

June Radford née Lodge

*Eastcote November 1943 - May 1944. WRNS Bombe operator.
Colombo June 1944 - October 1945. Decoding call-signs.*

My early life

I was brought up in Cheltenham and went to the Cheltenham Ladies' College as a daygirl between the ages of 9 and 13. After that I went to the Abbey School, Malvern Wells as a boarder between the ages of 13 and 18, and then finally left school.

My father had been serving in the Army when I was born and when my mother sadly died when I was only two; I was then placed with guardians in Cheltenham and grew up as part of their family thereafter.

After school I had a year at home in Cheltenham before joining up and in that time went to the art school in Cheltenham to study Architecture.

Mill Hill

In 1943, at the age of 19, I volunteered to join the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS). I was sent to Mill Hill, which I understood was an old research station of some kind, and here I received my basic training in the Royal Navy. It was also here that we had group interviews. We were told about a secret establishment called P5 (HMS Pembroke V) and we were told that to volunteer for it we had to have matriculation in our school certificate, which showed a certain level of education. We were also told that once in, we could not come out to different work and we were also told that we couldn't speak about it to anyone! All of this was a bit of a worry as to whether we were doing the right thing or not.

I had joined up with another girl from Cheltenham Ladies' College, [Bridget Anne Snowdon](#) and, undaunted, we both decided that we would accept the challenge and applied together. We stayed together as a team on the Bombes until I went overseas.

At Mill Hill we were in dormitories of two-tier bunks, one of which my friend Bridget Anne and I shared. The first night I did not sleep too well as the bunk was hard and the sheets too tightly arranged. Also the air raid warnings went off and the claxon for taking shelter was sounded as there was flak etc., so we had to dress a bit and those of us including me who had a First Aid Certificate had to report to the First Aid Post. However, we were not down for long as the "All Clear" was

sounded. So we went back to bed only to be woken again but this time the alarm didn't go so after that we slept half-dressed.

We were allowed out that first Sunday provided we reported back every three hours but I was able to see my father who came to Mill Hill and I was able to show him around our "stone frigate" as the naval shore establishments were called.

Each day began with "Divisions", these being a parade followed by prayers and notices, after which we had squad drill on the parade ground. This was nothing new to me as I had been a Girl Guide Ranger. We also had various lectures on naval history, establishment, traditions and routines.

We had duties to do every day. I was on "House" which involved getting up at 05.00 hours and cleaning the staff sifting room and then, after breakfast, cleaning the ablution block, which wasn't as bad as it sounded.

We then had individual interviews, I passed mine and we then had to wait while our backgrounds were researched to ensure that we were not security risks.

At the end of the two weeks we were fitted out with our uniforms and enrolled as Wrens. We had some difficulties fixing our starched collars with collar studs and we were supplied with service respirators much better than civilian ones, but of course much heavier. We had "approvals" which was simply a pep talk by the Chief Officer who stressed the importance of the step we had taken.

At the end we had an impressive march past and a pay parade where we were given £1/10s for the fortnight.

When the security checks were done we were sent off to Eastcote, which was a sub-station of Bletchley Park. We were driven from Mill Hill to Eastcote, near Ruislip and there we underwent basic training, working straight away on the machines, and that was very interesting.

Eastcote

We had been told at our interviews that we would be housed in newly built accommodation, that we would have good leaves at Eastcote and would be working eight-hour watches - midnight to 7.30 am; 7.30 am to 1.30 pm; 1.30 pm to 4.30 pm, and 4.30 pm to midnight. We had a week at a time like this and then changed to the alternate watches. After that we had to do two watches in 24 hours and we were all exhausted after that! Then we had 48 hours off. We also had four days

off once a month in which we could go home and this normally consisted of a four-day leave over a weekend when I usually went home to Cheltenham.

Our working blocks were heavily guarded with high walls and barbed wire. Security was paramount and we had to show our passes to gain entry. We went to block B in one of the long rooms and on this, our first introduction to the work; we had two lectures and were told that we would be part of the process of decoding German messages.

In block B, Bombes were in bays, each named after an allied country; ours was called "Poland" and the machine that Bridget Anne and I worked on was called "Warsaw". Our Bombe had a Teleprinter beside it.

