

Most Secret and Confidential: Intelligence in the Age of Nelson

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Steven E. Maffeo. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000, 355 pages.

Reviewed by T. A. Brooks

Fans of C. S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower or Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin series will feel at home reading Steven Maffeo's *Most Secret and Confidential*. Begun as a master's thesis for the Joint Military Intelligence College, this exquisitely researched and documented book looks at the conduct of naval intelligence by the Admiralty and the Royal Navy during the 1793-1815 period of almost constant warfare with France.

Although scholarly, this book is engagingly written, and the subject will fascinate anyone who has an abiding interest in the role of intelligence in support of command and, indeed, the role of intelligence in shaping history. When reading about the workings of the Admiralty and the Crown in collecting intelligence, the Patrick O'Brian fan can be excused if his mind conjures up images of hushed fireside conversations in exclusive London clubs between Stephen Maturin and Sir Joseph Blaine, the fictitious character who provided Stephen—a physician turned ship's surgeon and intelligence operative—with his tasking and support.

While men like Sir Joseph surely existed in the age of the Napoleonic wars, Sir Joseph's title of Chief of Intelligence was wholly inaccurate in that there was no formal intelligence organization in the Admiralty at that time. The title of Director of Naval Intelligence did not come into Royal Navy parlance until 1887, five years after the creation of a Director of Naval Intelligence in the US Navy.

In the 18th century, the collection of intelligence was primarily the realm of the diplomatic establishment, which obtained it by traditional diplomatic contact, on-scene observation and reporting, reading the local press, and recruiting agents when possible—methodologies not substantially changed to this day. The Crown supplemented this with an excellent system of opening the mails (and diplomatic pouches, when available) and decrypting messages written in code. This operation was part of the Post Office, and remained so until modern times.

Signals intercept and codebreaking operations of particular use to the commander at sea tended to be rather less subtle and included periodic raiding parties to go ashore and capture codebooks during attacks on shore-side fortifications and semaphore stations. Possession of

these books allowed British ships or personnel placed ashore to read the signals being relayed by the semaphore stations, which frequently included operational tasking to French fleet units.

Obtaining recognition codes from ships captured or sunk and providing these to ships of the squadron was particularly useful in allowing British fleet units to employ the *ruse de guerre* of masquerading as French ships in order to attack unsuspecting prey. This was a particularly useful ploy in an era when the Royal Navy operated a number of warships captured from the French (and, it should be noted, a few captured from the Americans as well), which could easily pass themselves off as French ships if they possessed the proper recognition signals.

In the era of sailing ships and goose quill pens, there was little prospect for the Admiralty to provide timely intelligence support to deployed fleet units. It could take weeks or even months for correspondence to pass between London and “those far-flung, storm-tossed ships” of the Royal Navy. Thus Nelson and his contemporary commanders were obliged to devise collection means of their own. Periodic visits with British and other friendly diplomats while making port calls, conversations with merchant ships or friendly/neutral warships encountered on the high seas, and reading whatever foreign press they could get their hands on and translate provided useful background intelligence. But the commander’s primary intelligence collection tool was the frigate, frequently dispatched to spy on enemy ports and bases, seek out and question foreign merchantmen, conduct reconnaissance forays ashore, and so forth. The common complaint of Nelson and his contemporaries was that there never were enough frigates to collect intelligence or enough dispatch vessels to disseminate it—a two-century-old example of the timelessness of the problem of assigning scarce intelligence assets and being able to disseminate effectively the product once it has been collected.

The commanders themselves directed the intelligence collection and dissemination in support of Nelson or other ship, squadron, or fleet-level commanders. There were no “intelligence officers.” Indeed, sea-going commanders had no staff officers at all. To copy correspondence, an admiral commanding an entire fleet might have two or three clerks, an aide/flag lieutenant, and occasionally a supply officer. A squadron commander would likely be limited to a single clerk.

Nelson had a finely developed appreciation of the importance of intelligence and a particular knack for its collection. He was a superb intelligence officer in his own right, but he would never have thought of himself as one. Intelligence, to him, was an essential element in his ability to fight the fleet, and its collection and inclusion in his decisionmaking were as much a part of his command style as logistics, planning, and fighting tactics. His contemporaries who were successful at sea treated intelligence similarly.

The author, himself a Naval Reserve Intelligence Officer, makes this point well in the final chapter of his book: “Whatever the specific case, in the final analysis the degree to which the naval commander uses, or fails to use, available intelligence in the decisionmaking process is crucial. Indeed, the commander’s possession and use of intelligence have been decisive in history, they are decisive now, and they will be decisive in the future.”

Reading *Most Secret and Confidential* will give the reader a good appreciation for the historical justification for this observation.

Rear Admiral T. A. Brooks, USN (Ret.), is a former Director of Naval Intelligence.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this journal are those of the authors. Nothing in any of the articles should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of their factual statements and interpretations. Articles by non-US government employees are copyrighted.