

# *Star-Crossed Translator*

## 2dLt Merle Ralph Cory, USMCR—KIA on Guadalcanal

Story by Dick Camp • USMC photos

### Navy Headquarters

Chief Ship's Clerk H. L. Bryant, OP-20-GZ's (Translation and Dissemination Section) yeoman, finished logging the sheath of newly decoded messages and looked around the desk-filled room, trying to catch the eye of one of its six linguists. It was the policy of the section chief, Lieutenant Commander Alwin D. Kramer, for an unoccupied linguist to dig into the untranslated message traffic as messages were delivered from the Cryptanalytical Section (OP-20-GY). However, the Tokyo-Washington and Tokyo-Berlin circuits were reserved for the most skilled translators. Minor circuits, termed the China net, were assigned to one of the less skilled men.

Bryant noted the top message was from the diplomatic circuit, the so-called Purple Code—Tokyo-Washington traffic. He caught the eye of a solidly built, slightly balding man in his mid-40s and nodded, indicating he had traffic for him. Civilian analyst Ralph Cory took the message and started working on the Japanese text, starting a process that would eventually reach the highest levels of the American government and be the subject of endless controversy.

Ralph Cory joined OP-20-GZ in 1940 just as relations between the United States and Japan were becoming increasingly strained. Japan, Germany and Italy formed the Tripartite Pact, vowing to

broken Japan's extremely complicated diplomatic cipher system. His team of codebreakers painstakingly constructed a machine which duplicated the Japanese apparatus, Alphabetical Typewriter, Type 97, *shiki O-bun In-ji-ki*, a drawer-size box installed between two Underwood electric typewriters.

The box contained four coding disks that were activated by a current passing through a row of sockets called a plug-board. When a key was pressed on the input typewriter, an electrical impulse traversed the coding wheels, causing totally different keys in the output machine to strike.

The American prototype wasn't pretty, but it worked, even though it reportedly spewed sparks and made loud whirring noises when it wasn't working right. The Japanese were convinced their code could not be broken. However, from the summer of 1940 on, the United States was reading virtually all the traffic between Tokyo and its important embassies—aptly calling the decoded transcripts MAGIC.

General George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, called this priceless asset "the most complete and up-to-the-minute intelligence that any nation had ever had concerning a probable enemy. ..." The Navy desperately needed linguists—there were only 50 trained linguists in the entire Navy—to take advantage of this

Nagasaki. He perfected his language skills there, while gaining an understanding of Japanese culture—indispensable skills for a translator.

Decrypted messages did not have sentence structure, just phonetic syllables, without punctuation. For example, "Ba" may mean horses or fields, old women, or my hand, all depending on the ideographs with which it is written. The translator had to make sense of the words and group them together into a meaningful text, which required the skills of a cryptanalyst, referred to as "cryptography." Code GZ's staff was known as cryptolinguists or "codebreakers." Ralph Cory's experience in Japan made him an invaluable asset.

### Making MAGIC

Daybreak was still an hour away when Cory left the modest bungalow in Rockville, Md., for his office in the old World War I Navy Department Building on Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C. When completed in WW I, the "temporary" structure was so ugly, according to then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, "it would just have to be taken down at the end of the war." The last of the relics was finally razed in 1970. A damp cold marked the late November 1941 morning, making Cory glad his old car had a working radiator. He didn't look forward to another long day of pencil pushing; he was bored with translating decoded messages, especially since he was now considered to be on a 24-hour duty basis. Cory and the other translators often worked from 0800 until late at night; 2200, 2300 were not uncommon due to the heavy volume of Purple traffic.

After parking his car, he entered the gray building and walked down a long water-stained corridor on the first deck to the sixth wing. He stopped in front of a tall, stern-looking Marine and showed his identification badge. The guard closely scrutinized it before allowing him to pass through the closed door. Security was tight. The tightly controlled area contained the offices of OP-20-G, Security Section, Naval Communications, whose innocuous title hid the

