

The Intelligence Education of the First Head of CIA: Roscoe Hillenkoetter

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The Setting

The oldest permanent US intelligence organization is the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), dating to 1882. Within three years the Army founded its own intelligence organization, and both services developed a cadre of foreign intelligence collectors: naval and military attachés assigned to American missions abroad. When the United States entered World War I on 6 April 1917, there were only a handful of US naval attachés stationed overseas, and those in Germany and Austria were expelled.

Other offices in Europe were quickly opened, however, and the ONI needed candidates with foreign language skills and experience. As Lt. Col. James Breckinridge, the first US Marine naval attaché in Scandinavia, later said:

We need two things, and we need them badly. These are a knowledge of languages away and beyond the usual American ability to stutter. . . . We are a joke in any international gathering. . . . The other thing is to have a small class in which to teach what intelligence duty is . . . to begin with, [attachés] should know the language fluently, know the history of the

*people and the country, something about their social conditions and persuasions, their national ambitions and prejudices. . . . They then will be at home. . . . If [the attaché] is prepared for that sort of work, there is no limit to what he can do.*¹

Rear Adm. Roger Welles, Jr., director of naval intelligence during World War I, was even more explicit in a reflective letter to the chief of the Naval Postgraduate School shortly after the war: “[The attaché] should be a man with a keen imagination, able to draw correct conclusions from very scanty evidence, courteous in manner, a man of the world (but not too worldly) and, in general, with sufficient intelligence to be a good mixer in all classes of society.”²

One of the best qualified of those new candidates was John Allyne Gade, the son of an American mother and Norwegian diplomat father. He is ably profiled by Patrick Devenny in a 2012 *Studies in Intelligence* article.^a Once the United States entered the war, Gade was given a Navy commission and made assistant naval attaché in Oslo, responsible for Norway and

a. Patrick Devenny, “Captain John A. Gade, US Navy: An Early Advocate of Central Intelligence,” *Studies in Intelligence* 56, no. 3 (2012): 21–30.

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Sweden. Soon he was promoted to be naval attaché in Denmark. Gade worked closely with allied attachés, but “found it humiliating to realize what a greenhorn I was in comparison with my [British and French] colleagues.”³ As Devenny demonstrated, Gade learned quickly.

By the 1930s, American intelligence organizations were wasting away just as fascists were seizing control of Germany and Italy, militaristic imperialists were dominating Japan, and the communist Soviet Union was aggressively planting spies and agitators all over the world. In 1933, one of Gade’s college classmates was appointed ambassador to Belgium and although Gade was then almost 60 years old, he agreed to return to Europe as naval attaché to Belgium and the Netherlands.⁴

From that vantage point he watched growing German aggressiveness in re-arming and re-occupying the Rhineland, Austria, and Sudeten portion of Czechoslovakia while communists and Nazis fought for dominance in the Spanish Civil War. Having begun his service as a naval intelligence officer working with Scandinavian partners against imperial Germany, Gade ended that service at the age of 65 in 1940, watching Nazi German armies march into Brussels.

Hillenkoetter in Europe, 1938–41

A month later, in June 1940, a much younger naval intelligence colleague, 43-year-old St. Louis native Cdr. Roscoe Hillenkoetter, watched another victorious German army occupy Paris. Too young for World War

I, Hillenkoetter had graduated with distinction from the United States Naval Academy in 1919 and spent his early years as a naval officer serving on surface ships and submarines and as a staff aide to senior commanders. Following two years teaching modern romance languages at the Naval Academy, and more sea duty in cruisers and destroyers, in October 1933, just as the Navy was imposing a 15-percent pay cut and drastic cuts in meager attaché expense accounts, he was appointed assistant naval attaché in Paris, where he served until September 1935.^{5, 6}

While Gade had been sent out with little preparation, by the 1930s prospective attachés like Hillenkoetter first came to Washington to review intelligence files and consult with Navy technical offices about their particular interests. The Navy also scheduled a few weeks of overlap at post so that the departing attaché could brief his successor.⁷

Like President Woodrow Wilson during World War I, President Franklin Roosevelt tended to rely upon his personal friends in matters involving foreign intelligence. Unfortunately, the president’s personal interest did not always lead to successful collection activities, especially when rival government agencies were involved. For example, while Roosevelt was “delighted at the idea” of assistant Paris naval attaché Hillenkoetter’s acting as a diplomatic courier traveling to Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow, and Prague as an excuse to observe military facilities, the Navy decided that it would be illegal for the State Department to pay his expenses.⁸ The Navy also decided that after his promising service as an intelligence officer, Hillenkoetter should return to

sea, and from 1935 to 1938 he was stationed on the battleship *Maryland* in the Pacific. In April 1938 he was back in Paris, this time with additional responsibility for Madrid and Lisbon.

