

## **Daphne Canning, née Tucker**

*Chicksands July 1944 – December 1946. WAAF Wireless Operator/Morse Slip Reader. Interviewed May 2017*

I left school when I was 14 and went to a Pitman's secretarial college in London to learn shorthand, typing and business procedures. I finished college in 1942 and went to work in a solicitor's office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. I worked there for nine months and during that time, when I was seventeen and a half, I went to the Air Ministry offices in Holborn and volunteered for the WAAF.

They asked me what I would like to do and as I already had a little bit of knowledge of Morse communications I thought I'd be a wireless operator, my father being one already. He was in the Air Force in the First World War as an observer in aeroplanes and had to know Morse for that. I was in the Guides and because of the connection I was quite interested in learning Morse, so I did a little bit of dot dash, dash dot and things like.

I was called up in December 1942, just before I was 18, and sent to Innsworth in Gloucestershire, where I was kitted out.

From there I went to Compton Bassett for six months to train as a wireless operator. I was very proud of my "sparks" badge and it always makes me cross when I see people on the television or a film about the Air Force and they've got two "sparks" that's wrong, it should only be one.

I was then posted to Hendon, receiving weather reports. It wasn't a very busy station, mainly to do with planes ready for delivery by the ATA - Air Transport Auxiliary. They were taken to Hendon and then flown off to wherever they were needed.

Four of us were posted to Hendon; two went into air traffic control and another girl and I were on shifts in the little WT cabin. I was a bit bored because I only had to do weather reports, which were all figures and where there were only two a day; I thought I was wasting my time and losing all my speed. I thought "This is no good to me, I can't do with this." A notice came through every so often listing other things we could do, and one included learning Morse slip reading in London, so I volunteered for that. Some people used to think I was saying "Morse lip reading".

I started my training for this in January 1944 at No 7 Radio School in the Science Museum in London. All the exhibits had been removed and the museum had been divided into small classrooms. Having been a shorthand typist was a great advantage as I didn't have to learn to type. I finished the

training in the June; I could have finished much quicker but I had to follow the whole course through.

I then went on a weekend pass to my parents in Wembley, London. I got back on Sunday and was due to be posted on the Monday. On Sunday night a doodlebug hit our accommodation in Thurloe Court, Kensington, so we were all rather delayed. I had an injury to my arm and the billets were demolished.

We were on the third floor; the three floors above us were vacant as they were considered too dangerous.

There was no warning, but I just knew the doodlebug was going to be for us, I was lying in my bed; most people were asleep, and I can remember pulling the bedclothes up to my ears and just waiting. There was a terrible wait, and then this terrible noise. A blessing that I had my ears covered and I'd got myself on my tummy with my face hidden but I did have a lot of glass in my head, which took a long time to come out.

Then there was silence; amazing really after the terrible noise. I asked one of my roommates "Are you alright Valerie?" "Yes I'm OK" she replied. I then I asked my other roommate "Are you alright?" she said "Yes, I'm alright, oh no, my arm is all wet". There was nothing we could do with it.

Another girl, whose bed was below the window, had lots of glass fragments in her face; it looked dreadful, poor girl. I don't think she was in any actual pain. I think we were all too shocked to know what we were doing really.

I know one lady was killed, Corporal Padbury; I don't remember her Christian name. She was in a little room opposite the one I shared with another two girls. I don't know in what way she was injured because it was dark and we couldn't see each other. Everything was confusion and I didn't know what was happening. We were all in shock, a bit like zombies.

One girl said, "Oh I must get my fags out," and I said, "Oh for goodness sake can't you smell the gas?", all the gas fittings had been ruptured.

Another girl started to scream and it was the first time in my life when I ever swore, I said, "Shut that bloody noise" and she did shut up...there was silence after that.

They were well built flats; the middle walls had fallen but the outside walls of the building were alright and the floor of our rooms was still solid. There was a stairway with a lift in the centre.

The fire engines couldn't get through to get us out because of all the rubble in the road. We couldn't use the lift and the stairs were demolished so the firemen put ladders over the gaps and we had to walk across and down these. We had to go down the steps going forward instead of backwards like you do normally on a ladder, as it was at a semi level slope. I remember the fireman lying across the gap and putting his hand up to give me some balance to walk across; I can't remember anything else, except it was dark, and the smell.

