

THE SILENT LISTENER, BY David J Thorp, pub. Spellmount,

The History Press. 2012 pp192

I feel that I should start by declaring an interest. I served during the Cold War period and was stationed earlier at some of the same bases as Maj. Thorp during his Sigint days in BAOR. This made it a little easier to read what might otherwise have been, in parts, an incomprehensible book. I have to say that this book is a disappointment in far too many ways.

With a few exceptions (notably Anthony Beevor) military training and life may not be good training grounds for a literary life. A hint of the problem comes in the writer's own words when he writes 'from a young age a small cadre of regular soldiers suitably **institutionalised**'. I found this concept, frankly, repugnant. Such training, much of it, from what he describes being totally pointless, is hardly likely to help develop any latent literary skills. Later in the book, Thorp's comments on the suitability or otherwise of the Middle Class for sourcing officers are, frankly bizarre, not worth repeating and without foundation.

The 'Silent Listener' is a book, very much of 'parts' and, though the cover describes it as being about British Electronic Surveillance in the 1982 Falklands campaign, it is so much more but, at the same time, sadly, so much less.

The first part is his life as a Boy soldier; the second, as a trained signaller and linguist in the Royal Corps of Signals and then the Intelligence Corps, where he was commissioned leading to most importantly, the role he played in Sigint/Elint in the Falklands war. The final part which relates to the 'Belgrano' incident is, to me, again bizarre.

His capability as an Historian is blemished when he recalls his brother and himself 'each carrying gas masks and small cases' being 'evacuated during the Blitz'. As I know to my cost, the Blitz lasted from September 1940 to May 1941 when Thorp was only 1 year old! Some recall!

When his time in Cyprus and BAOR have the potential to become interesting and we might possibly learn something, we are told that he spent 'the next three years on specialist technical training duties that the MOD has indicated it does not want defined' Marvellous! Thank you MOD/GCHQ for allowing Thorp to be so forthcoming.

Things get a little better when he moves on to 13 Signal Regiment BAOR. Unfortunately, when telling the history of the unit he leaves out the time the Regt. spent in Munster as No.1 Wireless (page 31) before moving to Birgelen. Not important but another historical inexactitude. Again, we learn little of what he actually did with no explanation of what 'being an expert in the field of Radio Direction Finding (RDF)' involved and to what purpose. When he gets to Schafholdendorf with 225 Signal Squadron, things look up for the reader with a brief anecdote that does not reflect well on 1st BR Corps. If '225' were able to disrupt an exercise think what could happen if the Soviets joined the party! 'GCHQ' by Richard Aldrich (Harper Press. 2010) gives some second hand anecdotal evidence of the value or otherwise of '225' which was not that well received by many of those who had served there at the time.

"British commanders in Germany enjoyed their own significant sigint and electronic warfare capability which was directed by an Intercept Control Centre The backbone of this was 225 Sqn. which was tasked to support British Forces in Germany. These units had provided an invaluable intelligence contribution in peacetime through their work on the Soviet Order of Battle. However these tactical sigint units themselves felt that their very success in peacetime (see Thorp page 32) had led to a dangerous estimation of their likely contribution "in a war of limited duration in NW Europe. If the standard of security in WP communication links is good, the timely intelligence and useful steerage that 225 can provide will be very small ...the problem ...is not so much one of equipment quantities rather the difficulty of conducting EW in a highly mobile tactical environment ... the wartime limitations of 225 Signal Sqn are not widely known; as a result the Squadron's capabilities are overrated".

Thorp misses the opportunity to put this in context and it is relevant to his experiences in the Falklands campaign.

Still in BAOR, he is a little more informative when he arrives at '226' and the uninitiated can finally begin to guess what *Elint* and the world of electronic surveillance cover! I strongly recommend that if you wish to learn more about the history of *Sigint/elint* in BAOR you go to the 'Langeleben' and, particularly the 'Birgelen' websites if you have not already done so.

This small chink in the Intelligence curtain is rapidly closed when he gets to 9 Signal Regiment in Cyprus where 'he became involved in a particular form of analysis that once again (he could not) describe'. Where is this 'extremely rare look into the world of signals intelligence support' that the cover promised us? Fortunately we have the evidence from the ABC trials in 1977 to fill the gaps whilst the Soviets had Geoffrey Prime who was in Cyprus in 1972.

Thorp is quite informative about the role of Sigint/Elint in the Falklands campaign – indeed this is the best part of the book by far - but tells us that again he was 'gagged'. For the first time in print as far as I am aware, *The Silent Listener* confirms the existence and role of the Special Task Detachment (STD) during Operation *Corporate* and provides details of the deployment and operational role of a dedicated ground based electronic warfare (EW) weapons facility including the establishment of a communications intercept site on East Island following the cessation of hostilities in the Falklands'. An interesting comment from someone who was one of their customers tells us-

'I was one of their customers once I got ashore myself. It was not that they were so secret, rather that a dark-blue heavy "naval intelligence" organisation had no idea how to cope with the excellent reporting from STD and from "them". An interesting Goose Green de-brief between two brothers, one from 264 (SAS Signal Sqn) and another from 2 Para, not too far from the Upland Goose threw up some tragic lessons-identified on how not to handle intelligence at JFHQ level"

This confirms what Thorp says.

