

The Talented Dr. Ripley

William J. Rust

S. Dillon Ripley, an ornithologist and leader of the Smithsonian Institution from 1964 to 1984, played a leading role in planning espionage operations in Southeast Asia for a permanent post-World War II intelligence agency. Never publicly candid about all of his work for the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its successor agency, the Strategic Services Unit (SSU), he told a reporter in 1984: "I was never an actual spy in the sense that I was rushing about trying to get secrets." When asked if he ever used "bird-watching" as cover, he avoided a direct answer, observing: "It never seemed to me to be realistic because I never could discover what someone out in the bushes could discover in the way of secrets."¹ The report that follows not only tells a different story but also sheds new light on the evolution of OSS into a peacetime intelligence service.

What "cover" would best suit American intelligence operatives in Asia after the war with Japan? Dillon Ripley, chief of the OSS Secret Intelligence (SI) branch in Southeast Asia, analyzed the topic for the agency's director, Maj. Gen. William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, in March and April of 1945. Before World War II, the United States had never operated a peacetime espionage organization equivalent to the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), also known as MI6. With the conflict turning inexorably against Japan, organizational and operational questions about a postwar intelligence agency loomed large in the minds of Donovan and his senior OSS subordinates.

Ripley, who was then in Washington for consultation and leave after 18 months in South and Southeast Asia, had definite ideas about cover for postwar intelligence officers in the region. First, US operatives should be able to move about freely, without attracting unwanted attention. He thought this would be difficult in a part of the world with relatively few Americans, virtually every one "a marked man" known to foreign security services. Another Ripley requirement was the ability of operators to "mix in any sphere of society from the highest official, professional and business class to the most primitive groups of hill tribes." Controversially, he



S. Dillon Ripley at OSS Detachment 404 headquarters, Kandy, Ceylon, undated, c. January 1945. (NARA)

dismissed the idea of using resident American business executives as intelligence officers because their travel opportunities and natural contacts seemed too restricted. Moreover, he wrote, an "unusual interest in political or economic affairs aside from his normal sphere

would tend to blow such a man's cover immediately.”²

In Ripley's opinion, the professionals most adaptable to undercover intelligence work were researchers and scientists, “given a suitable personality.” Acknowledging that journalism, sales in certain industries, and other occupations might provide acceptable cover, Ripley argued that researchers and scientists were already trained in objective observation and analysis. Emotional stability, “an intuitive sense,” and an aptitude for “picking people's brains” would be essential for American intelligence officers: “It is an obvious but often unstressed fact that one can find out the intentions of a man by rifling his brains quite as well as rifling his desk or safe.” When combined with government bulletins, business reports, and other quasi-open sources, such conversations could “be tied together by trained observers into reports of a highly classified nature.”³

Ripley envisioned a small number of well-trained career intelligence professionals — perhaps as few as twenty-five for all of Asia — who circulated “through the different human strata of the area.” His ideal operation would insert intelligence officers into scientific expeditions sponsored by museums or foundations. Such spies would have natural cover for limited-term assignments that required travel and contact with all kinds of people. “Intelligence operations of this sort must be designed around the personalities of the operators,” he wrote.⁴

In sum, the model postwar American spy in Asia, as described by Ripley, was Ripley.

“Terrific charm”

Sidney Dillon Ripley II was a tall (nearly six feet, four inches), lean (approximately 170 pounds), prematurely balding 31-year-old when he provided Donovan with his views on postwar intelligence. Born into a patrician family — a

great grandfather was the founding chair of the Union Pacific Railroad — he had received an undergraduate degree from Yale and a PhD from Harvard. Self-confident, sophisticated, and well-traveled, he mixed well with the senior military officers and diplomats he routinely encountered in Kandy, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), headquarters for both the predominantly British Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) and OSS Detachment 404. “He has terrific charm,” said Lt. Col. Richard P. Heppner, chief of Detachment 404, 1943–44. “He is ideal in getting the kind of intelligence going around a highly picked dinner table.”⁵

Yet he was also a “lone wolf...inclined to be over secretive — it was hard to get him to divulge plans,” according to Heppner. Describing Ripley as “an exceedingly good man” but a poor administrator, his “fatal weakness” as chief of Detachment 404’s SI branch, Heppner claimed that Ripley’s privileged background prevented him from understanding how to work with people in an organization. Among his OSS colleagues, opinions of Ripley varied. For example, Don S. Garden, a reports officer in Kandy who later became chief of SI’s Southeast Asia section in Washington, thought he was Detachment 404’s “best” operator, whose ability to reveal “various machinations are most valuable.” Guy Martin, a lawyer, naval officer, and special assistant to Heppner, was less impressed, finding Ripley “politically ambitious” and “on the make 100 percent of time.”⁶

Ripley’s introduction to the world of intelligence was working as an unpaid consultant in the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI), a research, propaganda, and intelligence organization established five months before the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor and succeeded by OSS in June 1942. His first assignment was editing a handbook on Malay, a language he had learned during two scientific expeditions in the South Pacific in the 1930s: a

26-month trip spent mostly in West New Guinea and a briefer visit to Sumatra organized by the wealthy explorer George Washington Vanderbilt III. After receiving OSS training in espionage, sabotage, and other clandestine skills, Ripley was assigned to the Sumatra desk of the SI branch in Washington.⁷

By April 1943, he had developed “Far East No. 22 (Sumatra),” a project that addressed “the most striking fact” about Indonesia, then known as the Netherlands East Indies: the absence of information about the archipelago since its occupation by Japanese forces one year earlier. Before launching psychological or any other operations in Sumatra, OSS deemed it “imperative to secure secret intelligence from the area.” OSS had identified a handful of potential Indonesian agents and two SI officers with prewar experience in Indonesia, Ray F. Kauffman and Robert A. Koke, who were training the agents in the United States. Approved by Donovan on May 12, 1943, FE 22 called for Ripley to “proceed to Ceylon to direct this operation in the field.”⁸

Departing Washington in early June, Ripley stopped off in London for three weeks to discuss the project with senior British intelligence officials and representatives of the Netherlands government-in-exile, the “territorial sovereign” of Indonesia. Although Dutch officials in London were surprised by Ripley’s interest in Sumatra, the American was well received by British intelligence officers. Cdr. J. P. Gibbs, chief of the SIS Far East section, thought that he was a “splendid” choice for espionage. “Ripley’s interest in birds,” Gibbs laughingly remarked, “is so innocent that I consider him a very dangerous man.”⁹

Ripley spent the month of July in Cairo, a layover required by a temporary ban on additional OSS officers entering the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater. Ordered by Adm. William D. Leahy, President Franklin D.

