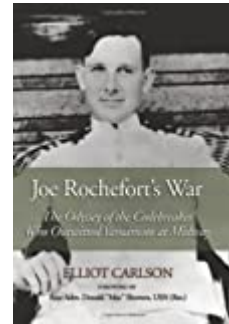


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elliot Carlson. *Joe Rochefort's War: The Odyssey of the Codebreaker Who Outwitted Yamamoto at Midway.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011. 616 pp. \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61251-060-6.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Elliot Carlson's lengthy examination of Captain Joe Rochefort's professional career is much more than a biography of an important yet understated naval figure. On the contrary, the author uses the life story of Joe Rochefort to synthesize important issues of cryptanalytic science, naval culture, and bureaucratic infighting. True, Rochefort's code-breaking unit pieced together clues that led to an intelligence breakthrough about Japanese plans leading up to the Battle of Midway. But Carlson offers much more in a beautifully written narrative.

Thanks to Hal Holbrook's portrayal in the 1976 film *Midway*, and a recent flood of literature about that pivotal American victory in the Pacific War, Rochefort's role in breaking the Imperial Japanese Navy's JN-25(b) code during the weeks leading up to the Battle of Midway is a well-known story. As one would expect, Carlson's biography focuses on the months during which Rochefort served at Pearl Harbor as a code breaker. The author, however, also exposes pertinent details of the subject's life and naval career.

Rochefort grew up in Ohio and southern California in a hard-working Irish-American family, where he was the youngest of seven children. He enlisted in the US

Navy at the close of World War One during the spring of his senior year in high school. Immediately after the armistice he applied for and was accepted into a Navy engineer school which earned him a reserve ensign's commission after graduating from the program in June 1919. He went on to serve in a unique sequence of assignments—engineer in a number of naval vessels, cryptanalyst with the Navy Department's Office of Naval Communications, Japanese linguist, and fleet intelligence officer—all of which prepared him to serve in his later capacity as chief of Station Hypo, the Hawaii-based radio intercept and cryptanalysis unit that failed to break key Japanese naval codes prior to Pearl Harbor but succeeded only a few weeks before Midway.

This study delves into Japanese encoding procedures and American methods to gain intelligence from enemy communications; key leaders in the Pacific and in Washington, DC, and the relationships between their respective staffs; and differences of opinion over naval intelligence estimates, especially between Admiral Chester Nimitz's Pacific Fleet staff at Pearl Harbor and Admiral Ernest King's US Fleet staff. Carlson clearly exposes the bureaucratic debate between the naval communications and the naval intelligence communities about maintaining primary responsibility over code breaking

of enemy signals traffic. The author also highlights the issue of command and control—should code-breaking units have reported to their naval district commander, the fleet commander, or the Navy Staff in Washington, DC? In the end, it was Rochefort’s unique combination of experiences that enabled him to form his team, guide them in their daily code-breaking work, assist with filling in the blanks through his understanding of Japanese language and naval culture, and convince his superiors of the accuracy of Station Hypo’s assessments. Rochefort’s candor ruffled a few feathers during his career, and this likely explains the denial of a service medal for his contributions to the victory at Midway in 1942. Rochefort’s colleagues later campaigned for setting the record straight and secured posthumous recognition for their friend and mentor in 1986.

Carlson, a career journalist, demonstrates his skill at storytelling throughout the book. For example, the description of the weeks before Midway reads like a Tom Clancy novel. Rochefort’s team knew the Japanese planned a major operation in mid-1942 but only possessed the thinnest strands of evidence that Midway was the target. The debate was over the two-letter code “AF,” a typical Japanese code group for a geographic location. In a flash of brilliance, one of Rochefort’s analysts

developed a plan to have the American base at Midway radio in the clear to Pearl Harbor that their fresh-water distilling plant was out of commission. Japanese intelligence specialists picked up the transmission, and then reported what they discovered in an encoded message by radio. Station Hypo intercepted the message and was thus able to verify that “AF” stood for Midway. Such intelligence enabled Nimitz to position his outnumbered aircraft carrier forces in a way that contributed to American victory in early June 1942.

Carlson mastered pertinent archival sources in the creation of this biography. Naval documents, oral histories, published memoirs, and even interviews with participants contributed to a fully researched study that left few stones unturned. The author chose the Naval Institute Press as his publisher, an organization willing to make room in the book for photographs of key characters and to publish the biography in eBook format. The publisher recently released this book in paperback. This is a lengthy study of 456 pages, not including front matter, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. Carlson’s biography of Joe Rochefort is well worth the investment for those interested in the Battle of Midway, cryptanalysis, and naval culture.

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