

A US Naval Intelligence Mission to China in the 1930s

Operations in Another Time

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In 1969, an “old military China hand,” Maj. Gen. William A. Worton, USMC, described an intelligence operation he undertook from 1935 to 1936 during an oral history interview by Benis M. Frank of the US

Marine Corps Historical Center in

Washington, DC. General Worton felt the operation was so sensitive that he restricted the opening of the transcript until 10 years after his death. His mission was to recruit and run agents from Shanghai into Japan for the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI).[1]

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There are few accounts of US military intelligence operations against Japan before World War II, and especially ones emanating from China. General Worton’s mission offers a rare insight into the methods used to collect military intelligence before World War II. The material concerning the mission to China comes largely from General Worton’s memory, and he realized the danger in this: “I am attempting to reconstruct from memory events that transpired...years ago. Information indicates reports submitted by me to the Chief of ONI and to the Commandant of the Marine Corps...are no longer available...I will do the best I can from memory.”[2] — DLN

Franklin D. Roosevelt's election in 1932 marked a revival in naval affairs. As an assistant secretary of the navy under President Woodrow Wilson and an avid yachtsman, Roosevelt's sympathies lay with the Navy, and this attitude affected the upper echelons of the service. Jeffrey M. Dorwart writes that "nowhere was this infectious attitude more evident than in the Navy's intelligence office." [3] On 4 June 1934, Captain William D. Puleston became director of naval intelligence (DNI). A "popular, articulate, and aggressive" officer, Puleston was an "ideal planner, a student of world history and foreign affairs." His abilities and drive led to ONI's "greatest years," and the "office's most direct period of influence over naval policy." [4] At that time, ONI became enmeshed in what Dorwart terms an "intelligence dilemma." That is, ONI's security operations "led to secret... domestic operations, and snooping...that might violate the constitutional obligations and freedom that every naval officer had pledged to uphold and defend." Puleston, feeling both this "dilemma" and the infusion of new life into the Navy, thought ONI should try to serve the fleet in outlying areas. In the 1930's, Japan was the obvious target. [5]

Zeroing in on Japan

In 1935, Major Worton reported for duty with ONI's Far East Section. He had impressive credentials for the assignment. He was born on 4 January 1897 in Boston, and he attended Boston Latin School, Harvard, and Boston University Law School. He entered the Marines on 29 March 1917 and sailed for France in January 1918. Worton fought in the Aisne-Marne offensive and was gassed at Bouresches. He also suffered other serious wounds. Before his assignment to ONI, except for two years in Santa Domingo, Worton served all his foreign duty in China (1922–26, 1927–29, and 1931–35), and he was a graduate of the US Department of State's Chinese language course in Beijing. Marine Brig. Gen. Smedley D. Butler commended Worton on his intelligence work in China when Butler commanded the 4th Marines there during 1927–29. [6]

Soon after reporting to ONI, Worton attended the frequent conferences Captain Puleston scheduled. The DNI asked for suggestions from the Far East Section about how ONI could operate against Japan. Worton

suggested that the Fleet Intelligence Officer use an assignment ashore at Hong Kong or in the International Settlement at Shanghai. The assistant would recruit and develop a network of agents who could operate in and out of Japan to report on Japanese fleet movements. Worton believed the best locations for the agents would be in the Japanese cities of Nagasaki, Sasebo, and Shimonoseki. Worton suggested that to be successful the agents had to be Chinese because he doubted “that any other person could operate in the area.” He also recommended recruiting Danish personnel from the Danish Telegraph Company as operators, because the company used lines running from Shanghai and Tianjin to Nagasaki and Shimonoseki. Years later, Worton recalled that Captain Puleston then “looked straight at me and...said, ‘I think you should go ...[to Shanghai] and establish [the network].’”

Puleston had already launched operations against the Japanese, and Worton’s plan to run agents from China into Japan would dovetail nicely with those operations. For example, ONI had an active coastwatcher system along China’s coast and an espionage network that included a member of the Asiatic Primate Expedition and a Harvard exchange professor at the Imperial University in Tokyo. Puleston, however, did not care to use agents in Hong Kong because ONI would then have to share the information with the British, an idea that Puleston rejected.[7]

Lack of Enthusiasm

Worton later recalled that he “didn’t think too highly” of Puleston’s suggestion that he be the first to run agents from China into Japan. Worton felt he had already been away from troop command too long, and the new assignment would hurt his chances for promotion. Worton became concerned enough about Puleston’s suggestions that he requested a meeting with USMC Commandant Maj. Gen. John H. Russell.