Roosevelt’s chief of staff, the so-called stop order would remain in effect until the United States and United Kingdom agreed on roles and responsibilities for allied intelligence organizations in India. US anticolonial rhetoric and British imperial traditions contributed to the operators’ mutual suspicions about the political and economic intentions of the other’s government.

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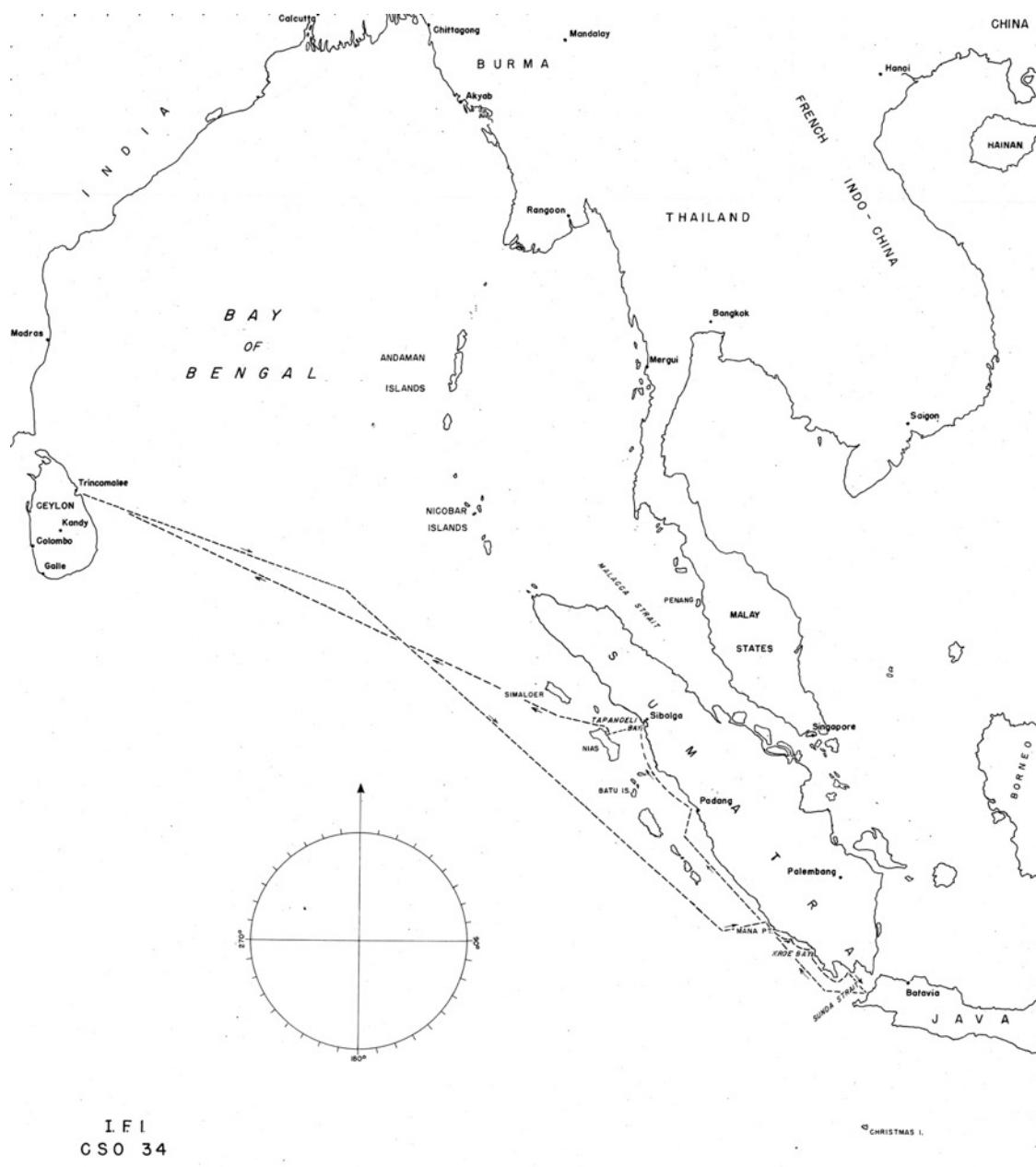
Before the ban was lifted (but presumably with the informal concurrence of CBI theater commander Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell), Ripley arrived in New Delhi on August 9. From the OSS perspective, his travel to India under cover as an employee of the Office of Economic Warfare, a short-lived civilian agency concerned with international economic affairs, was neither deceptive nor insubordinate. It was merely a way “to get around the technicality of the stop order” — i.e., a personal cable from General Stilwell to Washington explicitly requesting Ripley’s services in the theater.¹⁰

Ripley and FE 22 made little meaningful progress until allied leaders created the Southeast Asia Command at the Quebec Conference in late August, and SEAC commander Adm. Lord Louis Mountbatten and General Donovan reached an agreement on expanded OSS operations in Southeast Asia. Donovan reorganized OSS in the CBI theater,

establishing separate missions in China and Southeast Asia, with the latter under Mountbatten's operational control. In the last week of November 1943, OSS received SEAC approval for "the Sumatra project."¹¹

In Ceylon, Ripley leased camps for training agents and communicating with them within the theater. In late January 1944, Heppner reported to Whitney H. Shepardson, chief of the SI

branch in Washington, that Ripley "was doing a splendid job and I am sure that his operation into Sumatra will be successful."¹² As more OSS personnel arrived in Ceylon, Ripley was appointed chief of Detachment 404's SI branch in March. He continued to concentrate, however, on FE 22, which was expanded to include British Malaya and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the eastern Bay of Bengal.



