

Kevin Conboy and Dale Andradé, *Spies & Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam* (2000)

Chapter 12: Tonkin Gulf (116-23)

SOG [Studies and Operations Group] was not the only outfit running secret operations in the Gulf of Tonkin For years, special U.S. navy patrols, code-named DESOTO, had been making regular runs off mainland Asia to eavesdrop on shore-based communications in China and North Korea. Typically the missions were carried out by a destroyer fitted with portable vans welded to the ship's decks. These vans were manned by communications technicians from the National Security Agency whose job was so sensitive that they were kept separate from the crew.

Until 1964 DESOTO patrols were authorized no closer than thirty-two kilometers from communist shores. But on 7 January, restrictions were eased, allowing the destroyers to within less than seven kilometers of the coastline. . . .

[I]n late July [1964] when [General William] Westmoreland asked the U.S. navy to focus its DESOTO coverage along Ha Tinh and Thanh Hoa Provinces, especially toward some of the radar outposts located on offshore islands. These radio stations, combined with Hanoi's recent move to shift some of its Swatows [Chinese-made gunboats] to southern ports, were of understandable concern to SOG planners in Danang.

On 28 July, the destroyer *Maddox* set out from Taiwan to begin its scheduled DESOTO run. Three days later, the ship rendezvoused with a tanker in the Tonkin Gulf just east of the Demilitarized Zone [of the 17th parallel]. . . . [It sighted] SOG boats returning from the first offshore bombardment mission.

The *Maddox* planned to sail to sixteen points along the North Vietnamese coast . . . north to the Chinese border At each point the ship would stop and circle, picking up electronics signals before moving on to the next orbit.

For the next four days, the *Maddox* stuck to this schedule without incident. During the early hours of 2 August, however, things began to go sour. . . . Warned of [North Vietnamese Swatows in the vicinity], the DESOTO task group commander . . . ordered the *Maddox* farther out to sea to avoid a night confrontation.

Six hours later [at about 10 a.m.], after the North Vietnamese attack failed to materialize, the destroyer was back near the coast. . . . [However,] the North Vietnamese were preparing to repulse a possible repeat raid To Hanoi, it made

little difference if the encroaching foreign warship was a Nasty [a Norwegian-made gunboat used by the Americans and South Vietnamese in covert operations] or a destroyer—both were a threat. That noon, it dispatched three Soviet-made gunboats toward the *Maddox*. [Captain John Herrick] . . . sent a message to Seventh Fleet that his vessel was “being approached by high-speed craft with apparent intention of torpedo attack. Intend to open fire if necessary self defense.”

When the North Vietnamese boats had closed to less than ten thousand yards, the destroyer fired three shots across the bow of the lead vessel, which responded with a torpedo. The *Maddox* fired again, this time to kill, hitting the second boat just as it launched two torpedoes. Badly damaged, the boat limped home. Changing course just in time to evade the torpedoes, the destroyer was again attacked, this time by a boat that fired yet another torpedo as well as its 14.5 mm machine guns. The bullets struck the *Maddox*, but the torpedo missed. As the boat passed astern, it was raked by gunfire, which killed the commander.

In twenty-two minutes, the battle was over. Breaking contact, the North Vietnamese vessels turned for shore with the *Maddox* in pursuit. Aircraft from the carrier *Ticonderoga* appeared on the scene, strafing the fleeing boats and sinking one that had been damaged earlier by the *Maddox*. The others escaped. Unfazed by the encounter, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, the Pacific Fleet commander ordered the *Maddox*, this time accompanied by another destroyer, the *Turner Joy*, to resume DESOTO coverage up the North Vietnamese coast. . . .

[On] 3 August, one day after the attack on the *Maddox*, another four [SOG] boats headed north[, attacking and destroying a radar station and a security outpost].

[Despite opposition from Captain Herrick and Admiral Moorer, the DESOTO missions resumed.]. . . U.S. intelligence again began to receive indications of an impending North Vietnamese attack. Over the next few hours, during a period of inclement weather, edgy crews in the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* detected—and engaged—what they believed were no less than hour hostile gunboats. Some sixteen carrier-based aircraft responded to the perceived attack though no North Vietnamese vessels were ever spotted.

