

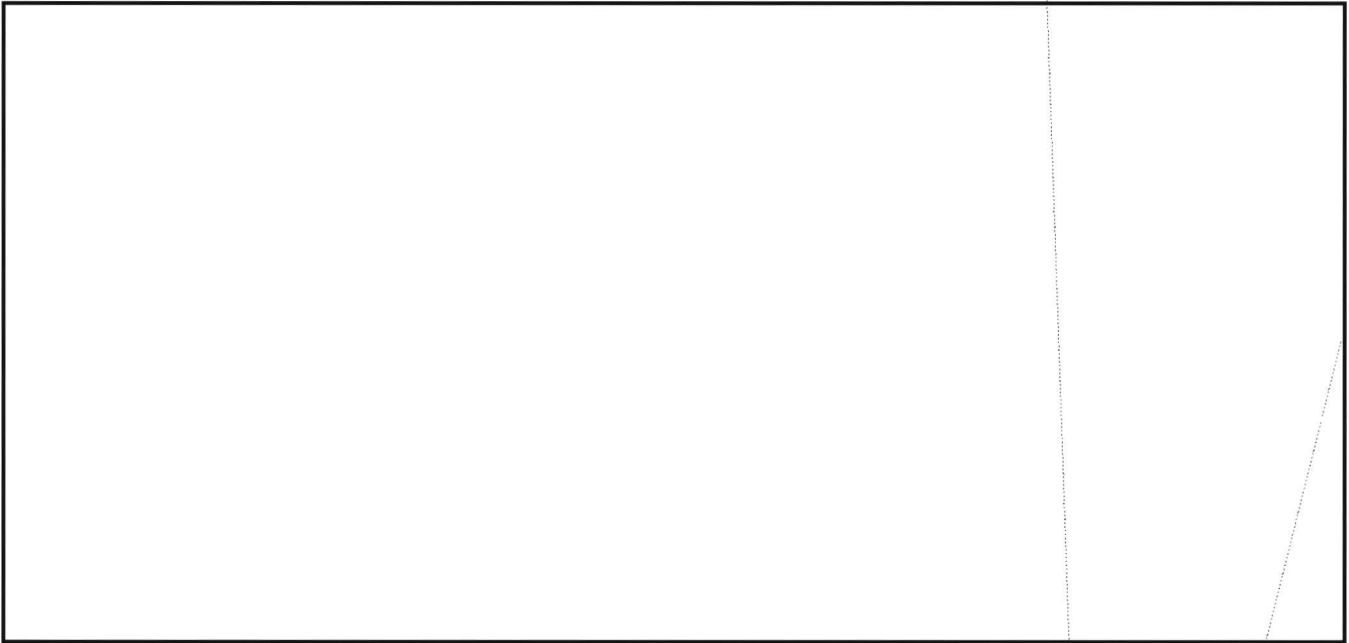
# (U) Cryptologic Almanac 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Series

~~(S//SI)~~ The Achille Lauro:A



Security Failure

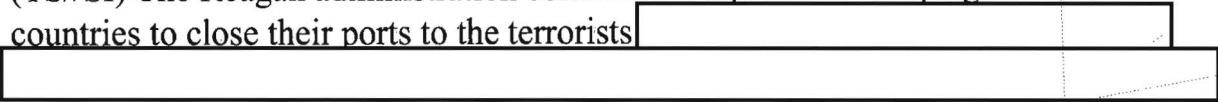
~~(S//SI)~~ The date was 7 October 1985. NSA's National SIGINT Operations Center (NSOC) learned from State Department sources that an Italian cruise ship sailing in the eastern Mediterranean had been captured, apparently by Palestinian terrorists. The U. S. SIGINT System went into action.



(U) The *Achille Lauro* had departed from Naples, Italy, on 3 October. The ship was scheduled to take an 11-day cruise with stops in Naples, Syracuse (Sicily), Alexandria, Port Said, Ashdod (Israel), Cyprus, and the island of Rhodes. A port authority spokesman from Naples reported that when the ship left Italy, there were 840 passengers on board.

(U) According to press reports, the *Achille Lauro* was hijacked while proceeding from Alexandria to Port Said. The hijackers set the ship adrift in the Mediterranean Sea. Most of the ship's passengers had disembarked at Alexandria to visit Cairo. The Italian ministry believed that between 70 and 80 passengers and the crew of approximately 340 people remained on board at the time of the hijacking. There were definitely Americans still on board, but there was no agreement on exactly how many Americans remained on the ship.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The Reagan administration conducted a diplomatic campaign to convince neutral countries to close their ports to the terrorists




(b) (1)  
(b) (3)-18 USC 798  
(b) (3)-50 USC 403  
(b) (3)-P.L. 86-36



~~(TS//SI)~~ To meet this next phase of the crisis, NSA turned its resources toward support to the military operation. An intercepting force of U. S. navy F-14s and supporting aircraft was flown to an aircraft carrier waiting in the Mediterranean south of Crete, and the unsuspecting Egyptian commercial pilot found himself with armed company. The pilot was forced to fly to the Navy base in Sigonella, Italy.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The U. S. intended to deal with the hijackers itself. At the last minute, however, Italy decided that although Sigonella was a NATO base, the hijackers were on its sovereign territory and should be managed by Italy. Therefore, the hijackers were turned over to the Italian justice system.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Abu Abbas was one of the passengers on the Egyptian plane. The Italians spirited him out of the country, while keeping the other hijackers locked up. 



(U) The snatching of the terrorists, on the other hand, turned out to be a security failure. The Reagan administration leaked information to the press. The 12 October edition of the

*New York Post* and the 21 October edition of *Newsweek* magazine contained the full story replete with details about SIGINT coverage. *The New York Post* described coverage of President Mubarak's communications by stating "between NSA and the Israelis, the entire area was wired." The *Post* further explained:

"The intelligence picked up by NSA's high tech vacuum cleaners was so accurate that at 4:00 P. M., while he was returning to the White House aboard Air Force One, national security adviser Robert McFarlane was able to give Reagan fifteen minutes advance warning that the Egyptian plane was taking off. At that time, Reagan gave the green light for the operation to begin."

~~(S//SI)~~



Nevertheless, good luck does not excuse poor security.

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