

Mail Snooping By the Military

Slightly longer version filed CIA (d).



Jack Anderson

IN OUTRIGHT violation of the law, military counterintelligence teams for years opened and read the mail of suspects.

This "flap and seal" operation, as it was called, rarely turned up any spies or criminals. It was used largely to snoop on servicemen who had complained about the Vietnam war.

Evidence that the Pentagon tampered with the mails has been offered to the Select Senate Committee which is investigating the excesses of the CIA, FBI and other government gum shoes.

The "flap and seal" term goes back to an earlier day when mail was surreptitiously steamed open and sealed again. But the Pentagon snoops pried into military mail by a more intricate technique called "rolling." Two prongs resembling knitting needles were used to slip letters from envelopes without breaking the flap seals.

★ ★ ★

OUR SOURCES told us, parenthetically, that the more resourceful Central Intelligence Agency has developed a machine that can read mail right through the envelopes. Electric waves penetrate the paper, scanning each layer and picking out the ink marks. Then the letter is reassembled electronically.

The counterintelligence teams, operating in strict secrecy, opened military mail both within the United States and at overseas bases. The practice was more

blatant, however, outside the country.

"As soon as an American leaves the United States, the intelligence authorities think he loses all his constitutional rights," said one source.

The snooping became so widespread, military sources told us, that letters stacked up faster than they could be read. Tapes of bugged conversations also accumulated.

In most cases, the justification for the snooping was minimal, our sources say. Some people had their mail read simply because they had sensitive assignments.

★ ★ ★

THE GOVERNMENT'S habit of prying into people's mail, in disregard of the law, is one of the abuses the Senate committee is supposed to investigate. But our sources say the leads often aren't followed up for lack of competent investigators.

In other cases, lawyers who came to the committee from federal agencies simply call their contacts in the intelligence services, obtain a denial of wrongdoing and call this an "investigation."

Footnote: A committee spokesman gave us this statement: "We also regard the opening of U.S. mail overseas as a domestic matter." The Defense Department had no comment.

(Written with Les Whitten)