**Records of Service: Codebreakers Transcript**

**Anthony Wilson-Smith:**Hi, I am Anthony Wilson-Smith, president and CEO of Historica Canada. The way we see the world today is informed a lot by our past, both the good and the bad. This is where our podcasts come in. Podcasts like “[Residential Schools](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools-podcast-series)”, a three-part series created to honour the stories of survivors, their families, and communities and to commemorate the history and legacy of Residential Schools in Canada.

**Riley Burns:**“I didn’t want to be an Indian, I didn’t know who in the hell I wanted to be. I wasn’t accepted by the white man; I was accepted by my own people in my reserve.”

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**AD READ**: In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to adopt an official multiculturalism policy. It was meant to preserve cultural freedoms and recognize the contributions of diverse groups to Canadian society. Today, multiculturalism is a defining feature of the Canadian identity, but for much of our history, that wasn’t the case. Today it’s a defining feature of the Canadian identity. But for much of our history, that wasn’t the case. Listen to A Place to Belong: A History of Multiculturalism in Canada, a five-part series from Historica Canada. Join us as we explore the history of multiculturalism in Canada. Subscribe to A Place to Belong on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

**Dorothy Lincoln:**“You know I figured out what you’re doing in there. He said, ‘There’s army, navy, air force, civilians, he said, I think you’re decoding.’ Well, I nearly died on the spot and I thought, ‘My God, what am I going to say?’”

**Maia Foster:**Welcome to “Record of Service”, a podcast presented by Historica Canada. I’m your host, Maia Foster. In this series, we bring you interviews with Canada’s veterans—their stories of life, loss and service. Today’s episode: Codebreakers.

We begin in Bletchley Park, a Victorian manor some 80 kilometers outside of London, England. Starting in 1938, this 50-acre estate became a main station for the Government Code and Cypher School. At the start of the Second World War, 200 people were working at Bletchley Park—experts in math, crossword-puzzles, and chess who were hired to decode the enemy’s encrypted messages.

**Beryl Howe:**“Most of them came from Oxford or Cambridge University.”

**MF:**This is Beryl Howe, one of Bletchley’s decoders.

**BH:**“Mostly mathematicians or people who had [a] sort of sideways vision in that they could look at a problem and see it from other than the straightforward angle. They were people who could do cryptic crossword puzzles in no time at all. People who had high mathematical skills.”

**Elizabeth Burnyeat:**“Bletchley Park was full of odd people, all nationalities, all different types of uniforms, all doing different things; nobody knew what anybody else was doing."

**MF:**That was Elizabeth Burnyeat, a veteran decoder who worked at Bletchley. By late 1944, the staff there had ballooned to close to 10,000 people, working around the clock in three shifts. Over two thirds of the staff were women.

Dorothy Lincoln remembers being presented with this mysterious opportunity when she inquired about joining the Women’s Royal Naval Service (also known as Wrens).

**Dorothy Lincoln:**“I went for this interview and I said ‘I really want to join the Wrens.’ He asked me about my life, and he said, ‘Well I think I’ve got just the job for you’. And I said, ‘Oh! What’s that?’ I was only about 18 at the time. And he said, ‘Well, it’s the most important thing and it means so much to help the war effort!’ I thought, ‘Heavens, I’m only 18 years old. What the heck could I possibly do that would help the war effort that much?’ And so, I said to him, ‘Can I ask you a couple of questions?’ And he said, ‘Fire away!’ I said, ‘Is it dangerous?’ I mean I had visions of being turned into a spy or something. And he said, ‘No, no, it’s not the least bit dangerous.’ And I said, ‘If it’s secret, what will I tell my family?’ And he said, ‘Just tell them you’re doing office work’. And of course, it was in a way. It involved a little bit of mathematics, so that was fine. By this time, I was so curious, and I did not know what on earth it could be that I said, ‘Ooh! Count me in!’”

**MF:** Dorothy would go on to work with decryption machines, including the code-breaking computer known as ‘Colossus.’

**DL:** “By the end of the war we were cracking 90,000 messages a month. And they had a huge staff, the government, to look it over and then they would decide what was important, which messages were important, to help the government – Churchill in particular, because it was his whole baby in the first place – and to help him run the war. And by the end of it, sometimes we knew information before even the high command in Germany would find out! And we had listeners all around the world!”

**MF:**Second World War decoding machines were incredibly effective, even by today’s standards. Dorothy recalls a cipher challenge that took place in 2007.

**DL:** “The German government took an Enigma machine out of the museum and sent 3 coded messages to Bletchley, so the Colossus was in competition with a line-up of experts on the modern computers. Colossus cracked two messages the first day and they did the third one the next morning. And none of the people, none of the workers on the ordinary, not the ordinary, but the modern-day computers cracked one of them.”

**MF:**For the first three years of the war, the Special Operations Executive was also operating Station X out of Bletchley. The SOE was created to promote sabotage and subversion behind enemy lines. It included dozens of training schools around the world, including Canada’s Camp X.

Officially named “Special Training School 103, Camp X”, the code deciphering site was located on the northwestern shore of Lake Ontario, between Whitby and Oshawa. Its radio communications centre housed a high-speed transmitter known as ‘Hydra’. Hydra processed traffic from Bletchley Park and the American Army and Navy. Isobel Duclos worked at Camp X.

