of the Hungarian revolution of 1956. In that case, the West had felt compelled to stand aside, watching the repression of a movement its propaganda had helped to incite. The same outcome could be expected in North Vietnam, whose communist regime would react with draconian measures and might even, in extremis, invite Chinese intervention. In such an eventuality, success would have resulted in a massively larger war.²⁷

Less catastrophic but still unacceptable was the possible effect of a new MACSOG initiative to challenge communist exploitation of Hanoi's supply route to South Vietnam with covert cross-border operations into Laos. To the policymakers, the hypothetical tactical benefit of ambushes on the Ho Chi Minh Trail had to be weighed against the need to preserve the Geneva Agreements, with their guarantee of a Laos at least nominally neutral. Even the covert deployment of American troops into Laos from Vietnam would, therefore, always be weighed against the risk of provoking either a massive DRV invasion of Laos or the collapse of the officially neutral Laotian government.²⁸

This tension between external strategic considerations and the need to reverse communist gains in South Vietnam would afflict military management of the program for the rest of the

war. The difference between the CIA's program and the one undertaken by the military was essentially one of scale. It therefore aggravated, in the eyes of Washington policymakers, a problem that until 1964 had been more hypothetical than practical.

The escalation of the war that began with the near-simultaneous launching of the aerial bombing campaign against the DRV and the deployment into the South of US ground forces reflected declining administration sensitivities about provoking the Chinese. But it did not by any means produce a new, anything goes, approach to ground operations on North Vietnamese soil. In addition, the insertion of agent teams under MACSOG auspices proceeded under much the same kind of inconstant mission guidance that had governed the CIA effort, and sabotage and resistance briefly gave way again to intelligence reporting in 1965.²⁹

The effect of policy restrictions was intensified by the DRV's competence at ferreting out attempted insertions. Hanoi's growing familiarity with the American operational routine offset improvements like the Nasty, replacing the Swift, and the four-engine C-130, supplementing the C-123. Employing the same techniques under comparable circumstances, MACSOG was, therefore, rewarded with no more success than CIA had enjoyed. Suspicious behavior by various teams prompted one MACSOG commander, Col. John Singlaub, to commission a thorough review of the entire stable's operational security.³⁰

The files were not voluminous: four years after assuming control under the SWITCHBACK rubric, MACSOG had radio contact with just seven penetrations, three of them— TOURBILLON, and EASY—inherited from

²⁷ FVSA 13960.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Conboy, Chapter 14.

³⁰ Ibid., Chapter 20.

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CIA. Singlaub's study, done in April 1968, gave a clean bill of health only to Team EASY, but a subsequent joint review by MACV intelligence and CIA concluded that it, too, was bad. Now disabused of the prospects for team insertions, MACSOG then adopted, on a much more mas-

sive scale, Bill Colby's psychological/political concept. Emphasizing deception operations, it followed the effort that Herb Weisshart had begun to implement in 1963, under CIA auspices, and then pursued on behalf of MACSOG.³¹

³¹ Ibid., Chapter 21.

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Chapter Five: "Just Shoot Them"

Despite the reservations entertained by different managers at different times, the Agency persisted into January 1964 with black entry operations against the DRV. At that point, it had inserted 28 resident teams by air or sea, and eight singleton agents, some by sea and others overland. Of these, the station thought five—four air-dropped teams and [] believed to have recruited his own team—worthy of transfer to MACSOG. The intelligence and covert action achievements of these five had been insignificant, and the program's managers sometimes invoked their very survival—as the station perceived it—to justify the effort, risk, and expense.¹ []

Why, then, did CIA decide to launch some 36 operations, persevering for almost three years, despite heavy losses, for results that barely qualified as negligible? Why did it go on to cooperate with MACSOG, even as the losses mounted? And why did it then so readily (comparatively speaking) declare the Laotian commando raider program an irredeemable failure? []

The short, easy answer—and one with a good deal of force—is that CIA had to do something to respond, first to the original Kennedy mandate in the spring of 1961, and then to pressures that increased in proportion to the decline of South Vietnamese fortunes in 1963. A presidential order is not lightly ignored, or even questioned, especially when it is driven by frustration and anxiety, and both these emotions affected US policymaking on Vietnam from start to finish. []

