

Interviewee: Helen Le Duc

Interviewer: Stephen Kinsella

Also present: Neil Sharman and unknown female

Location: University of Greenwich

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Interviewer: Ok, Helen, thank you very much for coming in and give me some of your time and your stories. Thank you very much for coming, giving your time to give us some of your memories of your time at war. So I understand that you – you spent a lot of time at Bletchley Park during the war.

Helen: Working for Bletchley.

Interviewer: Working for Bletchley Park.

Helen: Yes, their outstation in Cheadle.

Interviewer: Ok. Can you tell me how old you were when you first started working there? And what year it was?

Helen: I've got my papers with me [laughs].

Interviewer: Ok, refer to those, by all means.

Helen: I mean – joined up when I was seventeen and a half, you know, anyway, that's my husband story that I brought for you.

Interviewer: Oh, thank you.

Helen: And that's the traffic – well, it's a copy of a Traffic Magazine that was sold at Cheadle.

Interviewer: This is amazing.

Helen: And that's of secret pictures that were taken in Cheadle in Staffordshire. They were intercepting. That was my guard of honour which I wanted to send but I couldn't find it at the time so I sent another one in.

Interviewer: Are you happy for us to make copies of these?

Helen: Yes, please, yeah. That's – my husband was – joined up and he was on that – with that company. That's the WAAF that I met fifty-three years after she saw my picture in a magazine. So she got in touch with me and we met at the RAF church in the Strand.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Helen: And they took us to the House of Common – to the Law Courts for coffee.

Interviewer: Yeah, wow.

Helen: That's Chicksands when I went for a reunion, a 'Y' service reunion. That's me in the Morse Room [laughs]. Many years after. I think that's the one I've already sent in.

Interviewer: Wow.

Helen: This is my papers showing when I joined up and I was about seventeen and a half, I think. And that's – we're not naked there but not so much. It looks as if they are because they put bras on but you can't see. I think that's it more or less. They're all spare copies they are.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much.

[Pause while putting photos back into folder].

Interviewer: Ok, are we ready to begin?

Helen: Pardon?

Interviewer: Are we ready to begin?

Helen: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok, we'll stop with the camera anytime if you want to take a break or rest or anything. If you need some water and things just – just let us know. Like I said we've got some – some introductory questions to begin with and then from more of your sort of time at Bletchley. So could you just start by introducing yourself and give us your date of birth, please.

Helen: Yes, I'm Helen Le Duc and I'm – I was born on 21.4.24 so I'm eighty-six now.

Interviewer: Fantastic. And you used to work at Bletchley Park during the war.

Helen: I worked *for* Bletchley Park, yes.

Interviewer: Bletchley Park. So what was your role at Bletchley Park?

Helen: Working for Bletchley Park, an outstation in Cheadle in Staffordshire. It's called an RAF 'Y' Station and I went there after my training. I had trained in Leeds in the post office there and then I was sent, yeah, and whilst I was in Leeds I went to an RAF benevolent concert and we were told to get – to go to whether we wanted to or not and clean it out because it was a week before the concert and it was going to be a benevolent concert so it was going to be on a Sunday and we had to take dusters and clean it out and then sell programs.¹ And whilst I was there I had to go and audition to sing in the concert, you know, for [unclear], and I was prepped and I had to sing, *England Our Island Home Land Of The Free*, with about twenty airmen or thirty airmen around me. I sang the two verses and then the

¹ 5 min

chorus was sung by the men. That was for a Sunday and – during the Battle of Britain and when I was – I did my bit in the concert and then I went into all the rooms to get the autographs of the people that were there and it was ITMA, Tommy Handley and a few others like that. Then the main attraction was Richard Tauber who was like John – the Beatles today, you know, he was so well known, and he sang, *You Are My Heart's Desire*, and things like that, you know. So I got his autograph as well and he was in the dressing room spraying his throat, you know [laughs]. So that was that and then the other one was, well, it was the ITMA crowd, you know, with Tommy Handley and 'Can I do you now sir', the women who used to do that, and Jack Train, so you know.

Interviewer: So how did you come to work at Bletchley then?

