

The Women of Bletchley Park: Decrypting Gender Equality

Behind the Scenes: Bletchley Park & The Bletchley Circle

Madeleine Goertz & Josh Wentzien
Junior Division
Group Website
Written & Delivered by Sarah Harding

“[PIC1]

Thank you for inviting me to talk here. What an extraordinary place Bletchley Park is ! On first view it seems a rather disappointing, collection of military huts, almost an eyesore in the grounds of a lovely country house mansion with its peaceful lake. But, as you all know, the story behind these huts is one of heroism, tenacity and brilliance, kept secret for decades by the men and women who worked here and whose wartime contribution was only recently publicly recognized .

I first visited Bletchley Park last year when I was hired to direct the final episodes of an ITV series called ‘The Bletchley Circle’, a drama based on the postwar lives of women who worked secretly at Bletchley Park during the war. But I wasn’t the first member of my family to come to Bletchley. 70 years ago my mother, Dorothy Mary Thompson, a teenage wartime volunteer, found herself running a secret signals hut here. So in today’s talk I will be wearing two hats , - a professional one as director of the drama series but also a personal one, as my mother’s daughter,

I’m very proud to say that my mother Mary,[PIC 2] as she preferred to be called, worked at Bletchley Park from 1943 to the end of the war as a morse slip reader, ending up as a sergeant in charge of a watch at the tender age of 20. [PIC Mary] She left school at 15, never went to university but, in those incredibly formative years found fulfillment in a demanding and important job and made lasting friendships. But of course none of us at home knew that when I was growing up. Like all the others who signed the official secrets act here my mum kept mum. She told no one about the nature of her work – not parents , husband or children.

When I look back the clues were there. One of my earliest memories was of my mother teaching me to spell my name in morse code. I knew she worked in signals during the war but didn't think to ask more. The past is of little importance to an energetic and rather intense young girl. It was only after I saw a television play set in wartime Bletchley called 'The Imitation Game' and broadcast in 1980 that I made a connection. In it a 19 year old girl who played the piano (like my mum did) ends up working at Bletchley Park and meets a character based on Alan Turing.

'Mum,' I asked, 'that woman reminded me of you – was your war anything like that?' 'Yes, I was at Bletchley' she replied – and then clammed up.

Gradually after the publication of Robert Harris' book 'Enigma' [PIC 3 GIRLS] people began to talk about the extraordinary things done at Bletchley – the birth of computing, the cracking of the Enigma code and all the work done here that many people now believe shortened the war by 2 years. Bit by bit my mother and other Bletchley veterans realised they were allowed, indeed encouraged, to open up about their experiences despite having signed the Official Secrets Act. When I was doing research on Bletchley Park for the TV series I came across the Roll of Honour. There was my mother's name in black and white, her warwork recognized and celebrated so I applied for her veterans medal which she received proudly just after her 90th birthday. She is now 91, very frail, and living with my father near Bristol. Although she is proud that her war work has been recognized, like many others in her position she protests 'I don't know what all the fuss is about. I was just doing my job.'

When I was directing The Bletchley Circle I didn't ask my mum too much about her time there. After all I was making a crime drama for television not telling a personal story, but when the dust had settled on the production I thought I would try to find out any nuggets of information for the Bletchley Archive. Gently I began to ask Mary a few questions but her

memory is failing and mainly only muddled fragments emerged. ‘I don’t know why you’re doing this and tiring her’, my dad said, ‘she’s written it all down you know.’

And that’s how the memoir came to light. Written in 1996 Mum typed up the story of her life from childhood to motherhood and 18 pages of it cover her war work. She was reluctant to let me read it at first – as it is a very personal account – but in it not only did I find vivid details of her signals training and time at Bletchley but also a portrait of a fun loving and rather rebellious young woman with a very precise ear, a gift for hard work and for female friendship.

So, when The Bletchley Circle script landed on my desk it felt more than a coincidence. It was an opportunity to thank her and let her know how proud I am of her . As you can imagine relations between mothers and daughters are often fraught and, I believe, particularly so for my generation. The post war world gave women like me far more choice and opportunity in education and the workplace than prewar women had experienced. It cannot have always been easy for them to watch their daughters flourish, often on government grants, in further education and in the workplace when they had been expected to give up their jobs for the privilege of becoming homemakers. The four women featured in our ITV drama face exactly that predicament in 1950s Britain, a situation uncannily close to my mother’s experience.

