
**King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America's Spymaster in Korea.
By Blaine Hardin. New York, Viking, 2017**

Ed J. Hagerty
American Military University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss>
pp. 93-102

Recommended Citation

Hagerty, Ed J.. "King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America's Spymaster in Korea. By Blaine Hardin. New York, Viking, 2017." *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 4 (2017) : 93-102.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.10.4.1651>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol10/iss4/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Strategic Security by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America's Spymaster in Korea. By Blaine Hardin. New York, Viking, 2017

***King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America's Spymaster in Korea.* By Blaine Harden. New York, Viking, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-525-42993-7. Photographs. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp. xii, 260. \$27.00.**

Blaine Harden is a *New York Times* bestselling author who has written several books about events on the Korean Peninsula. His 2012 bestseller, *Escape From Camp 14*, told the story of a much tortured North Korean man, Shin Dong-hyuk, who eventually escaped his country's gulag system and defected to the South in 2006. It later transpired that Shin's tale, as it was related to Harden, was less than fully truthful. Subsequent editions of the book included an updated Foreword clarifying some of the fictitious aspects of Shin's story. Harden faced fewer complications in *King of Spies*. While some of the stories it contains are from oral interviews and are not corroborated by other sources, the bulk of the tale is based on Harden's painstaking research into the shadowy world of an Air Force sergeant who somehow managed to talk his way into the inner sanctum of the South Korean government in the late 1940s by winning the trust and confidence of the president, Syngman Rhee. The story of how the relatively untutored sergeant, Donald P. Nichols, rose to such prominence is truly a fascinating one, and it was one that Nichols himself tried to tell in a 1981 self-published autobiography. Like Shin, Nichols sometimes embellished his role and twisted the facts, but the truth in his story is sufficiently enthralling and it requires no fantasies to make it so. Harden skillfully sifted fact from fiction, uncovering documentary sources and interviewing those who knew Nichols, to present the narrative of his incredibly adventurous life and career.

Harden first stumbled across Nichols' name while researching a book about a former North Korean fighter pilot who defected in the spring of 1950, by flying his Soviet-made Ilyushin IL-10 ground attack fighter to a U. S. airfield in the South. The first person the pilot was able to speak to in his own language was the Air Force's Don Nichols, the high school dropout who ran a spy ring that was so successful it ingratiated him with President Rhee and made him one of the most powerful men in the country. How that came to be is a tale that is superbly told by Harden.

Nichols came from a broken home. His promiscuous mother deserted the family and left his father brokenhearted, so times were frequently tough during the Depression. Seeking to escape the poverty and hunger he knew in his youth, Nichols joined the Army in 1940. He served in India during World War II, working in a motor pool in Karachi and later volunteering in the

understaffed morgue where he embalmed his fellow servicemen who had succumbed to accident or disease. Later Nichols was accepted for training for the Army's Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) in Tokyo and was assigned to South Korea upon graduation in 1946. He reported to the tiny CIC detachment at Kimpo Airfield and found that South Korea was then embroiled in a violent civil war pitting an anti-communist Right against the communist Left. Anti-American sentiment ran high as well. A bloody uprising took place that fall, leading to mass arrests of leftists. The Army commander in Korea ordered CIC to go on the offensive, engaging in positive intelligence operations in an effort to develop information about North Korean and other communist agitators in the South. Nichols embraced that mission with relish. According to his version of the story, Nichols began his relationship with Syngman Rhee around that time, recognizing the immense intelligence benefits to be derived from such close access to government sources. Nichols also began working closely with the Korean National Police, witnessing brutal interrogation techniques, torture, and even executions. He seems to have become inured to it, in all likelihood reasoning that the dire circumstances justified the means. That attitude would soon pay dividends in his running of spy operations behind enemy lines in North Korea when war broke out in June 1950.

Nichols' relationship with Rhee is one of the most puzzling aspects of the story, causing one former Air Force historian to wonder why no one at the time asked: "What the hell is this twenty-three-year-old air force sergeant doing in the role of private confidant to a head of state?" (35). No one in the Defense or State Department ever thought to "place Nichols under the meaningful supervision of a senior intelligence official" (35). By June 1949, Rhee wrote to U. S. Ambassador John Muccio, personally requesting that Nichols serve as Rhee's advisor on Air Affairs for an expanding South Korean Air Force. The creation of that air force was greatly encouraged by Nichols, who—in direct opposition to U. S. Military wishes—urged the building of a separate service divorced from the army, just as the U. S. had done in 1947. Rhee acceded to Nichols' advice, and the low-ranked U. S. Air Force sergeant was given unprecedented influence over how that South Korean Air Force functioned. Though Nichols was undoubtedly flattered by his close relationship with Rhee, the president was shrewd in deriving benefits from the relationship as well. With the withdrawal of U. S. combat troops from South Korea in the summer of 1949, Rhee felt the vulnerability of his meager military capability in the face of a much more militant and well equipped North. While Rhee pressured the American government for additional military support, he also enlisted Nichols' aid in using the increasing number

