



Major General George H. Sharpe and The Creation of American Military Intelligence in the Civil War by Peter G. Tsouras.

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In this book, prolific military historian¹ Peter Tsouras provides a detailed account of the operations of the Bureau of Military Information (BMI) in the Army of the Potomac from its creation in February 1863 through Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox (9 April 1865). Framed as a biography of its founding leader, then Col. George H. Sharpe of the 120th New York Volunteer Infantry regiment, the book builds on previous studies by Edwin Fishel and William Feis.² That said, Tsouras has done yeoman's work in finding new records documenting the work of Sharpe's intelligence unit.

George Sharpe was an affluent, well-connected attorney in upstate New York before the war and then, briefly, a captain in the 20th New York State Militia regiment mobilized in 1861. During the mass recruiting drive in summer 1862, he raised the 120th New York regiment and assumed its command. The regiment participated on the periphery in the disastrous battle of Fredericksburg in December.

Tsouras begins his story soon after Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker assumed command of the Army of the Potomac. His predecessors, generals George B. McClellan and Ambrose E. Burnside, had not left him any military-intelligence resources. McClellan had relied on detectives hired by Allan Pinkerton, the head of a Chicago detective agency whose gross overestimates of the strength of Lee's army paralyzed the Union general. When President Abraham Lincoln dismissed McClellan from command, Pinkerton's detectives went home. Hooker, naturally eager for accurate information on Confederate troop strength and deployments, chose Sharpe to establish an intelligence operation as an adjunct to his headquarters and to collect useful information on Lee's army. Sharpe quickly found scouts who could infiltrate rebel lines and talented aides to oversee interrogations of deserters and compile Lee's order of battle.

The BMI was already operational in the lead-up to the battle of Chancellorsville (May 1863) and provided intelligence that could have enabled Hooker to destroy Lee's army. However, as Tsouras aptly observes, good intelligence is worthless if it is ignored. Hooker squandered his chances and Lee soundly defeated the Army of the Potomac. Maj. Gen. George G. Meade, Hooker's replacement, promptly used BMI reports to good effect in turning back Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania at Gettysburg (1-3 July 1863), though he failed to act on Sharpe's intelligence to attack Lee's army during its retreat across the Potomac.

1. And retired all-source military intelligence analyst for the US National Ground Intelligence Center and the Defense Intelligence Agency.

2. Respectively, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1996) and *Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 2002).

Meade, who remained in command of the Army of the Potomac for the remainder of the war, continued to use the BMI extensively, though he often (testily) preferred to act as his own intelligence chief. When Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant took command of the armies of the Potomac and the James to pursue Lee's army to the Confederate capital in Richmond, he made the most of Sharpe's detailed intelligence reports on rebel strength in Virginia. Importantly, Grant also learned to trust BMI's work in determining the state of Confederate morale. For example, Unionist Elizabeth Van Lew, a Richmond resident, smuggled out information that Sharpe and Grant highly valued.

Tsouras's accounts of the derring-do of BMI scouts behind rebel lines are most entertaining, but their length and granular detail are oppressive and obscure the larger picture of the value of Sharpe's efforts. Following as he does in Fishel and Feis's footsteps, the author delivers no new historical understanding of Union military intelligence. Other shortcomings include the many typos and repetitions in the narrative, as well as, more problematically, the author's penchant for using present-day military-intelligence terminology and acronyms in a Civil War context. Thus, we read that Sharpe was the creator of "all-source military intelligence." The BMI can and should be approached as a case study of military intelligence work done before it was institutionalized by the US Army in the twentieth century. But historians must resist the "whiggish" temptation to compare the practices of the "bad old days" to what are assumed to be today's better ones.

The author's evaluation of Sharpe as the unique example of top-rate intelligence work in the Civil War follows Fishel's myopic focus on the Army of the Potomac and overlooks significant intelligence operations in other Union armies and commands. For example, no historian has made a comprehensive study of Maj. Gen. William Rosecrans's significant intelligence work while he was commanding the Army of the Cumberland in Tennessee starting in fall 1862. The general directed a remarkably effective intelligence operation against Confederate forces in his front together with a far-flung security service throughout several states in his rear. In 1861, he used Ohio police detectives in western Virginia. In 1864, while in command of the Department of the Missouri with headquarters in St. Louis, he refined and expanded an already large intelligence apparatus that ranged from New Orleans to New York. In short, Rosecrans may have been the most consistent and sophisticated user of intelligence during the war. Until historians study these other operations, we must put off crowning Sharpe as the originator of high-quality Civil War intelligence work.

Tsouras also discusses Sharpe's contributions in postwar politics in New York. A Republican stalwart, he was selected by President Grant to run the customs office in the port of New York, a highly important job. Grant later appointed him US Marshal for the Southern District of New York, where he helped bust the corrupt Democratic Party political machine of William "Boss" Tweed. Here the author misses an opportunity by ignoring the significant intelligence role that the US Marshal played during the Civil War. Did the president appoint his friend Sharpe, the expert head of the BMI during the war, to continue that detective work after the war? Tsouras does not say.

George Sharpe's BMI was perhaps the best intelligence unit in the Union Army, but it certainly was not the first or, arguably, the most effective. Peter Tsouras's exhaustive research to piece together an account of Sharpe's wartime career should prompt historians to examine other important military-intelligence operations in the Civil War.