

Gwendoline Page, née Acaison

Bletchley Park April 1944 – June 1945, WRNS in Naval Section on U-boat signals index; Colombo July – December 1945. Interviewed October 2014.

I served at Bletchley Park during the war and after VE day I was transferred to Colombo in Ceylon, as it was then, now Sri Lanka. I was a member of the Women's Royal Naval Service, a Wren. At Bletchley Park I was an Ordinary Wren but in Colombo they gave me a 'hook' (anchor badge), which meant I was a Leading Wren.

Before the WRNS

I had left school at 16 because we were continually being bombed by the German bombers and having to leave our studies to go to a safe area, so I asked my parents if I could leave and get a job. I was lucky enough to be offered a job with an insurance company that had evacuated from London to Elstree Film Studios, which was only a short distance from my house in Borehamwood. I worked in the claims department and my job was to find the policies that related to the claims that came in.

At 17 I volunteered, and I chose the Wrens partly because my brother was studying at the Sir John Cass Nautical College prior to joining the Merchant Navy. We both were called up in the same week; my brother was sent to his first ship and I was sent only four miles from my house to Pembroke III at Mill Hill for my basic training.

Basic Training

At Mill Hill we learned to polish taps, scrub steps and general housework, things we probably hadn't done before! We all managed and I remember having a very nice conversation with another Wren with whom I was friendly, while we were scrubbing steps together, and this was a good opportunity for some *Gert and Daisy* banter, until a petty officer Wren shouted at us from above 'less noise down there!'

I was at Mill Hill for three weeks and at the end of the basic training we had an interview. I don't know if the officers who were carrying out the interviews knew anything about Bletchley Park, but they did ask me if I spoke German and I said 'Very badly'. I had learned German at school but I was not a good student. Apart from that I really don't remember what the other questions were.

I had no idea what they had decided I should do, I was just told one day to get in the back of a naval truck with several other girls and they

took us off. First of all I went to New College¹ where I had to do night watch duties in the office for two weeks. I took telephone calls, any questions that cropped up and passed on messages, but I had no idea what work was going on at New College. All I do remember is that I was on my own during the day after I had had a sleep and I would go into the nearby town and find a forces canteen and play table tennis. I did very well at table tennis in those days!

After about two weeks I had to get into another naval truck and I ended up at Wavendon House, near Bletchley Park. There were about six of us in this truck and we arrived in this lovely country house with a big lake and very nice grounds, and we discovered we had to sleep in the garage. There were about 40 of us there and of course we had to have the garage doors open because there were no windows. Luckily it was summer and by the time autumn came they'd requisitioned another country house, a very modern one, at Stockgrove Park, near Leighton Buzzard. So it was going from the ridiculous to the sublime!

Bletchley Park

When I arrived at Bletchley Park in April 1944, I had had no training for the work I was about to do, nor had I any idea of what Bletchley Park did or what I would be doing when I got there.

I was sent to Block A, the Naval Section, and discovered I was indexing signals from U boats. We had to copy these signals onto little cards under the correct U Boat Number so that the intelligence people could come down and find out where these U boats were. We copied the entire signal onto the cards but I don't remember much what went onto them, we were told to forget. So we just did our job and then forgot it. I do remember one or two personal signals came in; maybe the commander of the U boat was told that his wife had had a son, or the homes of members of the crew had been bombed. But mostly it was to do with positions, sightings and possible attacks. Our office was on the ground floor, second room from the entrance door until later, after VE day in May 1945 I was transferred to the Japanese Section upstairs.

We signed the Official Secrets Act on the day we came to Bletchley Park and I kept the secret right throughout my time and long afterwards. My family never knew what I did.

I never met anybody of importance as far as I know because we never knew anybody's names. I had a telephone call one day, so I picked up the phone, we'd been taught how to scramble, and someone wanted

¹ A theological college of the University of London, in St John's Wood. New College was used during the war to train WRNS Y service wireless operators.

to speak to the Duty Officer. I said I was very sorry but the Duty Officer was not there, I was asked who I was and replied that I was 'one of the Wrens', he didn't tell me his name and I wasn't going to tell him mine!

