**Dr. David Abrutat – Chief Historian GCHQ UK**

**Interview and Transcription by Huw Roberts**

Today I'm talking to Dr. David Abrutat. David is GCHQ's chief historian in the UK. Scarborough has what is believed to be the oldest continuously operated signal collection location in the world. Opened by the Admiralty in 1912, it moved to its current location at the former Scarborough Racecourse site during World War I. Since then, it has continued to expand to help keep the UK safe. From 2001, it has been officially known as GCHQ Scarborough, but it is referred to locally as the wireless station or the listing station. I'm hoping to understand how important the Scarborough listening station has been to the UK's security.

*David, a signal station was opened in Scarborough in 1912, two years before the start of the First World War. Why Scarborough and what activity did it undertake in Britain's war effort during World War I?*

Good morning Huw. So the Admiralty originally bought the land in 1911 and opened a site in Sandybed Lane in 1912. Global communications at this time; there was a big reliance on something called high frequency radio, HF radio, which allowed global and regional communications because it uses a layer of the atmosphere called the ionosphere to bounce signals. At the time it was opened as a communication site for the Admiralty and given where Sandybed Lane is, over the top of Falsgrave Park, it was geographically and topographically quite well positioned to collect signals of this type group. As I said, originally it was a communication site for the ability to communicate with the ships of the fleet in the North Sea, but in 1914 at the start of the first world war, it was transitioned into a SIGINT or signals intelligence collection site for which the predominant focus was looking at the German High Seas Fleet operating in the North Sea and the Baltic and obviously there were a lot of harassing ships coming across the North Sea during the first few months of the war and, you will know of the famous bombardment of Scarborough and some of the other eastern coast towns of England by the High Seas Fleet. There was a significant threat from the German Imperial Navy at the time, so the site became strategically very, very important for the Admiralty.

*And is there any possibility that the attacks and bombardment of Scarborough in 1914, was in any way connected with the fact the signal station had been set up?*

There's been some interesting debates with historians on this and I don't think there's been any direct proof, but certainly, I think it was a year before the first of all started, there was a ship which appeared here in Scarborough with a lot of German tourists on board who were asking a lot of questions about the site. A lot of that is hearsay, so I don't have any documentary proof, but I know during the bombardment there were a number of German naval salvos that hit very, very close to the site and around the top of Falsgrave Park and in Sandybed. Whether they were directly targeting the site is open for debate but, certainly, it makes a good story.

*It does. Tell me, during World War I then, were there any special stories that we should be aware of?*

Well, one of the main buildings that's still on the site is called the cottage, which was the old officer in charge, or the OIC lived. It was his house and there were around 25 radio specialists dispersed on the ground floor in various sort of operations rooms that were receiving the signals, processing them and trying to interpret and translate. The Germans became very, very active during that first war period and proved the value of having a permanent site there. But certainly I think at the height of the war there were about 100 radio operators at the peak at that one site and there are some really nice photographs that have been found in the Scarborough Library archive of photographs of the original members of staff at the site. But it was really the beginning of the journey for signals intelligence. It was really becoming a discipline in the First World War and for the information that was encrypted or enciphered by the German Navy, we were working with a new code breaking system that had been established in the Admiralty in London which was called Room 40 because the cryptanalysts or the codebreakers were based in Room 40. This was the beginning of a new organisation that would form at the end of the war called the Government Code and Cypher School, GC&CS, which would become GCHQ after the Second World War and people will associate my organisation with Bletchley Park. Well, GC&CS were based at Bletchley Park for 7 years from 1939 to 1946. The first war was the genesis of signals intelligence, but it was also the genesis of cryptanalysis or code breaking, the breaking of codes and cyphers used by our adversaries.

*In 1932 there was a proposal to close the Scarborough station and transfer operations to Hampshire, a decision which I understand was later overturned. What was the motive for the proposed relocation and why was it reversed?*

During the 1930s, a new Commander was brought in, Commander Rodgers or Jock as he was known. He picked up the site and he used the term Cinderella. It wasn't well invested in; it was poorly resourced in terms of equipment, and skills training wasn't being given to staff so there was a proposal to close the site in Scarborough and revert operations to a Royal Navy site in a place called Flowerdown in Hampshire. Fortunately for Scarborough the site wasn't closed; the decision was reversed and things really started to pick up in the late 1930s as Britain was preparing for war. We had the Munich crisis in 1938 and there was a big uplift of staff at the site and a batch of retired ACSWS, that's the Admiralty Civilian Shore Wireless Service, these were typically retired wireless operators from the Navy who were brought in as a civilian batch into the station and really things started to pick up during the Second World War for obvious reasons. The focus of the site at that time was the German Navy, but also Naval Air Force, being the natural synergies with the target being a Navy target, and things developed from there.

