Book Reviews

Very Special Intelligence: The Story of the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre, 1939-1945

Patrick Beesly. London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1977. 271 pp. Illus. Maps, £5.95 (Approx. $11.00). (Doubleday plans to publish a U.S. edition in May which will sell for $8.95.)

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The publication of books on World War II has been a strong minor industry for nearly four decades, but we are only now beginning to gain insight into many crucial aspects of command during that conflict. F. W. Winterbotham's *The Ultra Secret* (Harper & Row, 1974; reviewed in the August 1975 *Proceedings)* with its revelations about British successes in breaking German codes, answered some questions but raised many others. *Very Special Intelligence* clarifies matters greatly, at least so far as the naval side of the war is concerned. It is the story of how "Special Intelligence" (which was the Royal Navy's term, at least, for decrypted German messages) was integrated with information from other sources to provide a coherent picture, and of the effect that this activity had (or, in some cases, failed to have) on command. It is told by a man who was there (as a junior Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve officer) and who has had access to at least a substantial portion of the surviving records.

Beesly begins with a brief but revealing discussion of the successes and limitations of British naval communications intelligence in World War I. It has long been well known that the famous Room 40 team, through a combination of cryptology, traffic analysis, and direction finding (DF), had been able to supply the Admiralty with considerable information about the German naval order of battle, movements, and intentions. Drawing on unpublished contemporary analyses, however, Beesly shows that much of the potential value of communications intelligence was lost through lack of integration and correlation with intelligence from other sources, a shortage of analysis assets, and an overly casual mechanism for communicating the results to the operational commanders.

It could very easily have happened again, two decades later. Fortunately, in 1937 Admiral Sir William James, who had headed Room 40 in the latter part of World War I, secured the appointment of Paymaster Lieutenant Commander (later Vice Admiral Sir) Norman Denning to establish, on the thinnest conceivable resources, an operation intelligence section. With no experience and very little help or support Denning succeeded in laying the foundation for what became the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Center (O.I.C.).

The O.I.C.'s maturation was slow and, initially, unrewarding. At first it did not enjoy anything like the Admiralty's World War I collection sources. The Kriegsmarine was much more careful about communications security than the Luftwaffe (against which the British cryptanalysts scored their initial successes), and the war was more than 18 months old before any naval cryptographic systems were solved.

But, on 8 May 1941, U-boat *U-110* was brought to action south of Iceland by ships of the 3rd Escort Group whose depth charges brought her to the surface. The group's commander, recognizing the opportunity, sent in a boarding party who managed to recover the "Enigma" cipher machine and material from the mortally damaged submarine. This haul, with others from weather trawlers, provided the cryptanalysts with the fingerhold they needed. Soon the O.I.C. began to receive decrypted German naval messages from the British Code and Cipher Center at Bletchley Park.

But it was more like the uncurtaining of a befogged window than the opening of a door. The Kriegsmarine changed keys regularly and it could take the code-breakers hours or even days to recover each new key. Introduction of a new cipher system for Atlantic U-boats in early 1942 blinded Bletchley Park to their traffic for nearly the entire year. There were 13 major German naval ciphers, some of which were never breached. And wherever possible the German Navy (unlike the Air Force) was careful to send its traffic by secure land line.

Many, even most, of the decrypted messages conveyed little in themselves. They were filled with codewords, cryptic geographic reference points, and references to other messages the Operational Intelligence Center did not hold. At best a message might give a glimpse into an operation. But when correlations were made with direction-finding positions, with decrypted messages concerning cooperating or supporting units, with aerial photographs, with agent reports, and with a host of bits and pieces of information from all kinds of sources, a pattern might be discerned. Or it might not. An element of chance always remained.

From an historical standpoint the book's greatest interest lies in the fresh view it provides of many pivotal and controversial operations: the *Bismark* pursuit, the Channel dash, the PQ 17 disaster in which an Allied convoy from Iceland to Arkhangelsk was almost completely sunk, the sinking of the *Scharnhorst,* the whole U-boat war, and a great many more. In each case Beesly gives a clear sketch of the events and describes the O.I.C.'s role in some detail. Much light is shed on all, and, in many cases, one is led to a complete or partial reassessment. The descriptions given diverge sharply from those of some other recent writers (for example, Beesly states flatly that there were no decrypts of traffic to or from the *Bismark*), but it would seem difficult to challenge the author's *bona fides*. His pride in his old organization is evident, but it does not appear to have interfered with his objectivity of judgment.

But even for those utterly sated with (or entirely uninterested in) World War II history, *Very Special Intelligence* provides some very special intelligence indeed. It gives a picture, a rather balanced and complete picture so far as one can judge, of a pioneering and quite successful operational intelligence effort. Beesly tells of many lessons painfully learned—lessons important not only to those who might have to set up and operate operational intelligence centers in another conflict but also to those who might have to depend upon the information they would furnish.

In short this book merits the attention of anyone interested in Atlantic naval operations of either World War, and of anyone concerned with the problems of naval command in the present and future. One hopes that it will find a wide audience among American naval officers.