
Opening Extract from...

The Secret Listeners

Written by Sinclair McKay

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The Secret Listeners

The Men and Women Posted Across the World to Intercept the German Codes for Bletchley Park

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Aurum history

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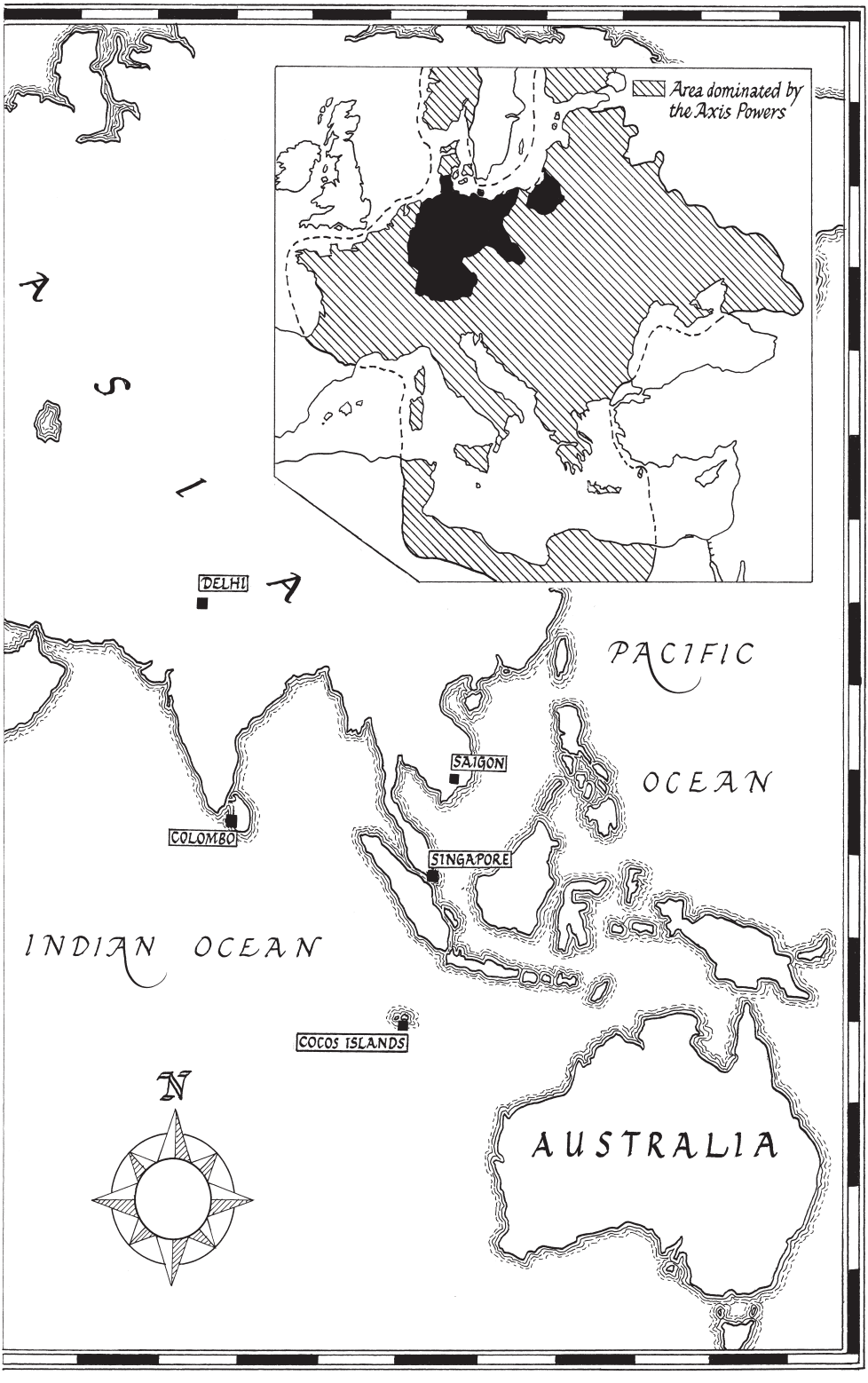
Contents

