

Phyllis Barton née Dalton

Bletchley Park. WRNS Bombe Operator. Interviewed September 2014.

On leaving school I attended a technical college at the age of 13 to study Costume Design. We started early in those days! The lessons at first were Art and Dressmaking but later the focus was on Art. After leaving technical college I became a theatrical costume maker. I had been working for a year before joining the WRNS.

I joined the WRNS with Rachel, a friend who was Southern Irish, in early 1944. I was 19. I never went to boarding school but I found mixing with different people in the WRNS was an education and gave one a good grounding in life.

After an initial interview in St James Gardens in London I reported to Mill Hill for basic training by myself, as Rachel's recruitment was delayed by some months. While I was at Mill Hill I had another interview with a prescient WRNS officer to see what work I was suitable for. There was a strange rumour when I was at Mill Hill about some of us being sent to work with water!

I am not quite sure how they sorted people out for Bletchley. I was not aware of anyone looking into my background. The only tests that I can remember doing was later, after the war ended, when I was remustered to work in Air Stores when I passed an exam in Leeds for Leading Wren, although I was not aware there was much promotion while I was serving in the WRNS.

The WRNS officer at Mill Hill said that she hoped "I did not have an artistic temperament". I thought the remark was quite funny. I knew very little about the job I was about to do but I do have a diary entry of "May do Secret work in the country". I kept a diary of events but nothing about the type of work I did so I must have made a decision to ignore the instructions not to keep a one. After spending three weeks at Mill Hill I was posted to Eastcote for Bombe training by the RAF, but I don't remember being told I was being sent to Eastcote. We were taken there by lorry without knowing where we were going.

After Bombe training at Eastcote I was posted to Bletchley on 12 June 1944. My first impression of Bletchley Park was seeing Scottish Country dancing taking place with men dressed in kilts, and I wondered what sort of place I had come to!

I was initially billeted at North Crawley Grange which was a large Elizabethan House with a large kitchen garden. The house was run by a WRNS Officer who looked after us very well; I believe she was a Vicar's wife. There was a WRNS cook who supplied good food. There was a lack of hot water at the Grange

but we used lemonade bottles full of hot water to warm our bunk beds in lieu of proper hot water bottles.

The WRNS who worked at Bletchley were a very mixed bunch; from Cockneys to some who a few weeks ago may have been dancing with the King. I do remember we had a lot of fun while at Crawley Grange. As there we only about 20 or so WRNS billeted there and most were shift workers my watch often had the house to ourselves.

I started work in Hut 11A on shifts 8 to 4, 4 to midnight and finally midnight to 8. We understood that the work was connected to codes and intelligence. Later, in August I do remember being taken round Hut 6 but I cannot remember much about the visit

Our task was to set up the Bombes from a plan, on a piece of paper. We had to put the plugs in at the back from this plan and then you switched the Bombe on. When working the noise was loud, and especially at nights, because of the rhythm, soporific. The Hut was cold and bare. We were on our feet for most of the time. Our watch was made up a dozen WRNS at the most. We all could do the same tasks on the Watch. The WRNS Petty Officer in charge, "[Chesh](#)", always had her hat on the side of her head, and was a little "butch". I do remember some of my fellow WRNS; [Pat Hewlitt](#), is now in a nursing home; [Anne Grierson](#) was a very pretty natural blonde and [Rosemary](#) became a Doctor. I did not know any of the senior staff at Bletchley Park who later became famous because of their work at Bletchley. I must say that I never thought the work was me, but as there was a war on we got on with it. In November 1944 we were allowed to close Hut 11A for half an hour at lunchtimes. Perhaps this was because the work was drying up.

We did realise that the end result made sense to someone in intelligence even if it did not make sense to us. I was also vaguely aware that they may have not been able to use all of the information obtained from our work in order not to make the enemy aware. We were small cogs in a large organisation and we were very young.

I was paid thirty shillings every fortnight when I arrived at Bletchley in June 1944. In October it was increased to two pounds a fortnight.

We had a good social life, we saw lots of films and we were invited to lots of parties at other military bases, some of them American. Usually the military bases supplied transport to attend the parties.

In my free time I remember "A watch" (I think this was my watch) entertaining wounded soldiers from Bedford Hospital. I remember walking to Cranfield in the rain and eating lunch in the churchyard before catching a bus to Bedford. I rowed on the lake at Bletchley Park on sunny days and even rowed on the lake at 3 o'clock in the morning! I also remember sitting by the

fire in the Ballroom at Crawley Grange sewing. Interestingly I do not remember using the canteen at Bletchley Park during our watches; we may have taken sandwiches in.

I also visited Cambridge, staying at the YMCA for two and sixpence, and buying loads of second hand books. I also remember going to Oxford for Tea at Fullers after watching "Pride and Prejudice". Strangely I do remember leaving the cinema after this performance and seeing street lighting being on, the first time we had seen this since 1939. It was lovely. This was in October 1944.

I sometimes visited London, probably by hitching lifts, especially after a "relief watch" This was from midnight to eight followed by returning at 2 o'clock the same day to work until midnight. You then had three days off. In London I saw my boyfriend and Rachel, who I had joined up with who was now a Hall Porter at the Oval in London. I could also see my parents who lived in West Drayton. To get around we often hitched lifts but felt perfectly safe

My parents knew my accommodation address and that I was involved in some support task but that was all.

Over Christmas 1944 we were not allowed to take leave but I do remember having a good time.

At some point we moved to Woburn Abbey which had been stripped of its paintings and furnishings. I did not want to move from North Crawley as it had a convenient church and shop. Woburn Abbey was a long walk through the grounds to the gate and Woburn village. When going to work at Bletchley Park we drove straight out via the gate.

I was involved in dismantling Bombes by hand at the end of the War. After this I then was remustered into the Fleet Air Arm where I worked in stores until August 1946. I enjoyed this as we often dressed up in flying gear!

I was released from the WRNS on 28 June 1946 onto 56 days resettlement leave with a payment of 21 pounds and 13 shillings.

While I was still in the WRNS my Aunt sent a copy of Vogue containing a competition on fashion journalism. I entered. The prize was a job for six months. I didn't win but Vogue wrote back and said |I might do well in fashion. I didn't really know this job existed. I phoned Vogue and spoke to the editor Audrey Withers. She was very encouraging and asked to let her know when I was being demobbed. When I was she provided me with an introduction to the "queen bee" designer Elizabeth Hosenden at Gainsborough Studios at Shepherds Bush but she didn't need anyone just then. Quite soon after someone else at Gainsborough Studios did, but his time at Islington. At that time there were lots of film studios open and they

could afford to provide an assistant to the clothes designer along with three or four people in the wardrobe. Now they would use a lot less staff. My job was steady for two or three years but then the studios started closing down

After the war I did not think about Bletchley Park, however I was pleased when the work of the Park become known. My Mother was unaware of what I did at Bletchley as she died in 1956. I may have discussed it with my Father who died much later.

Phyllis Dalton went on to have a successful career as a theatrical costume designer winning Oscars for costume design for "Dr Zhivago" (1965) and for "Henry V" (1989). She was also awarded BAFTAs for costume design for "Oliver!" (1969), "The Hireling" (1974), "Henry V" (1990), "Much Ado About Nothing" (1994) and a Special Award in 1994.

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