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Bletchley Park June 1942 - May 1945. Civilian in Naval Section, NS II, Italian and Japanese.

Memories of Bletchley Park during World War II, written in 2007.

In 1941 my call-up age group arrived and like many other women I had to fill in a government form and indicate which branch of the various armed forces I would prefer to enter. I was certain that whatever I selected I would not be rewarded by entry into the service of my choice. This proved to be correct, for about one year later (the government did not seem to be in any hurry for my service), I was summoned to a London office (location unrecalled) to be interviewed and learned that instead of the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) for which I had put down and didn't really want (amongst other things the khaki color put me off) I would be sent somewhere "in the country" (site unspecified) to do clerical work (details unspecified) in the company of other draftees which would include "society girls." The interviewer seemed to think that this would be a plus – I was somewhat dubious. However, I was heartened by the fact that I would be living a more or less civilian life and would be free of service red tape and regulations.

In June 1942, I received my instructions to proceed to a place called Bletchley (unknown to me then) and, saying farewell to my family in Bromley, Kent, caught a train from Euston. On arriving at Bletchley station, we were taken by bus with other draftees to Bletchley Park, where we had the prospect of doing some kind of clerical work (details still unknown to us.)

Some days after that, Jessie and I (former employees from Hodder and Stoughton, book publishers) were taken to one of the primitive wooden huts (could have been Hut 4, I am not sure) built in the vicinity of the main house of Bletchley Park itself. Here we finally learned why we had been transported to this area; we were being employed as cryptographers' (a new word for many of us) assistants on something called the Hagelin code, which was being deployed by the Italian naval forces for their ships in the Mediterranean. We were shown some of the messages which were being passed through a hatch at one end of the office. These messages, as far as I recall, had been recorded by a teleprinter elsewhere and were arranged in groups of five letters in lines down the page. Our job would be to adopt a procedure known as "rodding" (a term referred to recently on my daughter's computer.) This entailed making various stabs at trying to fathom the opening address of the message.

I soon learned there is no letter "k" in the Italian language so that all these messages began with this letter, which was also used as a kind of punctuation

mark between words. The Hagelin code itself was changed once a month, except on one occasion when it remained unchanged from the previous four weeks. Since it fell to our boss, C (Colin) E [Thompson](#), a brilliant cryptographer, to break the code every month, this particular episode gave Colin and his assistants a good deal of unnecessary work as our office could have used the previous setup without the cryptographers having to spend many sleepless nights attempting to crack the current (unchanged) code.

Various Italian city names indicated the origin of the message (i.e. K mari or marina – these words were always followed by one of the following – Roma, Brindisi, Venezia or some other coastal city. These possibilities were guesswork on our part and necessitated trying different beginnings over and over – something like working on an acrostic. Some of the interim details are lost in my memory, but after arriving at a breakthrough, we transferred the amended text to little hand-operated Hagelin machines. These machines had a series of wheels interspersed with spokes which could be moved to the left or right according to the way the code was broken. This was done by operating a small hand-operated wheel on the right side of the machine.

If one's rodding had been done correctly, the decoded Italian came out printed on the paper tape we had inserted in the machine. These paper strips were then pasted on the back of the uncoded message and hastily pushed through a hatch at the other end of the office where the Italian translators worked. Speed regarding this whole procedure was important since the messages contained information on the Italian shipping in the Mediterranean and were consequently of great importance to the Allied Forces. The whole thing had its tricky aspects since, as an example, on the occasion our section reported certain Italian naval movements which were fictionally picked up by a British reconnaissance plane, a maneuver which the Italians suddenly cancelled. Since we could not reveal our source of info (Hagelin), this created some awkwardness. I don't know how the British solved that one. On other occasions, I saw newspaper reports referring to the sinking of Italian vessels and knew that these attacks were due to information emanating from our office.

During the time I was working on the Hagelin code I found it very engrossing. There were about a dozen of us working a total of three shifts around the clock, 9 am – 4 pm (days), 4 pm –midnight (after hours) and midnight - 9 am (nights), in one week rotations. The night shift was deadly, since sleeping in the day was almost impossible and the idea of cafeteria food at 2 am quite repellent. One's body rebelled against the constant changes of schedule. I found this way of life hard to become accustomed to and the air raids we had endured in Bromley were almost preferable to the schedules at BP where, ironically, we had no air raids at all.

