Major General George H. Sharpe and the Creation of American Military Intelligence in the Civil War

Peter G. Tsouras (Casemate Publishers, 2019), 447, appendices, index.

Reviewed by David Welker

If William J. Donovan can rightly be called the "Father of the CIA," then George H. Sharpe might properly be American intelligence's grandfather. Where Donovan's story has been told in numerous books over the years, Peter Tsouras's fine volume is surprisingly the first such treatment of this important man's story. It is long overdue.

Like Donovan, George Sharpe lacked any intelligence background and was thrust into creating an intelligence organization by his superiors amidst a great national crisis. George Sharpe came from a prominent Kingston, New York, family and was, by training, a lawyer who answered his nation's call at the outbreak of civil war in 1861. Key in organizing and leading the 120th New York Infantry—seeing his first combat at the December 1862 Battle of Fredericksburg—Sharpe was tapped by new Union Army commander Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker in January 1863 to stand up an organization to collect and report information from Confederate prisoners, deserters, civilians, and escaped slaves.

Because the United States had forgotten similar efforts by Generals Washington, Scott, and other leaders during previous wars, Sharpe lacked a model or traditions to smooth his path and, like Donovan nearly 100 years later, charted his own organizational course. Given a free hand, Sharpe formed what eventually became known as the Bureau of Military Information (BMI), which included a corps of scouts to conduct intelligence collection and a group of four men to assess and write all-source intelligence reports for General Hooker.

Although Hooker's command tenure lasted barely beyond the May 1863 Union disaster at Chancellorsville, Sharpe's organization lived on to serve successive Union commanders, George Meade and Ulysses Grant. When barely two months old, the BMI proved its value by presenting Meade vital intelligence that after two days of fighting in July 1863, Lee's Confederate army possessed but a single fresh infantry division—Pickett's. That

knowledge enabled the Union army's surge to victory at Gettysburg. As Tsouras notes, "in fewer than 120 days of its existence the BMI had become, from a standing start, a fully functioning all-source intelligence operation . . . an accomplishment that would not be replicated again by the US Army at field army level until 1918 in World War I."

Tsouras' thoroughly researched and well written book weaves together two integrally intertwined stories, George Sharpe's life and the the history of the BMI. He uses accounts of Sharpe's pre-war life and rise through Union military ranks to demonstrate that it was largely George Sharpe's influence and energy that created the first modern American intelligence organization, where earlier efforts like Pinkerton's discredited Secret Service and various disparate Confederate networks had failed. The author—a retired Defense Intelligence Agency and National Ground Intelligence Center analyst—bolsters this volume's value for intelligence officers by frequently using both period-accurate and modern intelligence terminology to describe BMI missions, actions, and impact.

Tsouras' considerable research also brings to light numerous lost or forgotten stories of Civil War intelligence that otherwise might have remained hidden in the US Archives and Library of Congress. Recounting, for example, incidents in which Sharpe placed Union BMI scouts under cover among Confederate prisoners to ensure the veracity of intelligence collected there; reporting to Grant the same day they arrived the return of Jubal Early's Southerners from the Shenandoah Valley to the Petersburg trenches; exposing to Washington British agents shipping New York-made goods to the Confederacy via Bermuda, and many more.

As a final example of the BMI's effectiveness, Tsouras reports that at Appomattox, Grant used Sharpe's order of battle estimates of Lee's force—off by only 4 percent, despite weeks of near-daily personnel fluctuations—to allocate sufficient food to the starving, newly-returned

Americans even before the final surrender ceremony in the McLean's parlor. Tsouras similarly tells the sad tale of the BMI's flagrant elimination by a nation eager for peace, an act for which the United States would pay again and again.

In closing *Major General George Sharpe*, Tsouras similarly shares Sharpe's largely untold post-war life, an interesting tale in itself. Although the BMI was no more, the nation continued benefitting from Sharpe's intelligence skills when he was dispatched to Europe to chase escaped Lincoln murder conspirator Benjamin Surratt—son of Mary Surratt, hanged for the crime—and researching possible Confederate government ties to the crime (he found none). Tsouras notes that like intelligence professionals today, Sharpe became an advocate for his former assets, particularly persuading Washington to grant Richmond-based spy Elizabeth Van Lew—Sharpe's most valuable source and operations officer—financial support after the war.

In 1870, President Grant appointed Sharpe US Marshall for the Southern District of New York, a position in which he successfully led the fight to quash William "Boss" Tweed's powerful and corrupt Tammany Hall organization before Sharpe entered New York State politics to become an assemblyman and speaker, among other achievements.

This reviewer's only criticism is that the volume contains a few avoidable typographical errors and in some instances the author included more background and detail on otherwise well known battles and events than the reader needs to make sense of Sharpe and the BMI's role. Still, Tsouras's valuable biography of George Sharpe joins former NSA officer Edwin Fishel's *Secret War for the Union* (1996) as required reading for those interested in learning about intelligence during the American Civil War.

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