

MARIE WATTERS COLTON

This interview was conducted by Reid Chapman on April 3, 2003 at 392 Charlotte Street, Asheville, NC. Mrs. Colton graduated from Chapel Hill, December 1942.

1:00

Reid: How did you get recruited into the Army Signal Corp?

Marie: The Army Signal Corp sent recruiting officers to recruit graduates from language departments because they were looking for translators and, curiously enough, the man who recruited me was Lt. Fox, who was a graduate of the Asheville School and, I think, roomed with Jamie Clark at Princeton and Ben Holan - all were from Asheville

2:00

Reid: So they recruited you and swept you off to Washington DC. Marie:

Right. Reid: What year was this?

Marie: 1943. I had a rather short career because I got married in September '43 but I had graduated in December [1942] so I had that much time.

3:47

Reid: And tell me about going to Washington DC.

Marie: What they did -Mrs. Roosevelt set up a dormitory for the young women who were working for the Signal Corp. They met the buses every morning at Arlington Farms and were taken to Arlington Hall which is not the State Department grounds. My own daughter just trained there 3 years ago and she's there right now taking French lessons in the same building I was in and is probably going to Algeria. So they had a lot of girls because most of the men had gone into the service. I was a "hairsbreadth" away from going into the WAVES or something but I decided I liked to use my languages and I liked Washington DC. This was a joke in my family but we were classified as spies. You couldn't say anything. You see they were cracking the Japanese code and the Russian coded. They said, "we can't help you if you spout and say something pretty bad cause they might shoot you. My number was X-23.....my reports were translated from Spanish to English..... I signed them X23.

5:30

Reid: Tell me a little about your job.

Marie: I was in the Spanish department. We basically knew what our friends were doing but we couldn't talk about it. We would ride the bus, go out together, hang out together and just assume we knew what we were all doing. What we were doing was intercepting radio messages from Madrid because radio was how they all communicated and Madrid was neutral during WW II but they transmitted a lot of messages that could have been carrying messages that could have been helpful to the Axis about shipping to South American. I never got any hot reports about troop movements but there was one hot report about President Roosevelt going to Yalta to meet with Churchill and I translated that and sent it in. The Axis had no way to communicate except through Madrid that I was aware of and they needed to communicate with Latin America where they a lot of outposts.

Most exciting of all, was one day I came —nothing translated..... the working words had a 4 digit number so they would put them all into this numerical thing like a long line across a telegram....and to that they would add a cipher which meant they didn't have to change the code they just would change the cipher. But nothing worked. I realized someone had changed the cipherso I sent a note signed X 23 that I needed the new cipher. I came back to my desk and there was a photo of a man's hand— very hairy—probably someone who worked in the Spanish Embassy—his watch showed 3AM —his accomplice was photographing him holding the new cipher.

9:00

Reid: What was the social scene?

Marie: It was great cause it was teeming with service men. There were more women than men. Some women had their own apartments. I had an Aunt and Uncle there so I could go to their apartment. I knew officers. I would go out but I was already committed to Henry but I wasn't pining away.

10:00

Reid: So you were married in September '43 and then what happened?

Marie: Henry was finishing up his training in Florida... then he was sent out of Norfolk in spring of '44 to England and he came back in September '44. I lived with my mother in Chapel Hill while he was gone.

11:30

Reid: Describe what it was like living in Chapel Hill while he was gone.

Marie: 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.

13:15

Reid: How did you occupy your time?

Marie: Bridge, movies, visited his parents in Nashville. Some of the women were working at the university. I quit when I got married cause I couldn't stay in Washington and still follow him to Florida. He sent a telegram from England that his brother, a pilot in the Air Force, had been shot down in Germany.

Reid: How long was Mr. Colton in the service?

Marie: 1945 — and he was poised to go to the invasion of Japan but then, fortunately, didn't have to go.

16:30

Reid: Other stand out memories?

Marie: My brother was an Army pilot in the Aleutian island. We knew it had risks-mostly cold water. They were told if they went down they'd last about a minute. His younger brother was in Europe -went in at age 18. He was in one of those big battles He was wounded slightly. It was hard on his family— they had 3 sons in the service in constant danger. Yes, there was a lot of anxiety but we kept going, families visited each other. We were babies just after WW I. Henry didn't want to romanticize the war-it was dangerous. Some of his crew and his squadron Were killed. We wrote letters. There I was in the bosom of my family. The worst day of my life was when I saw him go off to war. I couldn't even look at him.

Reid: Describe that for me.

Marie: I don't want to - I'll cry.

Reid: It was just that draining.

Marie: We were staying with some friends in Norfolk. The man was his flight surgeon. They invited us to stay with them and they gave us their bedroom. ^f"

20:20

Reid: Describe when he came back.

Marie: I remember dressing up-putting on perfume and heading to Raleigh and this was going to be just great. My mother and aunt were waiting and had a wonderful meal. The funny thing was that he had all these C rations and K rations. They came back on the Queen Mary and got rations in case the Queen Mary was torpedoed. He brought back lots of presents - cashmere sweaters from Scotland - that was fun. I'll show you a little leather purse and a bonnet. Then we started our family.

22:00

Reid: What lesson would you like to share with folks from your experience of the war?

Marie: I started my serious education in the 7th grad. I was determined to work on peace. When I saw "All's Quiet on the Western Front" I was hysterical- this was the worst thing that could happen to anyone. At the time I was studying Latin and I loved it so I decided to major in languages. Lesson—I don't know the answer to war or no war and each generation has to fight a war. Luckily, my son didn't have to go to Vietnam- that was not a war that people felt good about.....We're going to have to find different ways to deal with war.

26:00

Reid: Any ideas as to what those methods might be?

Marie: I believe in the UN. I was a delegate to the Commission on the Status of Women and I went to UNESCO in Paris—but they need funding and support. We should teach peace and negotiating skills in the schools

Reid: Thank you, Mrs. Colton, for sharing your story.