

## Eileen Messent née Thomas

*Bletchley Park November 1943-November 1945. WRNS in Block A, Naval Section, NS V, Japanese, secretarial duties. Interviewed September 2016.*

I was just 17 when the war broke out. I had done whatever we were taking at school in those days and followed this with a secretarial course for a year. I lived in Wimbledon in London from the age of 12 but as the war got a bit more exciting we moved to Torquay, because that was where my father came from, and we settled there for the next 18 months or so. Then when I was approaching 21 I thought that I had better do something more and I applied to join the WRNS. I went for an interview, they said they would have me and I was sent to Mill Hill for a fortnight's probation and passed that as well. Then we were told what we were going to do in the WRNS and a lot of us were sent to Bletchley. They did not tell us exactly what we would be doing there and they certainly did not say that we were going to be working on code breaking.

I worked as a secretary to [Peter Laslett](#) who was number two in the Japanese Section. Janet, whose surname I can't recall, and I alternated working for him and this involved working 9 am – 4 pm for a fortnight and then changing and doing 4 pm to midnight. Peter Laslett was always around but would sometimes leave the work for me to type up. Every day there was something to be sent off to the Admiralty. I can't remember now much about what I was typing but it was probably about where ships were. It was mostly in plain English although they did send us some things in Japanese and even taught us some of the writing. I did a course at Bletchley Park during my first year there, just for a month, and you learned the words like *maru* for ship. Peter Laslett used to go through the reports once we had finished them.

Two other names I recall are [Joan Urwin](#) who worked in the typing pool and [Jean Warren](#), whose married name was Wainwright.

Thankfully I never had to go on those awful machines, the Bombes, I think because I was not tall enough. I discovered in one of the books that came out from Bletchley Park that there was a height requirement for working on them. The Bombes were terribly noisy because we could hear them but did not know anything about them at the time, although I was sharing a cabin with someone who was working on them. We never talked about our work although we realised that Bletchley Park was a decoding place.

The reports we typed up were sent off to the Admiralty at about 10 pm each night. I'm not sure whether they used to go by motor cycle or they could have been sent by teleprinter.

Peter Laslett had been to Cambridge and was in the Navy. I recall that at one time we wanted swimsuits and he arrived with three bikinis, not as skimpy as the ones they have now, but they were in two bits and in my diary I describe the colours and stripes.

*The bathing costumes arrived from Peter, very glam - one dark blue laced up the side with red and a bra top, the other blue and white striped with a skirt. I hope that the blue one fits me and that Rosemary does not want it.*

*Tried on the costumes, both fit, still want the dark one.*

I did get the one I wanted.

I started this diary in 1944, on Tuesday June 6<sup>th</sup>:

*I felt this was a fitting day to start this new book. This morning, just as I had dressed, Jean Wainwright came bursting in and asked if I had heard the wonderful news. I mistakenly thought she was referring to the marvel of her appearance to wake me. Instead it was to break the news of the invasion, and what news!*

*At work little notice taken of D Day somehow, immersed in a new code. Peter had fun, further evidence of Betty's hopelessness, had to do it myself in the end.*

I was not able to write anything about my work of course. The Diary is stamped 'Top secret Ultra' I just helped myself to it!

I wrote about the food a lot as most days it was rotten and I went to the YM to get chips. There was a YMCA at the station and if a troop train came through they got first pick so we had to wait and maybe then not get anything!

I was billeted first at Woburn for about 6 months, from where a bus took us into work. Then I went to Stockgrove Park which was very grand with marble baths and golden taps and a swimming pool which we were not allowed to use.

I was always going off somewhere. We used to get 48 hours off at a time, it was easy to get to Wimbledon and I usually took a friend with

me. We got the train right by Bletchley Park although I couldn't see where we got through onto the station when I went back recently. It was a good train service from Bletchley to Euston, and then we took the underground to Waterloo and came down to Wimbledon.

*Finished my packing then had quick bath and dressed and flew off to the golf club. Only a short lesson and not very encouraging.*

It goes on and on! I had taken my bicycle to Bletchley Park and another entry says:

*Left at 3.30 to cycle to station and was helped with bicycle both up and down the steps. Got it safely on train and proceeded to find my way to Waterloo. Quite easy as all the lights were against me. I had to keep hopping off. Got there at ten past five. Pretty good I thought. Porter put it on the Wimbledon train when I got on and when I got out was absolutely flabbergasted to see that the guard had put it out at Vauxhall. I had left the old label on. The foreman was very nice and is having it sent on and said that I could call for it in the morning, but Mummy was very disturbed and wanted me to go back for it. Couldn't seem to practice golf but did get my bicycle back.*

I'd forgotten that I had started golf at that time.

