

Ethel Baylem, nee Bamford

Beaumanor, ATS teleprinter operator. Interviewed November 2013

I was born in April 1919 and I remember people telling me about the First World War. Armistice Day was particularly remembered in my school.

During the war I lived between Stockport and Manchester and worked as a typist and secretary in what was called a tied job for a company in Manchester. They supplied drawing office materials to AV Roe aeroplane manufacturers who were building the special aeroplanes. I was also an ARP nurse and had a widowed mother. I was tied up with all that, so I didn't volunteer.

My office, which was opposite the town hall was bombed during the Manchester blitz in December 1940. I was making mince pies at home that night as we had got a ration of mincemeat and pastry from somewhere. Each time the siren went my mother and I went under the table and whenever it went quiet I came out and rolled a few more pies out. At about 10 pm I went upstairs to look out of the window and saw the whole of Manchester was ablaze. The next morning Piccadilly was strewn with fire-hoses and my office was flooded and I had to work at another office for about a week until I could go back to my office. We were thankful that there was no damage to ourselves.

Recruitment & training

I got called up when England really needed me, in late 1943 or maybe February 1944.

I was sent to Lancaster barracks in Lancashire, with another girl from the same village - it was a horrible place, dreadful. It was very military, marching up and down. We were a mixed lot of girls and of course we had to be examined, head examined and so on. Some girls had towels wrapped around their heads because of that and I kept well away from them!

I was then sent to Strathpeffer signals school in the north of Scotland, for the whole of the spring, about eight weeks. We travelled all night on a train to get there and arrived first at Dingwall, where a little truck met us and took us onto Strathpeffer about 10 miles away. I was billeted in a very large hotel and the wireless operators were billeted in the railway hotel. We had six blankets on the beds there, it was so cold. The Corporal who was teaching us wore mittens.

There were some Norwegian and French Canadian troops stationed nearby working in the forest 'lopping'. They used to invite us to their parties, but I never had the courage to go.

Apart from the PT training, which I wasn't very keen on, I learnt Morse code and touch typing on an ordinary typewriter with covers on the keys, which I thought was a bit silly as it wasn't a bit of use, I never used it. I had already taught myself to touch type so used to rattle away. My manager used to say it would catch fire I typed so quickly.

Eventually I was put on a teleprinter and had to learn a new keyboard altogether¹. I liked that. During training I had to successfully complete a number of messages, without errors. I also went to Derby to be trained as a wireless operator, for which I received an extra 4d per day, although I never did that job. Maybe if things had got worse I would have had to do both. On my uniform I had a signals badge, which I still have, and a white and navy blue Y badge on one sleeve and a wireless operator's badge. I once had a photograph taken in Loughborough, of me in uniform and a large copy of it was displayed in the photographer's window, but he wouldn't let me buy it.

Service

I was then chosen, along with two others, to go to a Y Station in Beaumanor, Leicestershire. I don't know why I was chosen to go there. I had applied to go to Bishops Waltham as I was engaged to someone whose home was near there. He was flying and was killed though, so that was that.

I was billeted in a small, rather miserable village, in what had been a hunting lodge, near Quorn in Leicestershire. I remember the billet had wooden beds, with three hard 'biscuit' mattresses, five beds to a room. We were told that the 'proper' beds and mattresses had been removed for the Italian prisoners to use. Quorn was a nice place though. I was taken, at all hours, in trucks, driven by girls, to Beaumanor to work. The truck dropped us off at the manor house where the telephone operator girl worked and the rest of us then marched in a platoon down a very long drive, to our huts – at night avoiding the bats!

I was in G hut, the teleprinter hut. Which looked like a tennis pavilion. The whole place was set up like that. The wireless huts looked like farm buildings.

1 . Unlike a typewriter, a teleprinter keyboard does not have separate keys for numbers and punctuation. They are on the same keys as the letters, e.g. 1 is on Q and full stop is on M. The number shift key is pressed to go from letters to numbers and the letter shift key to go back to letters.

There were also intelligence huts. I subsequently found out that G hut was reinforced against blast.

There were about 20 girls to a shift at Beaumanor. The shift pattern was 8 am to 4 pm, 4 pm to midnight and midnight to 8 am, with an hour break during the shift. After the midnight to 8 am shift I had the rest of that day and the following day as free time.