At the meeting, Worton felt General Russell was “not enthusiastic” about the assignment, because officers at USMC Headquarters still remembered the case of Maj. Earl H. Ellis. Ellis, with the knowledge of the then Commandant, Maj. Gen. John A. Lejeune, took an extended leave of absence in May 1921 to visit the Japanese-held Marshall and Caroline Islands to gather information about possible amphibious assaults in the

Pacific. Ellis travelled as a businessman, but “unofficially, he made a quixotic personal reconnaissance of the islands.”[8] Ellis died in May 1923 in the Palau Island group under conditions suggesting the Japanese may have killed him. It is no wonder, then, that General Russell showed little enthusiasm for sending another officer against Japan some 12 years later.

General Russell and Captain Puleston met over the next few days to discuss the assignment. Russell then met with Worton again and left it up to the major as to whether he wanted to volunteer. Worton decided to undertake the operation.

Fuzzy Orders

Puleston informed Worton that he would be working directly for ONI, with CDR Ellis M. Zacharias as his immediate superior and that all orders would be verbal, issued directly from Puleston. The only people in China who would know of his mission would be Col. John C. Beaumont, commander of the 4th Marines in Shanghai, and CDR Thomas M. Shock, naval attaché in Beijing. “I was to cooperate with Shock and to confer with Shock as far as practical,” recalled Worton. “You can see...I was going to be in the middle.”[9]

The lack of clear-cut orders made the assignment “confusing.” Eventually, Worton felt his mission was to “determine the feasibility of operating an ONI undercover agency in Shanghai ...and to study and screen prospective agents.” Worton repeatedly tried to obtain written orders from ONI. At one point, Zacharias informed him that it was better “not to have them, then you can’t lose anything.... [Y]ou know what we want, go out and do it, that’s all.” This meant that Worton was on his own, especially if anything went wrong. He must have had a moment’s reflection when General Russell informed him that “If you make a mistake, we’ll have to disown you, we will not admit to having...a person doing such a thing.”

Establishing Cover

With these “encouraging” words, Worton and ONI set about arranging cover for the mission. Worton was to travel to China as a disgruntled officer leaving the Corps to establish a business in the International Settlement in Shanghai. To avoid any chance of possible detection by Japanese agents, Worton believed it would be best to travel to China via Europe and the Suez Canal.

To enhance his cover as an ex-officer looking for a new life, Worton’s wife, Nellie, would accompany him. Worton recalled that when he came home and told Nellie that they would be sailing for France, she blurted, “Good God Almighty, what are you going over there for?” Worton could not completely reveal why he was returning to Shanghai, but Nellie “bravely made the trip and for almost a year ... [had to live] a lonesome life.”

In late summer 1935, the Wortons set out for China. The major carried three passports: one identified him as an attaché at Beijing; another as William Arthur Worton, a government employee on official business; and the third identified him as Archibald Robertson.[10]

In Shanghai, Worton arranged a room in the American Club, because it provided some security and another room at the Metropol Hotel. He also obtained a desk in an office where he could act out the role of a person studying to practice law before United States courts in China.

A Fortunate Friendship

Worton next traveled to Nanjing, where he met with a Chinese friend, Dai Li. Worton realized that he could not carry out his mission without the help of the Chinese. He “had to trust somebody,” and, because Dai Li “knew the war was coming,” he felt this was the person in whom he should place his trust. Worton had first met Dai when Chinese students came to play basketball with the Marine legation guard in Peking.

The friendship was a fortunate one for Worton, as Dai Li was one of the most important figures in Chiang Kai-shek’s retinue. In 1925, Dai was a young officer in Chiang’s military police. By 1927, Dai provided the list of communists to arrest and kill. Chiang eventually made Dai the head of the Chinese Secret Service. The secret policeman’s ruthlessness became legendary. Andre Malraux, the French writer, supposedly based one of the

characters in his book *The Human Condition* on Dai.[11]

Dai preferred to remain in the background, and he did not interfere directly with purely political matters. There was no need for interference, because by the time he achieved the directorship of the Chinese Secret Service, he was one of the most powerful men in China. Dai's career lasted 25 years. Shortly after the war ended, he died when his airplane exploded near Nanjing. One writer has noted that Dai was a "colossus who set out to give Chiang's China something like the first total and coordinated Secret Service that she had known in modern times." In short, Worton could not have had a better ally to recruit Chinese agents to penetrate Japan.[12]

Dai agreed to steer potential agents, Chinese and European, to Worton. There was no doubt in Worton's mind that most of these agents also reported to Dai, but he believed that this was a fair trade-off.

