



(U) Charlie Meals: Thoughts as Retirement Approaches

FROM: SIGINT Communications
Unknown
Run Date: 12/09/2005

(U//FOUO) This week, SIDtoday conducted its final interview with SIGINT Deputy Director Charlie Meals, as his retirement nears. We asked him to comment on the state of SIGINT today, to sum up the past, and to peer into the future.

- (U//FOUO) As SIGINT Deputy Director (since April, 2003), you've had good insight into how well SID is doing. So how would you rate SID's overall performance in recent years?

(U) In a word, stellar! We are absolutely at the top of our game. Never before in our history have we produced such timely, relevant intelligence. And we've done all this during probably the most difficult times we've ever had to deal with, given the pressures of countering terrorism and the unpredictability of the targets.

(U) I think we've been so successful that SIGINT is now without rival among the "INTs." When you think about it, this is only natural - we are living in the Communication Age, and people around the world conduct their business electronically. That presents an opportunity for us, and we're knocking 'em dead!

(U) This didn't happen by accident. It's a direct result of our having the best work force we've ever had. I believe that if the general public knew of the dedication, hard work, and effectiveness of our workers, they would be very proud. Our analysts are extremely creative and realize that there may be 50 different ways in which we can obtain intelligence about someone. The management's job is to unbridle all of this creative energy and encourage it. It also helps that we have adopted a risk management approach. That means that it is OK to make a mistake!

(U) Finally, it's helped that the morale among the leadership is at an all-time high. SID has a group of leaders in place who are "people-people," and who operate in an atmosphere of patience and collegiality. Dissenting views are not just tolerated -- they are encouraged.

- (U) What do you see as the main areas in which we still have room for improvement?

(U//FOUO) We still have a long way to go to be optimized as far as having the analytic tools and IT infrastructure we need to do our jobs. I think we can also do better in terms of training. This is not a knock on ITIS or on the NCS, by the way. We need to listen to the new employees and learn how we can do better.

- (U) If you could change one thing about the Agency, what would it be?

(U) A couple things come to mind. For one, I'd like to see us do a better job of nurturing employees and asking them to think beyond their job description. Each talented person who fails to reach his or her full potential while working here is a lost opportunity. Second, although some degree of bureaucracy is a necessary evil, we should do everything we possibly can to minimize it. We shouldn't constrain our work force with red tape.

- (U) Looking back on your career, what was the single most enjoyable job you ever had?

(U//FOUO) Mid-career, I had a very exciting and enjoyable job working as SINIO for Arms Control and Strategic Programs. But on balance, my most enjoyable job is the one I have now - SIGINT Deputy Director. A large part of the credit for that goes to MG Quirk. He has made me a full partner in leading our vital mission - I never felt like a Vice President! I've also been given a lot of responsibility and the opportunity to work with many different people. It's translated to

long hours, but I've gotten a lot of psychic income out of it. Although I've been doing this a long time, I should say that I'm not retiring because I feel burned out - rather, I just want to do other things, and this was the right time to do it, with MG Quirk due to retire next year.

- (U) What do you look forward to most as you move into retirement?

(U) I look forward to just having more time to do things outside of work. I confess that I feel a little guilty about leaving tasks uncompleted, but in reality, there will never be a time when one can say, "Well, that's all finished! Now I can retire!" I also feel good about the leaders who are in place to pick up where we left off.

- (U) When can we expect the new SIGINT Deputy Director to be named?

(U) I think my permanent replacement will probably be chosen in late spring. An Acting Deputy Director will be named to fill the spot once I leave in early January.

- (U) Any final thoughts?

(U) One thing I keep thinking about is that it really is all about people. We're often tempted to think that technology can solve our toughest problems. Think about it -- what is technology but the manifestation of someone's intelligence? Never try to substitute technology for top-notch people.

(U) I'm also convinced that we'll get our greatest return by teaming with each other. It's not all about "I," and we need a greater emphasis on teaming as we evaluate people for P3's and such. I look at the Issue Management Teams and see how three heads are better than one. In fact, the DNI has now created mission manager positions, so it seems that others are now emulating the way we do business.

(U) Lastly, I think about my career of almost 40 years and think about the mind-boggling changes that have occurred - all for the better. It's like a different planet! I never would have believed 40 years ago that I would someday hold this high-level position, either. It occurred to me that when I walk through that turnstile for the last time, someone will be walking in for the very first time... and what will the place be like when they wrap up their career 40 years from now?

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