

Ruth Bourne, née Henry

Eastcote and Stanmore August 1943 - December 1945. Bombe Operator and Checker. Interviewed October 2015.

I was in the sixth form at school studying languages and I got something called a matric, which gave me an entrance to London University to take a degree in languages. I never took this up because I wanted to join up and see a bit of the world before I went to university, which I never did. I volunteered for the WRNS when I was seventeen and half stating on the form my qualifications, which were French, German and Spanish to matric level and distinctions in English, and it may be that my interest in languages helped.

I was accepted when I was eighteen and sent to Tullichewan in Scotland, to do my WRNS training, where we were taught all the Naval terminology, how to salute, how to swab the decks and emptying what was in the ablution blocks. Whilst I was there I offered to sing in a concert and we put on shows and went to Glasgow a few times. I was there for about four weeks after which we were mustered, meaning we were put into categories, and given badges appropriate to the category, however there were a few of us that didn't get badges and we wondered what we had done wrong. We were told that our category was SDX, standing for Special Duties X, but they didn't know what the X stood for, just that it wasn't Y! Thirty years later I discovered that Y was the interceptors.

I don't think that I was very long at the Park although I do have a vague recollection of going somewhere and being told that the job we were doing was very secret, that there was no promotion we'd be working anti-social hours and that once you were in it, you could not be released. We had to confirm that we wanted to do it and of course we all said "Yes". I distinctly remember Petty Officer [Jean Skidmore](#) saying "We are breaking German

codes" but having read books about Biggles and spies, I was aware that people were breaking each other's codes so I wasn't particularly impressed with that at the time. Of course I didn't know then how difficult it was. Afterwards we had to sign the Official Secrets Act and we were assigned to HMS Pembroke V.

I have a very vague memory of being somewhere in Wilton Avenue near Bletchley Park, I think that was temporary and that we should have gone straight to Eastcote, but there was a slight hiatus when we were sent down from Scotland.

Eastcote had two blocks, Block A was where we lived, ate and slept. Block B was surrounded by high walls, barbed wire and two guards. Inside it had a long corridor with bays at right angles off to the left and right, each one was given the name of an overrun country, France, Holland, Norway etc. and each machine in the bay was given the name of a town in that country, so Norway bay had Røros, Stavanger, Trondheim etc. There were over 100 machines with, in most cases, 12 machines to a bay, six down each side. To start with we were put in front of the Bombe machines; we were not allowed to touch them, we were only looking. Then we were put into bays and trained by one of the girls there. She would watch us put on the drums and then, around the back, she would plug up with me and the next time she would do the same with my opposite number; there were always two of us plugging up as far as I remember. After that there was a period when I was allowed to operate the Bombe while I was watched doing the whole thing and writing the 'stops'. We also had to train on the checking machines, which were in a separate room, with a little hatch; at the end of this time you were on your own.

Each day you changed jobs between operating the Bombe and doing the checking. The 'stop' information was passed through the little hatch to your

opposite number – ‘oppo’ - and she would check it; this meant you could have a whole watch just sitting and checking. I believe it was also possible to check more than one Bombe, while the operator went for lunch. As the checker, if you got a ‘good stop’ you would pick up the red voice scrambler to report to the person at the other end, saying something like “This is Norway checker, I have a good stop for you on Stavanger” and saying you had, for example, three confirmations and no self-couples or four confirmations and one self-couple.

I had no idea why I was saying it or what it meant; I just knew that if for example A=Z and Z=A, or you got round a loop on the menu back to where you started, it was good. I knew that I was calling Bletchley Park, but I didn’t know that it was Hut 6. When they’d done their work at Hut 6 they would call to the petty officer in charge of the Watch and she would come and say “Job up!” if you were lucky. It was in the lap of the gods because there could be more than one Bombe running the same menu, at the time. I didn’t know why you had to say you were on Stavanger but I now know that it would tell them what menu you were running and where it was coming from, and if anybody hacked into your phone they wouldn’t know what you were talking about.

We knew nothing, we didn’t know where the menus came from other than from the petty officer’s office, we only knew this is the machine, how to set it up, phone it through, ‘Job up’ pull all the plugs out, put most or all of the wheels back and then you’d start a new menu.

We were never told if the work we had done had contributed to a successful military operation, in fact it was many years later when they did a programme on Radio 4 called The Reunion. I was there with [Mavis Batey](#), [Asa Briggs](#) and [John Herivel](#), when Asa Briggs said “When we got a good stop from the Bombe operators and it worked we used to cheer”; that was the first

time I ever got the other end of the story of what I was doing, it made an impression on me, I was chuffed.

