



The Hut Six Story: Breaking the Enigma Codes

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"Gordon Welchman worked at Bletchley Park, on the most important British de-ciphering operations of the war [WW2], from 1939 to 1945. Here, unsuspected by the Germans, the famous Enigma codes were broken, almost continuously throughout the war. Welchman was a leading figure at Bletchley Park; his brilliant mathematical mind, and imaginative attack on apparently insuperable problems, were of inestimable value in shaping the course of the war and hastening victory.

No other book has explained so thoroughly how the job was done, and how so often a flash of genius, an inspired insight, or even a stroke of luck, tipped the balance from failure to success, against all the odds.

Gordon Welchman, a talented mathematician, was educated at Marlborough, and Trinity College, Cambridge. He had taken up a post as a fellow of Sidney Sussex College when the war started, and he was an obvious recruit for the expanding codebreaking operations at Bletchley Park. He was awarded the OBE for his war work. After the war he emigrated to the USA, and continued to work on computers and their applications to security and communications. He died in 1985."

A publishing history is given on page 252, in Appendix III: First published by McGraw-Hill Book Co. Inc. in 1982, with a British edition appearing in the same year under the Allen Lane imprint. A paperback edition was published by Penguin Books in 1984.

The Hut Six Story: Breaking the Enigma Codes Details

Date : Published 2000 by M&M Baldwin (first published 1982)

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Author : Gordon Welchman

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From Reader Review The Hut Six Story: Breaking the Enigma Codes for online ebook

Pito Salas says

After visiting Bletchley Park in England a few weeks ago I renewed my fascination with WW1 and WW2 and also now code breaking. This book is a romp through long secret aspects of the work of cracking the enigma code and Ultra. Somewhat technical and definitely geek-worthy. I read it almost in one sitting.

David Tussey says

A bit geeky, for sure, but an interesting story about one of the unsung heroes of WWII and the breaking of the German Enigma encryption device. Although Alan Turing often steals the spotlight on the Bletchley Park code-breaking team, it was actually Gordon Welchman (and his team) that did the cryptology necessary to actually find ways to break the code. Fun stuff...amazingly clever how they took a machine capable of 200 trillion combinations, and got it down to under 1000 in minutes of daily analysis.

This book was published some 40+ years after WWII, and yet it resulted in the author being disowned and having his security clearance pulled. Madness...especially when you see material inside this book.

Paul Coombes says

An interesting book but one I need to read again in order to understand better how the bombes worked.

Glenn says

A fascinating book. Met all my expectations with a few extras. As others have remarked, the first half focuses on Bletchley park and the processes (predominately related to or within Hut 6 - where the focus was decryption and and Hut 3 where decrypts were turned into actual intelligence). Fills in significant detail on the organization, cryptanalysis and collection of manual processes without which the bombes would have been useless. The first half begins with a somewhat tedious but entirely necessary analysis of the operation of the Enigma and the basic manual decryption processes that allow the reader to better understand the rest of the book.

The 2nd half covers the author's experience when he worked with Mitre up until his retirement, and focuses the emerging battlefield network communications -- especially those related to aircraft. GW describes a better way for forward battlefield elements to communicate with one another without having to (WWII - style) switch back and forth between frequencies or wait till information had traveled up the tree to Command and back down again to forward elements that could best interpret the information and adjust their positions, tactics and strategy accordingly. He discusses a shared packet network where everyone is connected, messages are encoded to be short and specific, and elements can tune into only those they need to listen to -- (without having to worry about having to be on the right frequency at the right time.) There is also some history on early networking protocols buried in here - for those interested in those things.

The only reason I gave this book a 4 is because the last chapter (Secrecy, Security and Survival) is a bit pedantic and largely repeats views that were better covered in other parts of the book.

All & all, though, a very important historical work, by a Bletchley boffin, covering areas that tend to be ignored by the more recent "cult of Turing" authors.

