

Gulf of Tonkin Incident

The Gulf of Tonkin incident is the name given to two separate confrontations involving North Vietnam and the United States in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. On August 2, 1964, the destroyer USS Maddox, while performing a signals intelligence patrol as part of DESOTO operations, engaged three North Vietnamese Navy torpedo boats of the 135th Torpedo Squadron. A sea battle resulted, in which the Maddox expended over two hundred and eighty 3-inch and 5-inch shells, and in which four USN F-8 Crusader jet fighter bombers strafed the torpedo boats. One US aircraft was damaged, one 14.5 mm round hit the destroyer, three North Vietnamese torpedo boats were damaged, and four North Vietnamese sailors were killed and six were wounded; there were no U.S. casualties. The second Tonkin Gulf incident was originally claimed by the U.S. National Security Agency to have occurred on 4 AUG, as another sea battle, but instead may have involved "Tonkin Ghosts" (false radar images) and not actual NVN torpedo boat attacks.

The outcome of these two incidents was the passage by Congress of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which granted President Lyndon B. Johnson the authority to assist any Southeast Asian country whose government was considered to be jeopardized by "communist aggression." The resolution served as Johnson's legal justification for deploying U.S. conventional forces and the commencement of open warfare against North Vietnam. In 2005, an internal National Security Agency historical study was declassified; it concluded that the Maddox had engaged the North Vietnamese Navy on August 2, but that there were no North Vietnamese Naval vessels present during the incident of August 4. Regarding the two events the report stated

- August 2: At 1505G, Captain Herrick ordered Ogier's gun crews to open fire if the boats approached within ten thousand yards. At about 1505G, the Maddox fired three rounds to warn off the communist boats. This initial action was never reported by the Johnson administration, which insisted that the Vietnamese boats fired first.
- August 4: It is not simply that there is a different story as to what happened; it is that no attack happened that night. [...] In truth, Hanoi's navy was engaged in nothing that night but the salvage of two of the boats damaged on August 2

Background

Although the United States attended the Geneva Conference (1954), which was intended to end hostilities between France and the Vietnamese at the end of the First Indochina War, it refused to sign the Geneva Accords (1954). The Accords mandated, among other measures, a temporary ceasefire line, intended to separate Vietnamese and French forces, and elections to determine the future political fate of the Vietnamese within two years. It also forbade the political interference of other countries in the area, the creation of new governments without the stipulated elections, and foreign military presence. By 1961, President Ngo Dinh Diem faced significant discontent amongst some quarters of the southern population,

including some Buddhists who were opposed to the rule of Diem's Catholic supporters. After suppressing Vietminh political cadres who were legally campaigning between 1955 and 1959 for the promised elections, Diem faced a growing communist-led uprising that intensified by 1961, headed by the National Front (i.e. NLF or, derogatively, Viet Cong) for the Liberation of South Vietnam

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident occurred during the first year of the Johnson administration. While Kennedy had originally supported the policy of sending military advisers to Diem, he had begun to alter his thinking due to what he perceived to be the ineptitude of the Saigon government and its inability and unwillingness to make needed reforms (which led to a US-supported coup which resulted in the death of Diem). Shortly before his assassination in November 1963, Kennedy had begun a limited recall of US forces. Johnson's views were likewise complex, but he had supported military escalation in Vietnam as a means to challenge what he perceived as the expansionist policies of the Soviet Union. The Cold War policy of containment was to be applied to prevent the fall of Southeast Asia to communism under the precepts of the domino theory. After Kennedy's assassination, Johnson ordered in more US forces to support the Saigon government, beginning a protracted United States presence in Southeast Asia.



