

Three Amateur Spies and the Intelligence Organization They Created in Occupied WWII Indochina

Bob Bergin

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Introduction

The other group with which the OSS worked in Indo China was the Gordon-Bernard-Tan Group (GBT). It was organized in early 1942 by a group of employees of a U.S. oil firm in Indochina.^{a,1}

It was a *Terry and the Pirates* operation in a *Terry and the Pirates* world, and it was very effective in its time and place.² Arguably, it was the most successful Allied intelligence collection operation in World War II Asia.

When the Imperial Japanese Army invaded French Indochina in September 1940, all contact between the French colony and the Allied presence in neighboring China and elsewhere was cut off. The British, Chinese and Free French desperately needed intelligence on the Japanese occupiers, as did the Americans when they were drawn into the Asian war. But there was no intelligence coming out of Indochina, where the

practical difficulties of establishing intelligence mechanisms in a new environment were compounded by the complex political situation.

As explained by Tai Li, the intelligence and security chief of the Chinese Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek, “the Chinese “could do almost nothing as far as Indochina was concerned. . . . many different [Vietnamese] groups were active in one way or another, but the trouble was they did not like each other. On only one point, apparently, were they able to agree . . . none of them liked the Chinese.” As for the French in Indochina, “being French, they seemed to have almost as many different categories as people,” and all were “heartily disliked . . . for not having permitted the region enough liberty or political responsibility.”^{b3}

While the Allied intelligence services grappled with the problem, three amateurs created a highly effec-

a. The first group OSS worked with in Indochina was the Meynier Group, composed of French officers with Indochina experience who at the request of OSS came from the Free French military authorities. They arrived in China in the fall of 1943. By early 1944, a lack of progress in their attempt to penetrate Indochina and overwhelming “intra-French political complexities” resulted in an OSS request that “the group be transferred to the full control and authority of the French Military Mission [FMM] in China.” (*OSS War Report*, Vol. II, 439.)

b. The names of Chinese people and places in this article are rendered according to the spellings used in contemporaneous accounts, which in many cases differ from current romanization.

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tive intelligence collection mechanism that would become the chief source of intelligence on the Japanese and their activities in French Indochina.

The original purpose of the leader of the group, a Canadian, appeared to have been to bolster the morale of the employee's French friends in the country by maintaining contact with the outside world. However, what had been a casual arrangement began to assume the characteristics of an amateur intelligence agency. Subsequently, it developed into an actual Intelligence network collaborating with Allied organizations.⁴

Unlike classic agent nets run by professional intelligence services, the GBT group was fiercely protective of its independence on the grounds that it was its independence that assured its effectiveness. A look at the group's organization and how it operated offers an interesting contrast to the other Allied intelligence services then in China, particularly the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The GBT was small and free-wheeling; OSS was large and growing and experiencing the corrosive effects of a rapidly expanding bureaucracy. OSS leaders became intent on absorbing

the GBT group as the way to resolve their own knotty collection problems in Indochina.

OSS officer Archimedes Patti, reviewing the status of Allied intelligence in the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) and the China Theater in 1944—before he became the chief of OSS Indochina operations in China—wrote in his 1980 memoir:

The overlapping command structures, conflicting national objectives, inter-Allied and interagency jealousies, and interagency power struggles militated against effective operations and resulted in enormous waste of human effort and national funds.⁵

OSS Takes A Look at the GBT Group, September 1944

Although OSS at first had no direct relations with GBT, in September 1944 it provided some financial support and assigned a liaison officer to aid the development of SO [Special Operations] and MO [Morale Operations] and generally expand the GBT network.⁶

OSS operations officer Charles Fenn sat in the office reserved for visiting brass at OSS headquarters in

Kunming, China, as the “new OSS overall boss, . . . a full West Point colonel named Coughlin,” served him “real Nescafe”^a as he told Fenn of his new assignment: “We have a great new field for you to get busy on! It's with the Gordon Group^b covering Indochina,” a top OSS priority.”⁷

Coughlin explained why this assignment was important: There was a lack of intelligence on the Japanese Imperial Army occupying Indochina. Although the Vichy French administration in Indochina was an ally of Japan now, Free French supporters inside Indochina provided some intelligence to the FFM in Kunming.^c But their information was sent via courier. The lack of timeliness made it useless to the US Air Force for its bomber strikes on Japanese targets in Vietnam.

“But Gordon's got a couple of agents with transmitters,” Coughlin added. “We wanted to take over the whole operation for OSS . . . but he [Gordon] wouldn't buy it.” Gordon had always insisted that his group's success depended on its independence.^{d, 8} In the end OSS agreed to back Gordon if he'd take an OSS officer into his group. “Well now, Fearless,” Coughlin said to Fenn, “Yours was the only name he'd agree to.”

“Fearless” was one of the appellations Fenn was known by. Another was “Troublesome Fenn.” Yet Fenn was competent and experienced and had previously done exception-

a. Still an innovation in China in 1944.

b. Usually known as GBT, it was informally also called “the Gordon Group.”

c. The FFM in Kunming was actually just the cover for Free French intelligence running Indochina operations. The only real FFM mission was in Chungking.

d. Especially from OSS, “whose methods Gordon considered autocratic.” (Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 76.)

al work with Morale Operations, the OSS branch responsible for black propaganda and covert action operations. An independent-minded former journalist, he had broad East Asia experience and little patience with bureaucracy, in the OSS or elsewhere.