Helen: How did I come to work – well, I started off by doing my training then I was sent to do a course for – I went to Upwood which was an Area Bomber Command and I was working there in a [unclear] and transmitting to aircraft, to Blenheims, and giving them directions to how to come home. They would be given to me and I would send them and that was all part of the training because that's how wireless op – a German wireless op. would work by call signs and things like that. Because I had already been to school to learn all the call signs that the Germans would use so then I knew how it was like working in a ground station and listening for an aircraft so you've got to – you got suctioned in to it. But I was actually working in Cheadle but you began to recognise it was an aircraft calling his ground station and quite often they would send 'Heil Hitler', going in the [unclear] it would be all in German. I wouldn't understand the German but I'd write it down in plain language and it would be, 'Heil Hitler', going in and then it sent cue signal and that would be it. The others thing at Cheadle was that I picked up something, I worked in the beacons room and I got very bored with it because it was just sitting there listening to beacons and they always sent a four letter name, like girls names, Lina, Mona, Elsa, Greta and the A in the end was the beam so it would be, di-da-do-do-do-di-di-daaa, and the 'A' would go on and on. Like a long 'A' and that was the beam that the Jerry would use to guide him home. So I got really bored with that and asked if I could move to the big room which was fifty operators in the big room, or maybe more, and my husband was one of them cos he was in the Navy. He went on convoys and he was attached to the RAF because it was aircraft carriers that they used for them to land and they – the men from Cheadle, another outstations would go as a 'Y' party and joined a ship from Scapa Flow go to Murmansk or wherever it was and do the same work at sea. Then on one occasion my husband was drafted to go on it, on HMS Egret which turned out to be a sloop², it wasn't an aircraft carrier and at the last minute – he was drafted to go on it but at the last minute they took him off it. But that was sunk by a radar controlled German bomb. Well, that's what they said at the time, I haven't been to any place to check on it but that what was said in the room where I was working and that's what happened, some of our friends never came back. So my husband was still there and he would go up again on another convoy. He went on about five convoys from Cheadle. I don't think people realise that it was sailors' work, you know, people didn't realise what went on in some of them.

² 10 min

Interviewer: So he was your husband at the time or he was when he was he was going off in convoy?

Helen: I was with him at the time, well, yeah, cos we married there and we got married in 1944.

Interviewer: So what made you decide to volunteer for the RAF?

Helen: Well, actually I wanted to join the Land Army. I just wanted a very fresh aired life. I was brought up in a tenement [laughs] and I wanted – I wanted the countryside and I liked the uniform [laughs]. But they didn't want anybody at that particular time when I wanted to join up so my father who was very interested in wireless, he was always buying a wireless magazine and telling me to go down and get the accumulators charged up and telling me about the different parts of wireless, variable condensers and valves and things like that. So he says, 'Why don't you try to be a wireless operator or something like that?', so really it was my father's idea. I think he was living his dreams through me, you know, and that's – that's it. I joined up as a wireless operator. From there I went to Brinsworth to get my uniform and from there I went to Calne in Wiltshire where I had to – it was a school and that's where I had to learn German procedure and they would – this was after I trained as a wireless operator. This is where they told you to – you had to listen to the different – you were shown the different codes that the Germans would use to call up an aircraft to call up the ground station. They would use their own codes and, well, it could be H-L-D-D-D-E-E-L-W or something like that. So they used – although it was – it was – it wasn't all in German. It was their idea of hiding that they were Germans and that's what we did in the RAF. We had to do codes the same way to an aircraft calling a ground station. So it got to the point when you did train you could be handling more than one aircraft at a time. You'd be searching for a job, you'd have to – it – it was all – everybody were searching for call signs. In this room with fifty people there'd be a man raised on a platform and there was – the operators were civil – really crack civilian operators, sailors, Americans, WAAFs, the lot, you know. You would – you'd search for a group and if you found it you called out the frequency and maybe somebody else had found it as well so whoever got there first got that group by the man monitoring – having it monitored by directions finders squads whatever they do. That meant you had a job for the night. One night I picked up something that – I went down lower on the frequency and I picked up this group which sounded like the beacon. It connected, I could tell the signals were by the same hand somehow or other and I called it out quickly, although it was away off my frequency, I shouldn't have been there and it was monitored. It was put up on the board and then I was taking all the traffic down, a lot of it was in German, a lot of it was code and then the³ wing commander came down and he listened in on my set and then other people came in and listened on my set and it was causing quite a hubbub at the station. I knew something was going on but you never asked. You just got on with it. So I had about four or five different men even standing there because we did had operators – we did have men from Bletchley Park amongst us who were deciphering stuff and the – it just caused a hubbub, you know. My husband was sitting further back and he could see what was going on so it's in his story as well. But, you know, that's what it was all about [laughs].

