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The Origin of U.S.-British Communications Intelligence Cooperation (1940-41)

(Author's Note: In this article I have excluded a discussion of certain Comint cooperation in the pre-war period between the British and the FBI and U.S. Coast Guard. The role of the BSC remains to be told.)

By mid-June 1940 Great Britain was virtually alone in the war against Nazi Germany. France had just been defeated and most of Western Europe was occupied by German forces. A German invasion of the British Isles seemed quite possible. The danger was compounded by the tremendous losses in equipment that Britain had suffered in the Battle of France. At this point Britain turned to the neutral U.S. for a broad range of assistance. It was in this context that the highly secret U.S.-British relationship began in communications intelligence.

During that June the U.S. Naval Attaché in London received a proposal from British sources for exchange of material and general cooperation in communications intelligence, especially in regard to the Japanese cryptanalytic problem.¹ The Japanese threat to Malaya and other British possessions in Asia was extremely grave, especially during a period when reinforcement and resupply of empire garrisons was so difficult. In any event the British proposal was rejected by the U.S. Navy.

On 8 July 1940, Lord Lothian, the British ambassador to the U.S., addressed a memorandum to President Roosevelt suggesting, among other things, that the British government would appreciate a broad exchange of secret technical information especially in the "radio field."

¹ Earlier in 1940 the U.S. Naval Attaché seems to have been approached regarding possible Comint cooperation. However, this earlier request was narrower and less urgent. During World War I, the U.S. and Britain had had some association in Comint.

President Roosevelt favorably viewed this suggestion and the War and Navy Departments were directed to consider the details of technical exchanges. On 22 July General Sherman Miles, the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 (Intelligence), War Department General Staff, was designated as the Army's coordinator for technical exchange with the British.

Two weeks later a high-level U.S. military mission went to Great Britain to hold technical discussions, learn British war plans and generally to assess the British capability to hold out against Germany. The Army was represented by Generals George V. Strong of the General Staff and Delos C. Emmons of the Air Corps. The naval representative was Admiral Robert Ghormley, the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations. Admiral Ghormley, at least, had received his instructions personally from President Roosevelt. Concurrently, a British technical mission headed by Sir Henry Tizard visited the U.S.

At this point the Comint issue was raised by the U.S. Army. On 1 September 1940 Colonel Spencer B. Akin, Chief of the Army's Signal Intelligence Service (SIS), and his principal assistant, Mr. William F. Friedman, prepared an informal position paper for the Army's Chief Signal Officer, General Joseph O. Mauborgne. Akin and Friedman suggested that the Army should fully exchange with the British, on a reciprocal basis, all information related to cryptanalysis. Likewise there should be an exchange of intercept traffic especially, so that the U.S. could obtain Japanese and German tactical traffic. But, wrote Akin and Friedman, the Navy would have to agree to all this. Commander Lawrence Safford, the head of Op-20-G, the Navy's Comint organization, posed no objection to an exchange of traffic but would not agree to a sharing of cryptanalysis.

The matter was then dramatically escalated by a message to the War Department from General Strong in London.

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London No. 401, September 5, 1940

Are you prepared to exchange full information on German, Italian and Japanese code and cryptographic information therewith? Are you prepared to agree to a continuous exchange of important intercept in connection with the above? Please expedite the reply. This message for the Chief of Staff from Strong.

Lee²

The Navy would later claim that General Strong had acted abruptly and unilaterally. According to Captain Alan Kirk, the U.S. naval attache in London, General Strong, while addressing a British staff group, suddenly offered the British all U.S. information on cryptanalysis of Japanese diplomatic systems. The British, said Kirk, were astounded at Strong's offer but readily accepted it. That Strong acted without the Navy's agreement is certain, but he was following a policy, as we have seen, that had been advanced within the War Department.

General Strong's message was urgently couriered to General Mauborgne, who was visiting the Army Signal Corps center at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Mauborgne was advised that the Navy had already rejected Strong's proposal. General Mauborgne telegraphed his reply to the War Department:

23WVP—Fort Monmouth, N. J., September 7, 1940

Signals.
Washington, D.C.

As matter of utmost importance to National Defense strongly urge concurrence Chief of Staff in proposal General Strong that this government exchange complete technical information re Japanese, German and Italian codes and cipher systems but believe constant exchange intercepted traffic unnecessary. Each government should rely upon own intercept services for collection material and translation.

Mauborgne

General Mauborgne's position was endorsed by General Miles and was forwarded to the Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall. General Marshall approved the exchange. The matter was put before Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson in early October. In a memo to Mr. Stimson's military aide, General Miles stated that it was absolutely essential to undertake an immediate exchange with Great Britain of all "... information concerning military, military attache, and diplomatic codes, ciphers, cipher devices and apparatus and code and cipher systems employed by Germany, Italy and Japan together with all information concerning the methods employed to solve messages in codes and ciphers of the classes mentioned." General Miles emphasized that the

²Colonel Raymond V. Lee was the U.S. Military attache in Great Britain.

U.S. could significantly assist Great Britain by providing Comint material, while the U.S. in turn would (hopefully) receive hitherto unavailable Axis military traffic and solution data.³ What is especially interesting is the timing of General Miles' memo. Only days before, on 27 September 1940, the SIS had made their first solution to Japanese diplomatic messages enciphered in the Purple Code. This astounding breakthrough, accomplished because the SIS was able to construct a duplicate of the Japanese Purple machine, was now to be shared with the British.



Col. Spencer B. Akin, U.S. Army, Chief of the Signal Intelligence Service during 1940-41 (a later photograph as a Major General).

