

## **‘A dog in this fight’**

*Tony Simpson*

*‘GCHQ has been a key element in our relationship with the United States for more than 40 years.’*

*Denis Healey,  
House of Commons, 27 February 1984*

In 2009, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) announced ‘Mastering the Internet’, its project to ‘collect details of Britain’s communications and internet traffic for security purposes’, according to Richard J Aldrich in his book, *GCHQ: The uncensored story of Britain’s most secret intelligence agency*, published in 2010. The scope of the project, it seems, has proved to be rather wider than ‘Britain’s communications’, as Edward Snowden’s revelations indicate (see ‘Huge Dog’).

GCHQ is responsible for signals intelligence, abbreviated to ‘sigint’. Britain and the United States collaborate closely on sigint. Historically, Britain has traded terrain for technology with the National Security Agency (NSA), the US sigint counterpart to GCHQ, which commands significantly greater resources. As Aldrich writes,

*‘American code-breakers needed remote outposts in Britain’s “residual empire” at which to base their listening stations, and they rewarded GCHQ handsomely with access to remarkable technology.’*

Cyprus was one such location, permitting the US to listen to communications in the Middle East and elsewhere. In the mid-1970s, when the British Government wanted to withdraw from its bases in Cyprus in order to save money, Washington advised that they do no such thing. The

American view was that these listening posts were indispensable to intelligence gathering in the region. So the sigint bases have remained in Cyprus and, 40 years later, have grown considerably in size.

GCHQ takes by far the biggest part of the increasing budget of Britain's security services, austerity notwithstanding. It employs more people than MI5 (the Security Service) and MI6 (the Secret Intelligence Service) combined. By 2008, some 6,500 worked for GCHQ, primarily at their gigantic new facility, the 'Doughnut' (on account of its shape) near Cheltenham. At one time, the Doughnut was said to be the largest single construction project in Europe, requiring 15 miles of carpet and hundreds of miles of fibre-optic cable.

Menwith Hill, near Harrogate in North Yorkshire, has developed its sigint role in a different but related way to GCHQ at Cheltenham. In the early 1970s, the US National Security Agency was launching satellites which stayed roughly in the same place above the earth, thus requiring ground stations in specific locations to receive the large amounts of signals intelligence they transmitted. Pine Gap in Australia and Menwith Hill were chosen for the job. Since the 1950s, Menwith Hill had been a field collection station for the US Army Security Agency. Later, when it had been taken over and run by the US National Security Agency, it became the largest American overseas intelligence base in the world. In 2010, about 15 per cent of 'overhead' material received at Menwith Hill was diverted to Cheltenham for processing.

Of course, Menwith Hill is also closely integrated into US plans for so-called 'missile defence', which is being developed on a global scale. It serves as a ground-relay station, linking the new Space Based Infra Red System (SBIRS) satellites for the detection and tracking of missile launches directly to the USAF Space Command centre at Petersen Air Force Base, Colorado in the United States. Yorkshire CND have produced an informative and accessible report on this massive installation (*Lifting the lid on Menwith Hill: The strategic roles and economic impact of the US spy base in Yorkshire*, 2012). Dozens of radomes or giant 'golf balls', concealing satellite dishes, spread across the green hills of 'God's Own Country', as some Yorkshire people call their county (see *Spokesman 117*).