



Margaret Cooper

Carlisle's Margaret Cooper, 1918-2016

Sworn to secrecy by the British Government, **Carlisle's Margaret Cooper** spent the **Second World War** at the ultra-secretive [Bletchley Park](#), the centre of Allied code-breaking during the Second World War.



- Born Margaret Elizabeth Douglas in Punta del Este, Uruguay, to Argentinian parents, she volunteered to leave her friends and family to travel by steamer across the Atlantic in waters heavily infested with German U-Boats. On arrival in the UK, she signed up to join the British Royal Navy in *The Women's Royal Naval Service* (WRENS). Following a rigorous security screening she was selected as one of the first six women to be posted to the top-secret work at Bletchley Park for work in code breaking.



- Cooper was assigned to the Naval Section in Hut 4 to work with a *Bombe*, an electro-mechanical device developed by **Alan Turing** to assist British cryptologists to decipher German Naval Enigma-machine encrypted messages. Cooper at one time reported to Bletchley Park Security the presence of a disheveled character bicycling in the grounds of Bletchley Park who subsequently turned out to be the genius Alan Turing himself.
- In 1942 she witnessed the Allies' destruction of Axis supply ships to the German Afrika Korps in Libya and other major wartime events including the massive bombing of Coventry. While the plans had been fully decrypted in advance, no warning was possible without compromising the decryption work at Bletchley Park.

- She was subsequently promoted to be the personal assistant to Frank Birch (head of the naval section in Hut 4). In 1944 Cooper was assigned to Plymouth to serve as the Royal Navy liaison with Bletchley on U-boat activity during the D-Day landings.
- *I was sent down to Plymouth [on the coast] on the 26th of April 1944. Plymouth and Portsmouth were really the chief naval invasion ports of France [for the D-Day landings]. So absolutely everything was happening there. And I was to be, well, I was on the staff of the chief of staff, but I was liaison between Bletchley and Plymouth; should any U-boat messages relative to that area come up that I could deliver them to the appropriate person,"* Mrs. Cooper told Historica Canada's Memory Project.
- On one of her Leaves from Bletchley Park she travelled to Scotland to visit relatives with a single hen's egg nested in her pocket as the only contribution she could make under strict wartime rationing.
- In 1942 Margaret briefly met Craig Cooper at the Bletchley Railway Station who was serving as a volunteer with the Royal Canadian Airforce. While they did not exchange names at the time Craig subsequently established contact with Margaret after sending a letter addressed to "*the blonde Wren from Argentina on the platform at Bletchley station.*" They stayed in touch by letters throughout the war years and following VE Day (*Victory in Europe*) were reunited, married, and then moved to Canada. With some trepidation Margaret's had become a War Bride.
- Settling in Carlisle in 1947, the couple purchased the 65-acre Cherry Hill Farm on the 8th Concession (Craig had lived in Waterdown for a time while his father was principal at Waterdown High School at what is now Sealy Park). Margaret lived at Cherry Hill Farm until 2001 when she moved to Waterdown following her husband's death, living in McGregor Village at 47 Main St North.
- Interestingly, Cooper felt she could not tell her family and friends (including her brother who served as an intelligence officer) about her wartime service until Britain's *Official Secrets Act* was lifted in the 1970s. The British Government did not formally recognize the work done at Bletchley Park until 2009 – that year Cooper received a letter from British Prime Minister Gordon Brown recognizing her war service.
- Margaret Cooper died in 2016 at the age of 98.