I filled the index cards in with pen and ink and they were filed in little boxes with drawers which sat on the desk. One of the Americans called them 'those damned shoe boxes'. The cards were kept in our area and anyone who wanted to know something about a particular U boat would come and ask for the card.

For a short time we had a young lieutenant who happened to be sitting at a desk behind me. The Wren officers were very strict and always referred to us by our surnames, so it was always 'Wren Acason' if they wanted me. This young man didn't quite get on with that and he'd heard us girls using our Christian names between ourselves and one day he called out 'Gwen, can I have card so-and-so?' We felt this hush come over the place because the Wren officer was sitting there. I found the card and gave it to him without comment, and I often wonder if he got a rocket from the Wren officer afterwards!

There were about five Wrens working on each watch. The morning watch was 8 o'clock to 4; the evening watch from 4 o'clock to midnight and the night watch from midnight to 8 the following morning. We did a week on each watch and at the end of the night watches we had a rest day and luckily I was able to hitch-hike home to my family in Hertfordshire.

I remember during the time of the Invasion, which the French called the Liberation, there were signals coming in all the time and we were all very tired. When I got home my mother asked if I wanted anything to eat and I said that I just wanted to go to bed, and I slept for 16 hours! We had a very busy time then.

Because the signals had been translated into English I knew exactly what we were doing. I once saw a signal about my brother's ship, which was going in convoy through the Mediterranean, and I knew they were being attacked by Stuka dive-bombers, so I had a very good idea of what was happening.

We didn't know where the signals were coming from and it was not until much later that I found out about the Y service.

I remember a number of the girls with whom I worked in particular [Barbara Reynolds](#) with whom I became friends. The head of our watch was [Marjorie Kennedy](#), known as 'Ken' and another Head of Watch was [Frances Wyllie](#). We did change watch occasionally, as if someone

was on leave or taking a rest day they would come back onto a different watch.

After the Germans surrendered I moved to the Japanese section to work on the *marus*², the Japanese merchant service. We copied the entire content of the signals onto cards, in exactly the same way as we had with the U boats. Where the Germans were quite methodical, the Japanese were not quite the same and when the Allies had sunk one of their ships the Japanese would just take its name and give it to another ship which might be in a completely different area, and we had to be very careful about checking which area the ship was in before we could put them on the card. As with the U boats we kept the cards and people would come in and check them.

The new blocks at Bletchley Park were very good; we had central heating and I discovered the blocks had been built with protection against gas and bombing. It was very much like an office and perfectly clean. Signals were hand delivered to us in batches and we took them one at a time until they were all gone.

Social and Domestic

There must have been several hundred Wrens at Stockgrove. We had lovely cabins with about eight of us in each one. At Bletchley Park we didn't have parades, except for the occasional church parades. The officer in charge of us realised that we all worked odd hours and was very reasonable. Other places weren't quite as easy-going.

We did have defaulters parade and on one occasion, when I was at Mill Hill doing our training, we were only allowed out for two hours at a time. There were some girls from the North who could not get back to their families and were a bit homesick, I thought we would just about manage to get to my home so we took a bus there. My parents were in the garden having a cup of tea and my mother very kindly got busy and gave us all tea. So for a short time the other girls saw something apart from the quarters. Then we got the bus back, but unfortunately we just missed the bus up the hill to our quarters so we had to walk. We were a few minutes late and the Regulating Petty Officer was very stern and said 'You're five minutes late'. I argued and said 'I only make it two minutes', which wasn't a good thing to do. Next thing, we were on defaulters the following morning.

I think our pay was about 14 shillings a week and there were no deductions for food and accommodation. We received our pay in cash on payday. The food was quite good, we ate certain meals at Stockgrove Park, depending on our duties, and there was a separate

² Japanese word, meaning 'circle', used to denote a merchant ship.

Wrens canteen at Bletchley Park, near Block H, towards where the new housing is now. It was very difficult finding your way there in the blackout, through all the huts.

We were transported from Stockgrove Park in busses driven by Army drivers. We all had to have our passes to get in. Unfortunately one day when I was in the ladies at Bletchley Park, I had hung my jacket up outside and my pocket was picked, somebody took my pass, my regulating pay book and a pound note my father had given me. I had to report the loss to a civilian lady in the Mansion, the only time I ever went into the Mansion.

