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A History of U.S. Civilians in Field Comint Operations, 1953-1960

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The use of civilians in field Comint operations, a recurrent proposal, received close attention and was studied by several bodies during the period 1953-1960, resulting in a number of critical questions: Whose operations? Whose civilians? What kinds of operations? Can civilians be used instead of military personnel as intercept operators? If they are, can they be intermingled with the military, or kept in compartmented units though collocated, or located only at all-civilian stations run by NSA? Could the pay and perquisites of civilian operators, professionals in the work, be such as to satisfy them without injuring the morale of the military personnel? Could a civilian professional corps of intercept operators encourage the military operators to perform at higher levels in order to qualify subsequently for civilian employment?

Would a civilian intercept operator program in NSA compete with the SCA's for the men the SCA's had to retain as Comint career personnel, and would NSA success in competition undermine the SCA's?

If civilians were used only in specialties for which military personnel were lacking, should they remain NSA employees or should each SCA develop its own overseas civilian Comint group? How could dual control be exercised well?

These questions emerged; this short history presents attempts to solve them.

Grounds for Considering the Use of Civilian Intercept Operators Overseas

Although the U.S. Comint effort was aided by collection activities conducted by CIA, and by Second and Third Parties, it was primarily dependent upon intercept operations of the three SCA's. Consequently, success of the intercept effort and quality of intercepted raw traffic, which furnished the very basis of Comint production, hinged to a high degree on the effectiveness of the SCA's in

accomplishing their missions. They in turn had, since World War II, been heavily dependent upon conscription for personnel trained as intercept operators. Most operators left military service after one tour of duty, and the SCA's were engaged during the 1950's in continuous and expensive efforts to replace their experienced intercept operators with newly trained men. One estimate of the costs of procuring and training came to \$8,000 per man, and losses through failure to re-enlist were estimated as high as 85 per cent.

Despite this continuous flow of operators into and out of the SCA's and a concurrent decline in the overall numbers available, the U.S. in the 1950's began expanding intercept operations. A goal of [] intercept positions (of which [] would be kept in operation and the remainder would be stand-by facilities available for emergency) was established in February 1954 with the approval of the JCS and the Secretary of Defense.

Deadlines for reaching this goal were deferred repeatedly between 1954 and 1958, culminating in 1958 in a reduction in the total number of positions programmed. In fact, the SCA's would have needed at least [] additional personnel during Fiscal Year 1958 to man all positions and stations then scheduled, an almost impossible task.

Specifically, in each of the SCA's, approximately 60 per cent of the personnel served one tour; the other 40 per cent were career specialists. Re-enlistment ratios differed for each group and varied by service: for first-tour personnel, the re-enlistment rate in the ASA was about 5.9 per cent, the NSG about 10.8 per cent, and the AFSS about 17 per cent. For career personnel, the rates were about 87, 95, and 77 per cent. Also, after deducting time required for basic and technical training and six months for initial experience at a station, and allowing for return to the U.S.

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and subsequent processing previous to discharge, less than two years of productive service was realized in a four-year tour of duty. And this period was additionally shortened by military duties which on occasion required that an operator be away from his intercept position.

These problems, together with an awareness of highly satisfactory British experience with civilian operators for more than a decade, and CIA experience since 1951, provided the basis for consideration of the use of civilian intercept operators at U.S. sites overseas.

Initial Consideration of the Possibilities

As noted previously, in early 1954 the services were suddenly faced with sharply expanded personnel requirements for overseas collection, while their manpower resources were reduced. And as their experienced intercept operators left, the quantity and quality of intercept dropped considerably, creating serious problems for NSA.

CIA, which was attempting to relocate its civilian operators [redacted] proposed to expand its intercept activities to several other stations of substantial size. It further proposed manning these stations with experienced civilians recently discharged from the services. Representatives of NSA and CIA subsequently worked out the terms of a mutually acceptable agreement. Before it gained USCIB's endorsement, however, NSA restudied the use of civilian operators and determined that NSA might be in a better position to employ all, or many, of the operators needed. Reasons given for this were (1) that NSA would be in a better position to furnish career-related jobs and training during periods of rotation to the U.S., and (2) that NSA was in a better position to recruit experienced civilian operators among discharged service personnel.

