

brutal, informed interrogation of crewmen with cryptologic expertise. NSA concluded that the majority of material aboard the *AGER*—perhaps as much as 80 percent of document holdings and 95 percent of cryptologic equipment—survived the ship’s hurried, chaotic emergency destruction effort.²⁷

The ship had carried more than 500 documents or pieces of equipment, including 58 technical SIGINT instructions, 37 technical manuals, 33 COMINT technical reports and 126 collection requirements. *Pueblo* had copied about 8,000 messages containing SIGINT data transmitted over the fleet operational intelligence broadcast. The broadcast carried large amounts of information on Southeast Asia and China and thus collectively revealed the effectiveness of US collection efforts.²⁸ The *Pueblo* also used four cryptographic systems, associated keying materials, maintenance manuals, operating instructions, and the general communications-security publications necessary to support a cryptographic operation.²⁹

NSA reported that highly competent North Korean electronics experts intensively interrogated communications technicians (CTs) among the crew, focusing on technical principles of the cryptographic equipment, equipment operating procedures, and the relationship of the associated keying material to the equipment.^{30, 31} The North interrogated some of the CTs as many as 20 times in sessions lasting hours, according to the Cheevers account.³² Some of the CTs explained in detail how to change codes for and operate KW-7 encrypted teletypes and drew schematics of the KWR-37 gear used to copy the enciphered fleet

broadcast.³³ The assistance saved the North three to six months of technical diagnostic analysis, according to NSA’s conclusion.³⁴

NSA judged that the compromise revealed “the full extent of US SIGINT information on North Korean armed forces communications activities and US successes in the techniques of collection, exploitation, and reporting applied to this target.”³⁵ The material detailed the full extent of the American SIGINT attack on North Korean communications, including call-sign system recoveries, net and communications system reconstruction and diagrams, and the association of communications systems with platforms and transmission systems.³⁶

Ambiguous Warning Ineffective in Both Incidents

Military commanders before both incidents were aware of anomalous North Korean behavior but were not moved to cancel the missions. Theater commanders in *Pueblo*’s case assumed that the DPRK—like the Soviet Union—would respect international legal protections for operating in international waters and judged that they could manage the risk to reconnaissance aircraft posed by unusual NKAF activity by directing aircrews to remain 50 miles, rather than 40 miles, from the North Korean coast.³⁷

NSA, internally conflicted over the degree of risk the *Pueblo* mission posed and the appropriateness of sharing its concerns with the military, ultimately released a “background” message to the military on 29 De-

cember 1967 chronicling North Korean provocations against ships and aircraft previously operating off its coasts. The word “warning,” however, never appeared in the message.

Moreover, NSA’s chain of command added language suggesting the message was only “informational” and restricted the message’s distribution.³⁸ Had NSA packaged the same information differently, it probably would have provided enough to make the case for stopping *Pueblo*’s dangerous mission in its tracks, or at least forcing the military to reconsider the “minimal risk” assessment that was rapidly rubber-stamped on the mission proposal. Essentially, NSA’s message represented a warning opportunity missed.

NSA transmitted its message to the JCS Joint Reconnaissance Center highlighting North Korea’s historical sensitivity to surveillance aircraft and ships operating off its coasts. It noted that the North was “extremely sensitive” to peripheral reconnaissance flights, did not recognize international boundaries in the air, and reacted to South Korean fishing vessels. In addition to not using the word “warning,” it said there was no evidence of provocative or harassing activities by North Korean vessels beyond 12 miles from the coast.³⁹

The odd nature of the message, which was sent near the end of the risk-assessment process in Washington, reflected divisions within NSA over how to assess the threat, a reluctance to question the Navy’s deployment proposal, and a maladroitness of SIGINT product, according to NSA’s oral and written histories.

