

Eric Brown

Harpenden 1943 - June 1944. France and Germany June 1944 - 1945. 8 SWS, Intercept Operator. Interviewed August 2016.

Before I joined the Army I was a bank apprentice, as it was called in those days, working for the Royal Bank of Scotland. I started work at 16 and was conscripted into the Army two years later in the spring of 1942.

I was called to a preliminary interview in Edinburgh before joining the Army and I was asked by an officer if there was any branch or regiment that I would like to join, perhaps because of family connections or something like that. I knew nothing at all about the Army so I said that I had always been interested in animals and I thought I would like to join the cavalry. He looked at me and said he thought that I had the wrong war! He said that he would put me in the Signals as they had pigeons, so that was how I ended up in the Royal Corps of Signals.

I reported to the training depot for the Royal Corps of Signals at Ossett in Yorkshire on 18 June 1942. We spent about six weeks there doing basic army training – square-bashing, weapons and so on, and then we were transferred to another training unit in Yorkshire to learn wireless maintenance and Morse code. Towards the end of our training at a place called Slaithwaite, pronounced 'Slawit' by the locals, some of us were called to a meeting where we were asked if we would like to volunteer for some secret work. We were not told what the secret work was, but the indication was that if we did not volunteer for it we would end up in the Middle East with an armoured regiment as a wireless operator. So most of us did volunteer and we were posted down to Trowbridge in Wiltshire where we were required to sign the Official Secrets Act before we were told we were to join the Y Service as Special Wireless Operators intercepting enemy wireless communications.

We spent some months at Trowbridge learning German military wireless procedure and improving our speed of receiving Morse, not sending, and then we were transferred to Douglas on the Isle of Man where we continued the same training. On 9 November 1942 I qualified as a Special Wireless Operator, Grade E. We were graded and my grading gradually increased over the time I was in the Signals. I was graded B3 in June 1943, B2 in December 1943 and B1, which was the top grade, in April 1944. The main advantage of getting a higher grade was that we got a few more pennies in our pockets.

After the Isle of Man we were posted to Harpenden to join an existing

wireless intercept station which I think was No. 1 Special Wireless Group. It was already actively intercepting German messages and we were engaged in doing that, working in Rothamsted House. I am not sure exactly how long we spent there, but I do remember travelling up and down to London to see shows so it must have been a while. I don't recall staying overnight in London at any time, but do remember going down into the deep air raid shelters in the tube stations.

I was billeted in a pub called The Silver Cup although when we first arrived I remember we were in Nissen huts which were horrible. However, once we transferred to the pub it was very nice. Of course it was not acting as a pub at the time but I enjoyed my time Harpenden nevertheless.

Eventually we were transferred to a Special Wireless Section which was being formed at that time, or perhaps being reformed, as I think it did exist at an earlier time in North Africa, but they were just forming a new unit. We were stationed at various places on the south coast of England, Capel-le-Ferne near Folkestone, where we worked out of a bungalow, and Rustington near Littlehampton, in a commandeered hospital on the sea front. We were now intercepting German military communications across the Channel, and we stayed there until just after D Day. Both in Harpenden and on the south coast I think we did eight-hour shifts, midnight to 8 am and so on.

On 15 June 1944 we embarked on a landing craft, LST No 52, which sailed at 0100 hours the next morning and in the middle of the night we collided with another landing craft in the middle of the English Channel. The next day we were transferred while still at sea. One of the reports I read afterwards said we returned to port and were transferred but my recollection is we were still out in the Channel somewhere. We transferred to another landing craft which meant that all our vehicles, which were quite big and like buses, had to be moved across. My recollection is that this was done by putting planks between the two big tank landing craft and driving them over. Then a storm blew up and we were at sea for quite a while, not arriving in Normandy until 19 June which meant that we were 3 days at sea just crossing the English Channel.

