

COLONEL JOHN HUGHES-WILSON

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE BLUNDERS AND COVER-UPS

"A cracking good read . . . I will
recommend this book to anyone."

Professor Richard Holmes



TOP SECRET
CANUK-US EYES ONLY

Military Intelligence Blunders and Cover-Ups

Colonel John Hughes-Wilson

ROBINSON
London

For
Victor Andersen †
of the British Intelligence Services
And
Val Heller †
of the US Defense Intelligence Agency
And
General Sir James Glover †
Who made it possible

Constable & Robinson Ltd
3 The Lanchesters
162 Fulham Palace Road
London W6 9ER
www.constablerobinson.com

First published by Robinson,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd 1999

This revised and updated edition published by Robinson,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd 2004

Copyright © John Hughes-Wilson 1999, 2004
Maps and diagrams copyright © John Hughes-Wilson 1999, 2004

The right of John Hughes-Wilson to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold,
hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or
cover other than that in which it is published and without a
similar condition including this condition being imposed
on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 1-84119-871-4

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in
Publication Data is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the EU

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

On Intelligence

"Military Intelligence", runs the old saying, "is a contradiction in terms". This weary old joke has about the same impact on professional intelligence officers as jokes about striking oil have on drilling dentists. It is a commonly held view, however, because history is littered with disastrous intelligence mistakes. From the earliest recorded times down to the Gulf War, soldiers of all kinds have been taken by surprise. How could the military be so stupid?

Yet surprise is one of the cardinal principles of war. Every military academy and staff college in the world teaches the need to achieve surprise – and to guard against it – to every single student of the military art. Despite this, the military appears to have been caught out with almost predictable regularity. Is the failing one of endemic stupidity or of an opponent's cunning?

The answer is both. Just as every military commander hopes not to be taken by surprise, potential adversaries strive equally hard with every trick and resource to mislead, to deceive and to catch their enemy unawares. To avoid being surprised, commanders rely on intelligence and their intelligence staffs. Sometimes they are successful, sometimes not. On the success of intelligence hinges a military commander's decisions and his reputation; and very often the future of his country and its population as well.

Therein lies our fascination with the decisions of the military professional, and the difference between his and other

callings. Military decisions simply carry more weight than those of other professions.

For while other professionals in a host of occupations make key decisions, none of them, with perhaps the exception of a politician in war, carry such an awesome responsibility. If a banker makes a fatal error, economies crash and people lose their savings and jobs. If a surgeon makes a dreadful mistake, a patient dies. But when a general, admiral or air marshal blunders, soldiers and civilians alike die, sometimes in appalling numbers. To take just one example: Hitler and von Paulus sent no less than a quarter of a million men to their doom around Stalingrad. Of that number, only 5,000 broken men ever came back from Russia. Would Hitler have ordered the 6th Army to stand fast had he had accurate intelligence about the Soviet generals' plans?

Although intelligence can help, it cannot make a commander's decisions for him. Even when confronted with crystal-clear reports, accurate, up to date and supported by first-hand evidence, history has shown us over and over again that a stubborn, ambitious or misguided commander will simply ignore the cast-iron proof before him. We do not have to go very far to find an example.

In September 1944, General "Boy" Browning disregarded Major Brian Urquhart's black-and-white aerial intelligence photographs clearly showing the presence of German SS panzer divisions refitting before Arnhem. *Not only that; Browning promptly dismissed his unfortunate intelligence officer on the grounds that "he was mentally disturbed by stress and overwork"*. Urquhart was escorted out of the headquarters by a grim-faced Director of Medical Services and sent off on convalescent leave. Days later, the paras dropped.

The consequences of Browning's orders led to the catastrophic loss of the British 1st Airborne Division on the ill-fated Operation Market Garden. It need never have happened but for Browning's decision, which seems to have been based

primarily on a desire not to be left out of the action when the war's end was thought, wrongly, to be in sight. The soldiers of the British and Polish airborne brigades paid a terrible price for the conceit and arrogance that motivated Browning's refusal to acknowledge the accurate information put before him by his intelligence staff.

Ironically, years later, when Urquhart was the senior advisor on security operations to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, he recounted the story of that fateful wartime autumn in sad, almost humorous terms, ending with, "But I don't really blame General Browning; in his shoes, what else could he have done?"

By and large, military commanders are not stupid. Even the most intellectually challenged general has always understood that war is a matter of at least two sides and wants, understandably, to be on the winning team. Victory will bring him honours, riches, rewards and the applause of his countrymen. Why then, with such incentives, do approximately 50 per cent of them get it so consistently wrong?

