

Panthers, Gardening and Enigma

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This note is concerned with an aspect of the history of the weather ships which were operated by Britain and Germany during the second world war. Gordon [1] gives a chilling account of the wrangling and rivalry that led to the dispatch of the PANTHERS, two inappropriate and defenceless UK meteorological ships which were a perfect target for any U-boat. They survived unscathed during the early part of the war when merchant ships, cable ships and naval vessels were being sunk. Recent revelations confirm the substance of rumours that followed their loss and suggest that their fate was connected with other, significant events in the history of the war.

Gardening was a mine-laying operation that cost the lives of many RAF personnel during the Second World War. According to Smith [2] it required great accuracy, where the plane had to circle for a long time as the navigator made certain of the precise location before the mine was released. To the curiously sceptic historian this sounds really curious and sure enough, we are now learning more about these activities. Just as a fossil is prised from its surrounding rock, so the details of the quest to break the German Enigma code are being slowly drawn out of the shrouds of secrecy. A recent television series which has been accompanied by a book [3] reveals that *Gardening* was related to code-breaking, at least in part. It seems that one of the functions of mine-laying was to draw the attention of the Germans who would issue a warning by radio which could then be intercepted. It was claimed that this information was then used "to deduce Enigma settings". Even here, the sceptic is a little curious. Did this imply that the code-breakers at Bletchley Park already knew the German naval grid system?

Whether or not further revelations have been prompted by the recent Hollywood film *U571* (which attempted to credit the US with breaking Enigma), we now have some more of the jigsaw to put into place. Sebag-Montefiore in a recently published book [4] reveals that it was Harry Hinsley (author of several volumes of "British Intelligence in the Second World War") who identified the 'Achilles heel' of the German communications system, namely its weather-ships. Although weather information was transmitted in a readily accessible cipher, Hinsley hypothesised that they received their instructions via naval Enigma machines and with luck they could be taken by surprise. In early May 1941 the Navy dispatched a not insignificant fleet to intercept the *München* which was operating north west of Iceland. Halfway through June it was necessary to obtain further information in order to complete the construction of decrypt tables. On 28 June the *Lauenburg*, operating north of Iceland was captured, its vital contents removed and then sunk.

One can then conjecture whether these events were in any related to the destruction of the British weather ships, *Arakaka* and *Toronto City*. In his book Gordon [1] provides the key details. *Arakaka* was sunk on 22 June 1941 by U77 in position 47° 00' N, 41°40' W. *Toronto City* was sunk by U108 on 1 July 1941 in approximate position 46°N, 30°26' W. Gordon continues

"Rumours and office gossip after the event, some of it perhaps after the war was over, circulated to the effect that we (the British) had sunk a German weather ship, that there had been some tacit understanding that these ships on both sides would be left unmolested. The PANTHERS were then sunk almost simultaneously in retaliation. This explanation is not so unreasonable".

In the light of recent revelations we can also understand why, even if weather data was so important, *Arakaka* and *Toronto City* were not replaced.

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References

1. A. Gordon, "Skywonkie" Minerva Press, London 1966
2. G. Smith, "Norfolk Airfields in the Second World War" Countryside Books", Newbury (Berkshire), 1999, p. 85
3. M. Smith, "Station-X", Channel 4 books, March 2000 (ISBN 0752271482)
4. H. Sebag-Montefiore, "Enigma: the Battle for the Code", Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2000