

SRH-269

U.S. ARMY COMINT POLICY:
PEARL HARBOR TO SUMMER 1942

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U.S. Army Communications Intelligence Policy: Pearl Harbor to Summer 1942

The story of U.S. communications intelligence operations against the Japanese prior to the Pearl Harbor attack is well known, if open to widely different interpretations. It was the subject of various wartime inquiries by a presidential commission, the Army and the Navy. In 1945-46 a joint committee of Congress examined the previous inquiries and conducted its own hearings. The result was the release to the public of 39 volumes of testimony and reports under the title Pearl Harbor Attack (PHA). The material in PHA has been the basis for a number of books, the most scholarly and successful being *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, by Roberta Wohlsetter.

While one hesitates to go over that ground again, a very brief summary of Army Comint up to 7 December 1941 is necessary before exploring the reorganizations that took place during the first year of the war. During 1940, the Army Signal Intelligence Service (SIS), an organization within the Signal Corps, had broken the highest Japanese diplomatic system—the "Purple Code". The results of this breakthrough were made known to the Navy's Comint organization and a system for sharing the processing of Purple and other diplomatic material was developed.

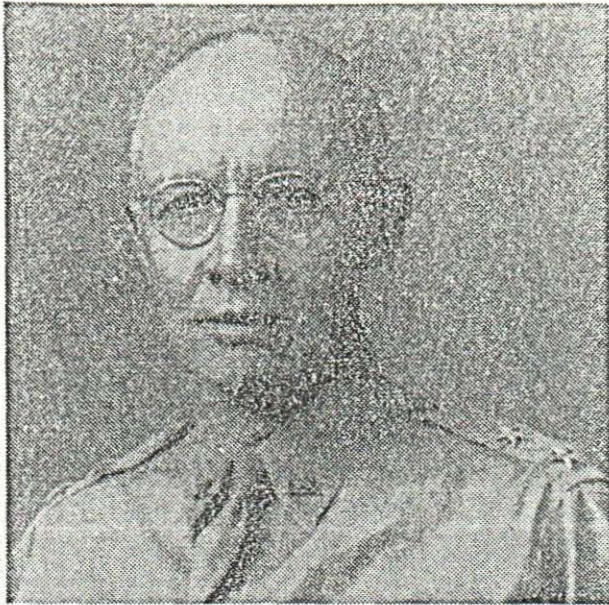
Within the Army all processing of Japanese diplomatic Comint, known collectively as Magic, was accomplished by the SIS—interception, decryption, translation, typing. The translations were delivered to the Military

Intelligence Division (MID or G-2) of the War Department General Staff for appropriate dissemination. During 1941 the usual recipient of Magic within MID was Lt. Colonel Rufus Bratton, chief of the Far Eastern Section of the Intelligence Branch. Bratton personally showed the Magic to a small group of authorized recipients: the Secretary of War, the Chief of Staff and some of his senior assistants, the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 (AC of S, G-2, *i.e.* the chief of the MID). Within MID Bratton may also have shared the reading and delivery of Magic with Lt. Colonel Dusenberry of the Japanese desk and possibly one or two others. Although Bratton and Dusenberry were under Colonel Hayes A. Kroner, Chief of the Intelligence Branch, Kroner did not see Magic, nor did Lt. Colonel Thomas J. Betts, head of the Situation Section of MID.¹ Finished intelligence reports based on Magic were not written; there was a notable lack of correlation or development of files. The recipients of Magic had to read each message, or perhaps a summary of a group of messages, all without written analytic comment or evaluation.²

¹There is some dispute concerning Kroner, but it is almost certain that he had no regular access to Magic. The restrictions were at the direction of Brigadier General Sherman A. Miles, the AC of S, G-2 and General Marshall, Chief of Staff.

²This in no way is meant as a criticism of Colonel Bratton, who worked seven days a week reading, sorting, delivering and securing Magic.

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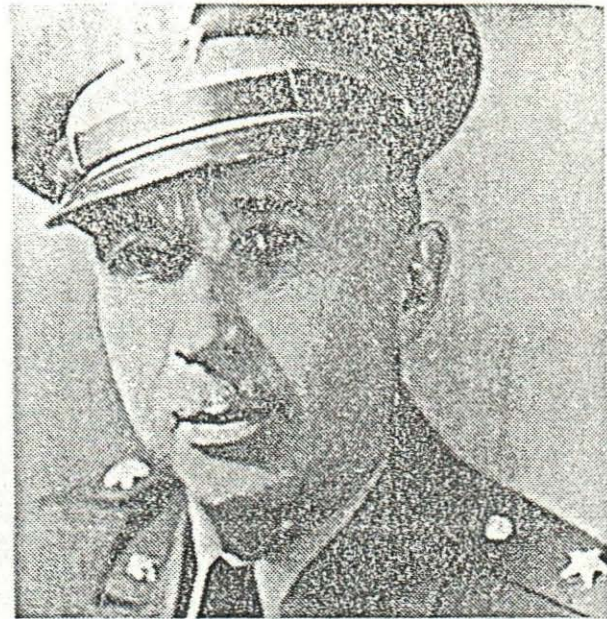


