

**TRANSCRIPT OF TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW WITH
AMBASSADOR DWIGHT J. PORTER**

Conducted 20 November 1991

A. Jay Cristol in Miami, Florida - Ambassador Porter in Silver Springs, Maryland

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AJC: I have turned on my recorder and you indicated that you have no objection to my recording the conversation. Is that correct, sir?

DP: Right.

AJC: Okay. Now you were saying that there is not much more than was in the newspaper.

DP: Right.

AJC: The newspaper was a little bit unclear about a couple of things, but background-wise, may I ask, when did you go to Beirut?

DP: Oh well, fine. I thought you could find all of that in public domain, but I can't remember exactly, but I was there for almost six years, in the period from '65 to '70.

AJC: I see. The next . . .

DP: Wait a minute now. Why are we getting into my bio? I don't –

AJC: Oh, only because, quite frankly, I apologize, you'll excuse me, but I had never heard of you until I saw your name in the paper.

DP: Ah.

AJC: And I was just curious to know something about you - anything that you care to tell.

DP: I'm in the Who's Who if you'd like to look it up.

AJC: Oh, okay, then I'll do that.

DP: Alright.

AJC: Basically, the article was unclear. At one time it talked about intercepts and other times it seemed to refer to decoded messages.

DP: Well, I'm sorry about that. **That was not what I said.** I'm quite sure that these were battlefield messages. They couldn't have been anything else in '67, because I do not

believe that even the Israeli Air Force or ours were, at that point, using coded messages for battlefield transmission, but what I heard, where, where, was direct battlefield talk, was probably, had originally been in Hebrew and clearly had been translated into English.

AJC: I see, so . . .

DP: Now I have no idea where the intercepts occurred and by whom they were made.

AJC: I see, but you heard it in English?

DP: All different possibilities of course. There was the Navy, there was, there's NSA, there's all sorts of possibilities, but the coding I think was probably a mistake. **I did not say that**, and that crept into the story, and I had nothing to do with the use of that word.

AJC: I see, so this, then this was an English translation of . . .

DP: I don't know that. . .

AJC: Oh, okay.

DP: All I know is that I read an English text.

AJC: Oh, I see. You read a text. In other words, you didn't hear it, you read it?

DP: Oh no.

AJC: And I have a FOIA release from the Department of State and they have given me 462 documents which include most of the message traffic and . . .

DP: Oh yeah. Well this had nothing to do with State Department message, this was some sort of an intelligence intercept.

AJC: I see.

DP: A couple of date time groups, no to or from, or anything else. And I must say to you, the day all this happened, **if my memory serves me right**, was the day the embassy was under a mob attack. And the mob attack very nearly succeeded in overrunning the embassy. So these messages were put under my nose to read in a moment of real, real tension, but there wasn't any question about it. I clearly, clearly remember them, and the embassy then burned, burned practically every piece of paper in the whole embassy, because, as I say, we were under attack and the embassy was being prepared for evacuation.

AJC: I see. And . . .

DP: If there had been a file, I wouldn't have kept it. You obviously are not clear on how these procedures were. A State Department person like myself was not privy to either the source or methods of this kind of intercept. We were shown the text because somebody who was in the Intelligence game thought it was important for us to see the text. So I have, I repeat, I have no idea of how this, these intercepts occurred, nor by whom they were made. Yeah.

AJC: I see. And . . .

DP: It was totally different then a . . . it is not a State Department communications thing at all.

AJC: And are you, is your mind certain that it was on the day that the Liberty event happened as opposed to, perhaps, some time a day or two later?

DP: Well, I , it was quite clearly that day because I became aware of it within, from the public domain, within a reasonable period of time. I can't remember how many hours or, as I told you, it was a moment of extreme tension.

AJC: I've interviewed the CIA station chief at Tel Aviv, . . .

DP: Uh huh.

AJC: Also Tony Perna, the Defense Attaché, Captain Castle, the Naval Attaché, and Lynn Blasch, his assistant or deputy, and I hadn't heard anything about such a message, you know, from those sources. I was just curious to know why they wouldn't have had it.

DP: I would have no idea.

AJC: And you wouldn't have any idea where it came from either as you said.

DP: It was just said, yeah.

AJC: Did you know Ambassador Barbour?

DP: I knew him. I did not have anything to do with him at that particular period of time.

AJC: I see. I never knew him. He died some time ago . . .

DP: Oh yeah.

AJC: But, I was talking to Wolf Blitzer of CNN . . .

DP: Okay.

AJC: And he said that he interviewed him in '76 and that Barbour had no information of this nature. There is one thing that I am wondering about. There are . . .

