

The Legacy of World War II Cryptologist Alva B. Lasswell

by Gregory J. Nedved

Abstract: The story of Alva B. Lasswell is becoming better known within the Marine Corps. The abridged version is that his cryptanalytic acumen greatly facilitated victory at Midway in June 1942 and the shootdown of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's aircraft in April 1943. The unabridged version, revealed in this article, shows that his cryptologic contributions were far greater than this. In fact, his contributions continue to affect Marine cryptology to this day, a remarkable feat when one considers that he left the field for good even before World War II ended. Indeed, his Marine Corps legacy has not only grown, it has expanded in ways he never would have anticipated.

Keywords: Alva B. Lasswell, Joseph J. Rochefort, Station Hypo, Battle of Midway, Yamamoto shootdown, Joseph Finnegan

On 4 November 2019, Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell was officially inducted into the National Security Agency's (NSA) Cryptologic Hall of Honor. Just a year earlier, on 15 November 2018, Lasswell Hall was officially dedicated as the home of the new Marine Corps Forces Cyberspace Command headquarters on NSA's East Campus in Fort Meade, Maryland.¹ It was not the first instance of the NSA recognizing Lasswell; the Crypto-Linguistic Association, the NSA's professional language associa-

tion, has been bestowing the Lasswell Award to mid-career military language analysts since 2003.²

Yet, the 2018–19 honors finally recognized Lasswell as a true World War II superstar in the field of signals intelligence (SIGINT). Prior to this time, the successes of Lasswell's wartime unit, the Combat Intelligence Unit (a.k.a. HYPO), at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, were usually credited to Joseph J. Rochefort, the unit commander.³ As the NSA noted in 2000 when it selected Rochefort for the Cryptologic Hall of Honor, he “provided singularly superb cryptologic support to the U.S. fleet during World War II, leading to victory in the war in the Pacific.”⁴ But the NSA determined

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¹ Loren Blinde, “NSA Inducts Four Pioneers into the Cryptologic Hall of Honor,” *Intelligence Community News*, 8 November 2019; Image: Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps Visits MARFORCYBER, Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, 2 October 2019; and John Lasswell and James Lasswell, correspondence with author, 27 December 2023.

² CLA president, memo, “(U) The Crypto-Linguistic Association (CLA),” *SIDToday*, National Security Agency/Central Security Service, accessed 25 August 2023.

³ Elliot Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War: The Odyssey of the Codebreaker Who Outwitted Yamamoto at Midway* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), ix, x, 99; and Tom Hunnicutt, *The SigInt Sniper: Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps* (Williford, AR: Hunnicutt and Hunnicutt Publishing, 2015), 10.

⁴ “CAPT Joseph J. Rochefort, USN,” NSA Historical Figures, Cryptologic History, National Security Agency/Central Security Service, accessed 25 August 2023.

that it was now time to highlight Lasswell's contributions to the unit's accomplishments.

Early Career

Lasswell was born on 3 January 1905 in Walpole, Illinois, to Charles S. Lasswell and Leanna Russell. The family relocated to Piggott, Arkansas, where he spent his early years. Although he attended schools in both Piggott and nearby Rector, Lasswell claimed that the majority of his educational training actually came from homeschooling by his father, a schoolteacher, lawyer, and farmer. In 1921, Lasswell moved to Oklahoma, where he helped manage stores for a few years.⁵

His next career move to the Marine Corps in 1925 changed his life and altered history, setting him on the path to cryptologic mastery in World War II. His first duty station right out of boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, was at the post exchange, where he became chief steward because of his bookkeeping and mathematical skills.⁶ He said later that this was the best education he had ever received since he had to account for every penny when closing the books for the day. Such skills as this, requiring attention to detail, were essential foundations of Lasswell's future career in cryptology.⁷ While at Parris Island, he also ran an officer preparatory course while taking the course himself. He did well enough in his first years as a Marine to make corporal (he was actually on the sergeant's list awaiting an opening). Next, he attended Officer Candidates School (OCS) and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in 1929. This presented some challenges, as he had not formally graduated from high school and was physically underweight by Marine Corps standards at the time of his OCS graduation.⁸

⁵ Tom Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero: Colonel Alva Bryan "Red" Lasswell (USMC), 1905–1988*, 2007, call no. D774.M5.H91 20071, object ID 2012.0101.0304, National Security Agency/Central Security Service National Cryptologic Museum, 1.

⁶ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 1, enclosure 1.

⁷ Hunnicutt, *The SigInt Sniper*, 35.

⁸ *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, Lasswell holdings, Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency/Central Security Service, 15–17; Alva B. Lasswell oral history, Lasswell, OH-1986-26, Lasswell holdings, Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency/Central Security Service, 3–5, hereafter Lasswell oral history; and Hunnicutt, *Unsung Hero*, 1.



Courtesy of the Lasswell family, photo by National Security Agency
Col Alva Bryan Lasswell.

His early career as an officer provided some variety. He spent two years (1931–33) on board the USS *Arizona* (BB 39), later sunk at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. He had assignments at various Marine barracks, including Hampton Roads, Virginia; Bremerton, Washington; and Quantico, Virginia.⁹ While at Quantico (1934–35), Lasswell excelled as a marksman and captained a national champion rifle team. He taught marksmanship (automatic weapons) to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents and received a letter of commendation from FBI director J. Edgar Hoover in 1935.¹⁰ He also attended flight school in Pensacola, Florida, and graduated from the

⁹ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2, enclosure 2; and *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 27–28.

¹⁰ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2, enclosure 2, 07-A, 07-B; and *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 28.



Photo by National Security Agency

Lasswell Hall, Marine Corps Forces Cyberspace Command, National Security Agency East Campus, Fort Meade, MD.

program, although he did not get his flight wings because there were too few openings for pilots at the time. It was one of the biggest disappointments of his military career.¹¹ In 1934, Lasswell was promoted to first lieutenant.¹²

Enter Cryptology

Lasswell's career move into cryptology was entirely serendipitous. He was selected for a special program to study foreign languages overseas. Lasswell had nev-

er aspired to study languages and had only inquired about the program on a whim, not expecting his commander to actually recommend him for it. Interestingly, Lasswell opined in an interview years later that he would have rejected an application such as his own had it ever needed his approval.¹³

In 1935, Lasswell went to Tokyo, Japan, to study Japanese for three years. Although he never developed an ear for the language and could not understand it well when spoken, he excelled at reading it. He be-

¹¹ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2, enclosure 2; and *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 27–28.

¹² Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, enclosure 2.