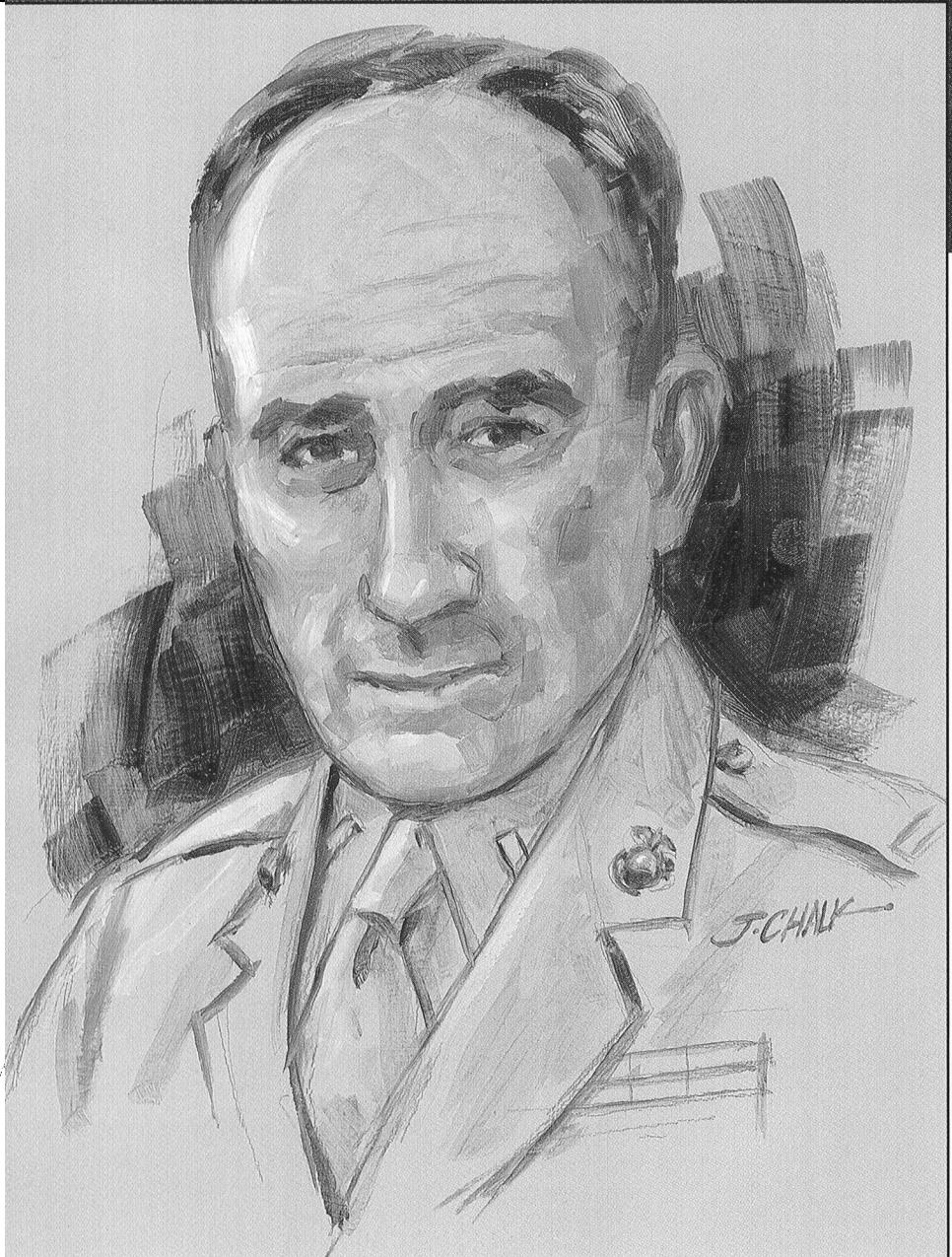
**They walked in silence, "just taking deep breaths of soft air," when Cory suddenly announced, "I'm going into the Marines!" Taken aback, Van der Rhoer asked why. Cory grimaced. "I'm sick of pencil pushing."**

"assist one another with all political, economic, and military means when one of the three is attacked by a power at present not involved in the European War or in the Sino-Japanese conflict," a direct reference to the United States.

Unknown to the Japanese, the United States, under Army Lieutenant Colonel William F. Friedman, had successfully

success. It recruited Cory from the Department of State.

Cory was assigned to the American Legation in Peking and attended Yenching University, where he was tutored in Japanese, before being posted to the Orient by the State Department. In the late 1930s, he was transferred to the embassy in Tokyo and the consulate in



Second Lt Merle Ralph Cory was an expert cryptanalyst, who, at the height of patriotic fervor, joined the Corps and went to war. His comprehensive knowledge of the American code-breaking successes caused many to second-guess the decision that allowed him to risk capture by the Japanese.

