

Voluntary Interceptors tribute at the RSGB National Radio Centre

by John Swartz,
WA9AQN

On an evening in 1979, thirty-four years after the end of World War II, television viewers in Britain learned of the existence of a cadre of quiet, unassuming operatives who carried out a secret mission.

From 1939 throughout the years of the war, to all appearances leading ordinary civilian lives, they were 'secret listeners', otherwise known as Voluntary Interceptors (VIs). Officially, they were MI8(c), a part of the Radio Security Service originally within the administration of MI5. They were amateur radio operators and shortwave listening enthusiasts who were all proficient in Morse code. Their mission was secret – and intended to remain so for the rest of their lives. Records identifying them were destroyed at the end of the war. Present estimates of their numbers range from 1000 to 1700, and they were dispersed throughout Britain. About 800 have been identified in a new exhibit that has quietly opened at the RSGB National Radio Centre, located in the grounds of Britain's famous wartime codebreaking centre, Bletchley Park.

Breaking the silence

After watching that TV programme, some wives turned to husbands, some husbands turned to wives, sons and daughters turned to fathers and mothers and said something like, "Was that what you *really* did during the war?" [1].

A goodly number admitted their complicity. There were others who still felt obliged by their pledges. Many had already passed away, carrying the secret with them. This was seven years after the publication of *The Ultra Secret*, in which the secret existence of Bletchley Park and its codebreakers had been revealed. Some then considered the revelation a scandalous breach of the oath they had taken. Some still do.

Paul Cort-Wright, G3SEM, spent two years researching the material that became that 1979 broadcast. He noted how little of the story of the VI's was known or recognised [2]. A decade later, Ted Handcocks, G5HN, himself a former VI, also



Voluntary Interceptors tribute at the RSGB National Radio Centre. (Photo: Giles Read, G1MFG).

wrote his story to provide greater recognition to the work of his compatriots [3].

In 2003, Geoffrey Pidgeon, who had assembled communications equipment at Whaddon Hall during the war, published *The Secret Wireless War, The Story of MI6 Communications 1939-1945* [4]. Pidgeon noted that the interception business had involved the greatest gathering of amateur radio talent ever in a single endeavour, and that greater recognition was due. At about the same time, David and Debra Rixon, of Grindelwald Productions, issued their two hour video entitled *The Secret Wireless War*, commemorating the communications achievements of the war years, which included prominent coverage of the secret work of the Voluntary Interceptors [5].

Who were these people?

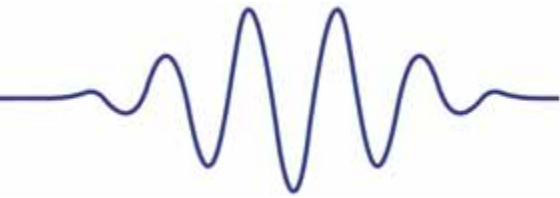
In the years leading up to Hitler's invasion of Poland and his designs on world conquest, the British intelligence establishment became more and more concerned about the safety of the British homeland. That concern enveloped fear of espionage, sabotage, and invasion.

Arthur Watts, G6UN, was then president of the Radio Society of Great Britain. He was

approached by the intelligence establishment to assist in assembling a corps of volunteer listeners to monitor the airwaves for signals from spies and foreign agents who might be transmitting to their controllers from within British territory. He undertook the assignment enthusiastically. Thus, the official system of recruiting and vetting Voluntary Interceptors began.

In a typical telling of his recruitment, Pat Hawker, G3VA, described his introduction to the Voluntary Interceptors. A mysterious letter had arrived "from a 'Lord Sandhurst' asking whether he would be prepared to do some voluntary work on behalf of the war effort." Candidates would be subjected to a background check. Each was required to sign a declaration under the Official Secrets Act before further information would be disclosed about the work to be undertaken [6].

A number of authors have addressed the subject of signals interception over the decades since the 1979 BBC broadcast. In *The Secret Listeners*, Sinclair McKay described the various intercept services, including the Post Office, each branch of the military services and the diplomatic or foreign service communications departments [7]. Each branch had particular fields of interest to serve, such as naval communications, air



force, diplomatic services, and others. These were commonly referred to as 'Y' services, short for "wireless intercept". The Voluntary Interceptors were but one component of the interception system, but more often than not, the use of the term 'Y service' excludes the VIs, who were not in uniform and not affiliated with any particular military base.

The VIs were unique among the wartime listeners in several respects. First, the Voluntary Interceptors were dispersed across the British Isles. Such broad geographic distribution made it less likely that signals would be missed because of variations in radio propagation, and reduced the likelihood that copying errors would not be detected or corrected in the analysis processes. Operating from their homes, the government did not have to pay for the work to be done.

Second, the Voluntary Interceptors already had their own receiving equipment, so there was no immediate expense to the government for new equipment, nor a time delay while manufacturers ramped up production to meet the need. Those who signed on started immediately, and many worked with home-built regenerative receivers. As the war progressed, many received new and higher quality equipment to use in their volunteer activity.

