

General Patton and His Use of ULTRA

Was General Patton's World War II success partly due to the ULTRA wireless intelligence provided by British Code Breakers?

Geoffrey Pidgeon

[Although there was no Amateur Radio during WWII, wireless communication played a significant role in the outcome of the war. This article, written by one who was part of the UK's code-breaking efforts, provides details on an under-reported aspect of the story. — Ed.]

I am the author of *The Secret Wireless War* and the recently published *Edgar Harrison — Soldier — Patriot and Ultra Wireless Operator to Winston Churchill*.^{1,2} I was a member of MI6 (Section VIII) during World War II. Section VIII was the communications arm of Britain's Secret Intelligence Services (SIS). It was militarized in June 1940 under the title Special Communication Units (SCUs) but remained outside the control of the British Army. Its head was Richard Gambier-Parry and his HQ was in Whaddon Hall a Georgian mansion some 5 miles west of Bletchley Park — the high security installation in England where British cryptologists

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received German encrypted transmissions and deciphered them.

Amongst its many roles, Section VIII was responsible for the dissemination of the ULTRA intelligence from Bletchley Park to Allied Army Commanders in the field. This intelligence arose from the thousands of wireless messages sent daily by the German military using their Enigma cipher machines. Bletchley Park then deciphered, analyzed and graded these messages with the most important classified as ULTRA.

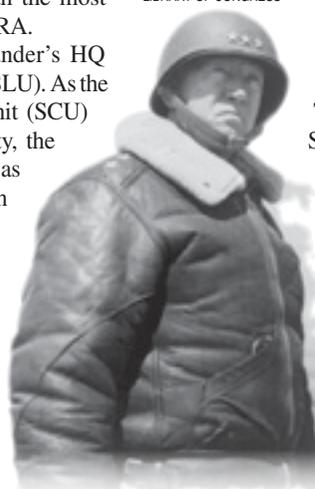
At each Army Commander's HQ was a Special Liaison Unit (SLU). As the Special Communication Unit (SCU) provided its wireless facility, the whole outfit became known as an SCU/SLU. The role of an SCU/SLU was to provide each Army Commander, be it Generals Bradley, Montgomery, Simpson, Patton or others, in their field headquarters with up-to-date and vital intelligence from Bletchley Park on the movements, status and plans of the German forces facing them.

ULTRA intelligence

is widely believed to have shortened the war and it certainly saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of Allied servicemen. Historians writing about Patton's success largely ignore its existence and put it down to his "brilliance and sixth sense." That is unfair to the tens of thousands working to provide ULTRA information to him.

This article is the joint effort of myself with my wartime colleague Wilf Neal, to put the record right. He was one of our four wireless operators attached to General Patton's Third US Army in the invasion of France. They worked in shifts in the SCU/SLU wireless vehicle built into a Dodge ambulance, placed in the very heart of Third Army HQ.

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Lt General George S. Patton Jr in March 1943.

ULTRA Decodes in WWII

Historians should take note of the *Cadre Papers No 10* entitled *XIX TAC and ULTRA — Patton's Force Enhancers in the 1944 Campaign in France* by Major Bradford Shwedo of the USAF, published by Air



The Bletchley Park complex in England where the ULTRA code breakers worked.

BRIAN PAGE, N4TRB

University Press, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. Throughout its 142 pages there are continuous and highly detailed references to the use made of ULTRA. In one passage it refers to Patton's daily ULTRA meetings with his intelligence officers as follows:

"The operational value of the services was so impressive that General Patton never passed a special briefing. If he was unable to attend the regular meeting, he always saw to it during the day that the recipients (ULTRA officers) came over to his caravan to make their showing."

The two American Third Army SLU officers *appointed and trained by Bletchley Park*, to Third Army G2 (Intelligence) Section, were Major Melvin Helfers with Major Warrack Wallace as his assistant.

In the document he quotes a number of instances where, as a result of advance ULTRA intelligence, preventative measures were put into place to avoid seriously jeopardizing the position of forward troops. This document attributes the following comment to Major Wallace: "An army has never moved as fast and as far as the Third Army across France, and ULTRA was invaluable every mile of the way."

The following comment by Group Captain F. W. Winterbottom (RAF), the senior British ULTRA officer, is on page 25 of this document and reads: "Patton studied every ULTRA signal and knowing where every enemy soldier was in his path, would thread his way round or through them and find the undefended spot. He had done it in Sicily and then all the way from Brittany to the Rhine."

