Elizabeth Reed née Langstaff

Bletchley Park October 1939-1945. Hut 3 and Block D(3). Secretary to Group Captain Jones, head of Hut 3, from 1943. Secretary of Bletchley Park Recreational Club Drama Group. Interviewed January 2017.

Before the War

Immediately before the War, I was working in Romania where I was looking after the two children of an English couple working there in the oil fields; the husband was an oil engineer. I had been born in Canada in 1916 and in the 1930s went to Cambridge University to do German. After graduating I went back to Canada to see my brother and took a business course there, before returning to the UK. I was looking for a job and had gone to see my tutor at Cambridge, when she casually asked if I knew of anybody who would like to go to Romania for a year. I thought it sounded fun and was keen on adventures of any sort so I took the job on the spur of the moment. I went out to Romania and had a marvellous time, but when Hitler went into the Sudetenland, war was obviously coming, and I was told to take the train and deliver the boys, who were aged five and seven, back to London.

On returning to the UK the boys went to live in north Oxford. Then I received a letter from Room 47 of the Foreign Office telling me to be ready in two weeks' time to go to a place called Bletchley Park for war work. I was told that, when I got to Bletchley station, I was to stay on the platform till everyone had been met, then a man wearing a dark suit and a striped tie would approach and ask me my name. That is what happened and when I gave my name the man said yes, that's right, you're the person I'm to meet. He had a special key to a door to the station yard which led straight into Bletchley Park. I had had interviews with the British Council before the war but hadn't thought about war work at all because I was still looking after the children when the war started. There was no interview for Bletchley Park and on the train there I felt very excited and wondered if I was going to be parachuted into France.

I started work at Bletchley Park on 16 October 1939. I was 23. As far as I can remember, the first thing we had to do was swear a solemn oath on the Bible never, till my dying day, to reveal what I was about to learn. What that was, I had no idea. We took the oath in the Mansion and I have no memory of having to sign anything as well.

Accommodation

The people in the villages roundabout had been told their war work was to take somebody who would be working at Bletchley Park, give them bed and breakfast and one dinner and the other meal they would get at their place of work. I was billeted with a nice couple, whose name was Hudson, in a

village called Woburn Sands. We were collected for the office, as we called it, from the billet, first of all by ladies in their private cars then by the military transport corps, as I think it was called, in vehicles driven by ladies in uniform. After that there was the train and later they put on a van which collected us from various points. There was one other person in my billet to start with. However, the lady who we were billeted with was expecting a baby and when her mother came down from London having been evacuated from the bombing, she had to have the other bedroom and after that I was there on my own.

Training

I didn't have any training at all for the work I was doing. I had a first-class honours degree in modern languages, French and German, from Cambridge University and I was completely fluent in German which, I imagine, is why I was called up.

The only equipment I used other than pencil and paper was typewriter and teleprinter. I think someone came in to train us on the teleprinter. When we used that we were just given an address and the message that was to be sent.

Work in Hut 5

I started off working in Hut 5, which was a military section, where we had to send messages up to London and in order to do this, we had to put the messages into code. It was such an old, four-figure code, that, for example, in order to encode the word 'aeroplane' you had to put a previous group, which meant 'take the second meaning'. I mean there hadn't even been a code word for aeroplane in the First World War.

We then typed up the coded message and sent it on. It was taken to London either by despatch rider, or Typex after they put in a Typex line, then finally, it was sent by radio.

I think there may have been about ten of us doing this work, but I really can't remember. I was in Hut 5 for five weeks or so. I mentioned in my diary that there was a kind of red-letter day, although I didn't make any mention about the sort of work we were doing. I wrote in my diary that I moved into Hut 3 on 10 April 1940 and that the war was really hotting up then. I can't remember if we all moved to Hut 3 or just some of us. Security was so intense and we were all programmed to forget everything we had learnt as soon as we had learnt it. We never mentioned the work we did to anyone else apart from the people we actually worked with, and we never talked about our work outside our place of work.

Work in Hut 3

I was doing much more interesting work than in Hut 5. The German messages were picked up by radio and had to be put into clear, that is, plain language out of Morse. When the messages came in they looked like old-fashioned telegrams, little strips of paper with what they had been able to make out from the translation. Often, the messages were full of German abbreviations, for various units or types of equipment or something like that and often there would be XXX when there had been static interference and it hadn't been possible to get the full message. These messages all had to be typed out from the German and then filed and sorted and so on. I did a lot of typing.

I didn't use my German a great deal, but you needed to know German to type the messages correctly and to understand the abbreviations. The men chiefly did the translations and the women did the typing. The women didn't all have a German qualification,. The intelligence out of each message had to be sent up to headquarters in London. We had to proof read everything and see it was typed out in the right number of copies and sent to the right places; accuracy was important.