2. Major General George V. Strong, the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 proposed G-2 control of Army Comint.

requested to advise the War Department of his IBM equipment needs and give an estimate of additional personnel required "for SIS at your headquarters." This message seemed to formally acknowledge that MacArthur would have his own Comint processing center. MacArthur had reached Australia from the Philippines on 17 March. Among those he brought out with him were Major Joe Scherr, who had headed the SIS detachment and Brigadier General Spencer Akin, his Signal Officer. Akin would become chief of the Central Bureau, MacArthur's Comint organization, and continue to be the Signal Officer for the Southwest Pacific Area theater.⁸ The other members of the SIS detachment (which had been placed under Akin's control soon after the war began) were ordered out of the Philippines on 24 March 42 in a message from MacArthur to Lt. General Wainwright. Lt. Howard R. Brown and 6 enlisted men managed to reach Australia and to help form the nucleus of Army Comint there.⁹

⁸ Akin headed the SIS at the time the Purple Code was solved. He was well-versed in Comint and had studied cryptanalysis under William F. Friedman.

⁹ The odyssey of the detachment members is a fascinating story. Not all got out of the Philippines. The Navy was able to evacuate all of its Comint personnel, by submarine, from Corregidor and remove or destroy special equipment and material. The Army unit, unlike the Navy's, did not have cryptanalysts or a Comint processing center in the Philippines.



3. Major General Dawson Olmstead, the Chief Signal Officer, who opposed Strong's plan.

At the War Department, the McCormack inquiry led to the formal establishment, on 15 May 1942, of the MIS Special Service Branch (shortly renamed the Special Branch), with Colonel Carter Clarke as chief and McCormack, who was commissioned a Colonel, as his deputy. In his capacity as Chief of the Special Branch Clarke became the "... authorized representative of the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, War Department, General Staff, for the purpose of supervising all Signal Intelligence activities and in handling and disseminating the special material produced by and through these similar activities." He was further charged with liaison with other government agencies similarly involved. The Branch was to "... (analyze) the results obtained from Radio Intercept activities now carried on by the Signal Corps." Thus the final product of the SIS, translations of decrypted intercepts, would be given to the Special Branch for analysis and dissemination.

McCormack recruited a small staff for the Special Branch while Clarke, initially, concentrated on assisting the SIS in securing expanded facilities. The Branch began to produce a daily "Magic" or "Diplomatic" Summary, which was finished intelligence, for the Secretary of War, the Chief of Staff, key general staff officers and the State Department and Navy. The branch subsequently began preparing special studies and analyses to fill operational and planning requirements of the War Department.

On 25 June, Major General Strong, the AC of S, G-2 since General Lee's retirement due to ill health in May, sent a memorandum to General Marshall recommending

that the SIS be transferred to MIS and that MIS thereafter be responsible for Army cryptography, intercept and cryptanalysis. He reasoned that the existing division of communications intelligence responsibilities between the Signal Corps and MIS prevented either service from doing the best job possible and that "... G-2 has only a limited control over this extremely important source of intelligence, while the officers of the Signal Corps are burdened with decisions requiring training and information that they do not have." His proposal was not accepted. While MIS influence over the SIS would increase during the war, operational control of that agency was not transferred from the CSO to the AC of S, G-2 until December 1944. As MIS would later learn, Strong's proposal was favored by Colonel Frank Bullock, Chief of SIS, Lt. Colonel Rex Minckler, the former chief, William F. Friedman and other SIS officers. The transfer was strongly opposed by Major General Olmstead, the CSO and Brigadier General Frank

Stoner, who headed the Army's Communications Service.¹⁰ Because of that opposition, the SIS committee studying the Strong proposal reported against the transfer of authority.

Regardless of the organizational struggles, the SIS (renamed in turn the Signal Security Service and Signal Security Agency) rapidly expanded and increased its effectiveness. Colonel W. Preston Corderman replaced Bullock in early 1943. Corderman, who, like Clarke, had been a section chief in the old MID at the time of Pearl Harbor, headed the agency through the organizational changes of December 1944 and September 1945, when it became the Army Security Agency.

Mr. Benson, whose article "The Army-Navy-FBI Comint Agreements of 1942" appeared in the previous issue of *Spectrum*, is writing a history of U.S. Comint organizations, coordination and policy, 1939-45, under a fellowship with the NCS Press.

¹⁰The Communications Service, which had various other names during the war, was one of the operating divisions under the CSO. The SIS was under the Communications Service.