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SOE: The Scientific Secrets (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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SOE: The Scientific Secrets. By Fredric Boyce and Douglas Everett.
Gloucestershire, U.K.: Sutton Publishing, 2003. ISBN 0-7509-3165-5.
Photographs. Illustrations. Tables. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index.
Pp. x, 310. £19.99.

This is a thoroughly researched and enlightening book. Only because the authors themselves worked for Special Operations Executive (SOE) has this important piece of World War Two history been brought to light and preserved. It should be kept in mind that the British government through its somewhat misguided intelligence establishment destroyed many of the basic documents and unusual "goods" that were developed and manufactured under the direction of the various scientific sections of SOE. This destruction was an expansion of what happened at the code breakers' Bletchley Park Ultra project—which was another effort to destroy an essential part of the history of World War Two.

The book successfully aims to set forth in some detail the formulation and use (or non-use) of such items as special personal firearms, an underwater glider that never flew, and millions of incendiary devices that were designed to "set Europe ablaze." The many conflicts with the Navy, Air Force, and Army are also well illustrated. It is emphasized that this was a new organization which was not going to be bound by tradition and custom, especially in the scientific and development areas.

An interesting summary of the scientific work can be seen in a Summary in Appendix D where there is a three-page list of all the devices concocted by SOE and the officers responsible for the same. The list together with the names of the inventors is impressive. It certainly serves to refute the criticism of the organization that often came from the leaders of the other services.

This work is enhanced by a number of personal portrayals of research and development officers. This makes it a bit easier to read than other works of this type. It is proven without a doubt that SOE attracted some of the best scientific minds in the British Empire.

The results of this scientific research and development were illustrated in a catalogue type publication which was made available to secret agents before they infiltrated into enemy territory. The developers and inventors, however, were not allowed to meet in initial

sessions with the agents before these missions; and upon their return they were not allowed to discuss successes and failures. The authors question whether this isolation was wise. It would seem that the strengths and weaknesses of these tools of underground warfare would have been better understood if there was oral input from the actual users of the products. It is apparent that the strength of SOE's scientific side resided in the development of firearms, explosives, and wireless equipment. It excelled in the latter area.

This is a workman-like exposition which lacks full details in some areas. This is not the fault of the authors, but rather is due to the missing records, as well as the lack of understanding of the role of history on the part of government leaders in the years immediately following World War Two.

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military doctor who met his death on Attu in May 1943, and the use of Japanese-American Nisei interpreters and intelligence operatives by American forces in the landings on Attu and Kiska in 1943. In the case of the Nisei, Hays does a good job, using original intelligence documents, interviews conducted with surviving Nisei, and well-chosen photographs to tell a most interesting story of a hitherto little known episode.

Much of the rest of the book does not live up to the Nisei standard. By seeking to cover so many topics in relatively few pages, the book gives the reader more of a fleeting taste than a truly satisfying and filling meal. For example, the too short chapter on American plans to deceive the Japanese about possible operations against the Kurile Islands does little to illuminate a most complex subject. Hays relies too much on a limited set of primary documents produced within Alaskan Defense Command itself rather than on the vast record sets produced by the various American command organizations in the wider Pacific Theater and in Washington, D.C. There is no mention of Admiral Robert Theobald's unrealized plans, as early as 1942, to mount a deception scheme in the Aleutians. Further, the excellent work on American deception plans in the Pacific conflict by Katherine Herbig is not cited.

Hays also does little to explain the attempts by such luminaries as Generals Simon Buckner, John DeWitt, Admiral Thomas Kinkaid, and various other planners and staff officers to mount a massive invasion of the Kuriles in late 1944 or early 1945. Such an attack would have been no small effort. In late 1943 Buckner lobbied for an expeditionary force of nine divisions (plus 18,000 corps troops), three aircraft carrier task forces, and hundreds of combat aircraft to force a decisive war-winning confrontation with Japan on its northern approaches. This plan, and numerous others, foundered upon two virtually unmovable shoals: the Soviet Union's consistent refusal to enter the war against Japan until after Germany's destruction; and the refusal of the senior levels of the American military command system, personified by General George C. Marshall, to countenance such a risky effort for fear it would have disrupted not only American plans for the entire Pacific Theater, but also the global Allied war effort.

In the end, Hays and his readers would have been better served had he winnowed down the number of topics, giving him the time and space to explore what remained in more satisfying detail. Finally, a correction. Hays mentions that the "Canadian Grenadiers" were given an American Nisei interpreter. The unit, in fact, was the "Winnipeg Grenadiers."

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