



An aerial view of the Pentagon, 11 January 1945. Spread out over 600,000 square metres (6,500,000 square feet). The US Department of Defense's headquarters was, and remains, the world's largest office building



WOMEN OF BLETCHLEY PART II: INTO THE PENTAGON

WORDS TOM GARNER

Charlotte “Betty” Webb MBE describes her experiences working inside the famous codebreaking mansion as well as the headquarters of the US Armed Forces

Bletchley Park was the headquarters of the British Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS), which successfully penetrated the secret communications of the Axis powers. Its teams of prodigious codebreakers worked in secret to devise methods that provided vital intelligence for the Allies.

Almost 10,000 people worked for the organisation and of those 75 per cent were women. Sixty per cent of these female employees were uniformed personnel with the majority being from the Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS or “Wrens”). Others were recruited from the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force and an even smaller number from the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). Approximately 414 members of the ATS worked at Bletchley Park including Charlotte “Betty” Webb.

Then known as Charlotte Vine-Stevens, Webb was stationed at Bletchley Park between 1941-45 in the estate’s famous 19th century mansion as well as Block F.

She worked as a registrar and paraphraser before being deployed to the Pentagon at Washington DC during the closing days of the war. Webb remains an active veteran and reveals a fascinating insight into the secret heart of Allied victory.