Bookish says

I am currently reading The Hut Six Story: Breaking the Enigma Codes by Gordon Welchman. This nonfiction book is written by an insider at Bletchley Park in Britain as they pioneered breakthrough methods for breaking encrypted German wartime communications. I'm just getting started on this but I am already surprised at learning several new things—the availability of Enigma machines, the role of allied operatives in Poland, and the foundation of code-breaking tactics. There is another great tie-in for this book: The author and protagonist Gordon Welchman lived for decades in Newburyport, MA, just steps away the Firebrand Technologies/Bookish headquarters. The story is enlivened by archived TV interviews of local residents in Newburyport describing surprise interrogations of Gordon by “men in black” visiting his home as the layers of secrecy surrounding Bletchley Park were slowly peeled back after decades of silence. —Doug (<https://www.bookish.com/articles/book...>)

Edu says

I was doing my rounds on you tube and came across the Bletchley Park story. This book was mentioned in the story and because of my interest in history, I bought the book.

The book narrates the secrets of how Welchman and other code breakers at Bletchley Park managed to decipher German coded messages transmitted through the enigma machine before and during the 2nd World War.

I enjoyed the narration of how the code breakers were able to capture and break the German codes but was somewhat lost with the mathematical aspect of code breaking, how the bombe machine worked and the whole process of enciphering and deciphering coded messages.

Overall i think this is one piece of history that had it not been told, we would not have known heroes like Welchman, Allan Turing and the rest of the code breakers who helped end 2nd World War earlier than expected.

Good read.

Patrick Neylan says

For the historian, Welchman's account is invaluable. But for the general reader it is too technical, concentrating on the mechanics of code-breaking in terms that are hard to understand.

Nor is Welchman much interested in the results of his work. No military achievements are mentioned and no

dechiphered messages are quoted. Code-breaking is an end in itself.

It seems churlish to criticise him for not writing a book he never intended to write, but a reader interested in the wider story is likely to be disappointed.

Tim Kordas says

A great study which combines interesting WWII history with the mechanisms by which crypto-systems fail in the real world.

Mandatory reading for anyone interested in crypto-systems and communications-security.

Tiffany says

This book basically has two functions: 1) to describe Bletchley Park's service during World War II, and 2) to put forth military and communications lessons learned during WW II to be used in the future.

I enjoyed the Bletchley Park part of the book, although Welchman's descriptions of machines (Engima and the decoding bombes) and their operations sometimes were too technical for me. I also liked The Debs of Bletchley Park and Other Stories more as a behind-the-scenes of the operations and people at Bletchley, but this book provided another perspective.

The second function of the book (which takes up roughly the last 1/3 of the book), however, didn't do it for me as much. I don't have a big desire to know about military tactics, although the way he relates lessons learned during WWII was sometimes interesting; plus, the book is over 30 years old, so I don't know how much of it is still true. And that's the other thing: I'm not in a position to actually take any of the advice he gives (in case you don't know me, I'm not a military general or a person in high position in the US military or government), so I don't know if his recommendations have been put into practice, and I wouldn't know how to forward them anyway (not being a high-ranking member of the military or government). So for me, the last 1/3 was superfluous.

^ says

Utterly fascinating; though at times I needed to keep pen & paper next to me in order to slowly work through some of the very mathematical sections (I have to confess to skipping others); this was well worth the effort.

What I really love about this book is that, for a talented mathematician, the author writes in good clear English; and he doesn't restrict himself solely to the technicalities. I enjoyed learning how operations were ordered on and off site, and how the community both worked, socialised, and yet maintained the absolute tightest of secrecy. Truly awesome. One doesn't need a mathematical/scientific brain to read and enjoy this book; but if you do, you'll get more out of it.

Both times I have read this book after a visit to the Bletchley Park site (now a museum, next to The National Museum Of Computing), near Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, England. Highly recommended.

Ray Noyes says

I found the book fascinating, but one needs a very logical, mathematical brain to be able to understand some of the techniques described. My engineering background failed me much of the time.