THE Y SERVICE
Principal Listening Stations

As an approximate guide to distance each segment of the border represents 500 miles


Area dominated by the Axis Powers
ASIA
DELHI
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COLOMBO
SINGAPORE
INDIAN OCEAN
COCOS ISLANDS
AUSTRALIA
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I Tuning in to the Enemy

Through the silence of the night, they were listening to the heart of the conflict. In stark rooms with green-shaded lights, furnished with plain desks and chairs and tables upon which rested the sleekest new wireless equipment – smooth grey bakelite, black metal, the vanilla glow of illuminated dials – dedicated women and men would sit, their ears clamped in warm headphones, in a strange half-world. The signals they were receiving might occasionally have been actual voices, although more often they were the abstract, monotone dots and dashes of Morse: but these coded messages represented chillingly implacable determination, explosive anger and frustration, intrigue and intelligence, and sometimes even the poignant laughter of fear.

Wherever in the world the operative was working – from England's south coast to the Orkneys, from Murmansk to Cairo, from Mombasa to Delhi to Hong Kong – the 2 a.m. watches were the worst. For Victor Newman in Colombo, nocturnal watches might be disrupted by mighty storms, violent rain smashing down on woven palm leaf roofs. In Alexandria, apart from the perpetual banes of dust and sand and flies, night shifts for Special Wireless Operator Bob Hughes would sometimes be made impossible by

distant thunder, which would create agonising feedback – 'this terrible crackling' – in the headphones. In Singapore, Joan Dinwoodie suffered from the relentless suffocating heat, 'the perspiration running into [her] shoes'. Meanwhile, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, on the tiny, barely inhabited Cocos Islands, nineteen-year-old Peter Budd would start a night shift by walking to his listening station through the profound and 'eerie' darkness of the palm trees, taking great care to avoid the lethal insect life whose venom had completely paralysed one of his predecessors.

In every station, the listeners had one thing in common: they worked punishing round-the-clock rotas, with after-effects that some would continue to suffer years after the war. This was as true for those working deep in the familiar English countryside as those in far-off lands. But their work was more than crucial. These young people were intercepting coded messages sent by the Germans, seeking out and faithfully transcribing the chaos of communications first scrambled by the Enigma encryption machines – with their almost countless permutations – and then sent via radio on ever-elusive frequencies. The listeners would pluck apparently random letters from the air and, having instantly translated them from Morse, send them on to the British codebreakers based at Station X, otherwise known as the requisitioned country house of Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire. Some listeners – particularly those in the field in Bletchley out-stations – would both intercept and decode the signals they received. The work was fantastically demanding, at every level.

It is sometimes said that the life of a soldier in a theatre of war is 90 per cent boredom and 10 per cent terror and exhilaration. For all those women and men listening and recording the course of war, the proportions were not so very different. But a soldier's attention could at least wander; there was no such luxury for those crammed over wireless equipment, trying to pluck order from an ocean of fuzzy noise. More than this: accuracy was paramount. A misheard signal concerning manoeuvres or forthcoming air raids

could cost lives. 'Boredom – a word not allowed,' noted Wren and Y Service veteran Joan Nicholls.

For Maurice de la Bertauche, a precocious seventeen-year-old wireless operator based at one of the larger listening stations in the Midlands, such disorientating days would start loweringly. 'One entered the bus to be met by a fug of cigarette and pipe smoke and a prevailing atmosphere of depression,' he wrote. The bus drove operators from their Northamptonshire billets to the country house of Beaumanor Hall. 'One came to a brick building disguised as a country cottage. Beyond the entrance vestibule, containing coat hooks and smelling of damp clothes, one could detect the smell of ozone from the thermionic valves used in the short wave receivers.'