Suddenly, and startlingly, almost as an afterthought, he casually tells us that "he was asked to carry out an investigation into the sinking of the Argentinian cruiser, the *Belgrano*" based on his involvement in the Falklands Islands War". This is absolute dynamite and a clue as to 'who' asked him is vital for it to have any validity. He adds that he was commissioned to investigate the Government's intercepted *Belgrano* signals, sent by the Argentine military and, that he produced a report 'The Sinking of the *Belgrano*', read by Margaret Thatcher at the time. Astonishingly, this has managed to remain totally absent from the historical record for thirty years, until now! Thorpe was, he claims, given this job in 1982, and has kept quiet about it ever since, until to this book was published, presumably due to the 30 year rule. We learn that, 'my analysis (note, analysis NOT evidence) revealed that the *Belgrano* had been instructed to alter course and head in the direction of the RV {Rendezvous-position] inside the

exclusion zone.’ When torpedoed, it was ‘relocating to the RV inside the exclusion zone, East of the Falkland Islands.’ These instructions were allegedly intercepted on 29 April?

Questions arise here, which the book does not address. If these signals were intercepted and relayed back to GCHQ, why did they not get into the so-called ‘Crown Jewels’ document which the Clive Ponting (to which he briefly refers) trial was all about? To refresh your memories, Ponting, as a senior MOD civil servant, was tasked to check out this collection of highly secret and sensitive documents, so that he could advise the Minister of Defence Michael Heseltine. He had not been allowed to see telegrams sent to and from Peru and America ‘if they existed’ before the sinking of the Belgrano, otherwise he scrutinised all of the documents. Similarly, a small group of Labour MPs studying the matter were allowed to view the ‘Crown Jewels’ but not permitted to take any notes or make copies. They concluded that no such document existed within that ‘Crown Jewels’ portfolio. So, what, if anything, did Thorp find and where had it been hiding?

The captain of the Belgrano Hector Bonzo has made quite a few comments on the course his ship was sailing when hit - away from the Exclusion zone. Messrs Gavshon and Rice (*The Sinking of the Belgrano* 1984) conducted several interviews with him, and never picked up any hint that he had received an order to move in and attack. Clearly the book these two published would have been very different, had there been any trace of evidence of an Argentine order for the Belgrano and its escorts to head into the Exclusion zone. The route taken by the Belgrano, which no-one seems to have disputed, in no way indicates any such change of direction.

Thus the claim made by Major Thorp needs to be challenged by someone better informed than me. Had any such order in fact been ‘received’ by GCHQ, then it would have been manna from heaven for Margaret Thatcher, enabling her to answer the nightmare questions about the sinking that so plagued her administration.

The Daily Mail’s pre-publication promotion of Thorp’s book screamed ‘**Britain WAS right to sink the Belgrano: Newly released intelligence proves the Argentine ship had been ordered to attack our Task Force**’ with their journalist Guy Walters adding ‘This crucial new evidence flies in the face of what is often claimed by many Argentinians and their useful idiots among the British Left — that the Belgrano was heading back to her home port when she was sunk...’ But hang on, *nobody has presented any ‘evidence’* as far as I can see, merely an allegation has been made – mysteriously surfacing thirty years after the event, (surely notly, just to sell a book).

Is Thorp in any way indicating that a document he prepared for Thatcher exists somewhere, or can he produce any testimony of some credible person who has seen it? As to how no-one noticed it, Thorp explained: ‘Somehow, the significance of this intelligence had been overlooked, misread or perhaps not read at all’ (Uh-huh. Do you really think that everyone else is that stupid?) The all-important sequence of signals sent to the Argentine ships has been combed over in detail. Can we have corroboration, perhaps by someone in GCHQ/MOD, as to how this crucial signal was overlooked for thirty years? Don’t hold your breath.

The Daily Telegraph advised its readers, ‘Despite the report being read by Mrs Thatcher she never disclosed the information either in Parliament or elsewhere possibly because she did not want to reveal Britain’s eavesdropping capabilities and the work of GCHQ. We are not

expected to believe that are we? It would have rescued her and Michael Heseltine from awful dilemmas. Its advance-promotion for Thorp's book was entitled: 'Belgrano was heading to the Falklands, secret papers reveal.' Oh, no it wasn't and Oh, no they didn't. Journalists should be trained not to believe stories beginning 'secret documents reveal...' Could a report said to be commissioned by Prime Minister Thatcher entitled "The Sinking of the Belgrano" not appear in the historic 'Crown Jewels' dossier, which contained all of the controversial Belgrano material; not appear anywhere else – and then mysteriously surface thirty years later, conveniently at the 30-year anniversary, to validate the official line?

Thorp's book describes how he was given a book by two Argentinians on the subject, and that clearly has to be the Gavshon & Rice book of 1984, but he omits to state its title, *The Sinking of the Belgrano*, presumably because he is claiming that this is the title of his unseen memo to the PM.

One can't help noticing the similarity of this amazing discovery to that alleged by Lawrence Freedman in 2005, Thorp gives us a hint that he has read Freedman's *Official History* in his preface which I would have thought would have been essential reading for him. I quote again "Hindsight is a wonderful thing and knowing the basic story (did he really write this?) of the sinking gave me a steer". This is not the comment of a serious Historian.

The best that I can say is that this is a thoroughly unsatisfactory book.

Paul W Croxson May 2012