On-the-Job Espionage

With his Chinese contact in place, Worton set about recruiting and preparing dossiers on agents. Worton had to learn the business of spying through on-the-job training, as there was no formal training for Marine officers in intelligence gathering. Before leaving for China, Worton read everything he could find on spies and spying. Eventually, the major prepared dossiers on more than 30 people who might help ONI, both Chinese and Westerners. Probably the best known was the Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a paleontologist who would be famous primarily for his involvement in the discovery of Peking Man. Other than Father Teilhard de Chardin, Worton felt that money motivated most agents.

Worton's Agents

The recruitment and use of the Austrian artist Fritz Schief is one example of Worton's work. Worton invited Schief, sent by Dai, to lunch at the American Club at least a half-dozen times. "He was a man looking for a dollar," recalled Worton. Over lunch one day, Worton proposed that Schief

use his abilities as an artist and set up an art school in Sasebo. The Austrian agreed, and he received \$200 for the trip to Japan.

Schief left for Sasebo in December 1935. Before departing, Worton impressed on him that his mission was to report on the movements of the Japanese fleet. The DNI felt that it was more important to know where the Japanese fleet was at all times than to know “whether the Japanese fleet had an 18-inch gun or a 16-inch gun. [Puleston] said...if we can't shoot better than they did, then we'd better get whipped anyway.”

The Austrian painter-spy remained in Japan for only a month. After returning to Shanghai, Schief reported verbally to Worton that he was “pessimistic” and thought it was “impossible... to work there or do anything.” In February, however, Worton dispatched a Chinese agent, Chen Zhendian to Sasebo and Nagasaki for three weeks. Chen believed that he had the opportunity to provide information on the Japanese fleet for ONI.

Worton recruited another Austrian, Franzi von Sternburg. Sernburg “would make a dollar anytime he could...and you had to use some of these people sometimes as blinds.” Worton sent Sternburg to Japan while he dispatched two Chinese agents. Sternburg went in one direction and the Chinese agents in the other. The purpose was that “if anybody was picked up it [would be] Sternburg.”

When Worton's agents were ready with their reports, he would meet them in the bar of the American Club, as if they had just happened to bump into one another. Then, after a few minutes of talk, Worton would invite the agent to his room to receive his verbal report. Worton would then encode the report into a business code and transmit it by cable to a friend in Scituate, Massachusetts. The friend knew in a general way what Worton was doing, “but he didn't know just all about it.” The friend would then pass the cable on to Zacharias.

Worton's greatest concern about detection came not from the Japanese, but from old acquaintances, both in and out of the Marine Corps. People who had known Worton questioned him about his activities in China, apparently not accepting his cover story. “Jealousies at that time were... pretty common in our Corps, and, if an officer went on a special assignment, well, [there] probably was a little jealousy in the fact that I had been picked for the assignment. I don't know. But I always felt that in Shanghai my brother officers...looked askance and wondered...what in the world I was doing out there, and why I was there.” For example, at a civilian

function in Shanghai, one Marine Corps officer's wife asked Nellie Worton exactly what she and her husband were doing in Shanghai. Nellie replied that she did not know, but "I know him well enough not to ask him...[and] I should think you would know that much."

Mission's End

In February 1936, Shock met Worton in Shanghai and informed him that Capt. Charles C. Brown, another Marine Chinese language officer, would be joining him in Shanghai. Worton was to brief Brown, turn over his agents, and then leave for the United States. Approximately three months later, the Wortons boarded an American Mail Line steamer en route the United States. Worton recalled that, when the ship touched at Yokohama, he "didn't leave my room all the time...the ship was in Japan.... I was glad to see us get out of there."

The Wortons arrived on the West Coast of the United States in June 1936 and then traveled to Washington, DC. The next month was spent in debriefing at ONI, the final part of Worton's mission to China.