Chart showing the US Navy's explanation of the Gulf of Tonkin incident

A highly classified program of covert actions against North Vietnam known as Operation Plan 34-Alpha, in conjunction with the DESOTO operations, had begun under the Central Intelligence Agency in 1961. In 1964 the program was transferred to the US Defense Department and conducted by the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Studies and Observations Group (SOG)

For the maritime portion of the covert operation, Tjeld-class fast patrol boats had been purchased quietly from Norway and sent to South Vietnam. Although the crews of the boats were South Vietnamese naval personnel, approval for each mission conducted under the plan came directly from Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Jr., CINCPAC in Honolulu, who received his orders from the White House. After the coastal attacks began, Hanoi lodged a complaint with the International Control Commission (ICC), which had been established in 1954 to oversee the terms of the Geneva Accords, but the US denied any involvement. Four years later, US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara admitted to Congress that

the US ships had in fact been cooperating in the South Vietnamese attacks against North Vietnam. Maddox, although aware of the operations, was not directly involved.

What was (and is) generally not considered by US politicians at the time were the other actions taken under Operations Plan 34-Alpha just prior to the incident. The night before the launching of the actions against North Vietnamese facilities on Hòn Mê and Hòn Ng? islands, the SOG had launched a covert long-term agent team into North Vietnam, which was promptly captured. That night (for the second evening in a row) two flights of CIA-sponsored Laotian fighter-bombers piloted by Thai mercenaries attacked border outposts well within southwestern North Vietnam. The Hanoi government (unlike the US government, which had to give permission at the highest levels for the conduct of these missions) probably assumed that they were all a coordinated effort to escalate military actions against North Vietnam.

The incident

On July 31, 1964, USS Maddox (DD-731) had begun its intelligence collection mission in the gulf. Daniel Ellsberg, who was on duty in the Pentagon the night of 4 AUG receiving messages from the ship reported that she was on a secret electronic warfare support measures mission (codenamed DESOTO) near Northern Vietnamese territorial waters. Captain George Stephen Morrison was in command of local American forces from his flagship USS Bon Homme Richard (CVA-31). The Maddox was under orders not to approach closer than eight miles from the North's coast and four miles from Hon Nieu island. When the SOG commando raid was being carried out against Hon Nieu, the ship was 120 miles away from the attacked area.

First attack

On 2 AUG Maddox radioed it was under attack from three North Vietnamese Navy P-4 torpedo boats 28 miles away from the North Vietnamese coast in international waters. Maddox stated she had evaded a torpedo attack and opened fire with its five-inch guns, forcing the torpedo boats away. Four USN F-8 Crusader jets launched from the aircraft carrier USS Ticonderoga (CVA-14) then attacked the retiring P-4s, claiming one was sunk and one heavily damaged. Maddox, suffering very minor damage from a single 14.5-millimeter machine gun bullet, retired to South Vietnamese waters where she was joined by the destroyer USS Turner Joy. The North Vietnamese claimed that Maddox was hit by one torpedo, and one of the American aircraft had been shot down. This account, however, has come into sharp dispute with an internal NSA historical study which stated:

At 1500G, Captain Herrick (commander of the Maddox) ordered Ogier's gun crews to open fire if the boats approached within ten thousand yards. At about 1505G, the Maddox fired three rounds to warn off the communist boats.

This initial action was never reported by the Johnson administration, which insisted that the Vietnamese boats fired first. The Maddox when confronted, was approaching Hòn Mê Island, three to four miles inside the twelve-mile limit claimed by North Vietnam. This territorial limit was unrecognized by the United States. After the skirmish, President Johnson ordered the Maddox and Turner Joy to stage daylight runs into North Vietnamese waters, testing the twelve-mile limit and North Vietnamese resolve. These runs into North Vietnamese territorial waters coincided with South Vietnamese coastal raids and were interpreted as coordinated operations by the North, which officially acknowledged the engagements of 2 AUG.



A North Vietnamese P-4 engaging USS Maddox

Others, such as Admiral Sharp, maintained that U.S. actions did not provoke the 2 AUG action. He claimed that North Vietnamese radar had tracked Maddox along the coast, and was thus aware that the destroyer had not actually attacked North Vietnam and that Hanoi (or the local commander) had ordered its craft to engage Maddox anyway. North Vietnamese General Phùng Th Tài later claimed that the Maddox had been tracked since 31 JUL and that it had attacked fishing boats on 2 AUG, forcing North Vietnamese Navy to "fight back."

