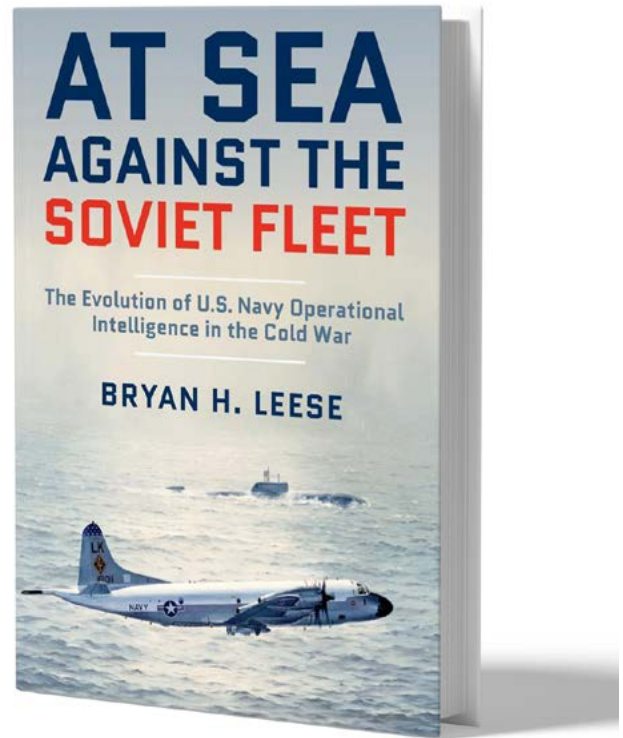


intelligence in public media

At Sea Against the Soviet Fleet *The Evolution of U.S. Navy Operational Intelligence in the Cold War*

Reviewed by Scott A. Moseman, PhD.

Author: Bryan H. Leese
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The activities of military intelligence units and their enabling technologies are often seen by outside observers as mysteries and are simply dismissed. What happens behind locked iron doors seems unobtainable and too highly classified to pursue. Therefore, one might assume there is little unclassified that can be added to military historiography on the subject. These skeptics, of course, are wrong. Every now then a scholarly work breaks down the vault doors that conceal intelligence history.

In *At Sea Against the Soviet Fleet*, historian Bryan H. Leese has done just. In this revelatory work, Leese portrays naval operational intelligence (Opintel) as a continually changing enterprise. He contends that Naval Intelligence leaders fostered the evolution of shipboard operational intelligence, starting in the early 1960s and

through the early 1980s. These officers recognized the importance of a corps of well trained, high-achieving, and motivated intelligence officers who could deliver timely, credible intelligence about a potent maritime adversary to operational leaders at sea. (15) The evolutionary, and sometimes revolutionary, processes of a formal and informal, centralized and, more importunately, decentralized nature were critical to naval intelligence professionals in delivering sound information to their bosses. Leese succeeds in showing readers that intelligence innovation was a difference-maker in the Cold War.

Leese succeeds because he provides clear definitions and parameters. He makes his arguments as though he were teaching a college leadership seminar on organizational change. Military institutions like the Army Command

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and General Staff College have leadership departments and provide multiple lessons on the subject. Leese references works such as Edgar H. Schein (*Organizational Culture and Leadership*) and John P. Kotter (*Leading Change*) to show how organizations can improve when their leaders put forth the effort. Leese points out that change can happen formally (e.g., through orders and doctrine) *or* informally (e.g., through experimentation or jerry-rigging of machines to do an operators' bidding). He states that some decentralization—disbursing missions and tasks to multiple suborganizations—is critical in improving intelligence methods; and innovation and adaptation can occur between centralization and decentralization in an ebb and flow. (298)

Leese argues that the Navy has also developed revolutionary technologies—e.g., the Integrated Operational Intelligence Center, the Ocean Surveillance Information System (OSIS), and Outlaw Shark-Supplemental (SupPlot)—that forced shipboard Opintel professionals to struggle to keep up. But they and their processes evolved to improve the intelligence they were able to give their commanders. Leese's arguments are generally clear, and through mounds of research, he proves his thesis.