On 27 August 1936, Captain Puleston wrote a confidential letter to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, in which he wanted to point out to "Selection Boards...[that] they be aware of [Worton's] duty" during his period as an agent of ONI. Puleston commended Worton for his "fluency in the Chinese language, familiarity with the Far East, tact, judgment, initiative and discretion ... and his competence, zeal, and loyalty." [13] Puleston clearly felt that Major Worton had performed his mission.

Evaluation

In retrospect, General Worton believed his undercover mission accomplished three things. It "opened the eyes of the Navy to the fact that we had in the Marine Corps men who were capable of making decisions affecting the Navy." Worton felt his contacts with Tai Li paved the way for Tai's assistance to the American war effort in China, such as helping to

establish a weather station in Mongolia. Further, Tai in 1946 helped to free some Marines who were prisoners of the communists in Qinhuangdao. Most important, “We learned what not to do.”[14] Worton also agreed with CDR Shock that in the future it would be better to have an officer in China in an official function, such as an assistant attaché, and operating covertly. This would help avoid embarrassing situations and the need to continually explain oneself.

The lack of records prevents an evaluation of the effectiveness of the intelligence on the Japanese fleet gathered by Worton’s agents. The archivist in the National Archives Naval and Old Army Branch, Richard A. von Doenhoff, was unable to locate any material on General Worton’s mission other than a letter from Captain Puleston requesting Worton’s assignment to a special project for ONI, and he believes the reports were destroyed.[15] General Worton’s oral history does not illuminate the amount and specific examples of the intelligence gathered. What this mission to China does illustrate is an officer’s native intelligence and abilities in a difficult and potentially dangerous assignment. The mission also provides a glimpse of the early intelligence-gathering methods used by ONI in China.

Unlike the spy of fiction and Hollywood, Worton felt that operating alone and under the guise of a private citizen was not pleasant: “[T]his type of duty is not glorious. It is a lonesome, frustrating, and hazardous occupation.... I spent frustrating hours alone, thinking, thinking, thinking, and wondering.”[16]

Footnotes

[1]This article originally appeared in classified *Studies in Intelligence* 43, no. 2 (1999).

[2]Unless otherwise noted, all material and quotes by Worton are from the transcript of an interview conducted in Washington, DC, on 3 and 4 February 1969. The transcript is located in the Marine Corps Museum, Washington, DC. In accordance with the general’s wishes, the transcript was declassified (opened) on 28 August 1983. The US Marine Corps Oral History program also holds a separate and detailed transcript of General Worton’s entire military career.

[3]Jeffrey M. Dorwart, *Conflict of Duty: The US Navy’s Intelligence Dilemma*,

1919–1945 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 59.

[4]Ibid., 60.

[5]Ibid., 60–63.

[6]Butler’s comments are in “Marine Corps 3rd Brigade Under Smedley D. Butler, USMC,” page 22, “ZK File,” Box 799, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Record Group 45, National Archives. Biographical material on Worton was in an attachment to a letter from Benis M. Frank, Head, Oral History Section, US Marine Corps History and Museum Division, to Dennis L. Noble, 27 August 1984.

[7]Dorwart, *Conflict of Duty*, 63.

[8]Allan R. Millet, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the US Marine Corps* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 326.

[9]Puleston’s official request for Worton is in: Puleston to Major General Commandant of the US Marine Corps, 9 January 1935, Division of Naval Intelligence, Security-Classified Letters Sent “Day Files,” 1929–1945, Box D28, Record Group 38, National Archives.

[10]“I took ... [the] name [of Robertson] because it has some family background, and I didn’t think anybody would know about [it].” Worton, 17.

[11]See also Frederic Wakeman Jr., *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)

[12]All quoted material concerning Tai Li is from: Richard Deacon, *A History of the Chinese Secret Service* (London: Frederick Muller, 1974), 263–65. For a different picture of Tai Li than that presented by Deacon or Worton, see: Oliver J. Caldwell, *A Secret War: Americans in China, 1944– 1945* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972).

[13]Puleston’s letter is reproduced in Worton’s formerly classified transcript as page 99.

[14]Worton also found that the Danish telegraph operators would not work as agents because they were afraid that the “company would get in trouble and the Japanese...would take over their company.” Worton, 26.

[15]Letter, Von Doenhoff to Dennis L. Noble, 21 May 1984 and conversation, Von Doenhoff and Noble.

[16]Worton served in the Marine Corps through WW II. After he retired, he served for a year as chief of the Los Angeles Police Department.

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