The fact remains that, before the DRV operations were even considered, independent-minded observers had been pointing out the universal failure of efforts to establish black resident teams in Leninist states. In 1959, at a conference of his FE Division counterparts, [] Peter Sichel had derided the practice as a "complete waste of time. We may as well just shoot them." As we have seen, Robert Myers shared that view. His objections to the DRV insertion program while he served as Colby's deputy may well have influenced his chief's stated intention, in November 1963, gradually to abandon the effort in favor of psychological operations. The dispiriting history of black teams was not, furthermore, unknown to the Saigon Station. As early as 1962, inviting Headquarters to judge the cost/benefit ratio, it suggested a look at the record of similar operations in China and North Korea.² []

Furthermore, it was not always a given that the Agency would simply salute and march off a cliff simply because "higher authority" wanted something. CIA was perfectly capable of speaking truth to power, as two examples from the Vietnam war attest. The Johnson administration had wanted to believe that aerial bombing of the North would shatter, or at least dampen, the DRV's will to annex the South by force. The Agency categorically rejected this. It predicted that bombing would fail, that no cost it could inflict on Hanoi would be likely to win Saigon a reprieve.³ []

On the operational side, too, the Agency had demonstrated the courage of a firm conviction. Like John Kennedy before them, President Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger wanted direct action against the DRV. When peace negotiations with Hanoi dictated suspensions of aerial bombing, they

¹ FVSA 17604. []

² Conboy, 82, citing Evan Thomas's CIA-authorized book *The Very Best Men*, 187 [] FVSA 14118. []

³ Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 49-52. Analysts at other agencies shared this judgment, which was first expressed to the Johnson administration in a study done in March 1964. []

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demanding covert action to keep Hanoi mindful that intervention in the South came at a price. Accordingly, they wanted CIA first to harass and then—after a March 1970 coup in Cambodia cut the communists' maritime supply route to South Vietnam—help to interdict the traffic entering the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴ []

For two years, from February 1970 to April 1972, CIA staged hit-and-run operations from Laos against military targets in the DRV. Except for their use of air rather than sea transportation, they resembled the raids conducted by Team VULCAN in 1962. They inflicted somewhat more damage, and with fewer casualties, but costs remained dauntingly high. And the strategic effect of the Laos-based program, like that of Saigon's teams, was scarcely perceptible. The main difference lay in management's reaction to meager results: in the spring of 1972, after months of working-level grumbling made its way to the 7th floor, DCI Richard Helms told Kissinger that CIA saw no point in continuing. []

When they threw in the towel on the so-called Commando Raider operations, Helms and his subordinates demonstrated a readiness to acknowledge failure that was conspicuously lacking in the first three years of the team operations out of South Vietnam. And having done so, they canceled the program. In Saigon, by contrast, the effort continued for more than five years after Colby's admission of its failure, almost a year of that period while it was still under CIA management. []

It is true that circumstances differed in one important respect. For Saigon, initially ambiguous signs of trouble allowed hopes that at least some of its teams were still secure. Commando Raiders, by contrast—like the VULCAN raiders—either reached their target or they didn't. There might be some doubt as to whether their ordnance actually detonated,

and if it did whether it was on target, but there were not the lingering uncertainties about agent bona fides. Nevertheless, it remains that even in hit-and-run raids like VULCAN and MACSOG's first such venture, similar to the later Commando Raiders, one sees a wishful optimism about results that contrasts sharply with the hard-headed skepticism that Agency managers brought to the Laotian project. []

A similar phenomenon appears in the self-evaluations that dotted the course of the program. As it happened, first Saigon, then Headquarters, displayed more doubts about the program in the early days, when evidence of compromise was still fragmentary, than either of them did as signs of trouble accumulated. Later, even when Hanoi began announcing the seizure of one team after another, Washington shrugged off the occasional access of doubt and joined the field in looking at the bright side when it came to evaluating those teams still reporting. Not until mid-1963, as already noted, did Bill Colby declare the experiment unsuccessful, and even then, he proposed to continue it until 1965. []

The vocal objections of contemporary critics establish that, in pursuing black team insertions into the DRV, the Agency had reason to know the length of the odds against success. The open skeptics were in the minority, certainly, but they were uninhibited about urging their view on their action-oriented superiors. And even those at the working level who dutifully concentrated on making the effort succeed did so with at least occasional twinges of doubt. As we have seen in the artful correspondence from [] in August 1962, such enthusiasm as field managers could muster seemed sometimes, at least, consciously aimed at meeting managerial expectations. Thus, [] balanced his optimistic list of opportunities with a warning to the desk about the obstacles to their exploitation. []

⁴ *Undercover Armies*, Chapter 16. []

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A Cultural Imperative

Taken together, these attitudes and events suggest an answer to the questions, posed earlier, about the Agency's attachment to the Saigon program of team insertions and its contrasting willingness to dump the Commando Raiders. That answer invokes the perennial tension between the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) and the Office of Special Operations (OSO) cultures, and the expression of that tension in the styles of individual CS managers.

