

James Rusbridger

The Sinking of the "Automedon", the Capture of the "Nankin"

New Light on Two Intelligence Disasters in World War II



THE CELEBRATIONS last year and this—surrounding the 40th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy and the VE-Day victory eleven months later—produced many reminders of the various stratagems the Allies employed to deceive and confuse the enemy as to our intentions, and the associated

Intelligence operations that were developed to eavesdrop upon the Germans' innermost deliberations. Due to an almost total absence of German archival material it has never been possible to establish beyond all doubt how many of these schemes worked as well as we like to believe they did, for in truth German Intelligence at operational levels—as opposed to that at command level—was of a very high order.

In the euphoria of victory and with the passage of time it is often forgotten that the Germans had their share of Intelligence coups too, just as dramatic and with equally far-reaching consequences as those the Allies perpetrated.¹

Over the past ten years the release of archival material regarding the role during World War II of "Signals Intelligence" (SIGINT)—the art of eavesdropping upon the enemy's radio traffic—has provided some public access to the work of the ULTRA code-breaking organisation. This was, to give it its official title, the Government Code and Cipher School (the forerunner of today's Government Communications Headquarters), which was located at Bletchley Park, near London, and to a somewhat lesser extent the Signal Intelligence Service in Washington, D.C., its US counterpart. The flow of books and television documentaries based on this material have mainly concentrated on the penetration of German ciphers. As yet, no Japanese ULTRA intercepts have been released by the

British Foreign Office into the Public Record Office at Kew, and the latest information suggests that there is little chance of this happening in the near future.

Because of the sensitive and controversial nature of Signals Intelligence and code-breaking, there is still much confusion—and a great deal of patriotic mythology—about exactly what was achieved during the last War, how it affected the outcome of individual battles, and—more importantly—what successes the enemy had with *their* Signals Intelligence and code-breaking activities against the Allies. Not surprisingly, because of their love of secrecy, the agencies involved have been only too happy to foster this confusion especially in cases where the reputation of a famous political leader or military hero is involved—e.g. Churchill or Field-Marshal Montgomery, whose apparent prescience during the War has become part of our history. The years pass, and those still alive who worked at Bletchley Park, and have first-hand experience of what went on there, dwindle in numbers and have been forbidden to publish their stories (or even to see their own wartime files, which are now kept at GCHQ at Cheltenham). An official history of Bletchley Park was written shortly after the War; but this has never been published, and there appear to be no plans to do so in the future.

Equally, there has been a surprising lack of definitive accounts from German sources detailing their wartime Signals Intelligence and code-breaking operations. Initially, this was due to the unavailability of the relevant records because, at the end of the War, all these were removed, either to London or Washington, for inspection by the Allies. It is clear that when these archives were repatriated to Bonn in 1958 quite a number of files were retained under the Anglo-American agreement, arranged immediately after the War, that there was to be no public release of any wartime material dealing with code-breaking, "double-agents", or any of the variety of deception schemes (and other ruses) that had been employed against the enemy.

Furthermore, it was not long after the War's end that the political tide began to change and the US Central Intelligence Agency started recruiting German Intelligence personnel (with scant consideration for their wartime activities or

¹ See, on the European front, the articles in *ENCOUNTER* by the Dutch historian Louis de Jong: "Was 'Arnhem' Betrayed?" (June 1981), and "The 'Great Game' of Secret Agents" (January 1980); and Robert Cecil, "Legends Spies Tell" (April 1978).

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behaviour) in order to prepare for the new Intelligence duel with the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, it was considered inadvisable to encourage our past enemies to publish details of their wartime successes against the Allies. These might have a direct bearing on current operations not only against the USSR and her allies, but also against other nations which were still using variations of the *Enigma* cipher machine.

All the available evidence does confirm, however, that in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War II in 1939 the Germans had developed an extremely efficient Signals Intelligence organisation (usually known as *B-Dienst*), which was regularly reading British diplomatic, Naval, Army, Air Force, and Merchant Navy ciphers with ease. The cause of this was the British Government's reluctance to adopt the principle of "machine enciphering." During the 1920s, this had been progressively developed by three principal inventors: Boris Hagelin and Arthur Scherbius on the Continent, and Edward Hebern in the United States.²

In the mid-1930s, the late Lord Louis Mountbatten had strongly recommended that the Royal Navy adopt machine enciphering, using the *Enigma*, of which two had been bought by the Admiralty in 1928. Unfortunately, no action was taken. When the War started the Navy was still using the cumbersome and outdated "book ciphers" which had hardly changed since World War I. These tabular columns of four- and five-figure groups, employed in conjunction with subtractor tables, were time-consuming in use, and prone to arithmetical error. In addition, the system suffered from a primary disadvantage: if any one set of code books was captured, new sets had to be issued to all the ships in that particular group—and in wartime that could be a very lengthy procedure.