There were 120 Bombes in Eastcote, each machine having three banks of drums each with three rows of rotating drums, so we had to be quite tall to reach the highest drums and to be able to switch the machine on. At the rear of each drum were many wire brushes, which had to be meticulously adjusted to ensure that circuits did not short though we did sometimes get an electric shock.

We continued with these shifts and had messages sent from Bletchley Park with which we kept a very close contact. Bletchley Park would send us a document, which they called a Menu, and which actually consisted of a diagram of figures and letters that told us how the Bombe machine drums were to be set up for a particular run.

When the "Bombe" stopped, a reading of letters was typed out on the automatic typewriter at the side of the machine and if the letters matched the menus it meant that the Enigma setting had been found. The Wrens in the checking room phoned through the reading to Bletchley Park, which was the code breaking headquarters and where the messages were deciphered and translated.

All the Bombe bays led off a central passageway and the system seemed to work very well as Bridget Anne and I got through very many runs like this. However, if by any chance one of the many menus was the right one to break a particular code it could have been any of us who found it as we all worked on the same menu for the code of that day, a code which the Germans changed every 24 hours at midnight.

If any of us were fortunate enough to break a code we had a message from Bletchley Park, which said "Job Up, Strip the Machines!". This we did and prepared for the next run with another menu. Bridget Ann and I were very lucky as we had only been there for six months and in that time had broken the code of the day 12 times. That was pure luck as

some people never broke it at all so for us the success was very satisfying.

In our work place we had to do a considerable amount of cleaning as of course no domestic workers could be allowed in. If there were any faults the Royal Air Force mechanics would come and fix them. Our pay was 27 shillings and 6 pence a week.

Accommodation

Our accommodation was a single storey building consisting of cabins branching out from a central corridor 500 yards long with ablution blocks at intervals. The first part before the cabins was the entrance hall, the officer's mess, the Fo'c'sle and the regulating office where we had to check in and out. We were divided into watches but luckily Bridget Anne, another friend, Janet Ovens, and I managed to stay together.

Our cabin was called "Illustrious" and it was divided into eight divisions each containing five double bunks making 80 Wrens in all. All one watch slept in the same cabin so we could all sleep at the same time.

Christmas 1943 at Eastcote

We came off duty at midnight on Christmas Eve and we decided that we weren't going to bed then. We decided instead, as it was Christmas, that we would have a party in our division. For a buffet table we pushed two dressing tables together and covered them with our face cloths and then we put candles on them with cotton wool and holly around the base of the candles. Bridget Ann had made a sort of Christmas tree from a bit of Yew tree and I made decorations for it. This all went down very well and we gave out Petty Officer a token for Harrods and to the rest of the staff we gave little gifts from the Christmas tree. We didn't get to bed until 2.30 in the morning and so, as you can imagine, we didn't get up early for the Christmas service and we didn't get up for the washing up either, we did that the next day, but we did have a lovely time.

On Christmas Day we had our traditional Navy Christmas dinner in the "ship". In the mess our officers, who were dressed in the pinafores and aprons of the kitchen staff, served us and we had a wonderful meal of turkey followed by plum pudding, which actually had threepenny bits in it.

We were on watch again from 1 pm to 6 pm on Christmas Day and the RAF mechanics who serviced our Bombes had decorated the working

quarters with much display of mistletoe, which I carefully avoided! We had presents off a Christmas tree and we sang carols.

On 27 December our watch was cancelled so we could have a long lie in till 9.15. Then we put up decorations for our A and C watch dance with pompoms, flags and some cut paper fishes that I had made. In the afternoon we prepared refreshments and a medley of men of different nationalities and services were invited and I won the spot dance being the first Wren wearing navy "blackouts" (being navy serge knickers with elastic round the legs, sometimes known as "taxi defeaters") to reach the Master of Ceremonies.

After Christmas we began our eight-hour watch system again and started with 6 am hours to 4 pm with a break for lunch midday. After work we had a compulsory lecture on Ceylon little knowing that it would be where I would be going there the following June.

Leave

Going on leave was always a bit of a trial as I remember the trains being absolutely stuffed full of people and I remember one particular journey when I stood all the way to Cheltenham. I was exhausted when I got home and my guardians insisted that I went straight to bed and gave me a small bell telling me to ring it when I woke up and wanted breakfast. The problem was that when I did wake up and rang the bell it was half way through the following afternoon!

