

Dr Michael Loewe

Bletchley Park 1942 - 1945. Civilian in Naval Section, Japanese. Interviewed April 2014

Selection Process

I was reading Latin and Greek, as an undergraduate at Oxford University. When war broke with Japan early in December 1941, the government ministries worked with incredible speed, realising overnight that they would need a number of people trained in Japanese language, and were thinking how to collect people who would be suitable for training. So they wrote to the Master of Balliol College Oxford, A D Lindsay, and to the President of St John's College here in Cambridge, Martin Charlesworth, to ask them for names of up-and-coming young undergraduates who they thought would respond to training in Japanese. Lindsay put my name forward and at the same time Charlesworth did; I knew him personally. When we assembled in a room in Bedford to take our first lessons in Japanese language the great majority of us were people who had been working on Latin and Greek languages and literature at either Oxford or Cambridge.

Training

We were interviewed for the job one very cold morning at the end of December 1941. The chap next to me was writing down Chinese characters in his notebook which made me think 'Oh, well, this is not for me, I'll obviously have to be an officer in the Artillery for which I was being trained. Well, we were both selected and my companion there on that bench did not do particularly well, he lived out in Hong Kong and had a certain amount of information, but not a capacity for learning languages.

There were about 20 of us selected for the training course at the Inter Service School, Bedford, which ran from December 1941 to August 1942. Some were civilians and some were already recruited into the Services. We were trained in Japanese language and had no idea at the time of the purpose of our work. We used Japanese dictionaries, grammar books and writings etc., which of course were not easy to get hold of. The authorities had closed the Japanese press agencies in London, such as the Asahi and the Yoimuri Shinbun, and collared all the write-outs of telegrams sent by their journalists to Japan, describing what was going on in this country. This telegraphic material was invaluable to our training.

There were a number of people who would become famous, on that course: Hugh Lloyd Jones, later Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford and knighted; Jonathan Clark, who became a fellow of the British Academy and a professor of philosophy; and [Wilfrid Noyce](#), one of the Everest mountaineers.

We were under military administration in Bedford while training and one day I remember receiving a notice from the War Office, to the effect that I had refused to obey commands to report for conscription in the services and unless I did by a certain time, I would be apprehended! I took this to Captain [Tuck](#), the officer in command, who sorted it all out for me. I was eventually recruited as a Temporary Junior Administrative Officer and paid by the Foreign Office.

We occasionally had visits from high-powered officers at Bletchley Park during our training at Bedford. I remember Brigadier [John Tiltman](#), along with [Josh Cooper](#).

At the end of that language course, we were allowed to tell our families that we were learning Japanese, but when we later completed a short cryptanalytic course and given problem-solving work to do, we were not allowed to divulge anything about that. At that point, we worked out what our work would involve.

At the end of the training we were posted to different places and some of my colleagues went to India, to work with the forward stations. Some went to East Africa, to the base at Kilindini. The Royal Navy had had to vacate its bases in Hong Kong then Singapore and for safety's sake they left Ceylon and established a base at Kilindini, near Nairobi. Quite a number of us were posted to Bletchley Park.

Bletchley Park

I joined Bletchley Park in August 1942 and worked there until August 1945, when war ended. One of the first things we did on arriving was to sign the Official Secrets Act. We were based in Elmers School and I remember the ceiling coming down on us one day! I can't recall much more about it – I think it was to the north of the Park, close to the church. We were there for a few weeks before being moved on to Hut 7. I remember all the buildings being standard, simple, utilitarian. I can't remember what arrangements there were for blackout, it must have been possible to black out those windows but I can't remember curtains. We later moved to Block B, upper floor, which was more comfortable.

I was assigned to the Japanese Navy team, working on Japanese decryption. [Hugh Foss](#) was the organiser at the time, and there were naval officers attached, including Captain [Keith](#), an executive officer of the Royal Navy, who was soon posted elsewhere. Later ones were paymasters, with white stripes in their uniform, to show what they were doing. I later worked under Commander [Macintyre](#) and Commander [Parsons](#), Royal Navy.

They had all learned Japanese, as part of their naval training and some had been working on these problems of codes and cipher breaking before they came to Bletchley. They were all very knowledgeable.