These were very turbulent years, and both Hillenkoetter in Paris and his senior colleague, Captain Gade in Brussels, were very active, especially in observing combat in the Spanish Civil War. The American Civil War had been an effective laboratory demonstration of industrial mass warfare for European military experts, and the Spanish Civil War offered American officers early exposure to 20th-century technological war. In his memoirs, Gade talks about visiting Portugal and Spain where he observed the German Air Force practicing the tactics that soon would give the German military such easy victories in Poland and western Europe.

He met with French Marshal Philippe Pétain, then-ambassador to Spain, and in March 1939 was invited to join the French embassy staff in watching Gen. Francisco Franco enter Madrid and review his own victorious army and those of his German and Italian allies.⁹ Gade, reluctant to be seen at a fascist celebration, declined the invitation on the grounds that he didn’t have a suitable uniform, and just over a year later Hillenkoetter would use a similarly flimsy excuse when invited to join the victorious German general to review his troops marching into Paris.

With the victory of Franco’s nationalists in Spain, and the collapse of his opponents, American citizens, diplomats, journalists, and anti-Franco Spaniards were evacuated from

the war zone by American and other western warships. The *New York Times* reported that “Spanish insurgent bombers” attacked the Spanish harbor of Caldetas near Barcelona, and American naval officers said that, although the American cruiser *Omaha* illuminated its Stars and Stripes flag with a searchlight, “projectiles and shell fragments were raining on us, and we thought for a while we would bring some of them back in our pockets.”¹⁰

The bombing of the town was particularly fierce, with estimates of hundreds of casualties, but instead of escaping by ship, Lt. Cdr. Hillenkoetter and Lisbon army attaché Lt. Col. Henry Cheadle left the city by car to better evaluate bomb damage and observe the activities of Franco’s forces. Hillenkoetter’s detailed reporting of the fall of Barcelona included descriptions of the “appalling destruction” caused by fascist bombers.¹¹



Hillenkoetter (right), as a lieutenant commander, viewing a map with the naval attaché, Capt. Francis Cogswell, (left) and the army attaché. 1939 photo © Phillips/LIFE/Getty.

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Beyond physical courage, self-confidence and boldness are essential traits for military officers, diplomats, and intelligence officers. American ambassador to Paris William C. Bullitt was a particularly aggressive officer, and years later Hillenkoetter remembered an episode that occurred shortly after his dramatic escape from the bombing of Barcelona. The FBI told the embassy in Paris that a blonde-haired, German beauty parlor operator was suspected of being a spy, but had managed to escape New York on a German steamship before she could be arrested.

Since the ship would stop in the French port of Cherbourg, Ambassador Bullitt and Hillenkoetter fabricated an “imposing looking” fake arrest warrant and Hillenkoetter was dispatched to Cherbourg while the new American liner *United States* delayed its departure to take the spy back to New York. The French police immediately recognized the warrant as a fake, but agreed “if our blonde disembarked . . . even if only for a walk,” they would arrest her and turn her over to Hillenkoetter. “By the time anybody, meaning the Germans, complained, she would be on her way back to the United States.”¹² In the end, the woman never left the ship “but we got an ‘A’ for effort and it was so characteristic of [Bullitt] to try to get the right solution in a difficult and involved situation . . .”¹³

Ambassador Bullitt and his assistant, Robert Murphy, were both convinced that European war would directly threaten the United States,

but France appeared paralyzed in the face of German aggression, first in annexing Austria in March 1938 and then in seizing the German Sudeten region from Czechoslovakia.