³ 15 min

Interviewer: Ok. So you – you mentioned that your father recommended that you'd take this role up?

Helen: Pardon?

Interviewer: You mentioned that your father recommended that you'd take this position.

Helen: Well, yeah. Yeah, he was encouraging it, you know.

Interviewer: Did you get any enjoyment out of the job?

Helen: Oh, yes, tremendous.

Interviewer: Yeah. What was the best thing about it?

Helen: Well, the excitement because it was competitive. So competitive, you know, you'd all be – you'd all be trying to get a group to keep you going for the night or whatever you were doing. And the excitement was – I never known anything like it, never. It was just so exciting cos some of them were really crack operators and I had learnt Morse up to thirty words a minute so I was in a room where I was happy. I wasn't happy doing the slow stuff and – just excitement. There was one – it was called the North Sea (??) I think it was called and that used to be an unarmed German aircraft and it would fly over the North Sea and then if you heard – if you heard it send K-R you knew it had spotted a convoy so all that was important, you know. If you had that – if you could get that for the day they always wanted to get that group up every day. You held on to it and you had a lot of work and the main thing was listening for this K-R, you know. Yeah, it was really exciting.

Interviewer: So was there anything that you found particularly difficult about your job?

Helen: No.

Interviewer: No?

Helen: No.

Interviewer: So you mentioned that prior to the war you worked for the Post Office?

Helen: Pardon?

Interviewer: Did you mention that you worked for the Post Office prior to the war?

Helen: Yeah, that's where I trained, yeah. I trained at the Leeds Post Office and used to – I was stationed down a place called Stainbeck Lane with a couple of, I think they were Jewish people, Mr and Mrs Golding and their two daughters. Then I would get the bus transport to the post office in Leeds and was sat in a room, like with a big oval table with transmitters. Mr Bradley was the one that was in charge of us and he was a fantastic man, he really was a crack operator. He got us – we learned the Morse code and then the numbers and then we transmitted to one another and at the end of the course we all had an exam and that was it, I passed it.

Interviewer: Ok. So you mentioned that you had a few guys working with you who came from Bletchley Park?

Helen: Yes.

Interviewer: At the time were you aware of the work that was going on at Bletchley Park or what it was for?

Helen: No.

Interviewer: Not at all?

Helen: No. No, we didn't. We only knew that the – we had a band, The Squadrons Airs, I think or something like that they were called. They used to go to Bletchley Park to play there and, I mean, in that Traffic magazine I think it mentions that they used to like the WRNS that they met there, you know.

Interviewer: Did you ever get to go to Bletchley at all?

Helen: Only after the war. Yeah, I went after the war because I was so – felt so connected, I had to see it, you know. I took my children with me, my son and – my two sons and my daughter [laughs]. That's my granddaughter, the youngest one.

Interviewer: So after the war, once you'd been back to Bletchley and obviously you found out about – a bit more about what was going on there. How did that make you feel with regards to your contributions towards it, what they achieved there?

Helen: Well, I felt quite proud, you know. I started – my husband never wanted to join anything so I joined the RAF club, you know. Cos he didn't want to join anything⁴ as regards – he wanted to forget the war, you know, cos for a long time we did forget the war. It was only when he died that I got sort of – got carried away with it again, you know. Yeah, I did feel – I wanted to investigate and find out more about Bletchley Park so we went to Bletchley Park had a look – I took my son and my daughter and his wife and we had a look around there. Had my picture standing in front of one of the messages that we used to take, the Y-messages and, yeah, we enjoyed the day there. It was lovely. Then from that I joined the Chicksands, the reunion group. So I went to Chicksands with my two sons and we stayed there for three days and we were entertained and we had the picture taken at the Y-set. It was a reunion but I never met anybody that I really knew but I knew that somebody was going there, one of the sailors but that particular year I went he couldn't make it, he wasn't well. So I never really met anyone that I really knew at the reunion.

Interviewer: Ok. So do you think you could describe a typical day while you was working. What – how would it pan out during the day?

