

## **MAJOR HERBERT O. YARDLEY**

### **US Army (Deceased)**



Herbert O. Yardley was born on 13 April 1889 in Worthington, Indiana.

On 16 November 1912, Yardley was hired as a \$900-a-year code clerk and telegrapher by the State Department. He practiced cryptography by deciphering State Department messages. Later, through connections with telegraph companies, he began to work on foreign embassy message traffic. In 1916, Yardley deciphered a communication between President Wilson and his aide, COL House, in two hours. This incident confirmed to him the need in the United States for higher-grade ciphers and code.

Yardley was commissioned a Second Lieutenant on 29 June 1917 and was placed in charge of the War Department's MI-8, the Code and Cipher Section. During the World War, his section deciphered a total of 10,735 messages sent by foreign governments. MI-8 helped convict Lothar Witzke, who was suspected of setting off the Black Tom explosion. Yardley deciphered a secret message found on the spy and sealed his conviction and death sentence.

During the armistice talks, Yardley was in charge of the code bureau attached to the American Commission at the Paris Peace conference.

On 17 May 1919, the State Department and the War Department approved a plan drafted by Yardley that kept MI-8 active. Because State Department money could not be spent in Washington, and for secrecy, Yardley set up shop in New York City. This organization would come to be known as the Black Chamber.

In December 1919, Yardley broke the Japanese diplomatic code. The information derived from this breakthrough proved useful during the Washington Naval Conference of 1921. During the conference, Yardley's organization processed more than 5,000 solutions and translations. The interception of the



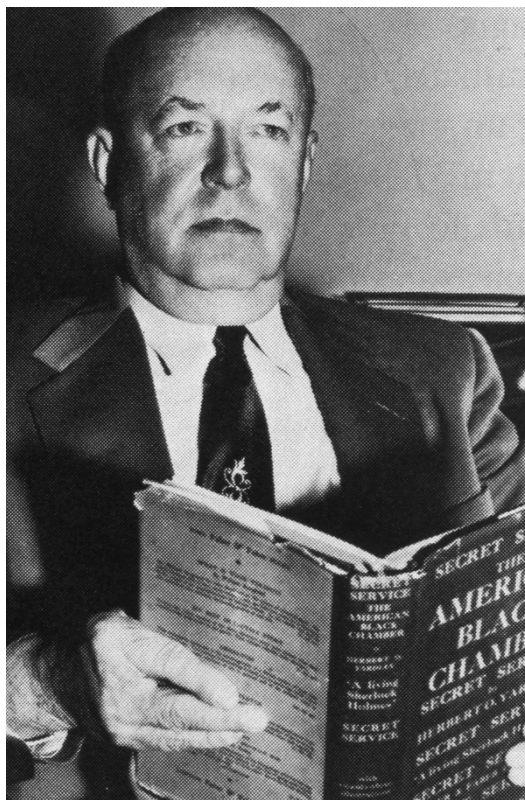
**Herbert Yardley in uniform,  
ca. 1917**

Japanese diplomatic traffic gave the American negotiators a major advantage.

After the success, the perceived need for an MI-8 type of operation diminished. Cooperation with the cable companies ended with a dispute between Western Union and the State Department in 1921. For example, in 1926, Yardley's Black Chamber was pronounced illegal. All State Department funds were withdrawn, thus terminating Yardley's organization. From 1917 to 1929, the Black Chamber solved more than 45,000 telegrams and cracked the codes/ciphers of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, Costa Rica, Cuba, England, France, Germany, Japan, Liberia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, San Salvador, Santo Domingo, Soviet Union and Spain.

In 1931, Yardley began publishing the story of his work at MI-8. His book, *The American Black Chamber*, sold 18,000 copies in the United States. The Japanese translation sold 33,000 copies. Reviews in Japanese papers caused a furor and the Foreign Office was heavily criticized for not changing its ciphers.

Yardley then wrote a second book entitled *Japanese Diplomatic Secrets*. The manuscript was confiscated by the government in 1933 and was not declassified until 1979. As a result of this episode, Congress passed Public Law 37, today known as Section 952, Title 18 of the United States Code, which forbids the publication of information through transmission intercept without US Government approval.



**Herbert Yardley holds a copy of his infamous expose, *The American Black Chamber*, which damaged US Intelligence leading up to World War II. His missing finger was the result of experiments with secret inks.**

Yardley turned to writing fiction. One of his novels, *The Blonde Countess*, a thinly disguised account of some of Yardley's experiences during the years 1917-1929, was adapted for the movie "Rendezvous."

In 1938, Yardley was hired by Chiang Kai-Shek at \$10,000 a year to decipher Japanese Army messages in China. He returned to the United States in 1940. Yardley went to work in Canada to solve ciphers but was quickly forced out because of pressure from the British and Secretary Stimson's refusal to cooperate with Canada for as long as Yardley was employed.

In 1957, after numerous business failures, he wrote the book *The Education of a Poker Player*. It was a success and was still in print 25 years later.

After several strokes, Yardley died on 7 August 1958. He was buried with Military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Despite the controversies surrounding his life, there is no question as to the contributions he made to Military Intelligence. Therefore, in 1988, Yardley was inducted into the MI Hall of Fame; in 1993, Yardley Dining Facility on Fort Huachuca was named in his honor.



**MG Paul Menoher and COL John Black celebrate the memorialization of the Yardley Hall Dining Facility on Fort Huachuca in 1993.**



**MI-8 officers provided COMSEC to the US delegation at the Peace of Versailles in 1918. In the rear is MI-8 chief MAJ Herbert O. Yardley. CPT J. Rives Childs, in front, later became a diplomat.**