

I.B.A.'s 'Mr. Q'

Charles Bovill 18 February 1911-18 February 2001

On February 18th 2001, Charles Bovill died.

Mr. Bovill was a friend of Baron Castleshort, Director General I.B.A., and used to teach I.B.A. electronic-counter-surveillance classes for years. Due to his great knowledge and capabilities with electronic-counter-surveillance affairs, he was known throughout the I.B.A. as 'Mr. Q'.

CHARLES BOVILL, who has died aged 90, played a key role in the creation and employment of Eureka and the S-phone, radio equipment that greatly enhanced two-way communications between SOE agents and Resistance parties on the ground after the fall of France and the Low Countries in 1940.

Eureka, a relatively small device by the standards of the day, enabled agents to direct aircraft towards weapon and supply dropping zones. The S-phone's principal asset was its ability to reduce agents' dread of detection. Capable of being carried in a suitcase, the phone enabled SOE-designated aircrew and agents in the field to talk to each other with little risk of interception, up to a range of 30 miles. It was also used effectively between motor gunboats landing agents on French beaches and reception parties.

In adverse weather conditions of mist and low cloud, a combination of Eureka and the S-phone could help to improve the RAF's accuracy when dropping weapons, supplies and people. In later life, Bovill invented and manufactured security equipment of such sophistication that in 1973 the IRA, fearing the use of one of his inventions against them, attempted to blow up his company's Westminster office and showroom.

Charles Barton Bovill was born on February 18 1911 at Battersea, south London. His father, C B Bovill, a successful playwright, employed a youthful P G Wodehouse as an assistant and had a number of plays running in the West End during the First World War; he was killed fighting on the Western Front.

Young Charles was then brought up in the South of France by his aunt, a redoubtable character who was well known to Wodehouse; several of his aunt's traits found their way into Wodehouse's fearsome Aunt Agatha who "eats broken bottles and wears barbed wire next to the skin".

Bovill was educated at Bedford School, at the University of Grenoble in France and at Regent Street Polytechnic in central London. In 1933 he joined HMV as a radio development engineer, moving in 1935 to the wireless telegraphy section at the Air Ministry, and three years after that to Marconi. As war approached, Marconi lent him to RAF Bomber and Coastal Commands as a wireless development engineer; he liaised between them and the company.

Bovill's work soon brought him to the attention of SOE and in October 1941 he was invited to command the radio experimental and flight section of the Inter-Service Research Bureau (ISRB), a cover name for SOE's technical research and development activities. Bovill's value as a specialist aircraft radio engineer was especially appreciated by RAF squadrons linked to SOE and in April 1942 he was commissioned as a flight lieutenant into the technical, signals and radar branch of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.

After regularly accompanying special duties' aircrew to install, test and also to operate S-phone and other equipment over France, Bovill was posted in June 1944 to SOE's Force 399 in Italy. His prime task was to equip aircraft of the Balkans Air Force with the S-phone and Eureka, thus enhancing communication with Tito's partisans, to whom the RAF and SOB were dropping a variety of equipment and liaison officers.

In January 1945 Bovill returned home to the ISRB where he developed technical equipment for use in the de Havilland Mosquito before returning to civilian life in May. Bovill then enjoyed a fulfilling career with Decca, where he was much involved with the creation, development and sales of the company's internationally successful Decca Navigator marine equipment.

In 1972, he joined Allen International as technical director. Soon the showcases at the company's Westminster premises were displaying microphones disguised as wrist watches and cufflinks, and microphones and radio transmitters attached surreptitiously to ties, fountain pens and table lighters.

The business provided Q-type gadgets for James Bond films while also building a reputation in the Middle East and elsewhere for security, espionage and counter-espionage equipment. One of Bovill's most effective designs was a crowd-control device which used a photic drive. This experimental equipment employed a combination of ultra-sonic waves and strobe lights to induce acute discomfort, sickness, disorientation and sometimes epilepsy.

After trying out the device on his wife in his laboratory at West Byfleet, Bovill marketed it in America where prison authorities were impressed by its ability to control disruptive inmates and riots.

On October 1 1973, staff at Allen International, Bovill's firm in Westminster, who were monitoring one of the firm's spy camera products, observed a suspicious figure lurking at the entrance. When they confronted the man he threw a bomb and bolted. Fortunately, since the device was later found to contain five pounds of gelignite, it did not explode.

Police suspected the IRA, who were believed to be anxious about the possibility that the firm's equipment - above all, Bovill's photic device - might be used against them, and issued a photofit picture of the culprit. Bovill continued to experiment and invent in his home laboratory until shortly before his death. He was a Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society.

He married, in 1963, Mrs Pamela Keegan (nee Bryan).