

# Canadian Military History

---

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 19

---

1-23-2012

## Intelligence Secrets

David Stafford  
*University of Edinburgh*

---

### Recommended Citation

Stafford, David (1994) "Intelligence Secrets," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 19.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol3/iss1/19>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Intelligence Secrets

David Stafford

James Rusbridger and Eric Nave, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbour: How Churchill Lured Roosevelt into World War II*. Toronto: Summit Books, 1991, 302 pages, \$19.95 US.  
Bradley Smith, *The Ultra-Magic Deals and the Most Secret Special Relationship 1940-1946*. Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993, 276 pages, \$24.95 US.

**R**ecently I was contacted by Radio Wales. An eager young producer had heard I was writing a book on Churchill and secret intelligence. What, he asked, did I make of the news that the prime minister's top secret wartime intelligence files had been declassified and placed in the Public Record Office; would they reveal that Churchill had indeed known in advance about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and deliberately withheld that intelligence from Roosevelt?

Inwardly I groaned at the reappearance of this *canard*. It used to be that Roosevelt knew but failed to tell the American people. Now, according to James Rusbridger and Eric Nave in their 1991 book *Betrayal at Pearl Harbour; How Churchill Lured Roosevelt into World War II*,<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt is the victim and Churchill the villain, as suggested by the subtitle. The argument is nonsense on at least two counts. The first is a matter of logic and common sense. If Churchill had indeed known about Pearl Harbour in advance, it would have made far more sense for him to have told Roosevelt. The Japanese attack would have failed, the United States would have gone to war with its Pacific Fleet unscathed, and Churchill would have accumulated an enormous credit with the President.

But Churchill did NOT know about Pearl Harbour in advance. Rusbridger and Nave — a wartime Far East cryptolinguist who had left the Far East Combined Bureau in

Singapore (Britain's Far Eastern codebreaking operation) before 1941 and the events in question — claim that the British were reading the Japanese Navy's main cryptosystem, JN-25, and therefore must have known of Japanese intentions. Indeed they were, or rather had been. But by December 1941 the basic JN-25 had received several additives and was almost impenetrable. Codebreakers in the Far East were actually **READING** (as distinct from intercepting) very few JN-25 messages, and none of them from significant operational traffic. That was why Malcolm Kennedy, a Japanese expert at Bletchley Park, was pestered by telephone calls from Churchill throughout the week preceding Pearl Harbour for any indications of Japanese intentions. When the attack was announced, Kennedy — on duty on 7 December — was taken completely by surprise.

An extensive demolition of the Rusbridger-Nave conspiracy theory has recently appeared in the *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*.<sup>2</sup> This, however, was far too complex an argument for the soundbite offered me by Radio Wales. So I contented myself with assuring listeners that undoubtedly the new PRO files would lay the matter to rest for once and for all. But just to be on the safe side, I decided to take a look at them myself.

The files, released only last November, contain signals intelligence that was passed directly to Churchill by the Government Code

and Cypher School at Bletchley Park. Invariably, they contain a cover note signed by "C," Sir Stewart Menzies, head of the Secret Intelligence Service, in his famous green ink. The selection usually has three elements: reports relating to enemy ground and air forces derived from high grade ciphers such as ENIGMA; naval headlines with summaries of German, Italian (and Spanish) activity; and BJ reports — selected transcripts of intercepted diplomatic telegrams. There are over a thousand files. The first dates from 27 September 1940, the request from Churchill to Menzies that he receive daily briefings.

What Churchill made of the material is difficult to say. Occasionally he underlines items in his red ink, sometimes he asks for clarification, and often he makes no comment at all. As Hinsley has pointed out, the volume of material was enormous, it took an expert analyst to understand its significance, and by the end of the war the Bletchley park output was so immense that Churchill could not possibly have mastered it. For all his desire to be his own intelligence officer, the very success of Bletchley Park prevented this from happening.<sup>3</sup>

What the material did do, however, was provide Churchill with a means of keeping his chiefs of staff and commanders in the field on their toes. They knew that he relished his "golden eggs" and that secret intelligence was manna to the prime minister. Even if he swallowed it undigested, they knew he would almost certainly regurgitate it at some unwelcome moment. Red ink or not, the files were weapons of war in Churchill's adamant demand that he, and he alone, bore the supreme responsibility for the British war effort.