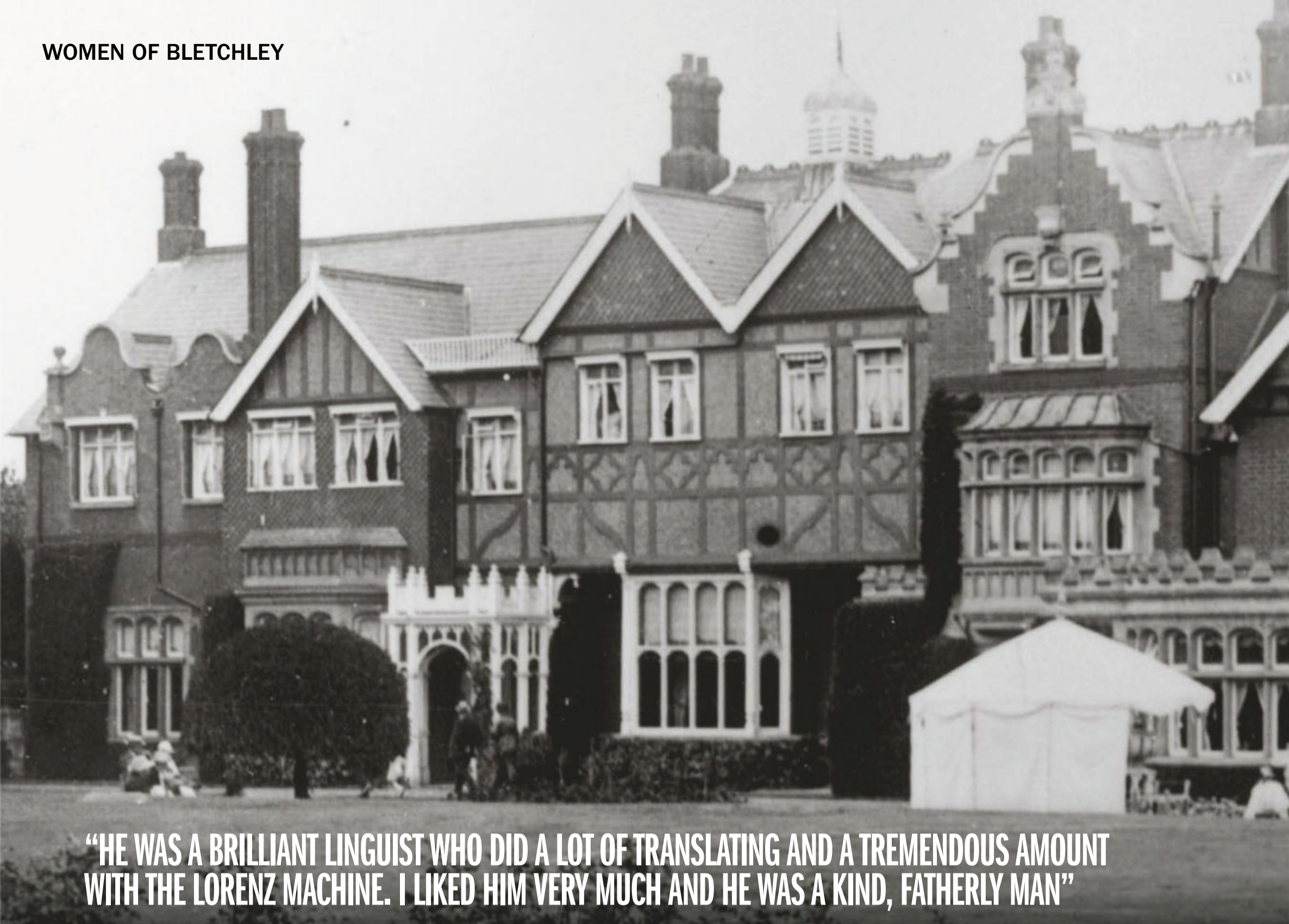
Visiting pre-war Germany

Born in 1923 Webb had a rural upbringing in the village of Richard’s Castle on the Shropshire-Herefordshire border. Her education included learning German and Webb visited

Nazi Germany in 1937 as part of an exchange visit, “I was there when things were beginning to get nasty. I was living with a religious family in Herrnhut near Dresden and they were very anxious about the political situation. Although I was 14 I didn’t really understand it but I do remember an atmosphere.” While being taught at a German school, Webb had to



Left: Staff Sergeant Charlotte Vine-Stevens pictured on duty in the Pentagon, May 1945. She is wearing a Canadian summer uniform to cope with the American weather



“HE WAS A BRILLIANT LINGUIST WHO DID A LOT OF TRANSLATING AND A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT WITH THE LORENZ MACHINE. I LIKED HIM VERY MUCH AND HE WAS A KIND, FATHERLY MAN”

give a Hitler salute along with her classmates, “It was very strange because things were just starting to evolve with the Nazi regime. Coupled with my youth and ignorance I didn’t know what I was doing. I sort of did the salute but tried not to make too much of a show of it.”

Once she returned to England Webb subsequently enrolled on a domestic science course in Shrewsbury. Britain was at war by this time and in 1941 Webb volunteered to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), “There was a feeling at the time that we wanted to be doing more for the war effort. I wanted to go in the Wrens but there weren’t any vacancies at the time. I still went ahead and joined the ATS.”

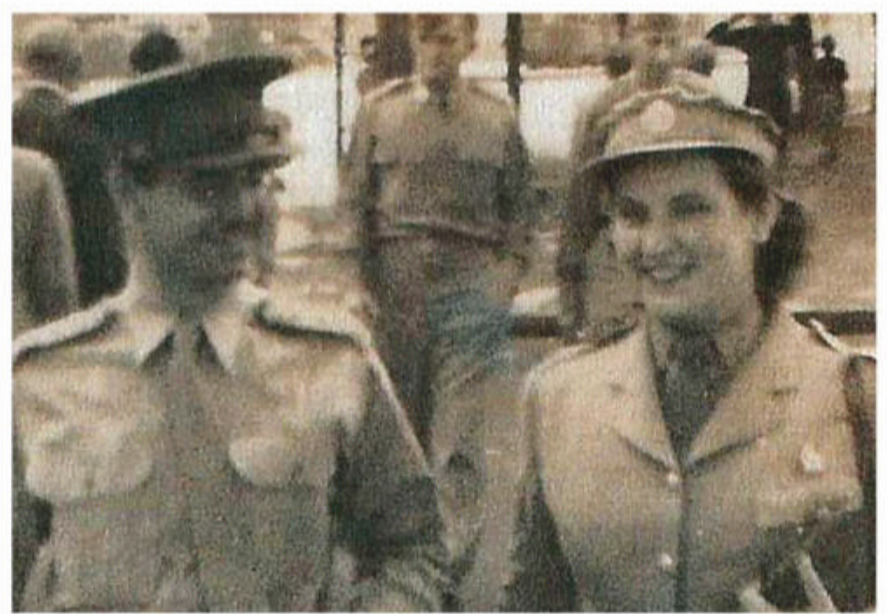
“A gun on the table”

Webb quickly found herself being recruited for Bletchley Park, “The basic training was about six weeks and after that you were asked what you wanted to do in terms of a trade. Being me, I said that I hadn’t the foggiest idea! However, I’d put on my CV that I was bilingual and that took me to an interview in London with an Intelligence Corps officer. He interviewed me for quite a long time in German. When he said, ‘Get yourself to Bletchley’, I thought, ‘Where on earth is that?’”

Upon arrival at Bletchley, Webb was swiftly taken inside the mansion and dramatically sworn to secrecy, “It was in a little room on the left as you go in and there was a colonel from



Vine-Stevens pictured in Washington DC aged 22 in June 1945



Vine-Stevens pictured with Captain John Burrows in Washington DC, 1945. Burrows was the officer who selected her to work in Block F and America

the Intelligence Corps with a gun placed on the table. I think it was quite normal but at the time it was quite frightening to see. It certainly had an influence on my interpretation of signing the Official Secrets Act. You hadn’t any option, you were not to say anything for 30 years so we just got on with it because you couldn’t argue about it.”