Sharp also noted that orders given to Maddox to stay eight miles off the North Vietnamese coast put the ship in international waters, as North Vietnam claimed only a five-mile (8 km) nautical limit as its territory (or off of its off-shore islands). In addition, many nations had previously carried out similar missions all over the world, and the USS John R. Craig (DD-885) had earlier conducted an intelligence-gathering mission in similar circumstances without incident.

Second Alleged Attack

On 4 AUG, another DESOTO patrol off the North Vietnamese coast was launched by Maddox and the Turner Joy, in order to "show the flag" after the first incident. This time their orders indicated that the ships were close to no more [less] than 11 miles from the coast of North Vietnam. During an evening and early morning of rough weather and heavy seas, the destroyers received radar, sonar, and radio signals that they believed signaled another attack by the North Vietnamese navy. For some two hours the ships

fired on radar targets and maneuvered vigorously amid electronic and visual reports of enemies. Despite the Navy's claim that two attacking torpedo boats had been sunk, there was no wreckage, bodies of dead North Vietnamese sailors, or other physical evidence present at the scene of the alleged engagement.

At 1:27am Washington time, Herrick sent a cable in which he acknowledged the attack may not have happened and that there may actually have been no Vietnamese craft in the area: "Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects on radar and overeager sonarmen may have accounted for many reports. No actual visual sightings by Maddox. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action taken".

One hour later, Herrick sent another cable, stating, "Entire action leaves many doubts except for apparent ambush at beginning. Suggest thorough reconnaissance in daylight by aircraft." In response to requests for confirmation, at around 1600 Washington time, Herrick cabled, "Details of action present a confusing picture although certain that the original ambush was bona fide."

At 1800 Washington time (0500 in the Gulf of Tonkin), Herrick cabled yet again, this time stating, "the first boat to close the Maddox probably launched a torpedo at the Maddox which was heard but not seen. All subsequent Maddox torpedo reports are doubtful in that it is suspected that sonarman was hearing the ship's own propeller beat"

Within thirty minutes of the 4 AUG incident, President Johnson had decided on retaliatory attacks. That same day he used the 'hot line' to Moscow, and assured the Soviets he had no intent in opening a broader war in Vietnam. Early on 5 AUG, Johnson publicly ordered retaliatory measures stating, "The determination of all Americans to carry out our full commitment to the people and to the government of South Vietnam will be redoubled by this outrage." One hour and forty minutes after his speech, US aircraft reached North Vietnamese targets. At 10:40 am these planes flying from US aircraft carriers, bombed four torpedo boat bases, and an oil-storage facility in Vinh.

United States Response

Shortly before midnight on 4 AUG, President Johnson made a speech by radio in which he described an attack by North Vietnamese vessels on two U.S. Navy warships, USS Maddox and USS Turner Joy and requested authority to undertake a military response. Johnson's speech repeated the theme that "dramatized Hanoi/Ho Chi Minh as the aggressor and which put the U.S. into a more acceptable defensive posture." Johnson also referred to the attacks as having taken place "on the high seas," suggesting that they had occurred in international waters.

He emphasized commitment to both the American people, and the South Vietnamese government. He also reminded Americans that there was no desire for war. "A close scrutiny of Johnson's public statements...reveals no mention of preparations for overt warfare and no indication of the nature and extent of covert land and air measures that already were operational." Johnson's statements were short to

"minimize the U.S. role in the conflict; a clear inconsistency existed between Johnson's actions and his public discourse."

While President Johnson's final resolution was being drafted, Senator Wayne Morse attempted to hold a fundraiser to raise awareness about possible faulty records of the incident involving the USS Maddox. Morse supposedly received a call from an informant who has remained anonymous urging Morse to investigate official logbooks of the Maddox. These logs were not available before President Johnson's resolution was presented to Congress. After urging Congress that they should be wary of President Johnson's coming attempt to convince Congress of his resolution, Morse failed to gain enough cooperation and support from his colleagues to mount any sort of movement to stop it. Immediately after the resolution was read and presented to Congress, Morse began to fight it. He contended in speeches to Congress that the actions taken by the United States were actions outside of the constitution and were "acts of war rather than acts of defense."

