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SPY STORY

by

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Secrecy for its own sake

In the light of the latest spy case, DUNCAN CAMPBELL looks back at GCHQ's lack of any accountability

LAST WEEK'S ARREST of a former Russian language intelligence specialist is potentially the most serious breach of security to have been discovered at Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the Cheltenham-based eavesdropping agency. It is however at least GCHQ's seventh such case since the war. The facade of secrecy and the mystique surrounding GCHQ are now truly cracked. If the allegations against Geoffrey Prime and some of the suggestions made off-the-record by the Prime Minister's Press Secretary last week are true, then there have been only seven years in the last 37 when there has *not* been a Russian spy working inside GCHQ.

The gravity of the charges against Mr Geoffrey Prime under the Official Secrets Act (and it has to be stressed that they are not yet proven) reflects the fact that he had access to and daily knowledge of the critical core of GCHQ's efforts to break Russian codes, and to read and interpret their military and diplomatic signals. Mr Prime joined Britain's 'Sigint' — or signals intelligence — organisation about 1959, in the Royal Air Force. Later, he worked at Cheadle, a Sigint base in Staffordshire, where Soviet Air Force communications are monitored.

Latterly, he worked in the Joint Technical Language Service at Cheltenham, a shadowy organisation within GCHQ, which employs most of the intelligence agency's translations staff, and which also assists other intelligence organisations, including the Secret Service and the Ministry of Defence intelligence staff. A special section of GCHQ — 'J Division' — organises the interception of Russian signals at GCHQ. Linguists in JTLS not only provide translations for J Division (or transcriptions of intercepted telephone signals), but also advise on special ways of codebreaking.

Last week, the police accused Mr Prime of spying and passing on information for a period of 13 years from 1968 to 1981. If their allegation is true, three consequences follow:

- GCHQ's own work in some or all areas of Soviet code-breaking would have been nullified.
- United States intelligence information also involved in Soviet codebreaking could be jeopardised to the same extent, damaging the US intelligence connection which the British agencies so highly value.
- GCHQ might have effectively been 'turned round' to undermine western security, if the Russians could use the activities of a well-placed agent to plant false or deceptive information.

The fact that previous cases of espionage seriously affected GCHQ has not reached public attention, because it has, at all costs, been determined to preserve its mystique with the British press, public, parliament and — not least — the Treasury. It has seemed to many on the inside that it cared less about the possibility of providing fertile pastures for KGB recruiters than about public knowledge of the nature or scale of their activities.

There has been a remarkable record of offensive action by GCHQ to prevent public discussion of its affairs. Since 1958, there have been two major prosecutions under the Official Secrets Act (one the so-called ABC trial in which the author was a defendant), three rows over the D Notice system, one American journalist has been deported, two others have been banned from Britain, and a number of 'troublemakers' eased out of Cheltenham to protect GCHQ from public scrutiny.



After the wartime successes against German codes which emanated from its celebrated Bletchley Park base, GCHQ became a post-war institution of the greatest inscrutability. With intense solemnity, new recruits to the business of 'Sigint' are 'indoctrinated' into the rules of the game. Sigint is surrounded by many special and elaborate, but often quite useless security procedures.

The reality of GCHQ, however, is expressed by Mr Alex Lawrie, a Labour County Councillor in Gloucestershire, who was for 22 years a language specialist working for GCHQ until he spoke out of turn in public.

The ritual of security is far more important than making sure it works... It's like believing in the dogma of a church. You cannot question the belief or challenge or question the procedures.

Mr Lawrie's case is instructive. Although a senior specialist in two languages (and a long term employee), he was warned shortly before he was due to retire that the establishment and its security force — 'R' Division — would not tolerate any further remarks of the kind he had made at a Fabian society meeting concerned with police accountability. He had then posed the rhetorical question: 'How many MPs, or even cabinet ministers, know how much money GCHQ really costs the taxpayer?' At a subsequent warning interview in late 1981, he was told that any repetition would have the 'direst consequences'. Two other 'offences' had also come to the notice of R Division, and threatened his future employment, he was told: as press officer of the Cheltenham Labour Party, he had issued a statement to the press reporting that the party supported Tony Benn in the Labour deputy leadership election; and, as a County Councillor, he had opposed an enquiry into unemployment in the Cheltenham area on the grounds that it would 'stigmatise' the unemployed. In the event, Mr Lawrie retired early.