Fenn had had a single brief encounter with Gordon some weeks earlier. Fenn was then based at Kweilin, southeast of Kunming and near the Indochina border, organizing Chinese agent nets to work behind Japanese lines. He left Kweilin on the last DC-2 as Kweilin town and its major US airbase were being evacuated to escape the oncoming Japanese *Ichigo* offensive.^a

Waiting at the Kweilin airport, Fenn had shared a café table with two strangers, “an oddly dissimilar pair, one being a tall Westerner, and the other an exceptionally short Chinese,” Canadian Laurie Gordon, and Chinese-American Frankie Tan. They were obviously connected with Indochina “somehow” but didn’t say how, their talk “limited by the “undercover nature” of their work, making them cautious of talking to strangers. It was a short meeting, but Fenn took an instant liking to Gordon, and apparently Gordon to him. “When I said goodbye, I little expected that this encounter would radically change the course of my present occupation.”⁹

“We’re not in OSS to play it straight but to get the job done!”

Meanwhile back in Coughlin’s office, the colonel asked Fenn, “So is it a deal?”

“It’s a deal, if you say so,” Fenn told the colonel.

“Good Man! So I’ll have Gordon contact you.”

Despite his well-known misgivings about OSS—and his links to British intelligence—Gordon now seemed willing to engage in a relationship with OSS. Archimedes Patti, at the time head of the OSS French Indochina desk in Washington and soon to take over as chief of Indochina operations in Kunming, offered background to this change of heart:

After the OSS/AGFRTS merger in April 1944,^b the British urged Donovan to use the GBT and, of course, to subsidize it. At first Gordon was adamant about wanting to retain his operational independence, unfettered by national interests and bureaucratic red tape. But recognizing British support limitations and OSS’s resources and growing influence in the China theatre, he finally agreed to cooperate with OSS/AGFRTS, and even to assist OSS in morale operations.¹⁰

The Other Side of Liaison

*We’re not in OSS to play it straight but to get the job done!*¹¹

Leaving Coughlin’s office, Fenn was told to see Lt. Col. Robert Hall, another of his bosses at the Kunming OSS base.^c Hall explained the realities of Fenn’s new assignment.

I told Colonel Coughlin you were just right for this job. But there is one thing you’ve got to keep in mind. We want to know how Gordon really stands with the other outfits he’s hooked up with. Is he maybe a British agent? Or working for the FMM? Or even Tai Li? [His radio operator at this end is actually one of Tai Li’s men!^d So get the gen on all of this. But play it cool. Gordon’s a touchy fellow, and that’s putting it mildly.

Fenn said that Gordon also was “pretty smart,” and “If I don’t play it straight, I’ll be out on my ear.” To which Hall replied: “We’re not in OSS to play it straight but to get the job done!”^e

Per Coughlin’s instructions, Fenn waited for Gordon to contact him. Gordon eventually wired him from Delhi. He would be in Kunming as soon as a flight was available.

a. *Ichigo* was the major Japanese ground offensive in World War II, aimed at destroying US airbases used by B-29s to bomb the Japanese homeland. It started in April 1944 and ended in December 1944. The Japanese deployed 17 divisions, with 500,000 troops. (See map on page 13.)

b. AGFRTS, the 5320th Air and Ground Forces Resources Technical Staff, a joint OSS-14th Air Force group at Kunming, taken over by OSS in April 1944.

c. “It is difficult to serve two masters. I subsequently discovered that in OSS, one was sometimes called to serve half a dozen.” (Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 19.)

d. And indeed he was. Tai Li was Chiang Kai-shek’s spymaster.

e. Cynical, perhaps, but Hall’s characterization of an intelligence service’s purpose does not seem inappropriate. (Author comment)

The GBT and its work was flourishing. Gordon had good contacts with the Free French and better ones with local Chinese warlords and the Kuomintang (KMT) of the Chinese Nationalists.

“Would [Fenn] get ready to proceed with him to his base on the Indochina border?”

River Voyage

We came upon a large ferry boat top-heavy with passengers and cargo. . . . Strung out behind were six or seven water buffaloes, only their muzzles and dilated eyes visible amid the torrent. This convoy hurtling downstream shot past us like an express train.¹²

Fenn and Gordon flew to Nanning, about 500 miles southeast of Kunming, and directly in the path of the Japanese Army’s oncoming *Ichigo* offensive. Gordon’s GBT base was at Lungchow, 100 miles southwest of Nanning on the Indochina border. The only way of getting there, Fenn wrote, “was by sampan up a fast flowing river”; a voyage that would take “eleven groaning days.” The 25-foot-long sampan carried the boat’s owner, his wife, five children, six crew members, and passengers Fenn and Gordon. “Two

cabins, roughly-constructed from bamboo mats, one for us, and one for all the rest. . . . The crew poled the boat from dawn to dusk with no break, but to snatch a meal. . . . As we pushed off against the swift current, a squadron of Japanese bombers swooped down and gave the environs a pasting.”¹³

Moving slowly upriver against the strong current made for long days, endless card games, and time for talk. Explaining further details of his operations, Gordon said he now had a dozen friends in Indochina sending reports, two by radio contact, the others by courier.^a Gordon said he had recently sent down [into Vietnam] six more portable transmitters, the famous B2 model given him by the British.^b

The GBT and its work were flourishing. Gordon had good contacts with the Free French and better ones with local Chinese warlords and the Kuomintang (KMT) of the Chinese Nationalists. For the British and Americans, GBT was the major source of intelligence coming from Indochina and “indispensable to the

