

Code Girls

Since this is the 100th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment giving the women in the US the right to vote, I tried to find suitable stories for this column. While searching for topics of women working in or for the military, I happened upon the Code Girls, a book written by Liza Munday. Munday did research and interviewed twenty of the women who were breaking enemy code in the US during WWII. My friends at Moorhead Public Library have the book. At the outbreak of WWII, the US intelligence effort was almost non-existent. With most of the men going to war, there was not a group of bright educated men available to break codes. The Navy initiated a program with the Seven Sister Colleges to recruit women who were gifted in Mathematics and Languages and were recommended as bright students by their professors. The Sister Colleges were seven highly selective women's liberal arts colleges in the Northeastern US. The women identified were asked two questions, do you like crossword puzzles and are you engaged. Those who answer yes to the first and no to the second were recruited by the Navy into a secret course in Cryptanalyses. Those that passed the course were invited to Washington, D.C. to work as civilian codebreakers for the Navy. Codebreaking the European Theater was primarily assigned to England. The US assumed responsibility for code breaking in the Pacific Theater. Complicating matters was the fact that the Japanese Navy and Army used different codes. Therefore, the US Army started recruiting women from teacher colleges, both students and recent graduates. The Army took over Arlington Hall, near DC as the training facility for the women code breakers. All of the women recruited by the Navy and Army were required to sign an agreement that they would never tell anyone what they were doing. They were told to say that they were working as secretaries. As the military was segregated during the war, so were the code breakers at Arlington Hall. A group of African American women were assigned to break codes in the private sector to see if US companies were doing business with the enemy. The Navy commandeered buildings in DC to provide barracks and classrooms for the women code breakers, many of whom were recruited as officers in the Navy. Following the breaking of the Enigma code by the English, the Germans created a new machine for encoding messages and the code breaking women were among those who broke the code of the new machine. As with the Navajo Code Talkers, the women's work wasn't declassified until the 1990s and they were free to talk about their service. Over 10,000 women were part of the Army and Navy projects.

Following the war most of the women returned to civilian life, many of them became teachers. A number of the women stayed in government service and were among the first employees of a new spy agency, the National Security Agency (NSA) at Ft. Meade, MD.