Vera. She took initiatives that exceeded her apparently low-level authority. Donovan wondered if the name Vera Atkins was a cover, it was so commonplace.

She drove him along a route taken months earlier by three charabancs loaded with Captain Ridley’s Hunting Party, which was the cover for the Government Code and Cipher School (GCCS). The name struck Donovan as hilarious. The route went by way of Marble Arch and some forty-seven miles northward along the old Roman road known as Watling Street, through the villages of Great and Little Brickhill, turning left at Fenny Stratford, then right onto Bletchley Road. He had been here before. Now she wanted him to catch the authentic flavor of the country’s largest clandestine operation, in which participants were ordinary folk with no pretensions. She paused for a pub lunch at the Shoulder of Mutton in Old Bletchley and was amused by his reaction to young men in patched tweed jackets and girls who mostly looked just young enough to attend finishing schools. She drove on, beyond an extraordinary muddle of stables and huts where code breakers worked. Donovan was unprepared for off-duty youths in gray flannel trousers who played cricket beside a muddy lake that was overlooked by the mansion called BP for Bletchley Park. BP was strategically located at the intersection of railways running north, south, east, and west, and was easily accessible by train for its Oxford and Cambridge “boffins,” many of them long-haired and gaunt, who shambled through BP’s barn doors. Old buildings had been converted and muddy lanes paved over by a Mr. Faulkner who turned up in full foxhunting gear on his way to ride with the Whaddon Chase Hunt. Mr. Faulkner had been instructed to take to the grave the secrets he knew. He was developing a priceless property; its core would become known as ULTRA.

Donovan was entrusted with an overview of work that revolved more and more around Enigma. It was clear that U.S. industrial capacity was needed. Even machines as elementary as teletypes, which shift increasingly heavy loads of text at high speed between outlying signal stations and analysts, were unobtainable in sufficient quantity. For starters, GCCS and a network of secret departments required four seven-line and two twelve-line Hollerith machines from America. The threat to shipping increased or decreased according to how speedily Bletchley deciphered orders to U-boats. On April 26, 1940, for in-
stance, a German trawler had been targeted so that up-to-date Enigma documents could be seized. A prolonged period in which U-boat signals were not read could be disastrous. U-boats were built and launched faster than the British could sink them. U-boat torpedoes caused a near-fatal drop in supplies to the United Kingdom.

Vera showed Donovan the contrast to the extravagances of his own country, which was far more advanced in the efficient management of production lines. BPers, cloaked in wooden sheds by heavy blackout curtains, made their calculations with pencil stubs and stumbled around in apparent disorder. Ian Fleming devised a scheme to capture a German rescue boat with another naval Enigma on board. A German bomber, gently forced down onto an English field, was restored for flight with a crew of British closework experts disguised in the gear of captured German flyers. The commandos were to crash it in the English Channel. When a German air-sea rescue boat arrived, the operatives were to board it, remove everything to do with the latest Enigma, kill the German rescuers, and make sure Berlin did not detect a ruse. Ian’s code name for this was Ruthless. Vera feared even someone nicknamed Wild Bill might see Ruthless as the brainstorm of a crackpot. She redirected Donovan away from Ian Fleming to the less flamboyant Colin McVean Gubbins.

Gubby coolly answered questions about the MM-4 mission in Poland, knowing Donovan might be asked to carry out work abroad for SOE, under cover of U.S. neutrality. Gubby joked that he had learned from Donovan’s Irish cousins how to wage guerrilla warfare. This neutrality shrank in significance after Hitler’s Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan. Americans were inclined to see the pact as a bulwark against communism. Gubby was happy to be assured that Donovan felt it foreshadowed a global war against the Allies.

Vera had mesmeric powers at her disposal. They were unnecessary in the case of Donovan. The day before his departure, Cadogan, now Churchill’s chief adviser, coolly noted, “Quite a good air battle over Dover. C has news that invasion will come. Hope so.”

This defiant spirit reinforced Donovan’s endorsement of collaboration with SOE when he joined President Roosevelt in the New England countryside on August 10, 1940. He had flown back to New York in a camouflaged British Sunderland flying boat. SOE seemed a model of future coordination for the U.S. navy and the U.S. army,