In case the information was intercepted it had to be put in such a way that anybody who intercepted it might think it was from a secret agent on the ground, not picked up from the air. The information had to be given a source rating: 'a reliable source reports', 'an often reliable source reports', or 'it is thought that somebody has reported'.

We weren't told the importance of the messages, but we did work that out. When the volume of work increased enormously, that meant that the Germans were advancing, because having advanced over such a large section of Europe, they had to send their messages by air. If they hadn't been sent by air, we wouldn't have been able to get them. When the volume of work increased like anything, even if the messages weren't decoded, we knew it meant that something was brewing. We knew when they were going to attack Russia, for instance, because there were heavy signals coming from the Russian border. We also knew about Coventry.

I think there must have been a few people like me who were at Bletchley Park right through the war, although a lot of my colleagues didn't arrive until later. From around 1943, I was made the PA to the head of the department who was Group Captain Eric Jones. He gave me a reference at the end of the war which I still have, although he obviously couldn't say the kind of work I had been doing exactly.

Part of the reference, dated June 1945, says:

> Latterly, she was one of a small party of specially chosen women who were tried on very exacting work which had previously been done

> entirely by well-educated men. The experiment was a success and Miss Langstaff was one of the most successful of those concerned and finally having seen her do jobs involving good qualities so well, I selected her as my personal assistant and personnel officer concerned with nearly 600 men and women, civilian and service.

I honestly have no idea any more what this 'exacting work' was. It was a very long time ago and I simply can't remember, although I do remember Group Captain Jones who was a very nice man. I don't remember any change to the layout of Hut 3 while I was there. When I went to work with Group Captain Jones, I suppose I must have moved to a different office in Hut 3. I remember we had a brick anti-blast wall put up outside and then finally we moved into large buildings, although we still called ourselves Hut 3.

My parents were already dead and I had a guardian aunt, but if anyone at all asked what I was doing for the war, I just said it was secret and couldn't tell them and that was respected.

I have a couple of diaries in which I mention red flowers out in all three gardens. That must have meant something to do with three codes broken in army, navy and air force I suppose. There is also a reference to daffodils all suddenly in bloom, another reference to red hats and another one to do with white lambs or something. I don't know now what these are referring to but they were obviously my little codes. The diaries start on 1 January 1940 and finish on 22 May 1940. Although they don't say what sort of work I was doing, there are references to some of the people I worked with, for example, I mention a couple of pranks I played on Commander Malcolm Saunders who was working at the Park. The diaries also mention constantly taking apart old bits of clothing and making them into new things and unravelling jumpers to knit up into socks or whatever. Then there is life at the Park, being picked up by the transport and being taken in to work and so on.

I remember two funny situations I ended up in. One concerned passwords. The grounds were extensive and it was blackout, so we had military police patrolling the grounds at night. When we were on shift and had to be out in the dark, a policeman would challenge you and you had to say the password. Well there was nowhere to wash up the coffee cups in the hut and so it was my job, for some reason, to take a tray of dirty cups over to the ladies' cloakroom in the main building which was the only place with running water, to wash up the coffee cups. I was stumbling through the dark to do this, with a tray of dirty coffee cups and my torch half blacked out when I was accosted by a military policeman. 'Halt, who goes there?' and I had to say the password, which on that day was Virgin Queen! What a stupid password; obviously invented by some man. To know what the password was going to be you had to open a drawer in a desk by the door of the main building. Inside was written the password for the next 24 hours and then you closed the drawer and memorised it.

When going on duty, we had to arrive in time to take hand over from the shift that you were relieving. I was on the midnight shift one Sunday night and I had gone up to London to see a play, as I often did. I had quite forgotten that the last train back from Euston on a Sunday went at 10 to 10, not at 10 o'clock. I arrived at Euston Station to see the tail lights of the train disappearing around the corner and I knew I had missed it. I had been told always keep tuppence to ring up with so I had two pennies in my hand. I had the number of a car hire place which I rang and asked for a car and a driver straight away to take me down to Bletchley. A smartly uniformed man turned up, I sat with him and he got me there just in time. The Park gates were always securely locked and military police manned the gates. Unfortunately, I didn't have the money to pay my driver, so I asked the military policemen at the gates if they could between them scrounge up £3 to pay the taxi. I said I would leave my gold watch with them as a pledge that I would repay them as soon as I had got enough money. They gave me the money, I gave them my watch and off went the chauffeur. I was in time for my shift and I later got my watch back.

At the beginning of my time at Bletchley, we didn't have shift work, we just worked from 9 am to 5 pm. I think the shift work started about the time I moved into Hut 3 in April 1940 and then it was 8 am to 4 pm, 4 pm to midnight and midnight to 8 am. Sometimes we would be asked to stay on and work from 8 am until midnight when the work got very heavy.

