

## **Andrew McMurchy**

*Harpenden, North Africa and Italy, Intelligence Corps code and cipher clerk.  
Interviewed November 2013*

I was recruited at the age of 21 from Cambridge University. I had an interview when I was still at Cambridge and I had no idea of what I would be doing, no idea of the Y service, although I think someone did say that I would be working in intelligence. I was initially called up into the Royal Artillery, but they took their time to transfer me to the Intelligence Corps, which was when I started my Y Service training.

I never went to Bletchley Park, but I did go all over the place. First I was at an outstation of Harpenden, at Queen Ann's Mansions in London, then on to various other places before I ended up at Harpenden itself, which was part of the Y Service. I was in 48 Wireless Intelligence Section at Rothamsted, a special wireless group and that is where I did my training. We were trained on the German Air Force Traffic because, of course, we couldn't get over to the Continent at that time. In the Special Wireless sections, the Signals people took the traffic and we Intelligence people dealt with it. I used to mark cipher messages TP (teleprint) to BP.

I was in England for about a year after I had started with the Wireless Intelligence Section. From our section we formed 55 Wireless Intelligence Section in Chertsey, and then joined the 128 Radio Intelligence Company of the American Army. I then went to North Africa in October 1942, where I served with the American Army, until the end of the North Africa campaign.

After landing in North Africa we were based near Oran, and then went up through Tunisia. I was dealing with the German Army traffic then and right to end of the North African Campaign; which was very interesting.

These were simple codes, as the Enigma traffic was passed upstairs. After the Signals took the traffic down I classified it and dealt with any codes that I was able to. I really felt that I could get to know some of the Germans sending them.

My grandson is very insistent that I tell you about this rather funny incident when I was attached to the Americans. At the end of the North African campaign, there was a prisoner of war camp not far from us and my American Commanding Officer wanted to go down there to see if he could get hold of a Volkswagen, and he took me with him to do any necessary interpretation, because he didn't know any German. When we got down to this camp it was a scene of utter chaos and I said to the chap who seemed

to be in charge, 'What's the trouble?' and he says 'Oh, no goddam son of a bitch speaks German!' I said 'Well I do, and in fact I have a bit of Italian as well', 'All right' he said, 'I want them separated out into other ranks and officers and put into different cages,' which I did. I was a corporal at the time and I got them all sorted out and an American colonel appeared and was watching me with great interest, when I had finished sorting out the prisoners, he said to me 'Phew, thanks a lot, now just go into the cage with the rest of them will you!!' and then he said 'What are you doing with that revolver?' and the American chap said 'But Colonel, the boy's British!' which I think is a very nice anecdote.

In April 1943 we received a commendation:

'To: Commanding Officer 128 Signal RI Company

1. The results obtained by the 128<sup>th</sup> Signal RI Coy and the detachment of 55 Wireless Intelligence Section attached and made available promptly to the proper staff officers of the Corps Staff were of the highest military value. Such information materially assisted the whole staff in their planning efforts.

2. I desire to extend through you to all members of the organisation the appreciation of the entire staff and assure you that we are looking forward to further valuable aid during the forthcoming operations

O N Bradley, Commanding General II US Army Corps.<sup>1</sup>

The Germans had attacked the Kasserine Pass in North Africa and we had intercepted a message telling us about this attack which we passed to Corps head quarters. This is probably what General Bradley was referring to and it was vital information for him at the time.

When I look back now I think it was a very interesting experience and I remember several little incidents. When I was with the Americans I went to visit one of our outstations and the American operator who was there was very worried because he had got an Italian station that kept asking him who he was and he didn't know what to do about it. There is a 'Q' signal, to ask what the station is, so I wrote down something to give him, which was a rather nasty message. I said to the operator 'Send that back to him', which he did and the chap came back with what I think it was 'QWP' which is the 'Q' signal for 'Obey Regulations'.

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<sup>1</sup> This document is quoted in *The Y Compendium*, by Hugh Skillen, OC of 55 WIS.

While the signallers had their radio sets for intercepts, we intelligence staff did not have any equipment, apart from the odd dictionary. The intercepted message was on a special form, called a Red with one message at a time. The Americans started typing in capitals, but we stopped that as it didn't fit on the form.