In July 1938 in the midst of a Czech war scare, Hillenkoetter surveyed German border defenses by driving from the North Sea southward along the Mosel and Rhine rivers. “South of the Rhine . . . the country is saturated with troops, aviation fields are numerous, and labor battalions are everywhere.”¹⁴ Aside from what he could observe from the road, he picked up hitchhiking labor corps “boys” and soldiers and “by the aid of a few cigarettes and mentioning that we were ‘Amerikaner,’” got the Germans to describe the depth of their fortifications and tank traps.¹⁵

Shortly after his trip, the Germans closed the border area to all attachés and even retired military officers.¹⁶ In September 1938 at a Paris dinner for military attachés, the German officers present expressed annoyance that the United States was supporting British and French resistance to Hitler’s Sudeten threats. Still, they predicted that war between Germany and the United States would only occur if the United States sent an army to Europe. According to Hillenkoetter’s chief, embassy naval attaché Capt. Francis Cogswell, “[The Germans] were sure we would never do that again, implying that they could act as they wished in Europe regardless of the opinion of the United States.”¹⁷

As the Sudeten Crisis continued in the fall of 1938, the naval attachés reported that “the exodus from Paris

“The whole city seems to be in your possession. It has hundreds of empty hotels. Take your pick.”

continues” as a renewed war scare gripped France.¹⁸ Hillenkoetter had a “long personal talk” with the German military attaché, Lt. Gen. Erich von Kuhlenthal, who said the Germans and French should form a “continental block” excluding Great Britain.¹⁹ The German naval attaché gave Hillenkoetter the same message. The Americans²⁰ also collected secret French naval documents and codebooks from cooperative naval and intelligence officers, and in December 1938, Hillenkoetter reported the pessimistic opinion of a French diplomat: “England’s help against Germany cannot be counted on too strongly, because it may be lacking, in spite of all agreements, at the critical moment.”²¹

Beyond the documents provided by the French, the attaché office reported that “the ex-German military attaché has allowed [Hillenkoetter] to copy” a detailed table of organization of the German army as of 1 December 1938,²² which Hillenkoetter used to write an extensive description of that army less than a year before it destroyed Poland and threatened France.

In general, the reporting and analysis that the naval attachés in Paris sent back to the Office of Naval Intelligence was as detailed and sophisticated as that of the State Department diplomats with whom they served, and was not limited to strictly military subjects. Weekly political and international commentaries, many written by Hillenkoetter, were faithfully sent to Washington, and the report on the 14 July 1939 Bastille

Day celebration described a huge military display by French forces and their British allies. The report also noted that ongoing Franco-Russian treaty negotiations were “furnishing the Russians with many laughs” amid rumors of a secret German-Russian treaty;²³ in fact, the so-called Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was revealed on 23 August 1939 and included secret protocols dividing Poland between Russia and Germany, and giving Stalin a free hand in Finland.

In late August 1939, Hillenkoetter sent a message to the chief of naval operations reporting that German forces were ready to invade Poland and predicting that in such an attack Great Britain and France would enter the war. In late December 1939, during the pause after the Blitzkrieg attack on Poland (which some called a Sitzkrieg), Captain Gade wrote a thoughtful analysis of this “war of nerves.”²⁴ “In a war of nerves, with the Germans having none, the English some, and the French many . . . is it not logical to believe in German victory? . . . Germany’s present inaction is . . . too paradoxical to last long.”²⁵

In the spring of 1940, President Roosevelt dispatched Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles to Europe on a peace mission, and acting ambassador Murphy accompanied him to meet French leaders. Both men were shocked at how “inept and unrealistic” the French leaders were.²⁶ As Murphy concluded, “everybody seemed ‘just too tired’ to resist the Germans.”²⁷

By mid-May, with Holland overwhelmed, Belgium about to fall, and the French government preparing to flee Paris, Ambassador Bullitt decided to remain in the city with Murphy, naval attaché Hillenkoetter, and army attaché Col. Horace H. Fuller.²⁸ On the night before the German army reached Paris, Murphy and Hillenkoetter went out for a midnight walk.

At the doors to the embassy they encountered the Grand Rabbi of Paris and his wife, who had decided, too late, to flee the city and now hoped that an American embassy car could take them with the rest of the embassy staff to Bordeaux. Murphy ordered an embassy chauffeur to take them, but the car was turned back at the outskirts of Paris by the German armored divisions now surrounding the city. As Murphy wrote: “I never saw the Grand Rabbi again but learned afterwards that he died in Paris.”²⁹ As the Americans walked “along the ghostly boulevards that sultry night, not a café was open, no lights showed anywhere, we met no one.”³⁰

On the morning of 14 June 1940, as German forces entered Paris, Murphy, Hillenkoetter, and Fuller crossed the boulevard from the American embassy to German military headquarters in one of Paris’s best hotels to pay a formal visit to provisional military governor Maj. Gen. Bogislav von Studnitz. While they waited for a German military convoy to pass, they were politely approached by a German lieutenant who confirmed they were Americans and then asked, “Can you tell us where we might find a suitable hotel?”³¹ Since not only the French government but many citizens had fled in the face of the German occupation, the Americans laughed in surprise and responded, “The whole

city seems to be in your possession. It has hundreds of empty hotels. Take your pick.”³² They found von Studnitz and his officers in excellent moods as they drank expensive champagne in the luxurious Hôtel de Crillon.

