

The Women of Bletchley Park: Decrypting Gender Equality

Transcript of Interview with Betty Webb

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Q: When you originally came to Bletchley Park, did you ever think that you would have such a direct effect on the outcome of the war?

A: Oh, absolutely not. I had no idea at all. I was very, very young and very inexperienced and one just did one's job without having any real, full knowledge of what was going on.

Q: During your time at Bletchley Park did you face any opposition simply because you were a woman?

A: No, not at all because the women outnumbered the men three to one. At the height of activities there were about 8,000 women there. I don't remember any animosity of any sort.

Q: How did your time at Bletchley Park affect your work at the Pentagon?

A: Not at all really because I was doing the same job in the Pentagon as I was in Bletchley towards the end of war.

Q: Can you tell us more about what you did at Bletchley Park?

A: Well, I did a lot of things, actually. Bearing in mind I was very young and very inexperienced generally and I wasn't trained for anything in particular, but I was given lots of fairly junior jobs to do, particularly registering all the messages that came in from signal stations. It was one of my main jobs. My most important job was actually paraphrasing the decoded Japanese messages. But that was towards the end of my time there.

Q: Can you tell us more about paraphrasing those Japanese messages?

A: I don't remember what was in them (it was such a long time ago), but bear in mind my job was just to paraphrase the words to turn them into different wording which meant the same thing,

but which would not be recognized by the enemy had they picked them up. That was what we hoped, anyway.

Q: How did working at Bletchley Park directly affect your life in the long-term?

A: I think it was a great education because it was a very mixed bag of people from all walks of life but mainly very intelligent people. And it was a great eye-opener for me and a really good education. It had nothing to do with the work; it was just mixing with the people who were there and integrating with them. I think it educated me probably in a better way than had I simply gone to school or university.

Q: We understand that there was a lot of secrecy between huts at Bletchley Park. As somebody paraphrasing Japanese messages, how much did you know about the rest of the operation at Bletchley Park?

A: Absolutely nothing. I only knew, as we all did, what was going on in the actual room in which we were working in because we were not allowed to talk about our work outside our own offices. It was very tight; security was extremely tight.

Q: If you were to look at the current state of women in cyber-security and to women working in the field, what would you say to them?

A: Now, you mean? I don't know really. I think the whole scene has changed so much. I mean, communication now is very quick which bearing in mind I'm 93 years old I was brought up in the countryside where we didn't have telephones; nobody did when I was young.

Communication was, to say the least, slow. [Laughs] Nowadays it's so quick that people have to think rather differently, I believe.

Q: At the beginning of when you were going to join the ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service] what did your family and friends think about that?

A: At the time the whole country was having to join up. Although I joined up before conscription came in, I volunteered to go into the ATS. The whole country was obviously geared to defending itself.

Q: How did your position at Bletchley Park evolve over time?

A: You mean promotion and so on? Bearing in mind that I was a very young recruit (I went when I was 18 years old) I hadn't had any sort of job beforehand. I was promoted; I started off as an Arms Corporal and ended as a Staff Sergeant which is when I went I went to Washington (I was a Staff Sergeant.)

Q: How were you treated similarly or differently between your work later at Bletchley Park and your work at the Pentagon? Or was it all the same?

A: It was all very much the same. If anything I suppose the Pentagon security was perhaps as tight as the security at Bletchley Park, if not tighter. That was the screening and so on, and it was more in depth. That was because we were not exactly foreigners, but people coming into the Pentagon, and our obligations were very strict again on the security side.

Q: How did the women that you were working with feel about how they were contributing to the war effort?

A: Well, the whole country had our backs to the wall, fighting off the enemy, so we took it all very seriously. And of course we had to contend with food rationing and clothes rationing and all that sort of thing. It was all jolly hard.

Q: So when you are giving these talks and talking to people like us about your time at Bletchley Park, what is something you would most like us to know about?

A: What I do mainly in my talks which are all sorts of groups of all ages and classes, I tell them about the whole operation, which is not just Alan Turing and his Enigma machine. There is much more to it than that, and I explain the whole process. And then I also tell them about our living conditions, which were rather strange, we lived in other peoples' houses in the villages roundabout. And I also explain about transport arrangements and eating and also recreation which was really quite good and a reasonable amount of play.

Q: Would you say that Alan Turing's contributions at Bletchley Park were over represented in the literature?

A: I wouldn't say over represented, but I think in the film "The Imitation Game", that's very good, but one has to explain to everybody that was not the whole operation at Bletchley. It was an important part, yes, of course it was, but not the only part of it. Well what I mean is, you've got a big operation, you've got a signal personnel around the world sending the coded messages into Bletchley, They then have to be registered, the code then has to be broken, then the translation, then transcribing. And then the final decision by the senior people as to what to do with the intelligence, which they gathered from the decoded messages. So you see, it is quite a lengthy process.

Q: Have you ever seen the show "The Bletchley Circle"?

A: Yes I have, but I'm not terribly happy about that. Because I think unless the general public know the real story, they could be a little bit misguided by it.

Q: How could they be misguided?

A: Well in the Bletchley Circle as depicted on television is not how it was at Bletchley at all. I can quite see that it makes a great story, but it isn't an accurate depiction of what we did at Bletchley, in my view.

Q: How exactly could it have been improved?

A: Oh dear. Well, I think they would have to go back to the beginning and do an actual, a factual story. Whereas the Bletchley Circle is not factual, as the real Bletchley story.

Q: So you're suggesting that it should be a true story instead of fictional?

A: I think it what it really is, is that these girls in the Bletchley Circle were influenced by their time at Bletchley, but not perhaps in the same way as it is depicted in the television series. Maybe I'm making it bit too involved, but that's my view anyway.

Q: That makes sense. Did you know about the immediate effects that the work at Bletchley Park such as work in Hut 6 and Hut 8 on the Enigma had, or did that knowledge come later?

A: That all come much later. We had no idea at the time because we come back to the fact, especially for a junior person such as myself, that you did not know what was happening in the next room, and certainly not in the next Hut.

Q: How did it feel when you knew then?

A: Well now of course the story is absolutely wonderful. Because we think we know most of the story and the background of it. And being able to go back to Bletchley which is now returned to its original state. And you get to go around and see everything as it was. It makes the most amazing story.

Q: What do you think about them spending 800 million pounds on restoration? Do you think there are more effective ways to restore Bletchley Park? Or the best way to preserve Bletchley Park's memory is to preserve the campus?

A: It's a very important thing that has been done because it's become one of the world's most informative museums. And attracted millions of supporters, having been put back to its original state.

-Telephone Interview with Charlotte "Betty" Webb

Webb, Charlotte. Personal Interview. 16 Jan 2017.

Our Interview with Charlotte "Betty" Webb gave us an invaluable perspective into Bletchley Park's operations, and how people on the lower end of the corporate ladder there were treated. We featured quotations from this interview throughout our entire website, though we dedicated a section on the Golden Geese to her; the transcript of the interview can be found on the page: *The Voices of Bletchley Park: Interviews*. This interview is a primary source because the interviewee worked at Bletchley Park during the Second World War.