Team operations into North Vietnam began during a period in which the OPC ethos still dominated the DO's self-image. Its adherents practiced what in retrospect seems a naive faith that good intentions and energy, applied with the creativeness allowed by CIA's administrative flexibility, would suffice to meet any challenge. Anything was worth trying, and something would surely work. ⁵

The most influential exponent of the improvisational OPC approach in the FE Division of the early 1960s was probably William Colby. As chief of station in Saigon, he began in 1960 a flurry of experimental programs, all of them shaped by the recommendations of officers in the field. These led to at least one signal success—the tribal village defense program called the Citizens Irregular Defense Groups—and to failures, the most costly of which was probably the black entry program against North Vietnam.

But Bill Colby was far from unique in his tendency to operate on a rather unreflective basis of self-confidence and eager optimism. A good

many of the Agency's covert action projects and plans of the era were little short of frivolous and on occasion potentially disastrous. Sometimes, they promised only disaster, even if successful, as with the collusion with the Mafia to dispose of Fidel Castro. Or they focused on a superficial symptom while ignoring a massive problem, as with the abortive plot to poison Patrice Lumumba in the chaos of the Congo in 1960. For sheer detachment from reality, there is the 1958 episode in which the Agency thought to influence Laotian elections by parachuting bulldozers into a few remote villages as harbingers of new roads about to be built by a beneficent government. ⁶

Richard Helms later said that he had always thought covert military action a "dubious option" in peacetime, but that wartime was different. With respect to Vietnam, in particular, he saw the Agency as obligated to contribute whatever it could. Nevertheless, not sharing the OPC-style reluctance to admit failure, he did not discourage a sober evaluation of the Commando Raider program. After a good-faith try, he declared the game not worth the candle. ⁷

By the early 1970s, moreover, EA Division management, both at Headquarters and in the field, was populated less by traditional activists and more by expert professionals. Indeed, William E. Nelson's careful, thoughtful style made him look like a careful bureaucrat to some of his more activist subordinates. Even Theodore Shackley, his hard-nosed successor, who was still chief of station in Saigon during the Commando Raider episode, was more the doggedly efficient executive agent of policy than he was any kind of activist free spirit looking for new worlds to conquer.

⁵ The OPC's attachment to an improvisational style, one that in effect glorified amateurism, is just one facet of the OSS psychology, a better understanding of which might illuminate its legacy in DO practice.

⁶ *Undercover Armies*, Chapter 1. The author served in FE (EA) Division from 1955 to 1972. His assignments there included Laos (1960-62) and Vietnam (1963-65) as a field case officer, and he has drawn on his recollections for his description of the operating style of the period. Full disclosure: he does not recall dissenting, at the time, from any of the cultural values and professional practices that he now criticizes.

⁷ and Russell Jack Smith, *Richard Helms as DCI* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993).

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A similar evolution had taken place in field management. Vientiane Station's [] was still run by the legendary Lloyd "Pat" Landry, a veteran of the abortive operation to overthrow Indonesia's President Sukarno in 1957. Managing four different paramilitary programs while helping hold together a fractious multilateral command had imbued him with a sober pragmatism that had little time for activist macho. And Vientiane Station itself was led by Hugh Tovar, whose cerebral approach to his paramilitary programs took into account the overarching fact that, whatever was done to "send a message" to the North Vietnamese, America was on its way out of Indochina.⁸ []

This interpretation, which emphasizes the ways in which the styles of individual managers reflected their attachment to their OPC or OSO antecedents, leaves room for the influence of other institutional and environmental factors that contributed to perpetuation of a failed program. One of these was the DO's institutional inferiority complex. This was another legacy of the OSS, which from the moment of its creation had confronted the hostility of mainstream military commanders to the freewheeling tactics of unconventional warfare. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, for example, shut OSS entirely out of the Pacific theater. The resulting feeling of having something to prove contributed to the DO's (then the Directorate for Plans) unwillingness to admit an inability to do whatever the policymaker—especially the occupant of the White House—might want. []