Chinese and to Chennault’s Fourteenth Air Force.”¹⁴

Gordon was quite aware that success had stimulated great interest in GBT operations, particularly from the OSS. He told Fenn, “not for the record,” that “both the French and the Chinese were reluctant to have the U.S. [via OSS] come in on the Indochina scene.”¹⁵ The French, because of the “Darlan Affair” in North Africa, did not trust the Americans,^c and the Chinese had the areas bordering Indochina under their control and “don’t relish American interference.”¹⁶ As for the British, they had limited interest in the area, and no problem with the Americans coming in. The US fleet was moving into the China Sea, and its carrier aircraft would soon be within striking distance of Japanese bases in Indochina. The US Navy would need to know targets, defenses, and weather. That was why OSS was told to get into the show, Gordon said. “The only effective way in is through our [GBT] setup.”¹⁷

G for Laurence Gordon

GBT began operations with couriers. It acquired a limited number of radio sets from the British in India and established stations

a. These 12 presumably were Free French principal agents, each with subagents and other contacts whose reports they transmitted to the Lungchow base. Several were in line for a radio upgrade.

b. “The British Type 3 Mk. II (B2) commonly known as the B2, is arguably the best known of spy radio sets . . . issued to agents and resistance groups and special forces operating on enemy territory.” The set consists of a receiver, transmitter, power supply, small for its day, but too big to carry unobtrusively, often delivered in suitcase version (original was red leather) could be cardboard or wood. See cryptomuseum.com

c. “Days after the Allies invaded French North Africa in November 1942 [Operation Torch], . . . an astonished public learned that French cooperation had been purchased by recognition of Admiral Francois Darlan—the third highest ranking officer of the Vichy Government. . . . Indignant protests in the American press were amplified in Great Britain . . . [that] excoriated [Darlan’s] lamentable record of collaboration, anti-Semitism, and Anglophobia, but especially denounced the appointment as a deliberate and ill-considered affront to the long-time champion of the French resistance, Charles de Gaulle. (Arthur L. Funk, “Negotiating the ‘Deal with Darlan,’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 8 no.2 (April 1973): 81.) Darlan was assassinated on 24 December 1942, by a French monarchist, alleged to be linked to the British SOE or American OSS.



Map courtesy of US Military Academy, History Department (https://www.usma.edu/academics/academic_departments/history/atlas/).

It was Laurence “Laurie” Gordon who had thought out the concept of intelligence collection in occupied Indochina, and then went into Indochina to implement his ideas.

at Hanoi and Haiphong, as well as a headquarters station at Lungchow in China, across the Indochina border. The Chinese government supplied operators for the headquarters station on condition that all intelligence received would be sent to Chinese military intelligence in Chungking.¹⁸

It was Laurence “Laurie” Gordon who had thought out the concept of intelligence collection in occupied Indochina and then went into Indochina to implement his ideas. Gordon had an adventurous streak. A British subject born in Canada, he started as a coffee planter in Kenya but gave that up to go into the oil business in Africa and Asia. He was in Indochina when the Japanese arrived.^a He resettled his family in California, then was convinced by Cal-Texaco to return to Southeast Asia to look after the company interests. When the Pearl Harbor attack brought the United States into the war, that plan was changed, by Cal-Tex, “to infiltrate Gordon into Indochina under semiofficial cover. The cover was provided by Sir William Stephenson, the head of the British Security Coordination Office in New York.”^b

With Sir William’s help, “Gordon was recruited into the British Secret Service.”^c He was sent to New Delhi, “secretly” given a captain’s rank in military intelligence, and sent to Chungking to work with FMM. The plan, to set up an intelligence network in Indochina in conjunction with the French, quickly proved unworkable. French involvement brought opposition from the Chinese, and the FMM itself was “hopelessly split by political rivalry.”

The US military attaché introduced Gordon to Admiral Yang Hsuan-cheng, the director of KMT Military Intelligence.¹⁹ Admiral Yang authorized Gordon to operate in China’s Kwangsi Province, which bordered Indochina and had “easy access routes across the frontier,” but Yang cautioned him that Chinese cooperation was contingent on Gordon’s not cooperating with the French intelligence services. While GBT is sometimes spoken of as a British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) operation, it quickly became apparent that Gordon kept the Brits at arms length, as he did everyone else.²⁰

Gordon initially confined his activities to maintaining a company presence among

former employees of Cal-Texaco. Later, “under the guise of a free-lancing oil agent,” he traveled throughout Vietnam. In the process, he renewed old contacts among the French he had known and turned them into informants—“in the interests of salvaging their former company’s assets.”²¹

That last phrase may explain the *OSS War Report* comment that GBT was started to bolster former French employee morale by giving them a way to maintain their contact with the outside world. The actual beginning of Gordon’s operation inside Indochina does not appear to have been the “casual arrangement” suggested by the *War Report* but seems much more deliberate. There is no record of Gordon receiving instructions from British intelligence in conducting clandestine operations, although it is most likely that he did. It is possible that it was left to him to decide the best way to approach potential sources and that it was Gordon who thought up what was essentially a “false flag” approach to recruit his old contacts. Whatever Gordon may have told his initial contacts at the start, there was no question that GBT agents later knew how their information was being used.

The cover Gordon used while he traveled through Japanese-occupied

a. “Gordon had supervised oil-drilling operations for Cal-Texaco in Africa, China, Egypt, and Madagascar, and at the outbreak of the war he was directing the Cal-Texaco operation at Haiphong in North Indochina. (R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America’s First Central Intelligence Agency* (UCLA Press, 1972), 325.)

b. When Archimedes Patti, as OSS Indochina desk chief found OSS headquarters file searches on GBT unproductive, an OSS colleague suggested he visit the New York OSS office, where in February 1945 he found details on GBT. “The New York office of the OSS was located with the British Security Coordination Office at 630 Fifth Avenue. Patti seems to have been the original source of information on Gordon’s early involvement with the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), which is not easily found elsewhere. (Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 44–45.)

c. Sir William Stephenson is, of course, “the famous Churchill’s man called ‘Intrepid,’ then operating secretly and with official American sanction out of New York City.” (Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 542, fn 6.)

