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Vietnam War: The Role of the CIA

Ten years ago, the Gulf of Tonkin incident led to massive U.S. involvement in an unwanted war in Vietnam. Did the Central Intelligence Agency play a hidden role in that incident?

We have now pieced together part of the story, together with other CIA exploits in Vietnam, from intelligence memos and old Vietnam hands, including an ex-CIA officer, John Kelly, who has agreed to break his long silence. It is a fascinating story, sometimes hilarious, sometimes deadly grim.

At the time of Tonkin, the CIA was already deeply involved in a vast undercover operation known mysteriously as Op-34-A. Memos show that the CIA, working secretly with the Saigon government and U.S. armed forces, kidnaped North Vietnamese fishermen to recruit them as spies, landed rubber-boat crews on the North Vietnamese coast to blow up bridges, parachuted agents into the Communist back-country and engaged in other clandestine activities.

Although U.S. forces weren't supposed to participate in open combat, a favorite Op-34-A sport was to send dark-painted U.S. patrol boats to bombard Communist-held islands off the Vietnam coast. This sometimes led to shootouts between U.S. and North Vietnamese gunboats. The incidents, according to one Pentagon memo, were regarded as acceptable risks.

The public wasn't told about these naval engagements until the late President Lyndon Johnson chose to make an issue of the August 2, 1964, attack on U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. There is some indication that the destroyers may have been preparing to draw North Vietnamese gunboats away from an Op-34-A operation when the celebrated incident occurred.

After the United States was drawn openly into the war, the CIA brass settled into a handsome dwelling next to the Italian embassy in Saigon. Instead of CIA, one of its units adopted the initials SOG—short for "Special Operations Group."

In long interviews with my associate Les Whitren, the irreverent John Kelly, now an investigative reporter for CBS News in New York City, remembers the SOG as a sort of "Catch 22" outfit forever goofing up but occasionally achieving a triumph.

The SOG, of course, was obsessed with secrecy. It operated fleets of black-painted planes, jeeps, trucks and PT boats. Even the SOG's gates were sometimes painted black. It didn't take the Vietnamese, South and North alike, long to identify black as the CIA-SOG color. The black gates, therefore, may as well have been emblazoned with the CIA seal.

On one occasion, the CIA's secret identification was found scribbled on a latrine wall in a Saigon bar. Among the obscene inscriptions, a horrified CIA officer saw the equation, "CAS equals SOG equals CIA." CAS means "Controlled American Source," a euphemism for a CIA agent. In great alarm, the CIA officer dispatched two majors and a team of enlisted men to comb the men's rooms of Saigon in search of similar security violations hidden amid the graffiti.

The CIA brass went to such lengths to maintain secrecy that they held their most important conferences in a huge transparent box, constructed of inch-thick clear plastic walls resting on plastic beams, with a transparent plastic door, at the U.S. embassy.

One day a CIA officer, peeping at the Italian embassy across the way, discovered the Italians

peeping back. He spotted a telescope lens aimed at secret maps on the CIA walls. With all the drama of a TV slapstick spy episode, his superior ordered the windows boarded up. This had scarcely been completed before another agent, missing the sunlight, tore down the boards.

Meanwhile, a terse security directive was issued by Washington after CIA agents in Nigeria were almost killed during a rebellion because their automobile was a "Rebel," a 1967 American Motors model. The CIA urgently ordered agents around the world to remove the "Rebel" insignia from their cars, Kelly was told.

When Kelly first arrived in Saigon under super-secret orders, he was greeted at Tan Son Nhut airport by a Eurasian, with a severely brawny build and a mouthful of flashing gold teeth. He turned out to be the official CIA greeter, who would have been hard to miss by the Vietcong agents lurking around the airport.

At SOG headquarters, Kelly found the CIA brass in a tizzy. One of his superiors had just been identified by French and West German intelligence as the naked American on vacation at the famous L'Île du Levant nudist camp off the coast of France. The CIA officer's girl friend had divulged his identity the moment he left the nudist camp for Saigon.

One of the CIA's great objectives was to get the North Vietnamese to listen to a CIA radio transmitter, which was disguised as a military Vietnamese nationalist underground station. To increase its Hooper rating, the CIA dropped tons of thousands of plastic transistor radios in styrofoam boxes on North Vietnam. The radios were locked upon a single frequency, so those who carried the radios could listen only to the CIA station.

To reach the Vietcong, whose jungle hiding places were difficult to locate for parachute droppings, the CIA strategists planned to bait the styrofoam radio boxes with food and float them down the Mekong River network. The hungry guerrillas, it was suggested, would fish the food-laden radios out of the river. The plan was finally abandoned, however, because the CIA could find no foolproof flow charts for the Mekong. At last report, there were still two warehouses full of the little black radios.

The CIA, however, had its occasional successes. It was able to determine, for example, that 25,000 Saigon officials, from clerks to cabinet officers, were active Vietcong agents or Vietcong sympathizers. More dramatically, the SOG units equipped South Vietnamese troops with Vietcong-style black pajamas. The disguised troops were able to crash into a North Vietnamese encampment, firing machine guns and tossing grenades.

But the notorious Phoenix program, an assassination scheme run by present CIA director William Coiby, was less effective. A report to the U.S. embassy revealed that the program was only one per cent effective.

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