

Rena Stewart

Bletchley Park 1944 - 1945. ATS in Hut 3, German Book Room. Interviewed November 2018

I went to St Andrews University in 1940, to read French and German, and graduated in 1943. My friend Aggie and I thought that we had done enough hanging about, and that we should do something about the war, so we volunteered for the Wrens. They were full up at that time and we were put into the ATS. There followed a long gap when we had medical examinations and tests for German and so on. Finally we arrived at the training camp in Guildford at the end of 1943 to be taught how to salute and important things like that, which were no use in Bletchley as nobody dreamt of saluting in the park!

We were given no choice about what we would do in the ATS, just told where we were going. We were sent on a course in Fitzjohn's Avenue, Hampstead, in one of the millionaire houses that had been requisitioned by the Army. It was a very interesting course; partly it was an explanation of the German armies, ranks etc. We signed the Official Secrets Act and then were told we were going to Bletchley; of course that didn't mean a thing to us.

While we were on the course we were told we were going to be log readers which I thought sounded incredibly boring, so I was very glad when we got to Bletchley that actually none of us were sent to the Log Reading Department. Three of us were allotted to the German Book Room, where we were typing, in German, the decrypts into a form to make it much easier for the intelligence people to go through in detail. We had to be sent on another course just to learn typing; they couldn't tell the people running the course what we wanted it for so we had to learn things like shorthand and about Army forms.

I finally arrived in Bletchley about February 1944 and the three of us were sent to the German Book Room; I don't think there were any other ATS people there. Of course when you are doing shift work you never see the people who are on a different shift.

The 'books' in the German Book Room were in fact sheets of typed script, stapled together. The messages were in five-letter groups and we just typed them up; it sounds like copy-typing, but there were lots of mishearings. We were told not to make too wild guesses about what was missing but it was usually pretty obvious; that was really why we had to know German properly

We were in Hut 3, the Book Room itself was a great big room with typewriters all over the place

We three ATS people were put in a little side room which we had to ourselves; it had a window that looked through to the main room. [Jane Luxmoore](#) was the head of the book room; she was civilian; they were nearly all civilians.

Somebody had written on the messages if they were 'Fish' or 'Tunny' and we also had some Lorenz ones; I didn't know what the terms meant then. I think the most interesting one I typed the whole time I was there was from Field Marshall Kesselring. He was doing a tour d'horizon informing the Führer of what he expected to happen, although a lot of it was quite dull, like ammunition returns.

We were never told where our work went after us and we didn't ask because we knew we wouldn't be told. I had no idea about Enigma or Bombes; I never saw an Enigma machine until the museum opened. I knew the Americans were there but didn't really come in contact with them.

As was usual in Bletchley nobody paid any attention to rank; four WAAF officers were recruited later on and although we didn't really have a hierarchy, we three, eventually sergeants, were actually senior to them.

We lived in Shenley Road Military camp and our commanding officer there, Senior Commander [Kemp](#), didn't know what we were doing in Bletchley and demanded to be shown; they did eventually take her in. I don't know what they showed her but it wasn't the full story.

We were living a kind of double life, working hard when we were in the park and also being expected to do compulsory PE and route marches and cross country runs and things. The cross country runs always left by the back gate of the camp and came back round to the front gate. If you loitered a bit you could let them all go out the back gate and then nip off to the NAAFI for a coffee and sneak down to the front gate. That was the kind of thing that happened with Commander Kemp in charge.

There were 30 of us in a very basic under furnished hut, just army beds and two pegs and a barrack box for our possessions.

We ate our meals in the sergeant's mess in camp and only went into the mess in Bletchley when we were on night shift.

We went into the back gate at Bletchley, there was an RAF gate there where they checked our passes; if you forgot your pass you had to go back and get it.

We started off by working day and evening shifts six days a week, with one day off; you chose your days on a big chart which was put up every month. You

could have a weekend off by having the Saturday of one week and the Sunday of the next, but that really wasn't a very good idea because then you had a long period before another day off. When later there was a tremendous increase in work volume, possibly around D Day, we worked night shifts as well.

There was a hall in Bletchley where they had theatre performances and revues, these were great fun. I can remember hearing that song to the music of "Trees" in a revue.

I did a lot of hitchhiking; we were all aged around 20 to 21 and had 21st birthday outings. There was a very modern roadhouse, which we occasionally went to and we hitchhiked there for somebody's 21st and the lift we got was in a coal lorry. The driver was very intrigued by us going to this roadhouse; you went in one way and out another and we tried to persuade him to let us off at the entrance but he insisted on driving right up to the door.

On one occasion a waiter came up to us and asked us if we wanted a drink; I asked for a sherry and he said, "Its 2/6, can you afford it?"

