

## Prologue

*A graveyard in a forest south of Berlin – January 1999*

I was standing in the middle of a clearing in a pine forest just outside Berlin when I realised that I must have found what I had been seeking. For months I had been hunting for some concrete evidence about the Enigma spy, Hans Thilo Schmidt. He was the German Defence Ministry Cipher Office executive who in 1931 gave the French Secret Service their first clues on how to break the Enigma code. Now I was almost sure that I had literally stumbled upon his last resting place. My feet were embedded in a springy, mossy mound, and the ground where I was standing was soft and swelling, as if the body hidden down below had loosened the earth while trying to push its way out.

It was exactly as it had been described to me. Behind the mound stood a solitary gravestone. I had to hack away the undergrowth and branches surrounding it before I could see that it was no longer the pristine white tablet, garlanded with flowers, it had been when last seen by my informant. It was already beginning to turn green, thanks to a coating of mould. But it bore the words 'Johanna Schmidt Geb. Freiin Von Könitz \* 27.12.1857 + 24.10.1928'. That was Hans Thilo Schmidt's aristocratic mother, who had been born a German baroness, in spite of the fact that her mother was English. Hans Thilo Schmidt's own grave under the mossy green mound was unmarked.

Before I tracked down his daughter, Gisela, I had had serious doubts about whether this man, who was said to have played such an important role in the Enigma saga, had ever existed. So little was known about him. My worries were only allayed after his daughter told me about the grave, showed me her

documents, and told me her sad story. That begged another question. Should Hans Thilo Schmidt be revered as an unsung hero, or had he just spied for the money? He had not exactly given the Enigma cipher to the Allies. He had sold it to them for a lot of money, and his original act of treachery had taken place two years before the Nazis seized power. So no one could say that he had, in the first place at least, been motivated by a desire to overcome the evil regime. His desire to destroy the Nazis only developed later. That made him a flawed hero, the codebreaking equivalent of Oscar Schindler, who, like Hans Thilo Schmidt, was perfectly prepared to put his own life on the line as long as he made a handsome profit, and seduced a lot of women, in the process.

Schmidt was eventually betrayed to the Germans by one of his French spymasters. But what happened next has been shrouded in mystery. Was he tortured by the Gestapo after his arrest in March 1943? Was he shot? Or did he kill himself? Even the French Secret Service which ran him as its most treasured spy did not know what happened to him at the end. His daughter was able to fill in some of the gaps. She also told me that she had only seen the grave in the forest once since that terrible day in September 1943 when, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she had watched her father's coffin being lowered into the ground. In her mind's eye, she could still see the words he had written to her shortly before he poisoned himself with the cyanide which she had helped to procure.

After finding the gravestone, I sought out the little cottage which serves as the administration centre for the graves dotted around the forest. It was there that I at last found the written proof I needed that Hans Thilo Schmidt had really been buried where his daughter said. A clerk handed me a formal document certifying where Hans Thilo Schmidt had been buried and when, and who had paid for the flowers which had once decorated his gravestone. The document contained a poignant reminder that he was abandoned and forgotten. No one had tended the grave since flowers had last been placed on it more than fifty years ago.

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### *The German military cemetery near Stafford – 12 February 1999*

Five hundred miles to the west of Berlin, in the German military cemetery at Cannock Chase in Staffordshire, are the graves of twenty-five more men who died while fighting in the battle for the code. These men were once part of an elite fighting force which manned the German U-boats during the Second World War. Their U-boat was the *U-33*, which was sunk on 12 February 1940 while attempting to lay mines in the Firth of Clyde, one of Britain's busiest estuaries, off the west coast of Scotland.

Every year on 12 February, the anniversary of their death, flowers are laid beside their gravestones. The flowers provide a shocking splash of colour in this bleak and desolate spot where the groups of identical grey granite rectangular gravestones are lined up in rows as orderly as soldiers standing on parade. No one at the cemetery knows who pays for the flowers. Even the cemetery administrator can only say that the order comes from somewhere in Germany.

There used to be another gravestone which commemorated the death of Max Schiller, a twenty-sixth member of the crew, but it was quickly removed during the late 1970s after Schiller turned out to be alive. He is now an old age pensioner living near Annan in Dumfriesshire. He will never forget the hours he spent in the sea following the sinking of the *U-33*. It was the worst day of his life.