By contrast, the *Enigma* consisted of a machine about the size of a portable typewriter, with a standard keyboard, three (later, four) interchangeable rotors, and a number of plug connectors. Together it offered 200 quintillion permutations, and yet it could be used without difficulty by semi-skilled operators under the most extreme battle conditions. The rotor settings could be changed daily (or several times a day) according to the number of messages transmitted; each setting produced 17,576 different positions, after which the rotors returned to their original setting.

² Of these three, Arthur Scherbius is the best remembered because he produced the *Enigma* cipher machine. Boris Hagelin eventually supplied cipher machines to the US Armed Forces and in the process became a millionaire (he set up his own cipher-machine factory in Switzerland after the War, and today it leads the world in cryptographic technology).

³ The pilot of the plane, Hugh ("Jimmy") James, managed to crash-land in flames, whereupon the German fighters, circling overhead, dived in attack time and again. General Gott survived the landing, but was killed during these attacks (see *Daily Telegraph*, London, 8 and 12 June 1984).

Less than a year later, in April 1943, American code-breakers intercepted a message detailing the proposed inspection tour by Admiral Yamamoto of the Solomon Islands; fighters from Henderson Field attacked his aircraft and shot it down, causing a terrible blow to Japanese morale at the loss of their great hero.

⁴ Bernhard Rogge and Wolfgang Frank, *Schiff 16* (Stalling Verlag, Hamburg, 1955); Ulrich Mohr, *Atlantis* (London, 1955).

A PART FROM RADIO INTERCEPTION and code-breaking, Hitler's Intelligence Services had also captured large quantities of secret cipher material from the various British Embassies and Consulates in Scandinavia during April-May 1940. A complete set of current Naval ciphers was seized from the submarine *HMS Seal*, captured off the German coast in 1940. There is still some mystery surrounding this incident, because nearly an hour passed between the submarine being forced to the surface and surrendering, yet no attempt was made to throw the ciphers overboard. On 11 September 1942, a motor torpedo boat was captured by the Germans which again yielded valuable cipher material. Similar secret Naval documents were found in Royal Naval vessels lost off Crete.

German Intelligence was also adept at exploiting specific coups. For example, in August 1941 an Italian employee at the US Embassy in Rome picked the lock of the safe used by the Military Attaché, Colonel Fiske, and photographed his cipher (sometimes called the "Black Code"), which was then passed on to the Germans. For the next 18 months or so, they were able to read all American military attaché traffic around the world.

In particular, the "Black Code" enabled Field-Marshal Rommel to monitor the daily reports from Colonel Frank Fellers, the US Military Attaché in Cairo, who sent back to Washington detailed summaries of the military and diplomatic plans of the British Middle East operations. Churchill was anxious that President Roosevelt should be apprised of what was happening in the Middle East, and Colonel Fellers was invited to attend all the most secret briefings. For a long time Rommel was credited with possessing almost magical powers in anticipating our next move in the Desert War—although, in fact, he was doing no more than we were with our ULTRA intercepts of German signals.

One result of this precious insight into our intentions was that the Germans learnt of the appointment of General William ("Strafer") Gott as Commander of the 8th Army, and of his plan to fly to Cairo on 7 August 1942 to take up his appointment. Gott's Bristol Bombay transport aircraft took off from a small airstrip at Burg-el-Arab and was immediately attacked by six Messerschmitt 109f fighters which had been lying in wait.³

The "Automedon" Windfall

ONE PARTICULAR THEATRE of operations where the Germans enjoyed spectacular success was in the Indian Ocean where their surface raiders intercepted, sank, or captured a vast tonnage of Allied merchant shipping. German accounts of these operations⁴ appeared soon after the War but concentrated on the buccaneering aspect of the raiders' exploits: and the full extent to which they used Signals Intelligence and cryptanalysis has come to light only recently.