DP: Let me - let me just say this. I would, I would have been reasonably confident that this sort of thing could even just have been picked up from the traffic of the Liberty itself. I really have no idea. Because, as I say, it came in the clear, at least I assume it came in the clear, because there I, there were no restrictions on the, nothing that would have indicated that this material had been from a source other than combat aircraft.

AJC: Because the Israelis have some tapes of their fighter aircraft. . .

DP: Uh huh.

AJC: And then subsequently, their helicopters . . .

DP: Uh huh.

AJC: And there is some conversation on that tape about a helicopter pilot saying that looks like an American flag, but that conversation was about an hour and a half after the attack.

DP: Well, I can not specify at all the hour and the minute of the attack. Even if I knew it at the time, I never had a record of this, and so I simply can't be any help to you on that.

AJC: I . . .

DP: Whether there was a delay or not, I would not have any helping knowledge of this, of course, for many hours afterwards.

AJC: Just one other thing.

DP: I see.

AJC: If I could touch bases with you, Sir, never having been to Beirut, I don't know where the embassy is. I was wondering if you could tell me approximately where it's located. What I'm really feeling for is it's elevation, was it down near sea level, or is it up in the mountains?

DP: Oh, it is quite high. That embassy doesn't exist anymore. It was destroyed by a terrorist bombing.

AJC: I see.

DP: But it was a very tall converted apartment building.

AJC: I see. But you say it was, was it in the mountains or was it down on the coast . . .

DP: It was in the city, it was right on the waterfront in West Beirut.

AJC: Tall building on the waterfront in Beirut. Well, I . . .

DP: As I say, it no longer exists.

AJC: Well . . .

DP: If you'd really studied the Middle East there, you would remember that the embassy was destroyed by bombing, what, ten years ago or so.

AJC: Yes. I seem to recall that, but it didn't stick in my memory because up until this point I hadn't focused on Beirut in connection with this incident. This was the first time that something outside - I've done most of my research in the United States and also in Israel in the area where it happened, and . . .

DP: I'm sorry I can't be of more help to you.

AJC: Well, I think that,

DP: Just the wartime circumstances and I can't of course even remember the actual text of the messages, all I can remember is the gist of them, and that's of course what I passed on. Ah, have you ever tried to get a copy of the Clifford Report?

AJC: I spoke to Clark Clifford . . .

DP: Yeah.

AJC: Personally - and he told me that he had heard electronic recordings of material, but he said that, at the time, he didn't recall doing a written report. He says that he thought that the report, part of his recollection was an oral report, which was made to the President and some of his top people. Now, in his recent book, he says something contradictory to that. He says that the report remains classified until today. So, I don't know where his memory was better, when he talked to me - or when he wrote the book.

DP: Well, I only just read the book, and I was really surprised at sort of the intensity of and the clarity of his memory on that one. I guess we'd all feel a lot better if somehow or other, every piece could be put out in the public domain.

AJC: Well, on the one hand his memory was quite clear but, on the other, it wasn't so good because he talks about Golda Meir being the Prime Minister (at the time), and she wasn't.

DP: Yeah, well.

AJC: So, I mean, you know, I can't fault someone's memory from 24 and ½ years ago, not being perfect. I doubt I remember what I had for breakfast this morning.

DP: I know it's a - it's a difficult problem. I felt that there must have been something in his memory which led him, rather positive about . . .

AJC: But, when I spoke to Dean Rusk, and I also spoke, let's see my recollection is that Dean Rusk was Secretary at the time and his number 2 was Nicholas Katzenbach . . .

DP: That's right.

AJC: And I interviewed both of them - plus a large number of members of their staff and I . . .

DP: I saw the list, yeah.

AJC: Yeah, they didn't seem to have any recollection of a written report either.

DP: Well, it's quite possible that they wouldn't have seen it - that it could have been locally intercepted, you know.

AJC: But I was referring to Clifford's report.

DP: Oh, I see.

AJC: Yeah.

DP: That, that's a real puzzlement. I - I can't figure it out either, why that has never been released.

AJC: Well, I was searching for it, I was demanding it. I even had Congressmen looking for it for me and noone could ever find any record of such a report. And then the Johnson Library thought they found it and it was Classified and then they came back and said no, they don't have such a report. And all of the National Security Council archives were sent to the Johnson Library, so . . .

DP: They were? I didn't - I'm amazed/

AJC: Uh,

DP: Well,

AJC: At least, let me correct that. I was told by the National Security Council that all of their archives were turned over to the Johnson Library, and of course, when I was dealing with State, getting their material, I had to chuckle because the fellow I spoke to, I don't remember his name, it's in another file, but he said this is all we have, he says, if we having something else we are not trying to hide it from you, it's just that's our lack of bureaucratic perfection.