I was in my pyjamas and I think I must have found my shoes beside my bed and put them on because I can't remember having bare feet when I went down the ladder.

When we got out we were taken to a church hall, where we were sorted out. Anybody who was really badly injured of course was kept, but if you could breathe and stand up, you were alright. I remember being told "Oh you can go home for two weeks"

Somehow I was given some uniform, which didn't fit me. I had a skirt too long and a jacket too tight and the cap was up like a chef's hat. When you got a new hat they were like this and you had to dampen it, flatten it, and hope that it would look more like a cap; what I looked like I've no idea!

I went home on the train on the Monday morning; I can't remember getting there. I opened the back door of the kitchen and my mother looked at me and said, "Good gracious what are you doing here?" because I'd only just left. I said "Oh, we've been bombed" and I shrieked with laughter. It was shock really but my mother thought it was a joke because I laughed. She and my father did go and look at the building after the war and she said "I'd no idea it was so bad"

I stayed at home for two weeks and then had a letter saying to report to Leighton Buzzard. From there they sent me to Chicksands Priory. I went to "B" site, the Morse Slip Reading site. "A" site was the interception site, although I was never actually told that; I knew it as that was where my father was. He wasn't there at the time as he was in hospital.

I had no idea what we were doing; I just did my job of Morse slip reading, which I liked very much as it was very interesting. We were very busy all the time. I had no idea where our terminals were until my husband was sent to India; he was in Delhi at the central signals centre. They were testing radio teleprinters there; up to then teleprinters all used landline, and they were

testing with radio as this would be much quicker. General teleprinter signals had to “jump” between places to get to their destination, as the signal wouldn’t get far enough, but with radio it could get further and didn’t have to have make so many relays.

To test these communications they had to use a frequency. One was the frequency that I used; it had to be used all the time otherwise somebody else would pinch it. The engineers would take turns to test it and when they wanted to have a rest they were glad to have somebody else who would take over.

My husband offered to do this when he discovered that one of the terminals was Chicksands Priory! So when I was having a quiet time at work I could talk to him, this was a bit naughty really. But I think I’m past being punished for that now! The operators would chat as part of setting things up, but it was supposed to be the official operator, not somebody who was just giving somebody a bit of time off. It only happened occasionally, when were on duty at the same time.

As Morse slip readers we had big typewriters, which made a strip of perforated paper, about an inch wide, known as “perforated slip”. It had a centre line of holes which went around a cog to move the paper along. In Morse, the letter A is dit dah. On the slip a “dit” is two little holes above each other and a “dah” is two holes at an angle. So dit-dah, you read as A, and dah-dit-dit-dit as B. That went through on the paper as you typed.

You typed message, and as you did so this strip of paper came out of the machine. When you had finished it you rolled it up into a little figure of eight and hung it up for the next person put onto the transmitter, which was quite small. The strip ran through it and the Morse was transmitted. At the other end, the Morse came through on another little tape which had a needle going up and down, a dit was a little point and a dah a line. You read that off as it came through and then stuck the tape onto a sheet of paper, as quickly as you could.

The message then went through to the teleprinters or to the routing office where they read off the directions for where it should go. They didn’t read the messages, but they knew where the signals had to go. They had books to say ABC goes to, say, Henlow, or FJK goes to Air Ministry. It seemed to me a lot of people doing a lot of actions for one message, but it was still quick and of course easy because it was radio.

We took it in turns to share the work and move around the different jobs because we got a bit fed up with doing the same thing all the time. If you didn't want to do a particular job there was always somebody else who would do it. I wasn't very keen on doing the transmissions because you had to finish off the message by hand; I can't remember the procedure but, using hand Morse you said, "One more", or "Two more messages to come".

I didn't feel confident enough to do this properly. I preferred to do the typing because I was more familiar with that.

The messages were all in code. Nobody ever told us what we were doing and we never really enquired. There were about four channels in the room, each one was connected to a different terminal. I don't remember where the messages were going to and coming from, we did think that one of them was the front line in the invasion as it was so busy; they might have even had two channels. I do wonder if another one wasn't to America.

I knew about Bletchley Park, as I once got stranded in London while on leave. I was going back to Chicksands and found my train had been damaged and was not running. I went to the traffic office; there was always one in the main line stations, and told the traffic officer I was stranded. As long as you did that you were safe, otherwise if you arrived back late you were on a charge. He arranged for me to get on another train to Bedford and from Bedford to go to Bletchley. When I got to Bletchley they arranged for me to stay the night and have breakfast there.

