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Admiral's memoirs hail code-breakers in WW II

Author tries to set record straight on 'Hypo' officer in Battle of Midway

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Forty years after the end of World War II, it is increasingly clear that theft of enemy messages was crucial to the United States victory over Japan.

This "theft" was accomplished by men and women who analyzed intercepted radio communications, cracked codes, and squeezed out secret information on such things as ship movements and attack targets.

Such radio intelligence gave the US invaluable advantage during the Battle of Midway, according to a new book drawing on recently declassified documents. But the man who broke the Midway secrets was promptly reassigned to a post of less responsibility so others could take credit for his work, charges the book.

Furthermore, US bureaucratic infighting may have earlier helped the Japanese achieve complete surprise in their raid on Pearl Harbor, according to "And I Was There," the memoirs of the late Rear Adm. Edwin Layton.

Last month, the Navy belatedly recognized the contributions of one of the most skilled radio intelligence officers of World War II, Capt. Joseph Rochefort, by posthumously awarding him the Distinguished Service Medal. Captain Rochefort had twice been turned down for the decoration during his lifetime.

It was Rochefort, officer in charge of Pearl Harbor's "Hypo" code-breaking station, who puzzled out the fact that the Japanese intended to attack Midway Island in June 1942. With that foreknowledge, Adm. Chester Nimitz, commander of the Pacific Fleet, set a trap that crippled Japan's naval forces.

Unfortunately for Rochefort, high-ranking intelligence officers in the US had insisted the Japanese would strike elsewhere. "Washington concluded the target would be, variously, the Aleutians, Hawaii, the West Coast, or the Panama Canal," says Capt. Roger Pineau, co-author of "And I Was There".

Proved wrong, these headquarters officers were unhappy. "They set about manipulations to prove they had been right all the time," says Captain Pineau. "In the course of that they ordered Rochefort back to Washington on temporary duty." Rochefort ended up commanding a floating dry dock, while the officers in question — notably a pair of brothers named Joseph and John Redman — solidified their bureaucratic hold on naval intelligence, says Pineau.

This incident shows that while radio intelligence was invaluable during World War II, it was also beset by terrific intramural battles that reduced its effectiveness. Admiral Layton, chief intelligence officer of the Pacific Fleet from 1940 until Japan's surrender, wanted to make this point clear in his memoirs, according to his co-author. (Capt. Pineau was himself a radio intelligence officer in World War II, and a long-time friend of Layton.)

Such Navy turf wars may have inadvertently helped Japanese forces in their Dec. 7, 1941, surprise raid on Pearl Harbor. Fearful of security leaks, Navy headquarters in Washington withheld crucial informaton from Pearl Harbor forces in the months preceding the attack. Given access to this data, most of which came from "Magic" decodes of intercepted Japanese diplomatic messages, Pacific commanders would have smelled out Japanese intentions, argues "And I Was There."

One message, from Tokyo to the Japanese consulate in Honolulu, asked spies to draw up a grid map of Pearl Harbor, so that information on ship anchor locations could be passed quickly and accurately.

"You don't ask for information like that casually," says Pineau of this "bomb plot" message.

The officers in charge of Pearl Harbor forces at the time of the Japanese attack — Army Lt. Gen. Walter Short and Adm. Husband Kimmel — were forced into retirement shortly thereafter. Layton, who as fleet intelligence officer was there during the attack, believed all his life that both Short and Kimmel had been made scapegoats.

The fault instead was institutional, believed Layton, a matter of poor lines of communication and bad analysis. But for the quickly-called panels of inquiry, to say so "would not have been good for the war effort," points out Pineau. "So they let two men take the rap."