One of their early successes was the capture by the raider *Atlantis* (on 11 July 1940) of the steamer *City of Baghdad*, from which was taken current copies of the Merchant Navy

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cipher and secret call-signs that enabled the captain of the *Atlantis*, Bernhard Rogge, to read messages for other Allied merchant shipping, plot their likely course, and intercept them without difficulty. On several occasions prisoners were told by the Germans the name of the vessel they would intercept the next day, and each time this proved correct.⁵ The raiders were practised at sending out false messages which cancelled the distress calls of those ships they had captured.

On 10 September 1940, using this technique, the *Benarty* was secured and more secret mail seized; then, on 11 November, the Blue Funnel steamer *Automedon* (7,528 tons) was intercepted by the *Atlantis* off the Nicobar Islands. In order to stop her using her radio to send a "Raider Sighted" report, the *Atlantis* shelled her with 28 rounds from her 5.9 inch guns (wrecking the vessel and killing Captain McEwen and two officers and a steward on the bridge).

The German boarding party was led by Lieutenant Ulrich Mohr, who had an excellent knowledge of English. Forcing open the strong-room they seized some 60 packages of mail including all the top-secret post *en route* for Far Eastern Command, Singapore. Among their haul were the new Royal Navy fleet ciphers; new Merchant Navy ciphers valid from 1 January 1941; Admiralty weekly shipping intelligence summaries; and a host of other sensitive documents. There was also six million dollars of new Straits currency notes, fresh from the Treasury printers in England.

THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ITEM, packed in its own weighted canvas bag marked "SAFE HAND—BRITISH MASTER ONLY", was a copy of the War Cabinet Minutes for 8 August 1940, which included the highly secret Chiefs-of-Staff report on the defence of Singapore and the Far East against Japanese attack, which was being sent to Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, C.-in-C. Far East.⁶

This document consisted of 87 detailed paragraphs, and was most gloomy in tone. It flatly stated that Britain was not in a position to resort to war if Japan attacked French Indo-China or Siam, and that Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies were indefensible since we would be unable to spare sufficient forces from other theatres of war to match the Japanese. It seems incredible that such a valuable document should have been sent to the Far East on a slow, vulnerable, merchant ship when the flying-boat service to Singapore was still in operation. Lieutenant Mohr immediately recognised its importance when he and captain Rogge inspected their haul.

Having sunk the *Automedon*, the *Atlantis* immediately

sailed for the Mandated Islands where the Japanese had been providing a safe harbour and refuelling facilities for German raiders. The mail and prisoners were transferred to the captured Norwegian tanker *Ole Jacob* which at once sailed for Japan carrying 10,000 tons of aviation gasoline. When it reached Kobe, on 4 December, the prisoners were taken off at night—to avoid them being detected by the British Secret Service who had the movements of German vessels under surveillance—and transferred to the liner *Scharnhorst*.

THE MAIL FROM THE *Automedon* reached the German Embassy in Tokyo on 5 December and was immediately inspected by Admiral Paul Wenneker, the German Naval Attaché. He photographed the most important items, including the Chiefs-of-Staff report, before sending them off to Berlin in the custody of a German Naval officer, Paul Kamenz, who crossed to Vladivostok and then travelled on across Russia, via Moscow, by train.

On 7 December Admiral Wenneker sent a long four-part cipher telegram to OKM Berlin (*Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine*), the German Navy headquarters, summarising the main parts of the Chiefs-of-Staff report. Because this message went by postal telegraph circuit across the Soviet Union it could not be intercepted by the British code-breakers at Bletchley Park. On 12 December the Japanese Naval Attaché in Berlin, Captain Yokoi, on the express orders of Hitler, was shown a copy of Wenneker's summary. Yokoi then sent his own shortened version back to Tokyo—and this message was intercepted by the Americans. . . .⁷ However, because it was in the Naval Attaché's cipher, it could not be read (the signal was not decoded until after the War, on 19 August 1945).

On 12 December Admiral Wenneker gave copies of the Chiefs-of-Staff report to Vice-Admiral Kondo (then Vice-Chairman of the Japanese Naval General Staff). At first he could not believe that the documents were genuine, suspecting that they had been deliberately allowed to fall into enemy hands in order to mislead both the Germans and the Japanese. However, when Wenneker explained how they had come to be captured, and the loss of life involved, Kondo accepted the authenticity of this almost incredible windfall.

