

The Women of Bletchley Park: Decrypting Gender Equality

Transcript of Interview with Elisa Segrave

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MG: What inspired you to create the ‘Celebrating Bletchley Park’ event?

ES: I had visited Bletchley Park at least six times, the first time in 2008 or 2009 while researching for the book I was writing on my mother - *The Girl from Station X – My Mother’s Unknown Life*. (My mother, then Anne Hamilton-Grace, had started working there in August 1941 in Hut 3 and had left in April 1943. She had had a very good job during the lead-up to and during Operation Torch, the Allied Invasion of North Africa, in October and November 1942. She was still in Hut 3 but it had been split up in May 1942 and her section had become Hut 3N.) I had also given a talk at Bletchley Park in March 2014, about my book, with Sinclair McKay, who by now has written other books on different aspects of Bletchley Park. Also while researching, I had read other authors, experts such as Michael Smith, who knew more than I did about the history of Bletchley Park, and I thought it would be a good idea to get these experts into one place for a weekend. After the film ‘The Imitation Game’ there was, even more, interest in Bletchley Park. I had also met a few veterans and I realized that clearly these women were getting very old and I wanted some of them interviewed during the weekend. I also realized the historic importance of Bletchley Park.

MG: What was your mother’s perspective on her impact on the outcome of the war?

ES: My mother, like all the women veterans I have met, was very modest about any effect she had and in any case was not allowed to talk about her work there. (She died in 2003, having had Alzheimer’s for ten years, and did not know that I had read her diaries or would write a book about her.) Occasionally my father mentioned (in a somewhat patronising way) when I was young that she had worked there, and until I read her diaries about her time at Bletchley (diaries which strictly she was not meant to write, as it would have been breaking the Official Secrets Act which everyone working there had had to sign) I knew hardly anything about what she did there.

I think it is only comparatively recently that it is generally acknowledged that Bletchley Park, with its code-breaking activities, may have shortened the war by at least two years.

MG: From your point of view, what is the legacy of the women of Bletchley Park, both related to the war and in more of an inspirational sense?

ES: I have attended two Veterans' Days at Bletchley Park, in September 2015 and 2016 and I would say that these are inspirational as you see elderly women, often in wheelchairs, women from all walks of life who, despite often having physical infirmities and being very old, can still tell you exactly what work they were doing at Bletchley Park in precise detail. They are inspirational also because they were in the unique position (so of course were the men at Bletchley Park) of not being able to tell anyone what work they were doing, as it was such a secret. Others during and after the war received medals and plaudits but those at Bletchley Park, then, and for thirty years afterward, had to keep the secret. The discipline of this and the discipline of the work itself is inspirational to me and I am sure to many others. I had one of my interviewees for 'Celebrating Bletchley Park' – Betty Webb – staying with me in my house - and she was a lovely quietly disciplined woman who again displayed great modesty. (She went on after the war to work at the Pentagon in Intelligence.)

MG: Would you say that the women at BP took 'a silent stand' against the stereotypes facing women at the time? If so, how?

ES: I would not say that the women at BP consciously took 'a silent stand' against the stereotypes facing them at the time. They were too busy getting on with the jobs they were required to do and in winning the war. Unfortunately, many of them, such as my mother, after the war never worked again and were expected to be just wives and mothers.

MG: How has your mother's role at Bletchley impact/inspired you?

ES: My mother's role at Bletchley completely overturned my whole idea of my mother. This would never have happened had she not kept those diaries and I had not read them. My mother was from a privileged background but had suffered the deaths of her father and little brother very early in life and had not had a formal education. When I knew her, much of the time she was a self-pitying alcoholic. (My brother drowned aged 5 on my 7th birthday, and my second brother died at 24 of an overdose, and my father died of cirrhosis while my mother was still in her fifties.) To see in the diaries my mother performing such a high powered job in Hut 3N at Bletchley Park – as Fourth Naval Duty Officer during the period of Operation Torch and just before, being the only woman in the Hut to be chosen for this job – was inspirational to me and completely changed my whole view of my mother. She had risen to the occasion and performed her tasks to the best of her abilities. On 11th November 1942, after the Allies had landed in North Africa, she wrote: *Certainly the most responsible position I am ever likely to hold in my whole life again, and as such, I pay a tribute to myself.....* I realize now that she was secretly proud of having done that job and of having worked there.

Segrave, Elisa. Personal Interview. 3 May 2017.

Elisa Segrave is both the daughter of a Bletchley Park veteran and the organizer of an event known as “Celebrating Bletchley Park;” we contacted her over email after we found the website describing the event that was held in 2016. Our email interview helped us understand how the women that worked at Bletchley affected their children, and how this motivated Ms. Segrave to put on an event that brought together experts on different aspects of Bletchley for two days. This is a secondary source because Segrave never worked at Bletchley Park.