Von Studnitz had been German army attaché in Warsaw and assured his visitors that he understood that their duty was to gather intelligence and he was thus quite willing to answer their questions fully and frankly.³³ He confidently predicted that, because both the French and British armies were shattered, the war would be over in a few weeks. Hillenkoetter asked how the Germans expected to cross the English Channel, but the general confidently responded that “plans were all made and . . . the war would be over in six weeks . . .”³⁴

In fact, the Germans proved so open and friendly that von Studnitz invited Hillenkoetter and Colonel Fuller to join him in reviewing his 87th Infantry Division as they marched into Paris. As Hillenkoetter later remembered:

*[We] could easily see how that would look in newsreels, photos, etc.—two American officers taking a review with a German general. So we hastily, but firmly, declined, saying that we didn't feel worthy to share the general's honor; that it was his division and his glory; and that it would be a shame to deprive him of even a share of the glory.”*³⁵

To take advantage of initial German friendliness, Bullitt decided to leave Murphy and the attachés in Paris where they collected much intelligence from high ranking

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German officials to be transmitted back to Washington and shared with the British. Murphy proudly noted, “Paris proved to be one of the best, if not the best, of intelligence centers of Europe at that moment.”³⁶ Because the embassy had destroyed its codes, and all diplomatic telegrams were being read by the Germans, this useful but sensitive information was guarded by embassy staff until they left Paris.

Beyond intelligence collection, the embassy took advantage of German cooperation in other ways. Murphy had not been able to rescue the Grand Rabbi—who, in fact, did survive the war—but the German army gave the embassy exit permits to allow not only American and British citizens, but hundreds of French, to escape German-occupied France. Finally, at the end of June 1940, Ambassador Bullitt, Murphy, foreign service officer Carmel Offie, Hillenkoetter, and the army attaché, accompanied by a British couple carrying fake American passports, drove from Paris through German lines to the resort town of Vichy, where the new French government was being set up.

False documents identified the civilians as the ambassador's butler and maid, but a border guard complained that the lady was too well-dressed to be a maid. “Of course not,” Offie piped up—never at a loss: “Don't you understand that the ambassador has a mistress?”³⁷ The French government was in complete disar-

ray, but the greatest concern shared by President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was the fate of the powerful French fleet, most of whose ships were in the Mediterranean. Neither the United States nor Great Britain wanted to see these warships taken over by the German navy.

Churchill's decision in early July to seize or destroy the French fleet at its bases in Egypt and Oran, Algeria, killing or wounding some 2,000 French sailors, almost drove France away from its British ally, but the American embassy worked hard to persuade the Vichy government that since the United States had at that point no intention of entering the war, France's only hope was a British victory.

Hillenkoetter as naval attaché had primary responsibility for working with Adm. François Darlan, Vichy's naval minister, and although Darlan was furious at the British attack, “[Hillenkoetter] used every persuasion on Darlan to prevent his anger from running away with him and soon he agreed to renew his pledge to the American Government to keep out of German control what was left of the French fleet.”³⁸

Trying to calm the furious French admiral, who felt betrayed by Winston Churchill, was undoubtedly the most difficult diplomatic challenge facing a relatively young and inexperienced junior naval attaché, but Hillenkoetter had other duties as well. In early August he was again mentioned

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in the *New York Times*, as on his third attempt he managed to deliver diplomatic pouches from the embassy in Vichy to the US embassy in Paris despite German army insistence that he needed the permission of German occupation authorities. Again, boldness and persistence paid off.³⁹

Much more important to the course of the war, however, was a brief trip Hillenkoetter made to French North African Morocco and Algeria. While the Vichy government seemed paralyzed by defeat and despair, Murphy reported that Hillenkoetter

was agreeably surprised and encouraged. . . . Contrary to rumor . . . from London, he found that the Nazis had left French Africa almost completely to its own devices . . . practically the same as before the war.