That is the context of my talk, which is set here in Bletchley but which straddles two worlds seventy years apart. First I will take you behind the scenes when we shot The Bletchley Circle here in the summer of 2013 and then I will use my mother, Mary Thompson’s memoir to provide an eyewitness account of her signals training and life at the government code and cipher school here seventy years earlier. Luckily we still have her wartime photo album so I

can illustrate her memoir with her own pictures. All the other photographs were taken by Shaun Armstrong on the day we filmed here.

For those of you who haven't seen 'The Bletchley Circle' "[PIC 4 –TX CARD] its a drama set in the 1950s about 4 women who worked in various capacities at Bletchley during the war. Now back in civvy street they are housewives and mothers (and if very lucky, secretaries), not allowed to acknowledge their war work or exercise their acquired skills. In our fictional drama the four women reunite to solve crimes that seem to baffle the police. They do so by applying the rigorous and methodical analytical skills they honed during the war. 'The Bletchley Circle' is a crime thriller but it is an unusual one in that the women are not professional detectives. The world they inhabit is fast changing postwar Britain which had not yet learnt to value women's working talents in peacetime. Even equal pay for equal work was decades away.

In the 1950s, the decade I was born, all wartime traces of Bletchley Park had been erased and the buildings were used for training purposes by various organisations. In 'The Bletchley Circle' one of our characters, 16 year old Lizzie is here in 1953, training to be a teacher.

I was intrigued when Katherine Lynch, the media officer here, gave me a picture [PIC 5] of the actual teacher training college at Bletchley in the 50s. Here young women are studying on the lawn. Note their full skirted summer dresses, inspired by the postwar 'new look', a far cry from wartime austerity. This became the basis for a picnic scene which I was keen to shoot in the real location. It had hardly changed at all in 60 years [PIC 6]

In our story Lizzie, played by Faye Marsay has only just been reunited with her mother Alice, played by Hattie Morahan [PIC 7 Hattie and Faye]. Lizzie was born after a wartime liason at

Bletchley and given up for adoption. (My mother does mention the drunken parties and more than one unwanted pregnancy she had to deal with as a sergeant so the scenario has a ring of truth about it.). Lizzie's relationship with her new found mother is understandably tentative but they are beginning to get closer and in one scene our four heroines go to meet Lizzie at Bletchley College for a surprise picnic.

[PIC 8 Clapper] In order to shoot a drama at least 80 or so people are involved, the cast, the extras, the crew – camera lights sound, costume, make up, carpenters riggers- not to mention caterers and drivers. It really is a travelling circus. For television you are expected to produce 5-6 minutes of screen material each 10 hour working day. That might sound like an easy life to you, but believe me we are working against the clock to get everything in the can. [PIC 9 REH] I rehearse with the actors who spend at least an hour in costume and makeup. Before we can shoot all the period detail of the set design has to be in place and tracks for the camera have to be laid. [PIC 10 Tracks] After we have rehearsed the actors' moves the scene has to be lit by the director of photography with the help of a team of electricians. It is then shot from various different angles with a script supervisor keeping an eagle eye on continuity (making sure everything matches – handbags held in the right hand for each take and so on). And of course there is the weather. Here are a few pictures from our picnic rehearsal [PIC 11] It felt as if the drizzling rain would never stop. Our four heroines women go to visit Lizzie at Bletchley College bringing her a surprise picnic. Of course I wanted everyone basking on the lawn in glorious sunshine just as they did in the old photograph. [PIC 12] When the heavens opened it looked like our picnic would be a washout but we had to shoot the scene that day so we soldiered on and rehearsed in the rain, crossing our fingers that the wind would die down and the constant drizzle stop in time for shooting. The actors' hairstyles were fiercely protected as we couldn't lose time sending everyone back to make up