Morse's efforts were not immediately met with support, largely because he revealed no sources and was working with very limited information. It was not until after the United States became more involved in the war that his claim began to gain support throughout the United States government. The controversial Morse was defeated when he ran for re-election in 1968.

Distortion of the Event

Evidence was still being sought on the night of August 4 when Johnson gave his address to the American public on the incident. Messages recorded that day indicate that neither President Johnson nor McNamara was certain of an attack. Various news sources, including Time, Life and Newsweek, ran articles throughout August on the Tonkin Gulf incident. Time reported: "Through the darkness, from the West and south...intruders boldly sped...at least six of them... they opened fire on the destroyers with automatic weapons, this time from as close as 2,000 yards." Time stated that there was "no doubt in Sharp's mind that the U.S. would now have to answer this attack," and that there was no debate or confusion within the administration regarding the incident.

The use of the set of incidents as a pretext for escalation of U.S. involvement follows the issuance of public threats against North Vietnam, as well as calls from American politicians in favor of escalating the war. On May 4, 1964, William Bundy called for the U.S. to "drive the Communists out of South Vietnam," even if that meant attacking both North Vietnam and Communist China. Even so, the Johnson administration in the second half of 1964 focused on convincing the American public that there was no chance of war between North Vietnam and the U.S.

North Vietnamese General Giap suggested that the DESOTO patrol had been sent into the Gulf to provoke North Vietnam into giving an excuse for escalation of the war. Various government officials and men aboard the Maddox have suggested similar theories. American politicians and strategists had been planning provocative actions against North Vietnam for some time. George Ball told a British journalist after the war that "at that time...many people...were looking for any excuse to initiate bombing."

Provocative action against North Vietnam was considered after the August, 1964 incidents. John McNaughton suggested in September 1964 that the U.S. prepare to take actions to provoke a North Vietnamese military reaction, including plans to use DESOTO patrols North. William Bundy's paper dated September 8, 1964 suggested more DESOTO patrols as well.

Consequences - Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara failed to inform US President Lyndon B. Johnson that the U.S. naval task group commander in the Tonkin Gulf, Captain John J. Herrick, had changed his mind about the alleged North Vietnamese torpedo attack on U.S. warships he had reported earlier that day.

By early afternoon of 4 AUG, Washington time, Herrick had reported to the Commander in Chief Pacific in Honolulu that "freak weather effects" on the ship's radar had made such an attack questionable. In fact, Herrick was now saying, in a message sent at 1:27 pm Washington time, that no North Vietnamese patrol boats had actually been sighted. Herrick now proposed a "complete evaluation before any further action taken."

McNamara later testified that he had read the message after his return to the Pentagon that afternoon. But he did not immediately call Johnson to tell him that the whole premise of his decision at lunch to approve McNamara's recommendation for retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam was now highly questionable. Had Johnson been accurately informed about the Herrick message, he might have demanded fuller information before proceeding with a broadening of the war. Johnson had fended off proposals from McNamara and other advisers for a policy of bombing the North on four separate occasions since becoming President.

President Johnson ordered retaliatory air strikes and went on national television on 4 AUG. Although Maddox had been involved in providing intelligence support for South Vietnamese attacks at Hòn Mê and Hòn Ng, Johnson denied, in his testimony before Congress, that the U.S. Navy had supported South Vietnamese military operations in the Gulf. He thus characterized the attack as "unprovoked" since the ship had been in international waters.

As a result of his testimony, on 7 AUG, Congress passed a joint resolution (H.J. RES 1145), titled the Southeast Asia Resolution, which granted President Johnson the authority to conduct military operations in Southeast Asia without the benefit of a declaration of war. The Resolution gave President Johnson approval "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."

[Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulf_of_Tonkin_Incident Jul 2013 ++]