Japan-U.S.S.R. relations: KITANO-KAZE KUMORI [north wind cloudy].

Japan-British relations: NISHI NO KAZE HARE [west wind clear].

*This signal will be given in the middle and at the end as a weather forecast and each sentence will be repeated twice. When this is heard please destroy all code papers, etc. This is as yet to be a completely secret arrangement.*

*Forward as urgent intelligence.*

Cory immediately realized the significance of the message: a nation that destroyed its codes was headed toward war. Normally reserved and quiet, a man who didn't call attention to himself, he nevertheless rushed over to LCDR Kramer and excitedly pointed out the salient points of the message.

A meticulous, exacting man, Kramer compared the original Japanese text with the translation—and, satisfied it was deciphered correctly, made his way up the chain of command. In addition to supervising OP-20-GZ, Kramer was also the Navy's courier, responsible for delivering MAGIC to the highest level of government, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Cory's translation of the "Winds" message brought about a frantic effort to intercept the execute order because it could give the United States several hours advance warning of Japanese hostilities. The Navy's main intercept stations at Corregidor, Hawaii and Bainbridge Island were placed on full alert. Plain-language intercepts flooded GZ, swamping Cory and his fellow translators with false alarms.

At 11 minutes before noon on Saturday, 6 Dec., the first of 14 parts of Tokyo's response to continued negotiations with the United States arrived by teletype at OP-20-G. By 2045 that evening, the first 13 parts had been typed and placed in their distinctive reddish-brown loose-leaf cardboard folders for Kramer's delivery. It was after midnight before he finished the mission. The 14th part, breaking off negotiations, arrived five hours later for decoding. By 0945, Washington time, the fully translated message was in the

highly classified Intercept and Direction Finding Section (OP-20-GX), Cryptanalytical Section (OP-20-GY) and his own Translation and Dissemination Section (OP-20-GZ). The "G" Section comprised the 20th division of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, the U.S. Navy's headquarters establishment.

Cory's morning began with Chief Bryant's message. Not wanting to waste valuable time on an unimportant communiqué, he quickly scanned the transcript to evaluate its importance. Cory immediately noted the classification, *Kimitsu* (secret), the sender (Tokyo Foreign Office) and the message priority (Urgent), which was enough justification to continue. Within a short time, he was able to organize the disparate syllables into a coherent text.

*[Secret]*  
From: Tokyo  
To: Washington  
19 November 1941  
(J19)  
Circular #2353

*Regarding the broadcast of a special message in an emergency.*

*In case of emergency (danger of a special cutting off our diplomatic relations), and the cutting off of international communications, the following warning will be added in the middle of the daily Japanese-language shortwave news broadcast.*

*In case of Japan-U.S. relations in danger: HIGASHI NO KAZEAME feast wind rain].*

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN CHALK

Marines are shown crossing the Lunga River on Guadalcanal some weeks after the ill-fated Goettge patrol was lost.

hands of the President, who said, in effect, "This means war."

The Japanese Foreign Ministry instructed Ambassador Kichisaburo Nomura in Washington to present the 14-part message to the U.S. Secretary of State no later than 1300 (0730 Hawaii time). Because of a series of administrative blunders in decoding and typing the message, Nomura didn't arrive until 1405, 35 minutes after the attack on Pearl Harbor had begun. By the time Nomura entered Secretary of State Cordell Hull's office, the fleet anchorage was a scene of utter devastation—USS *Oklahoma* (BB-37) capsized, USS *West Virginia* (BB-48) sank, and a huge cloud of black smoke marked the funeral pyre for more than a thousand men of USS *Arizona* (BB-39).

The next day President Roosevelt spoke before a joint session of Congress: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan."

The shock of Pearl Harbor hit the translators of GZ hard, but they didn't have time to reflect on what might have been. Messages poured in, and they went to a "day-on, stay-on" work schedule, scrambling to keep up with the traffic. New faces appeared as the Navy's recruiting effort paid off. One, Edward Van der Rhoer, became friendly with Cory and remembered taking a walk on Constitution Avenue during a lunch break. It was early spring with a hint of summer fragrance in the air. They walked in silence, "just taking deep breaths of soft air," when Cory suddenly announced, "I'm going into the Marines!" Taken aback, Van der Rhoer asked why. Cory grimaced. "I'm sick of pencil pushing."

