

Josh Cooper

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

Joshua Edward Synge Cooper was born in April 1901, the eldest son of an ancient Anglo-Irish family. At Shrewsbury School he came under the influence of Ronnie Knox, the famous Catholic convert brother of Dilly Knox. He read Classics at Brasenose College Oxford and then Russian and Serbian at King's College London. Josh Cooper had unusually high linguistic ability, knowing many European languages, and Arabic.

Joining GCCS in October 1925, he soon established a high reputation as a cryptanalyst, with an immense store of knowledge which stemmed from his constant reading and excellent memory. He was sent to Sarafand in 1930 to study the Russian Black Sea Fleet communications, reading some of their lower grade systems. In 1933 he was made head of the Italian Section of GCCS, and in 1936 became head of the new Air Section where much of the pre-war work was concerned with Italian military systems.

In September 1939 the Air Section consisted of nine men and nine women; by its peak in July 1944 it had grown to some 500, about 200 of these women, many in the WAAF, dealing very successfully with German, Italian, Japanese and meteorological problems. The youngest of the senior staff at Bletchley Park, he was appointed a Deputy Director in March 1944.

As well as being an outstanding cryptanalyst, Cooper was an imposing figure and a very pleasant person, always much respected by his staff. Cooper had a number of endearing mannerisms and many at Bletchley Park had their own favourite story about him.

Cooper was not a great administrator and the Air Section was organised very informally, but this proved to suit the circumstances. He supervised his German subsection directly for most of the war. He recognised early on the importance of close collaboration with the Y stations. He realised that the

German aircraft codes would be of most use if broken quickly, and this would best be done at the Y stations. As early as 1939 he persuaded Denniston to allow him to recruit young linguists from the universities to work at Cheadle, the main RAF Y station. This greatly improved the reporting capability of the station. The two main stations with which he dealt, Cheadle and Kingsdown, provided vital intelligence to Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz.

He appreciated that to achieve the greatest possible amount of intelligence from sigint about the German Air Force, all sigint sources had to be studied as one, and he applied pressure to be allowed to do this. However, the necessary combined study of high-grade (e.g. Enigma) and low-grade material was delayed because the need to minimise the number of people with access to Ultra material meant that the majority of his staff were not given access to it for most of the war.

His relationships with AI 4 in the Air Ministry were always awkward and often difficult. His German subsection's ability to produce unique intelligence needed by the home RAF Commands, and later the USAAF, could not be exploited until AI 4 agreed. It took Cooper the better part of a year to persuade them that this should be done.

After the war Josh Cooper continued to serve at GCHQ as one of its senior staff, retiring in 1961. He published several books on Russia and Russian literature, dying in June 1981. He had married Winifred Parkinson in 1934, with whom he had two sons.