

**Volume 14**

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**Last Full Measure – Gulf of Tonkin**

**Incident - I**

**Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on A Moment in Time is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose devotion gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, the last full measure.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: Of all the controversies of the Vietnam War, none has generated as much heat as that surrounding the**

**Gulf of Tonkin Incident of August, 1964. It represented the tipping point of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. From that seemingly innocuous dust-up flowed a vast increase in American engagement, ultimately American withdrawal, and, most would say, American defeat.**

**In 1945, Vietnamese nationalist leader, and passionate communist Ho Chi Minh, saw great possibilities for a unified, independent Vietnam. Japan had been defeated, the French collaborators were in disgrace, and he thought he had a new champion in the United States. Using the stirring words of the American Declaration of Independence in his own declaration, Ho hoped to solidify U.S. support for**

**an independent Vietnam, which he thought he had secured as he worked against the Japanese during the war with the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor of the CIA. Ho's optimism was proven wrong. Within months it was clear that the Europeanists in the State Department had prevailed and the U.S. would back France's return to Vietnam. American support grew both financially and then with troops over the next two decades. First France, then the corrupt and ineffective South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem, then the generals who overthrew him and murdered Diem and his brother, felt the increasingly assertive presence, power and purse of their American patrons.**

**By summer 1964, the U.S. engagement in Vietnam was intense. Over 20,000 military “advisors” were present to prop up the shaky government of the generals and off the coast, the Navy patrolled South and North Vietnamese waters providing intelligence, occasional fire and logistical support for offensive operations and airstrikes.**

**In early August destroyer USS *Maddox*, a part of Desoto patrol, an intelligence gathering watch in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam, was on station in international waters and at all times at least sixteen miles out to sea. On the early morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of**

**August, the ship intercepted a clear attack command on enemy frequencies. Several hours later, three North Vietnamese torpedo patrol boats entered an attack pattern clearly aimed at *Maddox*. The U.S. vessel and naval aircraft engaged the three attackers and disabled them. But the *Maddox* narrowly escaped three torpedoes launched before the boats were crippled. Next time: a second attack, maybe, and permission to go to war.**

**Research assistance by John Whalen, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

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