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Most Secret and Confidential: Intelligence in the Age of Nelson,

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of twentieth-century navies with the same comprehensiveness.

JAMES GOLDRICK
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Maffeo, Steven E. Most Secret and Confidential: Intelligence in the Age of Nelson. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2000. 355pp. $32.95

In Most Secret and Confidential, Steven Maffeo has written an exceptional study of how intelligence was collected and used during the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To limited degrees, the intelligence activities of the United States, Spain, Russia, Denmark, and several other European nations are described. More detail is provided concerning the excellent French intelligence efforts under Napoleon. The bulk of the text, however, deals with the use of intelligence by the British government, especially the Admiralty, during the years between 1793 and 1815.

Maffeo, who is a commander in a naval reserve intelligence unit, has combined his intelligence expertise with the skills of an accomplished historian to write this informative and most enjoyable history of British intelligence efforts during this period. His knowledge of the history of intelligence operations is excellent, and his grasp of the British navy of this era is unsurpassed. He uses not only primary sources (government papers and personal letters) to document his work but also the books of such novelists as C. S. Forester and Patrick O’Brian to make his points.

The opening chapter describes how the British government collected intelligence. It has been clear that Lloyd’s of London, by means of its agents located around the world, was able to provide a continuous flow of intelligence to the government, but it is fascinating to learn that by virtue of opening diplomatic and personal mail, the British Post Office became the largest intelligence-gathering branch of the government.

Subsequent chapters treat other aspects of the British intelligence effort. The Admiralty’s collection and use of intelligence is discussed in depth, and so is the transmission of information. The difficulties are shown of sending any type of message, especially when the usual form of communication at sea was signal flags, which were useless at night or in limited visibility, such as in battle. The subject of several chapters is the commander as his own intelligence officer. Some commanders, such as Nelson, were expert intelligence officers; others were not. However, all commanders had to sort through whatever information was available to them and make the best decisions they could—they were literally on their own. Communications between detached fleets and the Admiralty often took weeks, if not months. Commanders, therefore, without knowledge of the current government policy, would ultimately decide on courses of action. The fact that they were fully supported by the Admiralty and the government demonstrates the high level of intelligence skills among the officers of the Royal Navy.

The concluding chapters are case studies that show what role intelligence, or the lack thereof, played in three naval engagements. They are remarkable summations of the Indian Ocean action of Pulo Aur in February 1804, the Copenhagen expedition of December 1800–April 1801, and the Nile campaign of March through August 1798. These three chapters form an excellent conclusion.
This is a must read for every intelligence officer, and for any member of the military who is interested in the history of intelligence. It should also be on the reading list of every military and naval historian, most history buffs, and fans of naval fiction of this period. It substantiates that such fictional characters as Horatio Hornblower and Jack Aubrey are soundly based on historical fact, and that their activities, especially concerning intelligence, are authentic.

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