**Q&A**

***CODE GIRLS* by Liza Mundy**

1. **What interested you about writing (subject matter of the book)?**

My god, everything. The women. Their lives, growing up. Why they went to college at a time when only 4 percent of American women did so. What were their aspirations? What was the code-breaking course like. Their time in Washington. What Washington was like? The work they did. The opportunity to contribute to the body of literature on what remains the worst conflict the globe has ever seen, and try to get this cohort of redoubtable women some long-overdue credit for their contribution.

1. **How did you first find out about the Code Girls?**

I read a declassified NSA history of Venona, the code-breaking project that deciphered Soviet messages and led to the exposure of spies. This history, written by an NSA historian, mentioned that a lot of the code-breakers who worked on Venona, both during the war and for decades afterward, were women, and that a lot of them were former schoolteachers. Unusual for historians, he thought to interview those women about how they were recruited. The stories were amazing. Then I went and talked to Betsy Smoot, a current NSA historian, and Jennifer Wilcox, a curator at the Cryptology Museum, and they sketched out how the Venona women were part of a much, much larger cohort of women recruited during the war, working on Japanese and German systems. I couldn’t believe the story had not already been told.

1. **How difficult was it to locate and interview the surviving Code Girls? Were any reluctant to discuss this part of their lives?**

I worried about this, starting out—I knew that the women would be in their early 90s, if I could find them. I consulted a lot of rosters and put out a lot of letters and calls. It was hard because during the war, many women joined under their maiden names, and their names had changed since then, sometimes more than once. So locating their contact information based on rosters from the 1940s was a challenge, but in some cases, doable. The NSA also put me in touch with some families who had made inquiries about what their mothers did, and that email chain led me to a living codebreaker, Dot Braden Bruce. I also consulted alumnae records from colleges, some of whom, like Goucher and Wellesley, have begun to collect this information and recover this history. But some of it was happenstance. One friend went to visit her mother at an assisted living facility in Maine, of all places, and came back exclaiming that she had found not just one code-breaker, but three. And she did!

And you’re right, I did sometimes have to convince the women that after nearly 75 years, it is okay to talk. Sometimes it took some cajoling. When I was telling Dot Braden Bruce that it’s okay to talk, she hesitated, but then mused; “Well, what are they going to do to me at my age? Send me to prison?” I told her that if they did, it would probably be a nice prison, and she laughed. My sense was that they were still very respectful of their vow of secrecy—now lifted—but after all this time of having their work ignored, they were also eager to get some credit and have their contribution recognized. Understandably so.

1. **What was one of the most surprising things you learned in your research?**

The extent of the women’s contributions, even going back to the period before the war began. These women were not secretaries or assistants or ancillaries. They made major, major contributions to the course of the war and to the development of computers, code-breaking, and cybersecurity. And the extent to which history had ignored them. It made me angry.

1. **How did family members you spoke to react to the revelation that their mother/grandmother was involved in the program?**

With fascination and pride. In some cases, the family had been begging for years, asking their mothers and grandmothers to talk about their work. People are so proud to have a codebreaker in their family. They have so much respect for these women.

1. **How difficult, or not, was it for the women to return to their lives after the war?**

Difficult, in virtually every case. In some cases, quite traumatic. Some of the women were very traumatized by the stress of the work, the knowledge of the lives they could not save even as they did save so many. And their new lives were such a contrast to their old ones: suddenly they were married (usually) and pregnant (usually), scrambling for housing, living isolated in apartments and post-war houses, cut off from their old lives and their valuable work. (The same was true, of course, of returning men.) This is why one group of female code-breakers started a round-robin letter; to counter their isolation and stay in touch and preserve their friendship, even though, in their letters to one another, they could not talk about the work they did or even allude to it.

1. **Why do you think the contributions the code girls made to ending the war remained such a secret for so long?**

Because they were so good about keeping the secret, and because for decades—centuries—people just assumed that any work a woman did must be low-level and secretarial and not important. This is the great irony: precisely because of this stereotype about women workers, because of the general belief that their work is often rote and low-level, it was very easy for women codebreakers to fend off inquiry during the war. But alas, the stigma persisted afterward. It’s astonishing how their work is neglected in so many codebreaking histories, which often state, sometimes in an actual parenthetical: “Oh, by the way, most of this work was done by women.” And then the books press on and write about only the men. It’s not that the women were more important. But they were certainly as important.