

## **Rozanne Colchester, née Medhurst**

*Bletchley Park, FO civilian in Air Section on Italian and Japanese air force codes. Interviewed November 2011.*

Before Bletchley Park I was at home and when I was 18 I started work for Northern Command, in York, as a typist. My father was Air Marshal Sir Charles Medhurst, head of RAF Intelligence in the Air Ministry in London, and later Commander in Chief Middle East, in 1945. He told me about the Bletchley Park work and that I would have to go through various tests, so I went off to London to be tested for languages, I spoke Italian.

I was interviewed in London, by a woman and a man, who asked about my languages. I had to translate something to do with the inside of an aeroplane cockpit, which I knew nothing about! But anyway, about three or four weeks later I got summoned to go to the park. It was very secret, at the interview they didn't tell me what work I would be doing, just testing my languages. I had no idea, except a faint hint from my father that it was something to do with intelligence work. There was tremendous secrecy, extreme, nobody talked at all.

When I arrived, in April 1942, I had no training at all. I just went for a pep talk about utmost secrecy, we thought we'd be shot if we talked! You never knew what anyone else was doing and one never asked; there was no loose talk at all! Extraordinary! We then went to our various departments.

I was billeted in Simpson Road, Fenny Stratford, near the bridge. I was with a lorry driver and his wife; they became great friends and we got on terribly well. They had two little boys, three and nine months, and we all lived in a little council house. I was the only one from Bletchley Park there; people were dotted about all over, as far as Buckingham. I got to the park on my bicycle which I kept in the hut at the bottom of the garden. My landlady was a very good cook, I kept in touch with them both until they died, but lost touch with the boys.

There was a canteen for meals at Bletchley Park, up to the left as you came in. It has gone now, and it was also used for entertainments. There were meals all the time for the shifts – breakfast, lunch and supper. We were all given tickets, issued every day, for a particular time: 12 o'clock, half past 12 or one o'clock, it was very orderly. The food was very good I thought, I hadn't had great experience of cooking apart from at home, and I enjoyed the meals.

I was paid £3 a week, and when I left in 1945 my pay was £5 a week. I paid thirty shillings towards rent, nearly half my pay! But it seemed enough in those days, we weren't rich, obviously, but things were much cheaper then and of course there wasn't as much to spend your money on in the war.

My boss was [Josh Cooper](#), a code-breaker, extremely vague but brilliant at codes, and head of our hut. Then there was Joe Hooper who was later Director of GCHQ, a brilliant young man, very temperamental and always rushing around in a flap. , [Margaret Sawyer](#) from Edinburgh University who was rather clever, and she did decoding like me. Professor Last was also in our room and became a great friend. He was 45 which seemed like Methuselah to me, then 19. He was very kind, a typical bachelor don of those days, a race apart. It was the first time he'd had women around really, as there were none in his college, so he had led a somewhat sheltered, celibate life up till then. He was from Brasenose College Oxford and was later the principal. I knew Alan Turing, not very well, just in the coffee room. He was a very nice man, very kind.

The room was full of pipe smoke all the time – we lived in a complete fog of smoke! I hated that, no fresh air at all; I kept opening the window when they left the room.

In our free time, there was very little, I went to bed early after listening to the nine o'clock news and talking a little with my hosts, as I was so tired. There was not much time for having fun, but we did have some, at the dances in the Park Hotel, just down the road under the bridge. I got very involved with the concerts and plays, I was a dancer in one! They were wonderful concerts, as a lot of the men there were theatre types, so witty and funny.

Only occasionally, when you looked like you needed it, did you get leave. I must have had only about a month off in all the time I was there, it was very intensive. When I did have leave I went home to my parents' house.

When I had a day off I usually went to London to see my parents and had a good time going out with various young boyfriends to nightclubs, we never worried about the bombs! Bletchley was never bombed except once by mistake – before my time.

My father obviously knew what I was doing, and my mother knew, but of course no-one else did as we were sworn to top secrecy. My cover story was that I was doing work with the War Office or communications or something, you talked a lot of nonsense about it. The Dickenses, with whom I was billeted, had the sense not to ask!

To start with, I worked in what was then known as Hut A, behind the tennis court, then we moved to the new Block A near the lake where I spent most of the war until just before the end, when we moved to a new brick building, Block F. I helped for a time to do German dogsbody jobs, then Italian. Towards the end of the war I went into the Japanese department for a short while that was terribly boring, a bit of a fog so I can't remember much. It wasn't very specialised and was a bit dreary. All this time I was in the RAF section.

