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Text w/Tape:

INAME: MCGARRAH, Georgette

IPLACE: National Cryptologic Museum, Conference Room, Ft. Meade, MD

IVIEWER: COOLEY, David P., MUCKLOW, Dr. Timothy J.

Cooley: This is NSA Oral History 2013-06. Today is 22 January 2013, and we are talking to Georgette McGarrah, who worked at Bletchley Park during World War II as a Hagelin operator. This interview will focus on Ms. McGarrah's efforts at Bletchley Park during World War II. My name is David Cooley, and I am the Oral Historian with the Center for Cryptologic History. Along with me is Dr. Timothy Mucklow, Senior Historian with the Center for Cryptologic History. This interview's being recorded in the conference room of the National Cryptologic Museum; the interview is UNCLASSIFIED. Georgette, welcome! We in the Center for Cryptologic History appreciate you donating your time for this retrospective look at your work at Bletchley Park, during World War II. Now, to begin with would you talk to us about the hiring process and what it was like initially, when you went to work at Bletchley Park?

McGarrah: Well, the hiring process was that we went to the Admiralty in London, because we worked in the Naval Section of Bletchley Park, and we got the job and we worked on the Hagelin machine.

Cooley: What was the background? What were they looking for? Did you have a particular mathematics background or anything of that nature?

McGarrah: No, not a thing. We, uh, we spoke both languages. We spoke French and, of course, English, but we never used our French.

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Cooley: Mm hmm, uh...

McGarrah: And we worked...We worked, uh, a eight hour shift, five...eight to five, five to midnight, midnight to nine right through the war and no holidays.

Cooley: Mm hmm.

McGarrah: Those were the civilians. I think that the Forces did get leave, all the others, you know, the Army, the Wrens and the Air Force they all got holidays, but we didn't.

Cooley: Mm hmm. And what was the percentage like? How many civilian and how many military folks worked at Bletchley Park? Do you remember?

McGarrah: Well, no, I couldn't tell you that, but I know we were ten thousand people.

Cooley: Uh huh.

McGarrah: Ten thousand, so we had Army, Navy, Air Force, Intelligence and Civilians, but we amounted to ten thousand people.

Cooley: Okay, now when you were hired, were...Did they tell you specifically what you were hired to do?

McGarrah: No, no, no, they didn't. They didn't. They just told us that what we were going to do had to be secret, and we could not say...Nobody knew what anybody else did in the Park. Even husband and wife, who worked in the same building, were never able to tell each other what they were doing.

Cooley: Humph.

Mucklow: How did you come to apply for a position? ((Coughing.)) Of course, you didn't know that it was going to be a Bletchley Park, but what was your background that, you know, you decided that you wanted to go to work there?

McGarrah: Well, we wanted to be a Wren, but we couldn't be a Wren, because I was born in 1921 and they stopped recruiting Wrens who were people that were born in 1921. And so, my sister and I decided we did not...We went to the Admiralty and tried to get a job, but we...We didn't know it was going to be at Bletchley Park. ((Acknowledgment.)) We just went to the Admiralty and got a job in the Navy Section at Bletchley Park.

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Cooley: Were you involved at all...There's all of the stories about ((coughing)) the crossword puzzles in The Times of London was used as a recruiting tool. Was that...Were you involved in that at all, or...?

McGarrah: No, not at all...Not at all, but I know...I mean, ((she laughs)) there were chess players, there were mathematicians they were. Yes, crossword puzzle geniuses. I mean, they had absolute experts there.

Cooley: Mm hmm. How much of the actual and theoretical operation of the Hagelin machine did they explain to you, in terms of your training regime when you came to Bletchley Park? ((Coughing.)) What was that training regime like...?

McGarrah: Well, they just...They just told us how to use the machine...How to use the four cogs on the machine, and you had a little handle that you had to turn around and put the letters in different positions and then the tape would come out and we'd send that tape through the hatch and we don't know what happened next. I supposed that's how they broke the code, I don't know. ((She chuckles.))

Cooley: Mm hmm. Did there...How many people worked in your shift, in the particular area (B% that you)...?