Indochina is also not explained—except that he was a “free-lancing oil-agent” and “buying oil and other commodities for the black market in China.” Those words may in fact explain his *modus operandi*. The black market in WWII China, and the countries bordering it, was a massive and complex enterprise. Everyone with money played: soldiers and civilians, the Chinese Army, Japanese intelligence, and US soldiers and airmen. It embraced whiskey and cigarettes, British fashions from India, and a brand new Buick, if you wanted it. All that mattered was the trade and the money it generated. The rest was a wink and a nudge. Gordon presumably represented himself exactly as what he was, an expatriate Asia-hand, a former employee of an international company who knew his way around—and how to take advantage of the wartime economy that had evolved.

T for Frankie Tan

*Before the first year of operations had elapsed, Gordon, using British funds, radios and equipment, and Chinese personnel, was joined by two American associates. One was Frank (“Frankie”) Tan, a Bostonian of Chinese extraction, who had known Gordon in Haiphong.*²²

Halfway through the river voyage, at a place called Talu, Gordon and Fenn were joined by Frankie Tan, the “T” in GBT. With the help of coolies and ponies, Tan was in charge of getting 27 drums of “valuable” gasoline to a local GBT depot. He would join them on the sampan for the rest of the voyage to the GBT camp.

If Gordon was adventurous, Frankie Tan was on his way to become a master of adventure.

If Gordon was adventurous, Frankie Tan was on his way to become a master of adventure.²³ He was born in Boston of Cantonese parents, “went to good American schools and knew only American ways.” When the depression hit in 1931, his father, a successful Boston doctor with great interest in Chinese politics, decided to move the family to China. Initially, the family lived in Canton, moved to Shanghai, and then to Nanking. The family had just settled in Nanking when the Japanese Army took the city. “We all had to run for it, and I mean literally . . . we were attacked by robbers and fleeced of all our possessions . . . I had to find a job fast, to keep us going.”²⁴

Tan’s first job was with the KMT army, laying mines in the Yangtze River, where he was strafed by Japanese fighters and denounced by indigenous Chinese as an “overseas” Chinese spy and arrested. After his release, the only job he could get was with an American company set up in Indochina by Chinese as cover for a smuggling operation. As an American, not yet in the war, Tan was hired to deal with finances. He was arrested by the Japanese while he was carrying a trove of incriminating documents. He managed to escape and disappeared in the back streets of Hanoi. He kept on the move for months until the Japanese gave up looking for him. That was where Gordon found him and recognized his capacity for risk-taking and subterfuge.²⁵

B for Harry Bernard

*Short on words, he was long on know-how, especially concerning technical matters.*²⁶

Bernard was hard at work at the GBT base when Fenn arrived. He was the GBT second-in-command, the steady one, “always essentially practical.”²⁷ Fenn found that the “sometimes acidly ironic” Bernard was inherently very good natured.²⁸ OSS chief Coughlin assessed him as “not as shrewd as Gordon” and without Gordon’s drive or his “thinking in terms of preserving the empire”; Bernard “strongly desires helping Americans in every way he can,” which is a bit overstated.²⁹ Bernard’s primary loyalty was to the GBT Group. To the GBT he was eminently dependable, both as administrator and effective agent handler. He kept GBT running while others were preoccupied with their own concerns.³⁰

The Base on the River

*Give me the luxuries of life, and we will dispense with the necessities.*³¹

As the sampan approached Lungchow, “the river banks rose to huge stone cliffs on which a brownish line forty or fifty feet above the present water level marked the height of the floodwaters a few days earlier, a small wonder that we had to wrestle against swirling currents. Our boat tied up at the foot of some tricky stone steps cut into the massive cliff rising to Gordon’s headquarters.”³² The Chinese had given Gordon the use of the former headquarters of Chinese Customs at Lungchow, aban-

A Belgian-Chinese-Annamese agent named Simon—who spoke all three languages fluently, as well as English—walked 200 miles from Hanoi to check in with Gordon.

done when the city's steel bridge, which crossed the river marking China's border with Indochina, was destroyed. Perched high above the swirling river, "the setting was a veritable Chinese Xanadu."³³

Just as exotic was the GBT base staff: Madame Tone, a refugee from Indochina was in charge. "Her daughters, Helen and Janet, did office work, including cryptography." A most important member of the GBT team was radio operator Liang, a colonel in the Chinese army, and an agent of Chinese spymaster Tai Li sent to monitor GBT. Liang admitted his link to Tai Li once it was "ferreted out" by Gordon's clandestine contacts. Gordon kept him on: That "not only kept the Chinese friendly, but also forestalled their surreptitious spying." In any case, as Gordon noted, all the intelligence GBT collected went to all the allies, including the Chinese.³⁴

The day after they arrived, Gordon took Fenn across the river, into Indochina, to visit the French military outpost on the opposite bank, "a few sheds and a brick house;" the hosts, a captain and two lieutenants of the French Army—who also assisted Gordon's activities as they could.

