

Flo Cole née Golding

Chicksands 1943 - 1944. WAAF Teleprinter Operator. Interviewed November 2015

I grew up in Birmingham, the youngest of six children, and had two brothers in the Air Force. When war broke out I was about 17 and working for Joseph Lucas, until I was called up 1943 at the age of 20. I went for an interview in the centre of Birmingham, and the officer interviewing me said that they were very short of people in the Army. I said without thinking, "Does that matter. Can I choose something else please?" but she said that she would prefer me to go into the Army to which I said "I don't know what my mother will say because my two brothers are in the Air Force".

When I went home and told my mother that they wanted me to go into the Army, she said "No you're not, you've got to follow your brothers, go straight back and tell them that your mother has told you that you can't go in the Army". So I went back and explained that my mother had told me that I must go into the Air Force and that I couldn't go home until I did. The officer went into another office and after a little time she came back and said "Yes we will arrange for you to go into the Air Force, and we'll let you know".

Within a month I went straight into the Air Force and did my initial training at Innsworth Lane, Gloucester. On my first day, a very hot summer's day, I had full gas equipment on and I felt myself going off and I fell on the floor. The last thing I remember hearing was "Get that woman up off the floor!" but because I was a rookie I was not put on a charge!!

I was at Innsworth for a month and from there I went to 617 Squadron, 'The Dambusters', in Lincoln. Because I hadn't been trained yet I sat with the pilots and all sorts of people, next door to the room where they went they got back from their missions. It was top secret stuff and I wanted desperately to know who they were but they'd come in and report and I just had to absorb what I could hear. It was a very strange world to me. This was after the raid on the Möhne, Eder and Sorpe dams.

In August 1943 while I was with 'The Dambusters', we were asked to fill the bomb racks in the Lancaster bombers with propaganda leaflets to be dropped over Germany. Although the planes were so big there was little room for the seven crew, they were so brave because they had no cover, the rear gunner was a prime target.

A few years ago I was contacted by a lady, ex-WAAF, who still had one of these leaflets, so I had it translated and I was featured in the local paper.

At the beginning of 1944 I went to Cranwell for two weeks initial training on how to use a teleprinter, we were just typing ordinary stuff there, after which I went to Chicksands. We were not told anything about codes or before we passed out. It was daunting; I kept thinking to myself "What have I done?" "What's going to happen?", all these things went around in my head because it was unknown territory. It was quite frightening at Chicksands because we were a good mile off the road and there was no light anywhere and you never knew what was going to happen.

We worked a shift pattern of eight hours per shift, with a very short break of about 20 minutes. The wireless telegraphists were in a different place to us at Chicksands and we didn't know where that was. An officer used to come to us with a pile of paperwork in code, and he would hand them out to us. We would type this up, but because it was so secret we didn't know what it was.

Everything I typed was in blocks of five letters, we knew that we were dealing with codes, but because it was so secret we just knew that we had to type them. A courier would come to take them away and they disappeared. We never asked where they were going; we were not allowed to talk, so it was a bit boring. It's only now that I know they were taken to Bletchley Park and understand what I contributed.

The food was awful, nine times out of ten when I was on night duty and went for breakfast there was nothing left. I think it was because there were a lot of Americans there; they would have eaten it all.

I only ever went to one of the parties thrown by the Americans; I queued for about four hours to get a ticket to see Glen Miller when he came to the Corn Exchange in Bedford, it was wonderful.

When going home to Birmingham on leave I would get onto Watling Street and hitch hike. The only people to stop were the big lorry drivers who would give me a lift; they were a grand lot, the cars never stopped.

I was living on the camp, which was just below the Chicksands station, in a hut with about 20 others, from all over the country. I don't remember their names because although there was a lot of camaraderie we did not have the time to get to know each other well; it was a very strange world that we

lived in.

I got married in 1944 and was demobbed at the end of that year. I had met my husband-to-be in 1939, he was in the Army and we married when he came home on leave from mine detecting in the Middle East. He stayed long enough for us to get married and then by D-Day plus two he'd gone again, this time he was working on Bailey bridges.

He rarely talked about the war, but he did tell me that once, in France, they had just built a bridge and were standing back and thinking they had done a good job, when the Americans came and bombed it! When he was in the Middle East he made a Spitfire from a ha'penny, with very few tools, and that is now in the academy up the road.