McGarrah: We were...We were twenty, in our shift, twenty, in a hut, in a wooden hut. We worked in a wooden hut. A lot of people worked in brick buildings, but there were several huts as well. ((She coughs.))

Cooley: Mm hmm.

Mucklow: Did...Do you know...Do you remember which hut, by chance?

McGarrah: Yes, Hut four.

Cooley: Hut four.

McGarrah: Hut four, and Hut four was joined by Hut six, and Hut six was the intelligence people...worked in Hut six.

Cooley: Yeah.

Mucklow: Now, were you the only people who worked in that hut? You were that compartmented? Or, were there several compartments in that hut?

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McGarrah: No, just the two; Hut four and Hut six.

Mucklow: Okay.

Cooley: Were there Special Operating Procedures for you in Hut four? Did you have particular things that you were not allowed to talk about, even within your group in Hut four?

McGarrah: No, we never...We never talked about anything except doing what they told us to do on our machines. No, we never...We never talked about anything.

Cooley: What...How difficult was that, in terms of your ability to further grasp what you were doing?

McGarrah: It could be monotonous. Well, it was very monotonous, of course.

Cooley: Uh huh.

McGarrah: And I mean working night shift was awful. I mean, you know, you get tired but you ((she chuckles))...You had to keep awake.

Cooley: Uh huh.

Mucklow: Well, this...Just in terms of physical conditions there, especially if you worked nights. You know, right now, we're enjoying twenty-two degrees ((he chuckles))...

McGarrah: (B% Cloudy?)

Mucklow: Here at the...And I don't mean "the enjoy" at all, but anyway, we're having twenty-two degrees here. What were...What...How cool was the inside of the hut there, say in the winter? Uh, what...

McGarrah: It was...It was chilly; we had to wear our coats.

Mucklow: Okay.

McGarrah: We had a...one radiator, but that was all.

Mucklow: Yeah.

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Cooley: How much of maintenance was required of you on the machines? Were there any maintenance schedules that you had to maintain on the Hagelin machines that you operated?

McGarrah: No, not a thing. Not a thing. Those machines never went wrong, and we, and we—twenty of us using the machines and they never went wrong.

Mucklow: Could you describe, just briefly, what your duty day would be like?

McGarrah: Well, we'd get to Bletchley Park from...What did I say, nine to five? I've forgotten now what I said.

Mucklow: Yes, nine...Okay.

McGarrah: But anyway, we got there and we sat down and...and did our ((coughing))...We could have a coffee break, but it was all in (1B), we never went to a cafeteria or anything. We did have...Yeah, we did have breakfast at the cafeteria (2G), which was out...Which was within the Park...Within Bletchley Park. We did do that.

Cooley: So, there was no ability...Or, they had no capability to feed people there? There was a cafeteria?

McGarrah: Yeah, there was a cafeteria, inside the gates of Bletchley Park, and I can remember when we went there, we didn't like it. Well, we didn't like it because we didn't speak good English; and we were shy. But there was a cafeteria.

Cooley: Okay, wow.

Mucklow: And so, when you would get to work in the morning, uh, how did you begin the duty day? Did they give you a list of tasks that had to be performed? Or, just how did that work?

McGarrah: Well, they gave us these letters to put in our machines, and then we'd crank them. We had four cogs, and we'd put them...The letters on...in...on the cogs and turn a handle, and then a letter...another letter would come out, but we didn't know what they were all about. But that's what we did all day, during the whole shift. We had a coffee break, which we had our coffee in the hut, but that's what we did.

Cooley: Mm hmm.

Mucklow: Humph, and...

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Cooley: What was the atmosphere like at Bletchley Park, because there was such compartmentation and such secrecy? Were you able to develop friendships with people?

McGarrah: Well, friendships within our hut, and of course, we did know some other...I mean, we knew some Naval officers because we worked in the Naval Section. And we knew some Intelligence people, because they worked in Hut six, but we just knew them to say, "Hello." We never talked about anything.

Cooley: Mm hmm. What...

Mucklow: Oh, I'm sorry.