[NOTE: Vice Admiral Charles Turner Joy served in the U.S. Navy during World War II (Pacific) and the Korean War. Between the wars, he was commander of the Naval Proving Ground at Dahlgren; his final assignment was superintendent of the Naval Academy.]

Since the attacks were now front-page news, SOG assumed the worst—that an investigation would expose its operations against the north. It was also worried that Hanoi would launch reprisal attacks against Danang

Reverberations from the Tonkin Gulf skirmishes quickly circled the globe. Hanoi denied the second attack took place while at the same time publicly blasting Washington for the multiple commando raids being conducted along its coast. It could not have come at a worse time. The Johnson administration had just made the first of several secret diplomatic attempts to convince the North Vietnamese to stop warring on South Vietnam [The State Department told the International Control Commission created by the 1954 Geneva Conference] to tell the North Vietnamese that “neither the Maddox [nor] any other destroyer was in any way associated with any attack on the DRV islands.” This was the first of several carefully worded official statements aimed at separating OP 34A and DESOTO and at the same time leaving the impression that the United States was not involved in the covert operations. Among the president’s advisers, however, there was little disagreement that Hanoi was bound to see the covert raids and the DESOTO mission as linked. . . .

President Johnson was less sanguine. American ships, after all, had been attacked in international waters, an affront that begged a forceful response. . . .

[CIA director John McCone told Johnson,] “The North Vietnamese are reacting defensively to our attacks on their off-shore islands. They are responding out of pride and on the basis of defense considerations.”

Hanoi’s perception was only part of the equation. International opinion mattered much more, and Johnson was concerned about the publicity shining on his covert program. The president immediately halted all Op 34A operations “in order to avoid sending confusing signals associated with recent events in the Gulf of Tonkin.”

But there was no such candor two days later when Secretary of Defense [Robert] McNamara and Secretary of State [Dean] Rusk were called before a secret joint session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Armed Services Committee. . . . McNamara opened by explaining the attacks on the American destroyers were not isolated events but rather “part and parcel of a continuing communist drive to conquer South Vietnam.” He made no mention of the SOG raids.

Senator Wayne Morse, the Oregon Democrat, immediately challenged this account. He specifically mentioned the raids, correctly noting that Hanoi could only have concluded that the maritime attacks and the DESOTO patrols were linked. . . .

Like other members, Morse had not been officially briefed about SOG's existence. His limited knowledge of the raids came from sketchy accusations made over North Vietnamese radio. Hanoi, also unaware of the details behind SOG, had incorrectly assumed the raids were conducted by South Vietnamese naval units. . . .

Morse's impression gave McNamara his opening. . . . [T]he secretary suggested that the raids were probably part of a South Vietnamese anti-infiltration operation being conducted by their fleet of coastal junks. The diversion worked. . . . "Our naval personnel do not participate in junk operations." McNamara was being truthful on this last issue, though he knew full well that it was SOG Nasty boats—not South Vietnamese junks—that had done the deeds in question.

The perfidy continued later that day during debate on the Senate floor. . . . J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, . . . repeated the White House bromide that the DESOTO patrol was "entirely unconnected or unassociated with any coastal forays the South Vietnamese themselves may have conducted."

. . . [I]t took either a fool or an innocent to believe that the U.S. government knew nothing about the raids.

Despite this, congressional reaction fell in behind the president's men, and the question of secret operations was overtaken by the bigger issue of punishing North Vietnam for its blatant attacks on American warships in international waters. On 7 August, one day after McNamara's appearance on Capital Hill, the Senate passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution by a margin of 88-2. Senator Morse was one of the dissenters. The House of Representatives passed it unanimously. President Johnson . . . was now authorized to take "all necessary steps, including the use of armed force" to assist South Vietnam.

SOG, conceived as a means of showing American resolve short of war, had instead helped precipitate one.