

Mary Every, née Wisbey

Bletchley Park, WAAF in Japanese Air Section. Interviewed June 2013.

After leaving school I worked in a canteen in Peterborough for armed forces in transit, as I wasn't yet old enough to join up. As soon as I was old enough I joined the WAAF, we were all Auxiliaries. I had no idea at all what I was going to do, I had no qualifications at all, I just was hell bent on being a WAAF! I did my basic training at Gloucester and it is a mystery why I was picked out to do intelligence work. I did a fortnight's training at RAF Innsworth in Gloucestershire from where I was posted to RAF North Coates, a Coastal Command station in Lincolnshire. From there I was sent to Cambridge to do a psychology course at Downing College with Professor Frederic Bartlett. Looking back on it now it was probably at Cambridge that I was recruited for Bletchley.

I did many other things before I learned Japanese. This is how I was recruited: I was working on an aircrew selection board in Doncaster, having done two courses at Downing on psychology; mainly the psychology of the interview. From Doncaster I was sent down to London and told to report with a code phrase to a wine shop in Soho. So I went into the wine shop and I used the code phrase and it was quite obvious that the men working in the shop were not ordinary shop assistants.

I was taken to the back of the shop and a button was pressed – a door opened up and closed behind me and I was in a completely different world. I was told to go up a staircase and at the top of the stairs was a room with a door open and there was a senior RAF officer sitting there. He was speaking on two coloured telephones in two different languages at the same time, which I thought was rather clever! Eventually he ushered me in and he said something like "Did you have a good journey?" and then said that I would have to go in front of a selection board. Well that turned out to be a terrific ordeal as there were six or seven very senior looking people on the board and the questions were extremely varied and they covered all sorts of subjects, until they asked me what I knew about the art of the Ming dynasty.

At age 18 I really had no idea at all and I'm afraid I was rather facetious and said I thought it was slightly different to the Ting and there was the most ghastly hush and I thought "you idiot, you absolute idiot, that's blown the whole thing!" I had no idea what they were interviewing me for, then suddenly someone sniggered and the whole Board burst into laughter and the chairman said "That will be all thank you".

I immediately thought that was the end of that – whatever “that” was but, oh no, I was recruited, I have no idea why! There were no questions about crosswords or anything like that; it was mostly French poetry, literature and art, and suddenly the art of the Ming dynasty! By then I had no idea what they were doing or why I was there. Nobody had told me anything about Bletchley Park.

I went back to my work at the aircrew selection board and suddenly one day there was a letter saying “report to . . .” and that was the beginning of my Japanese language course at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). We were billeted at an RAF unit in central London, near the BBC. I started in July 1943 on what should have been a 6 month course, but I went to Bletchley after 3 months. The other 6 stayed and finished the course but I was urgently needed at Bletchley Park. No-one told us what we were going to do with the Japanese language but it became obvious as we only learnt military vocabulary about the Japanese Air Force. So by dint of imagination you could only hope and think that this was something to do with war in the Far East.

First of all we learnt Kana, the 32 characters that take the place of grammar in the Japanese language. Seven of us would go from our quarters on the No 14 bus to lectures with our 32 Kana characters and people would look and wonder what on earth we were doing as we sat on the top of the bus flicking and fiddling with our cards, but would never ask.

I was never told that I was going to Bletchley Park; I was given a railway warrant and was told to get out at the third stop on the train. Bletchley itself was never mentioned. I arrived at the third stop and the RAF met me; I was taken to Church Green and was put into a hut for accommodation. I was told where to go so I reported to [Joe Hooper](#), not in a hut, but in a concrete building. We used to walk down what was called the Burma Road. It must have been Block F which was pulled down about thirty years ago.

Joe Hooper took me into an office to work for an RAF officer, [Bill Elson](#). The first job I had to do was extremely boring, the call-sign index was terribly behind as no-one had worked on it for some time. So my first job was to bring the call-sign index up to date and it took quite a long time as I was doing it on my own.

I was a corporal when I arrived at Bletchley Park and promoted to sergeant after a while. Later I was commissioned and, much to the annoyance of Joe Hooper, I had to go away on the training course. What usually happened at Bletchley Park was that you were a sergeant one day and an officer the next,

and this was the first time that anyone there had to go and be commissioned through the usual training course. Nine of us were to go on the course and he tried to stop it but he failed so we had to go. None of those I had trained with at SOAS were commissioned apart from [Denise Gifford Hull](#), but she was lucky and did not have to do the course. I did and spent thirteen weeks at Lake Windermere. No wonder Joe Hooper was cross!

I got the index up to date and then I did something else, the details of which I can't remember. Eventually I worked on the order of battle which was my last job there until the war was over.

I can't remember ever being told I had contributed to a particular operation or success with our work and we had no direct contact with anyone in the Far East.

In the Japanese section our tools were fairly basic, paper and pencil. There were no windows in the blocks, just high-up ventilators so we could have huge maps on the walls with pins and flags for our order of battle work. That was our equipment!

I lived in RAF Church Green which was right next door – just a walk through the gate. It was an extraordinary camp– it was the largest sergeants mess ever, top heavy with sergeants and very few officers. There was a restaurant near the main gates which we used on night shift. On day shifts we ate in the mess. Generally the food was pretty horrible, but RAF food was better than civilian food. There was a very strange pub called the Fountain on the road to Stony Stratford – you could get things in there that were rationed and not seen anywhere else, like cream! So if we were desperate we'd get on our bicycles and go there.

In our spare time we'd hare off to London to get away from Bletchley. I played a lot of tennis, on the famous tennis courts, and acted in the Bletchley Park players. I was the lead in one of the plays; I think it was *Love From a Stranger*.

One of the programmes from one of my plays was in the Bletchley Park museum in the 1990s!

Family and friends never asked what I was doing; mine was a military family so they were very well trained not to ask questions! Leave was not easy to get, as we were always so busy, but I think I must have gone home when I had leave.

After the war I had to stay behind and work on translating French naval traffic for the archive. It took me about three months after VJ Day to finish this traffic and it was very lonely as everyone else I had worked with was gone. When that was finished I went to Monck Street which was the headquarters of RAF intelligence.

After that Joe Hooper got me back to Eastcote and I worked in the Russian Department. I didn't want to go back – I wanted to stay in military intelligence – it was a different work altogether. I was posted to the Middle East Air Force headquarters in Ismailia in Egypt where I stayed for two years. Then I had the choice of a permanent commission in the WAAF or a job in MI6 so I chose that. I left the WAAF and became a civilian.

In the 1970s when the story of Bletchley broke we were amazed – it was very difficult even then to talk about it, and people didn't really ask, it is only recently that people are so interested, having seen programmes on television, which horrified us, we didn't think Bletchley should have been advertised. There were some glaring mistakes in the programmes as they didn't ask enough people who actually worked there.

It is very difficult for people who didn't work at Bletchley or in Intelligence during the War to realise what pressure we were under because we had to bottle it all up. I have discussed this with my close friends who worked there and we all said the same thing: it affected the rest of our lives. I never did tell my husband what I did and my parents never knew what I did during the War.

It made one very reticent when you were in a group of people; you were always very careful who you made friends with in case you gave something away, in the first post war years, but not since it's been possible to talk about it.