Cooley: Go ahead...

Mucklow: I was going to ask what...Uh, did...During the course of your work day, did you have any problems, the really hard...Difficult problems that you had to solve? Were they reoccurring or did...Was it just, uh, simply a...A simple, streamlined process?

McGarrah: No, there were never any problems. We just did know, we continued using those machines all the time, and that's what we did. We...'Cause as I say, it was monotonous but obviously useful.

Mucklow: Obviously important, yes.

Cooley: What was...You've been talking about the compartmentation and everything...What was the security like at Bletchley Park? Uh, talk to us about, "Hey, you came in the gates and you had to be...

McGarrah: Well, you had to show your badge...You had to show a badge when you got in the gate. ((Acknowledgment.)) That...That was the secret part, I suppose. We had to always show our badge. And you were billeted outside the Park; nobody lived in the Park.

Cooley: Mm hmm, now when you...Uh huh, did you...

McGarrah: They all had billets, I mean stayed with, uh, different parts of England, and then they'd come by bus to the Park or by train, and we were only thirty miles from London and never got bombed.

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Cooley: Mm hmm. Did you, uh...What was it...Did you have to show your badge again to get into Hut 4?

McGarrah: Oh, no, no, no, no, once you were in the...Once you were in the Park, you were in the Park.

Cooley: Okay.

McGarrah: No, you never...You never had to show your badge again.

Cooley: Well, how did they know if you were...belonged in Hut 4 or not? I mean, obviously, the people knew you, ((coughing)) but was there an attempt to make sure that you weren't...You know, that was the building, the hut that you were supposed to be in, or...?

McGarrah: No, they weren't...No, there wasn't any...No, that's what...That's amazing. No, we never...There weren't many policemen or guards or anything. No, once you were in the Park, you were in the Park and you went to the...Hut 4.

Cooley: Uh huh.

McGarrah: Well, we were lucky, we were just...We were just a few minutes from the gate. We were very near the mansion...We were very nearly the mansion, which is the X...Which is called the X Station.

Cooley: Mm hmm.

Mucklow: Now, were you billeted with your sister?

McGarrah: Yes!

Mucklow: And where exactly were you billeted?

McGarrah: ((She repeats his question.)) Where was I billeted?

Mucklow: Yes, (1G)...

McGarrah: (B% Where , you mean where we stayed?)

Cooley: Yes.

Mucklow: Yes, yes...

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McGarrah: Well, at first we stayed in Milton Keynes, which is where Bletchley Park is. We stayed in a little cottage, with a elderly couple who told us, "If you don't speak the King's English; don't speak at all." So, we never spoke to them. ((Laughter.)) But, billeted there too, was a civilian and an Army Officer, and, of course, we were able to talk to them. Course, they didn't...They weren't so (B% trickish.) ((The laughter continues.))

Mucklow: Now....And so, would you get...Would they give you breakfast or you took breakfast there at the Park?

McGarrah: No, no...Yes, they would give us breakfast and dinner. Yes, we would.

Mucklow: So, you and your sister had a room by yourselves, or did you have to share it with...?

McGarrah: No, uh, no...We shared a room, but you see, we weren't there very long, because then they changed and said we could be...Because Bletchley Park started to recruit so many people, that in the end, they said, well, the people that can travel by bus can be billeted at home. So, we were billeted at (B% Beckford) which is our home, and we caught the bus for our three shifts. We caught the bus to Bletchley Park every day.

Mucklow: Did you ever have any trouble with transportation, bus not coming or....?

McGarrah: Oh, no. Luckily, no, we were never late. No, there were never...((She laughs.)) Nobody was ever late. There was never some of the people getting tired or anything, no, not in our hut, anyway.

Mucklow: Now, were you recompensed for your travel, or...Or did you just have to take that out of your pay?

McGarrah: Well, that I don't...No, it wasn't...We had to pay, but the point is, because we were not educated in England, our civilian pay was less than the other civilians.

Mucklow: Oh, gee. Well, now, how much were you paid?

McGarrah: That I can't remember, it wasn't much. I really can't remember how much we were paid, really. Don't remember.

