(U)Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U)The Move to Fort Meade

(U) Have you ever given any thought to living in Kentucky? How about Kansas City? Tulsa? Had conditions been just a little bit different, NSA could have ended up in any one of those places instead of here at Fort Meade.

(U) When the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA), the predecessor of NSA, was formed in 1949, its personnel were divided between two different sites: Arlington Hall in Arlington, Virginia, and Nebraska Avenue in Washington, DC. In an appendix to the document creating AFSA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the new agency to formulate a plan to consolidate all its personnel at one site. At about that same time, the USSR detonated its first atomic bomb, and the Joint Chiefs instructed all Department of Defense organizations to formulate plans to disperse their operations in case of an attack. As an alternate facility was impractical for a COMINT organization, it was decided to search for a primary site that would also meet the requirements for an alternate one.

(U) The committee to develop such a plan was organized in spring 1950. Over the next months, several criteria for the new site were identified. Besides having to be on an existing military base, the new site had to

    a. be within 25 miles of a city of at least 200,000;
    b. have workspace totaling at least 700,000 square feet;
    c. possess a "reasonably equable climate";
    d. be suitable for complete isolation by fences and the like;
    e. be accessible to mainline air, rail, and highways;
    f. be at least twenty miles from the Atlantic Ocean;
    g. possess dependable and secure water and electric power sources;
    h. be accessible to commercial and military communications.

(U) A list of possible solutions was assembled and included adapting federal buildings in Kansas City, Tulsa, or St. Louis, or constructing new buildings at Fort Knox, Kentucky, Rocky Mountain Arsenal near Denver, or Fort Meade, Maryland.

(U) The committee made its recommendations in early 1951. If an existing structure was desired, Kansas City was the place to go. If a new structure was preferable, Fort Knox was the best solution. Fort Knox was selected.

(U) However, at this point, it was realized that any move was impossible if the majority of AFSA's expert civilian workforce was unwilling to relocate. The civilian employees of AFSA were polled in May 1951: if the Agency moved to Kentucky would you go? The results showed that a majority of civilians would resign rather than make the move. This situation came to a head the following October when the deputy secretary of defense told the director of AFSA, General Ralph J. Canine, that not only did the civilian employees not want to relocate to Kentucky, but neither the State Department nor the CIA wanted AFSA that far away. Canine met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff who canceled the assignment to Fort Knox and told Canine to appoint another board to select a new location.

(U) The new board looked at several sites in Maryland and Virginia, only one of which, Fort Meade, was on the original list of possible locations. Since Fort Meade met all the original criteria and had been favored by Canine all along, it was selected. The choice became official in February 1952.

(U) By the time construction on Ops 1 began in July 1954, AFSA had been replaced by NSA. The move to Fort Meade was made in stages and started long before Ops 1 was complete. The first personnel to arrive on Fort Meade were 149 Marine guards to secure the area during the construction phase. Additionally, about 2,000 other employees moved to the Fort before construction was completed and worked in what are now the military barracks on Canine Road, across the street from the main NSA complex. This gradual move of operations prevented large sections from being completely shut down during the relocation and allowed NSA to meet the Joint Chiefs deadline of July 1955 for placing cryptologists at Fort Meade.

(U) While the military employees readily accepted the move as a matter of course, the civilians were more apprehensive. For most, it meant relocating from Washington, DC, or Northern Virginia to suburban Maryland. To assist its employees, NSA set up the "Meademobile," a house trailer that dispensed information on Fort Meade and the surrounding communities. On Saturdays, NSA ran a bus out to Fort Meade to give employees a chance to look over the area. Also, NSA announced that the move would be considered a PCS and that the government would pay to move the household goods of all personnel who decided to make the move.

(U) The move to Fort Meade, in spite of predictions, turned out to be a success. Ops 1 was completed in 1957, and all of NSA's COMINT personnel moved in shortly thereafter. (COMSEC personnel remained in Washington, DC, until 1968.) Although there were estimates that thirty percent of the Agency population would leave as a result of the move, the actual departure rate was only about two percent higher than normal.

(U) So, in the end, it appears that the right decision was made. Still, there is something about Denver....

[(U//FOUO) Jill Frahm, Center for Cryptologic History, 972-2893s, jefrahm@nsa]

(U) Source: This is a condensed version of Dr. Thomas R. Johnson's article "The Move, or How NSA Came to Fort Meade," which appeared in the Summer 1995 issue of *Cryptologic Quarterly*. Copies of the article are available through the Center for Cryptologic History.

Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

Content Owner: Feedback

Web POC: Feedback

Last Modified: by nsr
Last Reviewed: February 28, 2003
Next Review: 365 days