

# A Man of Intelligence: The Life of Captain Eric Nave - Australian Codebreaker Extraordinary

Ian Pfennigwerth

Reviewed by Ron Bonighton

Much has been written about the Allied effort to break enemy codes before and during World War II. Most accounts focus on the successes against German codes or, if dealing with the Pacific, on American efforts to exploit Japanese diplomatic and military codes. Ian Pfennigwerth's biography of Captain Eric Nave is therefore particularly welcome as it is one of very few books which provide insight into the considerable success achieved by Australians in the breaking of Japanese codes.

Dr Pfennigwerth is well qualified to write this account of Australia's pre-eminent cryptanalyst. A former naval officer himself, he brings a depth of understanding to the twists and turns of Captain Nave's own naval career, while his extensive work in the intelligence sphere provides him with clear insight into the value of Nave's work. It also enables him to shepherd the reader through lucid explanations of the often complex art of the cryptanalyst.

The author has taken advantage of the many accounts now available on codebreaking, but has also carried out extensive archival research and interviewed Nave's family and old comrades. He also had access to Nave's memoirs, although as these were written when Nave was 87 and without access to official records, they apparently proved not altogether reliable. The book is well footnoted, has an extensive index and bibliography, and contains some interesting photographs.

Writing on sensitive intelligence matters is always a difficult task and none more so than when discussing signals intelligence and the intricate details of codebreaking in particular. It was only in the 1970s that the extent and success of such activities during World War II came into the public domain: even then, interest tended to be focused on its role in particular incidents – the aerial ambush of Admiral Yamamoto, for example. Much material remained off-limits even then, and much was lost or destroyed, making the task of the researcher a difficult one.

This book sets out very clearly the sheer slog involved in codebreaking, its reliance (pre-computers) on a few gifted amateurs to make the critical breakthroughs, and the need for close co-operation across Allies and Services to intercept, process and distribute the material. *A Man of Intelligence* also explores the often misguided attempts – usually in the name of security – to limit access to such intelligence and separate control of the signals intelligence system from wider intelligence processes. All of these themes are, of course, directly relevant to the intelligence challenges of today.

Eric Nave joined the RAN as a Paymaster Clerk in 1917 after a series of fortunate events. The monetary aspects of learning Japanese, chiefly the extra five shillings a day in pay, attracted him to the language. His natural linguistic flair

resulted in him becoming the first RAN officer to undertake studies in Japan.

On returning to Australia, he began to take an interest in the intercept and deciphering of Japanese codes (from 1921 the RAN had instructed its vessels to copy Japanese naval traffic). Nave had come to British attention as a highly talented linguist during his stay in Japan and the Admiralty requested his attachment to the China

Fleet on that basis. Eventually, in 1930, the Admiralty sought his permanent transfer to the Royal Navy and he spent the next 19 years as an RN officer, a most unusual scenario as, until then, the traffic in navy officers had been from the RN to the RAN. Dr Pfennigwerth does a first rate job of setting Nave's role against the backdrop of Great Power manoeuvring in the Pacific between the two world wars.

As a key expert in the attack on Japanese coded traffic, Nave was highly prized by the UK, spending much of his time either in the China Fleet or at the top secret Government Code and Cypher School – the iconic Bletchley Park. However his health was ruined by his time in Asia and he returned to Australia in 1940 to recuperate. Here he played a key role – still as an RN officer – in developing the Australian war-time signals intelligence organisation.

This was by no means an easy task. Not only were Australian military commanders generally unaware of the value of such work and the effort involved in its successful and secure execution, but elements – particularly in the US Navy – were determined to thwart any pretensions or independent capacity Australia might have in this field. Indeed, following an agreement between the Admiralty and the US Navy on the division of cryptanalytic effort against Japan, Nave was left without a meaningful role, until recruited into Central Bureau (the forerunner of today's Defence Signals Directorate) by another legendary Australian Siginter, Mic Sandford. After playing a key role in setting up Australia's post-war signals intelligence organisation, Nave went on to help establish ASIO in 1949, serving until his retirement in 1959. His subsequent work with ex-Service personnel continued into the 1970s. He died in 1993.

This is a well-researched and easily accessible account of a career at once unusual and arcane. While Dr Pfennigwerth has a firm grasp of Nave in his professional role, his efforts to come to grips with Nave, the man, is less sure. Nonetheless, this is a 'must read' for the Australian intelligence enthusiast, and a worthwhile investment for the general reader. ♦

Ian Pfennigwerth, *'A Man of Intelligence: The Life of Captain Eric Nave - Australian Codebreaker Extraordinary, Rosenberg, Dural NSW, 2006, Softback, 304pp., RRP \$A29.95.*