for an hour. The actors' good humour was not dampened though. They had already been filming for 6 weeks and enjoyed much laughter and banter together. [PIC 13] Finally the coats and plastic hats were whipped off and we managed to shoot the scene. Have a look at these stills from the sequence. [PIC 14] The young students are dressed in the fuller new look skirts with bright colours while our four Bletchley Circle women [PIC 15] are wearing clothes of an already old fashioned cut and earthy colour tones, browns greens and, [PIC 16] for the more racy Millie played by Rachel Stirling, a dark tweed trouser suit. Lizzie belongs to both worlds as a young student and a wartime daughter so our costume designer [PIC 17 Faye] dressed her in a mix of both old and new colours and styles- a pleated blue skirt with a plain blouse or a bright blue coat with a dark brown scarf.

We then moved on to the Mansion house [PIC 18] to shoot one of my favourite sequences. Lizzie takes the women on a tour of the Park not knowing that it was their territory during the war. When I started work on the script the producer wanted Alice to tell Lizzie about her war work at Bletchley. I argued fervently against this and explained how my mother told no one – parent, partner or child about her work for 30 years. They had all signed the Official Secrets Act and knew that careless talk really did cost lives. Just as Lizzie is beginning to accept the mother that gave her up for adoption the mother has to hold her big secret back. [PIC 19] I also thought that we could get a very poignant scene out of Alice's enforced silence as the women have to pretend they have never been to Bletchley before when Lizzie proudly shows them round. By now the rain had stopped and the sun had come out . You may think that makes shooting exteriors easy but bright light brings its own problems.[PIC 20] Here we are holding up large pieces of black polystyrene so that the faces are not too harshly lit by the bright sunlight and you can see the sound recordist planning where to put the sound boom (

the thing that looks like a furry animal) so that it doesn't throw shadows on to the shot.

Perhaps you can now see why it takes so long to make it all look perfect on screen.

Let me play you the finished scene. [21 DVD extract 10. 22. 55 – 23.42]

[PIC 22 EXT] We only had one day to shoot everything we needed at Bletchley Park. Once a crew travels outside the M25 the transport costs become astronomical and the crew have to be given time to travel the extra distance as you can see from our schedule [PIC 23 schedule]. We normally work an 11 hour day including lunch while the costume and make up crew add another two hours on to that as they have to prepare the actors to be ready for rehearsal by 8 am. On our Bletchley day we only had 9 hours shooting time as 2 hours were taken up travelling. This meant that one of our crucial interior scenes set at Bletchley Park could not be shot there. We had to concentrate on the exteriors and find a matching interior in greater London for this scene. Here is a plan of our day's work, our schedule. You can see it is Shooting Day 5, the scene numbers are on the left, and they are all exteriors. There is a column for the specific location and time of day in the drama so all clocks and watches are set right and the director of photography can set the lights for the right time of day. This number represents what we call a story day. The scene by the lake was the final scene on story day 11. You will see that the picnic scene is day 8. This is the number of pages to be shot for each scene. 1 2/8 for the picnic. . Lastly these numbers represent the cast. 2345, the four Bletchley women and Lizzie no 6. [PIC 24 checks] It is very important to have all this information accurately noted on our schedule as make up and costume have to get the continuity perfect. Although we were shooting most of the scenes for story day 8 at Bletchley we had to do the interior day 8 scenes a fortnight later in another location and everything – props, hair and costume has to match perfectly. Watch out for this in the extract I'll play

later. The exterior of the hut is at Bletchley, lit to look first like dusk, then later for early morning but when the women go down the stairs they are somewhere else entirely.

[PIC 25] In my Bletchley Circle story the friendly picnic on the lawn where the women arrive with tea and cake masks a deeper purpose. Millie, Rachael Stirling's character, has been dabbling in the black market and come across a Maltese trafficking ring. (Soho was notoriously run by Maltese gangs in the 50s). But they aren't just bring in perfume and cigarettes - they are luring east european girls to England with the promise of better work and a new life only to be sold into sex work. This sounds horribly contemporary but there is evidence of 'white slave traffic' as it was known then and Soho was at the heart of the sex trade.