*We know that the listening station was very important during World War II and critically important in the sinking of the Bismarck, for instance, so can you describe then how that signal interception was undertaken to enable that to happen?*

There are two aspects to this answer. The station was involved in the interception of signals from high frequency radio traffic from German Navy and Naval Air force transmissions which might be formed units operating in the North Sea or some of the North Sea ports or even the Baltic. Because of the way propagation works, which is the way the signals are bounced off the atmosphere and come back down to land, Scarborough was ideally placed for that, being right on the coast. They also carried out something called Direction Finding, or DF, which is where they will pick up the transmission of a radio signal from a number of different aerials around the same aerial farm. They get the same signal hitting those aerials and they then do a parallel bearing on each of those signals because the time delay provides a fix on a position. The most famous story during the Second World War, Scarborough was one of the sites that contributed to getting positional fixes on the Bismarck, the pride of the German Navy, which led to its sinking on the 27th of May 1941.

The site became big at this stage. There was something around 60 staff on each watch and it became a very important part of the Royal Navy's signals intelligence with a lot of different sites around the UK. Encrypted traffic would be passed to Bletchley Park. Bletchley Park was opened on the 15th of August 1939 as a base for the Cypher School. Anything that was relating to German Enigma traffic that had been encrypted using the famous Enigma machines, were passed to Bletchley for decryption and it gave us a massive strategic advantage because we could understand secret communications, the stuff that the Germans wanted to keep secret and in providing us with big, big step forward.

*How did the information get delivered to Bletchley?*

There were two methods. For the timely material, stuff that was time critical, they would have been relayed by teleprinter traffic direct to Bletchley. If it was less timely, and less mission critical it was sent, typically by dispatcher. That's a motorcyclist, who would have gone, with paper copies in their little pouches driven all the way back over to Bletchley.

*During the war, the station was relocated to a bomb proof site, which is where it is now on the racecourse, and that happened in March 1943. Did this indicate an increased risk of attack to try to neutralise the station, or was it simply a recognition that its work needed to be protected against interruption?*

That's a good question. Certainly it needed to be protected from Luftwaffe attack albeit that there were bunkers on the original site. I've spoken to a few residents that live there and they know and have confirmed that there are bunkers underneath the Roblau flats that have been built on the footprint of the old site. But we needed a more resilient site and bigger site as well. It was cramped, the old site, and it really wasn't fit for purpose and the site needed to expand massively. So a parcel of land had been bought up in part of the Raincliffe Estates on Irton Moor just off racecourse and, on the 1st of March 1943, the operations were moved during that day to Irton Moor without a skip, a massive, obviously huge project, in its own right, but the fact that they never missed the skip is testament to the professional approach to reorganise the staff and the sites.

A lot of the operators there were female, they were Women's Royal Navy Service operators and the site was called HMS Paragon so it had a sort of a naval badge as well and, just prior to the site opening at Irton Moor, there was another famous story for Scarborough which goes back to August 1941 and it relates to convoy called OG 71. It had an armed merchant vessel within that convoy called the SS Aguilla and the convoy was setting off from Southampton and transiting down to Gibraltar and then onwards to Singapore. There were 21 Wrens on board SS Aguilla and twelve of those Wrens had come from Scarborough the site at Sandybed and unfortunately on the night the convoy had been spotted by a Fokker Wulf German aircraft and a reconnaissance aircraft. Two days after being spotted, a U boat, which was the U-201 attacked the convoy and managed to sink the SS Aguila on the 19th of August. It was the biggest loss of life in my organisation's history, and it's a story of Scarborough and the sacrifice that was made during the war. But it's also interesting what happened next. The Wrens' organisation, the Women's Royal Naval Service, decided to create a memorial fund for the 21 Wrens who died and they commissioned the build of an RNLI lifeboat which was given the name the Aguilla Wren and it was commissioned and put into operation at Aberystwyth lifeboat station for many years, and then it moved up to Redcar, Cleveland. Later, it was retired in service and I think given to the Sea Scouts and it fell into disrepair until a chap called Tim Curtin bought it, and because his father used to serve on it in Redcar, it was in memory of his father that he bought it and he wanted to restore it. So he got it restored by a restorer based in Northern Ireland and it's a fabulous, fabulous 39 foot long beautiful lifeboat and it's really a living memorial to the girls that died, but also to Scarborough and to the GCHQ site. It's now looking for a permanent home, so there may be more to come on that one.