In 1954, NSA devised and coordinated a plan for using civilian intercept operators at military overseas stations, and ASA, whose intercept responsibilities were greatly enlarged under the expanded intercept program, showed interest in testing the plan. NSA offered to provide civilian billets and the initial costs of practical tests at ASA stations, and the Department of Defense instructed the Director, NSA, to proceed with appropriate planning. DoD further requested that the Director of Central Intelligence defer for three months plans for CIA to develop a large corps of civilian operators.

The CIVOP Pilot Program

Details of the CIVOP Pilot Program were negotiated by representatives of NSA and ASA during the latter part of 1954. NSA agreed to provide billets and funds for [redacted] civilian operators; it would also recruit and train them. ASA agreed to allocate them to not more than two of its existing stations in each of the two main theaters of

operations. No all-civilian station would be attempted. The program was transmitted formally to the Chief of ASA in January 1955, to be implemented by June.

Within NSA, responsibility for the program was placed on PROD, which assigned it to NSA-60. [redacted] was designated the CIVOP Project Officer. During February, April and May 1955, the [redacted] billets were allocated to NSA-60Z (a new administrative control point). To fill these, the Agency followed normal hiring procedures: PERS obtained applications from former intercept operators who had completed their military service in an SCA; NSA-60 made the selections from about 600 candidates and managed the ensuing preparations and placements.

Applications from several candidates already employed by NSA facilitated the first steps. Those hired for non-Morse intercept were tested for technical proficiency at Vint Hill Farms Station; the Selection Committee (including NSA and ASA representatives) relied on records of experience in selecting Morse operators, and arranged for a refresher course for them. The appointees also visited elements of NSA concerned with tasks relevant to their future work overseas.

NSA sent them in small groups to the theaters, where ASA put them to work at [redacted]

[redacted] The first CIVOP reported at his overseas station in July 1955. Others followed at intervals extending well into 1956, thus avoiding the simultaneous rotation of excessive numbers when the time came.

Extending the Program to Include Civilian Non-Intercept Personnel

The CIVOP Program had hardly reached the stage of operations in the field when a broader use of civilians began to receive serious consideration. ASA, encouraged by G-1, Army General Staff, made plans to hire [redacted] civilian operators as Army civilian employees. The Navy, facing its obligations under the expanded intercept program, contemplated adding [redacted] civilians in three annual increments to its Comint activities. Also, ASA requested that NSA furnish [redacted] non-operator billets overseas to be filled while the CIVOP pilot program was in progress. NSA subsequently agreed, and the billets were allocated to ASA as follows: [redacted] for cryptanalysts, [redacted] for linguists and cryptolinguists, [redacted] for traffic analysts, [redacted] for SIT analysts, [redacted] for an IBM specialist, and [redacted] for specialists in the maintenance of equipment.

Proposals to Expand the Civilian Operator Program in Scope and Time

In August 1955 an NSA Task Group considered far-reaching proposals for the use of civilians overseas:

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The group recognized that the maximum size of the overseas civilian corps would be determined by the number of jobs available in the United States during a one-year period of rotation and by the length of the overseas tour. Thus [] billets in the CONUS and tours of three years would allow an overseas maximum of [] billets. They assumed that the overseas positions would be filled by personnel recently discharged from the SCA's, and by others in the Comint agencies at home, and that NSA would provide the extra billets needed for administration, training, operational control and other aspects of support. Finally, they assumed that the SCA's would be receptive to the use of civilians overseas.

The Task Group discussed three fundamentally different ways of establishing a corps of civilians in field Comint operations: (1) an NSA corps, including whole NSA intercept stations; (2) an SCA operation, in which each SCA had its own civilian corps, which NSA might, or might not, have recruited, selected, cleared and trained; and (3) a joint NSA-SCA operation, in which NSA civilian employees were placed under the operational control of commanders of SCA units, while the SCA's provided the necessary funds, billets, and local logistic support.