Without a mastery of the military background and a full understanding of the enemy order of battle at any given moment, the researcher in the PRO is worse off than Churchill, at least where the Enigma material is concerned. The diplomatic intercepts make more immediate sense, and there is a large number of them, more than the recent concentration on military intercepts has

encouraged us to expect. On 6 December 1941 we can see that Churchill read the text of a message from the Foreign Minister in Tokyo to the Japanese Ambassador in London that heralded an imminent crisis. It instructed him to destroy all except certain key codes and burn files and secret documents. "As these are precautions envisaging an emergency" Tokyo told the Ambassador, "you should communicate this to no one but your own staff and you should redouble your attention to your duties and maintain your calm and respect." No wonder Churchill was on the telephone to Kennedy at Bletchley asking if he knew where the first blow would fall.

The files received by Churchill on 6 December make no mention of Pearl Harbour. There is, however, an omission in the PRO material. On that day Churchill received three Bletchley files. The first (HW/302) contains 22 "special messages," i.e. Enigma intercepts. All relate to enemy activity in North Africa. The third (HW/304), likewise contains nothing relating to the Far East. The blue cover note on the second, HW/303, says that it contains 17 BJs, 3 special messages, and 1 summary of a naval message. In fact it contains only the BJs, all of them. The other items are missing. What were they? Where have they gone? In such gaps do conspiracy theories flourish, although for the reasons given above there's no reason to believe that this one would support the Rusbridger/Nave thesis.

Another file, however, grabbed my attention in the few hours I had to spare at Kew. The second in the special intelligence series, dated February 26, 1941 (why such a long gap since the first?) is indexed as follows: "C to PM requesting permission to reveal to US progress with German armed forces cryptography." Alas, the file was out to another reader, and I did not get to see it. Another series, however, touched on the same delicate issue of intelligence sharing. The Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) files up to the end of 1941 have now been released. Trawling around the Pearl Harbour date in this series I found nothing suggesting foreknowledge — indeed the Committee's last meeting before

the day of infamy was 3 December 1941, and none of the items dealt with the Far East. But on 30 December, with the Americans now fully engaged against both Japan and Germany — and with Churchill in Washington wining and dining with Roosevelt — it turned its attention to what the Americans should be told about Britain's intelligence. The committee concluded that most secret methods of intelligence acquisition should not be divulged to the Americans.

This might come as a shock to those who have bought into the Churchill-Roosevelt buddy theory of the Second World War, the tale of how two friendly nations linked arms and unreservedly shared their most intimate secrets from the beginning to the end. It was not quite so simple. Indeed, the issue of wartime intelligence sharing was extremely complex. Seeing the JIC decision in black and white drove home what I had just been reading about in a superb piece of research by Bradley Smith, *The Ultra-Magic Deals and the Most Secret Special Relationship 1940-1946*.<sup>4</sup> I can recommend it to anyone.

In a detailed examination of sources in Washington and London, Smith traces the slow and uncertain evolution of SIGINT-sharing (signals intelligence) between the British and the Americans, covering in some 200 pages what Hinsley and the official historians dealt with in fewer than 20.<sup>5</sup> The path to co-operation and collaboration was strewn with difficulties and suspicions on both sides. On the British side, showing the product of Ultra to the Americans was not the problem. Sources and methods, as the JIC meeting I've quoted indicates, were. Smith shows that the service intelligence heads, as well as 'C', were adamantly opposed to opening cryptanalytic doors any further to the Americans at this stage. In the Atlantic, they were receiving all they needed through Ultra material that was 'wrapped up' in items they already received from the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre. As for the U.S. Army, it had no operational need of such high grade intelligence at this stage of the war. Besides, American security was not yet good enough for the British in general or

Churchill in particular, who was rightly obsessive on the subject.

