

Charles Willoughby



World War II Intelligence
in the Pacific Theater

Charles A. Willoughby: The Most Prominent American Intelligence Officer of World War II

Major Carl A. “Tooey” Spaatz was the commander of the small American Signal Corps Air Service detachment in France during the first World War. His adjutant was Captain Charles Weidenbach. The unit was a training organization and did not have any planes, making for a disgruntled bunch of airmen. According to the newspaperman C. L. Sulzberger, the men “didn’t like the names or personalities of Spaatz and Weidenbach and used to refer to them as ‘the Prussians.’ The French likewise were pretty suspicious of those two officers.”¹ Despite the doubts of the men, Spaatz went on to become the first chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force. Weidenbach underwent a name change and became Major General Charles Andre Willoughby, MacArthur’s G2 throughout the war in the Pacific and in the Korean War.

In his article “Intelligence in the Philippines,”² Michael E. Bigelow finds Charles Willoughby wanting as an intelligence officer, citing those occasions when his analysis was flawed and wondering whether Willoughby did not let his loyalty to MacArthur “cloud his judgment,” perhaps in an effort to confirm his commander’s own strong views on enemy strength and intentions. Bigelow found that MacArthur’s G2 “consistently underestimated Japanese strength,” was inflexible once his mind was made up, and failed to stitch together a coherent big picture from his piecemeal estimates. He also pointed to systemic problems with the intelligence apparatus which Willoughby oversaw. His assessment of this intelligence staff officer is useful and corrective. He is by no means the only critical voice.

According to Elliott Thorpe, the ACoS, G2, on the U.S. Army Forces Far East side, another general on MacArthur’s staff summed up what he thought were Willoughby’s talents when he said, “Willoughby has the best hindsight of any intelligence officer in the army.” Thorpe could be expected to view Willoughby with dislike since both men were competing for authority in the separate G2 sections, both under General MacArthur.³ His noticeable Teutonic accent may have further set him apart from other members of MacArthur’s staff who referred to him as “Sir Charles,” because of his aloofness. One officer said Willoughby always looked as if he was “looking out over a high board fence.”⁴

Willoughby raised eyebrows after the war when he went to Spain to pay his respects to Franco who, by Thorpe’s account, he considered as “the second greatest general in the world.”⁵

My purpose here will not be to patch this structural damage done to his pedestal, but to get a better understanding of the man and his contributions. In any case, it is not likely his figure will be toppled in the pantheon of Military Intelligence giants in view of his long and valued service to the cause of providing the commander with, for the most part, good intelligence.

Born in 1892, Willoughby was the son of Baron T. von Tschepp-Weidenbach from Baden, Germany, and Emmy Willoughby of Baltimore, Maryland. Among the colleges he attended in Europe were the University of Heidelberg and the Sorbonne in Paris. He majored in philology and modern lan-

languages: French; Spanish; German. He settled down permanently in the United States in 1910, there to finish his education and get U.S. citizenship. He enlisted in the U.S. Army in October and served with Company K, 5th U.S. Infantry, for the next three years, rising to the rank of sergeant. In 1913 he enrolled as a senior at Pennsylvania College in Gettysburg and graduated the following year with a Bachelor of Arts. Then he sought a Master of Arts degree at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence.

He was commissioned a major in May 1914 in the Officers Volunteer Corps, the forerunner of the present Officers Reserve Corps. He vacated this to accept a Regular Army Commission as a second lieutenant in August 1916. While awaiting an Army appointment, he taught at the Howe School, Howe, Indiana, and at Racine College, Racine, Wisconsin, in their modern language departments.

In December 1916 he was posted to the 35th Infantry on border patrol duty at Nogales, Arizona. When the U.S. entered World War I, he was transferred to the 16th Infantry at Fort Bliss, Texas, and embarked for France with his regiment in June 1917. The 16th was assigned to the 1st Division of the American Expeditionary Force, but Willoughby would not be with them long. He soon joined the Air Corps, trained with the French, and was breveted as Military Aviator, flying the "Nieuport" and "Spad" pursuit aircraft.

As a captain, he served as Executive Officer to then Maj. Carl Spatz who would later command the Army Air Forces of World War II, stationed at the Aviation Training Center at Issoudun, France. Willoughby next took command of the Aviation Branch School at Chateauroux. He was transferred in May 1918 to the Aviation Section of the War Department in Washington. Working under Postmaster General Burleson, he helped pioneer the development of the first Aerial Mail Service. He left the Air Service in December 1918 and returned to his basic branch of Infantry. During the organization of the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, he commanded the demonstration machine gun units there.