Mucklow: (B% Okay.)

Cooley: When did you...I...I heard descriptions of a...What is it, a twentieth or

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twenty-fifth anniversary celebration that Bletchley Park veterans had that...Where they were first able to talk about what they had been doing (B% during) the war. Did you attend that?

McGarrah: Uh, we...I've attended four reunions. I don't know whether I attended the very first one, because, of course, I have to travel to England for that, from here. But I've been to four, so far, and found them most enjoyable...

Cooley: Uh huh, did...

McGarrah: But never knew anybody who worked with us. I think we're too old, you see, ((laughter)) I think they've probably all passed away or something.

Cooley: Uh huh.

McGarrah: Or didn't come to the reunions. No, I still go to the reunions, yes, every year.

Mucklow: Oh, how marvelous!

Cooley: Mm hmm.

Mucklow: Gee...

Cooley: Did you ever get...Do you still maintain contact with the people that you worked with?

McGarrah: Um, no...No, we don't, and it's a...We used to, when we...When...After the war, we did have reunions in London, with people from our hut, but then somehow or other, it all dwindled down and we don't...Now, we don't know anybody that used to work with us.

Cooley: Mm hmm.

McGarrah: No, we haven't, yet we...(B% we're all in...) I mean, we check in the book. There's a big book that tells you who worked at Bletchley Park, and we've checked on some of their names. And we did...We see them on...They're named there, but it doesn't tell us where they live or anything.

Cooley: Mm hmm.

Mucklow: Now, where...Among the twenty people who worked in your Hut 4, how many were women?

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McGarrah: Um, we were...We didn't have any men. ((Someone chuckles.)) They were all...They were all women in our hut.

Mucklow: Uh huh, okay.

Cooley: Do you remember any of the people or any of the leaders or managers or...of Bletchley Park that you...Did you have contact with any of these people?

McGarrah: Well, I mean, we used to see Alan Turing, who invented the computer.

Cooley: Right!

McGarrah: On the Colossus machine.

Cooley: So, you did see Alan Turing?

McGarrah: Oh, yes, we did see him. We didn't talk to him, but we used to see him. He used to ride his bicycle to the Park every morning.

Cooley: Uh huh.

McGarrah: And the Colossus machine, you know, was...Churchill decided that it must be demolished after the war. They didn't want that machine to be, uh, in existence, and everybody was so upset about that because it's a invention of the computer. So, Tony Sale decided that he would get all the people who used to work on the Colossus machine...Get them all together and rebuild Colossus. And they did, and they called it Phoenix. And when I was there last year, they sent a message and a message came back. And it's in perfect working order.

Cooley: Humph, wow! That's incredible...That's great.

McGarrah: It is, because poor Mr. Sale died a week before he was able to come to see the machine work again.

Cooley: Oh, my...

McGarrah: But his wife was there, and that was nice.

Cooley: Oh, that's good, that's good.

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Mucklow: Besides Alan Turing, were there any other people you recognized or can remember? People who would be more known to the general public?

McGarrah: I'm trying to...I'm trying to think. Of course, I knew Naval officers, but...Oh, dear...Um...Oh well, we...We knew...Uh, who did we knew? (sic) We knew the chess player who beat the Russians during the (B% war.) I can't remember his name, now. No, I can't...I can't remember, really...Can't remember. You now, this isn't going to be very interesting for you?

Mucklow: Oh, we...Actually it is very...

Cooley: No, it is. It actually...It is...

Mucklow: It is very interesting.

Cooley: No, don't question it. It's very, very interesting. Could you talk to us about...Give us a couple of the anecdotes or fondest memories you had (sic) of working at Bletchley Park during World War II?

McGraw: Well, in our hut, we had quite...Very interesting girls. And they could write poems, and they really were very good. Some were very unusual poems that she...They wrote. And one of them wrote a poem for my 21st birthday, and that was very good too. They were fun in our hut. We enjoyed ourselves.

Cooley: Good, good.

Mucklow: Could you remember—and you probably do—what were the least disagreeable aspects of working there at Bletchley?