After the Allied invasion and subsequent victory in Italy, our Hagelin days were over. Of course, we were glad to see that progress was being made on the Allied side, but there was a certain sadness to seeing our group (always known as "Hags" for an obvious reason) being broken up. We were a compatible lot and most fortunate to be working under a brilliant and patient boss (poor man, all these women!)

After the collapse of the Italians (whose opposite numbers we later discovered were paid far more than we), we transferred to another office to work on Japanese codes. Very dull, and we learned, the Americans were way ahead of us in Washington.

Some time in 1943, we noticed brick buildings being erected on the other side of the lake and realized that the war was probably going to continue for quite a while. We were subsequently moved out of the wooden huts into new quarters and (still working on Hagelin at that time) were most intrigued by the presence of an electric machine in the office. Gone were the little hand-operated machines and instead we had this electrical wonder which was great fun to use, rather like playing an organ. In retrospect, this machine was really a forerunner of today's computer and came into use with the help of BP's resident genius, Alan Turing.

Well, time moved on and so, of course, did the war. In 1944, the V1s were playing havoc with the London area, followed by the V2s, which were not as numerous, but more terrifying. The Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes in 1944 was well executed by the Germans and gave the Allies a nasty jolt.

Looking back on the Bletchley years, I would say that this area of the South Midlands had its interesting aspects. Living in the country took some getting used to. The BP personnel (8000 to 9000 of us) were billeted out in neighboring villages and taken to and from work in buses. I landed up in a small row of cottages outside Woburn, a village presided over by the Duke of Bedford. While he was visiting my landlady one day, I called out to Mrs King to beware of the tramp. She was horrified and declared that it was the Duke that I was alluding to (he wasn't wearing his coronet that day.)

To anyone who had ever worked in a typical British office at that time, BP was a real eye-opener. No neatly turned out daily workwear there. Weirdly colored clothing prevailed, gaudy pants for both sexes, sometimes non-matching shoes for the more eccentric cryptographers. By the time some bewildered Americans filtered into this world in 1942, they stood out with their rimless glasses and rather prim manners (not like the ones stationed at the nearby airfields.) On one occasion, I made coffee for my boss and some visiting Americans. The latter looked quite horrified at my striped playsuit, typical office wear of BP. However,

after a few weeks they in turn were drawing a large crowd of British females who were avidly watching Americans play tennis wearing very short shorts.

Another name recalled from the past was Frank Birch, whose name comes up in many books on Bletchley Park. I remember his somewhat eccentric manner which I was told by others as being brought about by the fact that he once played the role of Widow Twankey in a performance of the pantomime "Aladdin" and somehow never got over it.

Our off-duty pastimes included local movies ("Phantom of the Opera" was a big hit being regarded by BP as the funniest film of the year); listening to recorded classical music in the main house (relaxing); plays and revues put on by the BP Dramatic Society – very well done since many of the members were former professional actors. Dances were held in the newly-built hall and attended by the RAF and USAAF force members from neighboring air bases. These evenings, reciprocated by the afore-mentioned air force members, I may say, were not relaxing or particularly sober, but had some great bands and it was certainly nice to have some ice cream after it had been banned for so long in England.

Finally, of course, came VE Day and we were given the option of being demobbed or remaining until the defeat of the Japanese. I elected to return home though I left BP with more than a few regrets. The Official Secrets Act remained in effect for many years after the war and sadly my mother died before I could reveal the details of my work at BP.

During the war, the locals, who hated us and couldn't fathom why we were able to avoid helping the war effort (!), christened Bletchley Park "Lunatic Island" (rather apt, I thought). On reading my recollections, you must have realized that as upsetting as WWII was, it did have its humorous aspects. My daughter, who has heard some of my wartime anecdotes, persists in informing her disbelieving friends and colleagues that her mother did enjoy the war, so many funny things occurred (BP being no exception, of course).