GERMAN COMINT IN CHINA March 22

The Ehrhardt Group (or Bureau) is one of the lesser known organizations in World War II, and represents the German COMINT effort in China. Established by Lothar Eisentrager, a.k.a., Ludwig Ehrhardt, it ran the intelligence and propaganda apparatus for Germany in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing.

Perhaps one reason it is not better known is that it was not very effective, even to the point of incompetence. For example, in 1944, the Germans were unable to decode telegrams whereby four digits represented Chinese characters or Romanized letters, e.g., A = 1234. According to an Office of Strategic Services (OSS)* report, the solution to these telegrams could be found in any post office code book in China.** Yet neither the German "code expert" nor radio operator caught on, the former having worked there for four years.

The source for this OSS report was a disenchanted radio operator named Wedel, who had decided to work for the Germans because they offered him his best chance to return to his native Denmark. Wedel, a ship captain, had been stranded in Asia at the outbreak of the war. Among Wedel's other claims was (1) the Germans in China were never able to decode messages from the Allies; (2) the radio connection between Berlin and Guangzhou-Shanghai was denied for several months (because of incompetence and rivalries); and (3) messages from Berlin had to be repeated constantly, making them exceptionally vulnerable to decryption. He remembered as well at least one case when the Germans accepted information from a clearly spurious source. Humorously, Wedel opined that Allied sabotage against the Germans in China was not even necessary since the Germans engaged in self-sabotage.

It seems clear the Ehrhardt Group did not enjoy much success in China. It was small and ineffective — and dependent on the Japanese, who were not heavily committed to COMINT activities. Moreover, the Ehrhardt Group had been relying upon an Italian COMINT unit in Beijing for assistance, but this ended after the Italians switched sides in 1943. There were reports that the Erhardt Group helped sink U.S. ships in the seas around China, but this is dubious since the focus of the

organization appeared to have been air-to-ground communications, e.g. American supply flights "over the Hump."***

* The OSS was the predecessor of the CIA.

** This describes Standard Telegraphic Code, first used in the 1870s for sending telegrams in China.

*** Flying "over the Hump" meant going over the Himalayas, the world's highest mountain range, to airfields in southwestern China. For much of the war, this was the main route to supply U.S. and Allied forces in China.

Don Bormann and members of the team he led into areas of China that had been occupied by the Japanese.

Primary Sources interview of Don Borrman; Borrman led a team that, at the end of the war, led an Allied team that looked into enemy cryptologic activities in China, and encountered the Erhardt Group. And, "From the Archives: Codebreaking (or not) in Shanghai," Colin Burke, January 2007, *Cryptologia*