

Sheila Willson

Bletchley Park August 1944 - August 1945 WRNS in Naval Section IV on British Plot. Interviewed July 2015.

Before I joined the Wrens I was at boarding school in Buckinghamshire, and my anticipated career path was to go on the stage, which was quite a common wish for young women in those days. Fortunately, I worked my way through it without actually joining the queue for unemployed actors. I had an interview at the Albert Hall Central School and was accepted as a student just after I left school, but I decided that I would do that after the war as I wanted to join the Wrens. I knew that if I waited until I was drafted I would not have the choice of being a Wren, and that is what I wanted to do rather than go in any of the other women's services. I must say that I never looked back; although I did have a lot to do with the theatre in my later years, though not actually as a performer.

I was called up in 1944 and sent not to Mill Hill, which was the normal holding centre in London, as there was some sort of infection there. They wanted to keep that clear of new people, so I was sent up to Tullichewan on one of the lochs in Scotland, which was a beautiful area but cold and wet. I was there for three weeks and was interviewed for drafting to a Wren job. I was offered a job in Scapa Flow in Orkney although as I was so young I was allowed to turn this down as I had the choice of not working so far away from home. The job I was offered was as a degaussing operator. It has taken me a long time to find out that this had something to do with magnetic mines. Years later when I went to the area no one in the museum there knew what a degaussing operator did. Later, when I became a film editor, I had to de-gauss my equipment, so I did find out in a rather long-winded way.

I was interviewed and, I think because I had some German, having taken it for the School Certificate the year before, and they needed extra people at Bletchley Park, about two months after the invasion of Europe in June 1944 I was there. I had no idea as to what the job was about although I was quite intrigued to know that it should not be divulged. I started in Wavendon and was there for a short time and then I was sent to Stockgrove. I had a few days induction as to what cryptography was about and was thoroughly intrigued about this and being part of it and remain so because of my time there.

I worked in a department called British Plot and we were told that we were the only people in the whole place who drew their information entirely from British sources. Everyone else was involved in one way or another with Ultra material, but we had the means to work out

accurately the whereabouts of any British ships or convoys anywhere in the world. Codebreakers would come in and ask what we had in such and such a grid position as it might help them break a particular code. I remember one day someone came running in asking for the name of an American commander in the Far East whose name ended ...itz, and I was able to give him the name Nimitz. But I only knew that because I had been reading Picture Post the day before, it was not something that I knew from any secret source, but he went away happy.

It was an interesting assignment; there always had to be one of us on duty day and night. We took it very seriously because on night duty you had to write a bulletin on what had been happening at sea, which was an interesting thing to do in the middle of the night. The bit that I remember being the most worrying or difficult was plotting the British convoys leaving to take supplies to Russia in the most appalling weather. They went fortnightly in dreadful conditions and never came back intact. I had a very strong feeling moving that convoy towards Murmansk, because in the neighbouring room the U-boat people would be plotting U-boats. There were very often fatalities which made quite an impact on me, so if I ever see the Marines in their white hats parading at the Cenotaph I always think of the sailors' bravery and courage. I liked the people that I worked with, I considered I was very lucky and enjoyed the job very much.

We plotted British and Allied ships, but not anything American, except in the Far East. We mainly focused on European waters. We had colours for different ships, yellow and purple and so on so that we could quickly see what was going on. We took it very seriously. No one even considered talking about what they were doing outside, we were all carefully instructed before we began on our individual jobs, and it would not occur to us to disobey these.

We had wall charts, I think paper, on some sort of background, maybe felt. We plotted the information on various pieces of coloured card and plastic, cutting them out and writing the names of the various ships. We also used pins. At 8 am every day we would receive a huge list from the Admiralty giving estimated positions and speeds and directions and we would work out the position of the ships by midday in case anyone needed to have this information as the day went on. We must have had some sort of card index as well but mainly it was on the wall so that people could come in and see the whereabouts of a particular ship.