The track of HMS Tradewind from Ceylon to West Java and back for the OSS intelligence mission RIPLEY I, June 1944. (NARA)

“General smelling around”

The first Sumatran SI operation was RIPLEY I — the name of which Ripley insisted was not his idea. On June 19, 1944, the British submarine *Tradewind*, with OSS officers Kauffman and Koke aboard, landed Indonesian agent J. F. Mailuku on an isolated beach near Third Point, West Java. Mailuku planned to contact relatives and friends in Batavia (Jakarta), then cross the Sunda Strait to establish residence near Palembang, Sumatra’s second largest city and the site of oilfields and a refinery valuable to the Japanese. Specific objectives of his mission included identifying a coast-watching site, setting up a “letter box” for secret messages, and recruiting other agents. Ripley, who admired Mailuku’s “ingenuity, pluck and intelligence,” wrote to Shepardson: “He is one of the finest individuals of any race that has been trained by OSS.”¹³

Yet RIPLEY I began to go awry when Mailuku, weighed down by a wireless telegraph set, a hand-cranked generator, two pistols, and other equipment, slipped on loose coral at the landing site in West Java. “I fell,” Mailuku later recalled, “but fortunately my radio box protected my face and body.” Unfortunately, both of his “legs were badly hurt and cut” and became infected.¹⁴

Because of his injuries, detention by local security forces, and other misfortunes, Mailuku was unable to contact OSS until after the surrender of Japan. In fact, all US attempts to penetrate Sumatra were “unsuccessful,” according to the official OSS history. The costliest SI mission was CAPRICE, an operation to establish a radio-relay station in the Batu Islands off the west coast of Sumatra. After CAPRICE’s initial success, Japanese troops and their Indonesian auxiliaries found and killed all seven Indonesian agents.¹⁵

Detachment 404 had better results in Thailand.¹⁶ In late January 1945, two OSS officers — Maj. John D. Wester and civilian Richard S. Greenlee — covertly entered Japanese-controlled Bangkok and established face-to-face contact with the leader of the Free Thai resistance movement: Pridi Phanomyong, regent of Thailand and chief of state. Pridi and other Free Thai leaders provided the Americans with valuable military intelligence and plans, as well as political proposals. According to an OSS report to Washington, “This operation is considered to be the most successful, hazardous and important that this detachment has attempted.”¹⁷

The intelligence collected in Bangkok was deemed sufficiently important to warrant a special flight from Ceylon to Washington carrying Greenlee and Pridi’s emissary, diplomat Suni Theparaksa. Accompanying them was Dillon Ripley, who began a temporary assignment at OSS headquarters. The previous November, he had asked to come back “to get reoriented” to Washington’s thinking about Southeast Asia. He had also requested a deputy chief for the SI branch in Kandy, “so that I can devote myself to fairly long range planning and related intelligence work.” Various administrative and operational claims on his time, he wrote, made it “very difficult for me to do the amount of general smelling around which I would like to do.”¹⁸

When he returned to Ceylon on or around June 1, Ripley was no longer chief of the SI branch in Southeast Asia. Instead, he was made special assistant to Heppner’s successor, Col. John G. Coughlin. Ripley’s new job involved developing plans for postwar intelligence in Asia and traveling to India, China, and elsewhere to recruit potential operatives for a peacetime agency. Lt. Cdr. Edmond L. Taylor, who

supervised and coordinated Detachment 404's SI, Counterintelligence, and Research and Analysis (R&A) branches, advised Coughlin that General Donovan was "very interested in Dillon's assignment." Writing from Washington on temporary duty, Taylor thought it "important that Dillon should be given some suitable cover functions and afforded unlimited freedom of movement to carry out his mission." He predicted that Ripley "no doubt will pick up a certain amount of current material in his wanderings but this is a minor aspect of his mission."¹⁹

Coughlin, a West Point graduate who had most recently commanded OSS in China, recognized that espionage was "the key to

General Donovan's ambitions for his organization in the future." He did not, however, find Ripley's method of "making friends and traveling on a high level" a very efficient approach to gathering intelligence. In a letter to Lt. Col. Otto C. Doering, Donovan's longtime friend and his executive officer at headquarters, Coughlin wrote: "Ripley has been some help since he has returned but I think he more than anyone else makes me realize I shouldn't be in OSS. He gets along with me by making the necessary effort and I get along with him on the same basis. I know he makes a lot of sense to you people back there so I will help him all I can, though he makes very little sense to me. This high-powered civilian status just beats me to the ground."²⁰



Adm. Lord Louis Mountbatten, supreme allied commander of the predominantly British Southeast Asia Command, with Cora Du Bois, director of Detachment 404's Research and Analysis branch, and Col. John G. Coughlin, the detachment's commander, undated, c. January 1945. (Tozzer Library, Harvard University)

“The ‘Balkans’ of the next war”

In the days immediately preceding the announcement of Japan’s unconditional surrender, Coughlin established a planning committee “for expanding and continuing” OSS intelligence activities in Southeast Asia. The committee’s four members were Edmond Taylor, chairman; W. Lloyd George, chief of the SI branch; Cora Du Bois, chief of the R&A branch; and Dillon Ripley. The committee hastily drew up plans for increasing the size of the team in Bangkok and establishing OSS stations in Singapore, Saigon, and Batavia. Each team had an overt, war-related mission: evacuating US POWs, investigating Japanese war crimes, and assessing the condition of American property and installations. These overt tasks, however, were cover for the clandestine mission of collecting political and economic intelligence. “By the time all of these teams or missions are established,” Coughlin wrote to Donovan, “sufficient information should be available to determine the shape of the future organization out here.”²¹

Coughlin appointed Taylor commander of the Bangkok mission, codenamed INCIDENT. A journalist in Europe during the 1930s, he had written a book on the role of psychological warfare and propaganda in Nazi Germany’s domination of Europe. Recruited to COI in 1941, Taylor served as a psychological warrior in London and North Africa before arriving in Asia. Initially deputy chief of SEAC’s “P” Division, the coordinating committee for allied intelligence operations in Southeast Asia, he became Detachment 404’s intelligence officer in November 1944. Coughlin, who thought the detachment should prioritize strategic, political, and economic intelligence over tactical military intelligence, wanted him to “devote 90 percent of his time to the SI branch.”²²