The handover from the previous watch was brisk; on nights and days when the airwaves were filled with noise, when battles were being fought and won and lost, time could not be wasted. 'If you relieved an operator who was recording a message,' wrote de la Bertauche, 'the person being relieved would turn up the volume control, slip off his headphones, while still recording the message, hand the headphones to his relief, who at an appropriate moment would continue writing down the message.'[1]

This young man at least had the consolation of working in a busy room with several dozen other wireless operators. For many young women around the country, in smaller listening posts on the coast – and for the young women posted overseas to countries stranger and more exotic than they could have imagined – these small-hours shifts were not so much depressing as unsettling. 'Oh, the night shifts,' says Jean Valentine, who – having been posted to Colombo in what was then Ceylon – was breaking Japanese codes for Bletchley Park out of a low building fretted with palms, and assailed by a rich variety of tropical flying insects. 'Of course night shifts were lonely. You were there all by yourself, for those eight hours, and the only person you saw was the sailor who came in every hour, or every couple of hours, with a batch of new signals for you to sort out.'

And for those listeners in exposed positions on the British coast, or in far-off places such as Tangier or the Western Desert, Malta or Colombo, the threat of being shelled or bombed was ever present. On one night watch in the listening station at Scarborough, a Wren was upbraided by her superiors for having failed to keep a constant record of a stream of messages exchanged that night. Her matter-of-fact excuse was that she kept on having to run outside to 'swat away incendiaries' with a bat; her post had been targeted by bombers and just one incendiary bomb could have set the place alight. Twenty-three-year-old Women's Air Force volunteer and wireless interceptor Aileen Clayton – posted around the Mediterranean throughout the conflict – was strafed by a German fighter on Malta while on her way to her shift. She took it with remarkable good humour.

The work carried out by these thousands of women and men was intensely skilled; it was also extremely pressurised. Accuracy in relaying these coded enemy messages could mean the difference between life and death. The efforts of those men and women are sadly and curiously uncelebrated today. While the codebreakers of Bletchley Park – who fought so long to achieve recognition – are now properly honoured, the many people who made their work possible remain in the shadows. So much so that the very term 'Y Service' is still unfamiliar to many.

Yet it was the Y Service that kept the mighty machinery of Bletchley Park fed with information; it was Y Service operatives who listened in on the entire German war apparatus, every hour, every minute of every day; it was these young people who were the first to hear of any tactical shift, any manoeuvre, any soaring victory, any crushing defeat. The fruits of their labours, dispatched to Bletchley Park at top speed, enabled codes to be cracked quickly and German strategies unravelled.

Some months before war broke out, the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) – in essence, the codebreaking arm of

the Foreign Office – had established itself in a faintly ugly country house on the edge of an unremarkable provincial town. And it was within the bounds of this plain house and its estate – Bletchley Park – that an extraordinary line-up of the country's finest minds was assembled. All of them, from the irascible veteran cryptographer Alfred Dillwyn 'Dilly' Knox to the visionary young mathematician Alan Turing, faced an apparently insoluble and frightening problem: a means of breaking the German Enigma codes. The Germans themselves considered their Enigma coding machines – simple to use, very portable, yet capable of producing millions upon millions of potential letter combinations – completely invincible. Looking deceptively like typewriters with lights, these machines of bakelite and wood, with letter rotors of gleaming brass and discreet mazes of electric wiring, were brilliantly, lethally complex. First the machines would make implacable letter substitutions, and then the operator's colleague would transmit the letters, by Morse, in blocks of four or five. With code settings changed every midnight, and the letter substitutions produced electrically, how could any human mind begin to find patterns or order in that storm of random letters?

While the pressure upon the codebreakers was obvious, it was no less intense upon the young women and men who had to supply Bletchley Park with its raw material. The art of transcribing Morse code at very high speeds under stressful circumstances was already quite specialised; the ability to spend hours receiving such encoded messages was something else again. Yet the listeners also found ways to assist the Bletchley Park codebreakers to break certain ciphers. Their work was inextricably linked.

'Listen to all the noises in the air,' intoned the narrator at the start of the 1946 film *A Matter of Life and Death*, as the camera swept down over a fogbound wartime English Channel and the soundtrack was filled with the pleading electronic beeps of different Morse signals. 'Even the big ships sound frightened.'