I remember the first day at Elmers School – we were given a file of typed material to read, on foolscap paper. It was marked Top Secret, which gave us a thrill! The first one read 'From Admiralty to all ships and stations, commence hostilities against Japan, immediately, repeat, immediately'. All these files were transcripts of the communications of our own fleet and gave us some idea what was going on in the seas of East Asia. We were then given sheets on which there were transcripts of coded messages from the Japanese and we were instructed on what to look out for. Were they just sheets of jumbled letters? You had to look out for such-and-such and to say if we saw it. This was training us to get into the operations of breaking codes and ciphers. It involved a lot of writing things out by hand, mostly in Japanese kana syllables. In this way we were taken into some systems of codes and ciphers, where headway had been made, and we were there to continue the process, to exploit what was known, and to take it further.

Some time later we were put on to the Japanese naval general codes, the JN 25. This was a different system, using a code book of groups of five figures. The message would be set out according to the code groups and then enciphered by the addition of figures from another table. You had to find out if that table was being used only once or by several people. If it was only used once you probably couldn't do anything more with it, but if you found three to four Japanese navy clerks had opened that cipher table at the same page and were using it, you could do something about breaking it.

You were looking to uncover a series of five-figure code groups and you then had to break the meanings of the groups. Some of the material coming in would be perfectly clear, others would have gaps in transmission and would be corrupt. You'd have to do some basic validity checking on what you were doing. At this level of code groups, all were divisible by three. You could have a group which was 54630 or 61572, both divisible by three. If they weren't, you knew something was wrong and you had to see where the fault lay; this may have been in the transmission or it may have been in your own solution of the additive table which had been applied to it.

A new set of documents, a new codebook and a new set of additive tables, would be issued by the Japanese every so often. By the time one had been in use for a few months, you were getting somewhere and you were able to read a lot of material, much of which was routine.

Every Japanese ship was obliged to make a routine message to home base every so often on things like fuel and ammunition stocks and a report on casualties through sickness. You would get to recognise these, even if they were in cipher, as they would come on set dates and times. This was one of the ways in to breaking a new system because you started by knowing what the other chap was saying. Somewhere in that message he was going to say 'octane 81', or perhaps 'octane 83' and you knew to look for that sort of

information. Other things that helped us were the errors of the cipher clerks – for example some communications were very long and a tired clerk starts his work, writes it all out and suddenly realises ‘I did not insert the word “not” somewhere!’. He may already have sent the message, so he then sends the correct version. You can then line up the two versions together and see how they match. This was one of the ways into a particular cipher.

In the early days, I don’t remember working with any captured documents on which we could work, they came later. When we were working on the JN 25, our colleagues would be working successfully on other systems, for example the system used by Japanese merchant shipping, with groups of four figures rather than five.

There was one way you could get into these systems if you were lucky, and it did not happen very often. There was a whole series of systems used and occasionally you’d have something sent in a high grade system which you couldn’t read, and then repeated in a low grade system, which you could read. If you could recognise this it was of enormous help.

We worked in closed compartments. We never went into rooms of people working on German or Italian problems, unless there was a particular reason to do so. For example, when we were working on the Japanese merchant shipping code, somebody at a higher level than us realised that there was a great deal in common between that and a merchant shipping code being used by the Italians. A meeting was then arranged to see if we had problems in common and ways of solving them.

A great deal of the material that came out of these coded and enciphered messages was routine and if you are working on a code you may not be able to read everything that is given to you. You may have a message, and this was rather exceptional, telling you about the movements of the combined fleet. This might refer to certain ships by name, but as a codebreaker you might be able to identify that these were the names of ships, but you might not be able to find out exactly what the name was. So the material we were providing could not always be complete. We would work out the Japanese behind the messages, provide a translation and send it into the next office. They would then consider the value of the material they were getting from us and decide what to do with it.

If you had a series of messages from an airfield somewhere in the Pacific ‘Arrival at 10 o’clock, three fighter aircraft’, that would not be of particular interest by itself. Add up the messages of that sort that you got, day in, day out, and somebody might very well make some use of it in terms of intelligence. So we might very well go into the office next door and tell them what we had, they would say ‘Yes, we would like it in writing’, or ‘No, we don’t need it’ and they would then pass on anything of value to the right people. Some of it would go straight up to the Admiralty in London.