None of the famous names ever came down to Eastcote, but one day a note from Churchill was put onto the notice board saying 'Glad to hear that the hens are laying so well without clucking'

I don't remember too much about the conditions at Eastcote other than that the Bombe building, Block B, had long pitch floors and very bright lights, which were strip lights, not like the modern ones, they had a slight green tint and flickered all the time. The walls were very very tall with slit windows at the top so you could tell if it was day or night but other than that nothing.

The barracks, Block A, that we slept in were absolutely revolting, but being young you got used to it. Again the same thing, long corridors with spurs coming out with various things in them; there were 72 of us in the sleeping accommodation, in double bunks, with very flimsy curtains at the windows, which made it very difficult to sleep during the daytime when you were on the night watch. The food was appalling, but it was hot and you could eat it, although coming from home I found it very hard to eat. After training I think that I was paid higher specialised pay of £2.10s, but I'm not sure if that was for a week or two weeks, and I believe that they took some money out for WRNS insurance. I didn't have to worry about transport because I was on site.

We used spend our free time, when at Eastcote, going to the cinema in either Ruislip or Harrow. For the long breaks, which was when you came off at midnight, say on a Monday, you didn't have to go on again until midnight on the Wednesday so you had two full days and a night off, when we would go into London and stay at the Salvation Army hostel or the YWCA and we would have a marvellous time. There was a lot going on in London for service people, The Stage Door Canteen, dancing at Covent Garden or the services

clubs.

There were also very cheap, if not completely free, theatre tickets and I got autographs, amongst them I have Laurence Olivier's and Emyln Williams'. Also at the services clubs you got some very nice food, and of course there were the Americans and various people you could meet. Other times we took trains down to Brighton and stayed in service clubs there, where we would meet up with others and go dancing.

At the end of your three shifts, morning, evening & nights, you got four and a half days off and I would go home to Birmingham. It was lovely to be home, there were people and old friends to meet up with. My father was a doctor and had had a stroke at the age of 42 when I was only 13 and he was not really aware of what was going on. As it was our only income, though the private patients went elsewhere, my mother managed to keep the practice going with the use of a locum doctor for those people who were 'on the panel'. She had to learn how to drive, and after the house was blitzed there were only bits of wood on the windows because they had been blown out it was very hard for her.

At the end of the war, after dismantling the Bombe machines, I was sent to Leeds to retrain as a shorthand typist, because I had done some training at school. From Leeds I was sent to Chatham and then to Deal where I became a Royal Marine Wren and wore a Marine badge on my hat instead of an HMS badge.

I was working for a while in the Marine barracks at Deal as a shorthand typist until one day, because the building was so old, a soldier fell through the ceiling, and covered all our office with thick clouds of dust and all of our papers were ruined, so we were given a day off. I was then sent up to London as a shorthand typist and worked for the Port of London Authority in

Mark Lane. I was moved around to different billets in Sloane Square, Notting Hill, and Embankment, and finally to a Royal Naval Air Station outside Wolverhampton, HMS Godwit [*note, Mrs Bourne does not say 'HMS Godwit' in the interview, but did in an email in November 2017*]. All this time I was doing shorthand, typing and switchboard work. We were a bit useless after the war, after all, who wants a Bombe operator!

While in London, in May 1946, I met an RAF type in a services club in Upper Portland Street and we got married in December 1946 when we were both demobbed, I was twenty and a half. He had been given a job in the Ministry of Aircraft Production, based in Thames House on the Embankment, and we were given the use of a room in a flat in Notting Hill. We then bought a little flat with his demob pay and subsequently a small house in Barnet in north London. Following that we opened a laundrette in Temple Fortune and he, an RAF type mending the machines at night, just like the RAF mechanics on the Bombe machines; it was very reminiscent of my days at Eastcote

In 1974 I read the book by [Frederick Winterbotham](#) 'The Ultra Secret' and said to my husband that I had been doing codebreaking during the war. He said "Oh that's very interesting dear, what's for tea?" and nothing really happened after that until 1994.

I saw an advertisement for a talk about Bletchley, probably by [Michael Smith](#), in Kensington. I went to the talk and there was a chap with an Enigma machine, I'd never seen one! Afterwards there was a book signing and whilst I was waiting I heard a lady, by the name of Marie Bennett, mention that there was an annual Bletchley Park reunion at Bedford every year, so I found out about it and went along. It was at that reunion that they mentioned that they were open once a fortnight and that they were looking for volunteers and I started in 1994.

Tony Sale, along with other trustees, had set up a cryptology trail which was in Block H, and in one of the rooms there was an Enigma bolted to the table and I was very interested, Tony and John Gallehawk taught me how it worked and I started by demonstrating this to the customers. After a little while I asked the head guide if I could become a guide myself, so after reading some books on the subject and shadowing the tour guides, Sheila signed me off and I became a Bletchley Park tour guide.