The messages come through from the wireless huts in sheaves. The wireless operators wrote the radio messages down on a form, in code, usually in block letters, and the runner – a girl, then ran with them, from the wireless hut to the teleprinter hut. We also had a 'blower' thing, which shot down the messages in tubes, like they used to have in shops. It was positioned behind me. The messages were passed onto the sergeant at his desk at the top. G hut had teleprinters running down both sides. The sergeant then passed the messages out. I would be handed a block of message sheets and stand them on what looked like a music stand and copy them out onto the teleprinter. I didn't know who was on the other end. There was never any conversation over the teleprinters apart from at Christmas, when I would get a message back saying 'Merry Christmas OG' (Old Girl)

I was unable to decipher what the messages were, but they were always in three blocks of five coded letters on each line, in sections, a space between each five and repeated all down the page. Once I had done one I put it to one side and started on the next one. I didn't know if they were continuous messages or separate ones.

I had to be very careful to be exact when copying and an expert teleprinter operator. I took pride in what I was doing and didn't speak to anyone about the work. As Winston Churchill said we were "The Geese who laid the golden egg and didn't cackle"

Occasionally, instead of being in code, the messages came through in ordinary writing, which could be very difficult to read. For example a small 'c' could look like an 'e' and I would have to take advice from the sergeant.

The name Hamburg kept coming up and when we had a man who came to the village he told me it wasn't just a raid on Hamburg, it was a raid on any town and that Hamburg was used as a code name. I don't know if that was right or not.

On occasion I had to go to the manor house to relieve the telephone operator. It wasn't very nice walking over there on your own, especially if it

was dark. I also sometimes had to go out in the middle of the night to take a message to the intelligence hut.

On quiet nights I was allowed to read, write letters or do embroidery, but on busy nights worked at full pelt and never stopped.

I didn't have any contact at work with any of the girls in the other huts. I only saw them when we marched to and from the truck transport. Sometimes there would be dances held in the manor house and I would mix with the girls and Intelligence Corps men then. Some fellas in civilian clothes would also be there. Once we all went by truck to a concert at Stanford Hall in Leicestershire,

Free time

During my free time I would often go home. It was very easy to get a lift over the Derbyshire hills in various forms of military transport – American troop wagons and jeeps. The soldiers were very generous; they used to give us baked beans on the way. One time two or three of us picked up a big lorry and the driver, a black man, kept passing cigarettes, sweets and chewing gum to us and although we were all chatting away he never spoke a word. I didn't know anything about discrimination at that time and didn't realise that, as far as the Americans were concerned, you weren't supposed to speak to the coloured troops in those days.

I would sometimes go dancing near home and some girls would stay the night at my house as my mother was very hospitable or out with my brother and his wife. One night my brother bought a block of tickets and took us all to the cinema. All these girls in a row. They also gave us a meal and looked after us.

Other times I would go dancing in Leicester or Nottingham. If in Nottingham it was easier to stay the night afterwards at the YWCA by the town square. It cost half a crown, which included a clean sleeping bag. I can't remember if breakfast was also included.

When the American Army were based near-by the commanding officer at Beaumanor gave a lecture to us about how to be good girls, as some of the girls were becoming too friendly with the Americans.

At Barrow-on-Soar there was a bridge over the river and if it was dry and I had an afternoon off, I would occasionally go there and read. My friend Sandra once took us on the river in a rowing boat. I was no good at it, she did the rowing!

The Fleet Air Arm cadets were stationed near the meadow there and they used to come over to our dances and vice versa. There were also a number of RAF stations locally and we would also fraternise with them. We went out with them on D Day.

When the war in Europe was over I was sent to a military transport depot in Preston. I hated it. It didn't have the romance of Beaumanor somehow. I was in a little office and it was all about lorries, which wasn't in my line at all. Peace was declared and I was told I couldn't go far from Preston. I think it was about a 15 mile limit. I couldn't go home, didn't know anyone else in Preston so I thought I know I'll go to Blackpool, as that was fairly near. I thought some friends of mine might be staying there as they went there every year to the same boarding house - so I went along and sure enough they were there. They managed to let me stay the night. Afterwards we went to the Tower Ballroom and as I was in uniform people were patting me on the back thinking I had won the war! We also danced around the bonfires on the sands. There was quite an excitement about it all. My husband to be was then in Portsmouth and he was hating it and I wasn't very happy about not being at home. We got married in the September because we thought he was going to the Far East. I was then able to come out of the army altogether.

None of my family or friends knew what I was doing although they did know I was in War Office Y group Signals. I used to get letters from my mother, brother and others addressed to Private Bamford 250398, The Lodge, Barrow on Soar. So they knew where I was, not what I was doing, as I had to keep secret about what that, until long after the war.

That's my story. I quite enjoyed my time in the Y service, because they were a very nice crowd of girls and I was fortunate in the friends I had. I think they had been chosen for their intelligence mainly.

I found out from my niece in Manchester, that Bletchley Park Veterans were being sought. Then GCHQ sent me the commemorative badge for those who worked at Bletchley Park.

She also sent me word about The Story of Beaumanor Y Station by [Joan Nicholls](#) who worked at Beaumanor