Subsequently, the British opened up only very slowly, and there was intense bargaining between the two allies. Co-operation, Smith insists, was driven by hard-headed operational need, not sentiment. No general British-American agreement on military cryptanalytic co-operation was reached until May 1943, with the Washington BRUSA accord, when the needs of joint army operations made it imperative and the British had come to see that only the Americans could pay for the huge technical infrastructure required to maintain and increase the cryptanalytic effort required for victory. *Per contra*, they were ready much earlier to share cryptanalytic information with the U.S. Navy. This was because of desperate needs in the Atlantic; a naval agreement about this was signed between the U.S. Navy's communications wizard, Commander Joseph Wenger and GC and CS director Edward Travis on 1 October 1942.

It is always easy to get too close to a subject — especially the raw documents — to see it properly. For all his emphasis on the obstacles along the way and the pragmatic concerns that governed so much of the exchanges, Smith avoids the danger. He acknowledges the importance of the personal Churchill-Roosevelt link. Their early determination to work closely together provided the basic groundwork on which co-operation would eventually be built. Had either leader been opposed, there would be no story to tell. And he acknowledges that the transatlantic intelligence relationship was, when finally consummated, unique and unprecedented, providing the essential basis for postwar collaboration. "Here," he writes,

was a true revolution in interstate relations that would . . . guarantee a postwar continuation of the special relationship, because once the two countries so completely opened up their cryptanalytic secrets to each other, there was no way to terminate the arrangements without seriously lessening the intelligence-gathering capability of both partners.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, in September 1945, Harry Truman agreed to continue the transatlantic SIGINT relationship. Two years later Washington and London signed the UKUSA agreement of 1947, the cornerstone of Cold War transatlantic SIGINT co-operation and the very heart of the "special relationship."

Smith touches only lightly on two important aspects of the story. The first is the question of non-military SIGINT. BRUSA, while extensive, did NOT cover diplomatic traffic. This, by and large, still remains a neglected story in the history of intelligence during the Second World War (although, of course, Magic- the intercepts of Japanese diplomatic traffic- has always loomed large in the literature). Interestingly, the first venue in which American personnel were actually allowed to screen traffic decrypted by the British was at the Berkeley Street operation run by Bletchley Park's former commander, Alastair Denniston. Here the target was enemy and neutral commercial and diplomatic traffic. Much of it came from the tapping of cables, and, despite the BRUSA exclusion, by October 1943 the Americans were receiving "almost all the diplomatic traffic that goes over cables other than the cables passing through the United States."<sup>7</sup> Not a bad achievement, as Smith says, for an agreement not intended to cover such traffic! There is still plenty of work to do on this story. To tell how we spied on the enemy is one thing. But governments have been super-sensitive in concealing the extent to which they spied on neutrals, and even allies.

The other issue barely dealt with, of course, is Canada, invariably the neglected partner in stories of transatlantic intelligence sharing. There are only a few references to Canada in Smith's account, and in one of them he omits its particular significance for the Canadian side of the story. In late August/early September 1941 Alastair Denniston, still at that time head of Bletchley Park, visited Ottawa and Washington. It was the first transatlantic visit by a senior representative of Britain's codebreakers, and Smith rightly sees it as highly important in the move towards "full, high-level cryptanalytic co-operation between the United

States and the British Commonwealth."<sup>8</sup> It was especially so in the light of Denniston's concerns about the security of Ultra and his belief in the importance of human relationships in such a sensitive field. His establishment on this trip of a good personal bond with the U.S. Army's cryptographic genius, William Friedmann, marks an important stage in the story that Smith has to tell. What he does not tell us, however, is that this friendship was greatly helped by the removal of an obstacle that had threatened to sabotage it from the outset. The name of the obstacle was Herbert Yardley, and at the time of Denniston's visit he was head of Canada's codebreaking operation, the Examination Unit. Yardley had notoriously revealed U.S. codebreaking secrets in his bestselling *The American Black Chamber* (1931). In spite of this, Ottawa had chosen him to head up Canada's first independent codebreaking effort in June 1941. London and Washington quickly declared Yardley *persona non grata* and said that Canada could expect no allied co-operation until it got rid of him. Denniston's visit put the final boot in, and Yardley was fired.