Not only are our four heroines women but Guy Burt , the writer, took the bold step of making the Maltese gang boss female. I remember that it was thrilling and unusual to stage scenes of physical threat and power play between two women. For a change men only played supporting roles in the series. Marta runs the operation with her son, Lazzru as a spoilt second in command.

Although I was trying to separate my personal history from my professional work I did want our story to be both plausible and accurate which meant if it involved code breaking I had to learn very roughly how they did it. When I found out that over 2/3 of the people working at Bletchley during the war were women I realised that, as well as many having specialist mathematical or linguistic skills, women were also valued for their tenacity, accuracy and discretion. Accuracy was paramount as an error in writing down one letter of a coded message could jeopardise any chance of cracking the complex code.

In our fictional story Marta, the Maltese boss encodes the shipment details of her black market goods -including the girls - in a notebook that our crime fighters manage to access. They recognise that the code is uncannily like enigma and so, if it was encrypted by a machine they would need to lay their hands on a similar machine, a British type x or a German enigma to decode it. As a longshot Alice suggests they break into the old underground storage block at Bletchley to see if they can get their hands on an abandoned machine. This was a departure from reality as I believe all traces of codebreaking activity were systematically removed from Bletchley after the war – but in the drama, it provides an urgent reason for them to go back to the site. So the picnic at the training college is an excuse to get them into the park and, when everyone has left for the day they break into D block.

[PIC 26 EXT] This is the exterior which houses a warren of underground corridors, still littered with dusty equipment. [PIC 27 INT] We could shoot the exteriors here but would have to match the interior elsewhere.

Claire Kenny, our wonderful designer found a disused factory complex in Vauxhall and recreated the warren of abandoned corridors. She also commissioned a replica Enigma machine which was the production's pride and joy. So much so that when one of the actors had a birthday the caterers copied it to make an enigma birthday cake!

[PIC 28] Bletchley Park didn't just provide the setting for a key part of our drama it also provided some invaluable knowledge and expertise. With the very generous help of Dr Joel Greenberg from Bletchley's Museum of Computing we pieced together an encoding and decoding story for my episodes that came within the bounds of credibility . There was a highly secret Y station in Malta transmitting to Bletchley where our resourceful and

intelligent villain, Marta, could have worked during the war. I thought it far fetched that she could have her own enigma machine in London but Joel pointed out that all the German ships on the North Africa route passing Malta would have had one and I was amazed to learn that there had been anything between 40 to 100, 000 enigma machines in existence during the war. Not too difficult for Marta to have got her hands on one then! Joel suggested the day settings for the Enigma plugboard could be the Phoenix code that Rommel used in May 1941 to initiate the Siege of Malta. It's a code both Marta would have memorised and one that Lucy, the youngest member of the Bletchley Circle played by Sophie Rundle, would have been familiar with from her work on the North Africa desk.

There are over 158 quintillion (that's 158 billion billion) possible settings for a 10 plug board Enigma machine and even after the rotor wheels have been aligned and the plugboard set to the day's key code the operator provides one more encryption. The top three wheels are numbered to represent the alphabet and use a six letter code. [\[PIC 29\]](#) For example if this code was BERLIN the person receiving the message could set the wheels to 2-5-18, a numerical version of BER 2 B , 5 E 18 R , , then type the first three letters of the coded message (which as you'll see in our story are OZP) . If the setting is correct the encrypted OZP would generate the letters LIN to complete the word Berlin. Then the operator can continue to decrypt the rest of the message. For our drama we had to find a 6 letter word that would mean something to our maltese trafficker, Marta, but would also be able to be guessed by our heroine Lucy. Again Dr Greenburg turned up trumps just a couple of days before we started filming. The Y station in Malta transmitting to Bletchley was at Salina Bay so Salina became the code that let them in. [\[PIC 30 SALINA\]](#)

Maybe the drama didn't need us to think it through so carefully but I felt I owed it to my mother. She knew how important accuracy was especially during long shifts with dodgy reception. It was important to me to work within the bounds of possibility - however tenuous - but I think my producers felt I was going too far at times . My job was to find locations, cast, plan the shoot and work out camera angles rather than huddle over impossible mathematics and probabilities with a computer scientist. But I thoroughly enjoyed the process even though I can't pretend to understand it.