Taylor, accompanied by Ripley, covertly entered Thailand on August 19, 1945, with the

bulk of the 30-person INCIDENT team arriving overtly at the end of the month. Working with Capt. Howard M. Palmer, the OSS representative in Bangkok, Taylor and Ripley helped organize the air evacuation of some 300 American POWs during the last week of August. The OSS operatives also provided the US theater commander, Lt. Gen. Raymond A. Wheeler, and his political adviser, diplomat Max W. Bishop, with intelligence on Thai leaders and their talks with the British, who technically remained at war with Thailand. (US officials were more sympathetic, viewing the nation as a friendly, Japanese-occupied country.) “If OSS had not been able to provide this information,” Coughlin reported to Donovan, who valued intelligence free of foreign bias above all, “the Theater Commander and the State Department would have had to rely, to a great extent, upon the British version of the situation in Thailand.”²³

While in Bangkok — and acting under instructions, presumably from Donovan — Ripley asked Pridi whether the Thai intended “to develop a clandestine service of their own during the post war period.” Pridi, a leftist who led the civilian faction of the bloodless coup d’état that overthrew Thailand’s absolute monarchy in 1932, not only confirmed this fact but also instructed his designated leader of the secret service to remain in contact with Ripley “for any future intelligence developments.” From his conversation with Pridi emerged FLOWER, an operation that provided the United States with reports from Thai intelligence stations covering border areas with Indochina.²⁴

Ripley, whose stay in Thailand was brief, left that country on September 1. Three weeks later in Washington, he sent Donovan a progress report on his mission to develop long-range intelligence assets in Asia. Perhaps for security reasons, Ripley did not write down his own postwar plans. He did, however, emphasize the importance of US espionage in the region: “I feel

just as convinced as ever that parts of the Far East, particularly South East Asia, will be the ‘Balkans’ of the next war and deserve watching ‘clandestine-wise’ as never before.”²⁵

Ripley reported to Donovan that he had recruited US citizens as operatives in India, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, and Thailand. He did not mention their names but included their professions — for example, researcher, journalist, missionary, and banker. He also identified potential American recruits in China and Indochina, although he anticipated that “considerable coverage” of the latter could be obtained from Thailand: “I have already set in motion an undercover network in Siam [Thailand] and Indo China of Siamese agents. This network is completely independent of the present [Free Thai] underground movement.”²⁶

It appears that Ripley did not receive a reply from Donovan, who presumably had more pressing matters on his mind. On 20 September, one day before the date of Ripley’s progress report, President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order announcing the “termination” of OSS.²⁷

AUGUR

Although the need for comprehensive, coordinated foreign intelligence was recognized by some within the US government, the responsibility for this work had triggered bureaucratic warfare among the State Department, the military, and other agencies. A casualty of the conflict was General Donovan, who was dismissed and whose intelligence organization was officially dissolved earlier than he had anticipated — October 1, 1945. On that day, SI and other OSS operational branches were transferred to the War Department and renamed the Strategic Services Unit. Led by Brig. Gen. John Magruder, formerly Donovan’s deputy director for intelligence, the new agency was a temporary expedient to preserve OSS

capabilities until a definite intelligence policy was formulated by the Truman administration.

During the fall of 1945, when the future of postwar US espionage remained unclear, intelligence plans for Asia and the proposed personnel who might execute them were sensitive topics, restricted to a minimum number of SSU officers at headquarters and in the field. To ensure special handling of communications discussing these plans, a codeword indicator was used — AUGUR. A regional SSU security officer inspecting the Bangkok station recommended that the commanding officer have a separate safe for “AUGUR, EYES ALONE” messages.²⁸

Ripley and George completed a 100-page plan in December 1945 for possible execution by a new, permanent intelligence agency. The paper was a seminal SI document and the basis for subsequent iterations of espionage planning in Southeast Asia.

In Washington, Dillon Ripley and Lloyd George drafted the AUGUR plan for India-Burma and Southeast Asia. George, a prewar journalist, who simultaneously served as Detachment 404’s chief of SI, chief of the reports section, and acting intelligence officer after the war, traveled to Washington at the end of October to work with Ripley on the plan. They completed a 100-page proposal in December for possible execution by a new, permanent intelligence agency. Discussing personnel, cover, communications, and other operational topics, the paper was a seminal SI document

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The AUGUR plan also sheds light on continuity and discontinuity between SSU and CIA. For example, Ripley and George identified three categories of intelligence field personnel. The first was “agent” — the equivalent of a CIA “case officer” — defined by SSU as a highly trained US intelligence officer who resided in a foreign country under “natural” cover — i.e., there was a plausible reason for the operative living there. Valuing espionage skill over area knowledge, the AUGUR paper declared: “A good intelligence man is far harder to find than an old Southern Asia hand.” Agents would not only produce “original intelligence” but also serve as intermediary to Washington for information provided by two other categories of personnel: “observers” and “unconscious informants.”³⁰

The “observer” category comprised two well-trained groups of field personnel: (1) part-time resident intelligence officers, primarily businessmen and other American professionals, who could be “tapped” by an agent through a cut-out or letter box; and (2) travelers from the United States, who “presumably” would not contact agents in the field but would write reports on their return home. In a reference to Ripley’s preferred technique of espionage, the plan stated that many traveling observers “would be particularly useful for their ability to make specialized contacts on a variety of levels, often in a very high category. Their information could be of considerable value especially in a corroborative way.”³¹

“Unconscious informants,” the third category of field personnel, were generally social or business acquaintances of an agent or observer. Such assets were “never explicitly informed that they are furnishing intelligence to the United States Government.” These individuals, who included a large number of Americans,

Europeans, and Asians, “from government employees on all levels to the man in the street,” were expected to be “the basic source of intelligence in Southern Asia.” Perhaps reflecting the authors’ prejudices, as well as their security concerns, the AUGUR plan declared, “without exception,” that “no native of any of the areas of Southern Asia should be employed in any way except as unconscious informants.”³²