My guardians complained that my letters home were full of nothing but my days off but of course I couldn't mention the work we did. We sometimes went to the theatres in London when we could book stools in a queue for returned tickets and we went to cinemas and dances at the palais de dance or to dances at other camps and some that we had in our own place.

Sleeping-Out Pass

In addition to our usual four-day leave we had an occasional "sleeping out pass" and with this I would go to various places. On one occasion I booked into the YWCA in Baker Street and I had been out with an American Officer for a meal and then we tried to get into the Overseas Club, which was closed by the time we got there. We then went on to the Piccadilly Hotel where we got caught in an air raid and spent the whole evening under a table in their foyer. Eventually we decided to venture out but when we did we found much of the area ablaze with the bombings so we decided it was time to go home.

We parted our ways at the Underground, which was still running, and I went on to the YWCA at Baker Street. When I got to Baker Street Station there were still fires blazing and masonry falling and I was afraid that when I got to the YWCA it might have been hit, then what would I do?

Luckily it had not been hit and finally after that night I went back to Eastcote. I had not told my guardian that I had been to London that night but when I did and told them of the raid they told me I was never to go there again on sleeping-out pass whilst the bombings continued. Fortunately my guardians had brothers and sisters living just outside London so I went to Uncle Arthur at Potters Bar and Uncle Charlie at Eastcote, which was very nice and much safer.

Air Raid on Eastcote

Back at Eastcote we also had a raid on our sleeping quarters. The bombers dropped incendiary bombs that night and one of them hit our roof smashing into our water supply so it was an awful mess everywhere. I was on duty that night but I was sent over to be an extra help to the firewatch Wrens who were fighting the fires.

At a dance the next day I felt very sorry for the fireman who was called to a house in Eastcote which had been hit by a high explosive bomb and when he got there he found it was his own home and his Father, Mother and his sister were all killed.

The next day there was an alert and there was another heavy barrage so we had to decamp into the corridors, which, having a reinforced roof of seven inches of concrete was safer than the cabins.

Volunteering for overseas

After a while at Eastcote we were asked if we should like to volunteer for service overseas. I said yes at once but my friend Bridget Anne said no as she was a single daughter of a widowed mother and she didn't want to leave her mother alone in England.

[Third Officer Cramb](#) came round one night when I was on my own and was pleased with me as I happened to do something in ten minutes which usually took twenty. She told me I was a good worker, which pleased me very much. Then she told me that she was sorry to be losing me for I was on the list for posting overseas but we didn't know where that would be.

Things began to fall into place after that. We had to have new paybook photos taken and get special suitcases from Westfield and

were let loose in the canteen and advised to buy as much in the way of cosmetics as we liked as apparently they would be hard to obtain overseas. We all spent about two pounds (our pay was 27s/6d a week.)

Then came a round of good byes and a dance at my father's camp. He was in charge of a Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers camp which was in the old Aladdin works on the Old North Road and not very far away but he arranged for me to stay the night at the ATS camp just across the road.

My embarkation leave was spent between Cheltenham at my guardians' and at Stafford with my stepmother and half sister. Everyone made a fuss of me like giving me breakfasts in bed. We had been told that we weren't allowed to keep a diary either at the holding depot or on the ship because of security so I had to write after we arrived at our still unknown destination.

We didn't know where we would be going but we were sent off to this holding establishment at Crosby Hall, a large building in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea alongside the Thames Embankment. The Hall had been a Club for women graduates and was really beautiful. However now we had very cramped conditions with six of us to a room in three double bunks in which we slept whilst waiting for our orders to go. We were put together in alphabetical order and as my name was Lodge I shared a cabin with another girl from Eastcote, whom I knew, named Anne Luby. But my other friends were distributed around.

Anne and I were in cabin Merlin 1, Merlin deck being the third floor and ours the first cabin on it. We both got top bunks near the window, which overlooked the Embankment and the River Thames.

We had an interview and lecture from First Officer Taylor, who was in charge of Crosby Hall, to prepare us for going overseas but still they did not tell us where we were going!