In October 1919 Captain Willoughby was reassigned to the 24th Infantry serving at Columbus, New Mexico, that border post best known for having been raided by Mexican bandit and revolutionary, Pancho Villa. He was company and battalion commander in one of the two African-American infantry regiments in the U.S. Army.

His next assignment took him overseas to San Juan, Puerto Rico, where again he served as both company and battalion commander in the 65th Infantry from February 1921 to May 1923.

Returning to the United States, he spent the next few months of 1923 with the War Department's Military Intelligence Division, to prepare himself for Military Attache duties in South America. He arrived in July in Venezuela for service with the American Legations in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador. Over the next five years he would move from Caracas, Venezuela, to Bogota, Columbia, and on to Quito, Ecuador. He spent a good deal of his time studying the history of the countries in which he served and published a biography of the Venezuelan Simon Bolivar, the revolutionary leader and soldier. For Willoughby's diplomatic work, he was recognized by the governments of Venezuela and Ecuador with military awards.

He returned to troop duty in May 1927 at Fort D.A. Russell, Wyoming, and in September 1928, now a major, he was enrolled in the Advanced Course at the Infantry School at Fort Benning. After his graduation in June 1929, he remained for two months at Fort Benning to complete a *History of the Infantry School*, and to

publish his comprehensive study on *The Economic and Military Participation of the United States in the War 1917-1918*. The latter was also published in foreign-language editions to inform Latin-American countries about the military industrial capacity of the United States.

Willoughby's formal military education continued in August 1929 when he attended the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. After graduating two years later, he stayed on at the school as an instructor, teaching the subjects of Intelligence and Military History. He edited the *Command and General Staff School Quarterly*, increasing its scope and extending its interest to foreign affairs. He continued to research and write, publishing a textbook for the Leavenworth courses entitled *The Element of Maneuver in War*, a work which looked at the art of war as it evolved through the major campaigns of the 20th century. It was to become a standard reference book over the next few years. The next step was the one-year course at the Army War College in Washington, D.C., from which he graduated in June 1936.

In July 1936 he was back at Fort Benning, this time as an instructor in the Infantry School. During his four-year tour, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel. Next, he served briefly in New York City, where he got the War Department's "Military Dictionary Project" off the ground and published the foreign language pocket-dictionaries that became so well traveled in the global war that was to come.

On the eve of the war, in June 1940, Willoughby found himself assigned as a logistics officer in the Headquarters of the Philippine Department in Manila. As Assistant Chief of Staff, G-4, he planned and organized the roads, depots, and ports on Bataan and Corregidor, that would become so important to MacArthur's forces during their heroic defense.

After his stint as the G4 of the Philippine Department from 1939 to 1941, Colonel Willoughby became the G2 of the newly established headquarters of U.S. Army Forces Far East in August. He continued as MacArthur's Chief of Intelligence in the General Headquarters, Southwest Pacific Area, promoted to brigadier and major general.

Willoughby began his long association with General Douglas MacArthur and was one of the few key men who accompanied him on the escape from Corregidor to Australia in March 1942. He would be with MacArthur throughout the campaigns of the Southwest Pacific, remain at his headquarters during the occupation of Japan, and continue to serve him during the Korean War.

It was during the defense of the Philippines, when the Japanese were invading the islands, that Willoughby was out on a personal reconnaissance mission near Agloloma Bay, Bataan. Seeing that a company of the Philippines Constabulary was hard pressed to throw back an attack of a Japanese landing party and were without their commanding officer who had been shot, Willoughby reformed stragglers and personally led them forward through the jungle to mount a counterattack on the enemy line. While under fire, he went to the aid of a wounded officer and assisted him to the rear. Coincidentally, the commander of the Philippines Constabulary Battalion, Col. M. Castaneda, was a former student of Willoughby's at the Infantry School. For his "courage and leadership" in this action, he received the Silver Star.

It was not the only time he would put himself in danger. As MacArthur's personal emissary, he visited the headquarters of Australian and American corps during the heaviest fighting. In December 1942 he was with General Eichelberger in the capture of Buna Village in the Buna-Gona campaign. He was awarded the Army's second highest decoration for gallantry, the Distinguished

Service Cross, for “extraordinary heroism in action” during the Papuan Campaign in New Guinea from July 1942 to January 1943.