We did almost everything in this work of breaking codes and ciphers with our bare hands, pencils, India rubbers and 'Tiltman' stationary, which had been specially printed, to respond to the methods which Colonel Tiltman had devised. At the outset we had very little opportunity to use Hollerith machinery, as that was reserved for German and Italian problems. After the Italians left the war there was a little leeway and we found that long lists of code groups and meanings, which we would have compiled by hand, could be transferred onto Hollerith cards. In addition, the messages we received could be put onto Hollerith, which made it possible to do certain things rather more quickly than otherwise.

There was one line of work that I wasn't involved in directly, but in terms of the Japanese Navy was perhaps the most valuable things ever done in Bletchley Park: reading the machine cipher used by the Japanese naval attachés. People were working on it in 1942 and beginning to get somewhere in 1943, getting a little further towards the end of that year and in March or April 1944 they were reading some of the material that the Japanese naval attachés were sending back to their Admiralty in Tokyo.

I understand, though I have no personal evidence to prove it, that one day in April or May 1944 Reichsmarschall Goering offered to take the Japanese naval attaché to inspect the defences erected on the beaches of the coast of Normandy. So off they went, doubtless had a happy day and a good lunch, and the Japanese naval attaché, fulfilling his duty when he got back, sent a long report of precisely what he had seen back to Tokyo, which we were able to read. I hope that story is not too good to be true.

Living Arrangements

I was billeted in Stony Stratford, in a terraced house, with no indoor lavatory. I recall handing over our ration books to our landlady, who was very pleased that I drank coffee for breakfast, as she could have my tea ration! I remember a hard wooden bed supplied by the services.

The two shifts on Japanese naval material were 9 am to 6 pm and 4 pm to midnight. A bus collected us around 8.30 am and returned us from Bletchley Park later. There was a handover in the two hours between 4 and 6 pm. The late shift was especially nice in the summer, as you could get up later and enjoy the sunshine in the nearby villages. Those working on German material had to work three shifts, round the clock, as, unlike us, they were doing everything operationally.

I would have lunch at the cafeteria in the park and evening meal in the billet. Sometimes we would spend the evening in Bletchley too and go to the cinema or to a concert in the entertainment hall just outside the Park itself, by the main entrance.

One Christmas Day, the WRNS with us decided to start a carol singing party marching up and down the corridor, never mind the work they were supposed to be doing, and it was all taken in very good part!

Leave

We had one day off in seven and sometimes bunched these together to take two days in the fortnight. During leave, I would visit my mother who lived in Cambridge, by train from Bletchley. Sometimes I would visit my college in Oxford and see my colleagues who were on leave from the Army.

End of the War

At the end of the war, August 1945, we started receiving messages in plain, although rather garbled, language. Some were very clear and complete; in a form of the Japanese language which none of us could understand. It turned out to be a transcript of the message that the Emperor had read to the Japanese people ordering them to surrender and bring the war to a close. The trouble was that it was written in the very formal court language of the Japanese Emperor. Not the sort of language ordinary human beings could understand. I have heard from Japanese I have met since the war that they heard this and hadn't the faintest idea what they were being ordered to do.

One morning we were all called to hear an announcement from the Deputy Director, [Nigel de Grey](#), the Director, Commander [Travis](#) was away in America. We were assembled on the lawn in front the mansion and Nigel de Grey told us that war was over and that there would be a church service that afternoon, which we might like to attend, which we did, and we also attended various meetings in the pubs which we had got to know fairly well over the years.

I was working on breaking these systems and translating the material which came through. At the same time, my later wife [Carmen Blacker](#) had been brought in to work on the Navy Section's Technical Index under Commander [Tandy](#). It was concerned with technical terms, set up primarily to understand how they were used by Germans and then the Japanese, for example for radar. These terms were collected, interpreted and indexed by this section. . Carmen said how dull the work was and how no one ever came to consult her or see what she was doing. In that book edited by Hinsley and Stripp you'll find a chapter from Carmen. They asked her to write one and she turned it in, and I think her first sentence was 'Bletchley was the dullest time of my life and I never did the slightest thing there which was of any good whatsoever to anybody'. Some such statement like that, which the editors didn't particularly care for, and so they sent the chapter back and said they

weren't going to print it. To which Carmen replied, saying 'You asked for this chapter and you will print it', and they did. ¹!

¹ *Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*, edited by F H Hinsley and Alan Stripp, published by OUP 1993.