GBT at Work

No other intelligence group, either military or civilian, had

*equaled their record of information collected and disseminated.*³⁵

In the days that followed, Fenn would get a sense of how GBT operated: An old Chinese farmer who lived in the Haiphong area led in an American pilot who had been shot down while attacking Japanese targets at Haiphong. A French priest approached Fenn to help get "certain supplies, including radio sets," that would help him set up his own intelligence net in Indochina. Gordon turned down that request on the basis that "the FMM would have been furious at such competition," at a time when good GBT relations with the French still mattered.³⁶

A Belgian-Chinese-Annamese agent named Simon—who spoke all three languages fluently, as well as English—walked 200 miles from Hanoi to check in with Gordon. He reported the Japanese were doing a brisk business trading opium against mercury and copper ore.³⁷ Andre, Gordon's main agent, sent a message from Hanoi. "Owing to increasing tension" he was coming up for consultations, bringing along a Gaullist patriot, who was on his way to Chungking to liaise with the FMM. Could Gordon assist in getting them through the growing Chinese border bureaucracy?" Gordon went to meet them and led them through the Chinese lines.^a

An agent in Lang Son reported via radio that a Japanese general would attend a banquet the next day, hosted by the town's magistrate. Details were quickly forwarded to the Fourteenth Air Force with a request for a small bombing mission. The agent later reported on the results: When the sound of aircraft accompanied the first course, "Don't be alarmed," the general said: The Japanese Air Force knew he was there; the flyover was their greeting. Then the first bomb dropped, and everyone ran to the shelter. Later, the meal started again and the sound of airplane engines recommenced; and now the general led the race for the shelter. This time it was the Japanese Air Force overhead.³⁸ Fenn wrote: "The more I got to know Gordon's associates, the more I approved of them and him."³⁹

One thing bothered Fenn: Gordon's view on working with Vietnamese. As Gordon assured a senior Chinese official concerned about GBT involvement: "We have no intention of working with any Annamites.^b I agree with you they're all anti-French and quite untrustworthy."⁴⁰ Fenn had never worked with Vietnamese—as yet there was no need to—but he did not share Gordon's negative perspective. In the future, working with the Vietnamese would become a serious point of contention between the two.

The Gordon Plan

French civilians in [French Indochina] feel that the time has come for them to take a more

a. Concern about the *Ichigo* advance, led the Chinese to station "a strong defensive force" along the border, the "Peace Preservation Corps, a local militia unit armed with rifles made in Shanghai circa 1920, plus a few machine guns left over from the Russo-Japanese War of 1905." Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate*, 70.

b. Contemporaneous term for those originating from the Annam region of Vietnam which came to be used for all Vietnamese.

*active part in the war against Japan.*⁴¹

Gordon's reach into Indochina—and the OSS desire to control it—was displayed in “The Gordon Plan,” which Coughlin sent to OSS headquarters on 11 September 1944. Coughlin's accompanying comments note: “Gordon is in contact with 17 resistance groups in Tonkin totaling 412 members, 8 resistance groups in Annam totaling 94, all French civilians, and one company of active troops. . . . [GBT] had remained aloof of French politics . . . steering a clear course of pure intelligence without showing any partiality.” Because of that, and his [Gordon's] “official” contact with the Allies—evidenced by being able “to have targets bombed”—these resistance groups had “acquainted” him [Gordon] with their capabilities and asked for his help, rather than seek the help of their own Free French mission in China that was overseeing Indochina.

The French were not asking for financial backing, Coughlin added, but urgently needed “supplies, arms, explosives, incendiaries, and . . . competent direction. . . . The fact that they come to Gordon indicates they do not feel the French military . . . or [the French] Mission in China, is capable of doing this.”

Commenting on negative Chinese views of the Free French presence in China, Coughlin noted that the “Chinese have permitted Mr. Gordon to operate without hindrance . . . and Gordon can probably clear aiding

“. . . [GBT] had remained aloof of French politics . . . steering a clear course of pure intelligence without showing any partiality.”

and abetting resistance groups with greater ease than could the French mission—all of which sounds like a great vote of confidence in Gordon from all concerned . . . OSS should support the plan—and then to take over control of it.” He added:

A very natural by product of such a plan would be intelligence. . . . American officers could then be placed with Gordon . . . [who] has not invited us to participate [in the GBT intelligence operations and] would not divulge his agents or his set-up to any outsider. . . . However . . . liaison and association with him may permit our becoming fully acquainted with his intelligence organization and at the same time set up one of our own.^{a,42}

At this juncture, GBT operations were thriving, but the relationship with OSS was not. “So far they've taken everything and given almost nothing except backstabbing,” Gordon complained to Fenn, “with men . . . sent down to compete or even spy on us and subvert our agents. . . . Andre tipped me off to that.”^{b,43} GBT had not been advised that OSS had started running its own agents into Indochina. Keeping that hidden from GBT could be justified on security grounds, perhaps, but as the OSS liaison, Fenn should have known.⁴⁴ Fenn voiced his own concern, that

for some time “contacts with OSS went sadly adrift.” Communications from Kunming were “chaotic,” asking questions “to which there was no sensible answer,” and sending “directives that [were] inscrutable.” Something was amiss.⁴⁵

OSS: Disaster and Reorganization, October–December 1944

*It was during this dinner party that the unimaginable took place, instantly shocking the nerve centers of Chungking and Washington, from Roosevelt on down; the fate of OSS in China was fundamentally altered.*⁴⁶

On 16 October 1944, a senior member of the OSS Planning Board, Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Lyle Miller, arrived in Chungking for talks with Sino-American Cooperative Organization (SACO) Chief Tai Li and his Vice Chief Milton “Mary” Miles, a US Navy commodore. The relationship between OSS and SACO had been contentious from the start, but the conference seemed to go well and “ended most amicably.”⁴⁷ That evening, “Tai Li, in exuberant spirits, hosted a splendid welcoming party for Miller in the SACO headquarters.”⁴⁸ Immediately after the dinner, Arden Dow, the senior OSS officer attached to SACO, rushed to send an urgent Top Secret message to Donovan.

a. The Gordon Plan would not be approved. President Roosevelt responded to the idea in a memorandum to Secretary of State Hull. He wrote, “In regard to the Indo-china matter: it is my judgment on this date that we should do nothing in regard to resistance groups or in any other way in relation to Indochina.” (Cited in Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 94 and footnote 96; sourced to *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, 2 vols (Macmillan, 1948), 2:1508.)

b. It's not clear if Andre had fended off a recruitment approach by OSS or was told of it by his subagents.