The term 'Y Service' derives quite simply from the words 'Wireless Interception' – or 'WI'. As a technical proposition, the idea of clandestine world-wide interception was a daunting one; when the war started, the technology of radio was still relatively young. In some ways, the fledgling Y Service was to be asked to perform technological and organisational miracles.

All those German fighter pilots in the skies above; how would we record their conversations and their movements? All those aerodromes and rocket bases, all those divisions and battalions; who would be there to intercept the radio messages that they transmitted back to their superiors? What sort of infrastructure would be needed for an operation of such complexity?

Anyone on a train approaching Rugby station these days will notice, in a field just outside the town, an array of tall radio masts, like a steel Stonehenge. During wartime, the countryside was dotted with such elaborate structures, through which would pour the voices and the encrypted communications of the enemy, monitored continuously.

The Y Service in some ways provided a pleasing balance to Bletchley Park. Whereas the latter had an atmosphere of genteel chaos and anarchy – an ethos deliberately fostered to facilitate lateral thinking – the Y Service had a make-do-and-mend efficiency and organisational brilliance Baden-Powell might have been proud of. It encompassed accomplished linguists and highly intelligent Wrens; but it also reached out to schoolboys who knew how to build their own wireless sets and were thrilled to have the chance to participate in espionage against the enemy.

'All sections of the Y Service – Army, Navy, Air-Force and civilian, had special selection procedures when recruiting their operators,' wrote veteran Geoffrey Pidgeon. 'They had to pass the IQ test above a certain score, they had to be assessed as being capable of working under pressure, have the patience to sit waiting for hours for [an enemy] station to come to life and remain alert, to be mature enough not to gossip about what they did and not least

maintain a very difficult work pattern with meals and sleep patterns disrupted . . . for the forces special operators . . . [training] was 19 weeks. In that time they were taught Morse Code, wireless procedures and electromagnetism all alongside the military training of marching, cleaning billets.'

And so, swiftly, this shadowy organisation started spreading across the country, as well as around the world. There were the larger bases, at requisitioned country houses such as Beaumanor Hall in Leicestershire or Whaddon Hall in Bedfordshire, at the old fort of Chatham and at Kingsdown, both in Kent. There were smaller, more discreet listening posts – often little more than huts, caravans and small bunkers – in locations such as Hartland Point in Devon, Southwold in Suffolk, or along the coast of Kent – the latter becoming known as 'Hellfire Corner' on account of the fact that the Germans seemed to find them remarkably tempting targets.

So, while the Y Service operatives seem at first glance to be in the background, their experiences of the war are paradoxically much more central than most would assume. 'In France, 1940,' stated a top secret War Office memo from 1941, when members of the Y Service were being deployed in all parts of the world, 'warning of dive-bomber attacks on the Corps and adjoining fronts was given by the interception of plain language messages.' Those were the immediate cases; most other messages would have been encrypted as a matter of course via the Enigma machines. Yet, as listeners, it was almost as though they were in a prime position to observe the world being torn apart around them.

'Freelance or haphazard interception lead nowhere,' stated a War Office memo. In other words, the listeners had to be carefully directed; their antennae were fixed on very particular targets – whether it was young Peter Budd in the middle of the Indian Ocean, tracking and eavesdropping on Japanese submarines, or the dance-loving Wrens of HMS *Flowerdown* in Hampshire – a land-based naval station – picking up the frequencies used by German

naval command posts in Europe, and of those used by the lethal U-boats in the waters of the English Channel.

But the task of the Y Service was not merely to take down these complex messages with complete accuracy, but also, in the case of the out-stations far from Britain, to engage in decryption work. Codebreaking personnel from Bletchley Park were sent on voyages around the world – to the Middle East, Africa, Asia – in order to capture and decipher the encrypted messages buzzing through the tropical air. Out in the desert, or in the asphyxiating jungles of the Far East, mobile Y Service teams, men and women working with single-minded zeal, would provide instant decrypts which could turn the course of events. Field Marshal Rommel would later have reason to curse the Y Service operatives with particular vehemence – for it was the listeners who played a decisive role in the turning of the desert war.

