

Rolf Noskwith

Bletchley Park, civilian in Hut 8 Crib Room. Interviewed June 2012.

I was an undergraduate at Cambridge reading mathematics and at the outbreak of war I had finished my first year and was beginning to do the second part of the maths Tripos. Because I could also speak German, and was fond of crossword puzzles, I thought I had some qualifications for what I called "decoding". At that time the University had set up a recruiting board and they accepted me. I was also in the OTC, in something called Artillery Survey, so they recommended that I should be trained as an officer in Artillery Survey, but use should also be made of my knowledge of languages, with particular emphasis on decoding. It was a fairly composite sort of recommendation and I was very pleased with it.

I then had to go for a medical and to my surprise I came out grade 2, which meant the whole thing fell flat and I was rejected. I was told to go on with my studies and wait for something to turn up. I then had another medical for the ordinary call-up and I came out grade 3! I've had a pretty long life since, so I don't really understand why this happened!

So I stayed at Cambridge to do Part 2 and Part 3 of the Tripos but in early 1940 I was interviewed by [Welchman](#) and a man called [Jeffreys](#), who died young, and they said "Yes, we'll have you". I thought this was wonderful; they didn't say what the work was but I guessed it was something like "decoding", and two days later I got a letter saying "Sorry, we can't have you because you are not British-born and it has been vetoed by MI5". So I was told again to continue with my studies and then in early 1941, in my third year, I was summoned again. This time I was interviewed by C P Snow, who later became famous, but was then a Civil Service Commissioner, and by [Hugh Alexander](#) and it was obviously for the same job. They said they would have me, I said I'd been vetoed once and was told that the rules had changed.

So I finished my third year, part three of the Tripos and on 20 June 1941, seventy-two years ago today, I turned up at Bletchley station, Alexander met me and took me into the adjacent Bletchley Park and into one of the huts, called Hut 8 and said that that was where I was going to work, and that he was the acting head. Only then did I discover that the job was to break the ciphers of the German Navy. I was introduced to a man called [Michael Ashcroft](#), who had arrived two days earlier and who therefore was qualified to initiate me into what it was all about. That was my training! There was no training school, we learned on the job.

While at Cambridge I hadn't known that anyone was recruited to this secret work, but when I got there, there were several people I recognised.

I stayed in Hut 8 till midnight on the first day, sitting out the evening shift, and then I was taken in one of the shooting brakes to a village called Adstock on the way to Buckingham, and dumped outside a cottage. I don't remember how I got in, but there was no electric light and I went into a bedroom and a voice came from another bed "You're Noskwith, aren't you?" I said "Yes, who are you?" "[Tutte](#)", came the reply. I knew him by sight from Trinity. I stayed there for, I think, three nights and on the second night I went to plead for a different billet, although my hosts were perfectly friendly. I didn't think I would get anywhere, but I was sent to an elderly couple in Newport Pagnell and I lived in great comfort for the rest of the war. I was very lucky, they had been in service with the aristocracy and then they had kept the Swan Hotel in Newport Pagnell and they had retired comfortably, and had a nice house. She was a wonderful lady and looked after me well. So I had a comfortable war as well as a very interesting one.

There was the bus from Newport Pagnell at quarter past eight for the day shift and quarter past three or some such time for the afternoon shift, and for the night shift we might have used the shooting brakes. That was the standard way, but never having been particularly good at getting up I missed it fairly frequently. I must have bicycled and there were one or two people with private cars going in later who might have given me a lift. I didn't get into trouble as it was all very informal and in one way or another I would get to work and of course we worked a lot of overtime.

Our work was on the ciphers of the German Navy, which used the Enigma machine. The essence of Turing's method was a crib, a guess at what a section of a signal, about twenty letters or more, would be saying, and that guess was tested by the machines called Bombes which would go through all the possible combinations of the variable elements in the machine, and if the guess was correct it would find the correct one which was the key for that particular cipher for that day. Of course the key changed from day to day so this was a daily task, finding the correct crib for each of the different ciphers that the German Navy used. When I arrived there was only one, but they gradually broke it up into different areas and different types of ship, so there were more and more different ciphers and you had to find more and more cribs.

At the beginning there was also the process called Banburismus which was a sort of mathematical technique which reduced the number of combinations which the Bombe had to test. The Banburists were next door, there were a lot

of mathematicians, whom I knew, at least by sight, from Cambridge. When the U boat Enigma went on to four wheels at the beginning of 1942, Banburismus no longer worked and we had nine months in 1942 when we were not reading the U boat cipher. We still read the rest of the traffic, including the U boats in the Arctic, which remained on the three wheel machines, so we still could do some work on the convoys going to Russia.

