

CHAPTER 7

Letter to Winston Churchill (1941)

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Introduction

Jack Copeland

During 1941, codebreaking at Bletchley Park was hindered by shortages of typists and unskilled staff. These shortages could have been easily rectified, but the codebreakers' urgent requests were ignored by officials in Whitehall. Going over the heads of those in command at GC & CS, Turing and his co-signatories wrote directly to the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. On receiving the letter Churchill minuted his Chief of Staff, General Ismay: 'ACTION THIS DAY Make sure they have all they want on extreme priority and report to me that this had been done.'¹

It fell to Stuart Milner-Barry of Hut 6 to deliver the letter by hand to 10 Downing Street. In 1986, Milner-Barry recalled his trip to Whitehall:

Why I was deputed to carry the letter to No. 10 I do not remember—at a guess, because I was the most readily expendable from the scene of action. What I do recall is arriving at Euston Station, hailing a taxi, and with a sense of total incredulity (can this really be happening?) inviting the driver to take me to 10 Downing Street. The taxi-driver never blinked an eyelid: without comment he directed himself to Whitehall. Arrived at the entrance to Downing Street, I was again surprised at the lack of formality: there was just a wooden barrier across the road, and one uniformed policeman who waved my driver on. At the door to No. 10 I paid off the taxi, rang the bell, was courteously ushered in, explained that I had an urgent letter which I was anxious to deliver to the Prime Minister

¹ Both the letter and Churchill's minute appear in F. H. Hinsley et al., *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, vol. ii (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1981), appendix 3, pp. 655–7. A facsimile of Churchill's minute appears on p. xiii of R. Erskine and M. Smith (eds.), *Action This Day* (London: Bantam, 2001). The letter and minute are in the Public Record Office in Kew, Richmond, Surrey (document reference HW 1/155). They are Crown copyright and are reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

personally, and was invited to wait. Of course I did not see the Prime Minister himself; but very shortly there appeared a dapper dark-suited figure of shortish stature whom I subsequently identified as Brigadier Harvie-Watt, Mr. Churchill's PPS from 1941 to 1945. To him I again explained my errand; and while obviously and understandably puzzled as to who I might be and what this was all about, he took me sufficiently seriously to promise that he would without fail deliver the letter to the Prime Minister and stress its urgency. That accomplished, I took my leave and took myself back to Bletchley by the next train. It was some forty years later before I found out what happened to that letter, when I saw the Prime Minister's minute dated the following day... All that we did notice was that almost from that day the rough ways began miraculously to be made smooth. The flow of bombes was speeded up, the staff bottlenecks were relieved, and we were able to devote ourselves uninterruptedly to the business in hand.²

Milner-Barry added, 'I by chance met Commander Denniston in the corridors some days later, and he made some rather wry remark about our unorthodox behaviour; but he was much too nice a man to bear malice.'

² P. S. Milner-Barry, "Action This Day": The Letter from Bletchley Park Cryptanalysts to the Prime Minister, 21 October 1941', *Intelligence and National Security*, 1 (1986), 272–3. Reproduced with the permission of Frank Cass Publishers.

Letter to Winston Churchill

*Secret and Confidential
Prime Minister only*

Hut 6 and Hut 8
21st October 1941

Dear Prime Minister,

Some weeks ago you paid us the honour of a visit, and we believe that you regard our work as important. You will have seen that, thanks largely to the energy and foresight of Commander Travis, we have been well supplied with the 'bombe' for the breaking of the German Enigma codes. We think, however, that you ought to know that this work is being held up, and in some cases is not being done at all, principally because we cannot get sufficient staff to deal with it. Our reason for writing to you direct is that for months we have done everything that we possibly can through the normal channels, and that we despair of any early improvement without your intervention. No doubt in the long run these particular requirements will be met, but meanwhile still more precious months will have been wasted, and as our needs are continually expanding we see little hope of ever being adequately staffed.

We realise that there is a tremendous demand for labour of all kinds and that its allocation is a matter of priorities. The trouble to our mind is that as we are a very small section with numerically trivial requirements it is very difficult to bring home to the authorities finally responsible either the importance of what is done here or the urgent necessity of dealing promptly with our requests. At the same time we find it hard to believe that it is really impossible to produce quickly the additional staff that we need, even if this meant interfering with the normal machinery of allocations.

We do not wish to burden you with a detailed list of our difficulties, but the following are the bottlenecks which are causing us the most acute anxiety.

1. Breaking of Naval Enigma (Hut 8)

Owing to shortage of staff and the overworking of his present team the Hollerith section here under Mr Freeborn has had to stop working night shifts. The effect of this is that the finding of the naval keys is being delayed at least twelve hours every day. In order to enable him to start night shifts again Freeborn needs immediately about twenty more untrained Grade III women clerks. To put himself in a really adequate position to deal with any likely demands he will want a good many more.

A further serious danger now threatening us is that some of the skilled male staff, both with the British Tabulating Company at Letchworth and in Freeborn's section here, who have so far been exempt from military service, are now liable to be called up.

2. Military and Air Force Enigma (Hut 6)

We are intercepting quite a substantial proportion of wireless traffic in the Middle East which cannot be picked up by our intercepting stations here. This contains among other things a good deal of new 'Light Blue' intelligence. Owing to shortage of trained typists, however, and the fatigue of our present decoding staff, we cannot get all this traffic decoded. This has been the state of affairs since May. Yet all that we need to put matters right is about twenty trained typists.

3. Bombe testing, Hut 6 and Hut 8

In July we were promised that the testing of the 'stories' produced by the bombs would be taken over by the WRNS in the bombe hut and that sufficient WRNS would be provided for this purpose. It is now late in October and nothing has been done. We do not wish to stress this so strongly as the two preceding points, because it has not actually delayed us in delivering the goods. It has, however, meant that staff in Huts 6 and 8 who are needed for other jobs have had to do the testing themselves. We cannot help feeling that with a Service matter of this kind it should have been possible to detail a body of WRNS for this purpose, if sufficiently urgent instructions had been sent to the right quarters.

4. Apart altogether from staff matters, there are a number of other directions in which it seems to us that we have met with unnecessary impediments. It would take too long to set these out in full, and we realise that some of the matters involved are controversial. The cumulative effect, however, has been to drive us to the conviction that the importance of the work is not being impressed with sufficient force upon those outside authorities with whom we have to deal.

We have written this letter entirely on our own initiative. We do not know who or what is responsible for our difficulties, and most emphatically we do not want to be taken as criticising Commander Travis who has all along done his utmost to help us in every possible way. But if we are to do our job as well as it could and should be done it is absolutely vital that our wants, small as they are, should be promptly attended to. We have felt that we should be failing in

our duty if we did not draw your attention to the facts and to the effects which they are having and must continue to have on our work, unless immediate action is taken.

We are, Sir, Your obedient servants,

A M Turing

W G Welchman

C H O'D Alexander

P S Milner-Barry