



(U//FOUO) From SIGINT to HUMINT to SIGINT (through HUMINT) -- part 1

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How a SIGINT'er became an interrogator in Iraq, and what he learned as a result. (S)

(S) In December of 2003, just weeks into my first tour at the NSA and against the advice of a number of people, I resigned my position as an Intelligence Analyst and took a job as a contractor in Iraq. Having watched my old unit, the 101st, take casualties in Mosul, I found myself unable to resist the urge to be more closely involved in the conflict. My years as a police officer, combined with my security clearance and some formal HUMINT training in the Army, opened the door for me to be hired on as one of the first few civilians assigned to Abu Ghraib prison as an interrogator. Though my only goal at the time was to get to Iraq, it turned out to be an incredible introduction to the discipline of HUMINT that in turn would become a great tool for me in my career with SIGINT.

(S) Though much has been written and spoken about the dreadful conditions at Abu Ghraib, what became readily apparent to me as I looked out at the huge collection of Iraqi prisoners was the vast goldmine of intelligence available to be gathered. It was an exciting realization for me that the faceless voices I had listened to as a linguist in the Army were now standing in front of me in the flesh. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity for anyone in the intelligence field.

(S) I had always been limited to gathering only the information a target would reveal in a conversation, searching for small clues and hints, never having the ability to pry deeper when a target seemed to have vital information. Now I would have the opportunity to get to know these targets, ask them questions about their personal lives, gain a better understanding of who they were, and actually design and tailor specific approaches for each individual. It was an opportunity never afforded to me in SIGINT and I was excited to get started.

(S) The overwhelming number of detainees provided us an endless supply of interrogations to conduct. My interrogations lasted anywhere from 2 minutes to 2 hours and I conducted as many as I could in a day. The harder I worked, the quicker the days went by and the closer I got to home. Though mortar, rocket and small arms attacks remained constant, the insurgency hadn't yet gathered full steam and the hope was to cut it off before it got worse. It was apparent however that we were bringing in more prisoners than we could process, and as the numbers grew, so too did the ominous feeling that things were going downhill.

(S) In early March of 2004, in an attempt to sort through the detainees more efficiently and prevent Abu Ghraib from becoming overcrowded, I began traveling between Abu Ghraib and Camp St. Mere in Fallujah in order to set up a Division level interrogation facility with the 82nd Airborne (ABN). Because the numbers at the facility in Fallujah were more manageable, I was able to spend more time with fewer detainees. I focused on building relationships and found that I would get favorable reactions when I attempted to use my rusty Arabic skills. Detainees found themselves laughing at my terrible accent and limited Iraqi vocabulary and it became a great tool for me to break the tension and open doors.

(S) Gathering actual intelligence in the interrogations was not easy, and there were far more failure than success stories. Most detainees were scared and apprehensive, and it was all I could do to get them talking about basic biographical information let alone their knowledge of the insurgency. When the success stories would come, it was often because the detainee was tired and worn out from his ordeal and hoped to gain something by providing information.

(S) My most successful interrogation was with a man who sat down in my interrogation booth, asked for a cigarette and something sweet, and without provocation spent the next 3 days with

me naming names, locating weapon caches, cataloging groups involved in attacks, and providing specific information about future operations. I began to realize that the collection of HUMINT could be just as frustrating as the collection of SIGINT. As with SIGINT, there were a variety of approaches I could use and a number of tools at my disposal, but if the target chose not to cooperate, there was only so much I could accomplish.

(S) As my Arabic and interviewing skills improved, and as more and more contractors resigned their positions and headed home, a number of doors opened up for me in Iraq. After surviving the uprising in Fallujah in April, and the increasing number of IED* attacks on the road between Camp St. Mere and Abu Ghraib, I was transferred back to Baghdad to work the front gates of Camp Victory. My job there was less about interrogations and more about getting to know all the workers who lined up outside every day to come on base and work for the coalition. I looked to make friends by handing out cigarettes and chocolate and in return got help identifying strangers in the community who warranted closer attention.

(S) I spent my final two months in Iraq getting to know Iraqis. I learned about their lives under Saddam, their experiences in the Iran-Iraq war, their views of Sunni, Shia, Christian, Kurd and Jew, their lives now with and without electricity, and their cautious hope for the changeover and election that was to come. I learned the difference between the privilege and the hardship that membership in the Baath party offered, the lure of a few dollars to risk working with Americans, the variety of sermons in the thousands of mosques, and the motivation behind placing a bomb on the street for a few hundred American dollars.

(S) The countless hours I spent outside the gates talking with Iraqis from a variety of backgrounds became the most valuable experience of my life. But as the number of close calls continued to rise, and as I found myself missing my wife more and more, I decided in June of 2004 that six months in Iraq had been enough and it was time to come home.

(U) Read the conclusion of this article tomorrow!

(U) Note:

(U) IED = Improvised explosive device

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