

Stephen Biggart

RAF Corporal, Bletchley Park 1942 – 1945. Block E, Morse slip reading facility.

Having noticed recently the many references to Bletchley Park, I thought I would make you aware of the important part my colleagues and I played in the introduction of a better method of radio signal reception. This enabled perfect communication of Morse code messages at a much higher speed than 12 wpm which was the writing speed previously used by the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Shortly after Christmas 1941 four RAF Wireless Operators were recruited by Mr Wood, a Cable and Wireless Engineer, for the purpose of introducing High Speed Morse into Bletchley Park via the VHF Triple Diversity aerial system from nearby Stoke Hammond Wireless Station. These airmen were John Pugh from Portmadoc, Leslie Briggs from Bradford, William Brizell from Liverpool and myself, Stephen Biggart from Leeds.

After tests and interrogations we were sent to Station Z, the Air Ministry citadel in Harrow Weald, working with WRNS officers who taught us to touch type in a large bunker way below HM Stationery Office which was in the Kodak building at the bottom of Headstone Lane. We were billeted nearby with families until the course was completed.

The next move was to Dukes Avenue in Chiswick where we were introduced to Cable and Wireless operatives who taught us to read Morse pulled through a channel until we could type the signals at a speed of 35 wpm. Not fast for a typist but pretty impressive for a Morse reader. Whilst working in this large Victorian property we lived in a doctor's house nearby. We were told: "If anyone asks you what you are doing, tell them this is part of the London Radio College".

Eventually we reached B Block at Bletchley Park where the first slip reading facility was being set up in early 1942. This was done on a long bench which contained an Imperial typewriter, a Morse key, headphones and an undulator. The latter recorded the signals sent by land line from Stoke Hammond onto a slip of moving gum-backed paper which was pulled through a raised narrow metal channel, over a wet roller and was then cut off at appropriate lengths and stuck down in order on a large green message pad. The gadget which pulled the tape along could be adjusted for speed to suit the dexterity of the girl sticking the messages down. A thimble-like instrument with a blade was used for cutting the tape. When the message was completed it was passed on to another member of the WAAF, a Wireless Operator, who typed the Morse signals back to their original groups of 5 lettered code and passed it on to the decoders.

The typewriter and Morse key were used by us to receive hand messages from many home and overseas stations, transfer them as they were sent into the original 5 letter codes on a sheet of A4 in the typewriter and pass them on to an

adjacent prefab which held the Typex decoding machines. We were in contact with various overseas stations including Colombo in Ceylon, Kilindini in Mombasa and Caserta and Bari in the heel of Italy where they kept an eye on activities in the Adriatic. We worked around the clock with one day off a week. Many WAAF personnel were trained by us until the Cable and Wireless contract ran out and this system was handed over to Flight Lieutenant Sanderson and we were dispersed.

During our spell at Bletchley Park we lived at 20 Napier Street at the other end of town with a Mrs Ebborn and her son Tom, a local Fireman, where we were one big happy family. John Pugh and I played for the Church Green soccer team where our main opponents were The London Brick Company. I also played for the Church Green Cricket XI and had several conversations with Flying Officer Lilley, the Sportsmaster. As a matter of fact the cricket fixture for 1945 is still in my possession along with a couple more items relating to Bletchley Park.