¹³ *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 29; and Lasswell oral history, 6.

lieved that he could read more Japanese than any of his colleagues. Fortunately, reading was the skill most needed when working on Japanese codes and ciphers in Hawaii. While stationed in Japan, he was promoted to captain.¹⁴

In 1938–39, he was assigned to Radio Security Station C in Cavite, Philippines, where he decrypted and translated Japanese naval messages, replacing Joseph Finnegan, his future colleague at HYPO. This was Lasswell's first SIGINT experience and his first exposure to the Imperial Japanese Navy messages that would be so identified with U.S. codebreaking success in the years to come. The Japanese messages he worked at Cavite, he felt, were easier to read than those he would later see at HYPO. Since he knew Japanese, he also served as a liaison for a Japanese training squadron then visiting the Philippines.¹⁵

At the request of Redfield "Rosey" Mason, Lasswell then deployed to Navy Radio Security Station A in Shanghai, China, in 1939–40. Mason, then an intelligence officer for the Asiatic Fleet, would later spar with Lasswell about Midway translations in 1942. At Station A, the target was Japanese diplomatic messages, the only time that Lasswell was exposed to their content. Lasswell also served as the Shanghai site's final officer-in-charge, since Station A was deactivated in 1940.¹⁶

Lasswell's time in Shanghai would be memorable by anyone's standards. Lasswell's military parent unit there was the 4th Marine Regiment. His first commander did not fully grasp the importance of communications security; he constantly referred to Lasswell at social events as his personal *black chamber*, a term generally understood to mean an organization that

engages in secretive cryptologic work.¹⁷ This situation, if nothing else, demonstrated to Lasswell that his new career field carried some anonymity risks. Beyond this, it suggested that his superiors did not always understand, if even appreciate, cryptology work. A misunderstood profession at the time, cryptology was not a field officers usually entered to advance their military careers. Certainly Lasswell, when joining the Marine Corps, never intended to enter the field. His cryptologic career, by choice, was short-lived and he never received the Distinguished Service Medal that was recommended for him.¹⁸

Lasswell next played a major role in an international incident, demonstrating the capabilities of a Marine Corps cryptologist. Colonel DeWitt Peck, the 4th Marine Regiment commander, learned in 1940 of a Japanese plot to seize the International Settlement in Shanghai by perfidy. Japan would create an incident and, as a pretext for restoring order, send its army into the settlement as an occupying force. To thwart the plot, Peck selected Lasswell to quietly round up the Japanese infiltrators, who were disguised as Chinese civilians. Given Lasswell's rank, language training, and marksmanship skills, it is little wonder that Peck chose him.¹⁹

According to Lasswell, Peck had learned of the Japanese plot from French intelligence. Historian E. E. Okins, however, provides a different version of the story, which credits U.S. cryptanalytic acumen for exposing the plot.²⁰ To quote Okins, "Thank God for our intercept and code breaking ability."²¹ Okins suggests that Peck's action was the first use of tactical SIGINT by a Marine Corps commander. If U.S. cryptology

¹⁴ Lasswell oral history, 6, 15; and Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, enclosure 2.

¹⁵ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2, enclosure 2; Lasswell oral history, 8–9; *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 36–37; and Tom Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History, Volume One (1927–1942)*, Lasswell holdings, Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency/Central Security Service, 53.

¹⁶ Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 53–54; and Lasswell oral history, 9–10, 18.

¹⁷ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2, enclosure o8; Alva Bryan Lasswell, "Pearl Harbor Processing Center," *Cryptolog* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1986): 17; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell 1968*, interview by Benis M. Frank, Marine Corps Project, Oral History Archives, Columbia University Libraries, accessed 25 August 2023, <https://dx.doi.org/10.7916/d8-ra9e-af88>.

¹⁸ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 3, 5, 9, 11; and John Keegan, *Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 192.

¹⁹ Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 83–84, 86; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell 1968*.

²⁰ Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 83–84; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell 1968*.

²¹ Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 84.

was indeed responsible for uncovering the plot, then Lasswell would have figured prominently in it anyway since he was the Station A officer-in-charge and a Japanese language specialist.²²

Lasswell and an unnamed enlisted Marine then took action, disarming 16 Japanese soldiers. In each case, the soldier went for his pistol but the two seized his arm and, using a bayonet, severed the lanyard holding his pistol—"the hardest thing we had to do," noted Lasswell. When the soldier then refused to go into the waiting truck as demanded, Lasswell and the accompanying Marine physically tossed him into the back. This was a successful operation with no loss of life but loss of face for Japan, which later apologized for the incident. Since a typical Marine cryptologic officer was not expected to perform such heroics, Lasswell may be seen as having raised the bar for what a Marine cryptologic officer could (or should) do in the line of duty.²³

Interestingly, Lasswell shortly thereafter had to return to Japan as he was finally going home to the United States. He joined his wife, Betty, who had been coincidentally visiting Tokyo at the time. The foiled Japanese plot in the Shanghai International Settlement, including Lasswell's role in it, made newspapers around the world, especially in Japan, where he was referred to as a Japanese-speaking Marine and other things less kind. Fortunately, the Lasswells left Japan without incident. Surprisingly, the Marine Corps never directly commended Lasswell for his Japanese roundup actions.²⁴

Making Wartime History

The Marine Corps recognized that language skills like Lasswell's were badly needed. His next assignment was in California, where he was briefly involved in recruiting individuals with Japanese-language skills. According to Lasswell, "In general the talent was not that good, but I did find some who justified fur-

ther training."²⁵ Then Lasswell was assigned to run a Japanese-language program at the University of Hawaii. After his arrival in early 1941, he received sudden orders sending him instead to Pearl Harbor to work on Japanese naval radio traffic. The language program, as it turned out, failed to gain any traction, and the Marine Corps decided to send the students to learn Japanese in Boulder, Colorado.²⁶

His place of duty for the next few years—and the place where he influenced history—has had an identity crisis. Earlier historians always referred to it as HYPO, but that, strictly speaking, was Navy Radio Security Station H located in Wahiawa, a town near Pearl Harbor. Most historians have settled on Lasswell's organization as the Combat Intelligence Unit. When Lasswell worked the famous Yamamoto message, it was being called Fleet Radio Unit, Pacific (FRUPAC). Its informal name (and undoubtedly indicative of its physical appearance and environment) was "the Dungeon." For simplicity and consistency purposes, this paper refers to the unit as HYPO, the name that Lasswell used for it.²⁷

Lasswell's commanding officer at HYPO, Commander Joseph Rochefort, is now a well-known name in naval cryptologic history. A Japanese linguist with some prior cryptologic experience, Rochefort is sometimes credited by historians with doing the major cryptanalysis and translations of the Midway-related attack messages. This is not accurate, although he may have on occasion personally lent a hand or reviewed the most sensitive decrypts emanating from HYPO.²⁸ Instead, Rochefort's brilliance was as a manager, scoring high marks in that role from Lasswell. Rochefort essentially let his people, whose skills he trusted, do their work. Among his acknowledged achievements were the recruitment of idle members of the USS *California* (BB 44) band to run HYPO's IBM processing

²² Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 83–84, 86; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell* 1968.

²³ Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 86–87; Lasswell oral history, 10; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell* 1968.

²⁴ Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 87; Lasswell oral history, 8, 10–11; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell* 1968.

²⁵ *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 37; and Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, enclosure 2.

²⁶ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2; Lasswell, "Pearl Harbor Processing Center," 17; and *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 39, 41.

²⁷ Lasswell, oral history, 17; Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2, 4; and Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, ix, x, 99.