There is also the evidence of Jock Kane, a former Radio Supervisor and also a long term GCHQ employee, who proved to be more honest than GCHQ could stand. He too resigned under duress. His account of a 'disgusting network of corruption, inefficiency, and security betrayal' within GCHQ was published in the *New Statesman* (16 May and 23 May 1980). Kane's allegations were substantial. They led to a top level security investigation by Sir James Waddell, which was blocked by the Cheltenham administration.

Kane's fundamental point was that the corruption and graft practiced widely at GCHQ's many subordinate listening stations in Britain and around the world was not merely dishonest and repugnant to many staff (who nevertheless unwillingly acquiesced), but represented precisely the sort of conduct which would open staff to the risk of recruitment by the Soviet KGB.

With Kane's assistance, the *New Statesman* and the *Daily Mirror* prepared a dossier for the anti-corruption Commissions in Hong Kong, which led to the conviction of a former Ministry of Defence land agent, Eric Garland, on 17 charges of corruption. But when we sent the Director of Public Prosecutions other parts of the dossier, alleging corrupt activities by the same official and by a former senior GCHQ officer, Frank Wilks, the dossier and supporting papers were sent to Hong Kong, though his attention was drawn to the fact that a statute of limitations prevented their prosecution in the colony.

The Soviets are known to have first had details about GCHQ in 1960, when two Americans defected from its US partner, the National Security Agency. Since then there have been at least five spy cases directly involving GCHQ.



A major spy at the GCHQ listening station in Hong Kong, Chan Tak Fei (standing at back), was only caught by accident when a courier for his spy ring was searched by customs authorities.

● In 1961, a Chinese employee at GCHQ's Hong Kong listening station, Chan Tak Fei, was arrested as part of a major spy ring in the colony. He had been both memorising and removing secret documents and passing them to his communist Chinese controllers. Chan was never brought to trial. After a few months in prison, all the members of that spy ring were quietly sent back to Peking, to avoid fuss with China.

● In July 1963, a Sigint specialist in the Army Intelligence Corps, Corporal Brian Patchett, defected to East Germany from the GCHQ listening station at the Teufelsberg in Berlin. Patchett had worked in Sigint for 4 years, latterly monitoring East German and Russian radio signals from stations in Berlin and Birgelen, West Germany. His link with GCHQ, for which the Sigint units worked, was never revealed.

● In early 1962, another Sigint specialist started working for the Russians. RAF Sergeant Douglas Britten took money and over a period of 5 years worked for the Russians inside RAF Sigint bases at Pergamos in Cyprus and Digby in Lincolnshire. Both of these bases were of particular interest to the Russians, since they had the task of monitoring the radio signals of Soviet Air Force units. A former RAF technician, who worked for Britten in Cyprus has told the *New Statesman* how he was able to bring a spy camera, disguised as a cigarette case, into the base without any difficulty. He would then lean over his subordinates' shoulders and photograph the results of the

monitoring as they wrote them down. Britten was arrested in 1968, and immediately accused of having spent three months previously recording secret information at RAF Digby for his Soviet controllers.

Sergeant Britten is still in jail, having been sentenced to 21 years' imprisonment.

● In 1973, two Taiwanese Chinese specialists at the Hong Kong listening post also defected to China. Large quantities of top secret and secret documents were known to be missing from the station at the time — but no action was taken to check the losses for six months.

● The sixth case of alleged espionage affecting GCHQ concerns a former senior official who worked at Cheltenham, and at bases in Cyprus, Hong Kong and Australia. The official, Mr Leslie Bennett, was accused of being a Soviet spy by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Security Service, for whom he worked until 1972. He was subsequently medically discharged from the service, and was later exonerated by Canada's Attorney General. In his case, as in every previous case, GCHQ's name was kept out of the public record in Britain.

Since Jock Kane first left to make his case against GCHQ more than 20 people from the organisation, both serving and retired, have been in touch with the *New Statesman* or with MPs to add further details, or confirmation. Several gave details of standing arrangements, officially agreed, to pay overtime on all normal hours worked; others referred to lax secur-

ity arrangements from the 1950s to the present. Some had been disciplined or penalised for criticising lax security or improper activities. One official, who had identified corrupt activities to a local police force, was forced to return home on sick leave.