Let me play you the scene when the women break into D block and crack the code. One of the things I enjoy about it is that they all bring a particular skill - Alice's engineering, Lucy's memory, Millie's language skills and Jean's common sense to bear on problem solving. We see four women using their brains. Its about 4 minutes long.

[31 DVD Ep 4 10.24.37 - 10. 28. 17]

But enough of fiction and teacher training. I'd like to take you behind the scenes to my mother's training and her path to Bletchley as written in the memoir. In 1942 Mary was 19, living in East Dulwich [PIC 32] with her father, a primary school headmaster, her mother and her elder brother, Charles, a conscientious objector. Here's a picture of her family taken in the mid 50s, the era of the Bletchley Circle – (that's me on the right) Mary had left school at 15 without any qualifications but she was a fine piano player. This may sound irrelevant but I believe it has much to do with her ability to find the morse signals in a blizzard of noise, rather like holding an inner part in musical harmony.

So, in her own words:

‘The idea of joining one of the services occupied my thoughts for sometime; compulsory war work was not a concern as I was too young. I eventually volunteered for the WAAF (Womens Auxillary Air Force) having seen an attractive looking one in the Strand `Lyons Brasserie one evening. Dropping the completed application form into the pillar box seemed an immense decision (which it was). I had applied for Clerk Special Duties and was soon recruited having told no one. With about 14 days warning I packed, left my job and returned home to break the news to my parents. They were not pleased. I remember Charles saying I was doing it to save the family honour – he must still have been fighting his Conscientious Objector’s tribunal and his TB undiagnosed.’

[PIC 33] Mary then went for basic training at RAF Bridgnorth – cleaning and polishing in her kit of itchy underwear and ill fitting clothes. ‘It was all horrible and cold’. As there were no vacancies for clerks she was told she could be a cook or ‘something else too horrible to remember’ – the imagination boggles! Or as a volunteer she could drop out and go home. But stubbornness prevailed

‘I could not face my parent’s satisfaction if I did just that so I braced myself and asked, “Ma’am” if there was any possibility of another trade and was quite uplifted when told that wireless operators were required. “

After passing the necessary aptitude test there was more initial training, much of it in Morecambe drilling and marching on the promenade, cleaning kit ready for inspections – ‘six weeks of miserable cold existence’ A handful then were posted to Blackpool [PIC 34] but this time they all discovered they had one thing in common – they all aspired to be

wireless operators. Weeks of yet more wet blustery seaside marches followed while the group waited for a vacancy on a wireless operating course. [PIC 35 BLACKPOOL girls] The weather was still freezing cold with a bitter wind but ‘we managed to get a great many laughs and lasting friendships were made.’ This was the start of my mother’s very own Bletchley Circle. [PIC 36 Anne] ‘Anne Sinclair shared my bedroom and introduced me to smoking going to great lengths teaching me to inhale properly.’ Despite no toilet flushing after 8pm in the terrible billet and cold pork pies for supper Mary remembers it as a happy time, dancing in the Tower ballroom with no shortage of partners. [PIC 37 Edinburgh] A posting to Edinburgh for the post office run wireless operator course followed. This time with a comfortable billet .

[PIC 38]

‘Our small group were happy during both on and off duty hours, it was a beautiful summer, we lazed or studied on the grass between Princes Street and the castle.

[PIC 39 ANNE , M and AUNT]

An aunt of Anne’s lived near and we sometimes hitched there for a weekend. It was great fun especially when we called in a pub for refreshment and a prim lady in black dress and white bibbed apron ordered us out for being unescorted by a gentleman. There had already been previous occasions when I had been made to feel that the uniform was somehow associated with loose morals or behaviour....but I think it was more pronounced in Scotland.’

This attitude would be unthinkable to my daughters but I remember standing at a pub bar in the 1970s, the only female, while the bartender pointedly served everyone else and not me. As for class distinctions– I gather that well bought up girls were expected to be WRENS whereas anyone , it seems, could join the WAAF . After this experience Mary was gratified

to find that inside Bletchley Park there were no such distinctions. Civilians and the various servicemen and women mixed equally with unusually lax saluting requirements.