Furthermore, the [French] military . . . was far stronger than he had expected. . . . Hillenkoetter added that 'these experienced army, navy, and air force officers and men had not lost their . . . fighting spirit. . . . [and that] the atmosphere over there is not comparable to the confusion in Vichy,' Hillenkoetter told us.

*'If France is going to fight again anywhere in this war, I believe North Africa will be the place.' He impressed us all with his hopefulness, which was reflected in the reports our Vichy Embassy sent to Washington.*⁴⁰

Shortly thereafter Murphy was summoned back to Washington where President Roosevelt had carefully read Hillenkoetter's North African reports and dispatched Murphy to French North Africa as his personal representative.⁴¹

In September 1940, with Western Europe in German hands, the Battle of Britain raging, German bombs falling on London, and Winston Churchill rallying his countrymen and appealing to the United States for help, Hillenkoetter reported on a conversation with his former German naval attaché colleague from Paris. As good summer flying weather and suitable weather for cross-Channel landing operations were coming to an end, so was initial German confidence in an early and easy victory. The Germans couldn't understand why Great Britain had not surrendered:

*[The Germans] are in the position of a prize fighter who hits his opponent with all his strength in what presumably is a vulnerable spot and yet the opponent won't go down. . . . The failure of England to realize, according to the German viewpoint, that she is beaten leaves the Germans a bit perplexed.*⁴²

Beyond that, Hillenkoetter observed that his "German acquaintances and friends" were worried about the United States's entering the war, and angry that Roosevelt had given Churchill 50 old American destroyers to defend British convoys and blockade the European continent. The former German attaché

admitted the blockade was hurting, and that German Ford automotive plants building vehicles for the German military were only working at 35-percent capacity.⁴³ The German gloomily predicted that all of Europe would suffer a hard and hungry winter.⁴⁴ Hillenkoetter concluded by noting that the Germans were expressing their unhappiness with the United States in petty ways in "any transaction of whatever kind between the [American] Embassy and German offices."⁴⁵

At the end of December 1940, a new ambassador replaced Bullitt in Vichy. Adm. William Leahy, born in Hampton, Iowa, in 1875, had retired as chief of Naval Operations in 1939 and was governor of Puerto Rico when Roosevelt recalled him to try to keep the French—many of whom now felt that England had abandoned and betrayed them—from actively helping Germany. Commander Hillenkoetter met Leahy and his wife in Lisbon, and after a harrowing journey across war-torn Spain, Leahy met with Marshal Phillipe Pétain and Adm. François Darlan.

Although Darlan was very friendly, Leahy judged him "incurably anti-British" and "prejudiced beyond convincing."⁴⁶ Indeed, he told Leahy that "he had asked the Germans to seize Gibraltar and bomb the Suez Canal, in order to destroy British power in the Mediterranean."⁴⁷ Nonetheless, when Dwight Eisenhower's American army invaded North Africa in November 1942, Admiral Darlan—by then commander-in-chief of French forces—eventually ordered them to join the allies, and his order was obeyed.

During their time in Vichy, Leahy and his wife formed warm friendships with Hillenkoetter and embassy third secretary Douglas MacArthur II, whose father Arthur was a Naval Academy graduate and friend, and whose uncle was Gen. Douglas MacArthur.⁴⁸ Although embassy staff tried to maintain normal social and diplomatic activities, life in Vichy was extremely stressful. Because of German espionage, all sensitive reporting had to be dispatched to Washington by very infrequent and slow couriers.

One of Hillenkoetter's most interesting and sensitive reports came in July 1941, when a French source gave him the French General Staff analysis of Franco-British cooperation during the Spring 1940 Battle of France.⁴⁹ Hillenkoetter, who was a certified interpreter of French, Spanish, and German, produced a sophisticated translation of the entire report, which concluded, "when the German drive . . . began, cooperation became lamentable; even ill-will was apparent. Days went by when one side didn't know what the other was up to, and vice versa."⁵⁰

In his commentary, Hillenkoetter noted the difficulties in trying to get allies to cooperate, even if both had the best of intentions. He quoted a French general on why the Germans were so militarily successful: "They have no allies." Finally, he praised the French for their rigorous objectivity and harsh self-criticism, commenting that his French source warned, "Here is a very valuable lesson to be learned. For goodness sake, when America comes into the war, don't make the foolish mistakes we did."⁵¹