McGarrah: Well, no, we never seemed to...No, we never seemed to, except we were cold in the hut, but otherwise, no, we seemed to never...No, I can't think of anybody complaining. But I know we had a...We had a lady whose husband was on a ship, and of course we got the message that the ship was sunk. And that wasn't very...that was sad! And also, a girl who had a husband who was killed at, um, at Anzio, and that was sad, too, because they seemed to know the news before they were ever told.

Mucklow: Mm...

McGarrah: But...But that happened. That was sad.

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Cooley: Where...When did you find out what you were doing during the war?

McGarrah: ((She repeats his question.)) When did I find out what I was doing during the war?

Cooley: Yeah, what...When did you find out the significance of what you were doing?

McGarrah: ((She talks over Dave.)) (B% That was supposed to be thirty years afterward.) We weren't allowed to talk about anything, so thirty years afterwards we thought that we were...We did a ((she chuckles)) an interesting work, otherwise we didn't really know. Nobody....Nobody knew what each other was doing, so, we didn't know how important it was.

Cooley: Mm hmm...After...

McGarrah: And did you know what Churchill called the people working at Bletchley Park?

Cooley: No.

McGarrah: Did you know what he called us?

Cooley: No.

McGarrah: He called us, "The Golden Geese who Laid the Golden Egg and Never Cackled." ((All laugh.)) And that's what he called us, because that's true.

Cooley: Yes.

Mucklow: Yeah.

McGarrah: Nobody...Nobody said a word. It couldn't happen today, though, you know, Dave, it couldn't happen today.

Cooley: Yes, yes.

Mucklow: Now, uh, I think Churchill visited there once or twice. Did you ever...Did you get to see him?

McGarrah: Uh, no, we didn't see him, but he did come and visit the Park at one of the reunions, and in fact, where he stood, they now have got a big (B% brick) with a plaque on it that...where Churchill stood. And of course, we always

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look at his car. His car is also parked at Bletchley Park for the reunions.

Mucklow: Mm hmm.

McGarrah: You can ride in it, if you like. ((All laugh.))

Mucklow: They would let you ride, but not us, I'm afraid.

McGarrah: But I didn't.

Cooley: Did you have any experiences with, like, the Americans that worked there? Did you have any contact with them?

McGarrah: Uh, no...Well, we did see them, and I know that...I mean, I know that when they...It was first known that the Americans were coming to work with us, everybody was a bit suspicious and thought, "Well...((laughter)) Will they...Can they keep the secret?" ((She says, laughingly.)) And, in fact, they were very useful, but at first, we were a bit apprehensive about that. ((Acknowledgment.)) But, it all worked out well. They were as good as everybody else; probably a great help too. Well, we were a great help to them as well.

Cooley: Certainly.

McGarrah: But I know that I was in the mansion, when I heard the news about Pearl Harbor, and then we thought, "Ah, the Americans are going to come and help us now." Which is when...Which is what happened. America came into the war after Pearl Harbor.

Cooley: Right, right.

Mucklow: Besides the Americans you noticed working there at Bletchley, what other nationalities were there as well?

McGarrah: Oh, well there...In Bletchley Park, out of the ten thousand people working there, there were only two German Jews, and we knew them. The Ettinghausen brothers, and they were ex...wonderful code breakers, but there were only two in the whole of the...of Bletchley Park. They were very good code breakers. And there were Polish, of course. ((U/I voice/words)) Polish people, because I know that...There's a plaque for the Polish people, as well at Bletchley Park.

Mucklow: No, did you socially interact with any of these people in off-duty hours?

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McGarrah: No, I don't, no. No, I don't think...Why, one Naval officer for my birthday took us all...All our hut to the...To a pub down the road, and we all signed our names on the ceiling. And that pub still exists. ((Laughter.))

Cooley: Mm hmm.

Mucklow: So, ((clears his throat)) you worked a...an eight-hour...Minimum of an eight-hour day, and you spent what, about forty-five minutes getting to work in the morning?

McGarrah: So, from Bedford, it took us about...Yes, it took us about forty-five minutes by bus.