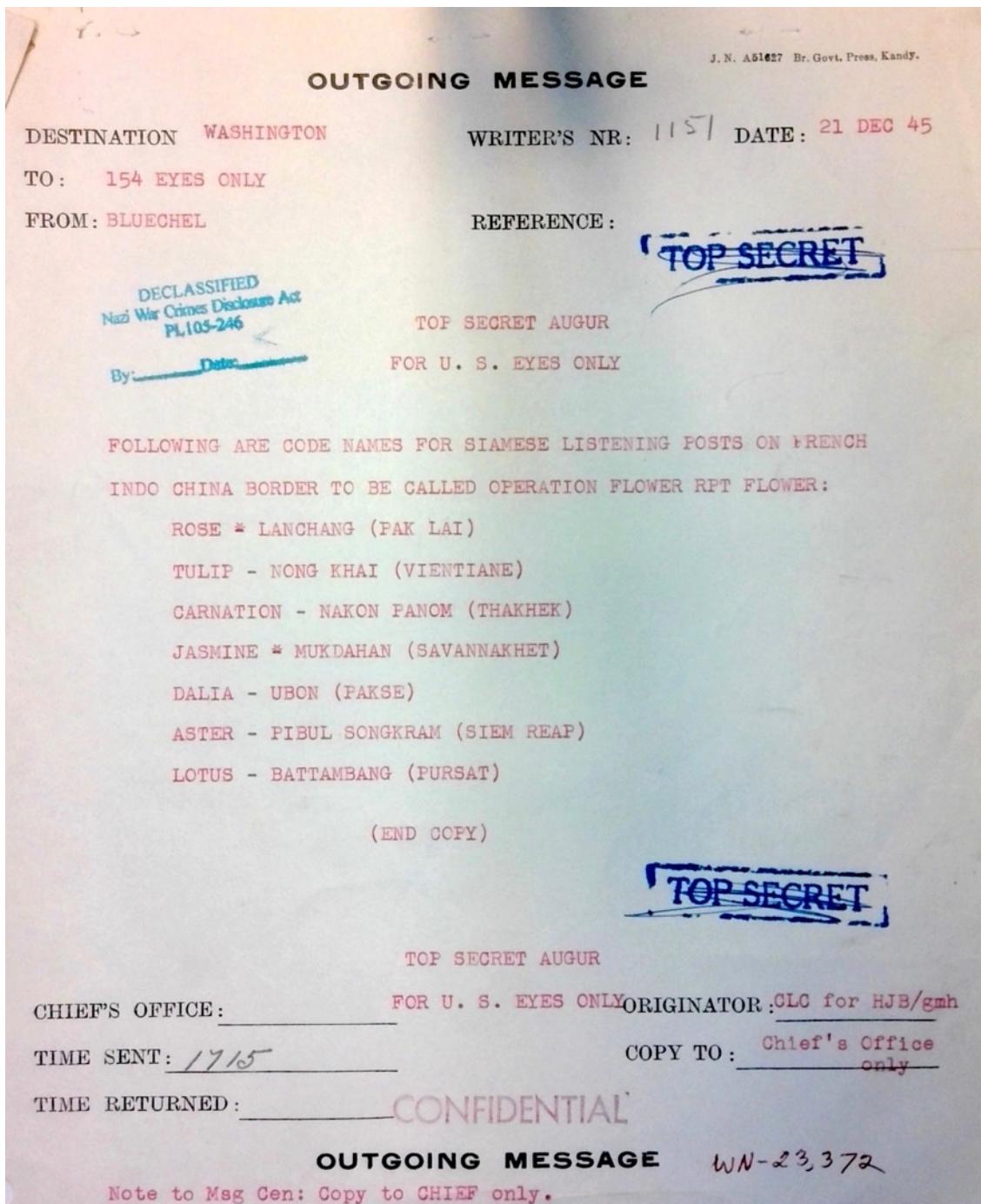
The Ripley-George paper scarcely mentioned diplomatic cover, upon which CIA would later rely heavily. When the AUGUR plan was drafted, however, State Department officials strongly resisted the idea of intelligence officers operating out of their embassies, consulates, and legations. “The less contact covered agents in the field have with diplomatic representatives in the area the better,” the plan stated. “Such contacts attract attention to the agents and are frowned upon by the State Department itself as a possible embarrassment to the diplomatic mission.”³³

The AUGUR paper’s narrow conception of espionage was expanded in a February 1946 revision that also included planning for China. The revised plan was less categorial about “non-American” personnel, who were acknowledged to be of “the greatest value and ultimately indispensable for full intelligence coverage.” The revision also accepted that information might be purchased or even “secured by blackmail and other extreme personal pressures, although the use of such measures will not be authorized by any persons except the most highly competent and level-headed Agents.” In rare instances, agents might employ — “through a carefully selected cut-out” — a “professional underworld operator” for a burglary or robbery “to secure intelligence which can be obtained in no other way.”³⁴

Entirely oriented to field operations, neither the AUGUR paper nor its revision mentioned the evaluation of “raw” intelligence collected by

agents and observers. Presumably, the field personnel in a new agency would continue to use SSU's alpha-numeric system for assessing the reliability of their sources (e.g., "A," completely reliable; "C," fairly reliable; "F," cannot be judged) and their information (e.g.,

“1,” confirmed by other sources; “3,” possibly true; “6,” cannot be judged). Further evaluation of field reports and the production of “finished” intelligence for policymakers would undoubtedly be the responsibility of intelligence officers in Washington.