Embassy telephones were tapped by both Vichy and German agents, and US embassy officers were followed. One young diplomat wryly noted, "Foreign ladies of a type never to have noticed me in the past, in fact of a type to have avoided me, now find me irresistible."⁵² Six years later as Hillenkoetter, now a rear admiral with the French Legion of Honor award, returned to Washington to take up duty as Director of Central Intelligence, the *Washington Post* described his secret activities in Vichy:

Hillenkoetter was a familiar figure in the lobbies and bars of the fabulous Hotel Les Ambassadeurs in Vichy after the fall of France . . . he served as a link in the 'underground railway' through which thousands of Frenchmen, British, and Americans got out of occupied France and the Continent to join the fight against Hitler.

Les Ambassadeurs—often called the 'international monkey house'—was his headquarters. It was also the hangout of most of Europe's spies, diplomats, and counter-intelligence agents. Hunted men sidled up to him at the bar. During an apparently aimless conversation they received identification papers, gasoline permits, money or a rendezvous with an innocent-appearing truck heading for the border."⁵³

There was great concern that Germany might finally occupy Vichy, France, and even overthrow their Spanish ally, Gen. Francisco Franco, to seize control of the British outpost of Gibraltar and thus the Mediterranean Sea. The embassy, therefore,

plotted escape routes and hid supplies of gasoline in buried tin cans along the way so embassy staff could, if necessary, escape in their cars.⁵⁴

Leahy was viciously attacked by the German-controlled French press: "Combining Anglo-Saxon hypocrisy with Jewish rapacity, this Admiral was performing a task that we ordinarily confide to secret emissaries called spies."⁵⁵

Embassies, of course, did house intelligence officers, and eventually Commander Hillenkoetter received a new assistant naval attaché—a young Chicago lawyer named Thomas Cas-sady.⁵⁶ Leahy remarked:

I soon found he did not know which end of a boat went first and wondered what kind of officers the Navy was commissioning. Some time later, I learned he was a secret OSS agent planted in the American Embassy. Cassidy was a very good spy—capable and discreet. He succeeded so well in keeping his secret that when the Embassy staff was imprisoned by the Germans in November 1942, the Nazis could not make a case against him, although they definitely suspected espionage."⁵⁷

As Leahy admitted, "I did not know either [Office of Strategic Services director William J.] Donovan or the OSS. . . . We learned later of their efficiency in collecting and evaluating intelligence about Axis military and political plans."⁵⁸

Leahy respected Hillenkoetter's skill in helping French underground members escape to North Africa, and in collecting information from both French and German sources: like

Cassady, “He never got caught.”⁵⁹ A year later as President Roosevelt’s representative on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Leahy was part of the senior military leadership to whom William Donovan’s OSS reported, and at the end of the war, as Harry Truman’s military chief of staff, Leahy recommended Hillenkoetter to become director of the Central Intelligence Group.

To the Pacific and War with Japan

In June of 1941 Germany invaded Russia, and that fall, French Indochina was captured by Japan. By then Commander Hillenkoetter had been recalled to the United States, and on 19 November 1941, he was assigned as executive officer, or second in command, of the battleship *West Virginia* at Pearl Harbor. Leahy remained in Vichy until the unexpected death of his wife in April 1942, after which he escorted her body back to the United States.

Leahy resigned as ambassador on 18 July 1942, and two days later Roosevelt recalled him to active military duty as chief of staff to the commander-in-chief of the United States Army and Navy, a position he held for both Presidents Roosevelt and Truman for the next seven years.

Among the first to suffer the consequences of America’s fractured intelligence apparatus were Hillenkoetter and the sailors of the Pacific Fleet on Sunday, 7 December 1941. The captain of *West Virginia*, Mervyn Bennion, was mortally wounded early in the attack and Hillenkoetter was trapped by fierce fires sparked by the explosion of *Arizona* and by over

a half-dozen torpedoes and bombs which struck his ship.⁶⁰

Thanks to the heroism and skill of her crew, the *West Virginia* was saved from capsizing but settled to the bottom of the harbor with relatively light loss of life as her surviving crew continued to fight raging fires. The next day, on orders from Adm. Walter Anderson, who as director of naval intelligence had been Hillenkoetter’s boss when he served as attaché in Paris in 1940, Hillenkoetter sent two sailors to hoist a US flag over the ruins of *Arizona*.⁶¹