Many confirmed details of security lapses. One added that it would be possible to remove material 'by the boot-load' from GCHQ itself, since no checks were ever made on personnel leaving the establishment. Mr Lawrie, the former linguist, described how hutted office blocks used by the translation services were redecorated in the mid 70s, when staff lost a stream of personal belongings through pilferage. As the decorators were working at night, unsupervised, in rooms where vast quantities of top secret intelligence intercepts were stored, the affair was raised as a potentially serious breach of security.

Nothing was done, then or later; according to Lawrie, two successive letters from the R Division security staff merely suggested that they were 'not responsible for the security of personal property'.

During May 1980, when Jock Kane's allegations were raised in Parliament with Mrs Thatcher and Norman St John Stevas (Leader of the House), the response was complacent. 'I do not believe that there is widespread public concern over the allegations', St John Stevas then said, 'I have not read the *New Statesman* but . . . they are old allegations and they have been investigated'. Mrs Thatcher subsequently claimed that all the 'requisite improvements' in security had been made.

GCHQ's FEROCIOUS track record in keeping itself away from British public attention started in 1958, when two Oxford undergraduates — also Russian linguists, but doing their national service in Royal Navy listening stations — revealed parts of the organisation's activities in the University magazine, *Isis*. They received six months gaol apiece for the breach of the Official Secrets Act and of their 'indoctrination' vows.

The first of three public battles with the D Notice committee took place in 1968. The *Daily Express* revealed the work of GCHQ in intercepting and analysing commercial telegrams and telex messages. A second battle in 1973 brought in the IBA, which suppressed all mention of GCHQ from a Granada TV programme.

In May 1976, Mark Hosenball, an American journalist, and I wrote the first full account of GCHQ for *Time Out* magazine. Details of GCHQ's covert response to this report were learned only recently: we were followed and our phones were tapped for weeks; GCHQ, through its former Director and then Cabinet intelligence co-ordinator, Sir Leonard Hooper, demanded prosecution under the Official Secrets Act. In fact we had not broken the Act — even technically. Former Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner, Jock Wilson, told GCHQ that there was no further action police could take. Thus frustrated, the secret world sought punitive action by other means, and Hosenball was deported to the United States. Two other US journalists were subsequently banned from entry to Britain. ►

The ABC trial of 1978 centrally involved GCHQ. GCHQ representatives attended the trial, and when the chief witness, Colonel 'B', lost a series of important points, GCHQ wanted to substitute a new witness, 'Mr C', a Superintending Director at Cheltenham. At a critical unreported and *in camera* session of the court case, it won a ruling that the name of GCHQ's Cyprus listening stations should not be confirmed or discussed in open court. It deployed major legal fire-power before the judge during a secret session, including the Director of Public Prosecutions in person and the Attorney General's chief legal assistant.

The government claimed to the judge that the secret should be kept because the Greek Cypriot government would be embarrassed by the revelation. This was untrue; and the Acting Cyprus High Commissioner offered to come to court and say so. In any case, the identity of the listening station — 9 Signals Regiment at Ayios Nikolaos — had already been published.

But GCHQ and the Foreign Office — again in pursuit of the illusion of secrecy — warned the Cypriot government, through Britain's High Commissioner, that their representative should not give evidence in the case. The witness then had to withdraw under orders from his own government, and the court ruled in GCHQ's favour.

In 1980, whilst we had been investigating Kane's allegations in Hong Kong, GCHQ warned off a series of former and serving staff. GCHQ technicians tapped our phones and then warned off interviewees in advance. The Foreign Office later admitted that everyone concerned had been comprehensively tipped off, claiming this was because of 'obligations under the Official Secrets Act'.

GCHQ's independence of outside scrutiny has clearly now been dented. If the investigations which are eventually promised get anywhere they are likely to focus on the damage that could have been done by someone working in daily contact with intelligence material harvested from Russian communications.

Three serious areas of damage to GCHQ's efforts are implied in the current charges. Firstly, the costly, elaborate, and often chancy business of intercepting important Russian despatches could have been worthless. Secondly, the pooling of information and techniques between GCHQ and the US National Security Agency through the UKUSA treaty could have compromised American information as well. Thirdly, if the Russians did indeed have a long-term agent in place inside GCHQ, they could have used their detailed knowledge of GCHQ operations to feed in false and deceptive information. At the very least, they would have contingency plans, in a crisis when intelligence would be critical, to change their codes and cyphers. In intelligence jargon, Cheltenham would have become a 'negative asset' — or in other words, we would be safer off (and spend less) without it. No doubt the forthcoming Security Commission inquiry will examine these possibilities. But it will be unlikely to tell parliament or the public what defensive value the secretive, £400-£500 million a year agency has provided — or had provided — in the first place. □