of alarming intelligence information reports to bolster his efforts. Nichols dutifully and steadily funneled news of a massive North Korean buildup to his superiors, eventually getting the attention of the Far East Air Force commander, General George E. Stratemeyer. The general's reports of Nichols' warnings finally woke up the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), who met at the State Department in March 1950, to begin to figure out just how accurate Nichols' detailed reporting was, and whether his dire warnings of impending war were realistic.

When the Air Force separated from the Army in 1947, the Army's former CIC agents generally transferred from assignment to the Army Air Forces to the new U. S. Air Force. Nichols was one of those CIC agents, but the Air Force soon created its own investigative arm, the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI), which combined criminal and counterintelligence investigations under one roof. Former Army CIC agents then joined former Army Criminal Investigations Division agents as co-equals in the new AFOSI. That agency had no clearly defined wartime mission that by any stretch of the imagination included even half of the things Nichols was doing in Korea. Still, backed by his relationship with Rhee and the quality of his intelligence reports, no one pressed the issue.

Nichols not only was the first American to interview the defecting North Korean pilot, he also convinced the South Koreans to give the pilot's IL-10 to the U. S. and enticed the pilot to work for him as a spy. By then he operated a tiny AFOSI detachment from his very own, separate spy base. From there he recruited, trained, and exploited South Korean spies, sending them into the North—many to a certain death.

His support from the National Police also allowed him access to other defectors and detainees, from whom he extracted useful intelligence information. His quest for accurate intelligence prompted him to go to North Korea himself in 1947, disguised as an Army officer accompanying a special train transporting supplies to U. S. negotiators in Pyongyang. Later he took hazardous surveillance flights over the North in unarmed spotter planes to see for himself the buildup of North Korean military power.

His reporting was undoubtedly highly accurate, so when it drew the attention of the JCS in March 1950, it also drew the attention of General MacArthur's chief of intelligence, Major General Charles A. Willoughby, who—whether out of stubbornness, arrogance, or pride—refused to credit Nichols' work as accurate. Instead, his sycophantic relationship with MacArthur, who believed

he had insufficient forces in Japan to even consider the possibility of supporting South Korea, caused him to downplay the prospects of an invasion of the South. Both Willoughby and MacArthur conspired to turn a blind eye to events on the Korean Peninsula. Inquiries from the JCS, however, soon pushed the issue into the limelight. Willoughby not only declined to concede the accuracy of Nichols' or other similar reporting from the CIA, he actively sought to silence the young AFOSI agent. Fortunately, Nichols was able to deflect the wrath of the vindictive Willoughby because the AFOSI personnel were assigned to the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG), not to MacArthur's U. S. Army Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). KMAG took its marching orders from the U. S. Ambassador, to whom Willoughby appealed unsuccessfully in May 1950, in an attempt to get rid of Nichols. The ambassador was more appreciative of Nichols' intelligence work, not to mention his "friendly relationship to key Korean personalities" (55). He defended Nichols' work, praised the young agent, and in no uncertain terms declined to eliminate that source of vital information.

Meanwhile, Nichols made a new friend: Major General Earle E. Partridge, the Fifth Air Force commander who led all air operations in the Pacific Theater. They first met at the end of 1949, and Partridge would later be totally stunned to learn of the threat posed by North Korea, all of which had been reported by Nichols. Willoughby had never passed on any of Nichols' information to his air commander. Partridge quickly recognized the talents and abilities Nichols exhibited, and he would become one of his most avid supporters, but in June 1950, the Air Force was as unprepared as the other services for the outbreak of war in Korea.