Positions were received by teleprinter on a very long piece of paper. I spent a day once at the Admiralty, what they called the Citadel, which had been built in the war, and where this sort of material originated. We had telephones that could be scrambled, when you

pressed a button the theory was that no one from outside could tap into it because the sound was distorted, although I never put that to the test.

Once on night duty there was an Officer of the Watch, I think his name was Heffer. and he decided he would test the scrambler to get in touch with the First Lord of the Admiralty, even though this person might be in bed asleep. Several of us stood around listening. In retrospect I think it was a bit unfair to disturb a busy man who needed his sleep. I only heard one side of the conversation and it went something like this, "Well, sir, I can't tell you who I am, sir. I can't tell you where I'm ringing from I'm afraid that's secret. No, sir, I can't tell you why." And went on, that sort of defended conversation. And there was something apoplectic coming from the other end with this man demanding to know why he was being woken up. I don't know the end of the story, whether this young man got reprimanded or not. Perhaps he didn't. He was doing it as a test, but he didn't really need to, he was doing it to show off and as a bit of a joke.

A lot of teasing and jokes went on in Bletchley. I don't think it was harmful, it was letting off steam. There were lots of nicknames and it was a jokey place, if you went to the canteen, there was lots of laughter which must have complemented the extreme seriousness of our situation. It was a sort of safety valve.

There were some people there who were natural jokers. One was Angus Johnstone-Wilson who became well known after the war as a novelist with a particular form of satire. Then he dropped the Johnstone bit of his name and became Angus Wilson, and taught creative writing. He would often have us in stitches, he had a great sense of humour. I don't know what his job was, but he was certainly in the same building as me.

I have been back to reunions on a few occasions and it was all quite familiar. The building that I was in was brick built with two storeys, and it was close to where they did the translations. I did know one of the people working there but can't remember the name now. They would take on the text when it had been decoded and translate it. Our British Plot was close to where they were dealing with the U boat information. We could certainly see their charts as well as our own.

As there had always to be one person on duty all the time and we had to stand in for one another, we became quite a close team. I remember one disappointment; I had been told that if you wrote to the BBC in Bedford you might get free concert tickets. So I wrote to Adrian Boult and he sent me two tickets for an early performance of an opera called *Child of our Times*, by Michel Tippett. I was thrilled and

looked forward to going to Bedford and taking a friend. Then at the last minute a colleague had a family illness and had to go on leave, and I had to take her place, so I missed the concert that I was so looking forward to. It taught me a lesson to enjoy things but also to be able to let go as well. I did see the opera some time later. In a small department we trusted each other, and we knew that if we were asked to do something, there was a serious reason for it, and we respected that.

The night shift between midnight and 9 am was the best job of all despite being quite a long stretch, when you got inclined to sleep. There's a period between 2 and 3 am, when it is very difficult to control sleep.

The main thing that we had to do on nights was to write a report of everything that had happened at sea that day, and we thought it quite a grand thing to do. Our report was attached to a longer bulletin, the other parts of which were to do with Ultra material and what had been read in coded texts, but ours was based on British information. It used to go to Churchill, and we thought it very grand because Churchill had a high regard for what was going on at Bletchley Park. He visited a couple of times, although not in my time, and knew what was going on and took it very seriously. We never doubted that what we were doing was in the best interest of the country as a whole and we all took it very seriously.

I have a guilty secret - on one occasion when I was writing the bulletin at night I gave a report of a hefty task force on its way in the Far East. It consisted of two battle cruisers and a number of destroyers, so quite a big force. Unfortunately, I got one digit wrong and if you looked at the map you would see it was in the middle of Australia. This went out on the bulletin with no one noticing. The next morning one of my colleagues had to withstand a ferocious verbal attack from a number of very upset naval officers asking how we could announce a task force being in the middle of Australia where there was no sea at all. I was very shamefaced as I should have checked it, just one digit wrong.

This is quite a well-known story and it is not always known who originated it, but now you know!