We sometimes went to the Corn Exchange in Bedford for concerts. We went once to hear Elsie Suddaby and afterwards went for a meal in a café. At the end of the meal we wondered about having coffee and we counted up what we had left; sometimes coffee was 4d and sometimes it was 6d. When the waitress came back we asked, 'how much is coffee' and when she replied 6d we said we won't bother we will just have the bill please; she came back with the bill and two cups of coffee saying 'go on, have your coffee'

I think the main thing I did was to belt down to the railway station to catch the 4 o'clock train up to London. I remember one time I went up and went to a matinée, where we were standing at the back of the stalls, then on to an evening performance afterwards. I would sometimes stay at service hostels overnight if I had a pass to do so.

I didn't get home on leave as a 48-hour pass was no use to get up to Scotland. The main leave I remember was my embarkation leave because when everything stopped in Bletchley all the civilians went away and I had to serve the rest of my time until my demob date came up.

Some of us went out to Germany to the CSDIC -Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre - where we translated the statements written by the prisoners. This was in Bad Nenndorf, a spa town; the prisoners were kept in the baths and accommodation that had been for the patients. Officially we were not allowed to go in there at all but I did get to go in a couple of times.

I arrived there in September 1945. It took us over 12 hours to get there from Ostend where I had been for a couple of days; a great time, hiring bathing costumes and going swimming. We left at 5.30 in the morning and didn't get there until 9 o'clock at night.

I worked there for over a year, about the same amount of time as I had worked at Bletchley Park, until I was demobbed in December 1946.

Our unit consisted of two of us doing the translations and a male NCO who did the interrogations. All the male NCOs were German Jewish people who had been in the Pioneer Corps. The one who was in our unit had a prisoner he was interrogating claiming to be a double agent; he was Belgian actually and Sean, the NCO, didn't think he was lying but thought he was a fantasist, just making himself important. Sean recommended that he be released but the colonel in charge, Colonel Stevens, said no, they were returning him to Belgium to stand trial. The day that Sean had to go and tell him this he asked me to come with him in case he burst into tears when he was told; that didn't work, he did burst into tears.

We lived in houses that had been for the doctors and patients, two to a room, but of course we didn't have any luxuries, just Army furniture. There was running water, which of course was a great advance on the camp at Shenley Road, where you had the ablutions! But the trouble was there any hot water. There were some empty houses within the camp so we went out one night and found an open window at one of them and went in and got hold of bedside tables with drawers in and managed to get them back to our room; they were the only drawers we had.

After I was demobbed I went back to Scotland and applied for jobs all over the place and got absolutely nowhere. It was a very bad time as the men who had been demobbed before us had all returned to their jobs by that time. I had an ordinary degree as I hadn't stayed on to do honours, and as I couldn't say what else I had done, it didn't sound very tempting for an employer. Sean, the man I had known in the interrogation camp, wrote to me that he'd been speaking to a friend of his who worked in the BBC, what was then External Services, and he thought I would enjoy a job there. He advised me to write to the BBC saying I could type and ask for a job and to take any job they offered, then have access to the internal advertisements. I did this and stayed there for 37 years! I had wanted to be a journalist and of course at first I was just a clerk, typing things. I kept applying for journalist jobs and was then sent to monitoring in Caversham, which was considered a kind of fringe journalist job; we were allowed to join the NUJ but very much on sufferance.

I spent ten years at Caversham and kept applying for jobs. The final one was for a sub-editor in Bush House and I thought if I don't get this one I'm just going to settle down and enjoy monitoring; it was actually a very good life, very pleasant company, meeting interesting people and a nice place to live in, but that was the application that was accepted! There I was a sub-editor, thinking that was fine, I'm going to do and enjoy this. Then a few vacancies for chief sub-editors came up and I didn't put in for it, I was Johnny-come-lately

The editor came to me and asked, "Why haven't you applied for chief sub?" I said I didn't think there was any point. Everybody is applying, he said. Well I got it and then duty-editor; I finished up being the first woman to be a senior duty-editor

I was horrified when the Bletchley Park story came out. How dare they? we were told we would never be able to tell in our lifetime! I bought the book by Winterbotham and it was quite unreadable. I looked up the index later to see what he'd said about Alan Turing and Turing's name wasn't on the index.

I had a weekend cottage in a village called Soulbury, about eight miles from Bletchley and as I didn't want to be the sort of commuter that paid no attention to village life, I joined the Women's Fellowship and the Women's Institute. The Fellowship in the early 1990's had two local ladies come along who were fighting to get Bletchley Park preserved, so I knew right from the beginnings it was going to open. After it was opened, to begin with just every second week at the weekend, I used to take people who were visiting me at the cottage to see what was to be seen at that time, which wasn't a great deal.

I was just a visitor but I got to know Tony and Margaret Sale quite well; Tony once invited me to come in and he had a recording machine; he said, 'just talk' The trouble was that most of the things we talked about were the things that happened in the camp not Bletchley Park! I don't think he got an awful lot out of that.

I had a phone call not very long ago from the only one of my German book room colleagues who now survives, she sat next to me; Elma Wasmoeht who was [Elma Morley](#). She married a Dutchman and lives in Holland. She phoned me round the time of the annual reunion to see if I was thinking of going and we had quite a long chat. I was at the stage I couldn't really use public transport and I dropped hints all round but nobody took them up!

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