There is no doubt that possession of these documents profoundly affected Japanese war planning in January 1941. This intimate view of Churchill's War Cabinet decisions and opinions enabled the Japanese to dismiss any serious fears that the British could make a worthwhile military intervention in the Far East. It also provided the Japanese with a clear picture of British knowledge of their armed forces (for example, that we were unaware that the Japanese Air Force possessed torpedo-carrying aircraft).

It is fair to argue, therefore, that the capture of the Chiefs-of-Staff report from the *Automedon* was the catalyst that sent the Japanese on the path to Pearl Harbour and precipitated the ruinous attack on America's Pacific fleet.

After the fall of Singapore in 1941, Captain Rogge of the *Atlantis* was presented with a *samurai* sword by the Japanese Emperor in recognition of his achievement. Only two other

⁵ File I/61/2/7 and MPI/587/22/153S, Australian Archives, Canberra.

⁶ CAB/65/8, Public Record Office (Kew), COS (40) 592, 31 July 1940, now CAB 66/10, Public Record Office. Letter from Squadron Leader G. H. Wiles (Air Ministry, London, dated 15 July 1948) to Air Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham.

⁷ 209/40-212/40 gKdos, *Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine* (OKM) signal log, and SRNA 0020, RG 457 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

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Germans received such an award—Hermann Goering and Erwin Rommel. Later, Admiral Kondo was to tell Wenneker on several occasions how valuable this particular document had been in planning the attacks on Pearl Harbour, the Philippines, and Singapore, on 8 December 1941, thus opening the war between Imperial Japan and the USA.

Despite the heavy shelling the *Automedon* had managed to send out a "Raider" report which, although incomplete, was intercepted by at least two ships, the *Malara* and the *Helenus*. On 30 December 1940, British Naval Intelligence in Singapore learned from a member of the Norwegian crew of the *Ole Jacob* that the Germans had seized all the mail on board the *Automedon*, and advised the Admiralty in London accordingly.⁸

The surviving members of the crew of the *Automedon* were brought back to Europe in the German blockade-runner *Storstad*, arriving at Bordeaux on 5 February 1941. After being held in a PoW camp for a month, they were taken (on March 12) to the railway station for transfer to another PoW camp near Munich.⁹

AT THE END OF THE WAR the British Government considered the *Automedon* affair so sensitive, bearing in mind the effect it had had on the outcome in the Far East, including the fall of Singapore—that all reference to it was to be withheld from the public. As a result, no files about the incident are to be found in the Public Record Office at Kew.¹⁰

Public knowledge of the loss of the Cabinet documents came to light quite accidentally when, in 1980, the US

⁸ Stephen Wentworth Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939-45: Vol. 1, The Defensive* (HMSO, London), p.282. Common Services Records (London), and Modern Records Centre (Liverpool), 20 September 1984.

⁹ While travelling across France, the *Automedon's* Fourth Engineer, Samuel Harper, jumped from the train during the night and started to make his way across France to freedom. By a series of fortunate coincidences he met with friendly and helpful Frenchmen who passed him on from one town to another until on 18 March he finally reached Marseilles. On 9 April he was taken by a party of smugglers across the Pyrenees, eventually reaching Spain on 13 April; he was promptly arrested and taken to a prison in Barcelona. The British Embassy secured his release on 29 May and, after being taken to Madrid for a medical check-up, Harper finally reached Gibraltar on 31 May 1941. (Modern Records Centre, Blue Funnel Line Archives, Liverpool.)

¹⁰ Search Department, Public Record Office (4 September 1984), Q/7821.

¹¹ John Costello, *The Pacific War* (Collins, 1981), p.614.

¹² Historical Section, Cabinet Office (London), 23 August 1984. Letter from Squadron Leader G. H. Wiles, 15 July 1948. Permanent Under Secretary's Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (London), 2 February 1984.

¹³ Letter from Lord Dacre to Mac Keen, Assistant Managing Editor, *Daily Mail*, London, January 1984.

¹⁴ Private correspondence (August 1984) with Colonel Brian Montgomery, author of *Shenton of Singapore* (Secker & Warburg, 1984), and Hugh Humphrey, CMG, OBE, who in 1940 was Sir Shenton's private secretary.

National Security Agency declassified over 130,000 pages of wartime MAGIC decrypts, (the word MAGIC being equivalent to the British ULTRA). Among these was the intercepted message from Captain Yokoi and, when this first publicly appeared in 1981,¹¹ it became possible to trace the lost papers back to the *Automedon*.