*That's an interesting and not well known story I suspect around Scarborough. After World War II the world experienced what was referred to as the Cold War. We know that the Scarborough station was tracking Russian activity during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Tell us a little bit about that Cold War period.*

Yes, the Cold War created a massive shift for the organisation. At the end of the war there was a British Signals Intelligence and there were tens of thousands of people working in it at a time of post war demobilisation. There was a rapid shift towards looking at the Soviet Union and the threats during the early stages of the Cold War rapidly transformed the organisation which was known as the Government Code and Cypher School but it became GCHQ

officially in 1946. But the site rapidly transitioned to focus on Soviet Union traffic and Navy matters, particularly the Soviet Navy as a mission and the one big story during that period, which we have put into the public domain is the story of the Cuban Missile crisis in October 1962. Since 1946, we've always had, a formal agreement with the Americans, an alliance for a division of effort in place. We can't cover everything; the Americans can't cover everything so there are lots of strands to our work in this division of effort. In terms of the Soviet Union and the Navy and merchant shipping, Scarborough was given responsibility for tracking and monitoring Soviet merchant ships in the North Atlantic, a fairly mundane task, with lots of fairly low hanging fruit in terms of reporting. In October 1962 it became massively important. On the verge of a third war, we had merchant ships being used to transfer medium range ballistic missiles across the North Atlantic to Cuba, the big standoff between Khrushchev and Kennedy. Kennedy obviously didn't want strategic missiles to be positioned on Cuban soil and it became a standoff which nearly escalated into nuclear war.

There's a key piece of intelligence which is worth mentioning and involves the Scarborough site. They had responsibility for tracking merchant ships, and one of those ships they were monitoring as routine was a ship called the Kislablosk was transiting across the North Atlantic from one of the Baltic Sea ports with medium range ballistic missiles on board for Cuba. The operator at the Scarborough site was monitoring the positions of the ship every 24 hours and on the 24 October 1962, right at the height of this escalation, at the point where the world was concerned that we were going into nuclear war, the Kislablosk had turned on a sixpence and the DF positions were NE of where it was 24 hours earlier. So it had turned around and it was one of the first indications that Khrushchev was standing down. So the report that came out of Scarborough would have been fed to our counterparts in America and the National Security Agency, and picked up by an operator called Juanita Moody, one of the US main analysts involved in the Cuban missile crisis terms of signals intelligence. She read the reports, and instantly noted how important this piece of information was. There was a chap called Adlai Stevenson who was the American ambassador to the UN and he was going to brief the Security Council the next day, and she wanted this intelligence to get to him. She managed to track him down to a hotel, I think in New York, but he was asleep and she tried to get the Security Service guys that were looking after him to wake him up to get this intelligence to him. But it's a fabulous story and relays the fact that our little site in Scarborough was involved in one of the most important stories of the Cold War.

*Yes indeed. Coming to the present day, how important is Scarborough Station to the UK's security infrastructure and how do you see the future of GCHQ in Scarborough?*

Well Scarborough is part of wider enterprise. Our main headquarters is in Cheltenham and has been since the early 1950s. But we have sites in the UK, places like Bude and Scarborough and now in Manchester and London. But we've got sites overseas as well and they're all, sites like Scarborough and Bude, that are involved in the collection of signals but increasingly so they are more and more involved with our missions. So we've got very broad brush missions, things like counter terrorism, serious and organised crime and support to military operations known as the strategic advantage. So this is looking at our key adversaries and no surprises to know that two of the main ones at the moment are Russia and China. But increasingly we're doing more on cybersecurity; the birth of the National Cyber Security Centre in 2016 has brought in sites like Scarborough into that mission. So it's really changed and transformed the site in the last few years in the way it works with the broader GCHQ enterprise and also our partners, not just in the UK but overseas as well. So it's a busy site and it has rapidly transformed in the past few years. It's also doing things like outreach with schools and cyber first programmes focusing on STEM and working with local schools, universities and colleges and it's really moved in newer direction and has transformed what is one of the key employers in the town.

*David Abrutat, Chief Historian for GCHQ in the UK, thank you very much for sharing what is such an important part of Scarborough's heritage in the stories that you have told us today. Thanks very much.*

Thank you Huw.

Transcript by Huw Roberts

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