When I was sitting at breakfast there were these two girls, like myself, they were busy chatting away and I couldn't help but hear what they were saying. They were talking about their work and what they were doing and I thought "This isn't right, they shouldn't be talking like this", and being nosy I said to them "Excuse me, but do you realise that you shouldn't be talking like this? You don't know who I am - I could be anybody and I can hear everything you are saying". They looked a little bit dumbfounded but they stopped talking then. I did know it was secret what they were doing.

I felt a bit embarrassed because I'd been a bit pompous, I wasn't normally an interfering nosy sort of woman. On the other hand I felt they shouldn't be talking like this; they didn't know who I was. I could have been a usurper because I wasn't from that station; I could have been anybody; I was in my uniform of course and I'd got my "sparks" up. If somebody wanted to get into anywhere there would be no difficulty, I had no difficulty getting into Bletchley Park; I just went on the train and showed my pass.

After breakfast I was taken by a despatch rider, in his motorbike sidecar, back to Chicksands.

There were too many of us at Chicksands so some of us had to stay at Wrest Park, there was a camp and we were taken by transport to Chicksands every day. I believe it was owned by an insurance company and they used it as a holiday area for their employees until the huts in the grounds were taken over by the Air Force. There were about a dozen huts and all had about 10 or 12 separate rooms each side so we all had our own little room, which was very nice, but there was only just enough space for a bed, a cupboard to put your clothes in, and some hooks. You didn't need much anyway, you only had your uniform. It was very nice, with a cookhouse where we had our breakfast. There were maybe 60 to 100 girls there but not always at the same time because we were on different watches. We did a four watch system, eight hours a day, morning, noon and night and then change-over watch so that you were off for a weekend; it was quite a reasonable system. It was quite nice for sleeping during the daytime if you'd been on duty at nights because you didn't get much noise.

Eventually we did transfer to Chicksands itself. Chicksands was beautiful, with an avenue of lime trees. This was in 1945, it was a lovely warm summer and we had these Nissen huts on top of the hill, and the sun on the lime trees was absolutely wonderful; I can remember the scent. We used to take our beds outside sometimes to sleep; it was such a nice warm, summer. I don't think that went on for very long but when you remember something so strongly you feel as though you did it for a long time. Wrest Park was nice too. Lovely gardens and walks in the area. Wherever we went was nice.

We were not very close to any town. I had met my husband, Ronald Charles Canning, when I first went to Chicksands. He had already been to the Science Museum and done his course as a Morse Slip reader and had been at Chicksands for three months,

We used to go to Luton or Bedford a lot because my husband was very keen on classical music; I'm afraid I wasn't but I stuck with it! There were also camp parties, dances, and things like that; we seemed to find things to do. We also used to walk a lot in the country; we liked walking.

We didn't go to the American bases at all. I don't think there were many Americans round about Chicksands. I wasn't very impressed with them to be honest; they were too loud and so cocky; I didn't like that very much.

Once or twice when I was stationed in London I went to one or two of the forces clubs. We had wonderful things in London, we were very lucky, it was a marvellous place to be, we got free tickets to go to the shows, Shaftesbury Theatre especially, and we used to have a lovely time.

We also used to go to Lyons Corner House where you could get a meal for a very low price and have as much as you liked because it was all off-ration. Of course we were very greedy and Ronald would stuff himself. But it was wonderful food; I don't know how they managed it actually. You would get a lot of forces going there.

My father had quite a story, he was Vincent George Tucker, born in 1899 and putting his age up by a year he volunteered for the Air Force, well, it wasn't actually the Air Force, in 1914. He was an observer in airships and then transferred to aeroplanes and learned Morse code.

Sometime before the start of World War 2, in about 1938, he volunteered for the Civilian Wireless Reserve, the CWR. I remember he had some sort of badge.

The Air Ministry used to send out radio messages to the CWR people as practise messages, to check their accuracy. The week before World War 2 was declared he was called up by the Air Force. He was 40 then and really shouldn't have gone because he was too old, but because he had this special knowledge he was called up. He was posted straight out to northern France as a wireless operator, with about half a dozen men in Breteuil. He was allowed to wear his flying badge as he had been flying in the First World War.