A critical problem was the year to be spent in the United States on tasks and specialized training needed by professionals for advancement. If the number of billets were to be sufficient, only NSA could provide enough of them. If the tasks and training were to be fitting, administration by NSA would be necessary. The majority of the Group favored a plan for using civilians in various field Comint operations which would yield a joint NSA-SCA operation. The minority asserted that the plan would bring about a fundamental change in the relationship of NSA and the services with reference to overseas stations, and would involve dual control over selection, training and career management, as well as an unsound division of responsibilities.

In summary, the Task Group proposed that the services establish requirements, by numbers and types, for civilian specialists to be employed at their overseas bases. The services would contribute billets and funds to a central personnel pool, in accordance with those requirements. NSA would administer the pool, consisting of NSA employees in every respect, and would assign them to overseas SCA establishments at which they would be under the operational control of the commanding officer. Each employee would spend one year in four in the United States

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at NSA or an SCA, on a job or in training. NSA would be responsible for budgeting, allocation of billets, recruiting, selecting, training, clearing, placing, security supervision, career management and rotation. The civilians should be able to hold membership in military reserve organizations, and legislation would be sought to exempt them from conscription and to require them to remain at their posts in cases of military emergency.

The Task Group recommended that a limited number of civilian positions be established to inaugurate this program, that the plan be forwarded directly to the services, and if their concurrence was substantial but incomplete, that an NSA-SCA task group be established to make needed adjustments.

CIVOP Becomes CIFCO, January 1956; PERS Becomes Responsible, October 1956

In view of the incorporation of the [] additional, non-intercept billets in the pilot program, and the prospects for extension in scope and time, the CIVOP Program was redesignated officially as "Civilians in Field Comint Operations (CIFCO)" in January 1956.

In October 1956, COLL relinquished to PERS all matters relating to the proposed CIFCO (Navy) Program, and by the end of that month, the same arrangement had been accomplished for the CIFCO (Army) Program. The Office of Training assumed all CIFCO training responsibilities, and, thereafter, COLL's role was limited to providing technical assistance, conducting operational evaluations, establishing professional and technical personnel standards for hiring and promotion, and participating in final selection of applicants. At this time, [] CIVOP personnel and [] non-operator personnel were on board. [] vacancies remained in the CIVOP group, [] in the [] non-operator billets. The largest group, [] operators, was stationed at [] out of [] authorized were a [] of [] authorized were at [] and [] of the [] spaces at [] were occupied. At [] men, and at [] operated non-Morse intercept positions; at [] manned a voice position; the others at all stations engaged in manual Morse general search.

The CIFCO Plan is Rejected by the SCA's, 1956-1957

In July 1956, DIRNSA sent the NSA CIFCO Plan to the chiefs of the three armed services for comment. The Department of the Navy concurred, in what the Secretary of the Navy called "a desirable modification of the original Navy program," and representatives of NSG and NSA began to prepare an interim version of the plan, to be in effect until additional actions were made possible by new legislation.

The Chief, ASA, was advised in April 1956 by Chief, ASA, Far East, that the CIFCO (Army) Program was a success which deserved continuation, even though it raised some administrative problems. In May 1956, however, Chief, ASA, Europe, stated that the CIFCO Program had already demonstrated that no civilians should be used in overseas Comint activities unless they possessed unique skills unobtainable among the military. Civilian specialists would be useful; civilian intercept operators would be unacceptable.

The Chief, ASA, at that juncture, recommended that the test be lengthened a year before the program was accepted on a permanent basis. The Department of Army, he said, would furnish [] billets directly to NSA on 1 July 1956, and ASA would provide funds to support the whole program through Fiscal Year 1957. However, when NSA in January 1957 queried ASA about procedures to be used in regard to civilian operators and other CIFCO personnel eligible for rotation, the Chief, ASA, replied that he had become convinced in the interim that civilians should not be used generally to replace military intercept operators, and that no plans should be made to extend their tours.

Before April 1957, NSG abandoned the interim CIFCO (N) plan on which PERS had been working in favor of a project of filling Navy Comint billets with personnel from the Marine Corps. The Department of Navy sought an extension of the time within which to meet its obligations under the expanded intercept program rather than fulfill them on schedule through the use of civilian employees.