We occasionally got near the action on the front lines. I do remember early one morning the American Sergeant Major came running through our camp and said 'Let's go lads, the Krauts are coming!!' That got us on the move. The Americans, I must say, were delightful people, but they were very immature. There was an air raid, and our American CO ordered us all outside with our weapons, expecting, I suppose, parachutists, until we persuaded him that we would be safer indoors, which he finally conceded. He put up on his daily orders one day 'The banging of doors will cease, if it doesn't you will all go out into tents and remember "A tent ain't got no doors!"'.

Occasionally we lived in billets but more often than not we were under canvas, it varied. With the Americans, the food was excellent. Our meals when on rations included a lot of bully beef, which is why I still like corned beef. The food was reasonable, considering the difficulties that they had in cooking out there. We were able to swap our cigarettes ration with the Americans for chocolate, tea sugar and milk.

After the North African Campaign ended I was moved to Tripoli, where I joined the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, staying in Intelligence Corps Wireless Intelligence units, deciphering and doing intelligence work. We went back up again to Tunisia and on via Malta, to Sicily and then Italy and at the end of the war ended up in Austria, which suited me very nicely.

I was Mentioned in Despatches while in Italy. I think it was the result of some specialist work I did on traffic of the German parachute regiments, which was my speciality. These were in non-Enigma ciphers and one of these used five-letter groups which we discovered, much to our delight, were being turned around and written backwards.

I was a Lance Sergeant when I was demobbed –the people in Special Wireless Sections and the intelligence side of it were mainly NCO's, there would have been the odd officer but generally the people that did all the work were NCO's, they were getting us on the cheap! I feel that we should have been commissioned, as most of the people at Bletchley Park were commissioned.

When the war ended I got on a three ton lorry and went across Europe from Austria to Calais, I thought I was going home on leave, but actually when I got home, I had a letter from the Unit saying that my Class B Release had come through, so I never went back. I had served from 1941 to 1945 and my college at Cambridge, Caius, had requested that I should be released to complete my studies. I returned to Cambridge and finished my degree in Modern Languages.

When I was recruited to the Army I had only done two years at Cambridge but I had spent some time in Germany before I went to Cambridge with my pen friends, pre war, so I was fairly fluent in those days. I didn't spend as much time in Germany as I would have done after the war, when people used to go for a whole term to do their time abroad.

When I finished my degree I went back to teaching, I had a wife and family to support after all. We got married in 1945, as soon I got back, much to the disgust of the vicar, who had been a curate in the church where my wife went to as a child, he had said 'No, no you shouldn't get married like this because he will be a different man' and she said 'We've waited long enough!'

I regret very much that I didn't keep in touch with people that I met during the war and that I haven't been back for reunions, I know we always say that we will keep in touch, but that doesn't generally happen.

A few people I knew later had connections with Bletchley Park, there was Irene Goodchild we knew that she had worked at Bletchley Park and I kept discovering other people that had worked there, such as Rolf Noskwith for instance. I am not aware of ever having been officially released from the Official Secrets Act – as far as I am aware it is still there<sup>2</sup>.

Throughout my teaching career I was also committed to the CCF. I went after a job, at my old school and the head said to me 'Well the man you will be replacing, ran the Naval Section of the CCF, what do you feel about that?', 'Well I said, I do know Port from Starboard!!' so I ran the Naval Section at Glasgow Academy for 9 years and I was so glad to get back to the Army when I came to teach at Nottingham High School, in fact I ended up at the dizzy heights of Lieutenant Colonel, commanding the whole lot!

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<sup>2</sup> Note by editor – Mr McMurchy is quite correct; the Official Secrets Act does not have an expiry date. However GCHQ say on their Bletchley Park commemorative badge application form; "You may consider anything that happened before VJ Day as unclassified".

I met my wife Barbara when I was in Harpenden as I knew her brother there. When I was stationed there, they entertained me and I was supposed to be going there for Christmas where I would meet his sister and father. As things happened, as they do in the services, a couple of days before Christmas I was moved and shortly after that moved again, to a place called Shenley. This was about three miles from Radlett, so I rang up the family, and said I was nearby and it would be nice to actually get to meet your sister. So I was invited to supper and that is how it all started. We have been married for 68 years!