⁴ 20

Helen: How'd it pan out? Well, we worked shifts we used to work four till midnight, I think, and then midnight to eight o'clock in the morning. It was three different shifts. There would always be an operator, I'd had – I'd have my desk with the light there, a stack – it was a long pole with a button on the end and you just pressed it to light it up. So that was our traffic book, you know, and I'd take over from the operator that would be there so you never left it. It was always covered and I'd just sit there and search around, do the same thing every day really. And then an operator would relieve you and if you went to the diner [unclear] somebody had to sit in your place while you were – so it was never left unattended and that's just a typical day. Every day was the same more or less, but still exciting.

Interviewer: Yeah. So how long did a shift last?

Helen: Well, eight hours I should think. Yeah, from eight o'clock in the morning till five-ish or something like that. Yeah.

Interviewer: So you mentioned that it was quite competitive work?

Helen: Very competitive.

Interviewer: So were there any shifts that were perhaps not as popular as others with people.

Helen: Well, the shifts that were the most popular were the horsch groups that used to come up. That was to do with what I had actually picked up because I told you there was a lot of interest in it and it was obviously a group changing their course. It was an – I think it was two ground stations, two German ground stations and I think they were changing their course for some reason or other. So the beacons room came down and they were very, very interested because I think it was to do with beacons and they – I can't really explain it all, it's difficult.

Interviewer: Ok. Can you tell me a bit more about how – how it was competitive?

Helen: How it was competitive?

Interviewer: What was you competing over?

Helen: Getting a group.

Interviewer: Getting a group.

Helen: Getting a group.

Interviewer: So did you have like a little league table going or anything like that?

Helen: A little what?

Interviewer: Like a league table or competition with your friends? How did it manifest itself?

Helen: Well, we were just all searching and whoever called out first got the group and that would keep them – if it was a – an interesting it would – you'd be on it for a long time. It would keep you busy all

night. If it was horsch that would – you'd listen to it for a while and then they put the clangers on it which was a noise that came over your headphones until your ear – till the earphones nearly jumped off your head. So that means that they couldn't contact one another. So that was the one that was mostly searched for⁵. That and the – the one for the weather one because that was most important for them to get that because Jerry also sent a lot of changes and codes and what they were going to do for the rest of the, you know, they'd send things out that – that were important to have for our side.

Interviewer: Ok. So despite it being quite competitive it sounds like you had quite a good social life there?

Helen: Oh, very good, yes, yeah. We'd just, well, Arthur was my boyfriend – my girlfriends –

Unknown female: Boyfriend!

Helen: Boyfriend [laughs]. So we were always out together, you know, but they often had dances that Uttoxeter which was ten miles away, I think. They used to have a night for the coloured people and a night for the whites. They never let them mix and quite often there'd be a few fights that would go on in Uttoxeter and the MPs would come and take them away, you know. So that went on a lot but we also had a pub that was very popular just up the road, you know, and it was, mm, I was so happy I can't describe it. I loved it all there.

Interviewer: Yeah. So what would you say is your best memory of that time?

Helen: I just loved it all, really, and then I met my husband there and I hadn't even seen his face but I said to this other WAAF, 'I'm gonna marry that man' [laughs] and I married him and it lasted fifty years and I only saw the back of him.

Interviewer: Fantastic.

Helen: Yeah.

Neil: What made you say that you were going to marry that man?

Helen: I don't know. I just saw the back of him and I said, 'I'm gonna marry that man' [laughs] and then I met him on the bus – we used to have a bus that would take us out of the camp. And I said, 'Oh, how is that sailor getting on that hurt his head?' cos a sailor had – had an injury coming on a van and he had hurt his head so I said, 'Oh, I heard that a sailor had hurt his head, how is he?'. 'Well, that was me', he says, 'What are you doing tonight?' [laughs]. That was the start of it.

Interviewer: That's brilliant. Fantastic.

[Pause]

Interviewer: So following on from your work during the war.

⁵ 25 min

Helen: Yeah.

Interviewer: What did it lead you to do after the war? Did you carry on working in that sort of line?

