

AN INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY STORY

By Robert Williamson for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society

The 110th anniversary of International Women's Day (I.W.D.) recognized their social, cultural and political achievements on Sunday March 8, 2020. Continuing their call for women's equality, this year's theme is; "An Equal World is an Enabled World"

A recent display of a German Enigma coding machine at Warplane Heritage made me aware of the true story of the creation of the world's first electronic digital computer designed to break codes during WW 2. It was the foundation of modern computers and illustrates this year's Women's Day theme.

Winston Churchill wrote that the Decoding Centre at Bletchley Park north of London provided information that won WW 2. Of the 12,000 people who worked there, 2/3 or 8,000 were women like the secretaries and typists or machine operators as shown below,* but as the war wore on, many women were found to be talented linguists, decoders and analysts.

Joan Murray, née Clarke,* a clergyman's daughter, applied for an important position at Bletchley Park. Despite being the **top math student** at Cambridge University, she



was almost denied an opportunity to contend for the position until she out-performed all the male applicants in puzzle solving. She was assigned to work with Alan Turing, designer of the first computer and played a role in breaking the German Naval Enigma codes, providing protection far beyond value to Atlantic convoys in 1941. After the war she was appointed "Member of the British Empire" (MBE).



Mavis Batey, née Lever was reading German at University College in London when the war began. She intended to go into nursing, but because of her **linguistic skills** was assigned to Bletchley Park. She imagined becoming a spy seducing German Officers but was assigned to code breaking instead. Consequently she contributed to many naval successes including the British victory over the Italian Mediterranean fleet at Matapan in 1941.*



Marigold Philips, attended all the best schools. Expected to marry wealth she joined the Wrens instead. Sent to Bletchley she trained as a **code breaker**. During Christmas 1943 her team's information trapped and sank the German battlecruiser, Scharnhorst, as it attacked a supply convoy en route to Murmansk in northern Russia.*



When the Battleship Bismarck, pride of the Kriegsmarine, broke out into the Atlantic convoy shipping lanes in 1941 and sank Britain's finest warship, HMS Hood, the hunt was on, creating the famous "Sink the Bismarck" episode in Britain's naval history. **Jane Fawcett, née Hughes**, daughter of a wealthy merchant, spent her vacations in the Alps where she became fluent in German. She was employed at Bletchley Park as a **typist in the Decoding Room**. On Sunday May 25, 1941 while typing routine

messages in German, she astutely noticed an unusual reference to the port of Brest. She brought this to the attention of her supervisor. A reconnaissance aircraft searched the locale in question, and the Bismarck was found and sunk. After the war Jane became a professional opera singer. In retirement she worked to preserve old Victorian buildings and was awarded the MBE.*



Elizebeth Smith Friedman, a farm girl from Indiana has recently been recognized as America's greatest Cryptanalysis. She learned code breaking during WW1. She and her husband formed a team of cryptographers assigned to break Japan's naval code prior to WW2. They succeeded in 1940 but because of America's incredulity and incompetence, they were unheard before Pearl Harbor. However, six months later, they were heard at the Battle of Midway, bringing ultimate victory

in the Pacific war. *Bing.com/images*

The work done by women employed breaking codes was one of the greatest achievements of World War Two. But because they were sworn to secrecy their efforts have only recently come to light. What better time to tell this story now on the anniversary of International Women's Day!

* Source: Michael Smith's "Debs of Bletchley Park" 2015.