

Cyber Sillies

Duncan Campbell unearths the real mistake which plastered British MI6 officers' names all over the world

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The night before last week's intelligence fiasco broke, Britain's most senior security adviser went to an address in the Strand. Edna Chivers, head of protective security in the cabinet office, is a former MI5 high flyer. She was addressing a Kings College seminar of academics and intelligence specialists about 'information warfare' and the threat it allegedly poses to our 'critical national infrastructure' (CNI).

Infowar and CNI are big buzzwords in America. Top military officials repeatedly warn of a coming 'electronic Pearl Harbor'. They fear that, any day now, a distant aggressor will use electronic expertise and the internet to cripple computers and communications, turning off power and transport and paralysing military forces.

Early this year, US assistant defense secretary John Hamre proclaimed that 'cyberwar' had already begun. In Britain, Ms Chivers and Margaret Beckett, leader of the Commons, hosted a closed conference for industrialists and intelligence officials to warn about the growing risk of electronic attack on Britain's own 'CNI'. Last month, Dr Ralph Benjamin, former chief scientist of electronic spy agency GCHQ, joined in: 'There is a problem... it could affect various aspects of the fabric of the nation.'

Subsequently, Reuters reported the Skynet satellite had been put out of action. 'Hackers have reportedly seized control of one of Britain's military communication satellites and issued blackmail threats,' the agency said. The news went round the world. The Telegraph confirmed the attack had triggered a ' "frenetic" security alert'. That story was garbage, part of a cycle of paranoia about the internet that spawns new fiction every month. Yet soon a real electronic Pearl Harbor was under way, at least from MI6's point of view.

It was Monday May 10, when the eccentric US-based Executive Intelligence Review placed its latest report, 'The MI6 factor', on the internet. This contained the famous list of 115 MI6 officers, now so widely disseminated following a government D-notice drawing attention to it, that all foreign powers know who they are.

MI6 says the list came from their renegade ex-officer Richard Tomlinson. Or it might have been posted at the behest of one of his contacts, Mohamed Al Fayed, aggrieved at his recent refusal of UK citizenship. (Both men deny these suggestions.) Yet as MI5's Ms Chivers travelled home from her infowar security seminar on Tuesday May 11, the worst was yet to come. Half a world away, a Canadian malcontent also had his finger on the trigger.

Raymond Amundsen (32) was born a Canadian but so hated it as a 'British colony' that he prefers to live in Point Roberts, a tiny piece of the US joined to land only by an isthmus from British Columbia. From his web pages on the internet, he confesses to being a 'trenchcoat mafia' person, who hates faggots, had planted bombs in his school, and planned poison attacks 'to neutralise my tormentors at the age of 15'.

Visiting the EIR website, he saw the article about MI6, and said : 'This is incredible'. Mr Amundsen hit the send button on his personal computer. The command 220.0 article copied the MI6 list to thousands of 'Usenet' computers all over the world. I have confirmed with several sites in London that it arrived in Britain, unimpeded, at 7.59pm. By 8.15pm, the MI6 names were stored in Yugoslavian, Chinese and Russian computers.

The list also went to computers run by the Ministry of Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) in Malvern and to GCHQ in Cheltenham. Both run 'open source' intelligence operations to spot valuable data in the sea of rubbish that is most of Usenet. The names also went to a computer in Norwich, where the government runs a news server computer: news.gtnet.giv.uk. for the government's own internet service.

MI6 were alerted to the original EIR website. But not to the other worldwide postings. The D-notice secretary, Rear Admiral David Pulvertaft, circulated a warning to the British media, while MI6 had the list removed from the EIR site (which they did somehow a few hours later).

Did Whitehall know that the list had already been broadcast worldwide, including to themselves? 'That particular detail wasn't known to this office,' Pulvertaft's deputy, Thomas Ponsonby, said last week. He said he had 'never heard of Usenet'.

After two weeks, Amundson's excited message would have been automatically wiped by almost all the world's news computers, in order to make space for new rubbish.

Had MI6 kept quiet, Amundson's message would have sunk in the swamp within days. To any casual and sensible observer, it would have appeared to be the deranged talking only to the deranged.

The folly of that decision to issue a D-notice warning is now clear. When the real electronic Pearl Harbor hit, nobody in British intelligence saw it coming. They didn't even notice when it arrived.

- Duncan Campbell specialises in electronic intelligence matters.