Even today, after nearly 45 years, the incident is evidently considered so embarrassing that the Foreign Office will not admit that the loss ever occurred, despite the fact that the captured documents were found in the German Foreign Ministry archives in Berlin in 1945. In 1983 I asked the Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, to inquire into the matter. After a delay of seven months, the Foreign Office advised me that it would be "improper" for me to know the facts of the incident, but hinted that the documents had perhaps been passed to the Russians, and thence to the Germans, by the exposed Soviet spy Donald Maclean.¹² Lord Dacre, who as Hugh Trevor-Roper was responsible for sifting through many German archives after the War, expressed the view that any suggestion that secret War Cabinet Minutes had been lost to the enemy in 1940 was "highly questionable" and that no such papers had been found among the German records.¹³

Although by the end of 1940 Churchill and his War Cabinet were aware that their most secret plans for the defence of Malaya and Singapore had fallen into enemy hands, neither the C.-in-C. Far East, Brooke-Popham, nor the Governor of Singapore, Sir Shenton Thomas, were told of the loss.¹⁴ This is particularly surprising because on 1 August 1940, while on leave in London, Sir Shenton Thomas had put his case for the defence of Singapore and Malaya personally to the Joint Planning Sub-Committee of the War Cabinet and many of his recommendations were incorporated in the ill-fated report. After the War Sir Shenton was very critical of the manner in which the official account of the loss of British possessions east of India was prepared. Indeed, he was not even consulted before the official history of the war against Japan was written—although he had come in for a considerable amount of criticism for the ease with which Singapore fell to the enemy. Had Sir Shenton (or his C.-in-C., who died in 1953) known that our entire defence plans had been in enemy hands for a year prior to hostilities commencing, he would surely have made some pertinent comment before his untimely death in 1962. One can only deduce that, for one reason or another, Winston Churchill had decided not to tell the authorities in Singapore.

IT ALSO APPEARS THAT neither the Australian nor the New Zealand Governments were told of this catastrophe—despite the fact that the British Chiefs-of-Staff report had been specifically prepared to satisfy their queries about Britain's intentions concerning the defence of the Far East in the event of a Japanese attack. In 1941 the Chiefs of Staff prepared another report on the defence of Singapore and Malaya, again in reply to a query from Prime Minister Robert Menzies of Australia. But this does not mention the loss of the previous report, nor is there any comment about this in the Minutes of the Defence Committee for 9 April 1941.

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when the defence of the Far East was also discussed in detail.¹⁵

The "Nankin" & the Compromised Cipher

ALTHOUGH THE *Automedon* affair was disastrous, it pales into insignificance compared to what happened when the Australian steamer *Nankin* was captured by the German raider *Thor* on 10 May 1942.

The *Nankin* had sailed from Fremantle on 5 May under the command of Captain Stratford with a crew of 180, 162 passengers (including 38 women and children), and 18 naval and 5 military personnel. Once again it is clearly evident that the German raider had advance information of the *Nankin's* movements.

In the early afternoon, an aircraft circled the ship (and then made a very low pass in an attempt to tear away the wireless aerial). Shortly afterwards the *Thor* was seen approaching, and when the *Nankin* broke radio silence and attempted to transmit a "Raider Sighted" signal, she opened fire. After an hour-long engagement during which there were fortunately only light casualties, Captain Stratford decided to surrender—but not before throwing overboard the ship's code-books and confidential papers.¹⁶ The *Thor* was then joined by her supply vessel, the *Regensburg*, and the three vessels remained together from 12 May to 28 May while the passengers, the crew, and the *Nankin's* valuable and useful cargo were transferred to the two German ships. (This clearly demonstrates how good the Germans' Signals Intelligence had become, for they evidently felt it quite safe to remain together for a long period.)

Among the *Nankin's* cargo the Germans found a large quantity of mail. There is some dispute as to how much there was: one report mentions 400 sacks of ordinary mail and 56 sacks of secret courier post, while another report (which seems the more likely), speaks of only 120 sacks.¹⁷ The bulk of the mail was quite routine material, mainly consisting of letters and packets from South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia, destined for England; but there was also a small amount of very secret mail from the Combined Operations Intelligence Centre at Wellington, New Zealand, en route to C.-in-C. Eastern Fleet (Colombo).

