

# The Wash

101st Year · No. 279

© 1978. The Washington Post Co.

SUNDAY,

## Spanish Diplomats Spied

### Allied Eavesdropping Helped Suppress U-Boats

By George C. Wilson  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Sophisticated eavesdropping—not radar, as Hitler's high command suspected—was the secret weapon that broke the German U-boats' stranglehold on the Atlantic sea lanes in World War II, according to formerly top secret documents just turned over to the National Archives.

Allied codebreakers intercepting and decoding German radio messages eventually sifted out those between Adm. Karl Doenitz's command and its U-boats, pinpointing their locations at sea and sealing their doom.

The Germans, according to the unnamed National Security Agency writer of a formerly top secret report

on the Battle of the Atlantic, "apparently never really believed" that the Allies could be intercepting and decoding such sensitive messages.

"Knowing that the U-boat had lost its secret strength and had become the hunted instead of the hunter," the report says in discussing the desperate countermeasures the Germans tried to develop in 1943, "the U-boat command persisted in reducing the mystery of Allied location to radar" or to some other technical advance that could be countered if only German technicians would supply the right gear. Astonishingly, the possibility that the German high command's coded messages were being inter-

cepted and read was not given serious consideration.

Doenitz apparently thundered at technical experts all over Nazi Germany, demanding that they come up with the new equipment needed to combat the Allied radar he believed was responsible for locating and sinking his U-boats. Help is coming, he kept radioing his U-boat commanders, exhorting them to "Attack!" to win the war for Germany.

The admiral was not overstating the value of cutting the sea lanes between the Allied arsenal in the United States and the fighting units in Europe, Africa and the Soviet Union.

See U-BOATS, A32, Col. 1

# Washington Post

SEPTEMBER 10, 1978

Subscription Rates  
See Box A2

75c

## on U.S. for Japan in WWII

### Documents Show Codebreaking Bared 'TO' Ring

By Thomas O'Toole  
Washington Post Staff Writer

During World War II, Japan operated a ring of spies made up of members of Spain's diplomatic delegation to the United States.

The Japanese set about organizing the spy ring three days after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor and financed the first months of its operation with \$500,000 left in a wall safe when the Japanese were forced to vacate their embassy in Washington, D.C. The Spaniards occupied the Japanese embassy and represented Japan's interests in the United States after war broke out.

The spy network was controlled from Madrid and was code-named

"TO," the Japanese word for "door." The United States learned of its existence by breaking the supersecret Japanese diplomatic code, but no attempt was ever made to break up the ring for fear of tipping the Japanese that their code had been broken. The code, it was felt, yielded far more vital war information than the TO spy ring ever supplied to the Japanese.

The existence of the TO ring and its operations in the United States during World War II are described in 30,000 pages of declassified documents just turned over to the National Archives by the National Security Agency. In the documents are the decoded versions of the messages Japanese diplomats were sending to Tokyo from all over the world, unaware that U.S. in-

telligence was reading them at the same time the Japanese foreign office was.

The only apparent overt U.S. move against the TO ring was on April 6, 1943, when its leader and the former Spanish foreign minister were assaulted in a park in Madrid. Japan's minister to Madrid cabled Tokyo that the two men were attacked on American orders.

"On April 6 Serrano Suner (the one-time Spanish foreign minister) and the chief of the 'TO' net were assaulted by two ruffians while walking in El Retiro Park and narrowly escaped with their lives," he cabled. "The lads were apprehended and con-

See SPAIN, A32, Col. 2

## SPAIN, From A1

fessed that the American embassy had asked them to kill the two gentlemen. The Spanish government, for the time being, is keeping this matter strictly sub rosa, but is conducting a thorough secret investigation."

The identity of the leader of the TO ring is never revealed in the documents released to the archives. Nor are the names of the spy ring's members in the United States except to note that there were "at least six and probably eight" spies working for TO throughout the war.

All but one are identified as Spaniards. The military attache in the Spanish embassy in Washington is identified as a member of the ring. So are the consults in New Orleans, New York and San Francisco, all port cities where information on the sizes and departures of ship convoys was vital to the enemy during the war.

A late arrival to the TO net is a Frenchman who was assigned to the Spanish consulate in Vancouver, where he reported on ship movements going north to Alaska's Aleutian Islands. The Aleutians were occupied by the Japanese in the early part of the war and were retaken by the United States in 1943.

While the released documents do not reveal how the TO spy ring helped the Japanese effort during the war, they show that its members sup-

plied Japan and its German allies with vital information.

Once in 1942 the TO ring member in New York passed on the size (68 ships) and departure time of a convoy leaving for Europe. The information immediately was passed by the Japanese to the Germans, whose submarines then infested the North Atlantic.

Another time, the TO member in San Francisco relayed the departure time of a convoy bound out of the bay for the Aleutians. In neither case do the documents reveal whether German or Japanese submarines intercepted the convoys at sea.

Frequently, information on U.S. war production and deployment of troops and machines was sent to Madrid by the TO network. The recipients of the information in Madrid were the Spanish head of the TO ring and Japan's minister to Spain.