Whilst there, arrangements were made for us to go to places of interest. These were not optional, and we went to the Houses of Parliament, the Tower of London, the Imperial Institute and other places, most of which I had been to before. During this time 25 of us were selected, and I was lucky to be one of them, to visit the Royal Hospital Chelsea for an anniversary event. It was lovely visiting these old gentlemen resplendent in their scarlet uniforms and tricorne hats.

Other than these our days were taken up with squad drill and endless inventory checks of clothing and luggage. We also had quite a lot of lectures. We did see immensely long lines of American vehicles at the

time and this of course was preparation for D-Day. We did think that this might interfere or even stop our going abroad but it was not to be.

On 8 June, two days after D-Day, we were given orders to pack up and be ready to travel. We were sent to a store across the road to be kitted out with tropical uniform, which rather pleased us all. We were fitted out with tropical whites and even given sola topees (which in the end we never wore). Then, having been fully kitted out, we were told to hide them all from view when going back to our accommodation lest anyone should see them and realise we were going abroad.

Finally we were all gathered together in our mackintoshes and carrying our greatcoats, steel helmets and gas masks, with our 48-hour luggage in one hand and our tennis rackets and a rug in the other. We were very laden down. To add to this, the cooks of the establishment had very kindly made sandwiches for us and they placed these in our steel helmets.

We were then taken in coaches through London in the late evening to St. Pancras. We still did not know where we were going and once on the train, the destination of which was also not told to us, we couldn't make out where we were as station name signs were blackened out during the war and it was dark anyway.

Eventually we arrived after a very long time on the train at Glasgow. From there we were taken to Greenock and there we were fed at the quayside by volunteer services and finally embarked on our ship the HMTS Alcantara.

Alcantara was an old Royal Mail ship that had formerly served the South American mail services. She was a ship of 22,000 tons with around 8,000 passengers aboard mostly of all three armed services but also some civilians with special jobs and a few physiotherapists I remember.

We left on 11 June 1944 and I thoroughly enjoyed that journey; it took us five weeks. As we made our way through the Atlantic it got very rough and I remember some Australian pilots teasing us about being seasick but although some of our number did indeed succumb to seasickness I seemed to be all right.

I can recall a little ditty we made up at that time:

My breakfast lies over the ocean
My luncheon lies over the sea
My dinner lies over the ocean
Don't mention my supper to me!

When we were shown to our so-called "cabin" on "C" we found it wasn't a cabin at all but one great big open messdeck to house 120 of us in three-tier bunks that were so close together that we had to take it in turns to get up and get dressed such was the lack of space.

There were limited ablutions and these consisted of four showers, and four toilets and one bath, all of which worked with seawater, and these had to be sufficient for all 120 of us! The trick here was to get up early ahead of the others.

But having been to boarding school and in the Girl Guides I was quite used to a little hardship and took to it rather well.

We were fed in the Sergeants' mess, which was just about on the water level, and we had pleasant stewards waiting on us. I had my 19th birthday on board and we had a Sergeants' dance that evening.

I believe we were one of the first convoys to go through the Mediterranean; previously all convoys had been around South Africa. The Mediterranean was wonderful, I had never seen a sea so beautifully blue.

We went to Cairo and then Aden and into the Red Sea where it got very hot, 138 degrees Fahrenheit, which was almost unbearable. Here it was suggested that we slept out on the upper deck. The idea was that we were to partner up with another Wren and take it in turns to sleep up on deck, but as my partner never wanted to sleep up there I slept every night under the stars. We were laid out in rows along the deck between two lots of Military Police! They did look after us very well in the Wrens!

Arrival in Ceylon

We reached the Indian Ocean and arrived in Bombay where we left the ship, and a lot of friends we had made who were now going to be in India and Burma. I think we knew by this time we were going to Ceylon. We waited several days until we transferred to a much smaller Polish ship called the Pulaski where we had better accommodation with a lot more space.

One night we saw the foam turning phosphorescent and the Southern Cross in the star spangled sky.