Within a week of the Japanese attack, Hillenkoetter was appointed executive officer of *Maryland*, whose crew worked around the clock to make quick repairs allowing the battleship to support the decisive Battle of Midway in early June 1942 that fatally crippled Japan’s naval air forces.⁶²

In September 1942, newly promoted Captain Hillenkoetter was given one of the most important, but also most controversial, intelligence assignments in the Navy when he was appointed chief of the Intelligence Center, Pacific Ocean Area (ICPOA), supporting Adm. Chester Nimitz, commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet.⁶³ Although a European expert, he replaced brilliant Navy Japan linguist and cryptographer Joseph Rochefort, who had finally fallen victim to jealous Washington enemies like Navy director of war plans Richmond Turner, who withheld access to Japanese MAGIC^a

a. MAGIC was the American codeword for decrypted Japanese communications intelligence (COMINT), just as ULTRA was the codename for decrypted German material. See Ronald Lewin, *The American*

diplomatic messages and then unjustly blamed Rochefort and his Pacific Fleet chief, Adm. Husband Kimmel, for the Pearl Harbor disaster.

As William J. Casey, a senior OSS officer who later became President Ronald Reagan’s director of central intelligence, said, “The military had confined the priceless intercepts to a handful of people too busy to interpret them. . . . No one had put the pieces together . . . and told [senior officials] of their momentous implications.”⁶⁴

In the words of one historian, “Simultaneously dismayed and driven by duty . . . analysts continued working without their former commander [Rochefort] to provide the best intelligence they could for [Nimitz].”⁶⁵ Aside from serious morale problems, Hillenkoetter had to deal with many of the same resource problems facing the entire American war effort. New personnel would appear with basic Japanese language skills but without necessary analytic skill or experience, requiring extensive “on the job” training.

Normally analysts would work 15–17 hours a day, seven days a week, but during Hillenkoetter’s months, the number of personnel would sometimes not match the workload and people would be moved to other assignments in a

Magic: Codes, Ciphers and the Defeat of Japan (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982) and Ronald Lewin, *ULTRA Goes to War: The First Account of World War II’s Greatest Secret Based on Official Documents* (Simon and Schuster, 1978). For a single comprehensive volume, see Stephen Budiansky, *Battle of Wits: The Complete Story of Codebreaking in World War II* (Simon and Schuster, 2000).

“helter-skelter personnel flow” that hindered the delivery of intelligence to Nimitz.⁶⁶ Hillenkoetter did have access to OSS reports since a small Coordinator of Information office had been set up in Honolulu a month after Pearl Harbor and the office continued under OSS to provide analytic studies, secret agent reports, and interrogation information to the Navy. Adm. Nimitz, on the other hand, never permitted OSS to receive ICPOA information.⁶⁷

Slowly the war began to produce useful intelligence for Hillenkoetter’s analysts. The first Japanese prisoner of war had been ensign Kazuo Sakamaki, the only survivor from the five midget submarines that participated on the attack on Pearl Harbor. He considered his capture a disgrace, demanded to be shot, and refused to answer any questions. On the other hand, 32 sailors from the aircraft carrier *Hiryu*, including the chief engineer, had been abandoned as the carrier sank during the Battle of Midway.

An interrogator flown out from ICPOA found them “reasonably cooperative” in disclosing “many facts and details clarifying our knowledge of the battle.”⁶⁸ In early 1943, according to an ICPOA analyst, US troops on Guadalcanal began capturing a “steady stream” of Japanese personal diaries written in a cursive script that American translators found very challenging. “Japanese soldiers and sailors were addicted to keeping diaries. Some . . . had real literary merit. Sometimes they provided intelligence of considerable value and occasionally they were evidence of war atrocities.”⁶⁹

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Two analytic successes were particularly important. A map from a crashed Japanese airplane showed the secret code used to designate any geographic location in the world, but it was not until Marine officer Alva B. Lasswell suggested using a nursery rhyme by which Japanese children learned their language that the code “fell into place like a Marine platoon at the bugle’s call.”⁷⁰

In early 1943, ICPOA codebreakers also broke the code used for Japanese supply convoys. Every morning intelligence analysts would meet with Pacific Fleet submarine planners to compare the movements of Japanese convoys to the current locations of US submarines. “There were nights when nearly every American submarine on patrol in the Central Pacific was working on the basis of information derived from [codebreaking].”⁷¹

Soon, new and more effective American aircraft and tactics were turning the tide in the south Pacific. With the Japanese increasingly unable to supply or reinforce their troops, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, the victor of Pearl Harbor, decided to launch mass waves of inexperienced pilots against Allied positions in New Guinea and Guadalcanal. Their exaggerated reports of success so encouraged the Japanese that Yamamoto decided to visit them, and in mid-April, codebreakers in Hawaii decoded the route his airplane would take.

