

## Who Said a Woman Can't Keep a Secret?

*Arlene Baker, Overnight Encampment Volunteer*

This is something my aunt likes to say and she should know, she kept a top secret for over 35 years. Bonalyn Wiedrich Selb was a Navy code breaker and a part of Project Ultra. Her father was a merchant sailor during WW I and Bonnie dreamed of growing up and joining the Navy. But of course that couldn't be since with the exception of nurses there were no women in the Navy. Then in 1942 the Navy created the WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service). The day after she turned 20 (the minimum age of enlistment for women at that time) she and a girl friend went down to the recruiting office and signed up. There was only one problem - women under the age of 21 needed parental permission and Bonnie hadn't told her father. He wasn't too happy about women being in the Navy but the night before she was to leave he gave in and signed her permission form.



*Bonalyn Wiedrich Selb*

She went to basic training at Hunter College in the Bronx which the Navy was using for WAVE training. Upon graduation she was told that she was selected for a top secret project and that those selected could not say what they did. The officer also said that just because they were women don't think they wouldn't be shot if they did talk because they would be. Her training for this assignment was at the National Cash Register Company in Dayton, OH. It was there that they learned to assemble and operate the "Bombe", an early computer. This whole project had been developed by the English at Bletchley Park. They invented the "Bombe" to decode messages made on the Nazi Enigma machine.

After training Bonnie and the other WAVES, along with their computers, went to Washington D.C. There they worked in shifts around the clock in a facility guarded by Marines. Bonnie worked on Project Ultra which was decoding German intercepts; the other part was Project Purple which was decoding Japanese intercepts. The process was divided into several parts so that no one person knew the entire process so that it couldn't be breached. When people asked what she did she would tell them she was just a pencil pusher. Having a top secret clearance had some advantages. She was often invited to embassy parties. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt was interested in integration and was curious if the WAVES would be open to this option. Bonnie and others were invited to tea with Mrs. Roosevelt to discuss the possibility. While the girls from the North were open to this the Southern girls were definitely opposed.

Some of the main intelligence the project gathered concerned the location of German U-boats. U.S. merchant ships were targets of those U-boats. Leo "Fritz" Selb was a sailor on one of those merchant ships.



*Bonalyn today with Arlene Baker.*

Bonnie and he were in the same class at Gloucester City High School. After the war he asked her to marry him. They eventually moved to Mullica Hill, NJ and raised three children. She went to work for the post office. Meanwhile the military kept Project Ultra and Purple top secret. They made sure third world countries got their hands on the Enigma machines and unbeknownst to them the U.S. could keep tabs on their communications.

Then in 1980 the National Security Council lifted the top secret and Bonnie could finally tell her family what she did during WW II. This is when she likes to use the line "Who Said a Woman Can't Keep a Secret". She told Fritz she was saving her a man for after the war and he was it. His reply was now you tell me thirty-five years too late to get away. Today Bonnie lives in Mantua, NJ and speaks about her experiences at various locations including to the girls' encampments on the Battleship. She is active with WAVES National, an organization for women who have served in the Navy, Marines and Coast Guard. She is also a member of the only all women American Legion Post in NJ.