Helen: No, because I had a family and my Linda was born in 1946 in Edinburgh where I lived and then I had to come and stay at my husband's place in Willesden. We didn't have a house or anything so I stayed with his parents and then we got a prefab because somebody had said if you'd suffered from chest trouble you can get more points for that. So my husband had been on a – to Murmansk on a convoy with no clothing other than a Matelot uniform. No overcoat or anything and he came back with congestion of the – of the lung. He was in the Staffordshire Hospital for six months, for quite a long time actually. So he mentioned that to the doctor and he got the points and we got a prefab. So I stayed in the prefab for twenty odd years. In the mean time I got a job in pharmacy as a typist selling, you know, the manufactured goods that would be sold to the retail shops that had – I would phone them up and get the orders and then they would be delivered to the shops. Then I moved to Twickenham so I still went back to that job and it was a long journey every day and my husband says, 'You've got to pack this up. You can't keep going back like that'. So I decided to call in at Beechams on the Great West Road and I said, 'Have you got any jobs for boarder clerk typist, and they said, 'When do you want to start?'. So I got a job like that, just selling the Beechams goods, getting their orders, a lot of them, Army and Navy, big orders, and then the – became computerised so for Pembroke and you would just get a star⁶ and it took all the joy out of typing away. My sister was a nurse in one of the local hospitals, she says, 'Why don't you become an auxiliary nurse?'. So followed that up and I became an auxiliary nurse for the next twenty years and worked in a hospital and then retired and then got a job at a doctor because I got bored stuffed [laughs] and that was it.

Interviewer: Ok.

Helen: So I retired at sixty-eight.

Interviewer: Ok. So you spent pretty much the entire war in England?

Helen: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helen: Yeah.

Interviewer: And obviously the nature of your work being quite sensitive, were you able to still keep in touch with your family during this time?

Helen: Oh, yes. Yeah. Yes, but you couldn't tell them about what you were doing.

Interviewer: No?

⁶ 30 min

Helen: No.

Interviewer: So how did you communicate? With letters?

Helen: Yeah, letters, yeah.

Interviewer: Ok. So obviously again with the nature of your work being quite sensitive and obviously you can't really talk to too many people about. Did that lead to you having – do you think closer relationships with the people you worked with?

Helen: Not, really because I had – there's a picture of them there. I had a WAAF on one bed and another WAAF on the other side of me and I didn't know where they worked. We were living in the same hut but none of us ever asked, unless you saw the person in the room that you were working in. But the two girls on either side of me, one was my best mate at my wedding and I never asked her where she worked. I never was aware of seeing her at work and the one on the other side was the same and it turned out they were working in a little hut that we never knew about. I never investigated.

Neil: Was that quite typical of the time that people just would not volunteer what they were doing or people would just keep very quiet about what they were doing?

Helen: Oh, yeah, I think you – you had to be very, very – keep your mouth shut sort of thing, you know, never discussed it with anybody.

Interviewer: Did you ever discuss your time during the war once it was over?

Helen: Yes, we did but mostly with the family. With the family – my husband and I used to send Morse messages at Christmas to see what, you know, I mean, she'll vouch for that.

Unknown female: Across the dinner table [laughs].

Helen: [Laughs]. And I we used to say, 'Give me a message and I'll send it to Gran – I'll send it to dad', so I used to whistle Morse [laughs] and he'd whistle back and the kids, of course. Couldn't understand it, you know.

Interviewer: Ok. So what do you think was the worst part of your job?

Helen: What do I think was?

Interviewer: The worst part of the job? What was the part that you least liked doing?

Helen: The worst part?

Interviewer: Mm.

Helen: There wasn't any worst part. I enjoyed it all.

Interviewer: The whole thing?

Helen: Yes, yeah.

Neil: How was – how was it working on nights when you knew that your husband was on a convoy?

Helen: Well, that again was a bit weird because when he was on one convoy there was a lot going on and – but you just got on with your work but you – you didn't know whether they were going to come back or not because that's how it was. And as it happened when he – when he was at one part Scharnhorst was there and, well, it's in his story because – I just can't remember it all. But that was – yeah, because there was other sailors still there. I mean, they didn't all go on the convoys although they all took their turn eventually. But they sort of turned around and looked at me as if, you know, 'Do you know what's going on?' you know. You didn't always know what was going on but you'd got a good idea that they were in some sort of danger, you know. So but, as I say, he went on five convoys whilst I knew him and he always came back but on this occasion, he didn't. He only came back on his own. I remember the night in that room when we were all talking about it, how awful it was. But three boys, I think, from Cheadle went and never came back. So it was that sort of thing that went on.