²⁸ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 5–6; "CAPT Joseph J. Rochefort, USN"; and Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 105.

machines and the sponsorship, if not the authorship, of the famous scheme to learn the true location of a planned Japanese attack (discussed later). In particular, Rochefort was the kind of manager who recognized talent when he saw it.²⁹

Lasswell appeared already to be a known quantity among the Navy's cryptologic intelligentsia. According to Lasswell, an old colleague from Cavite, Captain Jack S. Holtwick, met him when he arrived in Hawaii and updated him, stating that HYPO had persuaded the secretary of the Navy to approve the change to Lasswell's assignment.³⁰ Most likely, Rochefort requested the change, a prescient decision as a manager, given later developments. Rochefort knew Lasswell only by reputation at that point. Intriguingly, Lasswell arrived at HYPO shortly before Rochefort did. U.S. Navy commander Laurance F. Safford, head of OP-20-G (Code and Signals) in Washington, had promised Rochefort the very best language analysts out there if he agreed to lead HYPO.³¹ In assigning Lasswell to Rochefort, Safford kept his word.

Indeed, HYPO was becoming the magnet for Japan-trained cryptanalysts such as Joseph Finnegan, Lasswell's predecessor at Cavite, who would be assigned to HYPO after the Pearl Harbor attack. Lasswell seemed fated to go to HYPO and work for Rochefort, who put him in charge of overall language analysis work.³² Following the Pearl Harbor attack, Admiral William F. Halsey Jr. sought a HYPO linguist to serve on board the USS *Enterprise* (CV 6). Since this meant a likely combat situation for the *Enterprise*, Rochefort had to pick a qualified person. Interestingly, the linguist he chose was the other HYPO Marine, Captain Bankson Holcomb Jr., also Japan-educated, who had just arrived at the post.³³ Lasswell was too important

to Rochefort's mission to leave, even though he was more qualified than Holcomb.³⁴ It seems that Lasswell would have jumped at the opportunity had he been offered the assignment. Right around the time of the Holcomb deployment, Lasswell requested that a more experienced colleague, Navy captain Ranson Fullinwider, replace him as one of Rochefort's cryptologic team leaders. Lasswell recalled telling Rochefort, "You've got an officer much senior to me. . . . Let him take over, let me go to war." Rochefort said, "No Way." He was determined to keep Lasswell at HYPO. A few others, including Fullinwider, would eventually be deployed afloat but never Lasswell.³⁵

HYPO, finding its way under Rochefort, was not yet able to provide any indications that the Japanese would attack Pearl Harbor. JN-25, the Japanese Navy's general-purpose code (and the best source for preventing the attack), was still mostly unreadable because of a shortage of Navy personnel assigned to tackle it. Moreover, the Japanese had gone to radio silence in preparation for the attack.³⁶ Lasswell recalled personally canvassing the body of one of the dead Japanese pilots (his plane was downed outside of HYPO) and concluding, from the pilot's cold-weather attire, that the attack force had struck from the north. At the time, most U.S. naval strategists were convinced that the Japanese attacked from the south. This was not the last time that Lasswell's analysis was different from others and proven correct.³⁷

Midway Role

Although the 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor was a victory for Japan, the U.S. aircraft carriers that were the planned targets remained the primary obstacle for Japanese victory in the Pacific, since they were not at Pearl Harbor as the Japanese had hoped. In an attempt to bring the United States to the negotiating

²⁹ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 5–6; and Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 227–30, 334–36.

³⁰ Lasswell oral history; 11, and *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 39.

³¹ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2–3; and Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 38, 101, 213.

³² *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 41; Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2–3, 6; and Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 200.

³³ Holcomb's decrypts helped Halsey launch surprise attacks in the northern Marshall Islands in February 1942.

³⁴ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 94, 239.

³⁵ Lasswell oral history, 26; and Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 242–43.

³⁶ Keegan, *Intelligence in War*, 194; and Frederick D. Parker, *A Priceless Advantage: U.S. Navy Communications Intelligence and the Battles of Coral Sea, Midway, and the Aleutians*, series 4, *World War II*, vol. 5 (Fort George G. Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 2017), 16.

³⁷ Lasswell oral history, 12–13; Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 1, 104; and Lasswell, "Pearl Harbor Processing Center," 17.

table and ultimately win the war, Japan concocted a scheme to draw out those carriers around the island of Midway, a U.S. possession in the Pacific. It was at Midway that Japan planned to destroy the carriers in a decisive battle.³⁸

At this time, the U.S. Navy was getting Japanese SIGINT from a few sources, including direction finding (DF) and traffic analysis (T/A). DF refers to the usage of radio receivers and directional antennas to find the source of a signal. Antennas pinpoint the direction from which the signal is strongest. With several DF stations providing directions and positions, a control station can then fix the position of a ship. The Navy during World War II had a growing number of mid-Pacific high frequency (HF) DF stations.³⁹ T/A refers to the study of external features of target communications transmissions (excluding code or cipher message content), including radio frequency usage, callsigns, transmission schedules, transmitter locations, message traffic routing and volume, radio operator chatter, and manual Morse operator idiosyncrasies.⁴⁰ Simply stated, it is the information contained on the envelope rather than the content of the letter inside.⁴¹

Then there is codebreaking, such as cryptanalysis, which is often slow and tedious. Fortunately for the United States, its cryptanalysts had made enough headway on JN-25 to discern some of Japan's future naval plans. In mid-May, cryptanalysts struck gold. They gleaned from JN-25 decrypts Japan's operational plans for the Midway attack. Rochefort's cryptanalytic team at HYPO included Navy lieutenant commanders Thomas H. Dyer and Wesley A. Wright. JN-25 intercept was encrypted, meaning that the ciphers had to be stripped off before code recovery was

even possible. Code recovery was the task of Lasswell and Joe Finnegan, who, as noted, had been Lasswell's predecessor at Cavite.⁴²

JN-25 traffic was codebook-based, with the codebook providing numerical equivalents for Japanese military terms. As an example, 24396 equated to U.S. Navy (*Beikoku Kaigun* in Romaji, the Romanized Japanese script). Adding a cipher (i.e., encryption) meant that additional numbers, chosen at random, were added to the military terms. In this example, 13402, randomly chosen, would be added to 24396, and the new number, 37798, would be transmitted to represent U.S. Navy. The first step in decryption was to strip off the added 13402. Lasswell, without the benefit of the codebook, would then have to determine that 24396 meant U.S. Navy.⁴³

Lasswell was especially complimentary of Wright:

I give him credit for getting us to a stage where we could work on the codes. The Japanese put the most complicated cipher on top of their codes . . . and I'm sure that he [Wright] was the first one to get into it. I don't know what you know about this type of code (JN-25), but Finnegan and I had both worked with an actual code, which gave us an advantage.⁴⁴

The last step was the translation into English from Japanese. In addition to being cryptanalysts, Lasswell and Finnegan were also Rochefort's two primary translators. Their ability to perform both cryptanalysis and translation made them especially valuable at HYPO. Lasswell was the star translator since he had a better command of the Japanese written language, while Finnegan had the better ear. Lasswell also ran the language section. He explained, "On Joe's arrival, I reorganized the section on a two-watch basis. I took twenty-four hours and gave Joe the other twenty-four hour period with the other personnel of the section

³⁸ "Battle of Midway," World War II, History.com, accessed 7 December 2023; and "Pearl Harbor and the Japanese Expansion, to July 1942," Axis Initiative and Allied Reaction, World War II, Britannica, accessed 7 December 2023.