I enjoyed my work at Bletchley. I found it challenging and interesting but I would have done anything to help win the war. I was interacting with people all the time, although it was very taxing emotionally because we knew what was going on and then in 1941 I was taken off what I was doing and put onto work on Crete.

When we were dealing with decrypts and found gaps, we were allowed some leeway to put in what we thought was missing, but we had to identify this as what the translator's thoughts were, not what it definitely said. The information was then sent up to London.

If we received some advance knowledge of something that was really important, the information was called Ultra because it had to be sent Ultra-fast because it was Ultra-important. Such information was sent only to certain heads of section.

<u>Drama group</u>

What I chiefly remember is the fun and games we had. We had a lot of free time and we were all away from our homes and only working eight hours during the day to start with. I got involved with the drama group because I had always enjoyed acting, in fact, I can't remember when I wasn't acting in

something or other. The role I enjoyed most was Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of being Earnest* which I modelled on Edith Evans because I had seen her perform it in London, and on my own grandmother. Shaun Wylie was President of the drama group for a while. We started a play reading group and then what we called the BP drama group in 1940 I think, and then we decided we should put plays on.

We performed right through the war. A lot of people wanted to be involved. The second in command of the drama group was a man called Bill Marchant. He had taught French and German at Harrow before the War and his name was Herbert Stanley, H S Marchant, but he couldn't stand those names so he was always known as Bill. He had a wonderful sense of humour and he made up our Christmas revues; he composed wonderful songs. There was one song that went:

> We've brains and we've beauty
> We work at the Park,
> We're there for our duty and we're there for the lark.
> My Chief's a professor,
> My Don's over 40
> And my dear old Colonel's too old to be naughty.
> So what is the use of our loveliness when,
> There are no full-blooded men, no full-blooded men.

We sang all these songs and we had a lot of fun. Those times are what I remember much more than any of the work I did then.

I was secretary to the drama group but I also took part in the productions. I did a lot of acting, but song and dance was my thing. I have some programmes from the productions and the original of the words and music of 'We've brains and we've beauty' by the man who composed the music. I have another of a finale to a performance on 4 and 5 July 1941. That starts:

> We've done our day's work for the war and the nation,
> For work, solid work is our sole sublimation.
> It's the one panacea
> For the dull evenings here,
> Our passions, says Freud,
> Are now all null and void.
> We sacrifice pleasure with calm resignation,
> For the next generation,
> For the next generation.

It goes on like that for four verses.

Somehow, we managed to fit in rehearsals even when everyone was on shift work; probably because, apart from plays, the productions were made up of

small segments and skits. It was easier to get a smaller group of people together to rehearse. However, we did some big plays, including *Ladies in Retirement, the Importance of being Earnest, French Without Tears, Much Ado about Nothing, Candida, Gaslight,* J B Priestley's *They Came To a City,* and *By Candlelight.* Productions were put on about three or four times during the year. I suppose some of the productions we put on reflected a little bit of how the war was going but I don't think they were ever recorded. I can remember the Christmas revues best, because I remember the music.

Churchill had had a performance hall built for us outside the Park gates fairly near to the canteen, so that the general public could come to see the shows we put on. We had Bletchley Park people and local people all in the same audience. I am sure our performances boosted morale. The programmes I have kept show that in 1940 and 1941 performances were for two nights, but I think we did the Christmas review for five nights. I can remember a performance we did on one New Year's Eve and sang Auld Lang Syne and that was very sad and I cried.

The drama group was the only society I got involved with, although there was an excellent Scottish dancing society but I didn't belong to that. I only became keen on Scottish dancing later.

Leisure

I can't remember how much leave we got. We worked for three weeks and got two days off or something like that. There was a very hard winter in 1940 - 41 when the lake froze over and we were able to skate on it, which was rather fun. I got somebody to try and teach me to skate. I fell down a lot but in the end I got the hang of it. That was the only time when I remember it freezing hard enough.

I went to a lot of dances in various halls in the Bletchley area, but most of the time when I had any time off I went to London, so a lot of people are mentioned in my diaries. Some were friends from Cambridge who I met when they were on leave and some are people I knew when I was growing up.

If I had been on duty till midnight, I would go up on the milk train at 2 o'clock and get to Euston early, go and have breakfast at Lyons Corner House, spend the day in London and sleep on the train on the way back. If the air raid warning went off when you were in London, you had to plunge down into an air raid shelter where you met all sorts of extraordinary people that you wouldn't have met otherwise. I picked up one old lady who didn't know what to do because the last tube train finished at 10 o'clock and she couldn't get home. I told her to come and stay where I was staying, so she slept in the bed and I slept on the floor. You did that sort of thing. You also did what the English people never normally did in those days and talked to

complete strangers, because in the blackout nobody recognised anybody anyway.

Pay

My pay was £3 a week out of which I had to pay £1 and 1 shilling to the people I was billeted with. By the end of the war I was getting £600 a year which I thought was an absolute fortune.