DP: Well, you know, I think there are still missing pieces in this puzzle and I wish to heck they could all be brought out in the open. It's too bad, get it settled and done with.

AJC: Well, you know there is an NSA document which has been partially released, but the remainder is not to be released until 2011. *[Note: This document was substantially further declassified on July 3, 2004 and may be viewed on the NSA website, www.nsa.gov.]* The document itself is sanitized in the National Archives but the NSA, of course, still refuses to admit that it exists or to make any statement as to why they sent the ship there, except the official statement which regrettably, is, was not a true statement. From everything I can see they released that statement, "to facilitate the removal of diplomats from the area."

DP: Now which course is manifestly absurd.

AJC: Well, I spoke to Dr. Harold Saunders on that and his explanation was for every intelligence operation there must be a cover story, and that was the cover story.

DP: Right. Well, I wrote the one for the Powers incident. I was working with Bob Murphy at the time.

AJC: Oh?

DP: Nobody ever used it.

AJC: (Laughter)

DP: The Defense Department decided to accept responsibility, so that was that.

AJC: You know, about six months after that, I was still in the Naval Reserve, and I flew into Bodo, Norway. Here was a little, sleepy village, north of the Arctic Circle . . .

DP: I know it, yeah.

AJC: With a 10,000 foot runway and every possible radio navigation devise you could imagine.

What was that runway doing there? We found out that it was his [Powers] destination, which he didn't quite make.

DP: Yeah. That's right. Well, there's an interesting - did you ever read the Vishlaus (sp?) book on that subject? It's a quite interesting book.

AJC: No, I don't think I did.

DP: You ought to get it. I can't remember the name of it - I read it a couple years ago. It basically, the title has something to do with that, the whole story of the U2 and the Khrushchev - Eisenhower relationship at the time. It really was quite a fascinating story. . It doesn't really have much bearing on the Liberty, but it is an extremely interesting little bit of history. And I was, I was deeply involved in that because I was working for Bob Murphy then in the State Department.

AJC: I see.

DP: Well, I wish I could help you more. I wish you luck. I do hope you . . .

AJC: Well - let me put it to you this way. There are, you know, there are some people that are never going to believe one story, and there are some that are never going to believe another, and there are some facts that probably will never come out, but at least I started on this - as a Master's thesis. . .

DP: Did you really?

AJC: And, after a couple of years it was suggested that it ought to be upgraded to a Ph.D. and I've been cranking away for five years and I'm not sure when I'll finish - but all I'm doing is sort of putting a mosaic together and gathering little bits and pieces here and there.

DP: Yeah. I just think it would be good in the long run for this whole thing to be aired and to get it out of the way. It hangs over our relationships with Israel like a continuing, festering sore, and it would really be better if it were all . . . if the truth were known. And I have no, you know, I think quite clearly there were many mistake on the U.S. side too.

AJC: Unfortunately, that's what my research discloses. We made a lot of mistakes and they made, of course, the truly tragic one of pulling the trigger, but there are, there's so many. . . I mean, it's not just one mistake. It's like a compounding of mistake after mistake, and then there was this rivalry between the Air Force and their Navy which led the Navy to rush in and try and get this prize. You know, everybody had some action. The Navy had nothing in the war. They were trying to get into the, into the fight, and . . . The Chief of the Navy lost his job, pardon me, the Deputy Chief of the Navy lost his job over this, but

that has never been published.

DP: I didn't know that.

AJC: He was in command. The Chief of the Navy was out of Headquarters when it happened, and, of course another dumb thing was they had their Naval headquarters up at Haifa, at Stella-Maris, and their main command was in Tel Aviv. And that split command could have made a major difference if they had been together. Right after this they moved the Navy headquarters to Tel Aviv.

DP: Well, the Navy in the IDF has always been a sort of the step-child. You know, the Air Force has always been so brilliant, and, (laughter) the Navy, I think has always looked over longingly at the Air Force and the Army. But I, I didn't realize that their guy, the deputy lost his job.

AJC: Yeah, apparently, shortly thereafter the Chief of the Navy called him in and had what was known as a "heart to heart" talk with him. And he makes no bones about the fact that he used an error in judgment in attacking the ship because he said that even if it was the Egyptian ship, El Quseir, the it was no threat to Israel. . .

DP: No.

AJC: So there was no reason to attack it, but having attacked it, and of course, in what ensued, this fellow resigned. I did a little study on Chiefs of the Navy and almost in every case, not always, but almost every number 2 fled up to number 1, but this fellow was number 2 during the war and two weeks later, or one week later, he resigned.