Cory was too old for a regular enlistment, but the Corps was desperately short of Japanese linguists. He was offered a direct commission, which he accepted in May 1942. Just before leaving, he invited Van der Rhoer for dinner at his house in Maryland. "It was a strangely somber evening. I met his wife, and we had some drinks before dinner, but no one had much to say. Conversation lagged. We sat down for dinner in a gloomily lit dining room.



"Cory pulled himself together and talked a little about sailing on Chesapeake Bay, after which he lapsed into silence. His wife stared intently at him and only occasionally acknowledged my presence. As soon as a decent interval had passed, I thanked them for their hospitality and took my leave. Cory left OP-20-GZ not long after to enter the Marine Corps, and I never saw him again."

#### Over the Seas

Cory received orders to the First Marine Division, which was forming up at New River, N.C. He was assigned to the Fifth Marine Regiment's Intelligence Section as a translator used to interrogate prisoners and translate documents. Soon after he left, his friends at GZ received a letter bemoaning his new digs: "I received orders on Saturday morning for my final physical examination. Enclosed is the \$10 I borrowed. It's flat country, and I'm not too fond of the base. The weather is sticky, humid and hot! We're leaving in a few days for an

undisclosed destination, and I won't have time to come up to see you. I have blisters on my feet, but I'll have more than that before this is over."

Cory's billet of canvas was one of thousands in the New River, N.C., tent city, an isolated temporary encampment on the edge of a coastal swamp. The terrain was flat and swampy, unsuitable for large-scale maneuver. One staff officer remarked: "Why this division, training here, won't be fit for a thing but jungle warfare." In mid-May, the division sailed for New Zealand. It learned upon arrival that it was to conduct the first offensive operation, code-named Watchtower, against the Japanese.

In his book "Guadalcanal Diary," Richard Tregaskis recounted "shooting the bull" with Cory and another officer on the deck of their transport. They talked of home and family, a favorite topic aboard the troopship. "I'd like to be back sailing a boat on Chesapeake Bay," Cory related nostalgically. "I'd settle for the White Mountains or Cape Cod." Their discussion was abruptly



terminated as the ship's 1MC loudspeaker system blared, "General Quarters, man all air-defense stations," sending the interlopers scrambling.

A few days later they discussed the latest rumor, the sinking of a Japanese submarine that had been shadowing the convoy. One Marine said that he had actually seen the flashes of gunfire. Cory abruptly interjected, "Two more days to go," stating the obvious and revealing that he was nervous about the landing scheduled for 7 Aug. 1942.

#### Cactus

At first light, the assault troops clambered down cargo nets into the landing craft. F4F Wildcat fighters and SBD dive bombers roared overhead, while cruisers and destroyers belched fire in the half-light. Their target, Guadalcanal, was a picture-book tropical island 90 miles long and 25 miles wide, surrounded by white-sand beaches backed by coconut palms.

Jungle-clad mountains rose high in the southern part of the island. Rain

forest, coconut plantations and fields of kunai grass—crossed by rivers and streams—marked the northern part of the island. Cory's turn came later when his Intelligence Section boated for the run to the beach. They landed standing up; there wasn't any resistance. However, they quickly found out the tropical paradise was a hot, humid hellhole. Jungle slime gave off a fetid stench, while boot-sucking mud sapped strength and made patrolling a grueling experience. Jungle vegetation restricted visibility to a few yards and kept ocean breezes from penetrating the dense foliage. A horde of blood-sucking insects welcomed the newcomers as they scrambled ashore.

The advancing force overran a Japanese tent camp, and several prisoners were taken. They were a scraggly bunch, none more than 5 feet tall, dwarfed by their Marine captors, who looked huge by comparison. The call went out for Second Lieutenant Cory. He soon found out the half-naked men—clothes might hold weapons—were from a Japanese

Navy labor battalion that had been working on the airfield. One of the men had been allowed to keep his visored cap with its cloth anchor insignia. All had shaved heads, scraggly beards and sallow skin. Malaria was rampant on the island.

As Cory walked through the Japanese camp, he saw evidence of its hasty abandonment. Equipment was strewn throughout the area; the pre-H-hour shelling ripped tents. Shattered coconut palms, whose trunks were slashed by shrapnel, had their tops blown off. A few mutilated Japanese bodies were sprawled in the dirt, victims of the same bombardment. It was a sobering experience for the civilian translator-turned-Marine interrogator.

