



(BOOK 11)

THE DEBS OF BLETCHLEY PARK AND OTHER STORIES

Author: Michael Smith

Breaking the coded messages of enemies and friends has been common practice since the 14th century. Code breakers were at work in the days of Queen Elizabeth I and Oliver Cromwell, for example. Eventually complex machines were invented to encode messages. The enigma cipher machine was invented by a German company in the early 1920s in order to keep business information secure. By the late 1920s enigma was being used by the German navy and army.

Before World War II the British Secret Service was aware of its existence but found the enigma messages impossible to crack, although American, Japanese, Russian, Spanish and Italian codes were being broken. However, the Poles had succeeded by using the Bombe system they had invented. The Poles met the British representatives in France to discuss this matter. Leading up to World War II there were code and cipher schools in Britain at various locations run by M.I.6, all working on intercepted signals.

Before war broke out it was realised that people with specialised skills were needed to work on decoding. Academics in universities were targeted and professors, mathematicians, lecturers, linguists, chess players, translators and girls from well-to-do families were all amongst those recruited. Many of the so called 'debs' at that time hated the coming out season in London and were only too happy to get away from it all by working at Bletchley Park and other secret units. At the height of the war some 8,000 women were at Bletchley Park, including those drafted in from the WRNS, WAAF, ATS, and the FANY. Huts were built to accommodate the increased numbers required for the work. All had to sign the Official Secrets Act.

Over the years, the author, Michael Smith, himself a past member of British Army Intelligence Corps, has researched the story of Bletchley Park and interviewed several women who served there. Their many stories are to be found in this book and they make fascinating reading. Every one played a vital part in the success attributed to Bletchley Park's fame for shortening the war and saving many lives. Sadly, many ladies interviewed by Michael have now passed away. The book contains many stories that have been kept secret for so long and yet deserve to be told. This review must be short and cannot possibly do justice to Michael Smith's book that is highly recommended because I found it enthralling

MONICA TOVEY

(The Branch – April 2015)