I never found out who had taken it, but I had to get off the bus at the gates every day and someone had to come from my office to recognise me, until I got a new pass. I was fined 2/6 for losing my pass, which was quite a lot in those days. I would have loved to know if they ever discovered who took it, as they had to be so careful that the wrong people didn't get in. Eventually I was given a new pass.

I had a bicycle and sometimes in my free time I would go cycling round the lanes with other girls. We were also invited to various dances at some of the American camps near Bletchley Park. I remember going to an American dance and seeing all these strange dances; we had only learned ballroom dancing. An American GI came up to me and said 'Can you jive?' I said 'No' and he said 'That's OK I'll teach you'. He dragged me onto the floor and before I knew it I was being twisted around all over the place. My friends were having a nice chuckle and I said 'Don't worry, it's your turn next!'

I never got involved in the plays at Bletchley Park as I think this was mostly done by civilians. The odd Wren joined in but I was never asked. We used to have dances at Stockgrove Park.

I was very lucky to be sort of adopted by the family of the police inspector at Leighton Buzzard. He had a daughter of 16 and we met through his son, who was in the Navy. He was home on leave on day and I was in the local forces canteen and he asked me to play table tennis. He also asked if he could spend the rest of the day with me and I said 'Not really, I have to be back at 10'. It was a four mile walk between Stockgrove Park and Leighton Buzzard. He said 'If I can get you transport will you come out with me?'

We walked through Leighton Buzzard as far as the police station and he suddenly hopped over the wall. I wondered what on earth he was doing! It turned out he had persuaded his father, the police inspector, to take me back after we had been out. After the son went back to Portsmouth, I remained friendly with the family and they were very

good to me. His mother was disabled and I used to go and chat to her. On Christmas Day they saved me their rations for me to have dinner with them, which was very nice. The inspector and his daughter took me to a dance at Wing, where there was an RAF base and I was the only Wren there. I said to the inspector 'You watch these fellows, they'll go for all the civilian girls in pretty dresses first, then I'll be next because I'm the only Wren here'. I must have been 18 or 19 then.

Every three months or so we got about a week's leave. I was lucky as I was able to go home, but there was a time, coming up to the invasion, when we weren't allowed to go any further than 20 miles from Bletchley Park. I just managed as I was just within the bounds.

I never told my family anything about what I was doing, I had signed the Official Secrets Act and just said that I was in the Wrens. On the day we arrived at Bletchley Park a Wren officer came to see us in a little office at the gate and we had to sign the Act before we were told anything about what we would be doing. It was only when we got to our office, the only office we would ever go to, that we were told about our work.

Once the Germans surrendered I moved to Japanese Naval Signals and found myself stuck in an office again, filling in cards. I told the Wren officer that I had volunteered for overseas work and asked if there were any opportunities. She asked me where I wanted to go, I said 'Australia', and I got as far as Ceylon.

Ceylon

We travelled to Ceylon on the troopship Esperance Bay. We were told by one of the crew that she was the sister ship to the Jervis Bay, which had acted very bravely in the face of a big German warship and saved a lot of the convoy by attracting the fire onto herself. The journey took about three weeks and, because Germany had surrendered, we were not in a convoy. It was only when we got to Ceylon that I heard that the previous ship had been torpedoed by a Japanese submarine and there were 19 Wrens and a whole lot of troops and nursing sisters on board. Only two of the Wrens were saved, one of them happened to be a girl from my village who I was in the Girl Guides with.

We travelled out through Suez and after arriving in Colombo we were taken to Kent House in Guildford Crescent. This was a large place where the Wrens stayed, with gates guarded by two sailors with truncheons.

I remember that as the small boats came to take us off the ship we could smell the vegetation, which was a change from the previous three weeks. We had arrived in this wonderful tropical island and it started to rain!

We worked in HMS Anderson which was a bit outside Colombo and we went there by truck. I was in the Signal Distribution Office, a different job to what I had done at Bletchley Park, but all part of the same system. It was a forward station for Japanese signals. We had a teleprinter in the room next to us and I understand we were receiving intercepted signals from other Y stations, but I didn't get involved with that much.