³⁹ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 115; and "Early Direction Finding: From World War I through the Cold War," StationHYPO.com, accessed 29 May 2024.

⁴⁰ Such an idiosyncrasy was a "fist" (i.e., the operator's style of transmitting manual Morse).

⁴¹ Donald A. Borrmann et al., *The History of Traffic Analysis: World War I–Vietnam* (Fort George C. Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 2013), 3.

⁴² Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 307–8; Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 6–7; and Hunnicutt, *The SigInt Sniper*, 21.

⁴³ John Lasswell and James Lasswell, interview with author, 15 May 2024.

⁴⁴ Lasswell oral history, 15.

divided between Joe and myself.” Finnegan’s importance was such that Lasswell called him “my right arm.”⁴⁵

On 20 May 1942, Lasswell began work on what, for all practical purposes, was the Japanese Navy’s operations order for the attack on Midway. Rochefort biographer Elliot Carlson has questioned whether Lasswell worked on the actual order, arguing that it was instead a part, albeit an important part, of that order. Even so, there is no disputing that Lasswell translated critical Japanese Midway operational messages during this time, something that Carlson acknowledged: “Even if not the fugitive battle order, the messages contained information that amount to the same thing.”⁴⁶ Indeed, as HYPO’s chief translator, Lasswell would most definitely have approved the final wording on any translated messages related to Midway. His own recollection was that he recognized at once the importance of a certain Japanese message by its address group and spent a whole day working on it.⁴⁷

In the end, it was Lasswell’s translation work that mattered. His translations of Japan’s Midway attack plan were forwarded for comparison to NEGAT. The cover name for OP-20-G (Code and Signals) at the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, DC, NEGAT was essentially HYPO’s equivalent. Lasswell’s counterpart there, the aforementioned Redfield Mason, mostly agreed with Lasswell’s translations but disagreed that Midway was the actual target.⁴⁸

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the new commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet, had learned to trust the work of Rochefort and his team. Rochefort’s SIGINT had been reliable during the Battle of the Coral Sea (7–8 May 1942), the first time in the war

that a Japanese advance had been thwarted.⁴⁹ Vital to creating this trust was the role played by Commander Edwin T. Layton, the intelligence officer for the Pacific Fleet.⁵⁰ Layton also had studied Japanese and had a close working relationship with Rochefort. He was essentially the liaison between Rochefort and Nimitz. In this capacity, he could articulate to Nimitz what HYPO was learning about Japanese intentions. Even before Midway, Layton had advocated effectively on Rochefort’s behalf, persuading a reluctant Nimitz to permit the USS *California* band to run HYPO’s IBM processing machines.⁵¹

Trust can only go so far, however. Given his position and what was at stake for the United States, Nimitz had no margin for error. He had to have accurate intelligence for planning purposes. Therefore, he asked Lasswell how certain he was that the target was Midway. Lasswell stated that he was 100 percent certain.⁵² While Lasswell’s assurances were probably enough for Nimitz, all would agree that it was still better to remove any doubts about the ultimate Japanese military target. U.S. intelligence analysts had concluded from JN-25 traffic that the target of the Japanese attack was a location known simply in U.S. military phonetics as Affirm Fox (now Alpha Foxtrot), or AF. HYPO was insistent that AF was Midway.⁵³

To verify Lasswell’s translations and silence skeptics that the target was Midway, HYPO resorted to one of the oldest cryptologic tricks in the book—employment of the fake message. Although Rochefort may not have been the one who conceived of this scheme, he (along with Layton) deserves credit for their role in persuading Nimitz to implement it.⁵⁴ At the request

⁴⁵ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps’ Unsung Hero*, 2–3; *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 42; Lasswell oral history, 15; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell* 1968.

⁴⁶ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*, 344. According to Carlson, the actual order was never recovered by HYPO or by any U.S. collection entity.

⁴⁷ Lasswell, “Pearl Harbor Processing Center,” 17; Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*, 327; and Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps’ Unsung Hero*, 2.

⁴⁸ Lasswell oral history, 18; Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*, 540; and *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 42.

⁴⁹ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*, 292–93; and Parker, *A Priceless Advantage*, 26–27.

⁵⁰ Keegan, *Intelligence in War*, 202.

⁵¹ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*, 50–51, 230; and E. B. Potter, “Admiral Nimitz and the Battle of Midway,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 102, no. 7 (July 1976).

⁵² Lasswell, OH-1986-26, 18; and Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps’ Unsung Hero*, 7.

⁵³ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*, 326, 336; Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps’ Unsung Hero*, 7; Peter C. Oleson, “The Breaking of JN-25 and its Impact in the War against Japan,” *Intelligencer* 26, no. 2 (Winter-Spring 2021): 8; and “Military Alphabet,” *TV Tropes.org*, accessed 11 December 2023.

⁵⁴ HYPO ship plotter Jasper Holmes and Joe Finnegan are among those credited with originating it.

of HYPO, Midway command transmitted a message stating that Midway Island needed freshwater because of a water distillation problem there. The message was deliberately transmitted unencoded in channels accessible to the Japanese.⁵⁵ As HYPO had hoped, the Japanese intercepted said message and consequently indicated in their own JN-25 message that the location that needed freshwater was indeed AF. Lasswell performed cryptanalysis and translation for this message too.⁵⁶ The Navy now had its smoking gun, solid proof confirming that AF was Midway. HYPO had been correct in its analysis.

The Battle of Midway, most historians agree, was the turning point of the war in the Pacific. The U.S. Navy destroyed four Japanese aircraft carriers while only losing one of its own. Japan, which could not easily replace four carriers, would never again gain the strategic offensive and was forced to play defense for the rest of the war.⁵⁷ The impact of this battle is better understood if one considers the outcome of a U.S. loss at Midway: the U.S. fleet would have been weakened, if not destroyed. Although the west coast of North America was never a military objective per se of the Japanese, a Midway defeat would have increased its vulnerability.

NSA historian Frederick D. Parker, in his 1993 study of the Battles of Coral Sea, Midway, and the Aleutians, stated that its own SIGINT gave the Navy “a priceless advantage.”⁵⁸ Indeed, cryptanalysis provided the locations and dates for the Midway attack, while T/A played the primary role in determining what Japanese fleet units would participate.⁵⁹ The accurate analysis provided by Rochefort’s HYPO—and Lasswell’s role in this—made a critical difference by any yardstick used. Lasswell translated important messages that provided Japanese specifics about the plan, writing later, “I was directly responsible for our

knowing ahead of time of that attack.”⁶⁰ He personally assured Nimitz that the target was Midway. Lasswell cited Midway as his greatest contribution to the nation and to the Marine Corps.⁶¹

It is important to emphasize, however, that code-breaking does not win wars, or even battles. This is a reality often forgotten by codebreakers themselves. History is replete with examples of intelligence being misused or misapplied, even intelligence coups such as this one. Excellent intelligence—such as that provided by HYPO and Lasswell—does not necessarily equate to victory. The battle, in the final analysis, still had to be won by the Navy. Those familiar with the Midway battle even know that the United States did not fare particularly well in the beginning, its aircraft failing to inflict any real damage even when it directly saw the enemy vessels.⁶² In fact, the well-regarded historian John Keegan, in *Intelligence in War*, wrote that the United States “nearly lost” the battle.⁶³

Targeting Yamamoto and Thwarting Operation A-Go

Lasswell’s second major achievement led to the shoot-down of Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, the great Japanese naval strategist and mastermind of the Pearl Harbor attack. Lasswell decrypted and translated a JN-25 message providing detailed information about Yamamoto’s planned inspection tour of the Japanese-held Bougainville area from his headquarters at Rabaul (located in what is now East New Britain, Papua New Guinea). The details included gems such as the exact time of Yamamoto’s arrival. Lasswell’s translation was forwarded to Nimitz, who immediately planned the attack on Yamamoto’s aircraft. As a result, U.S. Army Air Corps pilots were able to shoot down Yamamoto’s plane on 18 April 1943.⁶⁴

Lasswell’s work on Yamamoto’s travel agenda essentially defined him, placing him among the greats in

⁵⁵ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*, 333–35; and Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps’ Unsung Hero*, 7.