Mary's glee at being one of only 3 women on the course to make the grade of Leading Aircraft women was tempered by yet another training posting which meant she remained on the 10 shillings a week training pay. Her friend Anne was posted to Hawarden where she remained for the rest of the war. At the time Mary felt it a bit of a blow as she fancied herself on an RAF station, communicating with pilots in flight. Little did she know what was in store for her. She was obviously piqued about the money as when she visited her brother Charles who was now suffering from TB in a sanatorium both her father and her brother gave her the train fare which she accepted – a naughty practice she continued throughout the war.

Her next posting was Chiswick where she met Jean Stratton [PIC 40 JEAN] (Auntie Jean to me) who became a life long friend. 18 years older than Mary, Jean had been transferred from the Post Office where she was working as a wireless operator. Now the training particular to Bletchley began in earnest. Mary and Jean were taught Morse slip reading and in this extract the girl who had fun hitchhiking and dancing reveals a clear technical interest.

‘We sat at covered typewriter keyboards on tables surrounding the large room with a thin paper slip running through a metal channel at eye level. The slip showed Morse in the form of a positive wave as per an oscilloscope. High for dash and slightly shorter for dots. Most of us were not conversant with the typewriter keyboard and had been trained in Morse sound via headphones. It was like starting from scratch. Fortunately the speed of the slip running through the channel was adjustable. Plain language was reasonably easy, one could use guesswork but this material was coded and had to be dead accurate.’

The good news was that Mary and Jean both passed the course and looked forward to postings. 'I felt sure we would get trade pay now so you can imagine how cross and dejected some of us were on learning that our posting to Compton Bassett was for an 8 week technical course on the contents of a transmitter and receiver, reception and aerials. Jean and Mary consoled them selves at their local pub The Crooked Billet but the smile was wiped from Mary's face when a policeman caught her cycling at night without a front light and she was fined 10 shillings – a whole week's pay.

[PIC 41] Returning to East Dulwich for leave was hardly restful though 'as it meant air raids and a less comfortable bed than the RAF provided. On one occasion I was alone in the house and cowering on all fours under the mahogany table because the air raid noise was so frightening.' Mary's parents had established a Rest centre for blitzed homeless families in south London but they now began to take pride in their daughter's achievements, 'they seemed to think my sparks and props meant something and were proud to have my jacket hanging on the door.' [PIC 42] The sparks were a rather graphic badge showing alarming electrical sparks beaming out from a central point. This indicated their signals qualifications.

After a few weeks working at Leighton Buzzard Jean and Mary were told to be ready to move out the next day 'very mysterious ' she comments. She found herself at nearby Bletchley Park where they met more WAAFs and were shown a large empty room set out for an obvious purpose. [PIC 43 Watch]

'It turned out that we were a nucleus for setting up signal communication using high speed morse virtually world wide – this did eventually include a few very important hand key mobile units. ' 'These messages were prefaced with the highest code for priority and

communication was always very poor quality. ‘Mary enjoyed working these units most. ‘They seemed quite personal’ she writes and I remember her telling me she could recognize the thumb of some of the morse operators she listened to.

Like everyone at Bletchley she worked a 24 hour watch system 8-4, 4- midnight and midnight to 8 am . She writes ‘It was satisfying to be in action at last and learn the secrets of the O book. This code could send quite detailed information’. I haven’t been able to find out what this O book is so if anyone here can help please let me know. It does however suggest that she was involved in sending as well as receiving messages and had some idea about the content of the material her hut was transmitting. Mary has told me she walked passed the Colossus computer everyday on her way to her room. I think this was practical so that no time was lost between receiving and decoding signals. After all the Enigma code settings changed every 24 hours. Her signals hut was entirely female except for a male Signals officer. Nearby two male mechanics sat in another small room. . The men were meant to solve any technical problems but were apparently not keen on the women interrupting them. Mary writes that by the time she was watch sergeant she was ‘usually able to sort things out myself unless it was damaged working equipment.’