Canada, the Yardley fiasco, and Canada's role in wartime SIGINT, including diplomatic SIGINT, have now been treated in another recent book, by John Bryden.<sup>9</sup> To that, I will turn my attention next time.

---

## NOTES

1. James Rusbridger and Eric Nave, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbour; How Churchill Lured Roosevelt into World War II*. London: Michael O'Mara, 1991.
2. "A New Pearl Harbor Villain: Churchill." Introductory Commentary by Louis W. Tordell and Edwin C. Fischel; "A Cryptologic Analysis" by Donald M. Gish, in *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, Volume 6, No. 3, Fall 1993, pp.363-388. See also an earlier critique by Richard M. Aldrich in *Intelligence and National Security*, Volume 7, July 1992, No. 3, pp.335-346, "Conspiracy or Confusion? Churchill, Roosevelt and Pearl Harbour."
3. F.H. Hinsley, "Churchill and the Use of Special Intelligence," in *Churchill*, edited by Robert Blake and Wm Roger Louis (Oxford U.P. 1993) pp.407-426.

4. Bradley Smith, *The Ultra-Magic Deals and the Most Secret Special Relationship 1940-1946*. Shrewsbury: Airlife Publishing Ltd, 1993.
5. *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Volume 2, (London 1981) pp.41-58.
6. Smith, p.157
7. *Ibid.*, p.161
8. *Ibid.*, p.88
9. John Bryden, *Best-Kept Secret: Canadian Secret Intelligence in the Second World War*. Toronto, Lester Publishing, 1993.

David Stafford's books include *Britain and European Resistance 1940-45* and *Camp X: Canada's School for Secret Agents*. He is currently at the University of Edinburgh. Dr. Stafford is a Contributing Editor for *CMH* and will also write a regular book review column.

---

## War Through the Ages

**Robert Vogel**

John Keegan. *A History of Warfare*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, 432 pages, \$36.95.

**K**eegan's *A History of Warfare* is a long and very uneven account of the "organized violence" which has dogged the history of humanity since the beginning of organized society. The attempt to encompass the whole of the human race in his account is wholly praiseworthy as are his divisions of warfare into four main sections — stone, flesh, iron and fire — which roughly correspond with the weapons at the disposal of the combatants. These sections are interrupted by four quite separate and often quite unrelated essays on topics such as "Limitations on Warmaking," "Fortifications," "Armies" and "Logistics and Supply." Keegan's military history is conventional; he deals adequately with various well-rehearsed topics from Alexander the Great to Hitler, adding little to what he and many other historians have said in similar but usually less ambitious accounts. One drawback of trying to do so much, however, is that the period for which there is most evidence, that is the last five hundred years, is covered in a rather breathless fashion in the chapter entitled "Fire" which attempts to encompass the history of warfare for the whole world from the first cannon to the hydrogen bomb in 69

pages, of which thirteen are devoted to the Second World War.

Had Keegan restricted himself to the history of warfare he would have produced a reasonable and sometimes stimulating account. Unfortunately he tries to do much more than that. The whole first section, some 60 pages, seems to be a speculative essay, entitled "War in Human History" which has less to do with history and more to do with an attack on Clausewitz. He begins with the portentous statement that "War is not a continuation of policy by other means" [p.3]. Contradicting Clausewitz is hardly an earth-shaking position. The problem is, however, that from there on, and for the next twenty-five pages, Clausewitz serves as a kind of whipping-horse for some of Keegan's less carefully considered flights of fancy. Clausewitz becomes a symbol for all things that Keegan considers have gone wrong with ancient society. This is apparently because Clausewitz was a "child of Aristotle" and therefore believed in the supreme importance of "politics." Warfare, argues Keegan, is not an extension of politics but of "culture." That may be an entirely defensible position but