I knew that Bletchley Park was about breaking enemy codes and realised that we were a very small part of a big puzzle. I had a cousin in the Wrens in Alexandria who was picking up gibberish and writing it down all day. Also several of my friends were learning Japanese and would wake up in the night sometimes talking Japanese, it was a very pressurised course which I would have loved to do that. I was going to be sent to what was then Ceylon but the war ended, and I didn't go.

I never heard the name Alan Turing, but when I was at Bletchley Park in 1944 he was actually in America. I knew Frank Birch by sight, but I was a very junior member of the team and didn't meet him. Commander Bacon was another that I remember. Occasionally naval officers would come in and we would speak to them if they wanted information.

Angus Wilson was the individual who I remember the most. He was very carefully poised psychologically, occasionally having a little breakdown. He was discovered one morning running naked round the lake, so they knew it was time for him to have a little rest. There was a sort of first aid place, I'm don't remember where it was exactly, and if it was noticed that we were getting a little stressed we would be sent there for a couple of weeks for a brief rest. I never got to that point, but I probably would have done if I'd stayed long enough, if the war had gone on long enough, pressure was quite extreme for some people. A friend who went there just had a nice rest and could sit in the garden and then came back to work feeling much better.

I suppose that some people might have had a serious breakdown, but this was more a question of the stress that you had to get used to with the different sleep patterns every week. Also, we were sometimes very unwise as I remember occasionally not going to bed when I came off duty at 9 am but deciding to go off and do something else. Sometimes I would hitchhike to London and go to the National Gallery concerts. I might then get only an hour's sleep at the end of day and could hardly stay awake the following night. But oh, no, I was 17 or 18, you think you can do anything and get away with it. The hitchhiking was a bone of contention, my mother knew about it and was quite worried, but in those days the amount of violent crime was much less than now, and it didn't cause the problems it would now. The lorry drivers that I met were always charming and very friendly and we would just flag them down and it was fine.

We were paid fortnightly and received 10 shillings which might have gone up to 15 shillings at some point. Everything was found, all our food and clothing, so it was pocket money really and it was worth a lot more than it would be today. We also got ration tickets for clothes, and things like concerts and entertainment were usually free. We used to be shown captured German films as an entertainment. I remember a coloured film, which was unusual in itself, about Baron Munchausen who was a bit of a villain and would be known by all German children. We had concerts, I remember the French composer Francis Poulenc, with the baritone Pierre Bernac. These two went around giving concerts in partnership, rather like Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. I can't remember where these concerts were held, there must have been a room in the mansion or perhaps there a big hut somewhere. It was just

part of the Bletchley Park complex.

Stockgrove was a very pleasant house with bigish rooms. As an ordinary Wren I shared with others and there were six in my room in bunk beds. We all worked in different watches so there would always be somebody getting up, or going to bed, and we were always quite respectful of that. We had our own bathroom. I suppose that we were quite lawless in some ways. I remember coming back with some of my roommates at night, particularly after night duty, we were always quite hungry, so we would go on the prowl starting in the officers' pantry and take any food that we could find such as bread and marmalade and take it upstairs and have a feast. That's what I mean by lawless. I don't think anyone suffered for food particularly; they probably had plenty of marmalade.

We had an old-fashioned gramophone and that was where I learned to love Mozart piano concertos as we used to play them over and over again. I was the youngest, 17, and treated as a child and looked after rather well by the others who were mostly in their 20s. I remember it as a sort of family atmosphere and not particularly given to rivalry or anything like that. The building had a big dining room, and in certain seasons there would be a tub full of wonderful Jersey milk donated by the Duke of Bedford from the Woburn herd. He supplied all the Wren establishments with this top-quality full cream milk. We could just take a mug and help ourselves and it was delicious. It was quite a nice idea. The food was good enough, what I liked when on night duty was that you had nothing but breakfast all day long and I have always liked breakfast, I thought this was the best of all meals and still do. The food was well organised, I have no memory of being seriously hungry. We had good people running the canteen, they were WRNS trained cooks. We may have grumbled about it but it was nothing serious.