⁵⁶ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*, 336; Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps’ Unsung Hero*, 7; and Lasswell oral history, 18–19.

⁵⁷ “Battle of Midway.”

⁵⁸ Parker, *A Priceless Advantage*, v.

⁵⁹ Keegan, *Intelligence in War*, 202–4, 218.

⁶⁰ Lasswell oral history, 38.

⁶¹ Lasswell oral history, 38.

⁶² “Battle of Midway.”

⁶³ Keegan, *Intelligence in War*, 220.

⁶⁴ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps’ Unsung Hero*, 7–8; and John Curatola, “Operation Vengeance: The Killing of Isoroku Yamamoto,” National World War II Museum, 26 April 2023.

U.S. cryptologic history since it was his achievement. Although he had been the de facto primary HYPO translator since his arrival, the shadow of Rochefort had obscured his Midway achievement. Rochefort though had left HYPO in late 1942.⁶⁵ Lasswell at the time clearly understood the significance of the Yamamoto message, shouting out, "We've hit the jackpot!" He performed both code recovery and translation of the message.⁶⁶

The message attracted a lot of attention since NEGAT and Fleet Radio Unit, Melbourne (FRUMEL) saw it, as well. It was Lasswell's translation, though, that was sent to Nimitz. As naval historian Roger Pineau reported, Lasswell worked on the translation all night and on completion, he gave it to Layton, who told Nimitz that Yamamoto was irreplaceable to Japan. Pineau later compared the actual message (as given to him by the Japanese) with Lasswell's translation and discovered that Lasswell had been 100 percent accurate in his translation.⁶⁷

If Lasswell's association with the Midway and Yamamoto events was not impressive enough, there was even more to note, particularly his role in thwarting Operation A-Go. Operation A-Go called for concentrating the Japanese fleet to ambush the U.S. fleet in a decisive battle in 1944. The plan included establishing a Japanese blocking line of seven submarines northeast of the Admiralty Islands and New Guinea, the expected path of American carriers. The submarines, in addition to providing early warning, were also expected to sink U.S. ships.⁶⁸

Lasswell believed it to be a Japanese attempt to assassinate U.S. Army general Douglas MacArthur, commander of Allied forces in the Southwest Pacific, as he was leaving Australia for the Philippine Islands in October 1944. This was Japan's supposed plan to en-

⁶⁵ William B. Goggins replaced Rochefort, however, he was not a language analyst. Lasswell became the de facto senior site language analyst.

⁶⁶ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 2, 407, 417; Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 7; and Roger Pineau correspondence package to Lasswell, 17 June 1988, Lasswell holdings, Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency/Central Security Service, 3, 6.

⁶⁷ Roger Pineau correspondence to Lasswell, 3–6.

⁶⁸ Michael Peck, "Meet the USS England: The Warship that Sent the Most Submarines to the Ocean Floor," *National Interest* (blog), accessed 2 June 2024.

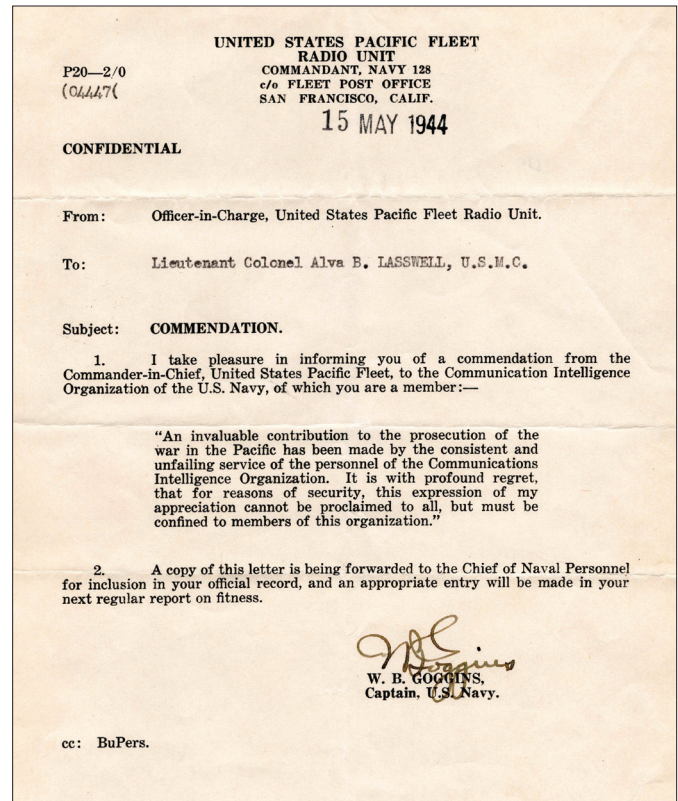


Photo by National Security Agency,
call no. VF 175-012, object ID 2022.0101.0291

This typed letter, stamped 15 May 1944, commends Col Alva B. Lasswell and the Communication Intelligence Organization of the U.S. Navy. It states: "1. I take pleasure in informing you of a commendation from Commander-in-Chief, United States Pacific Fleet, to the Communication Intelligence Organization of the U.S. Navy, of which you are a member: 'An invaluable contribution to the prosecution of the war in the Pacific has been made by the consistent and unfailing service of the personnel of the Communications Intelligence Organization. It is with profound regret, that for reasons of security, this expression of my appreciation cannot be proclaimed to all, but must be confined to members of this organization.' 2. A copy of this letter is being forwarded to the Chief of Naval Personnel for inclusion in your official record, and an appropriate entry will be made in your next regular report on fitness."

W. B. Goggins
Captain, U.S. Navy

act revenge on the United States for the Yamamoto assassination. At least five of those submarines were hunted down by the USS *England* (DE 635).⁶⁹ Lasswell later recalled, "I identified each of the locations in this [message] and put it on the circuit. Now, I understand, although I wasn't in a position to follow through but I understand that our own submarine people went

⁶⁹ Lasswell oral history, 22; and Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 8–9.