When we arrived in Normandy we set up our station at Villiers-le-Sec and were under the command of the British 2nd Army Headquarters. We were 8 Special Wireless Section, Royal Corps of Signals and 28 Wireless Intelligence Section, Intelligence Corps. I never quite fathomed out what our different roles were, except that the Intelligence Corps people were all sergeants and we were all signalmen so there was a rank difference, but what exactly the

Intelligence Corps people did we never really knew. They sometimes gave us instructions to listen out for particular call signs or to specific frequencies; obviously they knew what we should be looking for. Occasionally they would tell us that the messages we intercepted were from the Panzer Lehr Division or the 11 SS Panzer Corps so that we had some idea that we were listening to the German forces in the Normandy area, local and tactical, rather than high level strategic stuff. We were not listening to Hitler and his generals. I don't know if our messages went back to Bletchley Park or whether they were decoded locally because I imagine they weren't always using high-level Enigma code. Possibly the intelligence people in our Unit were decoding them but they did not tell us that. When we were in Harpenden I think we were doing higher level stuff and it was going to Bletchley Park. We weren't supposed to know about Bletchley Park, but we knew our messages were sent by dispatch rider and the dispatch rider told us he had been there so it was hardly a secret.

We were in Normandy for several weeks until just after the breakout in front of Caen when we moved out to a place called Boncourt and on 2 September 1944 we arrived at Mureaumont in Picardy. When we arrived there some French people came and told us that there were some German troops occupying a farmhouse nearby and holding a French family hostage and our commanding officer decided we must do something about this. There were four officers and twenty men, all Signals, of which I was one, and we surrounded the farmhouse and laid siege to it for a while. One of our Intelligence Corps officers who spoke German called to them to surrender which they refused to do. They fired out of the farmhouse and we fired back and we lay there surrounding it for some time.

There was a gun battle eventually and then the gates of the farmyard opened and a herd of cattle were driven out with the German troops crouching down amongst them trying to escape. We opened fire on them and in the battle we lost one sergeant and the Germans lost one killed and four wounded, twelve taken prisoner and nine of them escaped. I was asked with others to disarm the prisoners and I remember a chap pulling out a hand grenade and throwing it down on the ground! It was rather an unusual thing for us really as we were not combat troops. During the gun battle some armed young men from the Maquis, French resistance, appeared from nowhere and lay down beside us and then disappeared afterwards.

Our sergeant, Pat Sullivan, was buried there in Mureaumont the next day although I believe that his grave is now in a war cemetery just north of Paris¹. We then moved on to the Waterloo area of Belgium

¹ Sergeant John Edward Sullivan is buried in Marissel French National Cemetery,

where I remember us camping in an orchard with very large pears raining down on our tents when the wind shook the trees.

Then we moved on towards Holland through Belgium and I remember being camped in a wood somewhere near the Dutch border and seeing the sky full of planes when the airborne division were going in for the Arnhem landings. I understand that intercepted German messages after the breakout from Normandy had shown that the 11th SS Panzer Corps had been ordered back to the Arnhem area to refit and that this information was passed up the line to the high command, Montgomery I suppose. He chose to ignore it and go ahead with the Arnhem landings in spite of the indications that there were strong German forces in the area and as a result, although the landings were initially successful, they had to be abandoned.

The advance of the British Army really slowed down then for the winter and we spent our time in Holland listening in to the local German units. While we were there during that long winter we managed to get out into the countryside round and about. We were reasonably far away from the fighting at that time, so we were able to walk along the canals, visit buildings and interesting places. We even went to Brussels on a short leave on one occasion. We also had a bit of a social life and we had occasional ENSA concert parties and played a lot of cards.

Our vehicles were quite long, like a small bus, and you entered in the back, up steps. There were three desks with a wireless set on each side of an aisle, with HRO receivers. The first thing we had to do was set up the aerials. I think they were 30-foot mast aerials, and we had smaller wireless vans with the direction-finding aerials. I never did direction finding myself. Working in these vans when we were abroad I think we did four-hour shifts, four hours on and eight hours off and then 24 hours off.

We were sometimes given a frequency to listen to and sometimes call signs which we had to hunt around to find. Sometimes we were just left free to roam up and down the frequency to find some German transmitting stations which was quite difficult as you didn't know if it was German at first when you had found one. The Germans had their own wireless procedure, using Q signals, for example QRM which means 'there is interference' and QTC which means 'I have traffic for you,' so you knew it was German. Also occasionally you could recognise an operator's style of transmission. At Capel Le Ferne I recall listening in to a group of stations who had a peculiar habit of accentuating the dashes. Instead of saying di-di-di-dah they said di-di-

Beauvais.

di-DAAH. It was very distinctive and we could find other stations doing the same thing and we were told that they were the coastal gun batteries on the French coast.

