

Marie Watters Colton

Mrs. Colton graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in December 1942. From there she joined the Army Signal Corps as a translator because of her foreign language background. She had come very close to joining the WAVES but decided that she really liked Washington, DC and wanted to work there. Coincidentally she was recruited by a Lieutenant Fox who had graduated from Asheville School.

She was sent to Washington, DC in late 1942 and stayed there until Sept. 1943. While in Washington she lived in a dormitory in Arlington Farms and worked at Arlington Hall. Arlington Hall was a Signal Corps language training center. Sixty years later Mrs. Colton's own daughter trained in a foreign language in the same building in Arlington Hall in which she had trained in 1943. Mrs. Colton worked in the Spanish Dept. translating decoded documents from Spain. Spain was neutral during the war but had good relations with the Axis Powers and useful intelligence could be gleaned by breaking her codes and reading the messages. Mrs. Colton's work was sensitive and she was considered a "spy" by the Signal Corps who gave her a codename, X-23, with which to sign her reports.

During her time there Mrs. Colton did not translate any "hot reports" about troop movements but did recall one important message that referred to the meeting at Yalta between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. Madrid was one of the only ways for all of the Axis powers to communicate so it was important to read the messages going to and from there. Many dealt with Axis shipping in South America and the many diplomatic outposts maintained there by the Axis.

One day while she was decoding documents using a device that incorporated a cipher, obtained through espionage means, to translate four digit numbers into words the device "stopped working". Mrs. Colton realized that the Spanish had changed the cipher and the decoding device wouldn't work without a new one. She put in a request for a new cipher and a short time later received a photograph on her desk. The photo was of a very hairy man's hand (Mrs. Colton assumed this was an employee of the Spanish Embassy) holding the cipher so that an accomplice could take a photo of it. His watch read 3am! It was a very exciting glimpse into the world of espionage!

In September 1943 Mrs. Colton married Henry Colton. She left Washington, DC to move to Florida where he was completing training as a naval aviator. In the spring of 1944 he left for England. Mrs. Colton recalls that it was "the worst day of my life. I couldn't even look at him." While Mr. Colton was overseas Mrs. Colton moved back to Chapel Hill to live with her mother.

She described life in Chapel Hill at that time; "Everything was rationed- shoes, butter, sugar. I had a lot of friends there so we'd get together but our letters were censored and parts were cut out... We knew the attack was coming from England to the coast of Europe. It was pretty nerve-wracking." To occupy her time during this trying period Mrs. Colton played bridge, watched movies and visited her in-laws in Nashville,

Tennessee. She recalls getting a telegram from her husband explaining that his brother, an Army Air Force pilot, had been shot down and killed over Germany. Later she worried about Mr. Colton being transferred to the Pacific for the invasion of Japan but fortunately that never occurred.

Mrs. Colton also had a brother who flew with the Army Air Force in the Aleutian Islands where the weather was as much a risk as the Japanese. He was told that if his plane went down in the freezing water he would have about a minute to live. Her brother in law, Mr. Colton's younger brother, served in Europe and was slightly wounded. When they wrote letters Mr. Colton was very careful not to romanticize the war. He was believed that it was dangerous for people to have that kind of notion.

In September 1944, Mr. Colton returned home. Mrs. Colton met him in Raleigh with her mother and aunt. They had brought a wonderful meal and were surprised when Mr. Colton arrived with armfuls of C and K rations that the troops eat in the field. He had crossed the Atlantic on the ocean liner *Queen Mary*, then in use as a troop transport. They had been issued the rations in case the ship was torpedoed! Fortunately he also brought back other presents from Europe; a cashmere sweater from Scotland, a leather purse and bonnet among others.

Mrs. Colton's experience in the war and even before led her to believe that we should seek other means of resolving our disputes. She remembered back to the 7th Grade when she watched All Quiet on the Western Front and thought it was "the worst thing that could happen to anyone." Her experiences in World War Two only reinforced the belief that we should teach peace and negotiating skills in School. She also believes that the UN has a role to play in keeping the peace and in fact served as a delegate to the UN Commission on the Status of Women and attended a UNESCO meeting in Paris.