It goes into surprising detail as to how the Enigma machine was understood but he stresses something very important: Bletchley Park's success was as much due to the errors committed by German Enigma operators as anything else. These errors provided 'cribs' from which key vides could be deduced.

Welchman also stresses how important was their monitoring and plotting of German wireless networks to track troop movements. One aspect that surprised me was the huge number of staff working on breaking codes. I had the impression it was of the order of several dozen very clever mathematicians, chess players and crossword solvers, but that would exclude the hundreds of staff operating the so-called 'bombes', those intercepting transmissions, those employed in decoding and admin work.

Lil says

I'm glad I read a first-hand account of life at Bletchley Park before diving into the other books about this place. Mr Welchman's account gives a very top-level view of the management there, which was interesting enough to make me want more details about the place. And I appreciated very much his inclusion of so many different skills into his calculations of what made their projects work - it wasn't just the mathematicians and engineers. But I got terribly lost in his detailed explanations of the workings of the Enigma machines and awfully critical about his views of current (well, 1982) warplanning. I am looking for more about the culture of Bletchley Park, and this book was not that. Still, a very engaging read.

Bill Ardis says

Good history of Bletchely Park from someone who was there. Could get a little over technical at times (wished all of that material was in the appendix with better illustrations).

Marcus Jones says

The Hut Six story is an Autobiographical look at the Author's Time at Bletchley Park, in particular his experiences in the titular Hut 6 and his latter experiences as Director of Mechanization

I found myself engrossed reading about the function of the enigma machine, the development of the bombe, and the various methods used in cracking the codes. I also enjoyed reading about the polish contributions to the development of the methods, and how a lot of the code breaking was only possible due to mistakes made by the Germans.

Thomas says

Gordon Welchman was one of the key persons at Bletchley Park who was not featuring in the great The Imitation Game movie, which focused almost entirely on the contributions of Alan Turing to the breaking of the Enigma codes during WW2. While I understand that the movie was a much belated praise and acknowledgement of Turing, the Bletchley Park story cannot be told without also acknowledging the contributions of Gordon Welchman.

In this book written in 1982, Welchman recapitulates the operations and impressive results achieved around 40 years earlier where the best minds of Britain - standing on the shoulders of Polish intelligence - managed to break Enigma codes even before the war really started. The book tells the story in a much more factual and less dramatic way than the movie, but what really stands back in my mind having read the book is how lost the British COULD have been with more than 200 trillion combinations of encodings that the Enigma offered had it not been for the almost oracle-like see-through of an array of basic human errors and complacencies in the use of the Enigma by the Germans. The Enigma was truly a work of art offering this deep level of encryption in a typewriter-style apparatus and based solely on wires, connectors and current, but the Germans seemingly forgot that in the end it was people operating and orchestrating the use of Enigma and the British saw the humans behind the flow of jumble and this led the way to breaking the codes - on a daily basis; all work started over from midnight! In that sense, the book serves to illustrate the cultural differences between a Kant'ish belief in an absolute truth; an optimum; and a more organic approach to life, which may not be as efficient in all aspects, but surely proved very effective in this case; fortunately for all of us!!

In the book, Welchman clearly but never explicitly competes with Turing for the claim to fame at Bletchley Park. Welchman eagerly acknowledges the contributions of the many people involved in the operations, which grew to some 250 people at the end of the war, but the book is almost completely void of praise for Turing! This to me indicates a too strong bias that somewhat dilutes the credibility of the story. Welchman has a lot to be proud of and he tells about his ground-breaking approach to analyse and deduct on the German signalling traffic, which has a direct line forward to modern day traffic analysis on the internet, as mastered by NSA for whom Welchman worked after the war. Moreover, his diagonal board improvements to the Bombe were vastly reducing the solution space and Welchman does not hesitate telling how he managed to convince Turing about these improvements. Yet you are left with the impression of a man who tries a little too hard and a little too late to make a name for himself.