Nichols' warnings were validated on Sunday, June 25, 1950, when North Korean artillery opened fire and a phalanx of Soviet-made T-34 tanks rolled across the thirty-eighth parallel followed by hordes of North Korean soldiers crushing all resistance in their path. Nichols quickly notified AFOSI Headquarters in Tokyo, struggling to make the duty agent understand the situation over the poor phone connection. As MacArthur scrambled to respond over the ensuing days, he ordered Partridge to begin air strikes on the North. The General readily agreed to do so, but he quickly realized his bombers suffered from a severe handicap. They had no targeting information about North Korea and though fully ready to drop bombs with wild abandon, they had no idea what to drop those bombs on. Nichols quickly stepped into that intelligence gap and began to draw on his vast network of resources to provide the Air Force with targeting data and maps. While most American military forces in Korean beat a hasty retreat, Nichols and his AFOSI clerk

remained behind in Seoul, destroying vital files. In his autobiography, Nichols began at this point to inflate his heroic deeds, many of which were later laughingly dismissed by his clerk, Sarbando Torres. Still, Torres had to admit that Nichols “wasn’t afraid of a damn thing” (72). Despite his tendency to embellish his deeds, what he actually accomplished over the ensuing months was quite enough to cement his reputation.

By June 1950, Nichols had been elevated to the rank of warrant officer, and soon after the war began he was commissioned and quickly promoted to captain in recognition of his accomplishments. As North Korean troops overran the U. S. airfield at Suwon, Nichols led a South Korean force back to the field to destroy abandoned U.S. aircraft. Soon after that he flew the first of fifty air reconnaissance missions over North Korea, spotting eighteen Soviet-made fighters on the ground, which led to a successful bombing mission that was based on his reporting. Next he saved the life of the Korean Air Force chief of staff whose jeep had flipped over in a swamp. In July 1950 he was wounded leading a South Korean patrol that stopped a larger North Korean assault force attempting to infiltrate Taegu Airfield. In early August he led a mission to recover vital components of a disabled T-34 tank while under fire, though in that case it seems Nichols once again inflated his role. Still, after just a few months Nichols had engaged in actions that earned him an Air Medal, a Distinguished Flying Cross, a Soldier’s Medal for heroism not involving combat, a Purple Heart, and a Silver Star, the latter for the T-34 mission, which allowed U. S. forces to exploit a vulnerability in the tank’s armor.

One event that mars Nichols’ reputation even more than his tendency to inflate his role in action was his silence and participation in a thirty-one-year cover-up of the South Korean massacre of suspected communist civilians and prisoners. Nichols witnessed one of the largest of these massacres near Taejon in July 1950, which the U. S. government steadfastly denied, then later blamed on North Korea when the bodies of several thousand South Korean civilians were discovered. American witnesses to similar killings did complain, and the U. S. Ambassador raised the issue with President Rhee, which at least slowed the pace and scope of the murders. The South Korean government did not acknowledge these shameful actions until 2005, when former policemen admitted their role in the killings as part of an investigation by the Korean government’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. That some American witnesses and the U. S. Government chose to look the other way for fifty-five years is an inexcusable blemish on our nation’s sometimes

questionable role in Asian affairs. Likewise, Nichols' silence does him no credit, no matter what the motive.

Nothing can excuse such behavior, but nonetheless, Nichols continued to provide vital intelligence. With American forces hunkered into a defensive posture on the Pusan Perimeter, Nichols drew on the capabilities of a North Korean army radio operator and cryptographer who had fled his post in 1949 with sensitive codebooks. At that time, Nichols had the defector, Cho Yong Il, commissioned in the South Korean Air Force and placed in command of a radio intercept facility near Seoul. Within a few weeks, the war started and the unit fled southward. Cho found himself at Taegu, inside the Pusan Perimeter, where he and his men set up radio receivers and began monitoring North Korean messages. With results comparable to the breaking of German and Japanese codes in World War II, Cho's unit fully capitalized on the North Korean failure to change their codes after he escaped with copies. Perhaps the theft even went unreported lest Cho's former commander bear the responsibility as well as the fatal consequences of Cho's actions.

Whatever the reason, Nichols was delighted to find that Cho had taken the initiative to begin the intercepts at Taegu. He immediately ordered Cho's unit to set up shop in his own Taegu compound, where they established an efficient system of interpreting the intercepted messages and conveying the information to nearby Army and Air Force headquarters. Partridge's Fifth Air Force thus had plenty of targeting information and it acted quickly to strike troop formations, supply lines, and artillery emplacements. The information was vital in defending the Perimeter, and Nichols soon moved to consolidate all cryptological efforts under his control, making he and the information he produced essential to the American war effort. Nichols' proximity to the battlefield negated the typical problem with the analysis and dissemination of intelligence data, which was a delay in conveying actionable intelligence to field commanders. Nichols' unit had almost immediate access to Army and Air Force intelligence officers who could operationalize the data quickly. The U. S. Army commander in Korea, as well as the South Korean government, credited Nichols with contributing to saving both the U. S. Eighth Army and the Pusan Perimeter. With no clearly defined wartime mission, Nichols saw opportunity and grabbed it. The Air Force was soon clamoring for even more.