In the great majority of cases, defeat can usually be traced back to a lack of knowledge of the enemy. Whether from overconfidence, ignorance, gullibility or just a failure to comprehend the facts, military defeat is almost invariably associated with an *intelligence* defeat. In Malaya in 1941, British and Imperial commanders believed that the Japanese were puny little Asiatics, incapable of fighting in the jungle let alone operating modern combat aircraft, who posed little or no threat at all. They were wrong.

It is hard in hindsight to grasp how such misjudgments ever became part of a nation's military policy. We must therefore look closely at the actual mechanisms of intelligence itself, long regarded as a black and mysterious art practised by anonymous men and women far from the limelight. Are their failings and failures the true reason behind so many military

blunders? How can "intelligence" ever get it so badly wrong?

We should not be too surprised. Considering how important good intelligence is, the military has traditionally not been lavish in its support for an operation that can sometimes save an army's skin. In many an army, navy or air force, the intelligence staff is often a Cinderella organization. The problem is that the path to military glory invariably lies in the field of operations. Shooting down aeroplanes, sinking ships, capturing enemy brigades or being an *operational commander* is the sure path to recognition and high command in all military organizations. The result is that, with its fellow battle-winning partner, logistics, intelligence is often treated like a backwater or a mysterious haunt of clever but difficult individuals. Yet ironically, both intelligence and logistics are acknowledged by every staff college in the world as two of the fundamental keys that can guarantee a commander's success on the field of battle.

The realization that intelligence can be disregarded or challenged as being unpalatable or inaccurate has forced modern intelligence services to make their intelligence ever more robust. The aim is to force their "customers", be they military or political, to acknowledge the truth staring them in the face. To achieve this, military intelligence nowadays has been turned into a system designed to reduce error and anomaly to a minimum. The process is known as the Intelligence Cycle. It is a simple system designed to transform *information* into *intelligence*.

It is important for us to understand these basic processes of the intelligence world. Only then can we understand what went wrong in the past, and why.

The Intelligence Cycle

Intelligence is nothing more or less than information that has been systematically and professionally processed and ana-

lyzed. There are many definitions of intelligence, but every professional intelligence officer understands precisely what he or she is required to deliver. For the professional, intelligence is simply defined as "*processed, accurate information, presented in sufficient time to enable a decision-maker to take whatever action is required*".

The intelligence cycle is usually presented graphically as a circular process, as in fig. 1. *Inaccurate* information speaks for itself; no one gets credit for wrong facts. Even junior reporters are fired for failing to check their sources. Equally, to shout "Look out!" after the piano crashes to the ground is hardly *timely* intelligence. But the intelligence officer confronts another, more subtle, problem: that of capabilities versus intentions.

CAPABILITIES VERSUS INTENTIONS

Understanding the difference between a potential enemy's *capabilities* and his *intentions* is crucial to understanding the difficulties facing the purveyor of intelligence. For example, if I have a gun gathering dust in a drawer, then I have the *capability* for violent action. But there is no evidence of *intention*. I pose only a potential threat, based solely on my possession of an object designed for killing.

If, on the other hand, I have a sharpened pencil, but I am waving it in front of your face absolutely determined to stab you in the eye, then I am an extremely dangerous individual. Despite an apparently limited aggressive *capability* (every household or office has a pencil or two), my *intention* makes me a major threat. Capabilities and intentions are very different things.

This problem of separating intentions and capabilities will recur throughout our examination of intelligence failures. The intelligence cycle makes an effort to separate the two, though how successfully is open to question. But the distinction is clear.

The reason is simple. Capabilities are relatively easy to measure – anyone can count tanks or aeroplanes – but determining an adversary's true intentions is fiendishly difficult to quantify. A man's intentions can change like the weather. Even the most sophisticated intelligence breaks down when confronted by the vagaries of the human mind. Just what were Saddam Hussein's real intentions before he invaded Kuwait in 1990?

In fact, the classic Cold War intelligence briefing invariably centred around the issue of Soviet capabilities (lots of tanks and missiles) versus Soviet intentions for their use. During the Cold War, the "bean counters" (that is, the *capabilities* men) ruled the intelligence roost with a vengeance. For the first time in history, technology enabled intelligence organizations to collect information on a massive scale. Intelligence was reduced to the acquisition of huge quantities of information, often in very expensive and career-enhancing ways, and then drawing dubious conclusions from the evidence.