One should note that Group Captain F. W. Winterbottom — already head of MI6 (Air) — was appointed by Winston Churchill to ensure the total secrecy of the Bletchley Park intelligence output throughout the world. When Winterbottom refers to ULTRA signals he is referring to the original meaning of absolutely top-level intelligence. These crucial messages were, in turn, graded from Z1 through to Z5. A message Z5 at night would be enough for Major Helfers to rouse Patton from his sleep.

There are more instances of Patton's positive use of ULTRA in the *Cryptologic Almanac* issued by the United States National Security Agency and Central Security Service. It can be downloaded from the Internet under a heading — *General Patton and COMINT* — it is the third article. (COMINT — Communications Intelligence).

One of these recalls the daily meeting at 0900 of about 40 officers in the Third Army War Tent. "...at the conclusion of the briefing the meeting broke up, but seven officers remained behind. Then Majors Helfers or

Wallace would spread the ULTRA map over the war map and brief Patton on the enemy situation as seen in COMINT.... "All seven of these Third Army officers had been inducted into the ULTRA secret, namely: General George Patton, Major General Hugh Gaffey, Brigadier General Hobart Gay, Colonel Oscar Koch, Colonel Robert Allen and of course, Majors Helfers and Wallace.

The British Special Liaison Units

Now let me turn to the part played by Wilf Neal during World War II. He served in the Royal Corps of Signals with a small British SLU attached to the G2 section of the forward headquarters of the United States Third Army. The unit, being part of SCU/SLU/8 totaled some 15 or 16 men — the communications team was made up of a sergeant, two drivers, four wireless operators and the remaining members, including the officer in charge, were responsible for the cipher operation.

SLUs were part of the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), formed in 1940 to convey ULTRA intelligence to British and later to US Army Commanders in the field. SLUs, working in the utmost secrecy, were only attached to those Commanders cleared to receive ULTRA. They comprised two Sections. British Army signals personnel manned the SCU wireless operation and Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel manned the vehicle handling the ciphers.

During the invasion of Europe all US Army Commands entitled to take ULTRA used an ULTRA Representative — all of them officers — in the US Army whose task was to receive the deciphered signals from the SLU. After summarizing the information in them,

he presented it to the Army Commander, or the very few senior officers entitled to see it. These American officers, who served as part of the Command's G2 section, were not part of the British SLU, but were trained and indoctrinated at Bletchley Park. They totaled probably less than 25 across all of the US Army Commands. The principal officer attached to Third Army was Major Melvin Helfers, the only regular US Army Officer among them.

It has been said that US Army Officers were appointed to the US Commands "in case of language problems" but as far as the Third Army was concerned, it was more likely that Winterbottom was aware of the antipathy shown by Patton towards British Army personnel.

The intelligence was gathered by thousands of service men and women wireless operators, in what was known as the "Y" service (Wireless Intercept — Wi or Y). The Y Service task, 24 hours a day — often under harsh conditions — was to listen to the vast amount of Morse traffic created by the thousands of Enigma cipher machines of the German military. The Y Service units were spread across the whole of the UK. Many of these Service wireless interceptors worked in huts in bleak locations and most of them with inadequate heating in winter months.

It must be remembered that just prior to the outbreak of war, all British amateur wireless operators had their licenses revoked, transmitting gear removed and impounded, but were allowed to retain their receivers. Many of these amateurs were recruited in the RSS (Radio Security Service) to listen for German agents in the country but soon were employed listening to the German intelligence service — the Abwehr. RSS was later incorporated into the MI6 (Section VIII) organization and designated SCU3.



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A 2002 photo of Wilf Neal standing beside a US Army Dodge Ambulance of the type converted at Whaddon Hall for use in the SCU/SLU for Patton's Third Army. Wilf was one of the wireless operators working to provide ULTRA to US Army Commanders.



This is an Enigma machine used in different forms by the German Army and the Abwehr — the German Secret Service.



Three of the famous National HRO radio receivers whose superb selectivity made them ideally suited to intercept German wartime Morse code communications.

Code Breakers and Wireless Workshops

Thousands of these messages, from the German military forces via the Y Service and from SCU3, still in code, were sent daily to the famous code breakers at Bletchley Park for deciphering and analysis. There were upwards of 11,000 staff at “The Park” working round the clock in three shifts. The intelligence thus obtained about enemy movements and plans was listed as Secret, Top Secret and Most Secret but later the highest level was listed as ULTRA — although that has recently become the generic word used for all the Bletchley Park output. ULTRA intelligence reports were limited to a very few army commanders and their senior G2 intelligence officers.