By August 1950, Partridge was seeking additional targets for his bombers. Nichols coordinated with South Korean intelligence officers and soon recruited forty-eight agents to be dropped behind enemy lines after a rapid one-week training program in Japan. The results of that effort and several

subsequent infiltrations could be considered disastrous, with very few of the agents ever returning safely. Many South Korean veterans still resent that Nichols was seemingly insensate of the heavy toll.

In the wake of MacArthur's Inchon landing, which placed his army in the rear of North Korean forces besieging the Pusan Perimeter, allied troops broke out of the perimeter and joined in chasing the North Koreans nearly to the Chinese border. Nichols followed along in the wake of the advance, eventually searching Kim Il Sung's home and offices in Pyongyang. His cryptology team set up shop at an airfield forty miles north of the capital, but they had far less success cracking Chinese radio codes. In an intelligence failure that exceeded even the debacle of June 1950, allied forces were caught totally unawares when they suddenly faced hordes of Chinese troops. To their everlasting shame, both MacArthur and Willoughby callously disregarded all evidence that the Chinese were not only massed on the border, they were already fighting in North Korea. Despite ample evidence of the presence of Chinese forces, MacArthur underestimated Chinese resolve and stupidly ordered U. S. troops to advance all the way to the Yalu River. This was a threat Chairman Mao could not brook. On November 25, 300,000 Chinese soldiers fell on the unsuspecting Americans and their allies. Most of them had believed they would be home for Christmas. Instead they were swept up in one of the nation's most costly military disasters and sent reeling back across the thirty-eighth parallel.

Nichols' career benefitted from the catastrophe, though. His actions, as noted, far exceeded the scope of duties any AFOSI agent would have been expected to perform, so Partridge created a totally new outfit under the auspices of the Air Intelligence Service Squadron. It soon took on the name NICK, and it was the foundation of subsequent Air Force Special Operations functions. Reporting directly to Partridge, Nichols was charged with conducting sabotage and guerrilla activities behind enemy lines. As a result, NICK was staffed largely with South Korean Air Force personnel. Nichols and his team soon scored another intelligence coup in April 1951, when they recovered vital parts and information from a MiG-15 that had crash landed behind enemy lines. Nichols received a Distinguished Service Cross for that mission, which prompted engineers to improve the performance of the American F-86 Sabre so that it could outmaneuver the Soviet fighter. Nichols' power expanded even further in the aftermath of that mission, with Partridge tasking him to gather intelligence information "by any means necessary" (103). By the end of 1952, Nichols' spy network and intelligence empire had grown from a modest start to a squadron with fifty sub-

detachments scattered across the peninsula. Over 900 Korean agents were at his disposal, along with fifty-two U. S. Air Force personnel. The unit's activities were marked by some outstanding successes, such as the recovery of an intact MiG-15 instrument panel from another crashed jet, but also by continued disaster, such as the failed mission to blow up two railroad bridges from which fourteen of fifteen South Korean agents did not return.

Nichols' power was nearly absolute, and thus he grew in many ways to be absolutely corrupt. Rumors of his homosexual behavior began to surface, and South Korean veterans recalled how handsome young airmen would visit Nichols in his quarters. At some point a gunfight erupted in his quarters when Nichols was apparently attacked by a half-dozen South Koreans resentful of his callous profligacy with their lives. Nichols killed three of them and the others were arrested and tried. Other incidents reveal the extent that power may have corrupted him. Once he may have ordered a South Korean Military Policeman dropped behind enemy lines as punishment for arresting two of his friends. In another incident, Nichols ordered a North Korean officer suspected of murdering Chinese prisoners of war who collaborated with Americans to be flown over the Han River and pushed out of the plane without a parachute.