He told me that when the Germans overran France he and his men were told to burn everything. They couldn't get to Dunkirk as the Germans were in the way so they walked all the way to Saint-Nazaire. They waited there in a queue for a boat. He was very lucky as one boat skipper said his boat was full and that he should wait for another. A bomb went down the funnel of that boat and blew it up. He got on the next boat and when he arrived in England went to Cheadle before being posted to Chicksands. At Chicksands he was commissioned as a signals officer. I have a photograph of him and RAF and WAAF officers in front of Chicksands priory.

When I was training, my mother, to get away from the bombing in London, went to stay in Stevenage with my three sisters, who were all younger than me, so they could be reasonably near my father. My father had been the export manager of a big American dental firm before being called up. One

of his travellers lived in Stevenage and his wife was taken ill and so he asked my mother, if she would go and look after her, so she stayed at his house to help him out. My father loved this as he was able to come over and see us all.

By this time I was in wireless school at Compton Bassett and the CO of Chicksands, a very nice man, my father thought a lot of him, said "You should bring your wife and family to tea". I happened to be on leave at the time so we all went. It was a bit embarrassing really because strictly speaking I should have been in uniform. I wasn't because my father had said not to wear it, so I was just one of his family and we all went to tea at Chicksands Priory and had a very pleasant time. One of the lady officers came and spoke to me and said "I believe you are in the WAAF. What are you doing? It's very nice to meet you" It was a bit embarrassing as I didn't know whether to salute or not!

My father stayed on until the end of the war, ending up as a squadron leader. He became ill with rheumatic arthritis; his hands were very crippled and he was discharged under medical grounds. When he was in France he had been billeted in a derelict police station which was very damp and cold. He said they worked in a little hut out in a field.

At Chicksands he was in charge of a watch; there were A, B, C and D watches. We had had a signals officer in charge of ours; his name was Dunston. I didn't like him; he was a very unpleasant young man who was too well aware of his position and had a high opinion of himself. If he'd had a bit of personality it would have been better, but he didn't have and that was his misfortune. A long time afterwards, when my father had recovered sufficiently from the rheumatic arthritis to be able to move, he went to a reunion at Chicksands. When he came home he said "I met your officer Dunston, humph, didn't think much of him"

Nobody ever said that I had to keep the work I was doing secret, but I somehow just knew not to talk about it. It just was never mentioned; there was no need too, we all knew what we were doing. We knew it was all in code but didn't know what it was about. There was no way of finding out and we were not really interested in doing so. I don't think we had the curiosity that people seem to have now.

My husband Ronald started off as a wireless operator and in January 1944 went to Chicksands as a Morse Slip Reader before being posted to India. He was issued tropical kit but didn't know where he was going. I think he was going to Japan but the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki while he



was on the journey out to the Middle East and he was then redirected to New Delhi.

Included in his kit was a tin of cigarettes - Wild Woodbines. He smoked the cigarettes and he kept the tin as a memento. Years later, I was curious about this, had a look inside and saw that it had a lining which he hadn't noticed. Behind that were some bank notes, written in English, "Japanese Government - one cent". Perhaps they were all given something like that to use as bribes, if necessary. He stayed in New Delhi until he came home and was demobbed in 1946

I was at Chicksands until 1946. Peace was declared, but we were still very busy, even in 1946. I don't know what happened about the radio teleprinters, whether they were a success or not.

My husband came home in 1946; I was discharged that December, and we were married in 1947

When the story about Bletchley Park came out I never dreamed that I was connected with it in any way. It is only because of this interview and GCHQ that I realised there was a connection. I knew what A site were doing but I had no idea that B site was connected with them. I suppose for reasonably intelligent people, we were a bit daft not to work it out!

Maybe I was told right at the very start when I first joined up and attended various lectures. Someone might have said "Whatever you're doing, do not talk about it" There was always these posters about with things on like "Walls have ears" "Be like dad, keep mum"

It's extraordinary really when you think that with so many people engaged in the work, nothing got out. It is incredible that the Germans didn't get to know about it; I find that so staggering really.

I don't believe I had to sign the official secrets act. In fact when I wrote to GCHQ and filled in the form they sent me, I wrote on it "I don't think I'm eligible for anything, because I really didn't know what I was doing". I suppose in a way that was exactly what they wanted.

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