COIC (sometimes known as the Central Intelligence Bureau) was first established in 1940 in an office next door to New Zealand's central War room in Stout Street, Wellington. It was an offshoot of the Prime Minister's group called the "Organisation for National Security", which began work in

1938 keeping records on Japanese (and other aliens) in New Zealand. COIC coordinated the Intelligence activities of New Zealand's Army, Navy, and Air Force, and had close links with the Police and Customs Service; it also worked closely with the British, American, and Australian Intelligence Services from which it received a great deal of very sensitive information, much of which dealt with matters far outside the Australasian theatre of operations.

Each week COIC issued a "MOST SECRET" intelligence summary¹⁸ which was distributed on an "Officer Only" basis to 22 named recipients, including the C.-in-C. US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester Nimitz. A further warning inside each summary stated that the contents came from "Most Secret Sources", an expression coined by Churchill to denote that the information was of ULTRA classification and had been obtained from cryptanalysis.

Each summary was divided into four parts. The first, dealing with information about the ANZAC theatre of operations, gave details of Allied shipping, naval vessels, convoys, and so forth. The second part concerned external intelligence and appears to have covered any part of the world (it included, for example, weekly convoy tonnages arriving in the United Kingdom—which seems a strange piece of information to send all the way out to New Zealand). Part Three provided information on Japanese forces and general comments about Japan's economy, while Part Four gave a detailed list of the estimated disposition of Japanese naval vessels in the Indian and Pacific Oceans and their likely future movements. A separate appendix then gave the latest details of every Allied vessel in the same area and their future movements.

SOME OF THE INFORMATION in these summaries came from normal sources such as air reconnaissance; interrogation of prisoners; the coast-watcher service, which involved agents living behind Japanese lines and radioing reports to the Intelligence Services; and analysis of regular radio traffic passing between ships at sea and their land bases. But it was equally obvious that much of the very detailed knowledge of the whereabouts of enemy ships and their intended movements could only have come from code-breaking; and it seems, therefore, that the COIC was receiving a great deal of information from the US Navy's cryptanalysis organisation in Hawaii.

This was known as the Fleet Radio Unit (FRUPac), which had a subsidiary headquarters at Belconnen, in Australia. These two teams of cryptographers had been intercepting, analysing, and slowly penetrating the most complex Japanese operational cipher, which the US Navy called JN25. It is outside the scope of this article for me to attempt to describe in detail the principle of the JN25 fleet cipher, but it involved an elaborate system of double-encipherment using a number of different tables of figure-groups each of which was regularly changed. Although it was not a machine cipher like *Enigma*, or that used by the Japanese for their diplomatic communications, it was still considered impossible to break.

The Americans naturally guarded the secret of their code-breaking activities very carefully; and it is not yet clear

¹⁵ Secretary of War Cabinet, 5 August 1940, WP (40) 302, now CAB 66/10 at Public Record Office, COS 230/41, Defence Committee (Operations) 12/41, now CAB 69/2, PRO.

¹⁶ Australian Naval Archives, 2026/10/1854, MPI/1185/8, Box 21.

¹⁷ Paul Carell, "Gespenster auf Hoher See", *Kristall Magazine* (Hamburg), Vol. 13, 1958, Foreign Ministry files, Berlin, Pol VIII, 1064/42, now at *Bundesarchiv*, Freiburg.

¹⁸ New Zealand Archives (Wellington), Navy Series List, Series 11.

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whether FRUPac was aware of how much information was being passed to COIC, or to what extent COIC was redistributing it. The late Admiral Layton USN (he died in May 1984) was Nimitz's Fleet Radio Officer in charge of all Intelligence matters and in close touch with the code-breakers at FRUPac; and he has stated that there was always great concern within the US Navy that such vital information was being passed to organisations outside their control.¹⁹ Additionally, there was the constant problem of the US press which was subject to far less severe censorship than the British press and often published articles that came dangerously near to revealing the truth of such matters.

Because of the sensitive nature of the COIC summaries it would have been normal procedure, as laid down by the New Zealand Organisation for National Security, for them to be distributed by hand, using a courier, as with similar material from Bletchley Park. One of the great problems about putting the ULTRA material to use was how to impart its information without compromising the source. Frequently a cover story would be invented to pretend that it had come from a spy.

According to a surviving officer from the *Nankin*,²⁰ no such courier mail was handed to Captain Stratford. It seems, therefore, that the COIC summaries had been inadvertently included with the general mail—which, considering the large number of vessels captured by German raiders in the previous two years, was an appalling breach of elementary security.