When we were in Britain an NCO or officer would pop in to see what we were doing but when we were abroad we were left on our own. There were six of us doing our own thing and very often there was not much happening. You were told to listen to a particular frequency and perhaps there was a bit of transmission and then it went quiet and for an hour and a half or more there was nothing so we just wrote NHR - Nothing Heard - on the log pad. We occupied ourselves as best we could, I used to write letters although if it was very quiet and there was a spare set which was not being used we sometimes, or I did anyway, got one earphone onto the set we were listening to for German traffic and then with the other one tuned into music, the Forces Programme.

Occasionally there would be another signals unit camped near to us, called Phantoms. We were never told what they were although I suspect that they pretended to be an armoured division and sent out fake messages.

Signals tended to be five letter groups whatever the code was. We had two pads, a log pad on which we recorded any chat between the operators, saying they had interference or signal strength five or whatever and the time the stations came up, and then a message pad for the actual coded message to be recorded. These two pieces of paper were then sent off but we did not know where to. It might have been just next door to the Intelligence Corps or if they thought it something important it could have been sent to Bletchley Park, we were never told.

One little aside, we rarely had occasion to send Morse, we only listened to it, and we had quite a high-speed listening capacity. One day when we were in Normandy and had wireless communication with Second Army HQ where there was a team of wireless operators, someone must have been sick or something and I was detailed to go up and man it overnight. I was scared stiff that I would use German procedures as that was what I was used to. British messages started with the letters VE joined together – di-di-di-dah dit - and German messages started with a barred C – dah-di-dah-di dah. I was scared I would send the wrong signals but luckily it was a quiet night and nothing untoward happened although it was rather frightening.

We were mostly armed with Lee-Enfield rifles and some of us had Sten guns. As well as signallers we had despatch riders, wireless mechanics, cooks and other necessary back-up.

Some quite fierce battles were fought in that area through that winter. We crossed the Rhine eventually in the spring and ended up in Luneburg where the Germans in Northwest Europe surrendered to General Montgomery on VE Day, 8 May 1945.

Just before the very end of the war some of the German Army started to use plain language, abandoning codes, and we were asked to look out for any messages that indicated that they wanted to surrender although I can't say that I recall intercepting any such messages. But we were aware that the war was coming to an end.

Occasionally we would speak to the local people. My French was not fluent but I could get by and in Germany we were not supposed to fraternise with the locals. I do remember going to a farmhouse once and asking for eggs, which we paid for. They had a picture of a German soldier on the mantelpiece and I asked them if it was their son and they said 'Ja, ja'.

With the war coming to an end we had little to do so we were sent back to Minden in Germany where we spent some weeks doing very little before eventually being brought back to Bishops Stortford to learn Japanese Morse with the idea of being sent out to the Far East. Japanese Morse is more complicated than the international Morse code. However, the dropping of the atom bombs, fortunately for us, finished that war before we had completed our training and with others I was posted up to Forest Moor near Harrogate, where we spent the next year and a bit. At Forest Moor we were listening in to Russian and East European communications and were mostly using high speed Morse that produced tapes.

The radio set had on it a needle that went up for a dot and down for a dash and our task was to translate this into letters and write these in pencil but it could have been in a foreign language because we did not know Czech or Polish. I do remember Prague being one of the places we listened to. All messages from there started with 'Praha'.

I was at Forest Moor until I was demobilised on 24 March 1947 after nearly five years. It was an interesting time because I was young and did not worry too much about things but of course we could not speak about it to anyone other than former colleagues. I did keep in touch with quite a number of them for a while. The last one in Edinburgh died last year and there is a chap in Felixstowe I still keep in touch with.

When I left the Army I went back to the Royal Bank of Scotland and eventually ended up as one of their old-fashioned bank managers in

Edinburgh

I was aware that Bletchley Park had become public knowledge but that was only about five years ago when I agreed to give a talk to the Probus Club but I don't really know how it became known about, only that I heard other people talking about it. In any case, what I was going to talk to them about was not really much to do with the secret work of Bletchley Park and decoding.

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