DP: Well, I had one question for you. Maybe you've discovered the answer. I never read this Ennes book until actually after I'd been called by Evans & Nowack and told them the little bit I knew. I am puzzled with a, I guess, I can understand why the message went out to the Liberty to withdraw, but I am sure puzzled by that crazy communications patch work that didn't get the message to the ship for a long period of time and why it never got it to the ship at all.

AJC: Well, I think some of them arrived after the attack. They had been routed to the Philippines, came around the world to Asmara, Ethiopia and were relayed to the ship, unfortunately, too late.

DP: But have you been able to able to uncover anything more about why they, why the, headquarters, the U.S. headquarters, suddenly decided to send that urgent message? What triggered that? What motivated that message? That puzzles me. I just don't know.

AJC: Well, I can tell you my theory, as I said, if NSA would open up, . . .

DP: Yeah.

AJC: That would be helpful, but Liberty was off Africa, at Azerbaijan . . .

DP: Yes.

AJC: When she got the message, and I have to check my date, but it was in late May, to proceed. . .

DP: It's all in that. . .

AJC: Yeah. Go to Rota, Spain.

DP: Yeah.

AJC: And so, and then to proceed, and her first orders were to proceed to a point off of Port Said. Now, if you remember at that time, Nasser had asked the U.N. to pull out its troops. U. Thant pulled out his troops and the Egyptians were moving in. So we had a fairly good working relationship with Israel. I mean they were telling us what was going on there. We didn't know what was going on in the Sinai, and so it is my analysis that the ship was being sent off Port Said and then ultimately off El Arish to spy on the Sinai to see what was happening there.

DP: Yeah.

AJC: But it was overcome by events. Before she arrived, the war started.

DP: Yeah.

AJC: And nobody seemed to picture that until a fellow named Frank Raven, from NSA, the night before, all of a sudden said, "Holy Mackerel, she's going right into the war zone."

DP: I see.

AJC: And so they started sending, they sent the first message that said pull back 25 miles.

DP: Yeah.

AJC: Then the other four said 100 miles and actually, one thing that kind of annoys me is that at one point, they picked up the phone, I believe it was a Major Breedlov with the JCS in Washington, and he called London, where he said, "Send a plain voice message to the Liberty to get out of there." And an American -

DP: No.

AJC: A U.S. Captain named Hanley was the duty officer and he was required to write an explanation in our Court of Inquiry. It is attached as an exhibit. He explains why he refused to take that oral order, but it comes through to me, as “I’m a Captain, I’m not going to take orders from a Major.”

DP: Yeah.

AJC: And so he said, “Send us a written confirmation.” Had he picked up the horn and sent the message, this whole thing would have been avoided.

DP: Yeah.

AJC: But, you know again, that’s another “what if” in a long chain of events.

DP: There were obviously a lot of tragedies that accumulated, one on top of the other. Well, it’s really too bad. I - I wish you luck, I hope you find what you’re looking for.

AJC: Well, I mean, as I say, what I want to find is as much as I can and gather it all together. A lot of people have done research in the United States, and there have been three official investigations in Israel, but as far as I know, no one has tried to synthesize the two together and tie them up in one big ball of wax. When I went on the bench I thought I would have more time to study and when I got out to the University, just for fun, one day they said, “What are you going to write about with your qualifications?” I don’t know whether you know everything about me, but I was a Navy pilot and I . . .

DP: I saw that.

AJC: I got involved in the Law of Naval Warfare, so they said you would be an ideal person to write on this subject, and I initially said, “No. Nobody is even interested in that any more.” I happened to be on active duty in the Pentagon when the Exocet missile went into the USS Stark. I worked on that for a couple of weeks. I said, that happened a couple of years ago and nobody ever talks about that - who’s going to talk about a 20-some year old item. After I looked into it, I saw there still was some interest and some unanswered questions, so I started gathering the evidence and looking for the smoking gun but so far I can’t say I found the smoking gun. I have gathered a lot of data and I hope some day to put it all together. Whether it will answer anything or just raise more questions, I can’t tell you.

DP: Well, I hope that you publish. I hope we will get a chance to take a look at what you’re putting out, because it would be very interesting to find out. Yeah.

AJC: Well, you're very kind and I would like to think that maybe somebody might be interested in publishing it. On the other hand I wonder who, so time will tell. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me Ambassador.

DP: Absolutely no problem - and I wish I could be more helpful.

AJC: Alright, and perhaps some day when I am wandering through Washington, we'll get to meet face to face.

DP: Please.

AJC: Nice talking to you Sir. Goodbye.