It has been possible to establish from two of Admiral Weneker's telegrams to Berlin that COIC summaries 12, 13, 14, and 15 (covering the period 21 March to 20 April 1942) were on board the *Nankin* and were captured. These particular reports were of crucial importance. They clearly showed the increasing extent of the US Navy's knowledge of the Japanese battle fleet's movements in the weeks leading up to the Battle of Midway (3-5 June), and this could only have come from reading the JN25 fleet-cipher.

UNLIKE THE *Automedon* incident, on this occasion the Germans fortunately took much longer to get the mail to Japan. The *Regensburg* first called at Batavia, on 25 June, and only reached Yokohama on 18 July. Weneker immediately examined the mail; on 20 July he began relaying to OKM Berlin summaries of what he had found in the mail, and on 25 July and 28 July²¹ sent details of some of the COIC summaries. However, it was not until late August that Berlin authorised Admiral Weneker to show the COIC reports to the Japanese. On 29 August he had his

¹⁹ Various conversations with John Costello (New York) during 1983 and 1984.

²⁰ Captain B. W. Dun (Ret'd) (Hawthorn, Australia), 19 June 1984.

²¹ 1417/42 and 1435/42 gKdos (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

²² Imperial War Museum (London) and Public Record Office (Kew), ADM 223/51 Part I.

²³ OKW/Abwehr I M/TB 1663/43 gKdos (18 August 1943), Bundesarchiv (Freiburg).

²⁴ John Costello, *The Pacific War*, pp. 246-49.

first meeting with them, and for the first time the Japanese became aware of the extent to which the Americans were reading their fleet ciphers and that this had obviously been responsible for their severe defeat at the Battle of Midway. Nevertheless, despite the evidence from the *Nankin*, senior Japanese Naval commanders were very reluctant to believe their most important cipher had in fact been compromised.

The *Seekriegsleitung*, the war diary kept at German Naval Headquarters in Berlin, refers to this meeting (3 September 1942) and records that the Allied knowledge of the Japanese fleet dispositions showed that their communications were insecure, and the Japanese requested the assistance of the German Navy in improving their cipher security. As a result a communications agreement was prepared between the two Navies (11 September 1942), and subsequently 500 *Enigma* cipher-machines were sent to Japan from Germany in 1943. German cooperation with the Japanese in the field of cryptology had always been cautious because, in late 1940, they had learnt that the Americans were reading Japanese machine diplomatic ciphers—although, ironically, it never occurred to them that their own *Enigma* system might also be vulnerable.²²

There was ample evidence available that *Enigma* had been penetrated by the British, but, as so often in such matters, Hitler's senior commanders refused to believe it and junior German Intelligence officers soon realised that it was pointless to try to convince them. In 1943, Colonel Masson of the Swiss Secret Service had told German Intelligence²³ about an American contact working in the Navy Department in Washington, who had several times visited London with US Navy missions. He had reported that the British Navy had a special department (actually the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre) which since the outbreak of war had concerned itself exclusively with the decipherment of German naval codes—and, for some months past, had succeeded in reading all orders sent by the German Navy to U-boat commanders. Despite this startlingly accurate piece of information, the Germans continued to use *Enigma*, albeit with a few extra refinements, and refused to believe that the codes had been broken. . . .

As a result of the disclosures from the captured Combined Operations Intelligence Centre summaries, the Japanese Navy immediately introduced strict new security arrangements to protect the JN25 fleet cipher. It also drastically reduced the volume of radio traffic, and made significant changes to the call signs. The two code books used for JN25 were due to be replaced on 1 April 1942, as part of routine procedure. Due to logistical problems in circulating the new tables to every ship and shore station, however, the change had to be postponed twice, and the fleet did not switch over to the new cipher until 28 May.²⁴ Between then and August the US Navy's code-breakers began the laborious task of reconstructing the new cipher tables. But immediately after Admiral Weneker's meeting with the Japanese on 29 August they experienced a sudden signals blackout, so total that until well into 1943 the US Navy was unable to obtain any useful information.

This loss of signals intelligence seriously affected the outcome of at least three major naval engagements in the

Pacific: the battle of Cape Esperance (11-12 October); Santa Cruz (26 October); and Guadalcanal (13-15 November)—all of which resulted in unexpectedly severe losses for the US Navy.