NORTHERN IRELAND

Tainted witnesses

Tuesday's London bombings look like part of the IRA's response to a wave of RUC arrests, based on evidence from 'super-grasses'. EAMONN McCANN lists the cases

NEXT MONDAY 28 men whom the RUC believe to be the hard core of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force in the Portadown area of Co. Armagh will appear in court in Belfast charged with a catalogue of crimes including murder, attempted murder, conspiracy to murder, armed robbery and membership of an illegal organisation. A number have made statements admitting the offences and will plead guilty. At least six will be strenuously protesting innocence: the only evidence against them will be a statement from another UVF man who has himself confessed to crimes, including murder and who has been promised immunity from prosecution in return for his evidence.

The case is one of a number over the past eight months in which a succession of so-called super-grasses have turned their former associates over to the law. They have provided the RUC with what looks like a run of spectacular success: at the moment there are around 200 prisoners awaiting trial charged on the basis of super-grass evidence, more than 140 of them alleged members of the IRA or Irish National Liberation Army, the others mostly alleged UVF men. A further 16 people were arrested in Belfast last week by police acting on specific information. However, there is some indication that courts may be reluctant to accept super-grass evidence at face value.

The prosecution's star witness at the Preliminary Inquiry will be Clifford McKeown from Aghalee near Portadown. He was arrested last November after making a telephone call to the local RUC station from the home of a friend in Portadown. By some accounts he was drunk and in a highly emotional condition. He was taken to Castlereagh Interrogation Centre in Belfast where he made a nine-page statement followed by a 36-page account of alleged UVF activity in the area, and later signed a three-page addendum in which he is believed to have named three serving RUC officers as having been involved in local UVF activity. Within days, 27 people had been picked up and charged on the basis of these statements. The 27 did not include any of the RUC officers. A few were subsequently released and another handful arrested. In the end 28 were formally charged.

What has outraged a number of lawyers involved in defending those of the 27 who deny the charges is the nature of the crimes to which McKeown himself confessed and from which he now appears set to escape

prosecution. One was the murder of 20-year-old Peadar Fagan who was shot dead while sitting in a parked car outside his home in the Catholic Kilwilkie housing estate in Lurgan shortly after midnight on 17 November last year. The killing was in retaliation for the IRA assassination of South Belfast MP Robert Bradford two days earlier.

It was thought by some that Mr Fagan had been singled out since his family was prominent in the Gaelic Athletic Association and a member of the local Clann Eireann Gaelic football team, which loyalist paramilitaries might have regarded as a Republican connection. However, UVF sources in the area say that McKeown and another man had set out in a hi-jacked Ford Capri to kill not Mr Fagan but a leading member of Sinn Féin who lives in the Churchill Park estate in Portadown.

McKeown, so the account goes, had claimed to know this man's address. It was proposed to burst into his home and shoot him dead. However, the pair was unable to locate its quarry, possibly because McKeown had earlier consumed a considerable amount of drink in a social club attached to Glenavon Football Club. It was then, so the UVF sources say, that, at McKeown's suggestion, the pair drove the six miles to Lurgan to kill any Catholic available. It is understood that McKeown claims to have been the driver of the Capri while the other man fired the shots. UVF sources are adamant that the reverse is true.

The following night McKeown was on his own admission one of two men who drew up on a motor-cycle at a filling station at Lisnadill, a few miles outside Portadown. When the attendant, Patrick O'Hare, a Catholic, turned away to reach for the pump, the pillion passenger pointed a gun at his head from a distance of about two feet and pulled the trigger. The gun jammed. Again, there is disagreement between the UVF sources and what McKeown is believed to have said in his statement as to whether he was the pillion passenger or the driver. There is no disagreement that he was there. In addition, McKeown has confessed to armed robbery, conspiracy to rob, membership of the UVF and so forth. The UVF sources estimate that the robberies McKeown was involved in netted upwards of £30,000.

IT IS the apparent lack of proportionality between the offences which McKeown had admitted and the alleged offences of some of those against whom he will be giving evidence which has angered defence lawyers. The most serious charge against one is receiving stolen money. Moreover, the McKeown case appears to fit a general pattern which lawyers and some clergy and opposition politicians in Northern Ireland believe amounts to a systematic bending of normal legal standards (assuming that the