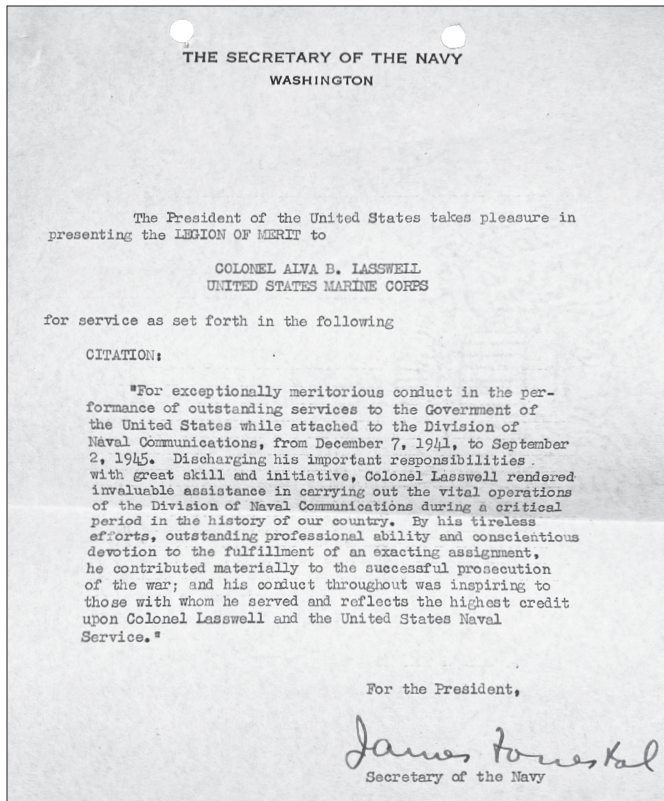


Photo by National Security Agency,
call no. VF 175-012, object ID 2022.0101.0294

This typed letter presented the Legion of Merit to Col Alva B. Lasswell on 25 March 1946. The Legion of Merit is awarded for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services and achievements. The letter states: "The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Legion of Merit to Colonel Alva B. Lasswell United States Marine Corps for service set forth in the following. Citation: 'For exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services to the Government of the United States while attached to the Division of Naval Communications, from December 7, 1941, to September 2, 1945. Discharging his important responsibilities with great skill and initiative, Colonel Lasswell rendered invaluable assistance in carrying out the vital operations of the Division of Naval Communications during a critical period in history of our country. By his tireless efforts, outstanding professional ability and conscientious devotion to the fulfillment of an exacting assignment, he contributed materially to the successful prosecution of the war; and his conduct throughout was inspiring to those with whom he served and reflects the highest credit upon Colonel Lasswell and the United States Naval Service.'"

For the President,
James Forrestal,
Secretary of the Navy

in and knocked off all of them as a result of that message."⁷⁰ Lasswell considered this achievement to be significant in terms of inter-Service cooperation.⁷¹

Moreover, a September 1943 document recommending Lasswell's promotion to full colonel specifically cited his cryptologic accomplishments at Coral Sea and the Solomon Islands.⁷² The former, as noted, is the battle that immediately preceded Midway while the Solomon Islands is probably a reference to the battle for Guadalcanal, fought August 1942–February 1943.⁷³ This is undoubtedly an acknowledgement of his role as a senior translator at HYPO, which actively supported both operations. Indeed, there was now added value to his contributions; with Rochefort's October 1942 departure from HYPO at the beginning of the Guadalcanal campaign, Lasswell was now undisputedly the final stop for any HYPO translation.⁷⁴

One of Lasswell's wartime colleagues remembered that "Lasswell approached cryptanalysis like a chess player maneuvering relentlessly to untangle his problem. His desk was usually clear of everything but his current puzzle. He worked sitting upright at his desk, wearing a carefully pressed Marine Corps uniform of the day, his sole deviation being a green eyeshade for protection against the hours under fluorescent lights."⁷⁵ Another colleague described him as "our steady, dependable, long-enduring, right-as-rain Lou Gehrig type of person."⁷⁶

Despite a recommendation by Admiral Nimitz following Midway, Lasswell never received the Distinguished Service Medal for his services in Hawaii.⁷⁷ Even the better-known Rochefort, also recommended by Nimitz, had to wait until the mid-1980s for his

⁷⁰ Lasswell oral history, 22.

⁷¹ Lasswell oral history, 22.

⁷² Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, enclosure 5. Lasswell would not take credit for the Coral Sea campaign, declaring, "I had no part of that." Historian Elliot Carlson also acknowledged Lasswell for his Coral Sea work. Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 279.

⁷³ "The Solomons Campaign: Guadalcanal, August 1942–February 1943," Naval Heritage and History Command, accessed 3 June 2024; and Parker, *A Priceless Advantage*, 26–27.

⁷⁴ Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 2, 402, 417.

⁷⁵ Undoubtedly *chess player* should be the intended meaning here. Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 8.

⁷⁶ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 3.

⁷⁷ Lasswell did receive the Legion of Merit Award in 1946, along with several of his HYPO colleagues.

medal. The usual reason cited for the omission (and delay) was World War II-era Navy politics, in this case a lack of recognition by Navy headquarters, specifically by Admiral Ernest F. King, the Navy's commander in chief, U.S. Fleet, of the critical role played by HYPO during the war. Even a recommendation by Nimitz did not always equate to automatic approval, apparently.⁷⁸

There were also sad moments for Lasswell. He acknowledged that his cryptanalysis and translations undoubtedly led to the deaths of Allied prisoners of war (POWs). His work facilitated the targeting of Japanese transport vessels, particularly surface ships or submarines. While the Navy sought to avoid attacking vessels carrying POWs, it could not always determine for certain which vessels were not transporting them. A colleague of Lasswell's from his study in Japan, Francis Jordan, was among the unfortunates who perished this way.⁷⁹

Aloha Also Means Goodbye

Early in the war, Lasswell was promoted to major (when he was working on the Midway messages) and then to lieutenant colonel. Yet, his cryptologic career in Hawaii ended before the war did. In October 1944, he was sent to NEGAT in Washington, DC, where he spent the rest of the war. He had served there briefly for two to three weeks during an officer exchange in 1943, in which Mason replaced him at HYPO while he replaced Mason at NEGAT.⁸⁰ It was at NEGAT where he achieved his final rank of full colonel in 1945.⁸¹

After this, he returned to Marine Corps units, holding a number of positions. For about a year, he

was the officer-in-charge of the Marine Corps Separation Center at Bainbridge, Maryland. Then he went to China, where he briefly served as the unit commander of the 1st Marine Division in Tianjin, the first time that a colonel ever commanded a Marine Corps division.⁸² After another stop, this time as the commanding officer of the 7th Marine Regiment at Camp Pendleton, California, Lasswell returned to Japan, where he served as the commanding officer of the Marine Barracks at Yokosuka. After a year in school and another job at Marine Headquarters, he went to Korea, although the Korean War (1950–53) was over by the time he arrived. His first job in Korea was as a supply depot commanding officer.⁸³

Lasswell's second job there, as an advisor to Major General Shin Hyun-joon, the commanding general of the Korean Marine Brigade, is memorable because of his involvement in an international incident. Lasswell opined that his use of Japanese at a banquet featuring South Korean president Syngman Rhee may have resulted in the banning of the Japanese language within South Korea by Rhee (Japan had colonized Korea, 1910–45). Rhee apparently overheard Lasswell talking in Japanese with Mrs. Shem at the banquet table—as she did not know any English, she spoke to him in Japanese. This was the only way they could communicate, but it was deeply upsetting to Rhee.⁸⁴ Finally, Lasswell became the chief of staff of the Marine Corps Reserve Depot in San Diego, California, his last Marine Corps assignment. In retirement, he worked in real estate and banking in southern California for several years before passing away in 1988.⁸⁵

Lasswell's Legacy

One might wonder why someone with such a distinguished cryptologic career would not go on to directly shape future Marine Corps and U.S. cryptology. Even

⁷⁸ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 9–10, enclosure 12, 16; Lasswell oral history, 19, 23, 27–28; and Carlson, *Joe Rochefort's War*, 2, 5, 392–93, 442–45.