For his staff work, he would receive a Distinguished Service Medal and an Oak Leaf Cluster, not unusual awards for a person of his rank and position. The first covered his work as a G2 up until September 1943, citing him for his “conspicuously accurate” intelligence assessments and “penetrating analysis of the military situation.” The second Distinguished Service Medal took into account the period up until March 1945, which included the operations in Salamua, Lae and Finschhafen, New Guinea; Hollandia, Wakde-Sarmi and Biak, Dutch New Guinea; and in the Philippine Islands. The citation credited him with “evaluating and disseminating information for use in planning and executing a series of devastating blows against the enemy.”⁶

It was Willoughby who called the Pacific campaigns the “War of Distances,” a characterization that took into account the vast expanses that caused so many logistical problems and presented a host of intelligence headaches as well. In assessing the intelligence work performed in the Southwest Pacific Area, he listed what he thought were the “insuperable obstacles” facing the G2 in the Pacific: “Worldwide lack of adequate initial information on Japanese strength, resources, disposition, and order of battle; scanty information of terrain held by the enemy (Compared with the ETO map situation, New Guinea was an uncharted wilderness); practical cessation of flow of intelligence from the Philippines in 1942; operations against an enemy with one of the world’s most complicated language systems; trend toward independence of the various intelligence agencies and Allied establishments leading to competitive efforts and sometimes duplications (e.g., CIC; COIC; AIB); and the absence of...appropriate intelligence agencies for geographical, linguist, and clandestine operations.”⁷

He created the appropriate agencies to coordinate allied intelligence and oversee linguistic, geographical and clandestine operations. There were the Central Bureau, Allied Translator and Interpreter Section, Allied Intelligence Bureau, and Allied Geographical Section, all under his control.

One of the biggest boons to MacArthur’s operations in the South West Pacific Area was the exploitation of Ultra intelligence, the reading of Japanese signal traffic. In planning the campaign to oust the Japanese from New Guinea and launch the allies’ island-hopping return to the Philippines, Willoughby was able to rely on precise information as to the enemy’s strength, dispositions and defensive planning, all as a result of Ultra. He recommended to MacArthur that he forego a landing at the heavily garrisoned and reinforced Hansa Bay on the northern coast of New Guinea and instead leap-frog to the more lightly defended Hollandia. Acting on Willoughby’s intelligence, MacArthur revised his plans and attacked Hollandia in April 1944, taking the Japanese by surprise and cutting the enemy’s lines of communication. Much of the credit belongs to Maj. Gen. Samuel B. Akin who organized the SIGINT effort in the Central Bureau, initially located in Brisbane, Australia, and the simultaneous decryption work of the Signal Security Agency at Arlington Hall, Virginia. But it was Willoughby who integrated this boon of solid information at the operational level where it became an integral part of MacArthur’s planning. With foreknowledge of the timetable of Japanese resupply convoys, MacArthur was able to interdict and destroy Japanese transports. Reconnaissance flights were sent out to the convoy before the air strikes to make the Japanese think that they had been discovered by aerial reconnaissance and not given away by allied knowledge of their codes. MacArthur’s surprise at Hollandia was achieved in large part as the result of deception

operations to reinforce the Japanese convictions that the attack would fall at Hansa Bay. The allies were aware of the prevailing Japanese opinion because of intercepted messages to that effect. In assessing the role of Ultra intelligence in this operation, historian Edward J. Drea concluded that:

MacArthur's leap to Hollandia and Aitape with simultaneous, multi-division landings on 22 April 1944 caught the Japanese defenders of Eighteenth Army totally unprepared, in effect facing the wrong direction in order to defend Hansa Bay. Ultra alone was not, of course, responsible for his success. Intelligence, no matter how accurate, is only valuable if a commander armed with that information acts to exploit his knowledge of the forces on the other side of the hill. It is a tribute to MacArthur's generalship that he could rapidly revise operational plans to take advantage of the windfall Ultra presented to him. Lesser or more cautious commanders might have vacillated and let the chance slip from their hands. ...But MacArthur's boldness and resolution capitalized on the intelligence gleaned from intercepts of Japanese radio signals and he used the information to amend his operational plans accordingly. ...The Ultra edge allowed MacArthur to select the battlegrounds and, with this advantage, the destruction of Eighteenth Army became really a matter of time. Perhaps the seeds of Inchon may be found in the New Guinea operations of early 1944.⁸