When we were on duty we used the canteen at Bletchley Park. It was quite pleasant and you could always get a hot meal whatever time of day. Nearly everyone was on a shift system 9 am to 4 pm, 4 pm to midnight or midnight to 9 am. Then we would get three or four days off and we could get a travel voucher to go to Oxford for a few days or to Bedford, or to go home. We could do what we wanted within reason.

Home was in my case just outside London, Kingston-on-Thames. My mother was by then widowed and running a business, and I would go home sometimes. We were not allowed to talk about our work as it was secret and it was a wonderful way of teaching us the right – I would rather now call it a rite of passage - to be able to say to your mother, no I can't talk about it, it was a good reason to establish an adult point of view. She would have loved to know but she did stop asking. I told her after the war, and she was very interested.

I remember I had a friend who came in very concerned as she had been buying a tube ticket and instead of asking for Hammersmith she had asked for Hammerfest which was the U-boat centre in Norway. She felt that she had done something very serious as these were words that we would not use to strangers. It was just that she was coming off duty and was sleepy and it just slipped out. The ticket seller probably didn't even notice.

The question of learning how to keep a secret was very important to me, and it affected me in all the jobs I did after the war. Firstly, when I was a film maker and editor for about 20 years, and then when I became a Jungian psychotherapist working with dreams, the secret language. When I was in film editing I did quite a lot of government films which were secret and we had to sign the Official Secrets Act so I was already used to the idea of keeping secrets, and again in psychotherapy you don't talk about things as this would be breaking a privilege, so I found that training both in secrecy and the question of secret or hidden language useful.

I remember walking through the U-boat room where there would be neat stacks of paper with rubbish written on them, letters of the alphabet in a random order which would be the setting for a particular day which had not yet been broken and could not be used, but precious because they had potential. Some of them perhaps never did get broken. So there was the assumption that there's meaning in what you don't yet understand and if you think carefully, the material you don't know yet you will possibly one day know, and then it will be extremely valuable. That idea went a long way into me, the idea that if you're working with somebody's dreams, neither they nor you may know at once what that dream is signifying, but you treat it with very great respect because there's gold dust in there and, if you're lucky, you will reach a level where it will be of high value. I'm perhaps exaggerating this but the idea that you have a high respect for what you don't yet know, and you don't assume knowledge until you get there, and the foundation for that was laid at Bletchley Park.

We knew from our induction days that we were doing secret work and we were young enough to take it as an adventure, although exciting, it was a serious adventure. We were breaking certain codes of behaviour, you don't tell people secrets, you don't look over their shoulder when they're reading something private, that kind of thing. I have read that in the First World War there were even questions in the Houses of Parliament as to whether we should be breaking our enemies' codes. There was a deep sort of resistance in some people about breaking behavioural codes, in that sense you were doing something reprehensible.

Much later when I was a psychotherapist I was asked to give a paper on a subject of my choice, and mine was on the archetype of the spy. I looked at certain spies, not only war time ones but people who for good reason dressed up to get information. For example, there was a man, his name was Griffin, an American journalist who disguised himself as a Black man. It was before the freedom marches, and he travelled around in the southern states experiencing the awful behaviour that was being directed at Black people and he wrote a book called *Black Like Me*. I used that book, and I used another one about an Italian priest who had been concerned about the ragamuffins just after the war in Naples. He managed to get funds together for these street children to give them a training but in order to persuade them to take it up he had to dress up as an urchin every night and gain their support and trust and finally, express the fact that he had been cheating them, he wasn't really a ragamuffin, he was a priest, and would they then trust him, would they come? And they did, because they trusted him. I took four cases of that kind of spying. Another one was Philby who was quite the worst human being that I have ever come across. I read what I could of what he had written of his life to try and understand what made him tick and he was the one I would really have hated to have met and spoken to as he was really corrupt. That was much later but I drew on my experiences at Bletchley Park.