A cable from Maj. Herbert J. Bluechel, SSU Singapore, to Whitney Shepardson, chief of the Secret Intelligence branch in Washington, identifying FLOWER intelligence stations along the border of Indochina. (NARA)

“Definitely interested”

The original AUGUR plan summarized the operational rationale and opportunities for each nation in South and Southeast Asia. A pre-cold war assessment of the region, the paper devoted relatively little attention to the danger of communism and emphasized spying on the European colonial powers, the nationalist movements resisting them, and the attendant implications for US policy and economic interests: “The unsettled situation in French Indo-China and Java, the delay in Malayan readjustment, the slowness of the re-establishment of Sumatra as an allied area, all point up the necessity for early establishment of a new and securely covered secret intelligence organization in those areas.”³⁵

The most fully developed planning was for Thailand, a country deeply penetrated by OSS during the war. Cordial US relations with Pridi and other leaders of Thailand’s pro-American government would “allow the setting up of almost any type of secret activity there,” according to Ripley and George. In December 1945, the same month they finished their AUGUR plan, Thai intelligence stations along the border with Indochina began providing the Bangkok SSU station with the first FLOWER intelligence reports, which showed “signs of promise.” At SSU’s request, Pridi also delivered secret biographical sketches of Asian leaders to the station.³⁶

According to the AUGUR paper, Lt. Cdr. Alexander MacDonald (SO-48)³⁷ was “tentatively chosen” as the senior intelligence officer for Thailand. A prewar journalist and US Naval Reserve intelligence officer, MacDonald initially worked in Morale Operations, the OSS branch responsible for “black propaganda” aimed at deceiving the enemy. After the war, he demonstrated a talent for espionage as a member of the INCIDENT team in Bangkok. The AUGUR plan declared that journalistic cover

would “allow him to reside in Bangkok as well as travel throughout the area. He will have contact with all Americans in the areas as well as all the influential Siamese.”³⁸

The Ripley-George plan acknowledged, but could not completely solve, a fundamental problem with staffing a postwar intelligence service with former OSS personnel: Most were “known to British, Dutch and French clandestine organizations and to many native leaders and organized groups.”³⁹ Because OSS was the only available source of trained, experienced operators, the planners were forced to assume that natural cover was available to officers who were residents of Southeast Asia before the war or who had prewar occupations that made their postwar presence in the region seem reasonable.

The AUGUR paper’s first proposed operator for Southeast Asia was Robert Koke (SO-32). Then serving as SSU’s chief of station in Batavia, Koke had owned a hotel in Bali before the war. Recruited by OSS for his knowledge of Indonesia and his ability to speak Dutch and Malay, Koke had been operating in Southeast Asia longer than almost any other US intelligence officer. According to the Ripley-George plan, Koke intended to resume his prewar career: “It will undoubtedly take him some little time to reestablish his cover, but once this is done he should be in an ideal position to establish himself as an observer and letter box at first, later possibly, as an Agent.”⁴⁰

Don Garden (SO-43), chief of SI’s Southeast Asia section, wanted to continue intelligence work, according to the AUGUR paper. A foreign correspondent before the war, he had worked as the editor of the English-language *Bangkok Daily Mail* in the late 1920s. During his OSS service in Kandy and Washington, he became very knowledgeable about military, political, and economic affairs not only in Thailand but also in other Southeast Asian nations. Ripley and

George believed that Garden “would be valuable at headquarters or in the field under the cover of a journalist or under diplomatic cover.”⁴¹

The AUGUR plan was particularly enthusiastic about recruiting Cora Du Bois (SO-36). She was described as “an experienced observer, administrator, and intelligence-conscious operator who has been one of the most capable people in OSS.” An anthropologist who had conducted prewar research in Indonesia, Du Bois was acting chief, then chief, of Detachment 404’s R&A branch. When OSS was dissolved, she transferred to R&A’s temporary successor organization, the State Department’s Interim Research Intelligence Service. “If enough inducement could be offered,” Ripley and George declared, “it is considered by the writers that she would be one of the most efficient and worthwhile agents that could be obtained by any postwar secret intelligence agency.”⁴²

The individual who received the most detailed discussion as a potential peacetime operator was Dillon Ripley (SO-44), whose contacts “should be extremely useful as a source of clandestine intelligence.” The AUGUR plan identified him as a likely part-time observer who had already been asked “to lead a combined University-Museum expedition” to Asia in 1946. Acknowledging his renown as an OSS officer in the region, the paper argued that his cover as a scientist was valid and that his recognized interest in political developments and intelligence would “favor rather than hinder high level conversations and exchanges of information.” Ripley, the document declared, was “definitely interested in continuing secret intelligence work under this cover.”⁴³

“A Bit of Snooping Around”

In a letter dated December 14, 1945, Don Garden congratulated Edmond Taylor on his recent promotion to commander and his

appointment as chief of SSU Detachment 404 — or in Garden’s words, “the Famous 404.” He reported that “Lloyd and Dillon have been working on the Augur paper,” but there was still “no definite word” on a permanent intelligence service. By the end of the month, Garden wrote, Ripley intended “to retire to his ‘Sabine farm’ — his family home in Litchfield, Connecticut — “for a couple of months, and Lloyd is speaking vaguely of devouring a hunk of his accumulated leave.” While in Washington, Ripley had “been doing a bit of snooping around with the usual interesting results,” mostly related to British attitudes toward Indochina and American intelligence activities in Southeast Asia.⁴⁴

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The presumptive permanent intelligence agency was finally created on January 22, 1946, when President Truman signed an executive order establishing the Central Intelligence Group (CIG). Initially a tiny organization, CIG was responsible for supervising the liquidation of SSU and the transfer of selected personnel to the new, more secure agency. On July 16, 1946, CIG “activated” the Office of Special Operations (OSO), which was responsible for espionage and counterespionage abroad. In the second half of 1946, CIG absorbed some 800 SSU personnel. Of that total, 171 transferred to OSO,

“constituting the nucleus” of its operators.⁴⁵ An unworkable intelligence organization lacking authority and an independent budget, CIG was officially dissolved and replaced by CIA on September 18, 1947.

