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Officer Who Broke Japanese War Codes Gets Belated Honor

By EDWIN McDOWELL

Forty-three years after Joseph J. Rochefort broke the Japanese code that helped the United States win the Battle of Midway, the former naval officer is to be awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

It will be given posthumously, because Captain Rochefort — who was denied the medal twice during his lifetime and ousted as an intelligence officer after he was first nominated for it — died in 1976.

Military and civilian historians say the Navy's decision to award the medal, one of the highest honors available to a noncombatant, will help rectify a longstanding wrong.

A World War II Feud

Beyond that, however, they say the award has helped bring to light the bitter feuding within the Navy's World War II intelligence operations.

"Not only was Captain Rochefort removed from his intelligence command in Pearl Harbor soon after the Battle of Midway," said Capt. Roger Pineau, the well-known naval historian, "but the Washington intelligence community, which was wrong about the time and place the Japanese would strike after Pearl Harbor, tried to take credit for Rochefort's code breaks and accurate intelligence evaluation of Japanese objectives."

A spokesman for the Navy said the award to Captain Rochefort was based "solely on the merits of the case." But several Rochefort supporters said the award was being given because much of the information in a new book, which gives details of Captain Rochefort's case and the machinations within the Navy intelligence community, had found its way into military circles.

The book is "And I Was There" (William Morrow & Company), the posthumous memoirs of Rear Adm. Edwin T. Layton, the Pacific Fleet's intelligence officer from 1940 until the surrender of Japan. Admiral Layton died in April 1984 and the book was completed by Captain Pineau and John Costello, a British historian who has written many books about World War II.

The publication date of the book, which has an initial press run of 100,000 copies, is Dec. 7, the 44th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Admiral Layton was one of the few people present during both the attack on Pearl Harbor and the ceremony of Japanese surrender aboard the Missouri. In 1983, he was persuaded to write his memoirs after the gradual release of classified documents in the National Archives.

A Linguist and Cryptologist

Among the documents were more than 300,000 decoded Japanese military and diplomatic messages, which form the basis of the book's detailed description of the secret radio surveillance of Japanese communications beginning in 1920.

Captain Rochefort was at the center of that radio surveillance.

"He was a Japanese linguist, an intelligence analyst and a cryptologist, all the skills that enabled him to bring together the missing bits and pieces," said Rear Adm. Donald M. Showers, who worked for Captain Rochefort in 1942 and who successfully petitioned for the Distinguished Service Medal on his behalf.

Installed in June 1941 as officer in charge of the Combat Intelligence Unit — Station Hypo — at Pearl Harbor, one of three stations where intercepted Japanese radio messages were sent for deciphering and translating, Captain Rochefort forged a small, dedicated team of analysts.

He provided daily intelligence analyses to Admiral Layton, then a lieutenant commander. Admiral Layton, in turn, conveyed them to Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, commander of the Pacific Fleet.

Their efforts paid off in late May 1942 when, in translating the latest Japanese naval code, the Rochefort team succeeded — despite claims from Washington intelligence officials that it could not be done — in cracking the codes revealing the time, date and place of the planned invasion of Midway Island.

Washington, by contrast, had said the target was likely to be Johnston Island or the West Coast of the United States, and later than the date of the actual attack.

Acting on Rochefort's analysis, Admiral Nimitz dispatched three carriers to positions northeast of Midway, out of range of Japanese observation planes. The ensuing three-day battle crippled the Japanese fleet and, at a time when the Pacific War still hung in the balance, turned the tide in favor of the United States.

Immediately after the Battle of Midway, Admiral Nimitz recommended the Distinguished Service Medal for Captain Rochefort but the Navy Department turned it down — ostensibly because Washington and the Philippines had also had a hand in the intelligence triumph.

"But this was a subterfuge," said Mr. Costello. "To award Rochefort the medal would amount to an admission that Washington had committed an intelligence blunder."

