

The Nuremberg typist and the translator

Military matters Two British women who were in the thick of the Nazi war crimes trials are honoured

Guy Walters

This Wednesday in Washington two British women in their early nineties will be honoured for the vital parts they played at the International Military Tribunal held after the Second World War in Nuremberg.

Until now, the roles of Gwen Niebergall, 92, and Barbara Bitter, 94, in what was truly the "trial of the century", have been woefully underreported.

But their achievements will be recognised at this year's Federal Inter-Agency Holocaust Remembrance Programme at the Lincoln Theatre, a yearly event in which US Government employees are educated about the Holocaust.

For Niebergall, who was born Gwen Heron in London in 1919, her involvement in the trials was a chance to get what she calls "payback" against the Germans. An administrative secretary who had learnt her skills at the Bedford Square Secretarial College, Niebergall was in charge of a team of 30 typists whose job was to produce the transcripts of the day's proceedings in time for the judges and counsel to inspect the following morning.

The process by which the transcripts were produced seems



Gwen Niebergall, sitting centre ankle deep in thousands of mimeographed pages, supervising the assembly of the transcripts for the Nuremberg tribunal
Ray D'Addario/US Army

exhaustive.

Court reporters would take down the proceedings in shorthand, which would then be passed to Niebergall's typists, who were capable of typing at 100 words a minute.

"Don't forget," she says, "these weren't electric typewriters. You really had to punch away at the keys. Me and my girls were really very good."

After the typing was complete, the pages were set on to a stencil, and then run through a mimeograph machine.

This piece of technology was nothing like as efficient as a modern photocopier, and as a result, thousands of pages came out as blanks and would litter the floor ankle deep.

Nevertheless, despite what looked like chaos, Niebergall managed to leave work at about 5pm. She and her fellow secretaries would repair to the Grand Hotel in Nuremberg - where they lived for a year - and enjoy a well earned drink. Because part of the hotel was bomb-damaged, Niebergall had to