

## Mary Elizabeth Caccavale

Mary Elizabeth, or “Betty” as she prefers to be called, is a significant contributor for a number of reasons. She was the first female enlistee in South Carolina, went through the first basic training program for the U.S. Navy “Waves,” served her entire career in Washington in the highly secretive naval office where codes were broken, is profiled in the book Women in War, and continues to speak to school children every year about her wartime experiences.

*Betty enlisted in Spartanburg, SC in 1942 (there was no provision for drafting women), and was sworn in right away, but because Congress had not established any procedures for training women she was not called for duty until March of 1943. At that time, she and a group of 25 reported to Cedar falls, Iowa for basic training. Her reason for choosing the Navy was because her father had tried to run away to enlist in that branch during the W.W.I, but was too young for service. Her swearing in was a major event in town, and was covered by the local paper, much to the chagrin of her mother (but not her father).*

There was really no special training for them. Where possible, they underwent training identical to their male counterparts. *As she described it, it was particularly rigorous because the “old salt” instructors resented their presence, and because the males knew that as their numbers grew, they would fill jobs that would send the men off to sea. When questioned if any special camaraderie developed, Betty said it certainly did, and that she felt it might be viewed as the beginning of the women’s lib movement.*

Betty had one experience that, unbeknownst to her at the time, predicted her ultimate role as a code breaker. Because of a near drowning experience, she could not swim. When her trainer realized this, he sent her to the unit commander. *After her explanation, she was exempted from that test, probably one of the few times that ever happened. As she later found out, the combination of her IQ scores and the fact that she was 5<sup>th</sup> generation American had already marked her for later assignment.*

After training, she and (only) one other from that group reported to Washington. There they met the others with whom they would serve. The first thing that they had to do was take a second oath, this time one of secrecy, where they had to swear they would not divulge anything about their work to anyone (including their fellow workers) until such time as the government said they were released from that oath. This in fact did not occur until many years after the end of the war.

They all were assigned to one barrack, and they worked for years in three rotating shifts. They were given frequent short passes, and as Betty was from SC, she got to go home often. She later found out that, due to the nature of their work, any time any of them were not at work or in the barracks, they were followed by an FBI agent (including trips to home). We discussed those visits, and she said no one ever asked what she did. Of course, they thought she was an Admiral’s secretary, but still, no one pried.

*Their code breaking work consisted of taking words and, based on frequency of common characters, trying to piece together how the code was structured. As she said, nowadays computers can easily do that. When asked if they ever had enough words to understand the*

*message once the code was broken, she said they did not, and they were not allowed to talk about it with their co-workers. Secrecy was so tight that when their unit was awarded a presidential citation, that was not made public until long after the close of the war.* As she expressed, they all understood the importance of what they were doing, but on a day to day basis, the work became very routine, *As stated in the citation, the work done by her unit was credited with shortening the war by almost two years.*

Another aspect of security worth mentioning is that, during their briefings and as part of their training, they were cautioned that both they and their office could/would be prime targets for sabotage, or even for an attack. *As such, they were instructed that in the event of imminent danger, they were to eat those items in their possession that were the most highly classified.*

Humorous incidents were few and far between. Betty described how, when she was carrying some material into a highly classified office, she came face to face with a man in an admiral's uniform that was clearly of Japanese descent, and who was in fact a Japanese American U.S. Navy admiral. He quickly read her expression and eased the situation, even complimenting her on her initial reaction when she saw his face.

Betty was fortunate to have spent a year casually dating a member of another country's ambassador corps, during which time she attended many social events at different embassies. Both this and her other Washington experiences provided valuable insight into human nature, something she would apply throughout her life.

She had started dating her husband during the war. After his second Purple Heart, he was to be discharged as partially handicapped. As the war effort was starting to wind down, they decided to get married. As a wife of a disabled vet, she became eligible for early discharge. Even though in their work, they never saw completed messages, their office sensed the war was almost over, so she elected to leave service. During her three-year tour, she had attained the highest enlisted rank possible, serving in a critically important branch of the Navy.

*In discussing her post-war activities, it was interesting to note that, contrary to what males had available, there were no veteran's organizations established for women until years later.* Betty served as administrative assistant to the head of the Cotton Exchange in New York until she and her husband opened their own plumbing business, which they ran until retirement.

When asked how her service had influenced her life, she said it taught her self-discipline, exposed her to a far broader population than she had experienced in SC, made her more cosmopolitan, gave her experiences far different than most have in decades and in general made her more aware of how to live in what would become the post war world.

Noteworthy are her comments regarding the distress they experienced when, during the Vietnamese war, their son spoke out against the war effort. It took both she and her husband a while to reconcile the concept that you could be anti-government, but still be patriotic. As stated at the outset, for many years both she and her husband have spoken to fourth and fifth graders in their local elementary school when the classes study W.W.II. *Of note too, when you listen to any of those that were engaged in the war effort, is how their involvement influenced their*

*thinking, their values, appreciation for the Country, and most importantly, how those values were passed on to their children. Based on all I have read, it is this last element that was so critical to the progress made in the decades following the war.*