It began, “Very grave diplomatic relations have arisen. General Miller, both in speech and conversation spoke most disparagingly of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, her husband, the Chinese people and the country itself.” A list followed of some of Miller’s colorful statements during a two hour “tirade . . . punctuated by a good deal of table pounding and swearing,” and repeated demands he made of Tai Li to be entertained by Sing-song girls. . . . Many more crudities . . . were later recorded by all the OSS officers present at the party.”⁴⁹

In the international brouhaha that followed, major changes were made. Gen. Albert Wedemeyer, who had just replaced Stilwell as the China theater commander, entered the fray and requested that Lt. Col. Richard Heppner be appointed as his OSS chief and *his czar* of all China intelligence operations—and report directly to him.^a Thus structured, Heppner’s new role made him virtually independent. OSS Chief Donovan was essentially cut out of China operations, but he agreed, as “this seemed to be the only way Donovan could possibly continue any project in China after the Miller disaster.”^{b,50} “Heppner was appointed OSS Chief in China on 9 December 1944” and brought to Kunming his own China team, replacing the heads of every major operational and administra-



SACO Chief Tai Li and Vice Chief Commodore Miles (second and third from left) with US Navy Capt. G. B. Taylor and KMT Gen. C. C. Lin, not otherwise identified in undated photo. © AV8 Collection 2/Alamy Stock Photo.

tive element of OSS in China.⁵¹ The transition was marked by confusion exacerbated by miscommunication.

1944: A Difficult Year

*When Wedemeyer took over . . . in late October 1944, the strength of OSS in China was a meager 106 [staff] agents; by July 1945, however, OSS had reached its peak with a total of 1,891 [staff] agents in China.*⁵²

A troublesome year for OSS in China drew to a close. Early in the year, OSS had cut its ties with SACO—the Navy operation aligned with Tai Li that hindered OSS operations in China—and created AGFRTS, hidden within the 14th Air Force structure as a cover for expanding OSS unilateral operations.

The Japanese launched *Ichigo* in April, and OSS created special operations teams to destroy weapons the KMT had cached that were now behind the lines, and mounted new agent operations to collect intelligence in territory the Japanese now occupied.

In October, the Dixie Mission led to long-sought contact with the Chinese communists, and a grand OSS plan for joint special operations and intelligence collection with the communists. With the US Pacific Fleet moving closer to the Asian mainland, OSS was preparing to move into Vietnam intelligence collection operations. With the liberation of France, OSS personnel who had become excess to the European theater were being transferred to China, which accounted for the massive increase in OSS personnel there.⁵³

GBT Moves On

November–December 1944

*In the OSS reorganization at the beginning of 1945, the administrative and operational control of GBT was projected.*⁵⁴

Meanwhile, at the GBT base, it was evident the Japanese Army was coming: “It now became clear that the Japanese, having ringed Nanning, could take it any day and, after this, come up the river and take

a. “Colonel Richard Heppner . . . an attorney from Donovan’s law firm. . . . He and the new theater commander General Wedemeyer, were the best of friends. They had lived in the same barracks in Ceylon while Heppner was OSS commander at the Southeast Asia Command.” (Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America’s First Central Intelligence Agency*, 266.)

b. Heppner may have been “virtually independent,” but he was very much a “Donovan man.” By accounts of those who knew both, they maintained a close personal relationship.

Lungchao.”⁵⁵ It was time to move. Bernard would be in charge of evacuating the base, while Gordon, “tired of OSS double-dealing,” (but unaware of the changes occurring in the OSS structure) decided to go to Kunming for a “showdown.” He asked Fenn to go along.

When they reached Kunming, the two learned of the reorganization and that Colonel Heppner had not yet arrived. The interim OSS boss in charge of intelligence collection, Paul Helliwell, told them that “OSS had written-off Indochina as being of no importance.”⁵⁶ That troubled Gordon: To get a clear directive, he intended going to Chungking, to see both Wedemeyer and “then fly to Washington and give them the facts.”⁵⁷

Fenn stayed in Kunming, making a side trip to Calcutta when asked by Gordon to pick up operational funds and equipment the British SOE was offering.⁵⁸ In Calcutta, as in Kunming, Fenn found his OSS colleagues suspicious of his work with GBT and his contacts with SOE: “It’s time you told us the lowdown on Gordon and his outfit.”⁵⁹ Commenting on one OSS friend, formerly “quite pro-British,” Fenn noted, “But as the war developed, he, like almost everyone else, grew more and more xenophobic until you would almost think it was the Allies we were fighting instead of the Axis.”^{a,60}

In Gordon’s absence, Fenn helped Bernard set up the new base at Kunming. Gordon’s talks with General Wedemeyer in Chungking had led to

On 9 March 1945, the Japanese initiated Operation Meigo, their contingency plan to take over Vietnam.