Assessing the overall implementation of the AUGUR plan and its revision is difficult, primarily because CIG and CIA records from the late 1940s have not been comprehensively declassified. There is, however, evidence of operational activity based on the two papers. On June 12, 1946, Lloyd George, then SSU divisional deputy for SI in the Far East, provided an update on “Long Range Plans” to Stephen B. L. Penrose Jr., Shepardson’s successor as chief of SI: “Both the China and Southeast Asia Sections have made considerable progress toward establishing some strictly undercover personnel in their respective areas.” Almost certainly referring to the AUGUR plan and its revision, George added: “Detailed plans conceived some time past have gone through the stages of drafting, presentation to the Director and CIG, clearance at these points, recruitment and undercover training. In one instance individuals in this category have actually been dispatched.”⁴⁶

There is much documentary evidence that the AUGUR plan for Thailand was implemented in the second half of 1946. James H. W. Thompson, a member of the INCIDENT team who succeeded MacDonald as SSU chief of station, maintained a close relationship with Pridi and other Thai officials. The FLOWER reports from the Indochina border areas continued to be delivered to Thompson, and at least one new Thai intelligence station was established along the border with Malaya. Until the end of 1946, when he resigned from CIG in frustration over a lack of cryptographic support and “red tape,” Thompson maintained contact with, and reported on, a wide range of Asians and Europeans, including representatives of the

resistance movements in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.⁴⁷

It seems very likely that the AUGUR plan contributed to the establishment of CIG’s, and later CIA’s, Domestic Contact Service, a division that collected foreign intelligence from US sources — for example, overseas travelers and business executives. These sources were volunteers who were fully conscious of providing information to US intelligence. “Generally,” according to a 1975 report by the presidential commission investigating CIA activities within the United States, “the division’s procedure consists of contacting United State residents with whom it has an established relationship to seek out available information on specific subjects for which the division has had requests from other components of the Agency.”⁴⁸

CIG’s Domestic Contact Service and its successor divisions in CIA’s intelligence and operations directorates were overt collection efforts, distinct from the AUGUR plan’s proposal for highly trained part-time intelligence professionals who would travel overseas and operate under nonofficial cover. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, it is unlikely that CIA will ever release information about the prevalence of nonofficial cover or identify personnel who operated in this capacity.

Many of the people proposed by the AUGUR plan for positions in a permanent peacetime agency did serve in CIA. Co-author Lloyd George, for example, continued to work for SSU and its successor agencies. He held increasingly senior operational positions in CIA, including chief of Foreign Intelligence. When he retired in 1967, George received the Distinguished Intelligence Medal for his contributions to the creation and evolution of the Agency.⁴⁹

Dillon Ripley’s post-AUGUR association with American intelligence is murky, at best. Appointed to the Yale faculty in 1946, he led the Yale-Smithsonian Expedition to India in the

winter of 1946–1947. The expedition included a controversial visit to Nepal, then closed to foreigners. Pretending “to be a close acquaintance and confidant of Jawaharlal Nehru,” then leader of the Interim Government of India, Ripley convinced Nepalese officials of Nehru’s interest in the expedition.⁵⁰ Once admitted to Nepal, Ripley met with the maharajah-prime minister, attended court ceremonies, entertained military leaders with bawdy stories, and acquired travel permits for a more extensive follow-up expedition.

Neither the AUGUR document’s reference to this trip nor the public record of Ripley’s expedition proves that he engaged in espionage for CIG. His trip to Nepal, however, was consistent with his stated aspirations and plans for postwar intelligence operations. It seems very likely that Ripley provided information on Nepal to either the overt Domestic Contact Service or the covert Office of Special Operations.

A recent biography of Ripley made the sweeping claim that there is “no indication” of “contact between Ripley and the CIA,” save one unexceptional recommendation to an Agency officer that the United States should get out of Vietnam.⁵¹ Admittedly, the book’s emphasis is on his scientific career and leadership of the Smithsonian Institution, but a search of declassified CIA documents on its website reveals numerous instances of Ripley’s “contact” with the Agency. For example, he visited director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George H. W. Bush in 1976 seeking CIA support for a scientific project, co-funded by the Royal Society of England and the Smithsonian Institution, in the Aldazbra Group of islands in the Seychelles. According to Bush’s notes of the conversation, Ripley felt that financing “this activity would be very good for the new Seychelles government.”⁵²

Bush told Ripley that CIA funding was “unlikely.” The DCI did, however, send him a “beautiful Atlas” that Ripley was delighted to add to his collection of maps connected with his ornithological work. His thank-you note included another pitch “to preserve Aldabra, which is a gold mine of future information on the behavior and distribution of all kinds of animals and plants.”⁵³

One of Bush’s predecessors, Richard M. Helms, enjoyed perhaps a closer relationship with Ripley. Both were OSS veterans and part of the Washington establishment in the 1960s. In December 1969, Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, leader of the Hmong army in Laos, offered Helms a priceless 1,800-pound prehistoric stone jar from the Plaine des Jarres as an expression of gratitude for the Agency’s longstanding support during that country’s so-called secret war. Unable to accept the gift, Helms asked Ripley if the Smithsonian Institution would be interested in the artifact. Ripley was “extremely eager to obtain” the stone jar, despite some of his trustees’ wariness of any connection with CIA. In the “personal and confidential” letter offering the jar to Ripley, Helms wrote: “Recognizing that the Smithsonian would doubtless prefer to have the Department of State indicated as the donor, I feel confident that we can have arrangements made to handle this, leaving the Agency out of the picture entirely.”⁵⁴

For intelligence historians, the question is not whether Ripley had “contact” with CIA officials during the postwar era, but whether he engaged in espionage on the Agency’s behalf. On the one hand, there appears to be no documentary evidence proving that he ever spied for CIA. (This lacuna, of course, might be attributable to continued classification of Agency records pertaining to “sources and methods.”) On the other hand, one might reflect on Ripley’s belief in the importance of espionage, especially in

Asia, his preference for high-level “unconscious informants,” and his access to such people as his distinguished scientific and cultural career progressed, culminating in leadership of the Smithsonian Institution. During his post-OSS and -SSU life, he traveled widely and met with

senior officials of many countries of intelligence interest to the US government. Based on the evidence presented in this article, it seems very likely that he would have discretely provided CIA with any political, military, or economic information of intelligence value.

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[June 11, 2020]

Endnotes

¹ Irvin Molotsky, “He Took Smithsonian Out of Attic,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1984.

² Dillon Ripley to William Donovan, March 2, 1945 at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP13X00001R000100240005-3.pdf>.

³ Ripley to Donovan, April 18, 1945 at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP13X00001R000100240005-3.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.; Ripley to Donovan, March 2, 1945.