The allied victory was in part attributable to MacArthur's willingness to change his plans at the last minute and the quality of the intelligence which diminished the element of risk in the new operation. This example of MacArthur's acceptance of intelligence stands in contrast to the landing in the Admiralty Islands in February 1944, the attack in Luzon and against Manila in January 1945, and his offensive toward the Yalu River in October 1950, all instances of his rejection of reliable intelligence in favor of his own preconceptions.⁹

Although Ultra did enjoy some notable successes in the Pacific war, like the Hollandia victory, the interdiction of Japanese convoys, the knowledge of the enemy order of battle in the Admiralties, and the flight plan and subsequent destruction of the aircraft carrying Admiral Yamamoto on his inspection tour, it did not have a discernable affect on MacArthur's decision-making. As Drea has concluded, "When Ultra fit into the general's plans, it was employed. When it did not, it was relegated to a minor role. Ultra was only one of many ingredients in MacArthur's complex approach to decision making."¹⁰

Even if Ultra had not played the same dramatic part that it had in Europe, Willoughby felt that SWPA intelligence had been a notable success, citing the victorious outcome of the war in the Pacific. After running down all the problems his staff faced, he concluded, "The fact that they were solved successfully is evidenced by the historical achievements of the forces in the Southwest Pacific Area. An advance of some 2,500 miles from Papua to the Philippines was made with a minimum of means and tactical losses. Victories were forged at the end of the longest supply lines the world has ever seen and were made possible only by the most economical use of usually limited means. Not a single tactical setback occurred in a most difficult, tropical theater against a competent enemy who fought tenaciously to the last ditch. The victories in the Southwest Pacific Area were substantially based on accurate intelligence information of every category. A mere trickle of enemy information, at the beginning of the war, became a flood of intelligence data on every phase of operation of the Japanese armed forces and the territory they occupied."¹¹

To bolster his conclusion about the success of allied intelligence

operations, he called upon the testimony of an opposing intelligence officer. "When queried on the primary causes for Allied victory in New Guinea, Lt. Col. Shinohara Masaru, Senior Intelligence Officer, Japanese Eighth Army Headquarters, said: 'Air superiority, superior strategy, General MacArthur's overall offensive plan, superior weapons and equipment, and a superior intelligence system.'"¹²

Centralization was a key objective during his long reign as manager of all the intelligence efforts in SWPA. While acknowledging that he was never able to fully solve this problem, he found it, and his publications program, to be among his proudest accomplishments. He wrote in his postwar history:

...Whatever success G2 was able to achieve can be attributed to a continuous, vigilant, uncompromising effort to establish and maintain centralized control of all intelligence agencies, affiliates and subsidiaries, in spite of obviously adverse conditions, and to maintain the highest standards in G2 publications which won final recognition by their intrinsic merit. ...Experience gained in the war in the Southwest Pacific shows the absolute necessity for centralized intelligence control. Competitive, quasi-independent agencies must be eliminated, or ruthlessly subordinated as they tend to unduly assert their individuality and operate independently, causing friction, duplication of effort, loss of valuable time, general inefficiency, and unsatisfactory command relationships. Centralized control was found to be imperative if intelligence was to operate at peak efficiency; everything else was tried reluctantly, only to result in failure.¹³

He had a message for the leaders of the yet to be formed U.S. Army Intelligence School. "The problem of effective coordination between various intelligence agencies will be one for Service Schools to solve through methods of training, improved curricula, intelligence planning against future emergencies. Without centralization of intelligence and sharply defined control of all intelligence agencies, needless waste of time, means and men is inevitable." He agreed with the findings of the Congressional report on the intelligence failures at Pearl Harbor. "Exaggerated secrecy and departmental intransigence dominate its pages of accusation. It is only recently that the principle of centralization has found highest official expression in the formation of a National Intelligence Agency."¹⁴

Before the Korean War, Willoughby maintained an extensive network of agents in Korea and they enabled him to produce 1,195 reports between June 1949 and June 1950. They noted the build-up of the North Korean Peoples Army and by March 1950 were agreeing with the CIA in predicting a North Korean invasion around June.

