

Beat: News

GCHQ marks the achievements of its first Head Commander Alastair Denniston

GCHQ hosting the launch of a new book

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USPA NEWS - GCHQ marks the life and achievements of its first Head, Commander Alastair Denniston, by hosting the launch of a new book. Written by Joel Greenberg and published by Frontline, "Alastair Denniston: Code-Breaking from Room 40 to Berkeley Street and the Birth of GCHQ" charts the career of a man held in the highest esteem at GCHQ.

Commander Alastair Denniston, an Olympic medallist, a teacher and a cryptanalyst, rose to become the first Head of the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) during the interwar period. The foundations he laid at Bletchley Park were to become a key component of the Allies' victory during the Second World War.

(Click on photographs to enlarge)

Tony Comer, GCHQ Historian:

"In many ways, Denniston was a "forgotten man" but, thanks to this book, he will be forgotten no more.

"He was the first person to lead the organisation and his vision for signals intelligence, along with the culture he fostered, enabled the team at Bletchley Park to read Enigma encrypted messages on an industrial scale. The values he promoted of ingenuity, teamwork, and authenticity, are ones that still bind today's GCHQ. This book rightly positions him as the giant of signals intelligence and the innovator that he was."

A short summary of the book

Cdr Denniston was recruited to Room 40 from a job teaching French and German at the Royal Naval College, Osborne and spent the First World War there as a cryptanalyst.

Denniston's personal qualities were recognised during that time and he was a natural choice to lead the peacetime national signals intelligence and communications organisation, the Government Code & Cypher School (GC&CS), when it was established as part of the Admiralty on 1st November 1919.

He remained Head of GC&CS until 1942, when a major reorganisation saw the diplomatic and commercial part of the organisation move back to London under his leadership as Deputy Director (Civil). He subsequently retired from GC&CS in 1945.

Although GC&CS concentrated largely on reporting diplomatic traffic, it was with Denniston's agreement that the first commercial Enigma machine was bought in 1926 and he later recognised the importance of the cryptanalytical advantage the French and Poles could bring and which would be the foundation of Bletchley Park's success.

He was able to identify talent such as that possessed by Alan Turing and he inspired a group of people to become a successful team at Bletchley Park. He understood the value which could be brought to Signals Intelligence (Sigint) by people with neurodiverse conditions if they were allowed to be themselves "a skill still practised by today's GCHQ.

He also oversaw the move by GC&CS from London to Bletchley Park in 1939 and led the establishment of closer liaison with the US, which is the bedrock of the special relationship the countries enjoy today.

Despite these accomplishments, Denniston's contribution has surprisingly been overlooked until now. Dr Greenberg has brought his achievements in a 30 year career in Sigint to the forefront with this book, written with the support of both the Denniston family and GCHQ.

About the Author

Joel Greenberg is an author and historian who researches and writes about signals intelligence and its impact on two world wars. He

lectures widely on the subject and has a particular interest in how technologies designed for signals intelligence impact on the computer-based technologies of today.

He is the author of a biography of Gordon Welchman, one of Bletchley Park's key figures throughout the Second World War. His book is the basis of a joint BBC/Smithsonian Network 2015 documentary about Welchman "" "Bletchley Park: Code-breaking's Forgotten Genius"[?].

Alastair Denniston: Code-Breaking from Room 40 to Berkeley Street and the Birth of GCHQ"[?] (ISBN 978-1526709127) is available through Frontline Books price £25.

To purchase "Alastair Denniston: Code-Breaking from Room 40 to Berkeley Street and the Birth of GCHQ"[?] by Joel Greenberg click on the 'More Information' link below.

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