There is a scene we shot for The Bletchley Circle which involved a flashback to 1943 . There Alice is working on an Enigma machine when a key seizes up. She mends it on her own initiative and is reprimanded. This scene didn’t make the final cut so only exists in a roughly edited form but I’d like to play it to you now as I felt a shiver of recognition when I found my mother’s comments on lazy male technicians and female resourcefulness in her memoir.

[44 DVD Rough cut extract.]

Social life was good fun at Bletchley, all the services mixed in the canteen although civilians ate elsewhere. Mary was billeted at Wrest Park, [PIC 45] 23 miles away and you can see from these pictures that the young women enjoyed larking about in the grounds. [PIC 46] [PIC 47]

When RAF Church Green was built next to Bletchley to house the signals watch they had more time to enjoy Bletchley's vibrant social life. She accompanied an Army Captain, Jim, who liked to sing Handel arias on the piano. Jim though became rather a nuisance, 'always interrupting me when on duty' so he was given the boot as there was no shortage of dates. However writing in 1996 my mother reflects on the confidence she had then when dealing with men's advances.

'On occasions there was an expected end result and I soon learnt to expect a complete turn off once I had made my position clear. As this sort of incident often happened in quite remote places I sometimes wonder if I would have been quite so sure of myself nowadays. Perhaps in the case of Servicemen there was always King's Regulations but I always felt in command of the situation and quite self assured.'

Mary was really enjoying Bletchely, both the work and the company. If she had any regrets about not being on an RAF base working with pilots these were dispelled on a visit to Ann Sinclair, [PIC 48] her friend from training, now a wireless operator at RAF Hawarden. They met in Chester, had a drink session and giggled all the time on the bus journey to camp before attending a station dance. The next day Anne took her to her work point on the flight perimeter.

She writes

‘It was an extremely small hut and her job was virtually just being there on her own – very little work, quite dull and uninteresting, hours of waiting for brief moments of activity if a landing aircraft needed some contact. I decided that although I was not on an RAF station my work was always go, go, go and much more satisfying”

[PIC 49] Mary and Jean had now been made sergeants in charge of a watch of 80 girls. Mary would have been only 20 at this point. The four sergeants were transferred to an all sergeant hut – ‘only 16 beds, bags of room and no inspections’. They learnt to move around quietly as they were all on different shifts and there was always someone trying to sleep in the daytime. To my mother’s annoyance one of the sergeants took every opportunity to play her gramophone and listen to Grieg’s piano concerto ‘ad nauseum’, Mary writes. ‘Whenever I hear it I get a flashback and am back in the hut. It has rather put me off a fine piece of work’.

[PIC 50] The female sergeants mess was obviously the place to be! ‘Our free evenings were spent very convivially, plenty of drink and conversation, several good pianists, the officers used to angle for invitations as they could relax more with us. There were drunken parties and ‘I got rather tired of putting to bed girls who were paralytic or being vomited over.’

As well as pride in her ability to handle unwelcome advances Mary was also proud of being able to hold her drink. But even she got caught out and one morning woke up with a terrible hangover.

‘I reached the mess for breakfast prior to 8 am duty and it was obvious I was in trouble. A male sergeant insisted I drank whatever my tipples were the previous night – whisky and something – it was so revolting I thought I would never get it down . However I went on duty

reasonably compos mentis and there were no comments in my hearing regarding my state of health.'

In the canteen they would listen to the Andrew's Sisters. 'Don't Fence me in' was a particular favourite. Meals were pretty awful and she remembers hearing the news of Franklin D Roosevelt's death on the radio at 3.30 in the morning while tucking into fried bread and cold pilchard.

The long shifts were giving Mary fibrositis in the neck but there was hope that the far east war would not last much longer. Her watch was invited to a dance on an American Army base where the food was good and there were loads of partners. 'Every partner invited you to go outside with them to look at the moon, which some girls did. I had to enlist the help of some Americans to find enough girls to match the number I had bought and was responsible for their return.' 'I was the real wet blanket' she adds wryly.

[PIC 51] VE day was celebrated at a pub near Bletchley. It seems relaxed and low key. She was in her element even though her 21st birthday was spent sleeping and then going on night duty. But then came a real blow.