The TO net told Japan that the United States was training 50 Australians, Hindus and Filipinos as spies to be dropped behind Japanese lines in Sumatra, Burma and the Philippines. "Their special training," said a cable from the TO agent in Washington, "is taking place in a bungalow near the Naval Observatory."

Apparently, the TO ring had informants in the United States who were paid for their information. No names

are mentioned in the documents, only occupations.

"Information in the TO reports has been attributed to the following sources," the documents say, "A major in the office of the chief of the air branch; a U.S. officer who recently returned from Australia; an Army man in the Air Force headquarters; a certain officer of the Air Defense Command; an instructor at the Merchant Marine School in New London; the manager of a Scranton munitions factory and a supervisor of floating piers in New York."

Even though the United States never tried to break the ring for fear of revealing its knowledge of the codes, Japan suspected several times that its codes had been compromised. Each time suspicion surfaced, it appeared in the coded messages the United States was breaking.

On May 26, 1943, Japan's minister in Madrid cabled Foreign Minister Shigemitsu in Tokyo: "It is strange how quickly the U.S. finds out about matters. I wonder if Japanese codes are safe." Shigemitsu replied: "I have studied the matter from a number of angles but I cannot believe that it is a result of their having solved our codes."

Later that same year, the Italians

said that American spies had stolen the Japanese codebooks from Japan's embassy in Lisbon, Portugal. Shigemitsu asked his minister in Madrid to investigate and the minister responded by infiltrating Japan's embassy in Lisbon with one of his own men.

The Japanese ambassador to Portugal discovered the infiltrator and threatened to commit hara-kiri. His staff threatened to resign, denying that any theft had taken place. The matter was dropped.

Besides members of Spain's diplomatic corps, the TO ring included at least three Spanish newspaper correspondents, at least two of whom were in Washington and who were apparently free to travel about the United States. The documents go on at length in telling how all three correspondents mixed in coded and secret information with their dispatches to Spain.

Payment of the TO network was in American currency smuggled into the United States in the Spanish diplomatic pouch. The Spanish ambassador to the United States carried money to the United States with him to pay the TO ring each time he returned from a visit to Spain. Each time a new agent entered the United States, he carried money to finance his colleagues.

A fascinating but unresolved detail about the financing of the TO network appears in the documents under the heading of "Mikimoto pearls."

Two pouches of pearls were sent by the Japanese to Buenos Aires to help pay for the TO net in the United States. They were supposed to be carried from Buenos Aires by a TO agent to New Orleans, then to the Spanish ambassador in Washington who was to arrange for their sale. The pearls were never sold by the ambassador because they apparently never made it to Washington.

The Japanese never came right out and blamed the Spaniards for the disappearance of the pearls but from their cables it is clear that is where their suspicions lay. But during a trip back to Madrid, the Spanish ambassador appeared to put the blame on the Argentines who acted as go-betweens in the would-be transaction.

The Japanese minister in Madrid cabled Tokyo: "When I was talking to (the Spanish ambassador to Washington) about the pearls, twice his eyes narrowed and he said musingly, ponderingly and in a soft, half-questioning voice to: 'Investigate tactfully Argentina's reasons for failing to send a congratulatory telegram on the emperor's birthday.'"

## U-BOATS, From A1

Said the National Security Agency on this point:

"The rapid depletion of the Allied merchant fleets at the source of Allied supplies constituted the greatest single threat of defeat ever encountered in our war with Germany."

But Doenitz's insistence on directing every step of the Battle of the Atlantic through radio commands gave the edge to the Allies even before they had the ships and planes needed to move against the U-boats.

"Heading points and operational plans were ordered by radio after the U-boats had put to sea," noted the U.S. government's hush-hush eavesdropping outfit, the National Security Agency.

"U-boats were not only told where to go after they had put to sea but also when they were expected to arrive in their heading area," the NSA said in its formerly top secret report which, despite the gray government prose, conveys a sense of incredulity about this way of directing the U-boats, whose survival depended on stealth.

Armed with the intercept information netted by their eavesdropping effort, code-named Ultra, Allied commanders were able to divert their convoys away from wolfpacks of U-boats in the Atlantic, starting in January 1943.

"For the greater part of January," notes the NSA in reporting on this turning of the tide of the Battle in the Atlantic, "U-boat groups swept and re-swept, made course and reversed course and found nothing" because the eavesdroppers had been able to warn the merchant ships where the U-boats were.

By the spring of 1943, the NSA report said, the Allies had mobilized enough ships and planes to attack the German submarines rather than just evade them. U-boat losses rose to a rate of 1½ boats a day in 1943, alarming Doenitz and his command and instilling a sense of dread in the U-boat crews at sea. Now they were being surprised by the Allies rather than the other way around.

The NSA report quotes the intercepted coded message from Doenitz to his submarine skippers in May 1943 in which he had to admit that the Battle of the Atlantic was being lost but that new weapons to regain the initiative were on the way:

"By use of his radar, the enemy has now once more gained a few lengths on us in his effort to deprive the U-boat of its most important attribute, its invisibility.

