

US Military Intelligence

Since my work in the Air Force was in Intelligence, working as a Russian Linguist and Intelligence Analyst, I wanted to know how far back in history US military intelligence went. You may be surprised that it is as old as our nation is. During the Revolutionary War, in addition to using traditional reconnaissance missions, General Washington developed networks of spies. Perhaps the most effective was the Culper Spy Ring on Long Island, NY run by Major Benjamin Tallmadge. By recruiting local merchants who would visit coffeehouses that British officers frequented, the spy ring gathered useful information on troop movements and plans. Intelligence messages were sent unencrypted via several methods to Major Tallmadge and then to Washington. In May 1779, the ring developed a secret ink which disappeared as it dried and required a reagent to make it visible. Later in 1779, Tallmadge developed a codebook for his network which was used until the end of the war.

During the War with Mexico, General Winfield Scott assigned spy duties to one of his officers, Ethan Hitchcock. Hitchcock hired Manuel Dominguez, the leader of a gang of Mexican bandits and with about 200 men, they became the Mexican Spy Company. This group kept Scott informed on Mexican movements during the war. Again, the unit was dissolved after the war ended.

The Civil War saw new methods of intelligence gathering. With the recent development of the telegraph, both the North and South tapped the wires to capture war plans. Since this was very easy to do, both sides developed codes for telegraph transmissions. Both sides experimented with using balloons for visual observations but found them ineffective. Methods of gathering intelligence included the use of spies, interrogation of enemy prisoners, advanced reconnaissance usually by the cavalry and even reading the enemy's newspapers. General Grant added the recruitment of southerners to work as undercover spies. Again, these practices were quickly forgotten following the war. However, in 1888 Congress authorized a system in the Army where embassy attachés gathered intelligence from overseas capitals including Berlin, London, Paris, Vienna and St Petersburg. This unit's data was especially useful during the Spanish American War. The US had very good information on the strength of the Spanish military in Cuba gathered by an embassy attaché. These efforts, although very successful were mostly abandoned by 1915. Perhaps we should learn something from history!

When the US entered WWI, we had almost no intelligence gathering capabilities, leading General Pershing to develop his own field intelligence organization. WWI saw the first use of airplanes to provide reconnaissance information on enemy troop movements. The War Department did create a military intelligence section and its responsibility was to not only gather intelligence but to protect US military plans from being captured by the enemy. The section established a Code and Cipher Bureau to encode our messages and to break the code of enemy transmissions. The military intelligence section also looked at the soldiers in the US Army, many of whom had ancestral connections with Germany. This story will continue in the next few weeks.