

Sheila Ford, née Gybbon-Monypenny

Eastcote WRNS Bombe Operator. Interviewed May 2015.

During the war I worked at Eastcote, which was one of the outposts to Bletchley Park.

I was living at home and waiting to get called up when I was 18. I did some work at a local hospital and helped Mum around the house, until the day finally arrived when I went to Mill Hill for training.

Now the first thing that comes to mind about Mill Hill is how hard we worked. I can clearly remember scrubbing down a stone staircase at 6.00 am. As well as lots of cleaning, we had to attend talks as well. These were usually given by the Petty Officers who were a bit like schoolmistresses to me. We had talks about life, how to look after oneself, and how to hang onto one's virginity!

When my training was completed, I was sent to Eastcote, which was the last stop on the underground and near to where my parents lived. Then we were told about what we would be doing but, before anything else we had to sign the official secrets act. Only when that was done could I finally begin learning the job I had been given, which was that of a Bombe operator, a job that I would be doing for the next 3 to 4 years.

Bombes were big and with my small frame it could sometimes be a struggle to reach all the parts that I needed to. In fact, I remember one girl who couldn't and she was led from our hut swearing she'd never say a word of anything she'd seen. She was very disappointed. These machines were also very noisy and greasy, ensuring your hands would be blackened in no time.

Operating a Bombe wasn't an easy thing to learn at first, I don't think I really understood it. I remember I used to drive my tutors mad by asking question after question, but I got there in the end. The most important thing was maintaining our accuracy. We were told that we had to be very particular about not making any mistakes, or our sailors in the Atlantic would be torpedoed and drown. That was a heavy pressure to work under.

It soon became apparent to me that the Bombe was trying to decrypt intercepted messages. This was confirmed when it was announced on our tannoy that the Scharnhorst, which was a big German battleship, had been sunk off the coast of Norway, so we knew we'd helped in some way. Although things like this weren't normally announced at all.

We worked in 8 hr shifts around the clock. So you would either be on mornings, afternoons or nights. It was quite hard and a great relief to go to bed at the right time of day. The food wasn't too great though, with most of it being stodgy, and things like fish and chips. I was probably one of the youngest doing my job at Eastcote, but then there were many others doing exactly the same elsewhere. If we got a 'jobs up', the results would be sent to Bletchley Park for the boffins, as we called them, to work on. That was one place I never got to visit until it was opened to the public.

When I wasn't working on the Bombe or sleeping in my two tier bunk, I used to enjoy my time off. Some of us used to enjoy having a coffee in a restaurant, whilst others preferred to go to the pub. I always considered myself to be a little bit young for this so I stayed firmly with the restaurants. There was one that did the most delicious Welsh Rarebit which everyone adored so we were frequent visitors. Sometimes people would ask us what we did so we said we were secretaries and somehow we were always believed. Every now and then, dances were held on camp and others would be invited to come over which was great fun. I remember the Americans were always popular. Of course if I was really lucky, I would be granted some leave so I could spend some time with Mum and Dad.

After the war was over, we began to hear about what had been happening in Germany and about the terrible camps. That was dreadful, it sort of haunted you and I had nightmares about it. It certainly changed your feelings about the whole thing. I don't hold any grudges against the Germans now, at all, but then it was very hard not to.

Anyway, it was a great relief knowing the 'boys' were safe and coming back home. It meant you could finally get on with your life. For me that meant returning home to live with my parents and going to Art School for the next three years. There seems to be an artistic gene that runs through our family so I enjoyed it immensely. Even after I'd left, I'd still meet up with my 'arty' friends at a place called the Drawing Club. It was at one of these gatherings that I first met my husband and we couldn't take our eyes off each other!

Well, we married and were always very happy. We had three children and lived in some nice places. Our favourite was definitely here in Devon. My husband used to call it his 'paradise'. Sadly he died 27 years ago, which was a bitter blow, but we managed.

Since living here, I've found out that there is another lady that lives nearby who was also a Bombe operator at the same time as me. She's lived here longer than me and when my story was published in a local magazine she

read it and rang me saying I'd just told her life story! Needless to say we had a good chat that day.

There's another lady called Jean that I've always stayed in contact with as well. She lives up north and we exchange Christmas cards every year.

It's nice now that after all these years, we can finally tell our stories. Funnily enough, my parents took little notice, but my friends were impressed.

I was promoted to a leading Wren before I left and wore my anchor on my tunic sleeve with pride. I still have that worsted tunic and a couple of photos as mementoes of those days.

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