⁵ Richard Heppner, interview by Robert Warner, undated, c. August 1945, National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 226, Entry A1 110, box 51.

⁶ Ibid.; Don Garden to Ripley, November 24, 1944, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 154, box 156; Guy Martin, quoted in Susan C. Seymour, *Cora Du Bois: Anthropologist, Diplomat, Agent* (University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 192.

⁷ Ripley personnel file, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 224, box 646.

⁸ OSS, “Far East No. 22 (Sumatra),” April 19, 1943, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 25.

⁹ J. P. Gibbs, quoted in Aubrey D. Hutcheson to Whitney H. Shepardson, August 30, 1943, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 210, box 370.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ OSS to “P” Division, March 11, 1944, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 154, box 154.

¹² Heppner to Shepardson, January 27, 1944, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 51.

¹³ Ripley to Shepardson, June 13, 1944, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 154, box 154.

¹⁴ J. F. Mailuku, “Ripley I,” undated, c. September 30, 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 216, box 9.

¹⁵ SSU, *War Report: Office of Strategic Services, Vol. II, Operations in the Field* (US Government Printing Office, 1949), 405; Joseph W. Smith to SSU, Singapore, February 20, 1946, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 25.

¹⁶ For a deeply researched account of allied wartime intelligence operations in Thailand, see E. Bruce Reynolds, *Thailand’s Secret War: OSS, SOE, and the Free Thai Underground during World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Harry L. Berno, “OSS/SEAC Mission Report,” January 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 99, box 61.

¹⁸ Ripley to Hutcheson, November 8 and 22, 1944, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 154, box 156.

¹⁹ Edmond Taylor to John Coughlin, May 16, 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 20.

²⁰ Coughlin to William R. Peers, March 30, 1945, and Coughlin to Otto Doering, July 12, 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 20.

²¹ Coughlin to Donovan, August 18, 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 20.

²² Coughlin to William C. Wilkinson, March 13, 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 20.

²³ Coughlin, "Chief of Mission Report," August 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 20.

²⁴ SSU, "Plan for Post War Secret Intelligence Operations in India-Burma and Southeast Asia," undated, c. December 1945, and Garden to Stephen B. L. Penrose Jr., May 29, 1946, NARA RG 226, Entry A1 210, box 310 and box 305.

²⁵ Ripley to Donovan, "Post-hostilities Plans in the Far East," September 21, 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 210, box 305.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Harry Truman, "Termination of the Office of Strategic Services and Disposition of Its Functions," September 20, 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945–1950, Emergence of the Intelligence Establishment* at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d14>.

²⁸ John D. Birn to executive officer, SSU, India-Burma Theater, December 17, 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 24.

²⁹ SSU, "Plan for Post War Secret Intelligence Operations in India-Burma and Southeast Asia," undated, c. December 1945.

³⁰ Ibid., 23–24.

³¹ Ibid., 25.

³² Ibid., 26.

³³ Ibid., 39.

³⁴ SSU, "Plan for Permanent Secret Intelligence — Far East," February 1946, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 210, box 516, 43–50.

³⁵ SSU, "Plan for Post War Secret Intelligence Operations in India-Burma and Southeast Asia," undated, c. December 1945, 2.

³⁶ Ibid., 3; Alexander MacDonald to Taylor, December 18 and 24, 1946, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 110, box 24, and Entry A1 211, box 10.

³⁷ The AUGUR plan uses codenames for individuals. The paper's fairly detailed descriptions of these people make their identification relatively easy.

³⁸ SSU, "Plan for Post War Secret Intelligence Operations in India-Burma and Southeast Asia," undated, c. December 1945, 61. MacDonald remained chief of station until March 1946, when the United States shut down its overt SSU mission in Bangkok. Resigning from the Navy, he resumed his journalism career, while simultaneously working part time for SSU, CIG, and CIA.

³⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 29. Koke subsequently discovered, presumably during a visit to Bali in March 1946, that his prewar hotel had burned down. His career at CIA included providing paramilitary training in the United States for officers in the elite Mobile Brigade of the Indonesian national police. He retired from the Agency's Directorate of Operations in the mid-1970s.

⁴¹ Ibid., 94. Like Koke, Garden was a career CIA officer. He died in 1962 at the age of 65.

⁴² Ibid., 91. Du Bois stayed with the State Department, serving as chief of the Southern Areas Branch in the Division of Research for the Far East. She resigned from the department in 1950 to spend a year working with the World Health Organization before resuming her academic career.

⁴³ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁴ Garden to Taylor, December 14, 1945, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 210, box 29.

⁴⁵ EFH to ABD, "OSO from July, 1946 to December, 1946," May 8, 1952 at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84-00499R000500110004-6.pdf>.

⁴⁶ George to Penrose, June 12, 946, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 210, box 379.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Thompson to Garden, September, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 23, and 24, 1946, NARA, RG 226, Entry A1 108C, box 9. Thompson returned to Bangkok, where he built a successful business producing and marketing Thai silk, while intermittently continuing intelligence work for the US government until the mid-1950s. He disappeared under mysterious circumstance in Malaysia in 1967.

⁴⁸ Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States, *Report to the President*, June 1975, 209, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0005/1561495.pdf>.

⁴⁹ "W. Lloyd George Dies, CIA Official," *Washington Post*, January 19, 1975; "W. Lloyd George, 74, Ex-C.I.A. Official," *New York Times*, January 18, 1975.

⁵⁰ Michael L. Lewis, "Scientists or Spies?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 15–21, 2002. Also see Roger D. Stone, *The Lives of Dillon Ripley: Natural Scientist, Wartime Spy, and Pioneering Leader of the Smithsonian Institution* (ForeEdge, 2107), 76–78.

⁵¹ Stone, *The Lives of Dillon Ripley*, 62.

⁵² George Bush to deputy director of operations, November 22, 1976 at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79M00467A000200140008-7.pdf>.

⁵³ Ripley to Bush, December 22, 1976 at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79M00467A000200140031-1.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Ripley to Richard Helms, February 27, 1970, and Helms to Ripley, February 12 , 1970 at <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84-00780R003600010034-7.pdf>.