

Brigadier John Tiltman

1894 – 1982

A brief biography, formerly displayed in the 'Hall of Fame' in Bletchley Park mansion.

John Tiltman was the head of the Military Section of Bletchley Park throughout most of World War 2. He was appointed as the Chief Cryptographer after the death of Dilly Knox in February 1943. He led the break-in of many ciphers, across a wide field. As well as being an outstanding cryptographer, he was one of the nicest persons at Bletchley Park. He remained with GCHQ until 1964.

John Hessel Tiltman was born in London on 25 May 1894 and was educated at Charterhouse. After school he taught before enlisting in the army on the outbreak of World War 1. He was commissioned in the King's Own Scottish Borderers. He won the MC in 1917, being severely wounded. Immediately after the war he served in the British contingent with the White Russians rapidly learning Russian, so demonstrating his uncanny ability with languages. He was seconded for two weeks to the newly created GCCS as a translator, but within a few days Tiltman had shown his ability at decryption work, and so his posting became permanent.

He was posted to Simla in India in 1921, where he gained much experience of the various tasks in the work of GCCS, largely on Russian diplomatic ciphers. He returned to GCCS in London in 1929 to head the new Military Section. He worked alongside Dilly Knox, breaking the Russian Comintern signals. He always established excellent relations with whoever he worked. Starting in 1933, at first on his own without even a Japanese interpreter, John Tiltman broke six significant Japanese cipher-systems before World War 2, including their Military Attaché system.

It was Tiltman who established the crash course in the Japanese language when there was a severe shortage of Japanese linguists. He rose to the rank of Brigadier in March 1944, thereafter being known affectionately as '*the Brig*'. His Military Section grew rapidly, and by the end of the war it had over 750 staff. In 1943 he was made the Chief Cryptographer and in March 1944 a Deputy Director. He continued to carry out cryptography work at all times despite his numerous other responsibilities, always working standing at a specially constructed desk. He kept the work going in Military Section on non-Enigma codes, such as those of the German army and police. Tiltman's forte was the breaking of manual cyphers, but he did make some contributions to the breaking of Enigma and other machines, such as those used by the German railways and police. In the autumn of 1941 John Tiltman succeeded in reading a lengthy repeated message sent on the newly introduced German Lorenz SZ40 machine. This enabled Bill Tutte to unravel the machine architecture, and so to the regular reading of some of the 'Fish' top-level German army messages by the Testery and Newmanry.

A less pompous army officer it is impossible to imagine. He tended to work alone, though he always liked to pay tribute to those who had contributed to his breaks. It is said that only once was he ever seen to lose his temper and that was when he read the first disclosures of their wartime successes in 1974. He was always keen to co-operate with allies, strongly encouraging the co-operation with the US. At the end of the war he stayed on with GCHQ as the first head of the cryptographic group, remaining until he formally retired aged 70, in 1964. He then joined the National Security Agency in the USA, consulting there until August 1980. He had married Tempe Monica Robinson when in Simla in 1926, and after retiring from NSA moved to Hawaii to be near his daughter, dying there on 10 August 1982. There may be those who will dispute the claim that he was the greatest of the old-school of codebreakers at BP; but there will be few who will doubt that he was the nicest.