

ON THE BOOKSHELF

Here's a great story for Women's History Month

"Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II"

By Liza Mundy
Hachette Books

Months before the Pearl Harbor attack, the US Navy realized it needed to dramatically improve intelligence-gathering operations. They and the US Army put out invitations to college co-eds with special skill in math, and to female math teachers across the country. If they passed the training, they would be hired by the US government for top-secret work as cryptanalysts. They could never, ever talk about it. As war engulfed the nation, secret recruitment letters were sent out yearly. Code-breaking proved crucial to disrupting enemy operations and saving Allied lives.

"The US military's decision to tap 'high grade' young women-and the women's willingness to accept the summons-was a chief reason why America was able to build an effective code-breaking operation practically overnight. More than 10,000 women traveled to Washington, DC to lend their minds and their hard-won educations to the war effort. More than half of American code-breakers were women. Here are their stories. The twenty women interviewed for this book were still reluctant to talk too much, even into their 90s.

Women were behind some of the most significant individual code-breaking triumphs of the war." A major example is breaking the Purple Enigma cipher, which allowed us access to most of the Japanese communications between leaders and ships and infantry units! Thanks to a chatty Japanese ambassador who reported on the Axis strategies, we also knew about German and Italian plans! Code-breaking was also critical to the pivotal successes of the Battle of Midway (in the Pacific) and the D-Day Invasion, and the total destruction of the Japanese merchant fleet.

With the creation of the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), the women code-breakers working for the US Navy would be commissioned officers in the US Naval Reserve. That meant better pay, a smart new uniform, and military living conditions and regulations.

"They pioneered work that would lead to the modern computing industry. The women also played a central role in shortening the war." Some of them broke messages that told of the fate of their own brothers' ships and units. The US Army code-breakers at Arlington Hall also had an African-American unit. Women also ran the machines that attacked the German Enigma ciphers, maintained wall maps that kept track of U-boat locations and Allied convoys, and wrote intelligence reports that would be used by naval commanders.

Their commitment, dedication, and patriotism deserve to be known and celebrated. Doc talks to journalist and author Liza Mundy about her new book, "Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II" from Hachette Books. Listen to the interview as it aired on WTBF-AM/FM [here](#).