The Americans were never told about the loss of COIC material on the *Nankin* and how this compromised their code-breaking achievements at one of the most important moments of the war against Japan. To this day there is no mention of the *Nankin* affair in any American archive—for the simple reason that the British and Australian authorities have taken great trouble to conceal the facts.

In 1945 the captured COIC summaries surfaced among the German naval archives (exactly where they were found is not clear, but it may have been at Schloss Tambach). By the time the German records were repatriated to Bonn in 1958, all reference to the *Nankin* affair had been removed. The log of the raider *Thor* (which is now in the *Bundesarchiv* at Freiburg) appears to have been retyped since the War.²⁵ The entry concerning the *Nankin's* capture makes no reference to any mail having been found on board; yet, a week earlier, the entry for the capture of the Norwegian tanker *Aust* precisely details the mail and other documents taken from her.

THE MOST CURIOUS ASPECT, indeed the greatest mystery, of the whole affair is the missing portion of Admiral Wenneker's war diary for the period 1 June through 31 October 1942. This just happens to include the period when the *Nankin's* mail reached Japan, and Wenneker had his series of meetings with the Japanese Naval Command. According to the Naval Historical Branch in London, this section was lost in transit between Tokyo and Berlin—although the rest of his diary (from 25 August 1939 through 31 March 1943) is intact and available.²⁶ The absence of this section of his diary makes it impossible to know what else Wenneker found among the *Nankin's* mail, what he told Berlin about it, and what was discussed at his meetings with

²⁵ I am grateful to Dr John Chapman, University of Sussex, for information supplied. I would also like to thank John Costello (New York), Philip Reed (The Imperial War Museum), Ian Brown (Combined Services Records), Michael Montgomery, the late Ronald Lewin, M. McAloon and R. M. Coppock (Naval Historical Branch, Ministry of Defence), and Ellen Ellis (New Zealand National Archives) for their valuable comments and assistance in preparing this article. I am greatly indebted to Dr Henry Kent for his expert translation of many of the German documents involved.

²⁶ Paul Wenneker's diary, under the title *The Price of Admiralty*, has been edited and translated by John W. M. Chapman (Saltire Press, 1984).

the Japanese. From checking the serial numbers of Wenneker's telegrams one can deduce that between 20-28 July 1942 he sent 52 messages to Berlin, most of which were probably about the *Nankin's* mail. The incoming-signal log at German Naval Headquarters in Berlin (in which all Wenneker's messages would have been recorded) has also vanished.

Wenneker's signals to and from Berlin after Hitler's invasion of Russia in June 1941 went by direct-beam radio, and were intercepted by the British code-breakers at Bletchley Park; they called this material *Seahorse*. Wenneker's special *Enigma* key (it is possible he was using an 8-rotor machine vastly more complex than the normal 4-rotor machines) was not broken by Bletchley Park until late 1943. At the end of the War, his earlier traffic would have been retrospectively decoded (as the Americans did, for example, with the Japanese Naval Attaché's signals from Berlin). Today, Wenneker's messages are kept in the "Japanese ULTRA Intercept" archives, under the control of the Foreign Office, which will not release them to the Public Record Office. When I was carrying out research for this article, I asked the Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, if I could see the 50 or 60 messages sent to Berlin by Admiral Wenneker in July/August 1942; I was not only refused access but also informed that none of this traffic would ever be available for public inspection. It is just possible that the US National Security Agency may hold copies of Wenneker's signals among its as yet unreleased archives, without realising that they contain the information that proved so disastrous for the US Navy in 1942.

HAD DETAILS of the COIC mail from the *Nankin* reached Japan more quickly there is no doubt that the outcome of the Battle of Midway would have been very different. All historians agree that the American victory turned the tide of the Pacific war and set the United States on the road to ultimate victory. The decisive victory very largely resulted from the US Navy's ability to read the Japanese Navy's ciphers and thus anticipate their intentions. As it was, the loss of this material seriously reduced the US Navy's fighting ability for many months at a most crucial point in the War, and caused unnecessarily severe American losses in several subsequent naval battles.

Just as the proverbial battle can be lost by "want of a nail" in the horse's shoe, so too the events of the *Automedon* and the *Nankin* illustrate that the most complex cipher system in the world, taken to be infallible or unbreakable, can be compromised by an accident, a far-away setback, or a single moment of carelessness.

ENCOUNTER

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