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What happens at GCHQ

By R. H. GREENFIELD, Defence Correspondent

CONTRARY to popular mythology, the typical modern intelligence agent is not a seedy figure in a trench coat haunting the gates of naval dockyards, or tapping out encyphered reports each night on a short-wave radio set in his attic. He is far more likely to be a highly respectable, law-abiding family man, driving home after work to wife and children, and never going within a thousand miles of enemy territory.

In a word, he is a civil servant — like the 10,000 of his kind employed at GCHQ, Cheltenham, and at other Government listening posts in Britain and overseas.

"Electronic intelligence" — known to its practitioners as Elint and to the world at large as radio-eavesdropping — is probably the single most important source of military intelligence in the world today. Even space satellites, for all their sophistication, cannot match the degree of detail to be gleaned from listening in to the radio transmissions of other countries.

The aerials are everywhere: over the rooftops of Cheltenham, on the masts and deck-houses of Russian "fishing trawlers," on the tops of embassies, in the fuselages of American RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft. Pate the thriller writers; it is hardly an exciting job — the monitoring of everything from a tank commander on manoeuvres to the chatter of a taxi-driver, followed by the painstaking collation of every snippet in search of something new or significant.

But, while it may be a dull task, it is vitally important. Indeed, I understand that one reason for the Cabinet's decision finally to clamp down on union activity at Elint establishments (a move seriously considered by earlier Administrations) was the increased sensitivity of the material they handle. Almost three-quarters of their work is now, it is believed, "of operational significance."

The importance of the monitor's role was stressed last week by Colonel Jonathan Alford, Deputy Director

International Institute for Strategic Studies. "It would not surprise me if up to 70 per cent of useful military intelligence was now derived from this source," he said. "A satellite may tell you that Russian troops have moved into an area, but it cannot tell you that they belong to the Second Shock Army, or their chain of command, or what radio frequencies they are using.

"It is the Elint stations that will tell you of new tactical transmissions showing that headquarters are on the move. They will give you

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your first indication of changed patterns of activity — or inactivity. Even silence can be informative."

Such information is of obviously vital significance in time of crisis: it may well be the level and pattern of radio traffic that indicates whether "routine military exercises" are being used as a cover for troop deployments. Well before the Russians invaded Afghanistan, the Americans knew from their monitoring stations that troops in the Soviet Asian republics were being mobilised, and fired off no fewer than six diplomatic notes to the Kremlin the autumn before the troops moved in.

The Swedes, for their part, were able to monitor little-publicised Red Army exercises at the height of the last Polish crisis, and deduce that they were being used to put overwhelming pressure on the beleaguered Polish regime. It is from such radio interceptions that governments can hope to gain early warning of whether their enemies are preparing for a sneak attack — or, equally important, whether they are merely rattling sabres.

tions, here and overseas, are of particular importance. Between them they cover the Middle East, Africa, the Russian military districts bordering Greece and Turkey, China and Eastern Siberia.

Meanwhile, other stations in Scotland and Northern Ireland are recording Russian naval and long-range maritime aircraft activity in the north-eastern Atlantic.

Nor is it only messages and conversations that are monitored. The intelligence authorities need to know the frequencies used by Russian military radar sets so as to be able to devise electronic counter-measures, and are keenly interested in intercepting the bursts of data transmitted on missile test ranges, in order to assess the capabilities of new weapon systems.

Clearly, it is absolutely essential for such monitoring work to go on day and night, week in week out, without the least possibility of union disruption. With military analysts estimating that the Russians are now capable of launching a "standing start, out-of-the-blue" attack at as little as 48 hours' warning, the listening stations can never afford to be off the air.

Furthermore, the nature of their work makes such stations themselves a major target for more old-fashioned types of spying — hence the Americans' insistence on the introduction of the polygraph or "lie-detector" as part of the British security vetting procedures, in the wake of the Geoffrey Prime spy scandal at Cheltenham.

Useful intelligence may be defined as "what you know about the enemy, that he doesn't know you know"; once a potential adversary discovers that plans, procedures, cyphers or radio frequencies have been compromised, he will alter them.

Whether or not the Cabinet is judged to have mishandled the sensitive issue of union membership, its concern for the security and undisrupted operation of its electronic listening stations is entirely understandable. It is on their round-the-clock vigilance that every British Government ultimately depends to ensure that this country can never be caught

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US demand for introduction of lie-detectors blamed

By Paul Routledge, Labour Editor

Civil Service union leaders last night branded the Government's proposed buy-out of union membership at GCHQ as "Judas money" and predicted that it would be rejected by 3,000 members.

They said that the Foreign Secretary's reasons were "a lie" and the official version a cover-up for American pressure on the Cabinet to break union resistance to the introduction of lie-detectors into sensitive defence installations.

The Council of Civil Service Unions is demanding an early meeting with Mrs Thatcher in her role as head of the Civil Service to try to dissuade the Government from going ahead with de-recognition of the five unions.

The TUC will be brought into the dispute today.

Mr John Sheldon, general secretary of the Civil Service Union, which has the largest number of GCHQ members, described the ex-gratia payment offered by Sir Geoffrey as "an offensive bribe". "They already have the loyalty of these people. It was proved in 1981, when despite the pay dispute all security work at Cheltenham

continued. To offer them £1,000 must suggest that it is unpatriotic to belong to a trade union, and that is a disgraceful downright lie. Trade union members are just as patriotic and loyal as any other civil servants."

Union leaders were called to the Cabinet office yesterday afternoon to be told of the Foreign Office move.

The head of the civil service,

Sir Robert Armstrong, cited the implications of the lengthy 1981 strike by civil servants as justification.

Mr Sheldon said: "This is a cover-up. The real reason for the announcement is that they are having pressure put on them to introduce the polygraph, to which we are opposed on the grounds of interference with civil liberties. It is the USA putting the pressure on the Government about its security system."

Mr Alastair Graham, general secretary of the largest Whitehall union, the Civil and Public Services Association, said: "I would have expected this from General Jaruzelski in Poland, but not from a Prime Minister of a democratic state. I do not believe that people's civil and trade union liberties can be bought for £1,000."

The union believes that ministers think the access enjoyed by full-time union officials to their members at GCHQ is a potential security hazard as they are not positively vetted. But nearly three years ago, union leaders were warned that the United States and other

Continued on back page, col 1



GCHQ union ban blamed on pressure from US

Continued from page 1

Nato allies were unhappy that a national one-day stoppage and further industrial sanctions at Cheltenham and the tracking station at Bude in Cornwall would damage strategic cover of signals traffic and hamper the surveillance of Soviet warships.

In their announcement on March 8, 1981, the unions said: "There will be a range of selective and disruptive action which will affect Britain's secret communications surveillance network. There will be both national and international repercussions."

Mr Len Murray, general secretary of the TUC, is to meet leaders of the civil service unions this morning. Last night, he said: "This decision by the Foreign Secretary, made without consultation or advance notice to unions whatsoever, is

an appalling and unacceptable denial of basic rights."

"Civil servants, whatever their work, deserve and require the protection of the union and proper union representation just as much as other workers."

"It is grossly offensive for the Foreign Secretary to imply that the fact of trade union membership poses any threat to national security. If there are or may be problems of any sort the Foreign Secretary should spell out what they are and discuss them with unions concerned, not jump to the most extreme measure possible."

"The offer of a tame, state-controlled union, backed up by £1,000 bribes, is no alternative to the right of genuine trade union membership."

The Government has set a deadline of March 1 for GCHQ employees to accept the ex-gratia payments.