The Wren officer took me in and introduced me to the sub lieutenant in charge, the duty officer, saying 'This is [Sub Lieutenant Page](#), he will be your duty officer from now on', and he was for the next 60 years. On one occasion I was at the hatch taking in signals from the teleprinters and some of the young fellows on the other side were asking me if I would go out with them, so my duty officer removed me from that position.

His name was Harry, he was very nice and friendly, had a good sense of humour and was well appreciated by the other ratings and Wrens. We spent a lot of time talking and were both keen singers and this drew us together. He said 'Drop the "sir", my name's Harry'. One night watch he invited me to the officer's canteen to have baked beans on toast and coffee, and things went on from there. I got invited to his billet for dinner, which made a nice change from the Wrens' quarters. There, we had our meals in an outside area with wire around to stop the crows taking things off your plate.

We lived in bandas which were built with plaster walls three quarters of the way up and palm leaf roofs. There was a gap between the roof and the top of the wall. We each had a bed with a big mosquito net, which kept off the things that came out of the roof. It wasn't luxury, but we were OK.

Harry had been out there well over a year before me. The story is that he and some other young men were trained in signals and were going to be sent into occupied territory to find out what was going on and send signals back. When they got out there the admiral didn't know this as it was all so secret so he put them into HMS Anderson, as they had learned Japanese in London, at SOAS.

He had left his work with the Gas, Light and Coke Company to join the Air Force, where he had hoped to be a fighter pilot, but didn't do too well on his landings. I think he had something wrong with his eyesight

and couldn't quite judge distances, so he applied to the Navy and enjoyed it. He had trained at a big training base near Ipswich, where they had to climb the big masts³. He was commissioned after taking his Japanese course.

VJ Day

I was in Colombo when the atom bombs were dropped and the Japanese surrendered. As the troops went into Malaya they discovered all these camps where the people from Singapore were imprisoned. Some of them had been held for three or four years. They were in a pretty poor state, having been half-starved, and once they had been taken care of and became fitter they were put on ships at Singapore to go home. These ships used to call at Colombo and we Wrens were asked if, in our off duty time, we would go down to the docks and receive some of these chaps.

I went there one day and found a group of five of them, looking rather lost, in Army uniform standing outside Echelon Barracks. I asked them if they had just come off the ship and they just stared at me and didn't answer. I asked again and one eventually hesitantly said 'Yes'. It wasn't until much later when I had taken them for a walk around Colombo and they had seen people doing normal things that they began to relax and they told me then that they hadn't spoken because they hadn't believed that I was actually talking to them. The Japanese had told them that no white woman would ever speak to them again. They couldn't believe that I was actually talking to them.

After a little walk around I took them into the forces canteen by the big clock in Colombo and bought them drinks, as they hadn't been given any money. I looked round for a table where we could all sit down; it was very crowded apart from one table with a Wren officer sitting on her own. I said 'Excuse me ma'am, may we join you on your table?' She said 'Yes, of course' so we joined her and a bit later on one of the fellows whispered to me 'Why do you call her "ma'am"?' I said 'She's an officer'. 'They don't have women officers!?' He couldn't believe it; they had been prisoners for so long that they did not know about all the changes.

Marriage

I had only been in Colombo for two months when Harry asked me to marry him. I thought we didn't know each other well enough but he continued to be friendly and invite me out. He changed his tactics at one point, as I had turned him down three times, so he invited me out in a group with another sub lieutenant who was going to be my partner

³ HMS Ganges.

for the evening and Harry took another Wren. That went very nicely and we discovered the fellows had changed their minds and preferred each other's girlfriend!

Once all the released prisoners of war had been sent home it was time for the women to go home. Harry had got annoyed with me because I wouldn't agree to marry him. I had only been out there three months and one day I found my name on the next ship to go home. I couldn't understand this as other girls had been there three years. When I was next on duty I said to Harry 'My name's on the next ship to go home; I can't understand it.'