The Army proposals were approved by Secretary Stimson and ultimately the President, although a detailed account of how the decision was made does not seem to exist.

Implementation was delayed by practical matters. Extra Purple machines to be delivered to the British had to be constructed. This was done by the Navy which, reluctantly, now agreed to join the Army in a general

³In 1940 the Army's SIS had no means of intercepting German or Italian military traffic and extremely limited access to Japanese military traffic. This situation did not greatly change until late 1942. Throughout the pre-war period the SIS concentrated on diplomatic traffic.

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~~HANDLE VIA COMINT CHANNELS ONLY~~



Col. Raymond E. Lee, U.S. Army, U.S. Military Attaché, London during 1940-41.

Comint exchange with the British. In mid-January 1941 a British joint-service staff group arrived in the U.S. aboard the new battleship *George V*. This group was the nucleus of the permanent British Joint Staff Mission in Washington. On 17 January Captain Abraham Sinkov and Lieutenant Leo Rosen of the SIS and Lieutenant Robert Weeks and Ensign Prescott Currier of Op-20-G departed for England aboard the *George V*. They took with them two Purple machines and other cryptologic materials. They delivered this material to the British Comint organization, the Government Code and Cipher School (GCCS), at Bletchley Park. As Mr. Sinkov would later recall, the planning and execution of this mission had been so secret that he (Sinkov) never knew if the British expected to receive the Purple machines or indeed if they even knew that the U.S. had solved the system.

The Sinkov mission remained at Bletchley Park for over two months. From GCCS they received information on German, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Latin American cryptographic systems, both civil and military/naval, and learned the status of various British

Comint operations. The naval members of the U.S. mission studied British intercept and direction-finding techniques and received British equipment to take back to Op-20-G. The British, now in possession of Purple, and with the approval of Prime Minister Churchill, shared their greatest secret: that the German Enigma cipher machine, used by all the German armed forces, had been solved and was being exploited. Captain Sinkov and his associates were sworn to secrecy and gave their assurances that they would reveal the Enigma secret to only a limited (and specifically named) number of American officers.⁴ The Sinkov group was not allowed to make written notes concerning Enigma and the British would not furnish any documents relating to solution or exploitation techniques. In fact, the British technical briefing on Enigma was not adequate to allow the U.S. to duplicate the British success.

The Sinkov group returned to the U.S. on a British destroyer in April. While this group had been at Bletchley Park, related discussions were taking place in the Far East.

In February 1941 the British Admiralty authorized the British naval command in the Far East to undertake an immediate exchange of Comint with U.S. naval forces in the Philippines. Soon thereafter a Purple machine was delivered from Bletchley Park to the British Comint organization in Singapore. The U.S. naval Comint unit in the Philippines, known as the Cast unit, received a Purple machine from Op-20-G at about the same time. At the end of February Commander Jefferson Dennis of the Cast unit and Captain Archer Allen, the U.S. Naval Observer in Singapore met in Singapore with British Comint personnel. A significant amount of cryptanalytic information on Japanese naval and merchant marine systems was exchanged. A British representative visited the Cast unit on Corregidor in April 1941 and detailed arrangements were made for regular exchange of Japanese traffic and cryptanalytic data. This exchange of Comint material, either by radio or in bulk via Pan American Clipper, continued until the U.S. entered the war.⁵

With wide-ranging Comint cooperation with the British now a fact of U.S. policy, additional specific arrangements continued to be made. In the late Spring of 1941, Captain Edward G. Hastings, Royal Navy, a veteran Comint officer, came to Washington to direct the

⁴Captain Sinkov agreed to reveal the Enigma secret only to General Miles, General Mauborgne and Mr. Friedman.

⁵The author has not seen any U.S. documents that describe the decision-making process that preceded these Comint exchanges in the Far East.



Capt. Abraham Sinkov, U.S. Army, Signal Intelligence Service. Captain Sinkov's mission to Bletchley Park helped establish the U.S.-U.K. Comint relationship.

working committee of the U.S.-based adjunct of the British Joint Intelligence Committee. Hastings was, in fact, a representative of the Chief of the Secret Service

(CSS) and was mainly concerned with British-U.S. Comint activities.⁶

A regular exchange of Comint between the Navy's Op-20-G in Washington and GCCS at Bletchley Park began in June 1941. Material was passed by radio and cable or, most often during that period, by air pouch. Ultimately the medium for exchange was the office of the British Security Coordination (BSC) in New York City. The BSC, headed by William Stephenson, was the Western Hemisphere arm of the British Secret Service.

In August 1941 Commander A. G. Denniston, head of GCCS, visited the SIS and Op-20-G in Washington. He was apprised of U.S. Comint efforts and was shown the machine-processing techniques being used by the SIS.⁷ Denniston in turn advised his hosts of the status of various British operations. As a result of the Denniston visit a British officer, Major Geoffrey Stevens, was permanently assigned to SIS as the GCCS liaison officer.

So, by the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, the U.S. and Great Britain had been united partners in communications intelligence for a year. Unfortunately, the full development of this relationship did not automatically begin when the U.S. and British openly became allies in December 1941. This will be described in a future article.

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⁶Captain Hastings remained in this position until Spring 1943. His relations with the U.S. Comint organizations of the Army, Navy, FBI and Coast Guard were often stormy and marked by not inconsiderable confusion on all sides. The British Secret Service was also known as the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and MI-6.

⁷One issue disturbed Commander Denniston. He observed that the Navy's Op-20-G was proceeding on its own in an attack on the German Naval Enigma. Denniston had hoped, for reasons of security and efficiency, that the U.S. would concentrate on Japanese communications.