Interviewer: Was you⁷ ever in any danger working there? Were you ever subject to any raids or anything?

Helen: Any danger?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helen: I suppose we were because, I mean, I think the enemy knew about Cheadle, you know, and – but you could be bombed or whatever, you know.

Interviewer: Did you ever experience any raid or anything?

Helen: No.

Interviewer: No. Ok. So can you give us an overview of your training prior to you work there?

Helen: The training I thought was excellent. Because you learn the Morse, you learn transmitting and receiving and I think the biggest asset was working for bomber command at Upwood and being in a – in a tower transmitting to aircraft and then getting their message back again. I thought that gave me a wonderful view of the enemy. A German would be doing the same thing and you'd just felt, you know, what I'm doing they're doing, sort of thing.

Interviewer: How about your – your basic training with the RAF before you became a – an operator? What was that like?

Helen: Oh, well, that was very good. Yes, I mean, you just went through the cycle of getting your uniforms, sending your civilian clothes home and just getting on with moving to different places for –

⁷ 35 min

have to go to somewhere to learn about batteries and wireless sets and things like that. Maybe that was all but it will come to me. It will come to me. There was a college, Cranwell College. We went there and then this one at – where they make the sausages in Wiltshire – the school that I went to, the German school. That was very helpful because then I knew how to pick up a Jerry, yeah.

Interviewer: So did you find it difficult to transition from civilian to military life at all?

Helen: Not at all. I loved it.

Interviewer: Really?

Helen: Yeah. Yeah, I did [laughs].

Interviewer: But was there anything in particular that you liked more than anything else?

Helen: Hmm, no. I just liked the whole life. The whole life style was great.

Interviewer: So how – what was better about military life than civilian life?

Helen: What was better?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helen: The freedom [laughs]. You never had your parents telling you what to do. Yeah, the freedom, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helen: Definitely.

Neil: Ok. Did you think about staying in the RAF after the war?

Helen: No, I didn't. No, I just wanted to have a family. I did, you know, I – I came out under clause twenty-two, which is if you're pregnant which I was because I'd been married a year or so and I got out under the clause twenty-two. My husband was still in and he had to go to Wimbledon to learn Japanese Morse and – but then it says the atomic bombs dropped so that was the end of that. So he didn't have to go, he was due to go, you know, to the Jap war, he learned Japanese Morse.

Interviewer: Was you ever at risk of having to be posted overseas?

Helen: Well, you were told that that could happen when you first joined up, that you could be posted overseas. That's why they showed you the different radios and if you were ever dropped in France or anywhere you'd have a radio with you and that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Ok. Was you being fairly prepared for that, you think?

Helen: Well, I couldn't talk French so I don't think I'd be any good at that really [laughs].

Interviewer: Ok. So how about you tell us about your wedding then?

Helen: The wedding?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Helen: Yes, well, my wedding was in Cheadle Parish Church. The WAAF that I never knew where she worked, she was my best maid and my husband's friend in the Navy was the best man and one of the civilian operators, a Mr. Doss, who had been a Post Office operator, he was – he gave me away cos my parents couldn't come to the wedding. When I got to the church, there was a WAAF Guard of Honour I never expected⁸ and then there was two rows of them, you know, there was a whole lot had turned out. One of the WAAFs played the organ for the wedding march [laughs]. It was just so unexpected. I never expected anybody to be there, you know. Even local photographers were there because the picture was put in the local paper and I cut it out to send it to somebody and, of course, I've lost it now. I've got the original but lost that picture that was in that WAAF magazine and fifty-three years later, a WAAF got in touch with me and she says, 'I'm the one that's second from the right in your wedding photograph', and could we meet. This was fifty-three years after so we arranged to meet at the RAF church, Clements and St. Danes, up at the Strand and I said I would hold up a magazine, you know, and she caught me and saw me and then we went. We were six hundred WAAFs were taken over the road to the Law Courts and we had the coffee there and I sat in the corner with Hilda, the one that I'd met up with after fifty-three years, and we reminisced about what we did, you know. Her job, where I worked, was – when we took the traffic from the – that we had written down, we used to hang it up on a hook, put the light on and her job would be to come and collect it. She was a traffic clerk, so she would be looking all over the room for lights and getting them as quick as she could to be deciphered. So that was that.