Leese also shows how his work fits into Naval intelligence historiography; he mentions the essential authors: Christopher Ford, David Rosenberg, Norman Friedman, and Wyman H. Packard. All of them, especially Packard, broke new ground in Naval history because other scholars have yet to touch the most interesting naval intelligence topics. The same is true of Leese's book, which, with its focus on Opintel, nicely complements this reviewer's March 2025 book *Defining the Mission: The Development of US Strategic Military Intelligence up to the Cold War*. It both leads into Leese's work and is complemented by Leese's operational focus.

The book's organization is acceptable. His preface and prologue lay out his thesis soundly. The narrative follows in four parts that roughly coincide with the technologies that have driven Opintel's innovations and adaptations. The first part (four chapters) covers how the stresses of the naval air campaign during the

Vietnam War helped shape adaptation in shipboard intel spaces, culminating in state-of-the-art intel centers aboard aircraft carriers. The next section (two chapters) in effect “goes ashore” to Opintel's adaptation on Navy patrol aircraft and in-country installations. Part III (five chapters) focuses on decentralization of the use of OSIS in places like Fleet Ocean Surveillance Information Facility (FOSIC), Rota. Their work harnessed all-source fusion to provide better tactical warning for operators. The last chapter of Part III again addresses bringing the power of OSIS ashore to create a “little brother” in SupPlot (196-98) that could provide traditionally shore-based quality intelligence to battlegroup commanders. (211) The book's last 50 pages—“Observations,” “Epilogue,” and “Conclusions”—could have been merged, redundancies removed, and shortened. However, the book's layout is adequate for the subject, and its roadmap is easy to follow.

At Sea Against the Soviet Fleet's strengths derive from Leese's experiences as a historian and a naval Opintel professional. These show up in his research. First, his bibliography is wide-ranging and large: He references open-source periodicals, newspapers, the Naval History and Heritage Center, as well as think-tank products. Most impressive are the 26 oral history interviews Leese conducted or consulted; what better way to understand the goings on and atmosphere of an Opintel workspace than to talk with officers who worked in the FOSICs, SupPlot, or the carrier intel center (CVIC)? (The stories Leese recited may also amuse veterans of Opintel work as they recall moments of controlled-chaos in their own active-duty days.) Leese also had to shepherd his work through DoW's prepublication classification review process, as formally required by his prior service and by the fact that his subject had originally been highly classified. As a result, Leese has revealed a world few Opintel practitioners over the decades fully experienced.

This reviewer has a handful of minor issues with the book. First, I wish Leese had provided more of the past history of shipboard intelligence officers and operational intelligence, which he glossed over in the prologue. Leese starts his narrative at 1945, but naval intelligence, the senior member of the US IC,

was created in March 1882 and its Opintel processes and tools had adapted and improved greatly up to and through WWII. Second, more detailed definitions of “adaptation” and “innovation” were probably warranted, given the author’s frequent use of the words.** Do the words have the same meaning? Authors David Barno and Nora Bensahel in their book *Adaptation Under Fire: How Militaries Change in Wartime* (Oxford University Press, 2020) do not seem to think so. They argue innovation happens in peacetime and adaptation occurs during war. Does such a definition affect Leese’s arguments about Opintel’s progress after WWII? Finally, the presence of too many passive voice sentences distracts from the story, whose readers should know who is behind the actions described.

These quibbles aside, Leese accomplished what he set out to do in *At Sea Against the Soviet Fleet* and provided a valuable contribution to military intelligence literature. The book should be a standard for US staff and intelligence schoolhouses, especially in the Naval Intelligence Officer Basic Course at Information Warfare Training Command, Virginia Beach. Staff schools will more understand the intricacies of organizational change on the leadership aspects of *At Sea Against the Soviet Fleet*. Students of Naval intelligence can glean insights into how their future commands evolved the way they did over the seven decades. ■