Webb had been thrown into the most closely guarded secret of Britain’s war effort, a situation that she initially found daunting, “It

was totally bewildering because I’d come from the country and led a sheltered life. Suddenly I was with lots and lots of people from different walks of life who I otherwise wouldn’t have met. It was an education.”

Registering the Holocaust

Initially assigned to work inside the mansion for Major Ralph Tester, Webb registered intercepted German messages as they came in from Bletchley’s outstations, “I worked upstairs



Bletchley Park mansion pictured in 1926. The building was constructed in the late 19th century by Sir Herbert Leon and was described by an architect as a "maudlin and monstrous pile"

and these messages were taken down by our signalmen and women throughout the country. There were 17 stations in Britain and many overseas. These messages were taken down in Morse code and there was absolutely no clear wording at all. They didn't mean anything at that stage but what I had to do was register each one with the date and a call sign number. This had to be done in such a way that Major Tester could call on any date at any particular time."

Tester was fluent in German and "very prominent" within Bletchley Park. From July 1942 he founded and supervised the "Testery" section, which used handwritten methods to break the German high-command "Tunny" cipher system on the Lorenz machine. Webb worked with Tester before his department was established and remembers him fondly, "He was a brilliant linguist who did a lot of translating and a tremendous amount with the Lorenz machine. I liked him very much and he was a kind, fatherly man."

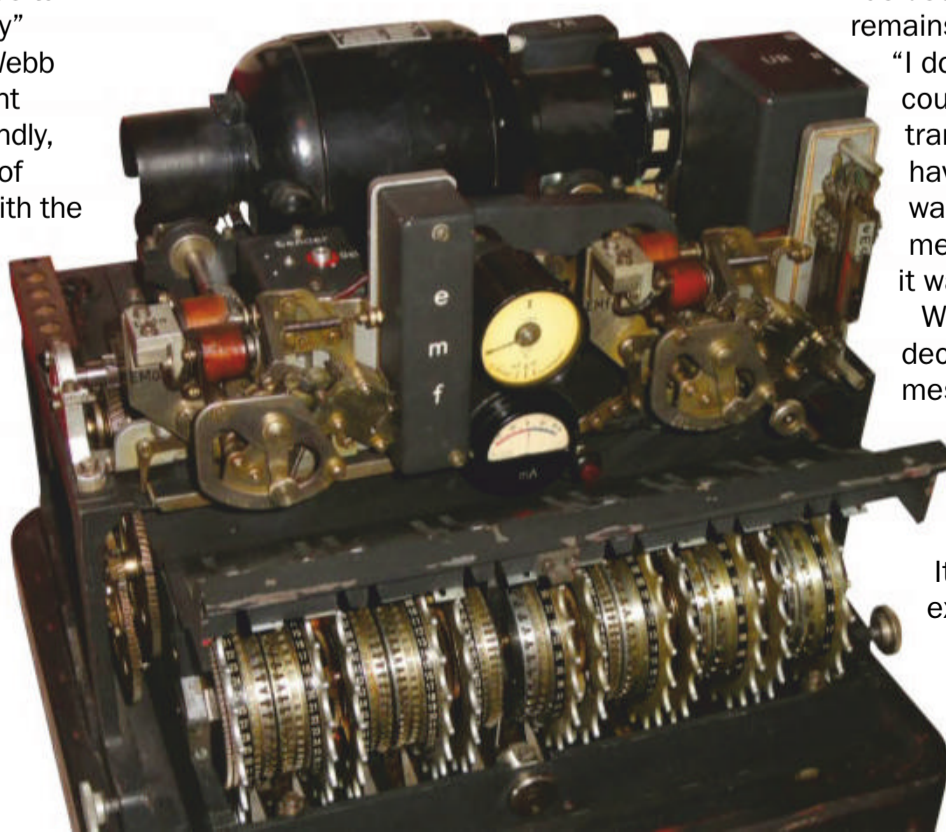
While she was on Tester's staff Webb recalls that working conditions inside the mansion were not ideal, "He had a separate office and I was in a little room way back over the ballroom that had probably been a

Webb first worked for Major Ralph Tester who later established the "Testery" section to break the German "Tunny" Lorenz machine

servant's bedroom. In my office there was a sergeant called Le Mesurier and another chap called Tubby Roots.