Mucklow: Humph, okay.

McGarrah: To Bletchley, yeah.

Cooley: Where was the pub that you went to? Do you...It wasn't that pub in Cambridge, was it?

McGarrah: Oh, no, it was in Milton Keynes.

Cooley: Oh, okay.

McGarrah: Milton Keynes. And you see, that's...That's thirty miles from London by train.

Cooley: Uh huh.

McGarrah: But it's Milton Keynes; that's where Bletchley Park is.

Cooley: Yeah, yeah. I was won...I went to Cambridge, when I was over in England, and there was a pub there that had all sorts of signatures on the ceiling from people; flyers and folks that had been there in World War II...And had trained there. So, that's why I thought maybe that was the place that you had gone to.

McGarrah: No, no...Not...No, but, of course, I know Cambridge. That's where you go to watch...See Shakespeare plays, at Stratford on Avon, yeah.

Cooley: Do you have any other memories of things that...Things...What it was like at Bletchley Park? Do you remember, uh...?

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McGarrah: Well, they all knew us by the (B% Muller) sisters. And I remember now, the chap who beat the Russians at chess; he was called Hugh Alexander.

Mucklow: Oh, yeah, we remember.

Cooley: Yeah, we know who that is.

Mucklow: Yeah, yeah, we know.

Cooley: Yeah. Okay...Yeah...

Mucklow: So...So, basically, as any good intelligence organization, nobody talked shop when you went home, or even when you were having meals.

McGarrah: No, no...Not at all, not at all. Nobody talked about a thing.

Mucklow: Uh, were...

McGarrah: We didn't!

Cooley: Was there ever a statement or were you provided a statement when you first got there to work, that you could be arrested and/or executed?

McGarrah: Oh, no, no, no, no, no, but when we were sworn to secrecy, they said if we whispered a word anywhere or in a pub, we would be shot at dawn. So, we didn't feel like saying anything, but that's what they told us. ((Laughter.)) Everybody was sworn to secrecy.

Cooley: Right.

McGarrah: And they kept the secret.

Cooley: Okay, very good. ((Some whispering.)) Well, Georgette, we want to thank you very much for giving us this opportunity to talk to you.

McGarrah: Yeah, but you know, I think you really thought I was more famous than that, but I...I'm not, you know.

Mucklow: No, no, no...

McGarrah: So, you (2G)...

Cooley: You did any outstanding job here. This is fun!

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McGarrah: Oh, no. It's all some...

Cooley: This is fun! This is really good information; we really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us.

McGarrah: Well, thank you very much. ((She says laughingly.))

Mucklow: Would, in the future after we've had a chance to review the transcript, could we give you a call again and maybe have some follow-up questions?

McGarrah: Oh, well, you...You might, but I don't think you'll find anything...anything...

Mucklow: Well, I...You've already been...More helpful than you probably realize.

Cooley: This has been very, very helpful.

Mucklow: Yeah!

Cooley: Very helpful; we really appreciate it.

McGarrah: Oh, well thank you both...And you know they call Bletchley Park the X Station. Station X.

Mucklow: Station X, yes.

Cooley: Yes.

McGarrah: That's the code word...name for Bletchley Park...Station X, and of course, all the messages were ULTRA SECRET, not just SECRET but ULTRA SECRET.

Cooley: Right, right. Okay. Well, Georgette, again, thank you very much. And we'll probably be back in touch with you, if you don't mind?

McGarrah: No, I don't mind. I don't mind.

Mucklow: But you see, the war...The war was shortened by two years, thanks to Bletchley Park?

Cooley: Oh, yes!

McGarrah: And if that hadn't happened, England would have been invaded.

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Cooley: Right.

McGarrah: You would have been all right, over here, but we would have been invaded.

Cooley: Okay.

McGarrah: All right.

Cooley: All right.

McGarrah: Thank you, Dave!

Cooley: Thank you very much, Georgette! And we'll be back in touch.

McGarrah: You're welcome!

Cooley: Thank you!

Mucklow: Thank you, again!

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