an investigation of Gordon’s complaints; GBT’s situation improved, temporarily, and the GBT settled in Kunming. “On most days we would receive intelligence from agents, some by radio, some by messenger, and send, code, decode, and circulate to all our outlets. In the evenings we wrote reports and sent off further inquiries, answers, and instructions.”⁶¹

The Japanese Coup

9 March 1945

*However, by 10 March, the Japanese completed total occupation of Indochina. The result was the inevitable disintegration of GBT.*⁶²

When it entered Indochina in 1941, the Japanese Army allowed the Vichy French government to continue its administration of the colony, but after the liberation of France, as the US sweep across the Pacific closed on the Asian mainland, the Japanese, concerned by the French threat against their back, moved to take full control. On 9 March 1945, the Japanese initiated Operation *Meigo*, their contingency plan to take over Vietnam. “Japanese troops took possession of [French] administrative offices, radio stations, the central telephone and telegraph offices, banks, and the main industrial enterprises. They also attacked the police forces and arrested French civilian and military authorities.”⁶³ Units of the French Army that survived the

initial assaults fought their way north toward the Chinese border.

The Japanese takeover created serious problems for the Allies. The intelligence flow from Indochina they had come to depend on was gone. “Even our air attacks had to cease, because we had neither weather reports nor any check on Japanese movements. Both Wedemeyer and the U.S. Navy sent us urgent pleas to get a new intelligence net operating.”⁶⁴

The Last Hurrah

The complexities of GBT’s final operation to find new reporting sources inside Indochina is beyond the scope of this article.^b In brief, it was Fenn who made the score. He learned of a Vietnamese named Ho Chi Minh, who was visiting Kunming, known to the French as a long-standing anti-French rebel, a communist, and leader of the Viet Minh, or League for Independence. Ho appeared a good agent candidate, and with OSS clearance, Fenn recruited him. Within weeks, Ho was on his way back to his jungle lair in Vietnam with Frankie Tan and a Chinese radio operator to help him.

Results came quickly. Archimedes Patti, by then in Kunming wrote: “Ho Chi Minh kept his word and furnished OSS with extremely valuable information and assistance in many of our clandestine projects.”⁶⁵ By the end of June, Fenn wrote, “Tan and Ho

a. This was an attitude the author found to be common to the US airmen, OSS members, and other Americans who served in Southeast Asia during WWII he has interviewed.

b. For a fuller account, see Bob Bergin, “Old Man Ho: The OSS Role in Ho Chi Minh’s Rise to Political Power,” *Studies in Intelligence* 62, no. 2 (June 2018): 7–22.

The war's end was close when two atomic bombs were suddenly dropped on Japan, and it was over.

between them had already set up an intelligence network of native agents that had amply replaced the French net lost by the 9 March Japanese coup.”⁶⁶ With the intelligence collection operation in place and Frankie Tan’s return to Kunming, the way was open for OSS to use the link with Ho and the Viet Minh for planned special operations in Vietnam.

Gordon finally returned from his travel to Washington. He arrived in Chungking in mid-May, to face an OSS ultimatum to bring GBT into the OSS—with OSS running the show—or lose all support. “AGAS [Air Ground Aid Service] will let us do it our way,” he later told Fenn, “so I’m throwing in our lot with them.”⁶⁷ By then, Fenn was “mostly running” GBT, and once Gordon finished catching up on what GBT had done—most of which he disapproved of—frustration brought Gordon’s inevitable outburst: “You’ve linked us up with an Annamite group whose real interest is to kick out the French, who happen to be my friends. One day they’ll be killing some of those friends, and it’s you I’ll have to thank for it.”

Gordon ordered Tan to disengage from the Ho Chi Minh operation and return to Kunming, which Tan resisted for a time. Gordon moved out of the GBT camp and was ready to leave GBT altogether. Maj. A.G. Wichtrich of AGAS, now providing the GBT financial and other support, offered Gordon a Solomonic choice: “If you won’t run the [GBT] show

under our overall control, how about staying in as civilian advisor and running any activities that don’t involve the Vietnamese?” Present at their meeting, Fenn later wrote, “This gave Gordon a happy way out.”⁶⁷

The war’s end was close when two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, and suddenly it was over. Fenn’s last assignment was to lead an OSS mercy mission to gain release of POWs in Canton and Hong Kong. For that he was awarded America’s highest peacetime award. For his efforts with Ho Chi Minh, he would lose his US passport, thanks to Joseph McCarthy. Years after the McCarthy hearings he would get it back.

GBT and Effective Intelligence Collection

GBT is unique in the history of modern intelligence. In its earliest stage it had the appearance of a classic agent net. But instead of being responsive to the needs of a single intelligence agency or even a single nation, GBT serviced the intelligence requirements of a multitude of customers of three major nations. As the *OSS War Report* notes, it took on the characteristics of an “amateur intelligence agency. Subsequently it developed into an actual intelligence network collaborating with Allied organizations.”

The three GBT principals were “amateurs” only in the sense of being novices in the craft of intelligence. They brought to the endeavor first-

hand knowledge of the hurly-burly world of early 20th century Asia and Japanese-occupied Indochina. Their operational environment was a confusion of nationalities and political rivalries. Understanding how this wartime culture worked and could be exploited was the most essential element necessary to conducting successful operations.

The GBT was small, self-contained and well-attuned to its operational environment, the characteristics that made it highly effective. Its fierce independence kept it “unfettered by national interest and bureaucratic red tape,” which Gordon had feared. It gave GBT freedom in conducting its operations and in sharing its intelligence reporting with Allied elements that needed it. The flaw in the GBT was that while it was self-contained, it was not self-sufficient.