Neil: Did you have time for a honeymoon as well?

Helen: A honeymoon we had at my husband's grandmother in Wallingford, we went there. Yeah, so. But he picked up the wrong hat, he had a big hat on that was – he picked up the other sailor's hat, you see [laughs]. We just had twelve guests, with [unclear] and stuff like that, you know. So that was it.

Interviewer: So you were quite lucky having your husband around pretty much during the war?

Helen: Oh, yeah, very lucky, yes.

Interviewer: But I've imagined a lot of the other ladies that you worked with too their husbands were – were overseas?

Helen: Well, actually there was two or three that had relationships in Cheadle and Hilda, the one that I met again, she was married to an RAF chap at Cheadle. They got married there and he was tele-

⁸ 40 min

printer operator but he died just recently, you know. But so that was one couple and then there – I think there was about four couples that got married in Cheadle. Yeah. There was a lot of the girls that were single, you know. There's been a lot of funny incidents. I mean, I went to Edinburgh once on leave and I went to a dance at the Palais de [unclear] and I took my pay book out of my pocket because I wanted to, you know, feminine shape and everything [laugh] and I put a pair of silk stocking on. Per as normally you wore lisle stockings and when I was there I was tapped on the shoulder and taken aside and they said, 'Why are you wearing nylon stockings?' and 'where's your pay book?'. Of course, I couldn't find it. I said – I had to say, 'I haven't got it, I left it behind', so they says, 'I'm afraid we will have to escort you home'. So they escorted me home and when we knocked at the door my mother says, 'Oh, you brought a couple of pals. Come in and have a cup of tea' [laughs]. I said, 'No, mum it's not like that' and I was put on a charge because I was – I didn't have my pay book with me and when I got back to Cheadle I had to clear out the toilets and work in the cookhouse for a week [laughs]. So I made very good pancakes [laughs].

Interviewer: What did your mother think of you having a – having been put on a charge?

Helen: Well, they got really worried, you know, I said, 'Oh, don't worry mum, I haven't done anything too bad', you know [laughs].

Interviewer: Did – obviously having your husband around, do you think you have any different relationships with other ladies? Do you reckon it had an effect on anything?

Helen: I don't think so cos they all had⁹ – they all had mates and boyfriends and relationships.

Neil: Did you have preparations for if the Germans invaded?

Helen: Hmmm, well, we used to have – learn about gas and if you smelt uraniums, that was – smell a bit like a gas.

Interviewer: Uranium is that, really?

Helen: Uraniums.

Interviewer: Ok.

Helen: So, you know, you did have sort of practices like that. Outside the huts and, you know, just lying on the ground at night. You'd be taken out sometimes at night to crawl around and smell gas.

Neil: In the early part of the war, did you think it was likely the Germans would invade or was the general atmosphere and the morale good thinking this wouldn't happen?

⁹ 45 min

Helen: Just never really thought of being, you know, I never ever thought of being invaded like that. I think you were so tied up in your work that you didn't think of anything else, you know. But your mind was just completely on your work, yeah, you know.

Interviewer: Did you ever detect anything during your work that you later found out to have led to a bigger incident? Perhaps read something in the paper about something?

Helen: Hmm, I don't think anything like that happened.

Interviewer: So –

Helen: The only thing I can remember is one WAAF, she was transmitting to Palestine or somewhere like that, Cairo or somewhere and she says, 'I'm just –' she tapped in English, 'I'm just off for a coffee', well, cos she – that was one of the biggest crimes she could have committed because if a Jerry had picked it up . So that went all around the station, we all heard that this WAAF had done that, you know. She should never have sent that message so she had actually given her position away cos they'd be listening for English stuff as well, like we were for the Germans.

Interviewer: And what happened to her?

Helen: I didn't know because she was in Cairo. I just know – I just know that the story went around about her doing that.

Interviewer: Ok. So do you think after working in that job after a while that you became perhaps desensitised to what was going on?

Helen: No, I don't think so because you – cos you were really trying to get to the enemy in the way that we'd been taught, you know.

Interviewer: I actually don't have any more questions.

Neil: Did you get many visits from the top brass?

Helen: From the top brass?

Neil: Yeah.