Headquarters, U.S. Air Force had expressed opposition to CIFCO during the previous October, stating frankly that in that service it was "believed that a really effective civilianization program within NSA will compete with, and be disadvantageous to, service programs which are designed to encourage trained technicians to remain in the military."

Nevertheless, in 1957, Headquarters, USAFSS, was still weighing merits and defects of the CIFCO plan. The Director of Civilian Personnel, USAFSS, visited NSA in April 1957 to study the CIFCO Program. And in May 1957, officers, airmen and civilians participated in a conference at Headquarters, USAFSS, to appraise the plan. Their conclusions and summaries of ASA's experience were sent to overseas commands in June 1957 for comment. The general conclusion of the overseas commands was that the presumed costs of a CIVOP program, if applied to bettering the lot of the military intercept operator, including extra compensation for extending service in short-tour areas, would achieve satisfactory results. Consequently, AFSS rejected that part of the CIFCO plan which included intercept operators.

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Although the SCA's rejected the plan for using civilian intercept operators at military stations, they recognized the necessity of using civilians for advanced, specialized technical activities. AFSS endorsed that portion of NSA's CIFCO Plan, and urged its early implementation. ASA, on the other hand, informed DIRNSA that it would develop its own civilian employment program, and asked that arrangements be made for transfer of [] of the [] CIFCO (A) civilian employees, including some intercept operators, from NSA to ASA. That would be the first stage in filling the initial [] Army spaces furnished to ASA for overseas civilians, a number that could be expanded later. At the same time, ASA recognized that it lacked the jobs and training facilities which its CIFCO employees would require during their rotation years in the United States, and it therefore proposed that NSA and ASA adopt an inter-agency career plan.

DIRNSA did not accept that proposal. He agreed instead that ASA might attempt to recruit civilian personnel then stationed overseas in NSA's CIFCO (A) Program, but only subject to the stipulation that their re-employment in NSA would not be guaranteed after transfer. He further stipulated that NSA employees overseas who were unwilling to transfer, but had been requested by ASA to do so, would, whenever feasible, be detailed to ASA. During an ASA employee's rotation to the U.S., NSA would accept him on detail when he could be properly used by NSA.

NSA's Evaluation of the CIFCO (A) Pilot Program in 1956

Conclusions reached by the SCA's differed somewhat from the findings of NSA when PROD evaluated the CIFCO (A) pilot program in 1956. From [] of the [] ASA station commanders, after months of experience with civilian operators in their units, came recommendations that the program be continued because it retained experienced men whose output was superior. They attributed that superiority to the high level of skills, the ability to rely on a continuity of two years on particular problems, and the lack of interruptions in regular work at the intercept positions. The civilians, they said, had actually stimulated some military operators to perform at higher levels than had previously been the case. From the

[] unit commander came the opinion that all objectives of the CIVOP program could be attained through an upward revision of the grade structure for military intercept operators.

Questionnaires answered by a large portion of the intercept operators themselves suggested certain subjects in which training should be intensified. At all four stations, work schedules, leaves and disciplinary policies had satisfied the men, though interest was expressed in having the chiefs of NSA field activities exercise more control over personnel administration.

Analytic units in PROD reported that the copy received from the civilian operators was more accurate and plentiful than that previously obtained. Also, notations (operator's comments) furnished by the civilian operators engaged in General Search were most helpful.

COLL, which had administered the program until October 1956, reported that it had encountered minor problems in hiring, security, training, travel, promotion policy, and others. The besetting difficulty was housing shortages at stations. COLL also noted that, had the program been continued, overseas tours would have begun terminating during July 1957, and that replacements for returning operators, as well as their absorption into activities at NSA, would have posed problems.

In conclusion, PROD recommended that the CIFCO (A) Program be enlarged and made permanent, and that the NSA field activities in the theaters be responsible for a larger role in its administration. It proposed that each SCA install a liaison team to work with NSA on matters of administration and support.

To be concluded next issue.

George F. Howe retired in 1971 after serving over fifteen years as NSA Historian. He is the author of many studies and histories of cryptologic operations, a biography of Chester A. Arthur, a history of the United States, and the official Army history of U.S. operations in Northwest Africa in World War II.