Dilly Knox

1884 – 1943

A brief biography, based on that formerly displayed in the 'Hall of Fame' in Bletchley Park mansion

With a growing reputation as a Greek scholar, Dilly Knox joined Room 40 in the Admiralty in 1914 and soon proved to be an outstanding cryptographer. He remained in GCCS between the wars, breaking Russian and other codes, and then making the first British break into Enigma in 1937. During World War 2 he led the team that made the first wartime breaks into German Enigma, broke the Italian Naval Enigma machine in 1940 and the Abwehr version in 1942.

Alfred Dillwyn Knox was born in July 1884, the fourth of six children. He went to Eton and entered King's College, Cambridge in 1903. He remained at King's as a Fellow, becoming distinguished as a classicist working on Greek papyri. In 1915, during World War 1, he joined Room 40 in the Admiralty, soon showing a remarkable aptitude for deciphering German naval signals. Amongst much distinguished work, he achieved the feat of breaking the German Admiral's cypher. He married Olive Rodman, his war-time secretary in July 1920. They bought a house near High Wycombe, where their sons, Christopher and Oliver, were born. Oliver served at Bletchley Park in the last years of World War 2.

Surprisingly, after World War 1, Dilly stayed on in the newly formed GCCS though he continued to work on Greek manuscripts whenever he could find the time. During the 1920s, it is thought that he was engaged in breaking Russian and other diplomatic codes. It was in about 1926 that he was promoted to be one of the three Chief Assistants in GCCS.

In about 1936 GCCS started to tackle the Service cyphers of the rising dictator states in Europe. Dilly achieved the great feat of reading an Italian naval Enigma message of 24 April 1937. But it was not until a meeting with the Poles in July 1939, that BP was able to make progress against German Enigma. When GCCS moved to Bletchley Park, Dilly Knox and his Enigma Research team went to Cottage No 3. Dilly set John Jeffreys, with a part of that team, to follow up the Polish 'Netz' method of breaking Enigma, making the first break by GCCS into German Enigma on about 20 January 1940. At the same time, Dilly encouraged Alan Turing to develop the Bombe machine that was to become the main tool for breaking Enigma keys. Dilly then concentrated on breaking into Enigma machines that did not have a stecker-board. He trained up a new team of some 10 women, who became devoted to him, despite his non-communicative and absent-minded ways; two of them became excellent codebreakers. It was on 28 March 1941 that their reading of the Italian fleet's Enigma signals in the Mediterranean provided Intelligence which led to the defeat of the Italian fleet at the Battle of Cape Matapan. This was an outstanding feat as the Italian navy sent very few Enigma signals.

Dilly now attacked the Abwehr Enigma. It was a version of Enigma with no plug-board but with fiendishly frequent code-wheel turn-overs. It was in the autumn of 1942 that the regular production of decrypted Abwehr messages began at BP. (These messages enabled MI5 to gain a complete mastery of the German spies in the UK, and to establish the very successful double- cross programme). Dilly was named the Chief Cryptographer of BP, and received the CMG in January 1943. By now he was seriously ill with cancer and was to die at home on 27 February 1943. As he lay dying his brother Ronnie, a Catholic priest, insisted on kneeling outside in prayer. 'Is that Ronnie still out there bothering God in the passage?' murmured Dilly.