Growth of Bletchley Park

I think when I went to the Park there were about 400 people working there, but by the end there must have been several thousand because a lot of Wrens were brought in. Stately homes in the area, like Woburn House, were taken over and used for accommodation for the Wrens.

I didn't really notice the changes to the Park at the time. You see, I only knew the place where I worked. It wasn't until I went back as a tourist after the war that I realised there were other buildings there at all. All I knew was that Hut 6 and Hut 3 went together and Hut 8 and Hut 4, which was Naval, also went together. You never mentioned to anybody, outside your own hut, what work you were doing or where you were doing it, or anything.
As the war went on, I wasn't aware of large numbers of people about at shift changes, only those involved in shift changes in my hut.

In the early days of the war when we had air raid practice, the men were allowed to stay in the huts wearing their tin hats but the women all had to leave and go to the air raid shelter which was somewhere near the lake. It was awful, with water in the bottom and freezing cold.

Food

Early on, when I was on duty, I think I used to have my main meal in the Mansion until numbers increased and they built the canteen. The food in the canteen was hardly palatable but it did sustain life. The worst thing I ever had was a stuffed heart at 4 o'clock in the morning. And we were given Lyons custard pies – a great lump of pastry with a blob of jam in the middle. Also, something awful called snoek which was a kind of fish that came from South Africa, I believe.

VE Day

On VE Day we all went mad. I went up to London and we were all dancing in the streets. We were mad with joy.

When the German war ended we were told our services were no longer required, goodbye - and so that was it. |Iam not quite sure exactly when I

left Bletchley. I don't remember going back after VE Day, but my term of employment was recorded as 16 October 1939 until 31 August 1945 so presumably I was paid until then. I was exhausted by that stage and on the verge of a nervous breakdown mainly because of the wartime conditions in England. You had to walk an awful lot and the shift work too was tiring. I spent the time until I got married in September 1945, recuperating in Minehead.

After the War

I haven't been back to Bletchley Park since about 2004 and I haven't been to any reunions, but I did keep up with a lot of friends who had been at Bletchley; many of them went on to GCHQ in Cheltenham.

I met my husband at Cambridge and married him 10 years later. He got a job as a magistrate in Nigeria, which was then of course, a British colony where we spent the next 29 years. We had a wonderful time out there. We were provided with somewhere to live and we moved about the country as ordered, but we had a house in a village in England because the children were all educated at English boarding schools and we had to have somewhere. We left Nigeria in 1975 because he was required to leave at the age of 62. They had the same regulations as they had for the army, when you reached a certain age or a certain seniority you had to leave. We built the house in New Zealand where I am now in 1973 and we have been coming here ever since, and have been permanently here since 1995.

Thirty years after the war, Group Captain Fred Winterbotham, who I had worked with, came out with the whole story about Bletchley Park in one of the tabloids. We were all horrified because we had sworn an oath never, never to reveal and we felt he should be put up against the wall and shot as a traitor, we really did.

Well-known names from Bletchley Park

I knew a few people who have become well known in relation to the Park. Commander Denniston gave me my first pay rise, which was a big thrill. Colonel John Tiltman rescued me once when I missed the train. I was always missing trains. He was there with his staff car and driver and popped me in the car to get back to the Park. John Cairncross was in Hut 3 for a couple of years; he was a linguist like me. I also worked with Peter Calvocoressi. Also Shaun Wylie, who was one of the top codebreakers and worked with Alan Turing. I knew him through the drama group because he was a very keen actor. I don't think he arrived at the Park until early 1941. He wanted to marry me and although I liked him very much, he was a very absent-minded mathematician. He married a Wren the following year and we lost touch, but then got back in touch about 15 years ago and we corresponded until he died.

I knew Professor Norman. I had to try to get him through the smoke hut where we practised escaping from a burning building. Apparently the air closest to the floor is the last to get smoky, so if you are going to escape from the smoke you have to crawl along the floor and I had to try to get this rather grim elderly professor crawling along the floor through a smoke hut.

I didn't hear of Alan Turing's name until Fred Winterbotham's book came out in 1975, even though I was close to Shaun Wylie who himself was working very closely with Alan Turing. That is an indication of the level of secrecy we were under, how little we knew about anything and how compartmentalised everything was. We didn't ever discuss what our work was with anybody from another hut. When I went back to Bletchley Park after the war I was absolutely amazed at the other places that were there. I hadn't realised anything else existed except our Hut. There was something called a cottage around the back of the Mansion which I didn't know was there. I didn't know anything about anything else. As well as being told not to think or talk about what we were doing, we chose not to see anything else as well. Otherwise, in walking about in daylight, you would think that we must have seen other buildings; it's just that I trained myself to forget everything that wasn't of relevance to the work I was doing.