

## **Pauline Gill née Hodgkinson**

*Eastcote 1944 – 1945. WRNS Bombe operator. Interviewed February 2017*

I was at school in the sixth form having done my school certificate, but I wasn't enjoying the subjects I was taking so I decided to sign up for the WRNS, I think because I liked the uniform. I was 17 at the time living in Surrey, so I went up to London to sign up and was accepted, then I was sent to Tullichewan in Scotland for training. The rest of my large family were nearly all in the services of one sort or another, so I think that's why I felt I wanted to join up.

I was there for few weeks and did a lot of basic training and drilling, and then eventually I was interviewed as to what I should do in the WRNS. I was told I might be suitable for something called P5, that's all they could tell me, so I had to accept going into it on trust.

I had to sign the Official Secrets Act before I started and I was told it would be at least 30 years before we could talk about it. I then had to go down to the south of England to a place called Eastcote, where I was told it was something to do with breaking codes. The next thing I remember was being at Eastcote, HMS Pembroke, making new friends and being trained to use these machines called Bombe machines.

We soon learnt that information was sent from Bletchley Park to Eastcote to put into the Bombe machine, which was very big. It had a lot of red electrical cables on the back and there were a lot of round things called drums which fitted onto the front of the machine; there were three banks of these drums and three rows of drums on each bank. There was a plug on each end of the cable and we were sent like a little map which showed us how to plug these cables in, which end went where. When the drums all been put on the right places you set the machine off and the drums started turning, making a lot of noise.

Every now and then they would stop, and a little lever came down at the side of the machine pointing to a letter and on the front of the machine there were three master drums which also had stopped at a letter, we would write down the letters and take them to a person called a checker who was in an adjacent room. You went to the hatch and handed the result to the checker who would then send these results to Bletchley Park, I would then wait for another map and do it all over again so fairly tedious. The time taken to set up the machine and get results could vary tremendously 5, 10 or 25 minutes, totally erratic as far as I remember. Sometimes we would be told that it had helped to break some code or other, that was enough, we were very happy, but if it didn't work, then we didn't know any more about it.

There was one person working the machine plus the checker, there were about 20 machines in one bay, as we called it, and there were a lot of other bays all doing the same thing. They were noisy because all these drums were rotating at different speeds and making a terrific sort of clank clank clank noise, very noisy. The machines would break down quite frequently but there were engineers who came to sort it out, I think some of them were in the RAF and some were American troop people. We worked eight-hour shifts either midnight to 8 am, 8 am till 4 pm or 4 pm till midnight. I don't think we had a meal break, instead we had a meal in the canteen or dining room before and after.

Eastcote was like a large barracks with a lot of separate buildings, the very big buildings housed the Bombe machines and the actual bays with the Bombes were quite hot because the machines threw out a lot of heat. Some buildings were big dormitories where we slept in bunk beds, I think there were two or four in each small bay and there were bathrooms as well so that's when we could really talk to each other and socialize. I think there was a separate building for the canteen and dining room where you could get perfectly adequate food, fairly plain but perfectly alright. There was another building which had a big hall where sometimes there would be dances, there was quite a bit of social life going on, and because the food and accommodation was all provided our pay of 10 shillings a week was pocket money really.

On our time off we'd sometimes go up to London, in fact I can remember being in Trafalgar Square when VE Day was declared, that really sticks in my memory because it was an exciting event. Sometimes I'd visit my parents who lived in Surrey, and my boyfriend was at Cambridge at the time, so I used to go up to Cambridge for weekends.

With the end of the war in Europe Eastcote was going to close down and I was given the option, because I was still in the WRNS, to go either to Bletchley Park which was going to be dismantled or to change to something else. Although my friends had decided to go to Bletchley Park, I decided to be different and retrain as a pay officer. So, I went off to somewhere on the South Coast for the actual training after which I was sent up to Warrington. I was working out officers' pay, which all had to be done in my head, because there were no calculators so you had two people looking after each set of officers so that you could check each other. Whilst I was there, I'd been promoted to petty officer by the time I was demobilized at the end of 1946.

As I'd interrupted my education to join up, I was eligible for a grant to do further education, so I applied to Guy's Hospital in London and trained as a physiotherapist which took three years, whilst I was doing this my boyfriend had to do his national service. He'd not joined up during the war because scientists were needed and he'd gone to university instead; we got married

when he'd finished his national service and I'd qualified as a physiotherapist and went back to live in Surrey to raise our family. I did keep in touch with my two closest friends from Eastcote, Isabelle Henson and [Dorothy Dane](#), but they both lived in Scotland so we didn't see much of each other

I think it was 1974 when my husband was reading a book and I'd realised it was all about the decoding and Bletchley Park that I was then able to say "Oh! of course that's what I was doing at Eastcote". He knew I'd been at Eastcote but he didn't know what I did there, it was a really strange feeling being able to tell him after all that time as well as my family and friends and so forth. It's rather good, it jogs the memory, and you realise you that can remember a lot and that there are things you can't remember very clearly, but it's quite exciting bringing it all back to life again.

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