(U)Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U)SIGINT and the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley, November 1965

(U) The Vietnam War film "We Were Soldiers" premiered this past weekend and was a box office champion. It relates the story of the battle of the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965 from the viewpoint of Lieutenant Colonel Harold Moore Jr. (played by Mel Gibson). Moore was the commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment (Yes, that 7th Cavalry!) of the 1st Cavalry Division. The battle was the first direct confrontation between the U.S. Army and regulars of the 66th Regiment of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). This would be the acid test for the Army's new tactics of aerial maneuver and attack based on the helicopter. It would also be a test of how well the 371st ASA Radio Research Company (RRC) could support the troopers of the 7th Cavalry.

(S//SI) The battle actually started in late October 1965. Three regiments from separate PAVN divisions concentrated around the Special Forces camp at Plei Me, located about twenty-five miles south of Pleiku in the Central Highlands. Intelligence from SIGINT and other sources suggested that this attack might have been the opening fight in a campaign to cut South Vietnam in half. PAVN rear support construction units were busy extending supply lines east from the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia. On 19 October, the PAVN 33rd Regiment attacked the base. The initial assaults failed, and the North Vietnamese fell back to harass the base with artillery. A relief column of 1,200 South Vietnamese troops, supported by tanks and armored personnel carriers, left Pleiku to relieve Plei Me. Seven miles from the base, the column was ambushed by another PAVN regiment. Pinned down, the South Vietnamese called for help.

(U) Relief was on the way as elements of the 1st Cavalry Division literally rode to the rescue in their helicopters. After freeing the Vietnamese column, the Americans turned to chase down the PAVN units. Knowing that at least one PAVN regiment was in the Ia Drang Valley south of Plei Me, the American brigade commander ordered Colonel Moore to seal the northern opening with his battalion. On 14 November, the 1st Battalion landed and the fight was on. For the next three weeks, in a pair of operations known as Long Reach and Silver Bayonet, the Americans used their firepower and mobility to effect, in the process reducing two PAVN regiments to tatters. Particularly devastating in the battles was the use of B-52 bombers in a tactical role.

(S//SI) It seemed to the PAVN commanders that every time one of their units settled in, an

air strike would hit them. One intercepted PAVN message [   ] concerned a staff meeting at which it was surmised that it was spies in the midst of the North Vietnamese ranks who were giving away their positions. Of course, it had not been spies at all; rather, it was airborne radio direction finding (ARDF) that had flagged the PAVN units and immediately reported their locations. Before this battle, ARDF results had been passed along after the aircraft had landed - no secure system was available in the early days. NSA had developed a tactical one-time pad that secured the messages from the aircraft. The planes now could report their fixes directly to the 371st element supporting the U.S. forces. The ASA personnel on the ground had converted an intercept position in a vehicle to a controller rack. For the Ia Drang battle five mission aircraft had been allocated. A final fix could be passed to the ASA controller within 30 minutes of first notice.

(S//SI) Ia Drang was an operational success for the 1st Cavalry Division. Some 3,500 PAVN troops were killed compared to 300 Americans. The Central Highlands had been secured for the time being. Ia Drang was also the first significant success for tactical SIGINT during an ongoing operation. It had demonstrated its value by alerting the American command to the moves of the PAVN regiments around Plei Me. The ARDF had been useful as a targeting tool for air strikes, allowing even B-52s to be used.

(S//SI) Still, Ia Drang was not an unmitigated success. Tactically, the battle had illustrated the limitations of the helicopter. Despite its mobility, landing zones were predictable, and the PAVN units managed at least twice to ambush units as they were landing. Often at a tactical disadvantage, American units had to rely on firepower in the forms of massive air strikes to bail them out. The Air Force later estimated that it mounted almost five times the number of ground support sorties than it had originally planned for the battle. At least two other significant firefights during the battle had been surprise communist ambushes. American SIGINT was unable to detect communist communications below the battalion level. Communist companies and platoons could be found only by reconnaissance on the ground - "leading with the chin," as some military textbooks call this form of intelligence.

(U) This lesson least understood by American commanders was that their communications security was a distinct liability during operations. A number of U.S. COMSEC specialists had monitored the communications of the 1st Cavalry Division for three weeks before the battle and during the month-long struggle afterwards. These monitors had listened to almost 40,000 voice, teletype, and morse code transmissions by U.S. units. What they discovered shocked them. They found that basic communications security had been disregarded for almost the entire campaign. Approved tactical codes were not used. Callsigns and frequencies were compromised and then not changed. Authenticators, used to guard against deception, were not used. During the battle, all security was thrown aside, and valuable information such as unit location and movement, fire missions, and complete tactical orders was broadcast in the clear.

(U) This problem was exacerbated by the fact that the PAVN units had their own SIGINT

support units, known as Technical Reconnaissance Units (TRU), which provided timely intelligence support. These units were detachments of about 13 to 18 specialists, some of whom intercepted the American voice transmissions. They were located close to their headquarters and could easily reach the commanders with important intelligence within minutes. With the extraordinary scope and range of American voice communications - even relay aircraft were used to extend the range of tactical field radios - the Vietnamese monitors had a veritable bounty to pick from, which they probably did to great effect at Ia Drang.

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