In the grounds of Whaddon Hall were workshops that produced much of the equipment used within the SCU organization. This included spy suitcase transceivers, many of which were used by MI6 agents, and various types of transmitters. Immediately facing the mansion was a wireless station operated under the code name of “Main Line.” This small station handled covert and non-covert traffic to some of our embassies and missions abroad as well as Winston Churchill’s messages when he was overseas. The dissemination of the ULTRA traffic deciphered at Bletchley Park was Section VIII’s most important task so a short distance away on the edge of Whaddon village was another station on Windy Ridge. It was from here that enciphered messages from Bletchley Park were transmitted out to SCU/SLU units in the field.

Also based at the Hall was the Mobile Construction unit. I was a member of its team of about nine under the leadership of Dennis Smith, a brilliant engineer, who played a major role in designing much of our most successful equipment. From the early days of the war the unit fitted wireless equipment into vehicles used by the units attached to forward military headquarters. Vehicles converted in the early days included Packard Sedan

motorcars, some Humber Estate cars, Guy 15 cwt wireless vans and US Dodge ambulances. The latter two were used with mobile units assigned to British, Canadian and American Army Commanders in the invasion of Europe. Dodge vehicles were assigned to the US forces and Guy vans to the others. This was one of the unit’s priorities in early 1944.

Under the code name “Ascension” we also installed wireless gear in Lockheed Hudson’s, Venturas and other aircraft at Tempsford airfield (UK). This was VHF to enable voice contact to our agents in occupied territory quickly and easily from aircraft. We fitted wireless on Motor Gun Boats and Torpedo Boats used to carry agents and equipment onto the coasts of occupied Europe.

Wilf Neal with the Third Army

Wilf’s own service with the Third Army was as an SCU/SLU wireless operator attached to the forward headquarters G2 Section, “Lucky Forward,” joining them at Peover Hall, Knutsford, Cheshire. The converted Dodge ambulances were equipped with a Whaddon MkIII transmitter, National HRO receiver with associated coils and a Marconi naval key. To make them totally mobile they carried an Onan generator for the daytime power supply and two banks of 12 V batteries for night work.

On June 29, 1944 Patton’s SCU/SLU had left Knutsford with the HQ, boarding the Liberty ship *J. F. Stefan* at Southampton and sailing for Utah beach where it disembarked on the evening of July 6, then moved to the village of Nehou the following day. Third Army was activated on August 1, 1944, this being the start of the swift drive across France before becoming stalled in Nancy and Luxembourg City during the winter. Once conditions eased in February/March 1945 they moved into Germany, crossed the Rhine at Mainz and were in Regensburg at the time the war ended. At this point, service with the Third Army ended and within a day or two they traveled to their respective HQs in Versailles.

Apart from when moving between sites, which occurred every few days between the beginning of August and end of September, the station worked 24 hours a day, every day. The batteries were charged during the day using the Tiny Tim petrol driven charger. The Onan and Tiny Tim were of US manufacture. They also had aerial poles and gear stowed in the lockers over the wheel arches. The aerial was of the long wire variety.

When they were later able to move to more permanent cover, like in eastern France and Germany, it was possible to remove the desk complete with its wireless equipment and install it inside and hook up to the internal power supply. The converted ambulances had the Red Cross markings obliterated and all the vehicles bore US identification numbers. The cipher van was also a converted Dodge ambulance but the total *need-to-know* secrecy that existed in our unit meant that the wireless operators were never allowed to even peer inside.

Thirty Years of Secrecy

For 30 years after the end of the war, due to the existence of the Secrecy Act, we were mostly unaware of the true nature of the work in which we had been involved. It was not until the publication in 1975 of articles relating to the activities at Bletchley Park that we became aware of the vital importance of our work. At this stage, Wilf started to take an interest in researching his unit’s history, although little information was available at the time. It was only when he started to attend reunions around 1997 and met up with men who served in other spheres within SCU and the RSS that a much broader picture of our activities emerged. It was also as a result of these reunions and the subsequent information that emerged that *The Secret Wireless War* was written.

There is no doubt that General Patton was one of the outstanding Generals of World War II. However, many of the brilliant maneuvers and victories attributed to him were undoubtedly achieved utilizing the ULTRA intelligence fed to him by Bletchley Park.

Geoffrey Pidgeon was involved with the manufacture and installation of classified radio equipment during WWII. He worked at Whaddon Hall, the headquarters of MI6, to fit communications equipment into a diverse array of vehicles ranging from aircraft and torpedo boats to Dodge trucks. Geoffrey is retired from his family business, which has been involved with bathroom fixtures since his great uncle was apprenticed to Thomas Crapper in 1871. Geoffrey can be reached at 3 Arundel House, Courtlands, Sheen Rd, Richmond, Surrey, TW10 5AS, United Kingdom, geoffrey.pidgeon@virgin.net.

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