The Untold Story

*Code Girls* by Liza Mundy is the untold story of the *American Women Code Breakers of World War II*. Recruited from small Southern towns and posh New England colleges, more than 10,000 American women served in the U.S. Army and Navy as code breakers during World War II. The story of their work, which helped shorten the war and save thousands of lives, has not been told until now. Many of us have watched the PBS television series *“The Bletchley Circle”* and know of the wartime code breaking efforts in England. Now thanks to our own Bob Poskitt, we will learn about such efforts in the United States, and a connection to our Society!

Two women quoted in the book are Elizabeth Reynard and her cousin, Virginia Gildersleeve, ladies very important in the founding of the Dennis Historical Society. Elizabeth was a retired Barnard College professor when she purchased the Captain Theophilus Baker House and Buildings at the corner of Main Street and Trotting Park Road in South Dennis in the 1950s. She named the house “Jericho” after the city in the Bible whose “walls were falling down.” Following her death in January 1962, the restoration of the house and grounds was continued by Virginia Gildersleeve, Dean Emeritus of Barnard, who then gifted the property to the Town of Dennis in 1962. The Town then completed that restoration work. This gift was instrumental in the formation of the Dennis Historical Society.

Wave Lieutenant Senior Grade, Elizabeth Reynard  
Virginia Gildersleeve, Dean of Barnard College  
(Photos from the Dennis Historical Digital Archives)
Let’s go back now to the early 1940s. Following the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the U.S. military decided to recruit educated young women with degrees from top colleges like Wellesley, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Goucher, Radcliffe, Barnard and Bryn Mawr to start the meticulous work of breaking the German and Japanese military codes. At the time, it was not easy to convince the all male, military bureaucracy that women could take on this difficult task. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was joined by advocacy groups, such as the American Association of University Women, with outspoken members like Virginia Gildersleeve, who is quoted as saying, “If the Navy could have possibly used dogs or ducks or monkeys, certain of the older admirals would probably have greatly preferred them to women.” Gender equality was not a term even remotely understood, much less expressed at the time! In 1942, it was Elizabeth Reynard, who came up with the acronym WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services) to describe the newly created Women’s Naval Reserve, in which she was the first to be appointed a Lieutenant.

In 1942, only 4% of women in America had college degrees, and they were almost never seen in the male dominated workplace. With so many men in the military, however, the timing was right for women to jump at this opportunity to go to Washington and start new careers…even though they knew absolutely nothing about what they would be doing! These were women who were curious and resourceful. They wanted to earn a living on their own. Often, they excelled in foreign languages and math and were on the lookout for work that satisfied them intellectually. Many of them were dissatisfied school teachers and secretaries, most were quite brilliant!

With guidance from Virginia Gildersleeve, uniforms for these women were designed and introduced. They were smartly tailored and an instant success, as they conveyed to the skeptical public that the U.S. military really cared about its women. Some code breakers were quoted as saying, “the uniform and their independence” were among the top reasons they accepted these new positions. The work was very challenging! Often, it included 12 hour days. Working conditions were often hot, humid, and very crowded. Secrecy was of the highest priority, as any leaks, even to family members, might result in military deaths. Living conditions in Washington, DC were worse than the working conditions, very sparse. Several women often sharing a room and communal lavatories.

The first breakthrough came in cracking the code of the Japanese “Purple” machine, a truly unbelievable accomplishment that could only be duplicated decades later with the use of computers. Code breaking enabled our military to know the locations of enemy ships, their payloads, and travel routes. Breaking the codes the Germans transmitted on their Enigma machines led to General Eisenhower’s decision to land US troops at Normandy instead of Calais, when D Day finally arrived. At the height, the code breaking women were deciphering over 126,000 enemy messages a month.
A Wonderful Final Note with a Local Connection!

Ann Barus Seeley was an outstanding, history major at Smith College in the early 1940s, when her dean asked her to attend a clandestine meeting in their science building. It was a recruiting meeting. Ann put her plans to be an intern at a prestigious firm in Washington on hold and jumped at the chance to be part of this new code breaking effort. Her job involved ceaseless, mental math, performed day after day, and week after week for more than three years. One of her mental gifts was the ability to detect common mistakes the enemy made in their coded messages. Identifying these mistakes was key in breaking the very complex Japanese codes.

Today, Ann is in her mid-nineties! She lives in a wonderful, early house on the Bass River in South Yarmouth and enjoys sailing, kayaking and giving tours of the Judah Baker Windmill close to her home on the river. Truly one of the unsung war heroes, Ann accepted the challenge to break the enemy codes. She takes her place along with Elizabeth Reynard, Virginia Gildersleeve, and other smart, courageous women, who greatly contributed to the war effort! They succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations. When the war was finally over, these outstanding women quietly went back to their homes and lives, promising to keep their efforts secret. All of us today enjoy the freedoms of this wonderful country, because of these amazing women! The Untold Story of the Code Girls is factual and needs to be shared. To Ann, Elizabeth, Virginia and thousands of other women, we honor and remember you and your outstanding accomplishments! THANK YOU, THANK YOU!

Bob Poskitt

And thank you, Bob, for sharing the Cape Cod connection to this untold story of American history!

Editor's Note:
The email below was sent to the DHS on July 19, 2017

Mr. Talbott,

Attached is the panel in which we used the photograph of LT Elizabeth Reynard you graciously allowed the Naval War College Museum to use for our exhibit. Many active duty sailors will see this and learn about the origins of the WAVES 75 years ago, and we thank you for playing a part in that. The Dennis Historical Society has been credited as requested. Thank you for your help and have a wonderful day.

Walter Nicolds
Museum Specialist (History)
Naval War College Museum
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If you have a story to share, please email it to me, Dave Talbott, at:

info@dennishistoricalsociety.org
This house and barn in East Dennis, "Photo 34-House," circa 1890, in the DHS Digital Archives, has no label. If anyone can identify it, or provide any information on it, please email me at info@dennishistoricalsociety.org. Helping to fill in the blanks for archive pictures will be a new, ongoing, newsletter feature.