He said he had put it there 'You won't marry me, so you can go home!' I said 'I've changed my mind, I will marry you, now get me off that list!' He now had to find another Wren who wanted to go home and luckily he did, at the last minute before the ship sailed. I still went home before Harry, just before, Christmas 1945, which I spent at sea and arrived back in January 1946. I was demobbed, from Chatham, very soon after my arrival in 1946. We were put into old barracks and it was bitterly cold there, with the change of climate from the Tropics.

Harry came home in March 1946; his father had died and he was given compassionate leave. That's when he met my family. We got married in September 1946, by which time my parents had got used to him.

My father had a confectionery, tobacconist and newsagent business with a flat above the shop so we were able to move there until 1947, when our first daughter was born and when she was five months old we got a new council house. Points were awarded in those days for war service, living in the village and having a family. Between us we managed to get a council house.

We stayed in Borehamwood trying to get back to normal but rationing was still going on and we had to make up our home with second hand furniture and things that people gave us. You couldn't buy new furniture until later. Then they wouldn't sell me a bed until I was pregnant! Things were pretty difficult but we got through.

We had both trained as teachers after leaving the services. Harry was teaching in St Albans and he got a job in Exmouth, so we moved and bought a new house in Raleigh Road, Exmouth and were there for quite a few years.

After Exmouth Harry got a job with the RAF and we moved for him to take up his new post as the headmaster of a school at Butterworth in Malaya. By now we had two daughters, Harry flew out in the January ahead of us to start up the school and we sailed out in February to join

him. As soon as we left Southampton we were in a storm and the children started being seasick. I was alright until I had to get up and deal with them. Once we reached the Mediterranean it was not so bad.

We spent three years in Malaya and were sent home when the country became independent. We taught in Essex for a while until Harry applied for a job in the south Pacific in what was then called the New Hebrides, now Vanuatu. We went out there for two years and the two oldest girls went to boarding school in Kent. Harry was teaching local people to be teachers. The girls came out for the long holidays and had been round the world three times before they left school.

In the late 70s we heard that Bletchley Park was no longer a secret and we started having reunions. People started writing books, first Freddy Winterbotham and then others and it occurred to me that if they can write about it there ought to be something told about the women's side of life.

I talked to the girls at the reunions and I asked them if they would let me have their stories to put together into a book. I tried Pen and Sword publishers but they didn't think people would be interested. They have been proved wrong as it has been on television so many times and everyone goes to Bletchley Park.

I started writing for my family's benefit, a book called *Growing Pains - a Teenager's War* about a teenager's life in wartime. Then I wrote *We Kept the Secret* about the Wrens at Bletchley Park. After this the Wren Y Service wrote to me to ask if I could get their stories published, which I did in a book called *They Listened in Secret*. After that I wrote another book about our time in Malaya called *A Tropical Adventure in the 1950s* but I don't plan to write any more!

As well as giving us this fascinating interview, Gwendoline Page provided a written account of her visit to a captured German U boat in 1945.

Towards the end of the European war a captured U-boat was brought up the Thames to London and we Wrens who worked on the U-boat index were given permission to go and see it. I went with a friend from the section. The first sight we had of it was as it was lying alongside the dock and the first thing I noticed was the tall pole with an egg-shaped top by the side of the conning tower. I realised that this was the Snorkel device that had enabled the U-boats to stay submerged for longer periods.

We were able to go aboard and made our way down the conning tower ladder cautiously, to arrive near the bottom and look down to find a British sailor looking up. Women still wore skirts in those days! We were free to make our way through the very confined spaces of the gangways, but to move from one section to another we had to pass through circular hatchways about two feet off the deck. Not easy in a tight Wren skirt! However I could see no-one around and heard nothing, so hitched up my skirt and put one leg through and then ducked under the hatch to come up the other sailor very quietly sitting there watching! I am sure they were there to help us of course!

I continued to explore and noticed how the bunks were shorter in length than an ordinary bed and how little floor space there was for movement. I then went into the torpedo section and saw where those deadly weapons were fired. As I had a brother in the Merchant Navy whose ships were targets for those torpedoes I was glad to know that this one had been put out of action!

It was an interesting and rewarding visit to see the objects that we had been concerned with in our work. I find it hard to understand how any submariner can live in such a confined and claustrophobic atmosphere for so many days. I certainly could not!