In its growing relationship with OSS, the GBT was to receive more funding, technical assistance, and operational guidance that would “aid the development of SO and MO operations and generally expand the GBT network.” The Gordon Plan showed the GBT potential to do that. The idea of working actively with the Free French militants inside Indochina was rejected by Washington. But there was nothing to prevent OSS from helping GBT expand its collection capabilities—when the need for intelligence in Indochina was growing—except OSS’s obsessive need to take over the GBT.

From the very beginning of their relationship, the OSS goal was to control the GBT—when there was no

a. AGAS was the US agency responsible for assisting in the rescue of downed airmen in China and Southeast Asia. Its work was divided between the “rescue of downed pilots, liaison with Prisoners of War, and collection of intelligence.” (Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, 73.)

good reason to do so. Gordon saw it coming and explained its inevitability to Fenn. Regular OSS reminders of its intentions to Fenn and Gordon became an open sore, distracting Gordon, particularly, from the busi-

ness of intelligence at a time it was most critical.

Absorbing GBT as the quick fix for the OSS lack of collection capability in Indochina begs the question: Why did OSS leadership believe an

actual takeover of GBT was necessary? OSS was working with GBT—not happily, perhaps, but effectively. The drive to take over GBT as its quick fix in Indochina defied the common sense dictum: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

Bob Bergin is a former Foreign Service officer, who researches and writes on historical aviation and Asian topics.



Endnotes

1. Strategic Services Unit History Project, *The Overseas Targets: War Report of the OSS*, Volume II (Walker and Company, 1976), 439–40. (Hereafter *War Report of the OSS Vol. II*.)
2. *Terry and the Pirates* was an adventure comic strip by cartoonist Milton Caniff set in contemporary China. It was launched in 1934. After the United States entered WWII, Caniff focused on resistance against occupying Japanese forces. It was a most popular comic strip in US newspapers. Thirty-one million subscribers read the strip between 1934 and 1946. See: Wikipedia, *Terry and the Pirates* (comic strip).
3. As told to US Navy Capt. Milton “Mary” Miles, then the director of OSS/Far East and Tai Li’s deputy in SACO. In Milton E. Miles, *A Different Kind of War: The Little-known Story of the Combined Guerrilla Forces Created in China by the U.S. Navy and the Chinese during World War II* (Doubleday, 1967).
4. *War Report of the OSS Vol. II*, 439.
5. Archimedes L.A. Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America’s Albatross* (University of California Press, 1980), 23.
6. *War Report of the OSS Vol. II*, 440.
7. Charles Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate: With the OSS in the Far East* (Naval Institute Press, 2004), 36.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 32.
10. Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 45. Patti’s referenced definition of morale operations is worth noting: “A branch of OSS engaged in one aspect of propaganda (“black”) which if not outright mendacious, which it may be, is intended to subvert by every possible device. Its source is disguised and is disowned by the government using it.”
11. Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 37, quoting Lt. Col. Robert Hall.
12. *Ibid.*, 47.
13. *Ibid.*, 44.
14. Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 45.
15. Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 48.
16. *Ibid.*, 46.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *War Report of the OSS Vol. II*, 439.
19. Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 44 and 542, fn 8.
20. *Ibid.*, 44.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 45.
23. Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 148.
24. *Ibid.*, 149.
25. *Ibid.*, 149–50.
26. *Ibid.*, 54.
27. *Ibid.*, 69.
28. *Ibid.*, 106.
29. Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War Against Japan* (University Press of Kansas, 2006), 94.
30. Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 79.

31. Ibid., 43. Laurence Gordon, quoting an unremembered source of the phrase.
32. Ibid., 54.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 71.
35. Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, 75. The judgment is Fenn's, but it was shared by most observers of GBT.
36. Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate*, 64.
37. Ibid., 68. "Thus at one stroke they deal two blows against China, since the opium destroys Chinese health and morals, while the mercury and copper makes detonators and bullets to kill them."
38. Ibid., 74.
39. Ibid., 71.
40. Ibid., 66.
41. Col. John G. Coughlin in his comments introducing the Gordon Plan to CBI OSS Headquarters, 20 September 1944. National Archives, Group 226, Entry 148, Box 7, Folder 103.
42. Ibid.
43. Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate*, 66.
44. Ibid., 79.
45. Ibid., 72.
46. Maochun Yu, *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War* (Yale University Press, 1996), 174.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 174–75. The general was recalled to Washington and retired "into obscurity." Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate*, 82.
50. Yu, *OSS in China*, 182.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 226.
53. See Robert R. Kehoe, "WW II Intelligence Culture Shock: From Europe to China: An OSS Veteran's Reflections," *Studies in Intelligence* 61, no. 3 (September 2017).
54. *War Report of the OSS, Vol II*, 440.
55. Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate*, 67.
56. Ibid., 83.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 107. The OSS Special Operations (SO) Branch was the American equivalent of British SOE.
59. Ibid. John Patton Davies, *Dragon by the Tail: American, British, Japanese and Russian Encounters with China and One Another*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), 287.
60. Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate*, 114.
61. Ibid., 120.
62. *War Report of the OSS Vol. II*, 440.
63. Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 124.
64. Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate*, 138.
65. Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 124.
66. Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate*, 82
67. Ibid., 206.

Other recommended reading:

Duiker, William, J. *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, Hyperion, 2000.

Yu, Maochun, *The Dragon's War: Allied Operations and the Fate of China 1937–1947*, Naval Institute Press, 2006.