⁷⁹ "Class of 1929," U.S. Naval Academy Virtual Memorial Hall, accessed 20 December 2023; Lasswell, OH-1986-26, 33–34; and "The Japanese 'Hell Ships' of World War II," Naval History and Heritage Command, accessed 89 January 2024.

⁸⁰ According to John Prados, Lasswell was sent to NEGAT to rest but ended up as Mason's replacement.

⁸¹ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 9, 10, enclosure 2; *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 43; John Prados, *Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of American Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1995), 308; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell* 1968.

⁸² Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 9, 10, enclosure 2; and Lasswell oral history, 36, 39.

⁸³ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, enclosure 2; and Lasswell oral history, 40.

⁸⁴ *Memoirs of Colonel Alva Bryan Lasswell, United States Marine Corps, Retired*, 48; and Lasswell oral history, 40–41.

⁸⁵ Lasswell oral history, 41; and Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 10, enclosure 2.

when he retired, he did not seek employment with the NSA or any other intelligence agency. He had never intended to be a cryptologic officer; it came about because he volunteered for language training in Japan. Language training equated to cryptologic work, which he took on as any good Marine would. He consistently sought to return to the regular Marine Corps and assigned combat duty. He even tried to leave HYPO in search of sea duty.⁸⁶

One of the biggest ironies in Lasswell's story is that his background as a cryptologic officer effectively prevented him from ever getting a combat command, even when there was no war taking place. His knowledge of codes and ciphers disqualified him from serving in combat command, where there was a potential risk of capture and torture by an enemy eager for such information. This lack of combat experience apparently prevented him from becoming a general officer. He was passed over numerous times for brigadier general.⁸⁷

The first Marine Corps cryptologic units, Radio Intelligence Platoons, were activated in 1943, with four of the seven platoons participating directly in amphibious assaults in the Pacific. They were all deactivated right after the war. With the war over, the Marine Corps saw no reason for their existence. They had been under Navy functional control anyway, meaning that Navy cryptologic needs took priority. Lasswell, as noted, had no involvement with these units, and it is unreasonable to argue that he, even with his clear understanding of the importance of cryptology, would have prevented their deactivation after the war.⁸⁸

Essentially, the Marine Corps would have to reorganize its cryptologic units, but this would take some time. There were no Marine Corps SIGINT units involved in the Korean War, although one was available at Camp Pendleton, California—but it was not considered combat ready. A Marine Corps study of its Korean War experience recommended enhancement of tactical SIGINT capabilities. This was done in the

years following the war. These units were reactivated at the battalion level just in time for the Vietnam War (1965–73).⁸⁹

In fact, many military cryptologic activities and organizations connected to Lasswell changed drastically in the years that followed or even disappeared, never to return. Currently, military cryptologic work is primarily the function of enlisted personnel, with officer oversight. Lasswell performed more cryptology than he would ever be expected to perform today. The most telling example of this change involved HYPO. In today's military, HYPO—with its core of officer cryptologists—would not look the same. The Services, through the Central Security Service (the military component of NSA) would perform this function. The enlisted personnel, with officer supervision, would do the heavy cryptologic lifting. Nor would it be an entirely military show, with civilians from NSA, for example, participating.⁹⁰

Another related change is that military officers do not usually learn languages for strictly cryptologic reasons. The job of a language officer has changed over time. A language officer in Lasswell's day might go to an embassy or serve in liaison posts, such as performing some function where speaking in the target language is necessary—but they might also perform cryptology. The language officer of today, often as foreign affairs officers, would primarily do the former tasks.⁹¹

Lasswell had a profound effect on Marine Corps cryptology in one major way, the ramifications of which should continue indefinitely: he was both a linguist and a cryptanalyst, a powerful combination indeed.

As has been shown, Lasswell was able to demonstrate just how powerful such a combination could be by his cryptologic accomplishments in the Mid-

⁸⁶ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2–3, 5; and Lasswell oral history, 14–26.

⁸⁷ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 9–10, enclosures 2 and 15; and Lasswell oral history, 35.

⁸⁸ Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History* 1, 3–5, 52, 97.

⁸⁹ Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 3, 97; and David A. Hatch and Robert Louis Benson, *The Korean War: The SIGINT Background*, series 5, vol. 3 (Fort George C. Meade, MD: National Security Agency/Central Security Service, 2000).

⁹⁰ "Central Security Service (CSS)," National Security Agency/Central Security Service, accessed 14 February 2023.

⁹¹ Lasswell oral history, 25, 31–32; and *Reminiscences of Alva B. Lasswell* 1968.

way, Yamamoto, and Operation A-Go episodes—even by his role in preventing the Japanese seizure of the Shanghai International Settlement in 1940.⁹² Since World War II cryptosystems were often language-based, one needed both a language analyst (i.e., a linguist) and a cryptanalyst (i.e., a codebreaker) to attack them. Not all linguists were codebreakers and vice-versa. Someone such as Lasswell who could perform both effectively was a rarity. Even the precomputer processing machines of the day—the electromechanical cryptanalytic bombe used to counter the German Enigma machine—did not eliminate the need for linguists and codebreakers.⁹³

Lasswell's greatest legacy to cryptology—not just to the Marine Corps—is that he was one of the first to institutionalize the language-cryptanalyst skillset. While forecasting the future is always risky, it still seems certain that this skillset will be needed indefinitely. One may argue that today's high-powered computers and the advent of artificial intelligence have made the linguist-cryptanalyst combination antiquated. However, military cryptologic organizations continue to seek language-qualified personnel and are willing to train them as cryptanalysts. As long as language-based cryptosystems exist, there will be a need for such a skillset. In this age of cryptologic revolution, Lasswell's legacy lives on.

Lasswell was hardly the first to possess such a cryptologic skillset; both Joseph Rochefort and Joseph Finnegan could make the same claim.⁹⁴ Lasswell was not even the first Marine so cryptologically endowed. Lasswell, however, was clearly the first Marine to enjoy this much success as a combined linguist and cryptanalyst. Indeed, he epitomized, even redefined, what a Marine Corps cryptologist can and even should do. A cryptologist could no longer be just a codebreaker or just a codebreaker: the more versatile the cryptologist the better. Within the cryptologic lan-

guage discipline, versatility has caught on. Today, the NSA does not employ linguists—it employs language analysts (i.e., those who do more than just translate).⁹⁵ Language analysts apply the analysis as well as translate. Lasswell was one of the first language analysts by 2024 standards.

