
THE ORIGINS OF THE MILITARY ATTACHÉ CORPS

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Those historians who have written about the history of American Military Intelligence have correctly traced its origins to the Revolutionary War. But for much of our history, the acquisition of military intelligence information appears to have been almost exclusively a wartime pursuit. Active military intelligence collection efforts tended to grow when military forces were engaged in combat and to all but disappear when the nation was at peace. This ebb and flow continued almost until the beginning of the twentieth century.

While early American military planners could feel reasonably safe behind the oceanic barrier that separated the growing nation from any would be aggressors, their European confreres realized that any other European nation could be a potential adversary. The European military hierarchy realized early on that a pair of trained eyes assigned in a neighboring nation or empire could report on the latest military developments in military technology and theory and provide great defensive value.

The French began the custom of adding military officers to their diplomatic establishments abroad as early as 1806. Other European nations soon followed suit. These first military diplomats served two purposes in European diplomatic circles. In uniforms bedecked with braid and brass they added to the spectacle of diplomatic ceremony. But their more important function was to observe the military developments in the country to which they were posted. There was no secret to this important role of the military attaché. Indeed most attachés were invited to observe the annual military maneuvers. In this way, one presumes, a hosting country might display the prowess of its military forces in hopes that the foreign attaché might report those forces were far too formidable for his own to vanquish.

As the numbers of military officers serving in diplomatic posts in Europe grew, each nation tended to develop its own unique term to identify those military officers assigned to the legation. Some nations called these officers simply military agents. In other legations they assumed the title of first or second secretary or even military secretary of the legation. Still other embassies called assigned military officers *chargés d'affaires militaire*. The officers in German embassies were known by the title *militärsachverständiger*. In all, more than ten titles developed to describe military officers serving as part of the diplomatic legation. But eventually diplomatic

convention settled on the term Military Attaché and Naval Attaché to describe these military diplomats.

Some historians appear to be confused by the term attaché. Simply because an officer was sent abroad did not make him an attaché. Nor even did the fact that an officer was assigned to an embassy make him an attaché. The term attaché has a significant and defined meaning in diplomatic usage. A military (or naval) attaché is an officer who has been nominated by his nation to serve in its diplomatic legation abroad. His credentials are presented and accepted by the receiving state and he is added to the diplomatic list. An attaché is accorded full diplomatic status and, as such, is afforded complete diplomatic immunity.

Attachés were military officers who straddled two worlds. They were detached from their service. They had no troops to command, and they were not in possession of their arms. On one hand they were part of their nation's diplomatic presence and as such they were expected to perform at diplomatic functions and circulate at that level of society which characterized the diplomatic community. On the other hand, they were military and naval officers who were expected to obtain military information which might prove useful to their nations.

EARLY COLLECTION OF INFORMATION

American naval officers have always been in a unique position to observe and report information. Because they stopped in foreign ports naval officers could observe the status of those foreign ports and note the presence of harbor fortifications and coastal defenses. While ashore, they could engage naval officers from other ships companies in conversation and make assessments of the training and capability of foreign navies.

American army officers had far less contact with foreign militaries. When the 19th century American Army needed information on new developments in military tactics or equipment, it usually asked American diplomats to obtain it. Occasionally, the War Department dispatched individual officers or commissions of officers abroad to obtain needed information. As early as 1807 the War Department began sending military officers to Europe in an effort to obtain specific information on military developments in tactics and weaponry. The War Department announced the