This was summed up elegantly in a NATO intelligence briefing in 1979, packed with pictures of Soviet tanks and guns and ships and aeroplanes and missiles. It concluded with the Supreme Allied Commander saying "So we're outnumbered, then" to the young intelligence briefing officer.

"Yes, sir!" he replied enthusiastically.

"Will they use them?" came the quiet question.

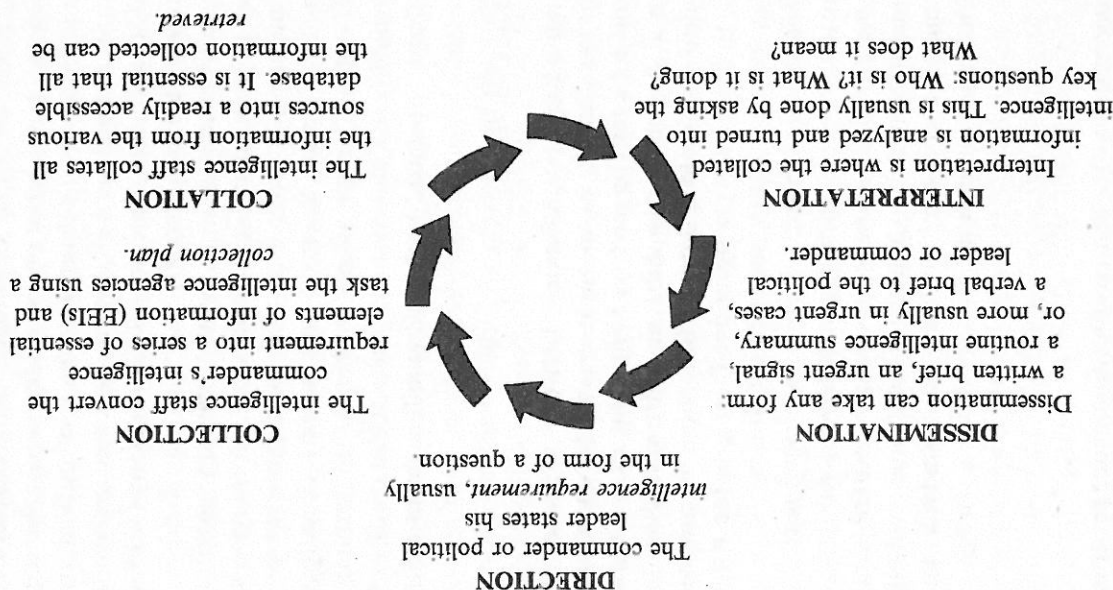
Crestfallen, the briefing officer replied, "We don't have that information, sir." Then he brightened up. "But they *could* do, sir!"

Sometimes it is hard not to feel some sympathy for a commander confronted with this level of advice. Capabilities are not always intentions.

INTELLIGENCE REQUIREMENTS

In order better to understand the intelligence process, we must return to our military commander and his wishes. The first

THE INTELLIGENCE CYCLE



stage of the intelligence cycle is the definition by the commander of his intelligence requirements. What precisely does he want to know?

Surprisingly, many commanders have been unclear about this vital aspect of their task. It is often as if their potential adversary and the whole business of intelligence can be disregarded as a mere impediment to their own impressive plans. At Waterloo, even Napoleon and Wellington, two of the greatest captains in history, both ignored their opponent's intentions and wider dispositions, concentrating only on fighting their own battle, despite Machiavelli's advice three hundred years earlier: "Nothing is more worthy of the attention of a good general than to endeavour to penetrate the designs of the enemy."

However, with prompting, most sensible generals will usually come to address this vital question. For example, "Will the Argentines invade the Falkland Islands? If so, when, where and in what strength?" is a classic and clear example of a commander's intelligence requirement, enabling the intelligence cycle to begin. If the British Joint Intelligence Committee had debated these particular questions in such clear terms in late 1981, the Falklands War might never have erupted in the way it did.

THE COLLECTION PLAN

These various requirements are then tasked to the various collection sources and agencies as part of a *collection plan*. To construct a collection plan, it is essential that the intelligence users understand the strengths and weaknesses of all the various agencies involved.

For example, "humint" (human intelligence, the business of running agents, traditionally the province of the CIA, MI6 and the James Bonds of fiction) is good at reporting on an enemy's *intentions*, whereas satellite photography (the province of the USA's National Reconnaissance Office, or NRO)

can count an enemy's *capabilities*, measured in tanks or rockets. Both agencies would find it difficult, if not impossible, to do it the other way round, given their sources of information. Plainly, it makes little sense to task an intelligence source or agency with a job for which it is ill suited. No one would expect a maritime search radar to provide up-to-date intelligence on a land-based nuclear research programme.