I had made friends before we went to Crosby Hall with a girl called [Ruth Bousfield](#), who later became a nurse. Because of our surnames we had not been together at Crosby Hall but we stayed all the rest of the time afterwards. We travelled together on the Alcantara and the

Pulaski and formed a strong friendship serving together in Ceylon and all the time going back to England

The officers and petty officers were two or three to a cabin but our cabin was effectively another messdeck, which had three sides, and one of them faced the outer deck with portholes. Nevertheless this was better as we could all put our things in the centre of the room and that made for a lot more space for each of us. Outside the portholes there were people milling around as usual and so our accommodation because it was full of Wrens, became known as "the Bird Cage".

We had good food although there were weevils in the biscuits and bugs in the bed so it was not a terribly clean ship. I volunteered to look after the ship's library and that was a good fun.

The voyage on the Pulaski was a rather short one and once we saw a fishing boat coming towards us we knew that we were approaching land and getting near to our final destination, Colombo, and there we would disembark. The land hove into view, we saw palm trees and beaches and knew we would soon be starting our new jobs.

Colombo

The work in Colombo was different. Unfortunately we didn't work on machines there but were pen-pushers. We were given a great big book called a "Koo Book" and that had in it a list of places from where all the Japanese messages would originate. The place names had been transliterated and these were shown in three-syllable words of two letters per syllable. Nowadays the only one I can remember was "Na-Ra-Ea" which meant "General Call".

We had to look up this book and identify the places and words mentioned in the messages and write down the translation. It became very exciting towards the end of the war as many of them came from the many islands occupied by the Japanese that, one-by-one, were being retaken and liberated by the Americans.

Quarters

Our quarters in Colombo were very good, the best we had ever had. We had individual wooden beds in huts that each housed 24 girls in two halves of 12 each. The walls were half height, just high enough to stop anyone seeing in, then a gap for air and a roof of palm leaves. We had mosquito nets hanging all over the place and we soon found that these were very necessary. One of the girls became so badly infected by mosquito bites that she had to be seen by the doctor.

We had local boys to do all the cleaning work and laundry etc. These boys were signed-on into the Royal Navy as ratings and as such were subject to the King's Rules & Regulations and Naval discipline, but this did not stop them stealing our vests, which we washed ourselves and hung on the lines. The boys would steal our issued vests, and wear them, but as we didn't need them any more no one really minded.

We had six sets of "Whites" day-wear (Tropical Uniform) – shirts and skirts because in the offices where we worked, as pen-pushers, we had to make two carbon copies of all our work and inevitably the carbon would come off onto our uniforms and thus they had to be washed with more regularity. The washing was done by *dhobi* boys and they always ensured that we were clean and well turned out when we went on duty.

Watches

Our watches were shorter than back in Eastcote before and were now the standard naval pattern of four-hours long, this was much better because the work was monotonous and of course it was very hot in Colombo.

At night we wore bell-bottom trousers with long sleeved shorts and a collar and tie. This was mostly because of the flying insects, some of them very big, and this afforded us some protection.

Time off

I was very fortunate; I had had introductions to some relatives of friends of mine in Cheltenham. They lived locally and very kindly offered us their house any time we liked for leaves and time off to get away from our quarters. Another couple lived up country and we enjoyed one particular leave with them. The husband of this couple worked with the Government Survey and the couple took us up to a Government Survey bungalow up near Nuwara Eliya where much of the tea is grown and produced in Ceylon.

We also had one leave with some people who owned a tea estate in Hatton. On this occasion we went on a very long train journey at the end of which we were met by a chauffeur and taken to their beautiful home. The lady of the house was not able to meet us as she had a hangover from the victory party they had had the night before.

On days off we often went up to Mount Lavinia, some 10 miles out of Colombo, near a large American base called Ratmalana. At the hotel, which was situated on the coast, we made friends with some Americans on the beach. They had some palliasse covers for their beds, which they found they could wet and run along the beach to

inflate them and then tie up to use as lilos. This was great fun and we floated around in the sea on these. After this we were invited to their club house which, funnily enough, was called "The White House", as it was indeed a white house, and here they had tennis courts, croquet lawns, a place to have meals and dancing. Ruth and I were invited there quite a bit towards the end of the war and we enjoyed ourselves. We were invited to their thanksgiving party in November 1944.