**Isobel Duclos: “**I just worked at Camp X sending messages to Britain and receiving them and handing them over to the men that were over me. Well, it was top secret. You were not to speak about anything. You were allowed to go home, but a Provo took you to the station, picked you up, and brought you back. We were just north of Lake Ontario. They trained the spies there, where I was. Mind you, I wasn’t with the spies, but that’s where they trained the spies. And they had to do all kinds of things to get their training, and then we went in, the Army girls went in, and we just took over from there. We just sent the messages to Britain and they sent it back. But the chaps that were the spies, they went over to Britain in different places, but you couldn’t talk about them.”

**MF:** In 1943, Evelyn Davis joined the Canadian Women’s Army Corps or CWAC.

**ED:**“I knew quite a lot about Morse code and radio before joining and being young and foolish, I wanted to return to Orillia and requested a transfer. It was granted and I returned to Trinity Barracks in Toronto, expecting to return to Orillia. About that time, the training of agents at Camp X, a spy training school and communication centre, ceased operation at the end of April or early May and became entirely communications. I was sent down to an office at Yonge and King Street and interviewed by a Major Justin. A few days later, June the 1st, 1944, three CWAC were picked up by an army vehicle and driven out of Toronto to Camp X. Our first view was a group of buildings surrounded by a fence and guards on the gates.”

“My first job was on a teleprinter as a teletypist. Later, I worked on a Kleinschmidt machine rather like a clunky typewriter with tape. I spent most of my time working on the Baume tape puller, or underlighter. We were sending and receiving traffic to England and to New York and Washington. We worked 365 days a year, 24 hours a day and there were several shifts, 8-4, 4-12, 12-8, and a couple of swing shifts. It was many years after the war, we learned we were sending to Bletchley Park. All traffic was in five letter groups and plain English was never used.”

**MF:**Accepting a job as a codebreaker involved signing the Official Secrets Act, a document that swore the signer to absolute secrecy.

**ED:** “The secrecy was kept. My family did not know where I was or what I was doing until after the war.”

**MF:** Margarita Trull, who worked at Bletchley Park, was required to keep quiet for much longer.

**Margarita Trull:**“First of all, we were sworn under the War Secrets Act, which was ninety years. I haven’t reached that yet, but there are certain things that have to be kept quiet, and I’m never a hundred percent sure what I can or what I can’t talk about. Because at the time, if we had divulged anything, we could have either been sent up to detention camp, or… believe it or not, they said shot! We were very careful not to speak to anybody about it. My mother died not knowing what I did.”

**MF:**She said that she still feels the pressure of keeping quiet about aspects of her work. Her 90 years of sworn secrecy will expire in 2030. This binding secrecy induced anxiety in many codebreakers. It meant that few were able to reveal their important roles in the war even to their loved ones.

**DL:** “They said ‘Now, you must realize this is absolutely secret. You must not tell anyone, especially any one of your relatives or boyfriend or anyone who was serving. Because if they are taken prisoner, they could be tortured for information.’ They said if you do tell anyone, if you break your promise, you will be fined 2,000 pounds and you’ll go to prison for 2 years.’

“Well of course, we were all horrified, we were scared of even talking in our sleep. I never told a soul.”

**MF:** Dorothy Lincoln once came very close to being discovered.

**DL:**“My husband was very smart, and he used to come and meet me, if he had a leave and I didn’t, and he’d come to the gates of Bletchley. And he was sort of, ‘You know, I figured out what you’re doing in there.’ He said, ‘There’s army, navy, air force, civilians,’ he said, ‘I think you’re decoding’. Well, I nearly died on the spot and I thought, ‘Oh my God, what am I going to say?’ And then I said, ‘Now how could I be doing that? I don’t speak German’. He said, ‘Oh no, that’s right.’”

**MF:**Due to the top-secret nature of their work, positions held by especially female code breakers were described to the outside world as clerical jobs. Terms like “writer” or “secretary” were common. Consequently, female codebreakers’ resumes did not reflect their skills or experience, and their contributions to the war effort went unrecognized for many years.

**DL:**“’Cause nobody knew a lot of the things that they did by cracking messages, they weren’t given their due! You know, they weren’t recognized as being the ones who actually changed the course of the war. And Churchill called us ‘The geese that laid the golden egg and never cackled.’ That’s lovely I think!

“And if our watch was responsible for some wonderful thing happening or a victory or something - a sinking of a ship or something like that, they’d come and tell us and say, ‘You were responsible on your watch,’ and we’d all go, ‘Hooray! Hooray!’ But they didn’t give us a drink for it.”

**MF:**Many of the women who had been on the forefront of computer science technology, and completed crucial work that helped win the war, were expected to return to traditional female roles.

**DL:** “Everybody did something, women just helped to take over. And then after the war was over, they said, ‘Oh well, now you’ve got to leave and just go back to your little houses because the jobs have got to be for the men now.’ So that’s why they started to rebel a bit and make a difference. Quite a different world now for women.”

**MF: “**Record of Service” is a production of [The Memory Project Speakers Bureau](https://www.thememoryproject.com/) and archive, connecting veterans and Canadian Forces members with school and community groups from coast to coast. The Memory Project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada. We are program of Historica Canada, a non-profit offering programs that you can use to explore, learn, and reflect on Canadian history, and what it means to be Canadian.

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Next time on record of service:

**Robert Burden:**“It was five days and five nights that the only time I left [the] admitting department in the tent was to go to the bathroom or get something to eat. I didn’t get back to my own tent to change my socks or brush my teeth in five days and five nights.”

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