

The Gay Man Who Defeated Nazi Germany

By Charles McCain

[Editor's note from GayPolitics.com: In light of the ongoing debate over whether openly gay people should be able to serve in the U.S. armed forces, it's worth remembering that gay people already serve with distinction, and that some of those discharged for being gay may have taken with them extraordinary skills or talents necessary for success in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Author Charles McCain, a World War II expert guest posting here, contributes the following commentary about one such hero, whose incalculable contribution to the Allied effort to defeat Hitler's Germany is not widely known.]

In 1952, the man who discovered the Ultra Secret was convicted of “charges of committing acts of gross indecency with another man.” The defendant was a rumpel Cambridge mathematics professor who had done something important in the war. Still did a bit of secret work for the government. He looked a regular sort of chap but he wasn't – he was a poof, a Nancy boy, a queer.

The judge gave him two choices: prison or chemical castration through the injection of female hormones. This to one of the handful of men responsible for Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War Two – a man whose ideas changed our world. He chose the humiliation of being injected with estrogen – the doses so high he developed breasts.

Upon conviction, his security clearance was revoked by the British Government and he was dismissed. Men, straight men – the ones who ran the intelligence establishment – were happy to see him go, no doubt. Don't need that sort around. Did something very hush-hush during the war. Not sure what exactly. Good riddance to bad trash.

But they couldn't let this man just wander off. He knew too much – about what, no one actually knew. What this man had done in the war was so beyond 'top secret' the British government had created a fourth level of secrecy. Prime Minister Winston Churchill is thought to have said, “this is so secret it must ever be the Ultra Secret.” And Ultra it became, the very highest level of security in Great Britain. Only a very few men in the world knew the entire scope of this mind boggling secret. Alan Turing was one of those men.



Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of all Allied Forces in Europe, considered the Ultra Secret, “decisive” to our victory over Nazi Germany. Yet only a few of his subordinates ever saw intelligence from Ultra and while they knew it was absolutely reliable they had no idea where it came from. It was so secret, so critical to victory, we still don't know the lengths to which the Allies went to protect it.

Did we assassinate men and women in German occupied Europe who may have known one small detail of the Ultra Secret? Most certainly. Mount hundreds of military operations to protect the secret by deceiving the Germans as to the origin of our intelligence? Yes. Lie, violate the 'rules of war', deceive our own commanders, break into diplomatic mail, kill anyone who might tell the Germans we knew the secret? Yes. Do we know the details? No, they have never been released to this day. The only thing we know for certain is this: the Allies would have done anything, gone to any length, to protect the Ultra Secret uncovered by Alan Turing.



After Turing had his security clearance revoked, MI5, the British Internal Security agency, as ignorant as they were small minded, watched him constantly because he knew the Ultra Secret – although they didn't use that term since the designation of Ultra was itself Ultra Secret. They trailed him, harassed him, treated him with the worst kind of contempt – because he was a fruit, a homo, a faggot. Treated him so badly, in fact, that in March of 2009, just over one year ago, then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown made an official apology on behalf of the British Government for the way Alan Turing had been treated simply because he was gay.

Unfortunately, Her Majesty's Government was fifty-five years too late. On 7 June 1954, police reported that a Cambridge mathematics professor named Alan Turing had committed suicide by biting into an apple laced with cyanide. Was he so depressed he committed suicide? His mother and his brother said no nor did they ever accept the explanation given by the police. So the speculation continues: did he kill himself or was he killed? If so, who killed him?

In 1974 the British government authorized the publication of a book simply titled *The Ultra Secret*. What the book revealed was so shocking, so incredible, so unimaginable it changed everything we knew about the Second World War. And what it revealed was this: during World War Two the British, and later the Americans, read almost 90% of all top secret German radio traffic – and the Germans used radio as their primary method of communication.

Because of gay activists in London we also learned something else: the key player in the Ultra Secret was a gay man named Alan Turing.

And this is how it helped us: “During the great campaigns on land or in desperate phases of the war at sea, exact and utterly reliable information could thus be conveyed, regularly and often instantly, mint-fresh, to the Allied commanders.” wrote historian Ronald Lewin in *Ultra Goes To War*.

Often we decrypted Ultra messages as fast as the Germans did. And what did we learn? Almost everything: battle plans, dates of attack, the position of every ship, plane, U-Boat, soldier – we knew almost all. And we knew it all because of a homosexual named Alan Turing.

To prevent anyone from understanding the secret information they were broadcasting, the German armed forces used a coding machine so complex the British called it the Enigma. It was unbreakable. Completely and totally secure. Only it wasn't. Why? Because in one of his many flashes of genius, mathematician Alan Turing, who was working for the British military, figured out how to crack messages coded by the Enigma.

There was a small hitch. In order to perform the actions required to crack the Enigma, Turing had to invent a machine of some sort – a machine which had never existed before. *The Oxford Companion to World War Two* gives this bland explanation: “Turing, Alan (1912-1954). British mathematician whose theories and work ... resulted in the modern computer.” Today, the ‘Nobel Prize’ of the computing world is the Turing Award—so named to honor Alan Turing as the father of the computer age. He changed the world. Yet few gay men or gay women know of him.



Turing worked for the British military and naturally had clearance for Ultra since he created it. Yet even with Turing on our side, even knowing all we did, it still required the combined might of the three strongest nations in the world – Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union – to defeat Nazi Germany. What if we hadn't known as much as we did? What if Alan Turing hadn't cracked the Enigma, invented the computer, and given us the Ultra Secret? What if the British military had not hired Turing because of his homosexuality? The alternative is unthinkable.

Somehow gay people are left out when the 'Greatest Generation' is honored. Let us therefore insist, beginning from this very moment, that whenever the 'Greatest Generation' is remembered, we remember Alan Turing, the greatest of them all.

[This article first appeared at GayPolitics.com. Images courtesy of TechFest–AV Techonology Blog, James Twining, and Wikipedia. More information can be found at Alan Turing's biographer's website at <http://www.turing.org.uk/turing/>.]