Days passed, and more prisoners arrived for Cory's interrogation. Most were cooperative. Japan did not have a prisoner of war code because it was expected that troops would kill themselves before capture, but a few were hard cases. One prisoner, a naval warrant officer, proved to be difficult. Cory worked



Marines took the opportunity for a quick bath in the Matanikau River, but under the watchful eye of an armed sentry.

Three were cut down, including Ringer.

The last survivor, Platoon Sergeant Frank L. Few, made a mad dash for the water. As he looked back, "swords flashed in the morning sun." Cory's old friend Van der Rhoer was told, "The swimmer saw a [Japanese] soldier thrust his bayonet into Cory's body, stretched out on the sand where he had first fallen."

Cory was listed as missing in action on 13 Aug. 1942, which was changed to killed in action (body not recovered) a year later for administrative purposes by the Secretary of the Navy. His wife, Carolyn, wrote to Van der Rhoer informing him that she had received the "bad-news telegram." A headstone was erected in New Tacoma Cemetery, Tacoma, Wash.

Ralph Cory should never have been a Marine, much less at Guadalcanal. It was government policy that anyone connected with MAGIC was expressly prohibited from combat or duty that put them in close proximity to the enemy. He slipped through the cracks and paid with his life. He saw his duty as being at the front, not "pencil pushing" in the rear.

*Author's note: Most contemporary accounts claim that the remains of the Goettge patrol were never discovered. In "Guadalcanal, Starvation Island" however, Eric Hammel wrote, "A patrol discovered a leg encased in a Marine legging and boondockers protruding from the sand. Nearby, an oversized, handless arm was sticking out of the ground. Marine Gunner Bill Rust thought it was either Goettge or Ringer; both of whom had been very large men."*

*The patrol was withdrawn before they had time to recover the remains.*

*Editor's note: Leatherneck appreciates former 1950s staff artist and Marine veteran John Chalk's painting of 2d Lt Cory. John operates War & Peace, Inc., Pottstown, Pa.*

*Retired Col Dick Camp is a coauthor with Eric Hammel of "Lima-6," a book about a Marine company commander in Vietnam. It is available at MCA bookstores. Col Camp is a frequent contributor to Leatherneck.*

on him to no avail and finally resorted to an old tried-and-true tongue loosener—a little medicinal brandy.

The libation did the trick. The man told Cory that a large number of *rikusentai*, infantry-trained bluejackets, and laborers were wandering around in the jungle west of the Matanikau River and were willing to surrender. At the same time a report came in that Marines in the same area believed they saw a white flag.

Cory took the information to LtCol Frank Goettge, Division Intelligence Officer, who organized a 25-man patrol to bring them in. On 12 Aug. 1942, they set out in the darkness aboard a tank lighter—scouts, intelligence clerks, a few infantrymen, Goettge, Captain Bill Ringer (5th Marines Intelligence Officer), Cory and LCDR Malcolm L. Pratt (5th Marines surgeon).

Navy LT Jack Fuller, officer in charge of the Lunga boat pool, remembered: "We were all laughing and talking to the members of the small party while they were awaiting the boat which was to take them down. They left feeling quite confident in their mission. We waited until our boat returned [from the mission] and then turned in. Ac-

cording to the boat crew everything was quiet and peaceful."

Shortly before 2200 the patrol landed just west of the Matanikau estuary—despite a warning to stay clear of the area—near a coral ridge. They deployed in a rough, shallow perimeter in a row of giant banyan trees near the water's edge. As Goettge, Ringer and another Marine went forward to find a suitable bivouac, the darkness was shattered by gunfire. Goettge fell with a bullet in the head, as a torrent of fire erupted from the undergrowth, catching the surprised Marines at close quarters. Ringer took charge of the survivors and organized a defense.

Within seconds, Cory fell seriously wounded, a bullet in the stomach. He lay on the beach bleeding heavily, unable to move. Dr. Pratt went to help a wounded man and was felled with bullets in the chest and lower back. Ringer sent two men for help, Corporal Joseph Spaulding and Sergeant Charles C. "Monk" Arndt, as the Japanese increased their pressure on the tiny perimeter. As dawn broke, only four Marines remained alive. They were trapped on the beach and made a run for the protection of the jungle.