None of these vigorous young men was prepared for the terror they experienced when their U-boat was spotted by HMS *Gleaner*, a British anti-submarine vessel. They had heard the sound of the British ship's asdic sonar beam searching for them under the water; it was as if gravel was being sprinkled on the outer shell of their submarine. Then their blood froze, as deafening explosions from the depth charges dropped above their heads were accompanied by what felt like violent blows from a huge hammer striking the submarine's hull. The bangs were so loud that they left even the bravest men feeling disoriented and out of control. So who could blame one of the officers for pleading with Max Schiller, who was just eighteen

years old and the youngest in the crew, to sit beside him because he thought he was going to die? And who could have guessed that the fear of being killed by the depth charges combined with the shock of being immersed in the freezing waters of the Firth of Clyde after abandoning the U-boat would cause another member of this elite force, who had Enigma wheels in his pocket, to lose his mind temporarily. It was just unfortunate, as far as Nazi Germany was concerned, that the Enigma wheels which this man had been told to drop into the sea were said to be still concealed in his clothing when he was rescued, and so were effectively handed to the British without their even having to board the sinking submarine.<sup>1</sup>

*Bedrule church in the Scottish Borders, 30 October 1998*

There is no special ceremony or floral tribute to mark 30 October, another important anniversary in the Enigma story, at the tiny church in the parish of Bedrule, in the Scottish Borders, near Jedburgh. But inside the church the searcher can find a black metal memorial on the north side of the nave, bearing the words:

In loving memory of Francis Anthony Blair Fasson, Lieutenant, GC, RN. Killed in Action in an Enemy Submarine in the Mediterranean 30 October 1942.

Under the plaque a more detailed explanation can be found in a modest wooden frame:

'At 1550 hours, on 30 October 1942, HMS *Petard*, of which Lieutenant Fasson was First Lieutenant, commenced a hunt for a German U-Boat in the Eastern Mediterranean. At about 2200 hours, following a search in company with other destroyers, *U-559* had surfaced and was being abandoned by its crew.

In a gallant attempt to recover Top Secret enemy code books, Lieutenant Fasson and Able Seaman Colin Grazier stripped off their clothes and swam across to the *U-559*. With the help of a very young NAAFI Assistant, 16 year old Tommy Brown, the attempt

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was partially successful, but the seacocks had been opened. U-559 sank taking Lieutenant Fasson and Able Seaman Grazier with it. Both were awarded the George Cross posthumously for reasons that could not be revealed at the time.'

This brief prosaic account barely does justice to what was one of the most courageous and significant acts of the Second World War. To dig up the details of the heroic story it was necessary to travel down to London so that I could look up the documents stored in the Public Record Office near Kew Gardens. There I found an account of what happened which is infinitely more stirring than what is revealed on the wall of the Bedrule church. The codebooks which Tony Fasson and his assistants recovered on that dark night contained the key to the Enigma code being used by the German U-boats, in the Atlantic as well as in the Mediterranean, in their attempt to bring Britain and her American ally to their knees.

The codebreaker boffins working at Bletchley Park, near what is now known as Milton Keynes, just could not break Germany's Naval Enigma code using brainpower alone. Without the codebooks Britain might have been starved into submission as her Atlantic lifeline was cut off by the German U-boats. But with the codebooks in Britain's hands everything changed. All of a sudden those eerie morse code messages, which for so long had been the harbingers of night attacks on Britain's defenceless merchant shipping, became welcome tell-tale clues enabling the convoys to avoid the deadly 'sea wolves'.

The Honours and Awards Committee, sitting in 1943, stated that Fasson's – and Grazier's – 'gallantry was up to the Victoria Cross standard'.<sup>2</sup> It was only with reluctance that the Committee went on to say that Fasson and Grazier were not eligible for the Victoria Cross 'because the action was over and the service cannot be held to have been in the face of the Enemy'. Instead they were both awarded a George Cross and Tommy Brown was awarded a George Medal for heroism not in the face of the enemy.

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## PROLOGUE

Behind all of these deaths, graves and medals lies an almost incredible story. It is the story of how Enigma was broken and how it remained an open book to the Allies for a substantial part of the Second World War. Contrary to what many people still believe, it is not a story of one solitary genius breaking the Enigma code through brainpower alone, although the famous mathematician Alan Turing did indeed play a starring role. Nor were the men mentioned in this Prologue the only ones who risked their lives in their bid to see that the code was broken. It is a long-running saga involving a large cast of charismatic, courageous and eccentric characters, many of whom would never have been allowed to perform the functions they carried out in today's more security-conscious society.

But courage and brilliant brains would not have been enough to have ensured that the code remained broken over such a long period. Luck, and mistakes by both sides in the conflict, also played an important part in the story. By analysing these mistakes, lessons can be learned which should be remembered long after all the heroes and geniuses mentioned in this book are forgotten.