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Intelligence in search of a consumer

THE MAYAGUEZ RESCUE OPERATION REVISITED

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On 12 May 1975, the U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez* was fired upon and seized by Cambodian forces near Poulo Wai in the Gulf of Siam. The ship, a 480-foot, 10,000-ton container craft, was bound from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand, with a cargo of commercial goods and supplies.

After its seizure by Cambodia, the U.S. crew was taken to Koh Tang, a 3-mile by 2-mile jungle island approximately 34 miles from Kompong Som. Attempts to negotiate the release of the ship and crew were unsuccessful and, by 13 May, the White House viewed the use of force as the only way to prevent the crew members from eventually being taken to the Cambodian mainland and possibly imprisoned. On 14 May the United States launched a military strike against the Cambodian island of Koh Tang. A major part of the basic intelligence on which the action rested was provided by CIA's Domestic Collection Division (DCD).

This article relates the role of one element of the intelligence community in support of policy makers involved in planning for the *Mayaguez* rescue operation. In passing, it shows how standard tasking mechanisms tend to be overlooked or bypassed in a crisis, and shows the importance of improvisation and flexibility at such times. The story of the DCD role in the *Mayaguez* rescue operation is not well known within the intelligence community, and makes an interesting narrative, presented here in chronological order.

At 1100 on 13 May 1975, a telephone call was received by a junior DCD headquarters officer from an officer of the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) who wanted to know whether DCD could obtain photographs or charts of Poulo Wai. He explained that the Navy had levied a priority request on NPIC for the information but NPIC files had no material on the island. Someone believed that oil exploration had been conducted around Poulo Wai; if so, perhaps a U.S. oil company might have charts, photographs or other data on the island. Could DCD help?

DCD's New York and Houston offices maintain extensive contacts with U.S. oil companies, and they were immediately asked to respond, by 1700 if possible, with anything that might meet the Navy's priority request. By 1630 both New York and Houston had reported that charts and photographs of Poulo Wai had been located and would be relayed to headquarters as soon as possible. Both offices volunteered detailed textual information on the island terrain and on the location of Cambodian installations and personnel.

The response was gratifying, but when the DCD officer tried to reach his NPIC contact by phone at 1635, he drew a blank. Without the NPIC intermediary, he had no way of knowing who wanted the information, how valuable it was, or how urgently

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it might be needed. He had a pretty good idea from the *Washington Post* and other media coverage that Poulo Wai must be related to the growing crisis surrounding the capture of the *Mayaguez*, but officially he was working in the dark. So at 1645 he called the CIA Operations Center to confirm his assumptions and enlist some help in finding his anonymous consumer. The watch officer on duty, although unaware of any request for intelligence on Poulo Wai, suggested that DCD contact the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for Southeast Asia. By 1700 the NIO was on the phone, and it did not take him long to recognize that the information DCD was trying to relay was a partial response to a set of requirements originally laid on through his own office. He asked DCD to begin immediate action to develop similar topographical information on nearby Koh Tang island.

The DCD officer explained that action might not be possible until the next morning, since DCD's operations were geared to the normal hours of its sources in the business community. There was only the briefest pause at the NIO's end of the conversation before he replied: *The information needed on Koh Tang is central to the situation involving the Mayaguez. No matter what it takes, or how slim the chances are for getting the information, you have got to go after it now with the highest possible priority. From now on, he concluded, you can assume that your consumer is the President and that he will get any information you can develop.*

New York and Houston were advised of these new requirements and priorities, and New York was able to respond with some additional data on Poulo Wai and some initial information on Koh Tang immediately. At 1800 Houston called with more material on Poulo Wai, but nothing on Koh Tang. Pressed to pursue the search, the Houston field officer replied that he was reviewing a list of sources who had not been contacted in some time in the nebulous hope that something in their background might provide a lead to a source for the information.

In 15 minutes Houston was back on the line to say that a source had been located. He was an independent consultant to a U.S. oil company who had done some survey work on the island a few years earlier. He had the maps and charts, but it would take a few hours for him to pull the material together and get it to DCD. With the NIO's injunctions ringing in his ears, the headquarters officer asked Houston to get their source to a telephone and put him in direct touch with the NIO.

At 1830 this was done and the source briefed the NIO directly on Koh Tang's terrain as he remembered it. When he had taken all the data down, the NIO told the Houston field officer that his information couldn't have been more relevant or more timely, and that he would be passing it on immediately to the DCI for his appearance at an emergency National Security Council meeting at 2200. With the DCI briefed and on his way, the NIO told Houston to cease operations for the night at 2130.

Promptly at 0800 the next day, 14 May, the NIO was on the phone to DCD headquarters with a request from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the source located the previous evening be flown to Washington for a military debriefing at 1600 the same day. Houston's response, at 0830, was that it was impossible to obtain a seat on a flight that would meet the debriefing deadline. When this word was relayed to the NIO, he told DCD to sit tight while he tried to get some help from the Pentagon.

At 0900 the NIO advised DCD that a military aircraft was being diverted to Houston at the direct orders of the Joint Chiefs. The Houston field officer and the source would be flown direct to Andrews Air Force Base where a helicopter would be waiting to ferry them to the Pentagon. Houston was advised, and the field officer and his source departed post haste to meet their flight.

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At 1530 DCD headquarters got the word that their field officer and his source had landed at Andrews and were on their way to the Pentagon; the headquarters project officer and his boss promptly left to meet them.

At 1600 the debriefing session began in a crowded National Military Command Center. In attendance were representatives of the Joint Chiefs and other ranking officers involved in planning the *Mayaguez* rescue operation. The DCD source gave a thorough description of Koh Tang's terrain, population centers and fortifications; pressed, he gave his assessment of potential problem areas. Asked directly by a Joint Staff officer for his view of the best area on the island to land a strike force, he gave his opinion. The essential details of his briefing were cabled directly to the assembling strike force.

The debriefing ended at 1800 and the source was escorted to the NIO's office at CIA headquarters by the three DCD men. He was still there—in case more information was needed—at 1930 when word came that the strike against Koh Tang had been given Presidential approval. A short time later the DCI, enroute from the White House, called to ask if he could meet the source, and at 2130 the group met in his office to receive from the Director the President's personal appreciation for their efforts. The next day the source was flown back to Houston on the same Air Force jet that had brought him to Washington.

DCD's role in the *Mayaguez* operation was notable in several respects. It is an office more accustomed than most to receiving its requirements by way of formal and often elaborate tasking channels many times removed from the ultimate consumer. As noted, it is geared to the businessman's working day, and much of its collection work proceeds at the pace of its commercial sources. It obviously is not as well known to tasking officers as NPIC or its own parent organization, the Directorate of Operations. In this case DCD got its tasking requirement almost by accident well after the initial requirement had been laid on other intelligence collection components, and for awhile DCD was working without any official sense of the importance and urgency of its task. Having found one needle in a haystack half a continent away within one working day, we were promptly sent back to find a smaller one the same night. With a little bit of luck, a lot of determination and professionalism by a few skilled officers and, eventually, some well placed assistance, we put the requester and the source face to face in just over 24 hours through a process that operated almost entirely outside normal tasking channels and on a wholly informal basis.

Whatever one may think of the purpose and the result of the *Mayaguez* rescue operation, it was DCD that provided the essential, ground-level intelligence needed by the strike force to bring it off. In the process, DCD gained some valuable insights into the operation of the higher levels of the crisis management mechanism. One can hope that the crisis managers and the tasking channels in between learned something about DCD's potential and capabilities as well.

(All of the foregoing article is classified ~~SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM~~)

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