An intelligence collection plan works as follows:

An Intelligence Collection Plan

A Commander's Intelligence Requirement:

Does the enemy intend to invade or not? If so, when, where and in what strength?

What are the essential elements of information?

- Enemy force dispositions?
- Readiness states?
- Exercises and training?
- Pattern of air and maritime activity?
- Civil mobilization?
- Logistic preparations?
- Stated intentions?

The detailed intelligence collection plan is prepared by the Intelligence Staff and tasked to as many different sources and agencies as possible. Not all the information collected will be secret: what is vital, however, is that the very secret information is kept separate ("compartmentalized") and that a time-limit is placed on the agencies for reporting back. The collection programme is monitored and managed on a regular basis. "Hot" items are usually reported immediately.

An intelligence collection plan's requirement can be broken down into even more specific "essential elements of information", as shown in fig. 2.

Collation – Putting It All Together

Once information has been collected, it has to be *collated*. This can be laborious and unglamorous, but the greater part of the intelligence operative's work is taken up with collating a mass of information rather than collecting it. This is the province of the clever and industrious clerk and is far removed from the exciting world of guns and missiles. Nowadays, collation systems and records data are computerized; in Napoleon's day they relied on quill pens and good memories. Interestingly, Hitler's prime expert on the Soviet Army, Colonel Gehlen of Fremde Heere Ost, or Foreign Armies East, who had painstakingly collated the best card index and records on the Eastern Front, was promptly recruited by the US Army at the end of 1945. Gehlen went on to found West Germany's new Secret Service, the BND. A unique intelligence database can overcome almost any scruples.

Collation is important for another reason. In today's technical age it is, perhaps for the first time, possible to overload an intelligence system with *too much* data. For example, in the Vietnam War the Americans famously held drawers full of unlooked at aerial photographs. This "foot-drawer of photographic intelligence" became a derisive symbol of the failure of US military intelligence to cope with the mass of information available, let alone present it to their masters. There simply was not the time or the manpower to look at every single image. And – who knows? – perhaps the vital piece of intelligence that could have alerted the USA to an important event and saved lives in Vietnam was never looked at.

An Intelligence Collection Plan's Essential Elements of Information

SOURCES & AGENCIES	ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF INFORMATION (EELIs)	Where are the enemy's attack aircraft?	Is there any evidence of ammunition being out-loaded?	Are the attack pilots away for the weekend?	Are the marines embarking on ships?	What is their government's official line?	Is there any evidence of civilian mobilization?
HUMINT	e.g., SIS/MI6 CIA, KGB		✓	✓			✓
SIGINT	e.g., NSA (US) GCHQ (UK)				✓	✓	✓
IMAGERY	e.g., NRO (US) JARIC (UK)	✓	✓		✓		✓
DIPLOMATIC	e.g., Foreign & Commonwealth Office, including attaches	✓		✓		✓	✓
MILITARY	e.g., DIS (UK) DIA (US) GRU (Russia)	✓			✓		
ALLIES	e.g., UK/US Treaty, or NATO			✓		✓	
OPEN SOURCES	e.g., CNN BBC, media newspapers		✓	✓		✓	✓

Technology can overwhelm resources. Modern police surveillance cameras suffer from the same problem. So a collation system must have a "rapid retrieval response capability", to be immediately accessible to users when they need to get at data, for it to be of any real value. For the collator, the cardinal sin is to have vital evidence and not know it or be able to find it in order to interpret it.

Interpretation – What Does It All Mean?

Once collated, information then has to be interpreted or processed. This means that it is compared with all other existing information to answer four basic questions:

- is it true?
- who is it?
- what is it doing?
- what does it mean?

On the objective answers to these deceptively simple questions the whole expensive intelligence effort can stand or fall. Maddeningly for the technocrats, the human factor, with its flair, expertise, experience and intuition, cannot be bettered. Interpretation remains firmly the province of the intelligence expert.

Dissemination – Telling The Boss

This final part of the intelligence cycle is perhaps the most fraught. Although the days of killing the bearer of ill tidings are long past, no bureaucracy relishes the prospect of passing on unwelcome information to its political or military masters.