Working at Bletchley for a short period of time, I was there for about a year and a half, left quite an indelible impression about giving it your best and not just taking automatic decisions about things, but really weighing them up. And having a sense that the outcome of what you were doing was worth supporting. And if it wasn't, you had to question whether you were right to be doing it in the first place. It was a privilege to have been there and a privilege to have been alive during the war because it brought us nearer to death and we were much more aware of death as a possibility. If asked what you were going to do when you grew up it was really if you grew up. I really wanted to be an actress but luckily going to Bletchley Park cleared me of that although not the interest I had in theatre, and when I was making films I was very much in touch with theatre as a source of inspiration.

When the war finished our work finished overnight and they had to do something with us. I remember being put into lorries and driven to Denham where there was a tomato growing farm and we had to pick the tomatoes in the sunshine. It was quite a pleasant job and on the other side of the field were a group of very handsome German PoWs doing the same thing. We were not allowed to fraternise with them, we just nodded. They had their picnic and we had ours of fresh bread and

cheese. Perhaps if we had pushed the matter we could have gone over to speak to them but we didn't bother. The farmer gave us a nice lunch and we were out in the sunshine. It didn't go on very long, just a couple of weeks; it is a very vivid memory. The men were probably much faster than us, we were doing it in a rather lady like manner. The other thing that I remember is on the other side of a wall was Denham Studios and there was a papier mâché sphinx looking over the wall. It was from the Cleopatra film that was being made at the time with Vivien Leigh.

On either VE or VJ Day, I can't remember which, I was in London. One of my Wren friends had by now married and had a little flat in Paddington and I remember spending the night with her and then the next day joining the crowds in London.

As soon as the War with Germany finished I was switched to the Japanese department and I had to learn about Japanese submarines, their whereabouts and information that came in. These were book codes, not machine codes, and our knowledge of these was some way behind the Americans'. But by that period it didn't matter much as everyone knew that the war would end. It ended suddenly with Hiroshima, and there is a whole other story attached to that.

I don't think I got very far with the Japanese submarines in the time that I was there, just learned the names and how they were operating, but I was probably only there about four months.

When the Japanese war ended in 1945, I spent about two weeks at Eastcote. I remember being in a huge room with about 50 bunks in it, but I don't know what went on there. I then stayed in the Wrens for another two years, I had a year at Winchester at a Fleet Air Arm Station where they were testing radio equipment for aircraft, and I had my first flight there. The work was nothing to do with Bletchley Park, I was just living out my commitment to the service, and then I was sent home from there.

The serious part of the war for me was my time at Bletchley Park where I felt near the heart of things. I had to read a lot of the signals although not act on them. But just by picking out any naval material I got an idea of the awfulness of things. I remember reading one message about a Japanese submarine which had been blown up and someone had reported seeing bits of flesh in the sea. It just felt really creepy. But that was part of the deal. It was an enforced growing up for many people of my age; we just had to adjust to it. Actually I was lucky, as I missed the draft in Scotland due to illness and could not go on the week I was supposed to go. If I had I would have ended up working on the machine codes which although an important job was very boring

just putting yards of numbers into a machine. Instead I got my very interesting British Plot job, so I got an idea of how justice works in this world.

I don't remember being told that I was not supposed to talk about things when I left Bletchley Park. In fact I started to talk about it quite naturally pretty well immediately after the war. So when the story came out in the 1970s I was quite surprised that everyone had been so quiet about it all as I saw no reason why we could not talk about it although I would seriously see it as an obligation and would not have talked. After the war lots of the films I was working on were seriously secret and we had to lock them up every night and take great care. It remained a habit of mine to keep secrets. There is not always a firm line and sometimes you have to change that line, one value supersedes another value but it's a serious issue and it is today. Mobile phones being tapped into for example, these sorts of things have to be treated very seriously. People vary and have to look for meaning in their lives, and Bletchley Park gave me an extra meaning to my life, and I have pursued the subject a bit.

How we keep secrets is in my view a really serious issue, particularly how we train ourselves. Like many of the young people in the SOE who had to withstand torture and not reveal what they knew. I have huge respect for them as I am sure that I could not have done it. People like Violette Szabo, Noor Inayat Khan. It must go beyond putting up with the pain, you must block it out I suppose. I am still very interested in their stories and I have a great respect for them.

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