Another institutional factor in the conceptual rigidity of Project [] was the archaic training program [] that shaped the thinking of new operations officers. At least as late as 1957, the model for behind-the-lines intelligence and resistance activity was the

OSS role in the partisan warfare of World War II. The training regime implicitly assumed an operating climate in which a population awaited liberation from foreign occupation or from the exactions of a puppet regime like Vichy. It was then applied to Cold War operations, where it ignored the effectiveness of Leninist internal security discipline in the Soviet Union and the new communist states that arose in the postwar period. It also obscured the fact that the subjects of these communist governments, at least those with experience of European colonialism, did not all necessarily yearn for liberation by US-sponsored regimes. []

Contributing to this blinkered view was the anti-communist zeal of the period. Few if any of the Agency officers serving in Vietnam in the early and mid-1960s recognized the nationalistic, anti-colonial appeal of the Viet Minh, and its success at mobilizing political talent at all levels, down to and including the hamlet. Word of peasant opposition to communist rule in lower North Vietnam in 1956 nourished the American impulse to believe that the entire country was groaning under what it saw as a despotic, exploitative elite. The North Vietnamese peasant was assumed to be ready to seize any opportunity to cooperate with the anti-communist Vietnamese of the South. In fact, whenever local peasants came upon indications of a foreign presence, their immediate and only impulse was to report to the authorities. Whether they did so out of fear or out of positive loyalty, or some combination of the two, the result was the same.⁹ []

Finally, in this context of cultural influences, comes the disdain for counterintelligence. Not characteristic of the entire Clandestine Service—for many years, CI was the heart of operations against the Soviet Union—the

⁸ The management styles of Tovar and Landry are described in the author's *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973*. []

⁹ The author remembers hearing for the first time, in Vietnam, about the Sino-Soviet split, which he—and to the best of his recollection most of his colleagues there—dismissed as mere communist disinformation. He can think of no better reason for his closed mind than the threat posed to the activist ethos by the uncertainties of a complicated world. []

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prevalence of this bias corresponded roughly to the importance assigned to covert action in a given area division or field station. In the FE Division of the 1950s and into the 1960s and beyond, CI barely ranked as an operational stepchild, and ritual injunctions to pay more attention to it and to operational security in general were neither enforced nor obeyed.

This institutional indifference to CI in FE Division was, to be sure, encouraged by mutual dislike and distrust between Bill Colby and James J. Angleton. As chief of the CI Staff, Angleton suspected that, in the late 1950s and 1960s, the DRV was penetrating and playing back Saigon Station's operations against it. Accordingly, he urged Colby to accept a CI Staff unit in Saigon, something comparable to the OSS's X-2 element. Colby would have nothing to do with it, and frustrated Angleton's design. But as with other organizational practices, FE Division's indifference to CI was not the creation of a single manager; it pervaded the entire culture.¹⁰

The Lust to Succeed

The case officers and managers of Project probably gave little if any thought to the cultural and institutional influences on their professional practice. They were busy getting on with the task at hand. The Agency seems to have assigned itself that task, for work on it began a year before President Kennedy's demand for guerrillas in the North. No correspondence from those early days has been found, and the only account of the inaugural period is Bill Colby's, given in an interview in the mid-1990s.

As Colby recalled it after some 35 years, the decision to go north sounds almost casual. Trying to distract the Vietnamese from their obsessive effort to overthrow Prince Sihanouk

in neighboring Cambodia, Colby had been looking for ways to return the emphasis to the South Vietnamese insurgency and its sponsors in Hanoi. "One of the questions came up very soon, why don't we do to them what they do to us, in North Vietnam. And we went back to our World War II experience of dropping people in by parachute and things like that...."¹¹

It is significant that Colby reached back to the Second World War for a precedent, for if he had looked to the more recent past, he would have found nothing but failed operations against the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea. There is also the very fact of his reliance on OSS experience for ideas for a new and only superficially similar problem. Now, it may well be that he could have offered a more refined rationale for the program, had his interviewer pursued the point. As it is, we are left with an account that leaves him and the Agency looking as if they were still fighting, not even the last war, but an even earlier conflict, one whose outcome made it a more congenial model.