Intelligence officers are as human as the rest of us, and the temptation for the nervous, ambitious or sycophantic officer to tailor the story to suit a superior's wishes or avoid his displeasure can be very strong. Who would relish saying to Winston Churchill or any other strong-willed Prime Minister or President, "I'm afraid you are wrong . . ."

Interpretations can be and often are twisted to suit political preconceptions with no basis in fact, as happened to the Israelis in 1973 with their mantra "no attack is possible without full Egyptian mobilization". Even worse, intelligence reports can be blatantly excluded altogether. In 1916 and 1917 Haig's intelligence chief, Charteris, smoothly ordered his junior staff not to report bad news or intelligence that contradicted the British C.-in-C.'s assessment of the German Army: "We shouldn't upset the Chief with this sort of stuff . . . it merely increases his burdens and makes him depressed." Against this sort of bureaucratic manipulation there is little defence. In a university, such behaviour could be airily dismissed as "intellectually dishonest". In the First World War it led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of men. Military decisions carry a grimmer responsibility than a discredited academic thesis.

Dissemination, then, should be accurate, timely and clearly distinguish intelligence *fact* from interpretative *comment* or assessment. It should also be secure and free from prying eyes (if the enemy knows what you are up to, he will probably change his plans). Above all, it should be brutally honest and objective. These are easy sentiments; but who in reality really likes to confront an all-powerful politician or general with the knowledge that their best-laid plans are either nonsense or soon will be because the enemy refuses to co-operate?

Hitler, the supreme warlord who dictated both the strategic and the tactical dispositions of the German Army in the Second World War, could fall into towering rages when

contradicted by his staff. On one occasion before the final Russian attack at Stalingrad, a brave intelligence officer briefed him on the growing Soviet capability in the Don Bend. The Führer exploded with rage, shouting "I won't have that sort of talk in my headquarters . . . ridiculous pessimism!", then physically attacked the unfortunate individual before his astonished generals and had him sacked from his staff. As every intelligence officer has known throughout history, telling the truth can sometimes be a *very* bad career move.

The pinnacle of the whole intelligence process is often a device called the I&W Display. Indicators and Warning is the most important way of keeping track of an enemy's capabilities and intentions. It effectively fuses all known intelligence into an easily read matrix, usually coded like a traffic light's green, amber and red for danger. Black usually means unknown. It is really nothing more than a comprehensive all-source collection chart. Technically developed governments like the USA and high-tech agencies such as North American Air Defense Command [NORAD] rely nowadays on highly sophisticated computer-driven I&W displays. Traditional, politically-conscious organizations (such as the mandarins of Britain's Foreign & Commonwealth Office or the Joint Intelligence Committee) have tended to look down on such an obvious technical tool as lacking the intellectual subtlety of the more elegant "diplomatic assessment".

However, the deceptively simple I&W display can be relied on by military and political planners far more than the vagaries of individual minds, however brilliant or experienced, because it applies ruthless academic discipline that cannot be denied. For example, if in the Cyprus crisis of late 1974 the British Foreign Office had asked the key questions "Are the Turkish Air Force's aircraft at flight dispersal or not? Are they bombed up? Are the Turkish pilots at readiness or away for the weekend?" they might have been better served. If the

Foreign Office had listened to the Ministry of Defence's political-military I&W assessment of the Turkish government's intentions over Cyprus in late 1974, which was based on answers to these simple questions, it need never have embarrassed the Foreign Secretary and forced an apology at Cabinet level, a fact which is still concealed with some embarrassment.

I&W, done properly by objective third parties, and using rigorous techniques of critical source analysis, can successfully fuse intelligence from all sources to give realistic estimates of a potential enemy's capabilities and intentions. Even where it cannot, a good I&W display will highlight even for the most obtuse minister or commander precisely which critical elements of information are needed to make up the full picture.

Armed with a better understanding of the mechanics of the intelligence process, and able now to discern the true role of "intelligence", we can look more closely at the truth behind some of the intelligence blunders that have shaped armies, wars and the destinies of nations. Our case-studies and examples can be grouped under the headings of the intelligence process itself: failures of collection, of collation, and of interpretation with a particular hell being reserved for failures to disseminate intelligence to those who really needed it. (It is impossible not to feel some sympathy for those unfortunate commanders who just didn't know, *because someone with the information failed to pass it on.*)

For our first foray into the murky world of poor intelligence, it is reasonable to start with a genuine error: those unfortunate intelligence officers in the run-up to D-Day who were deceived by the evidence they had so conscientiously collected and collated, and who failed to interpret it correctly – the *misinterpreters*. They undoubtedly did their job; they just didn't do it very well.