

Jock Kane's story

THE IBA'S DECISION to block the showing of the *World in Action* film on GCHQ's security deficiencies and financial laxity was a further demonstration of the power that GCHQ can exert beyond the shores of its own lush empire, through ritualistic references to the alleged requirements of 'national security'. The importance of GCHQ to the security of this nation is considerably called into question by the secret Department's own behaviour.

The Prime Minister's admission, earlier this week, that some of my allegations were 'well founded' is welcome. But her repudiation of the remainder, and suggestion that deficiencies have now been rectified, is an exact echo of GCHQ's line on the subject for almost seven years. I met one divisional head of GCHQ in 1974, and put some of my concerns to him personally. He later wrote to me agreeing that I was right to draw attention to the breaches of security involved. He said disciplinary action was taken where appropriate.

The GCHQ Chief told me that in 1974, David Ennals told Charles Irving the same thing in 1976. Now Mrs Thatcher claims that matters have been put right. I am well aware from my service inside GCHQ until 1978, and from contacts now inside that nothing of substance has been done. Sir James Waddell's enquiry, too, has produced no discernible results. An independent and basically public enquiry is the only forum which will be beyond complete manipulation by GCHQ.

Besides these deprivations, GCHQ managers have become accustomed to carrying a not inconsiderable burden of incompetents among their staff. On occasions, carelessness or disregard of operational requirements — itself bred of circumstances where financial self interest replaces concern for national security — has led to the most dangerous consequences.

During the early 1970s, at a time when a war crisis was imminent, my station was allocated a particular target as overall number-one priority. The target had been 'on' since 5am

one morning. I came on duty at 1pm, and checked the paper tape punch and printer. *I found it was on the wrong target.* This should have been quite apparent to each of the 8 officials who had been responsible for checking the operation for the previous 8 hours. But they had just rolled up the tape and sent it off for dispatch without even bothering to read it. Their incompetence had left Britain's defences down.

Superfluous staff

I have long been familiar with GCHQ's easy going attitude to incompetents in its ranks. As early as 1953, as acting supervisor of a small overseas classified post at a site (not Hong Kong) I found that we were expected to bear our share of the incompetents.

Ten years later in Scotland, I encountered perhaps the worst of these — a Radio Officer, earning almost twice the average working wage, who couldn't even do the most basic job in the book, which was reading morse code at the boy scout rate of ten words a minute. Despite complaints from myself and others he remained in GCHQ employment for 12 years.

At the same station, a distinguished example of *competence* showed in a different way just how bad GCHQ's work and workers could be. During March 1978, we assessed the work in one section which had produced 80,000 words. Two men had produced 60 per cent of this total; the remainder, 10 people, produced 40 per cent. With efficiencies as low as that, we might as well have switched off during three quarters of every day.

In Hong Kong in 1975, I proposed that we could selectively reduce the station's manpower by 20 per cent, and yet achieve a greater output (there was considerable deadwood in the managerial levels as well as amongst the ranks of the radio operators. One Duty Officer was a habitual drunk, and his errant behaviour ensured that the station operated more efficiently when he absconded to the bar rather than attended his post.)

The Hong Kong station's second in charge, Dave Oswald, told me that GCHQ 'would not disagree' with my figures. That was a damning admission. Later that year, I conducted a productivity survey of staff working at Little Sai Wan, and discovered individual variations of four hundred per cent.

Drunkenness and il-efficiency were a serious problem at many stations, including Cyprus, Hong Kong, and those in Britain. Indiscipline was also problematic (see box); besides financial and security laxity, radio staff resisted being instructed to perform their work properly. Cyprus was particularly plagued by alcoholics, especially when families were sent home after the Turkish invasion.

Cleaning out the secrets

An investigation into the missing documents mentioned last week might usefully examine the disregard of official regulations affecting local Chinese staff who cleaned the base and our working areas. They are not supposed to enter certain rooms until every scrap of paper has been locked away. This regulation was frequently disregarded. Nor were they searched properly as they left the base.

On more than one occasion at Little Sai Wan, I found the Chinese cleaners calmly shifting around documents in order to polish underneath. These documents bore a codeword identifying them as the most sensitive and restricted material in GCHA.

On one occasion a Duty Officer left four Chinese carpenters in a room full of Top Secret and Secret documents — none of them locked away — while he slept in a room on another floor. The four carpenters were alone with the documents for 6 hours.

When I started complaining about these incidents, I became the target of what can only be taken to be a hostile intelligence service. I was photographed close-up in the middle of a Hong Kong street by a Chinese, who quickly transferred his camera to an accomplice for a quick getaway. Although I reported this incident — which was clear evidence of continuing Chinese penetration of the station — the mystery of the photographer was never solved by GCHQ's security department.


This was just part of a casual pattern: up to the time I left Little Sai Wan there was a photocopier at a point of easy access for many of staff, who used it for all purposes, quite without check. One confidential clerk used to cheerfully churn out numerous copies of classified documents on this machine. She thought that there was no security problem so long as she had the original.

Little Sai Wan is supposed to be a sensitive and important operation. It almost passes belief that its security is placed, presumably by deliberate choice, in the hands of 60-year-old men, who go out for three-year tours as GCHQ's Security Office Far East (SOFE) to wind-up their official careers.

GCHQ's curious willingness to see its highly-secret personnel in the hands of financial predators lasts to the very end of each tour, when it is time to pack and go home. Three packers' estimates are required, and GCHQ administration in my time recommended Shanghai Packer Koo, who (discreetly) offered free metal trunks and charged \$HK10 per cubic foot. In order to meet the regulations, Koo kindly offered to provide estimates in three names — his own being the lowest. His charge, however, was exactly twice that of, say, Crown Packers, who were never recommended by GCHQ. (Details of administrative changes and staff movements, in this sensitive establishment were known to landlords, packers and so on, even before staff themselves were told.)

Incidents in the United Kingdom, too, show that 'security' is a convenient pretence, not an operational reality. At the Scarborough station, one senior officer used regularly to remove the most highly-classified documents he could find in the secure areas of the station. These he would take to his rugby club and elsewhere, with the idea of impressing upon acquaintances — especially women — his own high importance in the affairs of the nation. This intriguing habit came to an end one evening when he left some Top Secret papers behind on a bar stool.

But he was not prosecuted, even though failure to safeguard information is an offence under the Official Secrets Act—his case could scarcely have been more grave. He was quietly moved sideways to a high-ranking post in the Department of the Environment, and has since been twice promoted.




Composite Signals Organisation Station
Little Sai Wan Hong Kong BFPO1

27 Sept. 1973

1. An unpleasant incident occurred this morning when an RO who had wandered, without permission, into another Ops area to have social discussion with

2. This is a measure of the level we have reached in standards of control and behaviour in the setroom. The SRO in question was doing his job — and is invited to "come outside" for doing so. The reaction by the


JS Peddie
Operations Officer

A leisurely attitude to their supposedly vital intelligence work is taken by some GCHQ employees. Portions of an internal memorandum show how a Supervisor ('SRO') was nearly dragged into a punchup after asking one operator to return to his job. According to current and recently serving GCHQ employees, attitudes have in no way changed since 1973.