"I am fully cognizant of what this has meant for you in your difficult battle with enemy escort and defense. Be assured that with all my strength as commander in chief I have undertaken and shall undertake every means at all possible to alter this situation as soon as I can.

"Experimental stations in and out of the navy are working to improve your arms and instrument equipment.



ADM. KARL DOENITZ  
... his messages cost Germany subs

I expect of you that you will continue your determined fight against the enemy, and that against his wiles and technical innovations you will pitch your ingenuity, your ability and your

obdurate will to dispose of him no matter what he does.

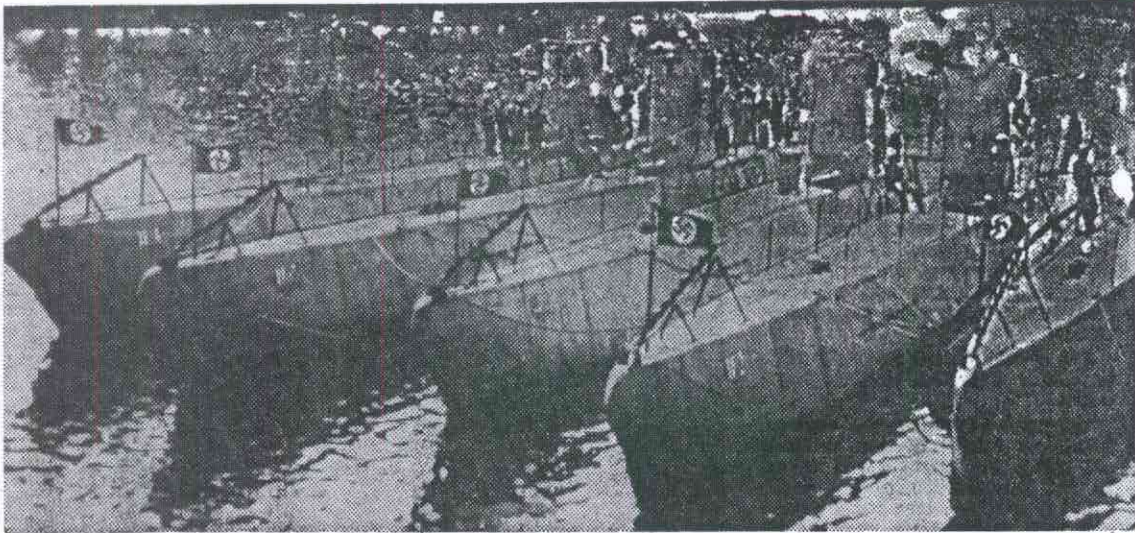
"In the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic, commanders have proved that the enemy even today has weaknesses at every turn and that his auxiliary devices are in many instances by no means so effective as they at first appear to be, proved that one is determined to achieve something in spite of them.

"I believe that I shall soon be able to give you better weapons for this hard battle of yours."

In another intercepted and decoded message, Doenitz's demand for desperation tactics by his U-boat skippers comes through with chilling clarity. Don't worry about the Allied planes, said Doenitz of bombers which were blowing U-boats out of the water by the dozen in 1943, but just use your anti-aircraft guns (which were virtual pop guns). "Then the plane will soon stop attacking," Doenitz assured his skippers.

However, both the submarine skippers and the German high command had to concede the Battle of the Atlantic was lost — at least for the time — and in 1943 concentrated on other sea lanes not as crucial to the Allied war effort.

Very late in the war, the NSA/notes, German technicians came up with ways to restore the invisibility of the U-boat; among them, the snorkel



Associated Press

German U-boats like these in 1939 photo terrorized Allied shipping in the North Atlantic until 1943.

breathing device that enabled a submarine to remain under water for long periods. But the improvements came too late.

On May 5, 1945, the defeated Doenitz radioed to his skippers this message which, like the other ones that had proved so fatal to the German navy, was intercepted by the Allies' Ultra listening net:

"Six years of U-boat warfare lie behind us. You have fought like lions. An overwhelming superiority in materiel has forced us into a very narrow space. From this small basis a continuation of our battle is no longer possible . . . U-boat men, unbroken

and unashamed, you are laying down your arms . . . keep your U-boat spirit, with which you have fought bravely . . . long live Germany."

The NSA said that of the 489 German U-boats sunk by Allied forces at sea starting in January 1943, the U.S. Navy sank 63 "with the direct aid" of Ultra radio intercepts plus "some 30 more with the indirect aid of Ultra." The Ultra information, as noted earlier, also saved untold tons of Allied war supplies as convoys were routed around German U-boat wolfpacks.

The NSA, in a formerly top secret volume entitled "Allied Communication Intelligence and the Battle of the

Atlantic," noted that despite the success in driving the German U-boat out of the Atlantic, the fleet as a weapon was never really destroyed.

"It should be borne in mind that the U-boat arm was not in May 1945 defeated at sea," concludes the NSA report.

"The pre-snorkel U-boat had been decisively swept from the Atlantic in the summer of 1943, but the loss was made good and the U-boat reappeared in force. The power of this fact in the imagination and memory of a possible future German navy will not be easy to estimate."