With the signing of the armistice ending the Korean War, Nichols remained at the helm of his extensive spy network for another four years with a very brief interlude in a U.S. assignment that was cut short after Nichols appealed to Partridge to return to Korea. By 1955, Nichols was thriving in Korea as commander of the Air Force's 6006th Intelligence Squadron with the rank of major. The expanded number of Air Force personnel under his command apparently led to his undoing. Complaints began to flow in about his mistreatment of the troops assigned to the squadron. Nichols behaved no differently than he ever did, but he seemed not to grasp that he was no longer pushing around South Koreans fearful of their own government. He was now dealing primarily with Americans, and his "unusual and abnormal conduct," not to mention his excessive weight of 260 pounds, was not what they expected of their commander, especially when the war was over (146). By 1957, few of his men even knew what Nichols had accomplished during the war. Eventually, his old unit, AFOSI, conducted an investigation into some of the allegations leveled against him. While the details leading to Nichols' eventual dismissal from command were not located by Harden, one may surmise that the involvement of AFOSI, whose mission was the investigation of serious crimes and counterintelligence issues, meant that something other than poor leadership lay at the root of the problem. Harden poses some

tantalizing possibilities. Nichols apparently amassed a small fortune during his service in Korea, so there is the suspicion of financial irregularities or outright theft. It is also possible that his homosexual tendencies were finally exposed as more than rumor. Lastly, Harden raises the prospect that Nichols' close relationship with Syngman Rhee had outlived its usefulness to the U. S. Government. Rhee was hanging on to power by a thin margin and the use of strongman tactics bordering on a dictatorship. He and his henchmen were increasingly seen as a threat to U. S. interests in the region.

Nichols was relieved of command in July 1957. By October he was under psychiatric evaluation in an Air Force hospital in Japan, despite not a single shred of evidence of mental disorder in any of his performance reports or his medical and service records. For ten days doctors could find nothing wrong, then Nichols grew impatient with the involuntary stay. He lashed out and became "agitated, disoriented, and very aggressive" (159). Nichols was sedated with Thorazine and transferred to a hospital in Florida. Confinement to an institution with plenty of time to reflect on his traumatic experiences and years of accumulated stress must have led Nichols to the point of questioning his own sanity. He was eventually diagnosed as schizophrenic, leading to a tripled dose of Thorazine and finally to electroshock treatments as his condition deteriorated. He was stabilized, released from active duty, and placed in disability retirement status in the spring of 1958. Nichols was permanently separated from the Air Force four years later with a 70 disability rating.

The disgraced spymaster never fully recovered from the shame of dismissal and the mental health diagnosis. The remainder of his life is marked by a series of sad events, including an arrest for child molestation in 1966, followed by another arrest for raping a 15-year-old girl. The 320 pound retiree skipped bail and fled to Mexico with the son he claimed to have fathered with a Korean woman. He said he had married the woman in Korea, but she died in childbirth. No one else ever seemed to know anything about her. After nearly a year in Mexico, Nichols was eventually convinced to return and face the charges with the assistance of a prominent attorney. He was found not guilty of the sexual assault charge, and the rape charge was dismissed when the girl changed her story.

Nichols settled down in Florida to begin work on his autobiography and his life took on a semblance of normalcy. He was invited on a few occasions to address special agents in training at the AFOSI Academy at Bolling AFB, and he returned to Korea in 1987 at the invitation of his former South Korean Air

Force comrades. There he was feted and hailed as a war hero. Shortly after returning home, however, he was again charged with a sexual offense and he pled nolo contendere to lewd and lascivious behavior. He was fined and ordered to attend counseling, but another arrest followed six months later. Nichols was confined to a psychiatric ward in a VA hospital in Alabama until his death in 1992 at age sixty-nine, a disgraced and forgotten hero of a forgotten war. Nichols determined to remain tied for eternity to the shadowy world of the spy. By his instructions, the marker on his grave bears no mention of his military service or of Korea. It does however bear the name of his supposed Korean wife.

Spy stories can often lead one to conclude that spying is not a business for the faint of heart. This is certainly true of Don Nichols, who embraced his mission with a relish that indicates he was interested only in results, not in how they were achieved. He was a man willing to do the dirty work and get results no matter the cost. In that respect he was no worse than those for whom he worked. His superiors welcomed his information, praised his skills, and looked the other way. Were it not for his disreputable personal conduct, he would undoubtedly be celebrated as a hero for the deeds he performed for his country. Despite his braggadocio he did risk his life on numerous occasions to accomplish his mission. He expected no less from others and he could not have been an easy man to work for. In allowing Nichols so many years of virtually unsupervised free rein, the Air Force contributed to letting the renegade genie that was Don Nichols out of his bottle. Getting him back inside was an equally ugly affair that does his handlers no credit. Blaine Harden's book adeptly lays out the whole process in this well written, stranger than life tale of a man who would be king—of spies.

Edward J. Hagerty, American Military University