Finally the war with Japan ended and Ceylon was used as a base for the former prisoners of war of the Japanese (Far Eastern POWs or FEPOWs). It was used as a staging post to treat and help rehabilitate the FEPOWs prior to being repatriated to the UK. There was a hospital down by the docks and these poor men were treated there and for those that were still walking they were quickly shipped out to go home. When my time came to go home I went on a ship that carried a number of these men.

The journey home

We were part of a Victory Parade on the Galle Face Green with Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander in SE Asia taking the salute. On 7 October 1945 I was placed on a draft and went down at the docks at 10 am to embark on the SS Chitral of the P&O Line. It was a ship primarily for the ex prisoners of war of the Japanese and there were also some civilian families who had been interned.

Our quarters were very good and the whole voyage promised to be more comfortable than on the way out. We travelled second class but had all the privileges of first class passengers. We were in the role of welfare workers so had to wear uniform all the time. I volunteered again for duty in the ship's library. The meals were vast and excellent.

I stood at the rail of the boat deck on the port side watching the coastline of Ceylon receding and I was sad to see her drop below the horizon; I had been happy there.

The FEPOWs going home were treated as First Class passengers. Of course they were joyful at having been rescued but they were very thin and very brown. I got to know a couple of the men from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and in the process of the voyage home they taught me and another girl how to dance the eight-some reel with the intention that we were to perform this on one of the evening concert shows. Sometimes there was quite a swell and we kept being thrown out of our positions in the dance and ended up being cast into the scuppers but we managed to get back into formation each time and finish the dance. This was very much the highlight of the journey.

We finally arrived back in Southampton on 29 October 1945, all our luggage was unloaded. We had to check our luggage, which was laid out alphabetically on the quayside. Then we were given tea, cake and chocolate we left on the 3 pm train for Waterloo.

We travelled then to Chatham and it was not a very nice homecoming! We had arrived in early winter and of course we found it all dreadfully cold and very much an anti-climax to what we had experienced in Ceylon. Ironically, when we arrived at Chatham Railway Station we found ourselves sitting opposite a poster with a picture of a bullock-cart and the message "Come to Ceylon", and we felt like going straight back again!

We were placed in former alms-houses in Chatham and our beds had not been made up. We were given a few lettuce leaves and some bread with which to make sandwiches and for a while it felt very miserable. Of course the England we had left two years before had had a tough time of it, everything was in short supply, everywhere there was so much damage and it couldn't have been a more marked contrast to the life we had left behind.

Shortly afterwards we received disembarkation leave. Mine was prolonged slightly as when I was living in Cheltenham with my guardians, who were both doctors, it was discovered that I was carrying an intestinal worm. The lady doctor decided to bottle it and take it to the hospital to try and identify it. I rather stupidly read up books and papers about it and discovered that it could be just one of many! Luckily it wasn't and after a little bit of extra sick leave I returned for demobilisation.

I returned to Chatham to become demobilised. I thought of staying in the Wrens and perhaps go to Australia but this would involve completely retraining and I didn't fancy this much so came out when the opportunity presented itself.

Subsequently I went to Nottingham, to the School of Art, for three years and did the equivalent of a degree course in Architecture, the Intermediate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. There would have been another two years to take my finals plus another year of experience in an office but by this time I had met Peter Radford who became my husband.

We had three children, two sons and a daughter. I moved back to Cheltenham and I felt I wanted to go back to work. I was invited back into the Cheltenham Ladies' College and offered a job as one of the Arts Staff. I had designed some scenery design in 1966 for a pageant a friend was having in the History Department of the College about the

Norman Conquest in 1066. I based my designs on the Bayeux Tapestry and it was such a success that when a new teacher came in the Art Department and needed an Assistant the Headmistress recommended me! I remained at the College for 15 years until I retired.

I remember the news coming out about Bletchley Park in the mid 70's. This was about the time Winterbotham's book came out. I was on a Swan Hellenic cruise at the time and there was a woman on board who had written a book about it and she started speaking about Bletchley Park and the war. Up to that point I hadn't breathed a word about it and both my father, and later my guardians, had all died never knowing what I had done for the war effort. We had taken an oath of complete secrecy and it all seemed very disconcerting to hear it being talked about openly.

It took a while before I could get used to talking about it but gradually I spoke with my immediate friends and family about it all.