'He Was Yanked Out of There'

The Navy would not comment on the earlier decisions not to award the medal. But Arthur Davidson Baker 3d, an official adviser to the Secretary of the Navy, said this was the first time such a proposal had come before John Lehman Jr., who has been the Secretary of the Navy since 1981.

However, he added, "Somebody sure as hell did Rochefort in, because he was yanked out of there and never did intelligence again."

Admiral Nimitz's recommendation of the medal for Captain Rochefort was turned down by Adm. Ernest J. King, chief of naval operations, who is now dead.

Admiral Layton said two people who worked to undermine Captain Rochefort, and strongly advised Admiral King against singling him out for the award, were two brothers, Capt. John R. Redman and Comdr. Joseph R. Redman. Captain Redman had been officer

in charge of the research desk at naval intelligence in Washington; Commander Redman was deputy director of naval communications. Both are now dead.

A Rival Team

For Captain Rochefort to have received the medal, Admiral Layton writes, would have been a tacit admission that the principal intelligence breakthrough had been made by his team. "Worse, it would not have squared with the Redmans' claims that their Negat team was responsible for the crucial cryptanalytic success."

Capt. Wesley A. Wright, a leading cryptanalyst of World War II who served in Pearl Harbor and Washington, recently said of the Redman brothers, "Their specialty was the Office of Naval Communications, and they were very good at it. They felt strongly that naval intelligence that was derived from intercepted enemy messages should be controlled by their office in Washington."

Admiral King accepted his chief of staff's recommendation that the medal be disapproved, in part because the intelligence work done by Washington had been "of as high an order as that done in Honolulu."

Captain Rochefort was recalled from Pearl Harbor and eventually reassigned to command of a floating dry dock in San Francisco.

He was "speared like a frog," the authors say, "and hung out to dry for the rest of the war when he could have done so much more to help us win it."

Nimitz Makes 2d Request

Captain Rochefort eventually returned to intelligence work in Washington in 1944, but in a position of lesser responsibility. In 1946 he was awarded the Legion of Merit. "But that came with just a general citation that reflected his total wartime service," Admiral Showers said. "It said nothing about his work at Midway."

In 1958, Admiral Nimitz again took up the Rochefort cause, sending a two-page, handwritten letter to the Secretary of the Navy. That request was also denied, on the ground that awards for action in World War II had been closed.

Joseph J. Rochefort Jr., an Army captain and a graduate of West Point,

said his father never complained about not being awarded the medal. "His attitude was, you can accomplish almost anything as long as nobody cares who gets the credit," he said recently.

But colleagues familiar with the case continued to lobby on Captain Rochefort's behalf. These included J. Wilfred Holmes, a writer who served in Station Hypo. His 1979 book about Hypo, "Double-Edged Secrets," published by the Naval Institute Press, is dedicated to Captain Rochefort.

And in 1983, Admiral Showers, drawing upon formerly classified intelligence materials, again submitted Captain Rochefort's name.

Secret Agreement Claimed

Admiral Layton's book makes a number of controversial new claims, including that President Roosevelt made a secret agreement with Winston Churchill that the United States would go to war if British territory in the Far East were attacked, and that the Soviet Union might have known how, when and where the Japanese would attack Hawaii.

Not everyone agrees with all the Layton assertions.

"It's an intriguing hypothesis, but the book does not prove the existence of a Churchill-Roosevelt pact, and I never found any evidence of such a pact in the Churchill-Roosevelt correspondence," said Warren F. Kimball, professor of international history at Rutgers University and editor of "Churchill & Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence."

But Professor Kimball said the Layton memoirs were "the first really new evidence on the subject since the opening of the diplomatic archives."

The undated citation, signed last month by Secretary Lehman and yet to be awarded, cites Captain Rochefort's "exceptional meritorious service."

It says the intelligence information on Japanese naval plans and intentions that the Rochefort unit provided "served as the singular basis for the fleet commander in chief to plan his defenses, deploy his limited forces and devise strategy to insure U.S. Navy success in engaging the Japanese forces at Midway."

Admiral Showers said it was all that he and Captain Rochefort's other admirers could have hoped for