



(U//FOUO) Interview with... Charlie Meals, Signals Intelligence Deputy Director

FROM: Charlie Meals
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Run Date: 10/13/2004

(U) Here's one in our series of interviews with SID leaders...

- (U) What was the most memorable experience you've had during your career?

(U//FOUO) There have been many memorable events. For example, I remember being on duty in NSOC when we learned that the Soviets were invading Czechoslovakia. More recently, in April 2001, I was at NCPAC [NSA/CSS Pacific] when the Chinese forced down the U.S. Navy's EP-3 SIGINT collection aircraft. And, of course, there was 9/11.

(U//FOUO) But in terms of an overall experience, I would say that my first field tour at GCHQ in Cheltenham, England really stands out in my mind. Becoming acquainted with a new environment - an unfamiliar landscape, a different culture and people -- was very exciting and fun. My field tour in Hawaii was also quite memorable.

- (U) What was your first job at the Agency?

(S//SI) After serving four years in the Air Force, I came to NSA permanently in the late 60's and worked in the Soviet "weather shop." It may sound odd now, but in those days the only effective way the U.S. had of determining the weather in various parts of the Soviet Union was to listen to their communications. The Soviets knew this, and actually encrypted the locations of their weather reports.

(S//SI) You may ask why we needed the information. Well, the primary customer was the Strategic Air Command (SAC), which needed to have current weather reports in case U.S. bombers ever had to fly into Soviet air space. Weather reporting also served as an indicator or warning of impending action. For example, we knew that the Soviets were serious about invading Czechoslovakia in 1968 when they began to include Czech weather data on their military weather broadcasts.

(S//SI) This weather effort was actually quite big: there were people at bases around the world -- the UK, Germany, Pakistan, Italy, Japan, etc. - as well as about 250 people here at NSA working the target. More than 30 years ago, I was the first person to serve in NSOC as a weather analyst and the desk still operates today.

- (U) If you could give one piece of advice to employees just starting their SIGINT career, what would it be?

(U) I would say: "Be open to opportunities." When you have been doing a job for a while and feel very competent, it's tempting to continue in that role indefinitely. But periodically it's a good thing to step outside your comfort zone and try new things. If you take the risk, you may achieve a greater payback. You may even find that you end up in a very different place than you began -- for example, the Director used to work as a Bulgarian linguist!

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DERIVED FROM: NSA/CSSM 1-52, DATED 08 JAN 2007 DECLASSIFY ON: 20320108