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Most Secret and Confidential: Intelligence in the Age of Nelson

Steven E. Maffeo

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In today's world of satellites and electronic eavesdropping it is hard to appreciate the difficulties involved two centuries ago in collecting and disseminating secret intelligence in time of war. This book treats readers to a close-up look at the ingenious methods used to obtain and analyze secret material and deliver it to operational forces at sea. It brings together information from a variety of sources to provide the first concise analysis of the use and development of intelligence in the days of fighting sail. The British experience from 1793 to 1815 is the book's main focus, but it also includes French and American activity. In addition the book examines how commanders used the information to develop strategy and tactics and win--or sometime lose--battles.

A naval intelligence officer himself, author Steven Maffeo illustrates the role of this "dark craft" by concentrating on the experiences of Lord Nelson and his contemporaries. A profoundly complex figure, Nelson epitomized the active acquisition of intelligence and the bold execution of decisions based on an understanding of the material, and Maffeo offers fresh and illuminating information that supports the admiral's high regard for intelligence work.

Reading at times like a cloak-and-dagger mystery, the story is filled with examples of how Nelson and his associates dealt with intelligence obstacles and how the outcomes affected their own futures, and, in some cases, the history of the modern world. Maffeo's anecdotes give marvelous insight into the thoughts of the era's important figures, Bonaparte, Pitt, Spencer, and Cochrane--not to mention C.S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower and Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey and Maturin. The author's winning combination of vibrant narrative and zeal for accuracy assures this book a place in the libraries of military and intelligence professionals, historians, and Forester and O'Brian aficionados.

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