'A few months after VE day I was summoned to see a senior but unknown WAAF officer which was most unusual. I was informed by her that I had been given a Class C release (compassionate). In fact I was being de-mobbed forthwith. I was shown a doctor's certificate on behalf of my mother stating that she had hypertension and that it was a progressive

disease. It was just a matter of handing in my kit and going home. The officer was very cold about it and I was livid.

I had to forgo the demob gratuity and twelve weeks pay. Though I had been told about my mother's health she was not bedridden. How my release was arranged I had no idea, the WAAF officer was not prepared to answer questions and my parents just expected me to realise my place was at home. My father merely told me that he would give me £2 a week pocket money to look after mother, who seemed to be leading quite a normal life.

I started by spring cleaning the house. I must have been pretty thorough because I remember my father saying I would be washing the coal in the cellar yet."

So Mary Thompson's time at Bletchley came to an abrupt end, not of her choosing. She called the summary and ignoble demobilisation a 'conspiracy'. Its not surprising she felt like Cinderella after the clock struck 12. At the end of the war she had been expelled from paradise – and the fulfillment that comes with work, a sense of purpose and firm friendships. And to cap it all she could tell no one about the importance of her wartime contribution. Her mother's needs were more important but unfortunately the family conspiracy chimed favourably with the government's drive to release jobs for ex servicemen and return women to homemaking . I haven't been allowed to read the rest of the memoir but I know it ends with motherhood. [PIC 52] Partly because she was beginning a completely new phase of her life but also partly because that signaled a full stop to the independent life she loved . She continued to look after her parents for the rest of her life and as a child three generations of us inhabited the bombed east Dulwich house that had seen my Grandad through two world wars.

So my return to Bletchley Park, not just as a visitor , but to do a job there in 2013, had a special poignancy. I would sit in the canteen or walk around the lake almost summoning up the spirit of the young vibrant woman who had worked hard and played hard there 70 years earlier. I believe it was one of the high points in her life. I don't think she was particularly suited to domesticity although when she decided to do it – like spring cleaning- it would be done with military thoroughness.

Like many daughters of the baby boomer generation I wanted to take advantage of all the educational and workplace opportunities that were opening up to women in the 70s and 80s and I thought that my life as a television director was a far cry from anything my mother had experienced. Suddenly at Bletchley I realised some bizarre connections between our two working lives. On the surface they couldn't have been more different, her crucially important military work and me spinning fiction for television. But what did our workdays consist of? We were both driven to work from our billets, fed in canteens at fixed hours, were expected to deliver results quickly to tight deadlines and work day and night shifts as required, and we both managed teams of people. So my mother and I have more in common than I thought. I am my mother's daughter after all, doing hard work I enjoy as well as having two daughters of my own. The difference is that I was born into a world where that has become the norm. So it was a privilege to work on 'The Bletchley Circle' which dramatised the predicament of many talented women from Bletchley who were overnight expected to put down their code books and pick up their knitting. It took a generation for Britain to appreciate and encourage the untapped talent of half the population.

[PIC 53] Now 91 Mary lives near Bristol and when she speaks of her wartime years a light comes into her eyes. Recently she was reminiscing about her time there and she fell into a

reverie. An hour later she said to me – ‘I can see the hut clearly, it’s all in front of my eyes. I can’t leave Bletchley’. ‘Is it a happy place mum, ‘ I asked. ‘Oh yes’ she said. ‘So why don’t you stay there for a while.’ [PIC 54]”

Harding, Sarah. “Behind the Scenes: Bletchley Park and The Bletchley Circle.” Celebrating Bletchley Park, Riding School, Firle Place, East Sussex, 19-20 Mar 2016, Accessed 13 May 2017.

This speech given by Sarah Harding, the daughter of Bletchley Park veteran Dorothy Mary Thompson and director of The Bletchley Circle, helped us understand how her mother experienced her time at Bletchley Park, and what a lasting impact it had on her life. We use quotes from this speech on our *Golden Geese* page, and the speech can be downloaded there. This is a secondary source because it is a relative’s description of a family member’s life, and the speaker never worked at Bletchley Park.