"It was cramped and very cold in the winter because there was no central heating."

Despite the discomfort Webb found out the valuable content of her registered messages decades later, "It was all very primitive, we didn't have anything except shoeboxes and little cards to write things on. It was terribly improvised but it worked. I was told fairly recently that a lot of it was to do with the Holocaust but I didn't know that at the time.



The messages contained information about the Nazis putting Jews into camps during the initial stages. I imagine I would have been registering SS and Gestapo messages but nothing was 'in the clear' and we didn't know where it had come from. You would just see a group of five random letters or figures."

Confusing the Japanese

After registering messages Webb was transferred to the newly established Block F. Constructed in 1943, this concrete building was known as the "Burma Road" because it was used to break Japanese codes. Webb remains unsure as to why she was reassigned, "I don't know how anybody found out that I could transcribe the already decoded and translated Japanese messages. It might have been Captain John Burrows but he was very non-committal about why he gave me the job and simply said that he thought it was a good idea."

Webb's specific task was to paraphrase decoded and translated Japanese messages, "You used other words to turn a message into something that meant exactly the same thing so that it would hopefully not be recognised by the Japanese as having been decoded. It was helping to cover up the very existence of Bletchley Park."

WOMEN OF BLETCHLEY



Priority teams work in Hut 3 at Bletchley Park, 1943



Webb was awarded the MBE in 2015 although she is most proud of her Bletchley Park Commemorative Badge, which is worn next to her medals

Paraphrasing meant that Webb was effectively confusing the Japanese and recalls working on a message that related to the Battle of Kohima in 1944, “I remember that quite clearly. For example, one decoded message said ‘Border areas near Kohima and Imphal expected to be attacked Monday’. I would paraphrase that to become ‘Early next week, attacks could be further west, maybe Kohima area’. It was terribly simple but if the Japanese picked it up it would hopefully say to them that we had, or hadn’t, got their codes. We’ll never know unfortunately and that was a very short message but some of the ones I handled were much longer than that.”

Often referred to as the “Stalingrad of the East”, Kohima was a turning point of the Japanese offensive into India. Between April and June 1944 British and Indian forces decisively defeated the Japanese and their victory enabled the Fourteenth Army to launch their successful re-conquest of Burma. Despite the vital role that intelligence played in the victory, Webb remains modest about her role, “I’ll never know if I was a contributing factor but I hope it helped.”

“The next best thing to a university”

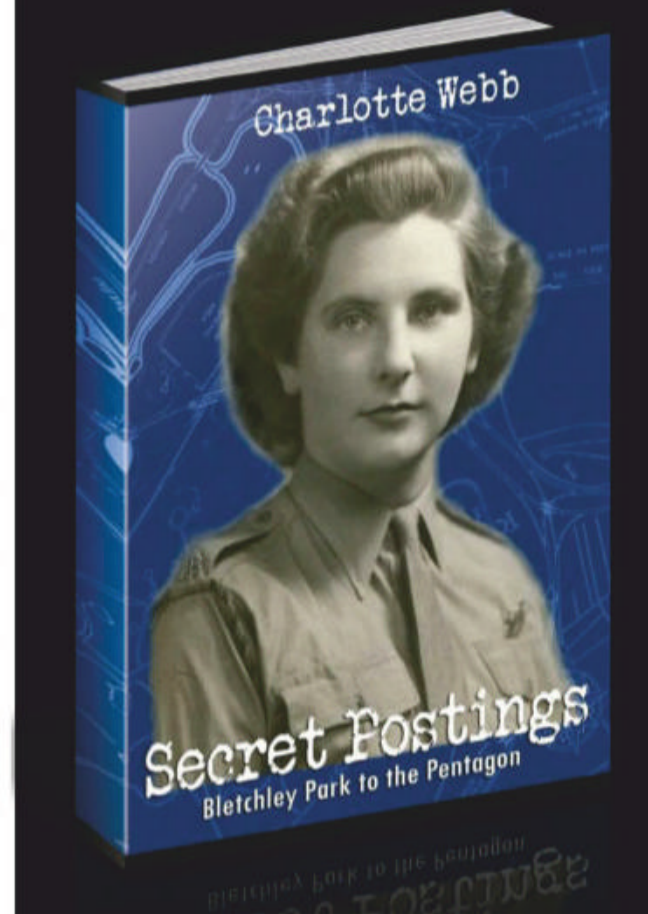
Because of the famously covert nature of Bletchley Park’s operations Webb remained ignorant of the groundbreaking work of the

cryptanalysts. The high level of secrecy was even kept on a room-by-room basis, “There would have been a handful of men who knew the whole story at the time but you certainly didn’t at my level. I had no idea about the complexity or the detail. We were just in these little rooms and didn’t communicate with anybody outside. Can you imagine it? I said to myself ‘You know the rules, you don’t talk about it beyond your own office’. Of course, I couldn’t tell my parents where I was or anything like that but it was a discipline that had to be observed.”