That went on until the middle of 1943 by which time we got the new Bombes from America which could deal with 26 times as many combinations and therefore could deal with the U boat keys by cribs. Cribbing became more important and Banburismus faded out, as we had such strong Bombe capacity for three wheel ciphers and it was decided that the Banburists could do more useful work elsewhere, and a lot of them went to work on Tunny. In the end it was all done by four cribsters, and I stayed on cribbing until the end of the war. As a cribster I was involved in writing the bombe menu.

It is known that our work had a great effect on the war at sea; we gradually destroyed the German surface fleet, ending in the sinking of Tirpitz in November 1944 and we had great success in the battle against the U boats with an enormous effect on sinkings of merchant ships. There was a direct correlation between breaking the naval cipher and the sinkings. When we were in business and breaking the ciphers the sinkings were much lower, and when we didn't as during most of 1942, the sinkings went up. In Hut 8 we were kept pretty well informed about how our work was contributing to the war effort, particularly against the U boats.

[Alan Turing](#) was the head of Hut 8, but, as he wasn't an administrator, Alexander was brought in as acting head. I worked under Turing from when I arrived until he left in about late 1942 and he was friendly when I asked him about a problem, when he could help he would always do so, we chatted from time to time, I remember him lending me a book, but we were not close, as neither of us was extrovert. I had a much easier relationship with Alexander, who was extrovert, and had lots of things to talk about and I also had close contact with [Wylie](#). They were very easy to relate to. One of the lucky circumstances of Hut 8 was that it was a very pleasant place to work, due, particularly to Alexander and Wylie.

In 1943 we moved out of the Hut into Block D but were still called "Hut 8". I remember very little about what either building looked like, but I think I regretted the change, as Block D was somehow soulless compared with Hut 8, but one got used to it. Having been to Hut 8 recently I can't remember any details, but I am sure what they say was the crib room is in the wrong place. I

am sure that looking down the corridor, at the big room, it was on the left, not on the right.

I spent much of my free time going for walks with my landlord's dog and occasionally with other people billeted in Newport Pagnell and the surrounding villages, occasionally going to the cinema in Bletchley. I played some bridge and chess, and although I went to dramatic society performances I wasn't qualified to join in, and wasn't musical so didn't join the choir. It was a friendly place and I made some lifelong friends there. Because we worked long hours and liked doing so, and were very happy to work overtime, you had to tear the work away from the previous person as they wouldn't let it go! I found it interesting and satisfying work.

I went home occasionally on leave, we must have been entitled to a weekend off every so often, but it was almost a matter of pride that one didn't take all one's leave. I remember the journey, having to go via either Bedford or Rugby and in each case you had to walk quite a long way between stations. I think my parents must have guessed what I was doing, partly because I had talked before that I wanted to do "decoding", but it was not discussed. I don't remember being asked very much, even by friends. It was probably thought that I had found myself a soft job to keep out of the services, but in fact it was never an embarrassment.

We were all made to join the Home Guard at Bletchley, under a gentleman called Captain [Keith Shaw](#). We had to dress in uniform and do arms drill and thought it was a bore and a bit of a waste of time. A skit in one of the reviews was about being in the Home Guard:

My object all sublime, I shall achieve in time
To make civilians toe the line, civilians toe the line
Through smoke-filled huts, these decadent mutts
On their bellies are forced to crawl
Anaemic scholars, with dirty collars
And hair on their lower jaw
Are being degraded by being paraded
And cursed by Captain Shaw

When the war ended I couldn't tear myself away and was briefly put on Japanese work and possibly Russian as far as I can remember, and then I

worked under Brigadier Tiltman on Yugoslav ciphers, and that was fascinating. I even went on to Eastcote in early 1946 and I kept boring my friends by saying "What shall I do next?"

After Eastcote I went back to the family business, Charnos. A close friend from Bletchley Park was [Harry Hinsley](#), and we disapproved of [Winterbotham](#)'s book, but he was too old to be arrested. On the other hand we thought the story might as well be published; there was no point in keeping it all secret, and Harry was commissioned to do the multi-volume official history. Then there was Welchman's book but the Bletchley Park story didn't really become common knowledge until the 1990s when Harry and [Alan Stripp](#) produced the original "Codebreakers" book, to which I contributed a chapter. And now Bletchley Park is quite a cult and late in life I seem to have another identity!