All the huts were ordinary brown wood, not painted, just brick or plain wood or maybe just white-ish paint. There were metal windows – ordinary white paint. In my hut the floor was just wooden boards, no lino. The heating was by stove, it got quite warm as the rooms were small with a lot of people in, so it heated up quite quickly.

There were a few RAF men in my Hut and others in uniform. Kate Godfrey was a WAAF, we were the same age and arrived on the same day. Her father was head of Naval Intelligence, my father's counterpart. We met a lot as we were in the same hut, until she went on a WAAF course.

I was a decoder working shifts. You took over from someone else, then messengers, young girls, came in with Italian air force radio messages. We decoded them, using techniques we learnt there. You learnt what to look out for, what the actual messages consisted of, and the run-ins or preambles added by the enemy so you that you wouldn't know where the message itself started. Josh Cooper and Joe Hooper, who had the right sort of numeracy, worked out what the enemy were going to use each day, which was constantly changing. So it was very concentrated, very hard work, an awful lot of slog! You had to pay attention the whole time looking for the message itself to begin. In a way it was very exciting work; occasionally you got a message in advance about what was happening and that was absolutely wonderful because then you had some idea what the enemy was going to do.

For example, Savoia-Marchetti SM 82s or SM 79s were leaving North Africa and flying to somewhere in Italy, Sicily or Sardinia. It was terribly important to get these messages out in advance of course.

Joe Hooper would then tell the Air Ministry about this; I don't know how; he was obviously in touch with them the whole time and also with places in North Africa to send messages through. Occasionally there would be wild

excitement if you got a message in advance of the actual happening, once or twice this led to several enemy planes being shot down.

There was tremendous excitement when we were told before an event what was happening. It was only very occasionally so you had to be on your toes the whole time and mentally awake as well – which was difficult in the middle of the night or amidst the smoke! Everybody smoked like a chimney and we lived in a constant cloud of smoke. Nowadays it's hard to imagine.

We just used pencil and paper, sheafs of paper, we were told about the techniques by Joe Cooper at the beginning of the week so we knew what to do. There was silence in the room as everyone worked away, then lunchtime came and that was a blessed relief to get out and walk away from the smoke and go across to the lake for lunch and fresh air.

Bletchley Park looked then awfully like it does today – but of course then, masses of people were there all the time, people coming on and off shift, eight till five, five to midnight and midnight to eight, so constant coming and going of buses and coaches and the roaring of engines. At night it was all in the dark of course so people got lost!

It was an extraordinary life at the park, you got to know people in an extraordinary way. Lunch was always relaxed in the mansion hall and the coffee room, people passing like ships in the night. You talked about plays, reviews, London, life outside, but never about what you were doing inside the park. It was fascinating!

After my father was sent as commander to the Middle East, and my brother was missing, I got compassionate leave to go out with my parents to Cairo to do similar work in the Inter-Services Liaison Department, the whole time was extraordinary, my brother had been at Arnhem and was missing, and later found dead. Really a rather dreadful and fraught time.

When the war came to an end I was engaged; Halsey was a parachutist in the SAS. He became part of the secret service and was sent up to Palestine; I stayed in Cairo to work until we got married. Then we had a wonderful year in Jerusalem before all the fighting began there. We came back to England in 1948.

At the time no-one ever asked anyone what they were doing. Then in 1975 someone wrote a book, at first we didn't take any notice as we didn't know about it. We had kept silent for 30 years; we had got so used to forgetting about it, on purpose, that we could hardly even think about it! It was very awkward when people asked what I did in the war and I had to make up

things! I remember being very annoyed when my in-laws asked me and I had to say just war work in the War Office! It must have been 1980 when I felt I could talk about it, and then it felt so strange as people around me hadn't known about it. It wasn't very easy to talk about it, even then! As my husband was in MI6 I knew how to keep a secret, which helped.

I kept in touch with a lot of people who had become great friends of mine in the park: for example Professor Last, Tom Boase and Rhoda Welsford. I still see Pam Rose but we don't talk about it much. You made friends for life back then. It was funny, it was all preserved in your mind, you just had to forget it, until you were reminded of something.

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