Willoughby dismissed the idea that the Chinese would intervene in Korea, thinking that the logical time to do so, after the Inchon landings, was passed. He was adamant, and his analysis would later prove to be tragically flawed.¹⁵ But his intelligence apparatus was not entirely at fault. Despite being the focus of blame by the press, he had correctly identified the Chinese order of battle and briefed their capabilities. He erred, however, in underestimating the strength and timing of the attack. Moving at night and maintaining camouflage discipline during the day, the Chinese formations of General Lin Piao went undetected. Willoughby was not alone. The CIA made the same mistake. The press had a field day dissecting MacArthur's judgment and gross miscalculation of "the intentions, strength, and capabilities of the forces against him." Willoughby replied in a newspaper article to the critics. He said, "One can hardly blame the United Nations field command for the Chinese coming en masse at their own time and place. That

monumental decision was beyond the local military intelligence surveillance; it lay behind the Iron Curtain and the secret councils of Peiping.” MacArthur himself wanted to author a refutation of the barbs aimed at his G2, but was prohibited by the Department of the Army. It was a measure of his confidence in Willoughby.¹⁶

Phillip B. Davidson was the head of the Plans and Estimates section of the Far East Command G2 during the Korean War and prepared the all-source daily intelligence estimates which were Willoughby’s chief means of disseminating intelligence. Davidson claimed that history has given Willoughby rough handling because historians have judged him solely on the Daily Intelligence Summaries, routine reports put out by junior officers to which Willoughby paid scant attention. Davidson’s estimates, not the Daily Intelligence Summaries, were Willoughby’s “true voice,” but because “they remain classified and thus unattainable, historians have consistently garbled Willoughby’s intelligence product and forecasts.”¹⁷

C. L. Sulzberger was a journalist on the foreign affairs beat for the *New York Times* when he interviewed Willoughby in May 1950. He left this impression of the man in his diary.

He is a large man who, it is said, is more or less a professional soldier of fortune. Apparently his father, according to rumor, was some sort of a German baron. Some say his mother’s name was Willoughby and that he adopted his mother’s maiden name during World War I. Others say he changed his name from Weidenbach. He speaks with a slight Germanic accent. He is a man with considerable “manner.” He said he has been in the Far East for thirteen years. He is violently anti-Communist and thinks Senator McCarthy, by and large, is doing a good job.¹⁸

Because Willoughby worked for so many years for such a high profile commander as Douglas MacArthur, he has been open to more scrutiny than any other World War G2 at a time when military intelligence was less of a science and more of an art than it would later become. His performance as an intelligence officer has been adjudged uneven. He comes through this historical audit shaken, but with his contributions intact.

Notes

1. Sulzberger, C.L., *A Long Row of Candles*, Macmillan, New York, 1969, p. 765.
2. *Military Intelligence*, Apr-Jun 95.
3. Thorpe, Elliott R., *East Wind, Rain: The Intimate Account of an Intelligence Officer in the Pacific, 1939-49*, Bambit, Boston, 1969, p. 95.
4. Sulzberger, C.L., *A Long Row of Candles: Memories and Diaries, 1934-1954*, New York, 1969, p 765.
5. Thorpe, p. 96.
6. Willoughby, Maj. Gen. Charles A., ed., *A Brief History of the G-2 Section GHQ, SWPA and Affiliated Units*, General Headquarters, Far East Command, Military Intelligence Section, General Staff, 1948, pp. 124-5. Among his other U.S. awards were: Legion of Merit, 1941; American Defense w/One Star, 1941; Asiatic-Pacific Theater w/Seven Stars, 1941-45; Victory Medal, 1918 and 1945; Japanese Occupation, 1945-48; Unit Citation w/Three Clusters, 1942-45; Philippine Defense, 1941-42; Philippine Liberation w/Two Stars, 1944-45; Distinguished Service Star (Phil Rep), 1945; and Philippine Independence Ribbon, 1946.
7. Willoughby, pp. 124-6.

8. Drea, Edward J., "Ultra Intelligence and General Douglas MacArthur's Leap to Hollandia, January-April 1944," in Handel, Michael I., ed., *Intelligence and Military Operations*, Frank Cass, London, 1990, pp. 323-349.
9. Handel, Michael I., ed., *Intelligence and Military Operations*, Frank Cass, London, 1990, p. 83.
10. Drea, Edward J., *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War Against Japan, 1942-1945*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1992, p. 234. Drea's is an excellent account of the role played by Ultra in SWPA operations.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-6.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-6.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-6.
14. Willoughby, pp. 124-6.
15. Higgins, Trumbull, *Korea and the Fall of MacArthur*, New York, 1960, p. 67.
16. Manchester, William, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur, 1880-1964*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1978, p. 604, 613, 615.
17. Davidson, Phillip B., *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, Presidio Press, Novato, CA, 1990, p. 96.
18. Sulzberger, pp. 570-72.