In World War II, it was Americans, along with British and other allies, who were "dropping...in by parachute," but no one ever suggested adopting this feature of OSS practice in the Cold War operations that followed. If anyone had, the reaction might have tempered the damn-the-torpedoes flavor of the enterprise, and of similar efforts earlier in the Cold War. An American presence would, of course, have multiplied the already enormous risks, and there is no reason—at least in the case of —to think that it would have improved the results.

The question remains whether any Agency manager would ever have taken the same risks, for so little reward, if these operations had required even a token CIA presence. It is

¹⁰ John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 160–61.

¹¹ Tourison, 19.

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certainly true that the GVN tolerated its casualties, not all of whom were merely expendable members of despised minorities. This willingness, it seems, served to legitimize for CIA the exposure of dozens of Vietnamese agents to a degree of risk that no Agency manager would ever have contemplated imposing on his own people. []

This interpretation is necessarily speculative. But nothing else explains the Agency's apparent sense of detachment from the fate of the agent personnel. That sense may have been encouraged by the sometimes almost adversarial tone of the relationship with them, something provoked by their generally low quality and frequently uncertain motivation. []

But even lacking any sense of personal attachment to the people being dispatched to an uncertain fate, the station could be expected to have devoted serious efforts to identifying the causes of a series of failures seen by late 1963 as nearly without exception. That it did not do so is attributable, in part, simply to inadequate staffing; []

[] But the fact remains that the surviving official correspondence expresses almost no curiosity about or interest in the causes of known failures.¹² []

One academic study of the program, based largely on interviews conducted with captured agents after their release by Hanoi, makes repeated references to poorly selected drop zones, attributing them to the planners' reliance on old and unreliable French maps. In fact, the official record is replete with correspondence detailing the aerial reconnaissance photos explicitly commissioned for [] missions. But it does appear that drop zones sometimes—perhaps often—turned out to lie in populated areas. It is possible, of course, that

navigational error led to some teams, or individual team members, being dropped far from their specified DZs. This question would have figured prominently in any examination of the program, but no serious effort of the kind was done until 1968. At that point, as we have seen, CIA collaborated with the military to conclude that even Team EASY, which had enjoyed the greatest confidence, was also compromised.¹³ []

The CI exercise that exposed Team EASY came four years after CIA had ceded to MAC-SOG the American side of Project [] management. Had the Agency applied the same rigor to this kind of examination on its own watch, it might well have written off the teams that it eventually bestowed on the military. One feature of their performance, notable from the beginning, was their almost universal failure to come up on the air for weeks after insertion. Despite its standard injunction to make contact immediately, the station invariably accepted the excuses offered in tardy first reports. By July 1963, it was treating the phenomenon as routine when it reported a team as having come up after the "usual initial one month silence." Risky at best, this passive stance turned into simple credulousness as one instance followed another.¹⁴ []

The lust to succeed, in an institution that defines itself by its ability to do what the policy-maker wants done, cannot be eliminated, but only managed. Clearly, the notoriously risk-averse stance that followed William Casey's stewardship was not and is not the answer. But neither is the almost robotic activism with which the DO tends to respond to policy-level pressure. For examples, one need look no farther than the programs aimed at intelligence penetrations of []

[] With "recruitment" the supreme—sometimes apparently the only—goal, the DO let itself be manipulated into a

¹² []

¹³ Conboy, whose references to faulty drop zones include one on page 62. []

¹⁴ SAIG 9322. []

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series of embarrassing and damaging failures in which nearly all the agents were controlled by the other side.

These self-inflicted wounds might have been prevented by an institutionalized adversarial process that, in effect, took the OSO-OPC cultural rivalry and turned it to constructive purpose. In the case of Project a CI section in the Saigon Station of the period, charged by the COS with challenging the operators, would very early on have produced a more balanced assessment than the station ever, in fact, conducted. But a CI unit would by itself have had little effect, in the absence of a watchfully skeptical chief, and skepticism was uncongenial to both Colby and Richardson. Both of them displayed more interest in a display of vigorous action than in resolving indications of trouble even with the few teams still maintaining radio contact. Headquarters, moreover, abdicated its oversight role, making just one half-hearted effort to evaluate the integrity and productivity of the effort. There, too, workday pressures on a small staff inhibited a hard look at the program. But so did the comfort of knowing that "this is the way we do things."