Helen: The only time we were called into the top brass was when an airman – and I could swear it was Alan Turing was dressed up in an RAF uniform and he approached me and I noticed that his uniform wasn't quite right. There was no – there was just a uniform, an RAF uniform but no badges, no nothing on it and he said, 'How do I get to the Beacons Room?' and having worked in the Beacons, I said, 'Well, you just go up the stairs and turn right and it's the first on your left'. And the next day there was a – a document put up on the wall that said, 'Anyone who spoke to this man', that had been round the station, this airman, 'I want them to report to the office'. So about ten of us reported to the office and we were asked what questions he asked and I told him what he'd said to me and I told him how to get there and then others told them what they'd been asked and the Wing

Commander said, 'Well, you must never ever speak to anybody and tell them how to get there'. Because he said, 'It could have been a spy and you were giving information¹⁰ about the – about Cheadle', you know. I mean, I – I did – having seen his photograph afterwards, Alan Turing, I just feel convinced it was him.

Neil: Who was Alan Turing?

Helen: Pardon?

Neil: Who was Alan Turing?

Helen: Oh, the enigma chap.

Neil: Ok, yeah.

Helen: Yeah. But I could swear it was him, I mean, cos it was a face that I couldn't forget and when I saw him afterwards, after the war in magazines and things. I just feel it was him.

Interviewer: Was it well known that Alan Turing was working at Bletchley Park during the war?

Helen: No, not to us. We never knew. I'm just thinking of how I saw him, this man, and then saw him afterwards that I just feel convinced it was him and it's the sort of thing that he could have been doing, you know, because he was very much one for keeping your mouth shut and that sort of thing.

Neil: Did breaking the enigma code have an impact on your job?

Helen: The enigma code?

Neil: When the code was broken at Bletchley, did that have an impact directly on the work that you were doing?

Helen: Well, we knew it was important. We knew that they would be deciphering it all but you'd never get any information. You'd never get the information that you would be, like, you'd want to hear. 'What was that I just taken down?', but you never got that. So just left you a bit –

Neil: I – I probably have to ask you this question. Have you seen the film, the Enigma film?

Helen: Oh, yes.

Neil: Did you think that was true to life? Did it – would it reflect life as you remember?

Helen: A little bit, yeah. Not entirely but – no.

Neil: No, a little bit of Hollywood [laughs].

Helen: Yeah, a little bit of Hollywood there, yeah.

¹⁰ 50 min

Neil: And did you meet many people from different nationalities? So it sounds like the dances you went to were they American dances or?

Helen: No, I met a lot of Americans. There was Americans – American Air Force men came over, in fact, there's a picture of them in that magazine. They worked with us. But four or five of them but no foreign – no Polish or any people like that.

Neil: So mainly British people that you worked with?

Helen: There was mainly British people, yeah. Yeah.

Neil: Ok. I'm going to ask you too if you have any questions. Or if there are any other stories that you think that Helen knows that we were may have missed today?

Unknown female: You had an important letter from – recently, didn't you? Sent to you?

Helen: The what? Offer – oh, oh, the badges that I got, yeah.

Helen's relative: Oh, no, also George Brown, wasn't it?

Helen: Sorry?

Unknown female: George Brown. George Brown.

Unknown female: George Brown wrote to you?

Helen: Oh, yeah. I got a diploma from Gordon Brown.

Unknown female: Gordon Brown, sorry!

Unknown female: You said George Brown and I repeated it [laughs]!

[Laughter]

Neil: So George – George Brown?

Unknown female: You're saying it as well now [laughs].

Neil: So Gordon Brown wrote to you?

Helen: It was from Gordon Brown, yeah, just –

Unknown female: A certificate.

Helen: I've got it, sort of in a frame, and just thanking us for what we did during the war and the important role that we played, you know.

Neil: Are you from Scotland originally?

Helen: Yes, I'm from Edinburgh.

Neil: And had you moved from Leeds by the time war broke out or did you move to Leeds during the war?

Helen: No, I moved to Leeds during the war. That was the moves I made once I'd left Edinburgh.

Neil: So you worked for the Post Office, right ok.

Interviewer: Do you want to tell us a little bit about these badges you got?

Helen: Well, I've got the – I got the Chicksands badge and I've got the Bletchley badge, the latest one. It's got – it's got marks on it for Bletchley and outstations and I was an outstation. I've got another – I've got two Chicksands bands, one to –

End of Interview.