Capt. Edwin T. Layton, Pacific Fleet intelligence officer, immediately reported the news to Admiral Nimitz, and on 18 April 1943, thanks

to MAGIC, Japan’s best World War II military commander and strategist was ambushed and killed by US army fighter planes.⁷²

Just a few weeks before this great success by the analysts of the Pacific Fleet’s Intelligence Center, Captain Hillenkoetter had been transferred back to sea duty. As Hillenkoetter’s successor, Army colonel, later brigadier general, Joseph J. Twitty, concluded, the Intelligence Center’s goal was not to produce “‘apple polishing perfection,’ but to provide enough intelligence to get the job done.”⁷³ From this perspective, “getting the job done” meant helping Admiral Nimitz and the troops and sailors under his command in their daily fight against the Japanese from island to island and over, on, and beneath the broad Pacific ocean.

The “combat intelligence” Hillenkoetter—and then Twitty—supplied included information about Japanese forces, their strength, disposition, and probable movements, but necessarily quickly expanded to include detailed data about the islands on which the Americans would fight in their long march to Japan.⁷⁴ More general global information to help the president and his generals and admirals direct the worldwide war was left to ONI in Washington, the Army’s Military Intelligence Division, and an ambitious new organization led by dashing World War I Medal of Honor winner William J. Donovan.

To the USS Missouri and CIG

The end of World War II was formalized on the decks of new President Harry Truman's favorite battleship, *Missouri*, on 2 September 1945. At the end of September, by Truman's directive, the Office of Strategic Services was abolished. At about the same time, Capt. Roscoe Hillenkoetter, who had spent the last year of the war in senior positions in the Bureau of Naval Personnel, assumed command of the famous "Surrender Ship." In the spring of 1946, the Navy sent the battleship to the eastern Mediterranean ostensibly to conduct the body of the late Turkish ambassador home to Istanbul, but also to send a pointed message of American power and global reach to shaky western governments in Turkey, Greece, and Italy and to the aggressive communist forces threatening them.⁷⁵ In the summer of 1946 he returned to France for his third tour as naval attaché, and on 1 May 1947 as a newly promoted rear admiral, Hillenkoetter was appointed third director of the Central Intelligence Group by President Truman—on Fleet Adm. William Leahy's recommendation. With the passage of the National Security Act of 1947 and the creation of the CIA, he became the first statutory director of central intelligence and director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Afterword

From his years at the Naval Academy, "Hilley" was recognized as versatile and capable. His early naval service ranged from sea duty on everything from submarines to battleships, to tours as aide to senior commanders, to teaching at Annapolis. Hillenkoetter demonstrated equal versatility as naval attaché, gaining experience in an unusually broad range of intelligence skills. Beyond the routine liaison functions of exchanging and eliciting information from the host government and cultivating fellow foreign attachés, he observed and reported on combat operations in Spain, conducted reconnaissance probes of the German border and French North Africa, reported on order of battle, sought information from senior combatant commanders, and undertook delicate diplomatic negotiations with an aggrieved and humiliated senior Vichy minister.

Hillenkoetter attempted what would now be called the "rendition" of a suspected German spy, "exfiltrated" belligerent citizens from occupied territory, planned and cached supplies along potential escape routes, and challenged military perimeter controls.⁷⁶ With little formal training, he was collector, operator, reporter, and analyst, and his attaché reports to the Office of Naval Intelligence reflect the level of sophistication and skill of someone with his impressive academic and linguistic record, and someone worthy of assignment to one of the most critical



DCI Hillenkoetter (right), standing next to his successor, Gen. Walter Bedell Smith. CIA file photo, date uncertain, most likely December 1950.

diplomatic and military hotspots of the decade before the outbreak of the European world war.

Having witnessed the destruction of Spanish and French forces in the face of modern industrial war, and survived the destruction of his own battleship along with the entire American battle line, Hillenkoetter had earned a postgraduate education in the role that intelligence—or intelligence failure—plays in national security and he put that knowledge to work as the first director of the Central Intelligence Agency.



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