

Joyce Aylard née Baker

Eastcote September 1943 - May 1945. WRNS Bombe operator. Bletchley Park May - October 1945. Japanese naval codes. Interviewed November 2016

I was evacuated, at the beginning of the war, with my school to South Wales. I came back, aged 16 and left school, because there had been no higher education in my family at all.

I did a secretarial course at Dagenham Technical College, and then worked for a year, studying in the evening for the first year of a B Com course, a bit like an A level.

As soon as I was 18, I volunteered for the WRNS. At the time, everyone wanted to go into the WRNS, and I joined in September 1943. We began with two weeks basic WRNS training at Mill Hill. At the time I was recruited, they probably wanted people to work on breaking the Enigma code and most of us who joined at this time, went to Eastcote, there was no choice.

There wasn't really any training at all. We were recruited, it was all very secret, and then we spent just a very short time training on the Bombes, we were told how to work them and that was it.

We worked in a sort of large, newly built hut. We had a bay for each set of Bombes, named after a country – for example we had a Poland bay. The bays were named, but not the individual machine. There were about ten Bombes in a bay, my guess is 50 altogether, I may be entirely wrong, it's very hard to remember.

We worked shifts, 8 am to 4 pm, 4 pm to midnight and midnight to 8 am. We had a few days off before a week of nights, then have a day or two off. I never minded that at all, it made life more interesting.

I was told that the first officer in charge of the base didn't know what we were doing. We had to cross to this special section, guarded by a Royal Marine, and had to show our pass.

We knew what we were doing, we knew we were breaking the German Enigma code on the machines. When they stopped, we had to write down the stop and check it, and if it went through a certain degree of possibilities, then it would be teleprinted to Bletchley Park, and that was all we heard of it. Very occasionally, we had a message back to say, 'job up', that meant something we had found at Eastcote, had actually broken one of the Enigma codes, which was always rather nice.

Sometimes we were told to strip the machine and put on something new that came in, urgently, quickly, and that would roll round. Otherwise we might put

back an old one that had been going for months, well weeks anyway. I can't really say how long each one took.

There were two of us on a machine - one would be operating, one checking, and then we would check them together. Then one of us would operate the machine and the other would go into a different room and check the stops as they came in.

At one stage, I can't remember much about it, I was called in by someone, I can't remember who, to work on something special. I did this for a short while and then nothing came of it, so I don't know what it was. I seem to recall that for this very short spell I did in this special bay there was tickertape, but that may be wrong.

We had Royal Air Force men who would service the Bombes. The machines would break down occasionally and we just called in someone to put them right for us. They were fairly reliable, working most of the time, as far as I remember.

I was promoted to leading Wren in July 1944. I think I was in charge of a bay, and then had to allocate the Wrens to the different Bombes. Things like that, it wasn't very much more.

The day the war ended, everything on the Bombes completely ceased and Churchill, I gather, gave orders to have them all destroyed. I think there were one or two that weren't. I was immediately transferred, almost the next day, to Bletchley Park to work on Japanese code. None of my colleagues from Eastcote came with me. Most of the Wrens were left behind and had to take the machines to bits; it was pretty horrible I think.

When I got to Bletchley Park, I was immediately put in a section run by someone called Hugh Foss. For about the first month I was working on my own going through a codebreakers' course in English, not Japanese. I think they were looking for people to work for the Government Code and Cipher School after the war, that's why I think I was doing that, otherwise there was no point.

Then for a very short time I was working on a Japanese code, just pencil and paper, in the corner of a room, on blocks of numbers. I can't remember much about it, because in August the war was over.

I was at Bletchley Park such a short time - I was only there May to August. I vaguely remember the house and the lake, but not much else. I was promoted to petty officer Wren in June 1945 - right at the end of the war and I was very pleased with my Tricorn hat and gloves.

At Eastcote we were quartered nearby in the WRNS quarters. The accommodation for the Wrens was all newly built and quite comfortable. We had sort of a bay for about eight to ten, with two-storey bunks and we eight to ten in each section.

While at Bletchley Park I was living at Wavendon - it was a lovely home, really delightful. The end of summer was simply gorgeous. We travelled in and back by coach.

At Eastcote, we were very near London. When we were free, we might go there to do what we wanted. I remember going to see John Gielgud in Hamlet, we had to leave before the end, to get back for night watch.

We used to have a little café near Eastcote station, where we had an extra meal, having had a meal in quarters. The food was very good, so I put on quite a lot of weight then, having my two meals.

At Eastcote we used to have a gramophone concert in what we called the fo'c'sle, and they were rather nice. We used to play hockey a lot too, that was rather fun. We did a little of our own amateur dramatics. Apart from that I can't remember very much more really.

I could go home for a weekend on the tube with no problem, but of course we could not say anything about what we were doing. It was lovely, particularly at Eastcote, being in London, very pleasant. Being at Wavendon was even better - it was in the summer, lovely weather, we used to go swimming in the gravel pits at Woburn Sands, just a short walk across the fields. We could never stay behind at Bletchley, because we had a coach to take us back, so we didn't go to anything locally at all - none of the famous amateur dramatics.

When the war with Japan ended I was given immediate release. It was a quick demob, because just before I went in the WRNS, I was starting a degree course in Economics, I went straight to LSE in October 1945.

I had a letter after the war, dated 16 May 1947, from Hugh Foss. He wanted me to go back to the Government Code and Cypher School, but by then I was going to LSE.

When the story came out in 1974, my parents were dead, but I could tell my brother and people like that. My father died never knowing anything of what I did, and was very upset, but there you are. I remember some of my friends from the Wrens, whom I didn't see very often, they wouldn't even talk about it then. I still vaguely remember it coming out, being able to tell people. I was very proud I'd been involved in that.

In the beginning, it wasn't really talked about, it wasn't that big a thing. Rather it was that book by Winterbotham - when that came out - but it wasn't given that much prominence at all. It gradually built up over the years.

Bletchley Park Oral History Project. © 2018 Bletchley Park Trust.

Permission must be obtained to reproduce or publish any content from this write-up. Please contact: enquiries@bletchleypark.org.uk