The NSA's own Crypto-Linguistic Association (CLA) formally recognized the need for Lasswell's special skillset in 2003 when it created the Colonel Alva B. Lasswell Award, intended for mid-career military language analysts. The criteria for selection admittedly go well beyond anything Lasswell could have hoped to accomplish. For example, the computer category would never have existed in Lasswell's time. Nonetheless, other award criteria—production, transcription, translation, analysis—are 100 percent Lasswell skillsets. This is what the modern language analyst is supposed to accomplish. The CLA's Lasswell Award, in addition to recognizing Lasswell's past accomplishments, also ensure that his skillset will be perpetuated.⁹⁶

The Marine Corps, as noted, had to reinvent itself cryptologically after the war and without any direct participation in the process by Lasswell. Fortunately, his experiences and successes clearly created a legacy, in that the Marine Corps would continue to recruit and train language cryptanalysts. For example, General Alfred M. Gray, the father of the modern Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion, was also a language cryptanalyst. Both men are members of the NSA Hall of Honor (Gray was in the class of 2008).⁹⁷

Furthermore, Lasswell serves as a reminder that a military cryptologist is first and foremost a member of their respective Service. Lasswell would be the first

⁹² Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 83–87; and Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2, 6–9.

⁹³ Jennifer Wilcox, *Solving the Enigma: History of the Cryptanalytic Bombe* (Fort George C. Meade, MD: Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 2006), 21, 24, 40.

⁹⁴ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 6; and “CAPT Joseph J. Rochefort, USN.”

⁹⁵ “Career Fields,” National Security Agency, accessed 25 August 2023.

⁹⁶ “Career Fields,” National Security Agency; and “A Brief Description of the Four Language Analysis Awards at National Security Agency (NSA), 2008” (PDF), GovernmentAttic.org, accessed 21 February 2023.

⁹⁷ Loren Blinde, “NSA Inducts Four Pioneers into the Cryptologic Hall of Honor,” *Intelligence Community News*, 8 November 2019; “General Alfred M. Gray, USMC (Ret), Chairman,” Board of Regents, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, accessed 27 February 2023; “General Alfred M. Gray, USMC: 2008 Hall of Honor Inductee,” NSA Historical Figures, National Security Agency/Central Security Service, accessed 25 August 2023; Scott Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine: The Early Years, 1950–1967*, vol. 1 (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute Press, 2013), 366–67; and Hunnicutt, *United States Marine Corps Cryptologic History*, 3, 97.

to clarify that he was a Marine first and a cryptologist second. He was in fact an accidental cryptologist, one who enjoyed spectacular success. The fact that Lasswell had a more rugged pedigree—the man who once disarmed a Japanese unit and was a great cryptanalyst to boot—shows that it can be done. This is especially important to the Marine Corps, which demands tough, well-rounded officers. Gray, for example, with his experiences in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, satisfied this requirement. Among Gray's achievements, something Lasswell would undoubtedly appreciate, was ensuring that every Marine was first and foremost a rifleman.⁹⁸

Worth noting is that enlisted military personnel studying a language at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) are still expected to pass room inspections, to salute officers, and to perform physical training. The Services never let them forget that they are soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines. A story about Lasswell's achievements might well be in order when a junior Marine complains to their senior about being unable to study for their Russian test because of military duties. Academic work is still the primary military duty at DLIFLC for Marines. One suspects that Lasswell, who had his struggles with Japanese, would have agreed with this policy.⁹⁹

Expanding the Legacy

An interesting phenomenon is underway involving Lasswell's legacy, and it is not cryptologic or even military in nature. There is now an Alva Lasswell Award for Fleet Support, bestowed by the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) in San Diego. One of the recent winners, for example, was a civilian engineer. This award is presented to mid-level active-duty or civil service technical individuals who directly support the Fleet forces. Support can be either through

technology innovation or in-service engineering accomplishments.¹⁰⁰

One has to wonder here about the relevance to Lasswell, who had no obvious technological achievements and was not an engineer. His Fleet support connection is very clear—his language cryptanalytic work was decisive at Midway. According to the NDIA website, Lasswell worked day and night to decipher radio traffic of the Japanese Navy, helping to ensure the American victory at Midway Island. He “was innovative, believed in excellence, and worked tenaciously to get the job done. Innovation, excellence, and tenacity are the hallmarks of this award.”¹⁰¹

As should be obvious from this study, Lasswell made his name as a cryptologist. The NSA's CLA Lasswell Award applies to cryptologic language analysts only and it clearly reflects a skillset that Lasswell possessed. Yet, this NDIA award, at least according to its description, focuses on Lasswell's personal traits. Similarly, the Marine Corps Forces Cyberspace Command headquarters on NSA's East Campus, dedicated in 2018, is called Lasswell Hall even though the concept of cyberspace did not exist in Lasswell's day.¹⁰²

So, what does this mean for Lasswell's legacy? He is clearly getting the attention that he never received before, given the number of recognitions he has been getting in the last few years alone. He continues to impact cryptology long after he left the field by helping to institutionalize a skillset that is a requirement for success against tactical cryptosystems. The CLA Lasswell Award and Gray's accomplishments that mirror Lasswell's demonstrate this. Lasswell epitomizes what a Marine can, and should, do in a field not of his own choosing while remaining first and foremost a Marine. The Marine Corps continues to look to him as a

⁹⁸ Hunnicutt, *The Marine Corps' Unsung Hero*, 2–3, 5–9; and “General Alfred M. Gray, USMC (Ret), Chairman.”

⁹⁹ “Student Life: A Day in the Life of a DLIFLC Student,” Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, accessed 25 August 2023; and Lasswell oral history, 15.

¹⁰⁰ “NDIA San Diego's 2024 A. Bryan Lasswell Award for Fleet Support,” Lasswell Award, National Defense Industrial Association, San Diego Chapter, accessed 25 August 2023; Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, “Navy Engineer Receives NDIA's A. Bryan Lasswell Award for Fleet Support,” press release, accessed 25 August 2023; and Marine Corps Systems Command, “MCTSSA Marine Receives 2018 Lasswell Award for Fleet Support,” press release, accessed 25 August 2023.

¹⁰¹ “NDIA San Diego's 2024 A. Bryan Lasswell Award for Fleet Support.”

¹⁰² “(U) The Crypto-Linguistic Association, (CLA)”; “NDIA San Diego's 2024 A. Bryan Lasswell Award for Fleet Support”; and Image, “Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps Visits MARFORCYBER,” Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, accessed 17 October 2024.

role model and someone to emulate.¹⁰³ Furthermore, as demonstrated by the dedication of Lasswell Hall, his legacy connects the cryptology of the past with the cyberspace operations of the future, ensuring his impact for years to come. Finally, his traits of innovation, excellence, and tenacity—which gave him his

Midway triumph—connect him to other fields as well. This is demonstrated by the Alva Lasswell Award for Fleet Support.¹⁰⁴ Given his growing legacy, there may come a day when every Marine, regardless of military occupational specialty, will know his name.

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¹⁰³ “NDIA San Diego’s 2024 A. Bryan Lasswell Award for Fleet Support”; and Laidig, *Al Gray, Marine: The Early Years, 1950–1967*, vol. 1, 366–67.

¹⁰⁴ “Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps Visits MARFOR-CYBER”; and “NDIA San Diego’s 2024 A. Bryan Lasswell Award for Fleet Support.”