For many recruits, earlier experience of Germany – being sent to live there as young women in the 1930s, and learning the language – ensured that they were ushered straight into positions of importance within the Y Service. Their experience enabled them not merely to know the language grammatically, but also to read its nuances and cadences, to analyse and interpret the motivations of the men speaking it. If half the battle of intelligence is learning to think the way the enemy thinks, then many of the young women recruited into this darkened world would prove to have a substantial advantage over their commanding officers.

For all the plucky spirit of the recruits, there were those for whom the work would get too much. The intense concentration required could have serious side-effects. Occasionally, even officers would have minor nervous breakdowns. It is not difficult to understand why: the job was not merely about interception, but also about using the knowledge gained to stay one step ahead of the enemy. The pressure was unfathomable: and what exacerbated it was the sense of proximity to each and every battle.

For the secret listeners, these voices in the air were much more than merely abstract dots and dashes of Morse; they were live commentaries on events. Unlike other combatants, who would receive news second hand after a time lag, the men and women of the Y Service were at the very front of the information line, and it was through them that the fortunes of war were transmitted to high command. The messages may have been encoded, but in times of crisis, their essential weight and import would have been nonetheless easily understood by those who were listening in on them.

These men and women found ways to compensate for the intensity. On long shifts, when the airwaves were sullen in their hissing silence, unexpected and unlikely friendships would form. And although they might have worked in the shadows, the secret listeners always made the most of their time off, away from the mind-boggling intensity of work. From Alexandria to Algiers, Bombay to Plymouth, their stories now are of romance, and youthful laughter, and quite often a certain glamour. On top of this, even the privations of rural Devon, for instance, have been recalled with immense fondness.

Many of those packed off abroad were young women. Cherrie Ballantine had originally been recruited to Bletchley Park at the age of nineteen; in 1941, she was told that she would be sent across the Mediterranean to Cairo. The life that she – and many others – found there was beguiling. She and others like her were doing what very few other women had ever been able to do before: take an active role in a conflict that stretched across the globe.

Those others included eighteen-year-old Jean Valentine, whose six-week voyage to Ceylon was marked with the constant peril of U-boats, and Aileen Clayton, who as well as dodging Stukas on Malta, spent time in the desert alongside Montgomery and Eisenhower's men. The women would sometimes meet resistance from officers and commanders, appalled that females should have been allowed anywhere near the front; but they were very much in the forefront of a new age – precursors of a more assertive generation to come.

But alongside this went an abiding sense – especially among the young women posted around the world – that they were growing up tremendously fast. Several such women recall that by their mid-twenties, a certain carefree element of youth had passed them by. The sights they saw, their intense experiences, forced them to swiftly adjust their perspectives on life; from the old expectations of quiet domesticity to the sophistication and confidence that their new, exciting, cosmopolitan lives bestowed. War is of course always transformative; for the women and the men of the Y Service, that metamorphosis was deep and fast.

Like their colleagues at Bletchley Park, those enlisted into the Y Services were compelled to sign the Official Secrets Act. Security was paramount – not merely throughout the years of conflict, but during the years afterwards. Like their Bletchley Park colleagues, the secret listeners of the Y Service had to keep quiet about their achievements, and even about the equipment that they had used. 'I would have loved to have been able to tell my dad,' says veteran Y Service operative Betty White with some feeling. 'I would have loved to have told him about the work I did in the war. But I couldn't. You couldn't tell anyone for over thirty years.'

'It was dinned into us right from the start,' says Jay McDonald, who had also been recruited as a wireless operator. 'Not only were we not to say anything. But we also knew just how vital the work was.'

Even if they have not had the full recognition that their colleagues at Bletchley Park have won, the secret listeners have at least their own private satisfactions: that they played a constant role in the war, and that without their quick-wittedness, focus, and good humour in the face of sometimes unimaginable pressure, that war would have been very much more difficult to win.