Third, being qualified for amateur radio licences prior to the war, the Voluntary Interceptors were already well able to receive and copy Morse code. Other listening services needed to train thousands of new operators and to equip listening posts in order to be fully functional. As the amateurs were accustomed to copying plain language and commonly understood abbreviations, the transition to encrypted text was all that was needed. Amateur radio operators were ready to roll; having undertaken a considerable amount of effort to obtain licences, it could easily be said that the ability, dedication, perseverance and discipline required for the arduous listening watches had been demonstrated.

Fourth, and significantly, amateur radio operators were accustomed to dealing with weak, watery, fading signals, while others were not. Learning Morse was not enough, interceptors needed to know how to handle extraordinary receiving conditions. The VIs came prepared.

Fifth, because their primary qualification was possession of an amateur radio licence or proficiency in Morse, the age requirements or physical restrictions associated with other forms

of service were not applicable. Thus the VIs included some who were wheelchair bound, teenagers, and pensioners.

Among contemporary writers who address the subject of signals intelligence and its part in the war, the role of the licensed amateur radio operators who used their skills in the privacy and secrecy of their own homes remains obscure. George Busby, however, spent 10 years in researching the story of one of Bletchley's 'outstations', the RSS listening post at Gilnahirk, Northern Ireland. In *The Spies at Gilnahirk*, Busby describes the origins of the RSS and, particularly, of the Voluntary Interceptors [8]. He has identified many of the VIs and RSS personnel from Northern Ireland who

worked at the Gilnahirk installation.

In 2017, Sinclair McKay paid homage to the Voluntary Interceptors in *Bletchley Park, The Secret Archives*, a beautifully illustrated history of the Park and its work during the war: "Intelligence analysts had another fantastically useful, top-secret army – the VIs, or Voluntary Interceptors..." [9].

Much is revealed

The 1979 broadcast had revealed that the VIs had discovered the secret radio networks of the German military intelligence, the Abwehr.

Contributing to the lack of recognition is the fact that the RSS and the Voluntary Interceptors had become a part of MI6, the office responsible for foreign intelligence activities. As a result, the cloak of official secrecy remains over whatever records may still exist. In 1986, historian and author Nigel West wrote a very engaging treatment of the origins and development of the Voluntary Interceptors, *GCHQ: The Secret Wireless War 1900-86* [10]. At that time, many of those who had 'been there, done that' were still alive and available as sources. West and Pidgeon noted

that the RSS, and thus the Voluntary Interceptors, had been removed from MI5, the domestic or Home Front security agency, and delivered into the fold of MI6, the Foreign Intelligence office, after it became clear that there were no signals emanating from spies in the UK, and that the VIs were tracking the Abwehr. So, while the Voluntary Interceptors were able to tell their friends and neighbours their own stories after the main story became public, none of them were then (nor are those few who survive) yet privy to any records that would enable them, or modern historians, to discover what messages they had copied that resulted in countermeasures of note in any particular action.

The VIs were supposed to blend in with the civilian population, keep quiet, and not be noticed. Some VIs suffered public questions and inquiries about why they were not otherwise in uniform and their curious activities sometimes resulted in their being reported as suspected spies. But they kept their mouths shut.

Greater recognition for their work is the purpose of a new interactive exhibit housed at the RSGB National Radio Centre. A visit to the National Radio Centre should be on the agenda for anyone visiting Bletchley Park, and that is especially true for amateur radio operators.

When you do, it is worth the effort to take some time to view the new exhibit, to view the commemorative list of those whose identities have been discovered, and to provide any information you may have to assist in identifying anyone else who may have served quietly and in secret.

References

- [1] *The Secret Listeners*, BBC, <http://eafa.org.uk/catalogue/5108>
- [2] *Radio Communication*, December 1980
- [3] <http://cdmnet.org/RSS/SecretListeners/Handcocks.pdf>
- [4] G Pidgeon, *Secret Wireless War*, UPSO, 2003, p102
- [5] *The Secret Wireless War*, Grindelwald Productions, www.grindelwald.co.uk/html2/sww.htm; see also PBS Programming of Interest to Radio Amateurs, *K9YA Telegraph*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (2004), p6
- [6] Pidgeon, p298
- [7] S McKay, *The Secret Listeners*, Aurum, 2013
- [8] George Busby, *The Spies at Gilnahirk*, Ballyhag Books, Donaghadee, Northern Ireland, 2016
- [9] Sinclair McKay, *Bletchley Park, The Secret Archives*, Aurum Press, Bletchley Park 2017, p102
- [10] Nigel West, *GCHQ: The Secret Wireless War 1900-86*, Coronet Books, Hodder & Stoughton (1987).



Arthur Watts, G6UN, President of the RSGB, performed a key role in setting up the Voluntary Interceptors system.

About the RSGB National Radio Centre

Run by the Radio Society of Great Britain, the National Radio Centre (NRC) is a showcase for radio technology. The NRC provides the opportunity to discover the history and development of radio from its earliest days through to modern communication methods. Entry to the NRC is included within the general admission to Bletchley Park and it is open six days a week (closed Tuesdays). For more information see www.rsgb.org/nrc