A group of us from Bletchley Park went to see the captured German U-boats moored on the Thames. This was on 4 June 1945 and the diary says:

*Got to the U boats at 11.30, most interesting especially looking up the periscope. Afterwards went off to Father's office.*

Shortly after this I was moving to Crawley from Stockgrove and just as we were going I discovered:

*Horrors! I am not going through with the first batch but Joan is going to try to save me a bunk.*

Another diary entry:

*Visit to Ascot - got away to catch the 3.47 and got home hot and sticky about 6. After supper went into the Messents'.*

They lived next door to us and I met my future husband Sam when he came back from having been a Prisoner of War with the Japanese on

the Bridge over the River Kwai.

*Daddy has suggested going to Ascot tomorrow and I have accepted!! Mummy to have her hand in plaster of Paris. Up at eight and after breakfast cut the sandwiches and packed the basket. Wore my red suit, new shoes and new white blouse. Looked awfully nice. I drove all the way and we got there in very nice time and consumed our lunch and then went into the enclosure. Daddy showed me round, he was a member. We picked a grand spot where I could stand right up and opposite the finishing post. More and more crowded but we got the right spot, most exciting. I thoroughly enjoyed it all but to my annoyance failed to back a horse.*

*We left just before the last race and were in time to see Princess Elizabeth leaving. I got a real close up view and she looked most attractive.*

I did hitchhike home on occasions usually because the bus was too full or I was too late for it. I felt safe although did not tell my mother too much about it as she would worry.

Sometimes if we had a week's leave I did go further away, Torquay for example, and then we also got so many 48 hour passes. They gave us rail warrants to get home

I was always making things, nightdresses, skirts, and so on. Also in our time off at Bletchley Park we went to the cinema. There was one in Bletchley and we used to go to Bedford and St Albans as well and we were also able to go dancing. I think that was with the Americans who were not very far away. That's where we learned to do the jitterbug although we didn't get tossed onto their shoulders. Quite a few WRNS attended the dances; you usually found a group of friends and went off with them. We were always shopping as well, although everything was rationed.

Another most important date in my diary - 13 December 1945:

*Sam and I got engaged though not with tremendous enthusiasm from Mummy and Daddy.*

My war carried on until August when the war with Japan finished and I was eventually demobbed in December 1945. Some of us were on leave at the time and were told when we got back that we would be going. They took us to Wavendon I think. What could they do with 2000 WRNS suddenly landed on them? You had the option to remuster,

which I did, although I was afraid that I might get a job as a steward or something like that but actually I went as a secretary at the University of London which was quite convenient because I went up on the train for about six or eight months before I got married.

I still have a letter from Peter Laslett at Peterhouse, Cambridge

*28 January 1946*

*Dear Eileen*

*I am writing this to thank you for all the work that you did with me Bletchley. I was sorry that you had gone when I finally arrived at the Park on 28 December since I should have liked to have seen you for this purpose. I am well aware that the job was monotonous and not very interesting for a person like yourself and that it must have been very difficult to go on doing it without complaining and I must also apologise that my own over enthusiasm and arrogance made things worse, but I wish you to realise that what you did was very much appreciated. I am established at Cambridge, very happy and very, very idle and it is good to have nothing urgent to do after so much rushing about. Please don't hesitate to use me in the way of reference or testimonial and for an introduction if you think that I can help. I am only sorry that my name is of such little consequence. Call on me whenever you are in Cambridge. My best wishes for 1946 and good luck in whatever you do.*

*Yours, Peter*

I never saw or heard from him again, although my son Peter was at Cambridge and I said that if he saw him he should mention me and have a word with him, but Peter Laslett was an historian, and my Peter was doing biology.

I did keep in touch with a couple of colleagues from that time but unfortunately they live up north, Liverpool, Newcastle etc and so you did not get to meet up with them easily. I did keep in touch with two of them [Jean Warren](#) and [Mary Pollard](#) who was in the same form as me at Wimbledon High School. We met at Mill Hill and both found ourselves at Bletchley but she was in a different job. However we managed to wangle having a cabin together and we did keep in touch but I haven't heard from her for a while. Jean Warren married the head of Boodles, the jewellers in Liverpool, and they then lived in Honeysuckle Cottage or somewhere like that. She came down for our golden wedding in 1996. Her daughter lived in Richmond and she

came and fetched her and then I met her again on a golf course about three years ago. We have invitation meetings at our golf club and she turned up and she looked at me and said I know you and I said the same and we finally worked it out so I had news of her mother. So as long as she gets invited I will get news.

When the story of Bletchley Park became public I was suddenly able to tell my parents what I had been doing; you could not rely on people absolutely not to tell before that. We were told to say that we were secretaries, which was true of course, but they did not really ask. They were amazed when I told them what I had been doing. Even married couples did not tell each other what they had been doing there until the 1970s.

When they opened Bletchley Park my husband and I went up by car and got lost going round the roundabouts. I've been about five times now I would think and I could hardly recognise it other than the Mansion and the lake.

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