Despite being confined to her office Webb recalls that conditions in Block F were better than the mansion, “They were much more civilised because there was central heating. Compared with the huts, where there was hardly any heating, fresh air and poor lighting, Block F was very comfortable.”

Bletchley was also well supplied with recreation activities, “It was wonderful because there was an orchestra run by Herbert Murrell who was a professional musician. He had a very good Bach choir that I belonged to and a madrigal society. There was also a gramophone group, lectures, sports such as tennis and facilities for table tennis, dances and a library within walking distance of the manor. There was plenty to do and we were allowed to go out and cycle in the countryside because there wasn’t much traffic in those days. In my

Charlotte Webb is the author of *Secret Postings, Bletchley Park To The Pentagon*, which is published by BookTower Publishing and available to buy on Amazon. For more information visit: amazon.co.uk





Webb paraphrased intercepted Japanese messages including for the hard-fought Battle of Kohima



Pentagon workers take a break, June 1945

Bletchley staff pictured at the registration room of Hut 6 in 1943. Webb registered messages inside the mansion



view, we had a very balanced life.” Webb has previously described her time at Bletchley as “the next best thing to a university”, which she puts down to the variety of staff she worked with. “A number of us have said this but it was because one met such a large cross-section of people. There were aristocrats down to ordinary people like me. We were all working at different levels but it was nevertheless a good mix.”

Assigned to Washington

Although the war in Europe ended in May 1945, Webb was despatched to the United States by Captain John Burrows to work at the newly opened Pentagon. After an arduous 22-hour flight and train journey, Washington DC was a “totally new experience. The main excitement was that there was very little food rationing. Compared to what we were going through in England it was absolutely magic”.

Nevertheless Webb also discovered a shameful side to American life, “Black people were segregated and that hit me when I was there. For example, they had to sit at the back of a bus and it was quite a shock. That didn’t happen in England and in fact a lot of the women in the London ATS were Jamaican so we were quite used to this situation.”

The Pentagon itself had only been opened in 1943 and it employed huge numbers of people including Webb who continued her paraphrasing work, “It was very impressive and utterly

enormous. There were 32,000 people working there and unless you’re there you can’t describe the sheer size of it.

“However, the only time that it ever felt crowded was the queue for lunch!”

Webb was also present when Dwight D. Eisenhower visited, “He was the hero of the day and when he finished in Europe he came over to the Pentagon to see us. He had an entourage of troops and was standing up in a tank that was taking him around.”

Although Webb remembers that the British Pentagon staff was treated well by the Americans, the situation was slightly different among the civilians, “There was a feeling that we, the British, had dragged the Americans into the war. It wasn’t exactly spelt out but sometimes there was that kind of atmosphere. They also didn’t seem to have very good communications about events in Europe and I think they had a rather biased view of what was going on. It wasn’t an unpleasant experience but it was something that I noticed.”

Speaking out

Webb left America in October 1945 and briefly returned to Bletchley before she was demobbed in February 1946. She later rejoined the armed forces in the 1950s to become a permanent staff officer in the Territorial Army and ended her military career as a staff captain.

For decades after her wartime service Webb was legally forbidden to talk about Bletchley Park and found ways to maintain her silence, “I just put it out of my mind completely. If people asked what I did I brushed it off by saying that it was just a boring secretarial job. That was the easiest way to approach it and people largely accepted it.”

However, Bletchley veterans began to hold reunions in the 1990s when they were finally free to talk. Webb took full advantage of her newfound freedom and began to speak regularly about her experiences, which she still does today, “The public enjoy it and ask questions that you don’t really expect. It’s fantastic.”

Despite the respect Bletchley Park veterans now receive, Webb is concerned about the global rise of far-right movements today, “It’s very worrying and hurtful. They haven’t learned the lesson [of WWII] and I think it’s appalling. Because the war was so long ago the general public can’t understand the dangers.”

On 9 October 2009 Webb was awarded the Bletchley Park Commemorative Badge in a ceremony with other veterans by the then Foreign Secretary, David Miliband. She was later appointed an MBE in 2015 for promoting the codebreakers’ work but she is still most proud of receiving her badge, “It is more important to me in a sense because Bletchley was unique. There are relatively few of us left and there will never be anything like it again.”