The Pitfalls of "Lessons Learned"

What is to be learned from the misadventure? For one thing, it suggests that the conventional "lessons learned" approach to a professional failure usually obscures what most needs to be illuminated. Why? Because the conventional examination of a disaster is usually confined to mechanics, the particular flaws in operational tradecraft or analytical interpretation that led to it. Conducted by people who share the culture of those they are judging, exercises in "lessons learned" hardly ever examine the institutional factors behind a

failure. But these must be identified if errors are not to proliferate. The reasons *why*, for example, an operational component ignores all the canons of counterintelligence practice, while it clings to a failed program, are what count.

An attempt to get behind flaws in professional practice to find root causes encounters its own difficulties. To what extent is institutional culture the product of the personal style of individual leaders, and to what extent, conversely, are the leaders formed by their culture? One thing seems certain, that in a meritocracy whose leadership rises from the ranks, an institutional culture tends to be perpetuated from one generation to the next. In such an organization, the greatest threat to effective performance is failure to adapt to a changing environment. Past experience, especially that of an institution's founders, tends to shape perceptions of events and circumstances long after it has lost whatever relevance it may at first have offered.

In the case of Project the program's originator was himself one of the CS's founding fathers, but Bill Colby cannot be accused of having imposed an idiosyncratic mindset on unwilling subordinates. Only two CS officials are known to have opposed the effort, despite an open Colby management style that positively encouraged the lower ranks to speak freely. Their acquiescence resulted more from cultural mores, accepted and internalized, than from any kind of subservience, even reluctant. Had neither Colby nor any other OSS veteran been on hand when the Kennedy administration called for action against North Vietnam, the response would likely have been the same.¹⁵

One thing is certain: archaic modes of thought and outmoded professional self-image will yield

¹⁵ The power of cultural convention is on even more conspicuous display in the history of US Air Force programs that reduced the importance of manned aircraft, and thus threatened pilots' self-image. This occurred first with ballistic missiles as a threat to the manned bomber and more recently with controversy over unmanned aerial vehicles as a partial substitute for manned combat and reconnaissance missions.

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only to determined, independent-minded leadership. The challenge to DO management, in the early 21st century, is to develop a culture that combines self-confident energy with constructive self-questioning. Bureaucracies and their

leaders hate dealing with an ambiguous agenda like this one, but it cannot be avoided without risking catastrophic failure in an era of unprecedented threats to the national security.

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Source Note (U)

In comparison with EA Division holdings on its operations in Laos and South Vietnam, the surviving record on team insertions into the DRV is remarkably thin. Chronological files have been found for all of the code-named operations, including many that were never launched, and it thus appears that what has been seen is what was archived. If so, Project [] is by far the most poorly documented of the activities researched by the author in his 15 years of work on Agency operations in Indochina. The total absence of any examination of failed operations is particularly striking. Opportunities for interviews with participants have also, by comparison with earlier volumes, been few and far between; I am, however, grateful for the useful recollections of [] and Robert Myers. []

A small but serious open literature saved this project from becoming an exercise in futility.

Richard Shultz was particularly helpful on the policy context of the early 1960s. Kenneth Conboy, with Dale Andradé, and Sedgwick Tourison conducted detailed interviews with former [] agents after their release from communist jails; the Conboy book, in particular, has assembled narrative material that seems to reflect a good-faith effort to get not merely stories, but facts. []

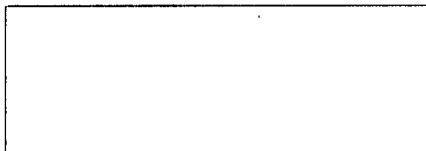
Shulz, Richard H., Jr. *The Secret War Against Hanoi: The Untold Story of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (Perennial Books, 2000). []

Conboy, Kenneth, and Dale Andradé, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam* (University Press of Kansas, 2000). []

Tourison, Sedgwick, *Secret Army, Secret War: Washington's Tragic Spy Operation in North Vietnam* (Naval Institute Special Warfare Series, 1995). []

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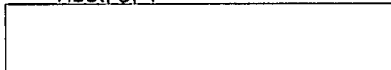
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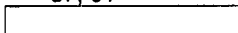
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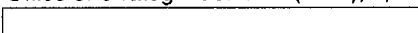
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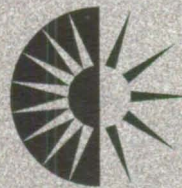
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