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Bedford September 1943 – January 1944, ISSIS. Aldford House, London, January 1944 – July 1945. Cryptanalyst in Research Section. Interviewed November 2013.

I'd been at school in Belfast and then went on to Trinity College Dublin to study Classics. In my second year I wanted to join up as my older brother had been killed in Burma in 1942, so I wanted to do something worthwhile. I knew someone who had been at Trinity College the year before me and had gone off to Bletchley – he never mentioned the word Bletchley – but he said that there was a very interesting job I could apply for that in his opinion was more important than piloting a Liberator! This impressed me rather; then I found that my school was arranging interviews. So about ten of us were interviewed and a couple of us were invited to go off to Bedford, in September 1943, to the Inter-Service Special Intelligence School (ISSIS) at Albany Road in Bedford, which was a cryptography school.

I had been interviewed by Captain [Cheadle](#) who ran the school and who, after asking various things about what we had done asked me if I was interested in music and what piece did I like. I said I was rather fond of Beethoven's 9th Symphony and he said "I think it's utterly impossible!" The other questions were about what I had done in Mathematics, Greek, Latin and French. I don't recollect them asking me about crosswords but a short while after I started work I discovered that there was a crossword culture, and there were people there who could do the Times crossword on the train coming in without even writing on the paper!

The training at Bedford was quite intensive and was largely general principles of cryptography – beginning with simple things like frequency counts and what it meant to get a depth; also various things like how subtractors worked. We had a handbook with exercises in it, which, when you had worked them out, produced messages about Rommel in the desert. All of us on the course were male, and about half in uniform.

In Bedford I had three different billets – one was good, one was very good and one was not good (that was a brief one). I was lucky.

We were under the War Office for those three months, then at the beginning of January 1944 some of us were sent to Bletchley Park and some to London - Berkeley Street or Aldford House, and now we under the Foreign Office.

Aldford House is a block of luxury flats on Park Lane looking into Hyde Park; Grosvenor House to the north, the Dorchester to the south. We occupied a

couple of floors in the upper part of the building – I worked on the eighth floor, and we were scattered around in rooms all over the top of the building.

At Aldford House my chief was [Norman Sainsbury](#), an orientalist in the British Museum and later in the Bodleian in Oxford, an able person, smoking his pipe all day in his small office; he had an assistant called [Daphne Hanson](#) who was also very bright; they were the people who received the messages and decided which ones should be worked on by others and which they could do themselves. I worked in a room full of young women who were given squared paper and coded messages in five-letter groups which you wrote down, and then wrote 25 letters at the top of the sheet. We had to try and break into these messages that came in either as photostats (white on black) or on flimsies, and were sorted out according to where they came from. We had to try and break into this, largely by hunting for a depth, and we knew that these may have come from a clerical error by a cipher clerk.

I can't remember in detail how it worked but one of the things we discovered working on Dutch messages, was that frequently a message would end with a nine-letter word meaning 'the rest will follow' You knew these nine letters might be in any message, so if you had two messages and bits of them were the same, you could arrange them under each other and then you could gradually unravel the whole thing.

These messages had been enciphered on a Hagelin machine which was commercially available and widely used. That, in short, was how we worked. The chief and Daphne were very good at working on messages quickly. We worked office hours, 9 to 5, but could stay on if we wanted and I remember once working all night and at 5 am one came out and you knew you'd got it!

We knew we were not doing German or Japanese codes but were told that what we were doing was important, including telegrams from the free Dutch in London to Curacao in South America, or from the Free French in London to French Guyana.

You worked with interesting colleagues working on a variety of languages; at one end of the flat we worked in was Colonel [Jeffrey](#), a very senior man in the Chinese section. There was a Swiss section I knew about but you didn't know much about what was going on – you didn't talk about your work when you met these people.

I understood that my work went off to Bletchley Park, and we were very conscious that we were a branch of Bletchley Park. If something was really promising we sent it off to be "Freeborned" in Block C which saved a lot of

the manual work; I don't know exactly how it was sent there but I imagine it was as paper telegrams and Freeborn knew how to process them.

I don't think we ever got feedback about our work, we never knew what happened or the result of our work. For example, in the Roll of Honour it shows that in 1943 [Bernard Scott](#) broke a Russian code. I got to know him quite well and he never mentioned anything about that, it was a complete surprise to me. You heard nothing of many people's achievements for many years.

It was a very interesting time to be in London. Unlike in Bedford, where we had been billeted, we had to find our own digs. I ended up in a nice lodging house on the edge of Primrose Hill with men from other ministries. There was so much going on – Myra Hess piano recitals in the National Gallery, a lot of ballet with Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpman, my chief was very keen on ballet.

In a way it was a rather cushy existence which wasn't what I had been looking for, so I joined what has come to be called Dad's Army, which in my case was 64 rocket projectors in Hyde Park. It so happened that we were on duty on 15 June 1944 which was the first night of the flying bombs coming over London so we spent the night firing rockets at them; but then Mr Churchill decided our rockets were doing more damage than anything else so that soon stopped.

We had books I hadn't come across before – there was a very interesting woman there called [Jean Lewis](#), who introduced me to CS Lewis' work. Life was never dull! I was a fire-watcher at St Paul's – an advertisement in the paper had said they were looking for volunteers so I went along with a colleague, [Bill Barbour](#), and I got to know the cathedral very well and met some interesting people, including architects, lawyers and engineers, who were determined to preserve the Cathedral.

I never had to go to Bletchley Park with my work, and to this day I have never been there!

In Aldford House there were three men who belonged to the Corps of Commissionaires; one was an Australian who we called Digger and a man called Robinson was in charge; they had to look after the waste paper, which had to be shredded. They were good at keeping up morale, joking with the girls. One day we heard that Robinson's son had been killed in action, and because my brother had also been killed we had a sort of bond. There was a distinguished-looking lady called Miss [Tanqueray](#) whose job was to look after us all and she ensured that everyone under 20 (which included

me) could get orange juice every day, and also Radio Malt if you were under 18; they seemed to take a lot of care with our welfare. It reinforced my guilty feelings that it was a rather cushy position in London!

My colleague Bill Barbour, who had joined with me, eventually resigned as he realised it wasn't the sort of work he wanted to do – he joined the Army. But I didn't resign until after the War was over, then I wanted to get back to University.

After the war I went back to Trinity College Dublin and finished my degree and then decided I was going to enter the Ministry. I went to New College Edinburgh and did my final year in Belfast. I then spent two years on the staff of the Student Christian Movement (SCM), in London, as secretary for theological colleges, which meant I travelled all over the British Isles, selling the Ecumenical movement which was only just beginning in those days, organising conferences for people from different denominations to meet each other. After that I did some more postgraduate work in Basle in Switzerland, under Karl Barth. Then I got married to an Australian colleague in the SCM and we went to India for the next 20 years teaching at a theological college. After that we went back to Australia for our children's education.

Eventually my first wife died and then I met up with a colleague I had known many years before and we got married 13 years ago; for 10 years we spent half the year in Australia and half here in Edinburgh.

I kept in touch with one of my colleagues in Ireland, [Eric McDowell](#), who worked in Berkeley Street, and, quite by chance, met one of my woman colleagues and have kept in touch with her, but that's about it. On the whole you just got on with life and then all that war work just faded into the background. Until recently that is!

In 1974 when the story came out it awoke my interest and I got the books as they came out but I still thought of it as something that happened back then in a different life.

It was a very good feeling when we eventually got our badges and certificates and got on the Roll of Honour and could see our friends and colleagues there.