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IPLACE: NSA, Ft. Meade, MD; National Cryptologic Museum

IVIEWER: WILCOX, Jennifer; LEUMAS, Carmella; COLLINS, Jimmie

[Tape 1, Side 1]

Collins:

Today is Friday, 8 February, 2002. We're chatting with Mrs. Elizabeth Corrin in a conference room in the National Cryptologic Museum. Mrs. Corrin was a WAV during World War II working in the cryptologic field. Her father was Admiral George Dyer. The interviewers are Jennifer Wilcox, Assistant Curator for the museum, and Carmella Leumas, a volunteer Oral Historian from the Center for Cryptologic History. I'm Jimmie Collins, Oral Historian with the CCH. This is Oral History 2002-06. The overall classification of this interview will be UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY unless otherwise specified at the end of the recording. The essence of today's interview is a look back at Mrs. Corrin's career and experiences during World War II. Mrs. Corrin, could you share some of your past with us? Where you were born? Where you grew up? Sort of, "Beth Corrin, the early years"?

Corrin:

[TR NOTE: Laughs.] I was born in Manila (Philippines) because my father was stationed there at the time. I grew up on both coasts. My grandparents lived in the Mid-west. So, we went back and forth and stuff there along the way. We were in Hawaii for three years which was the longest we were any place. I went to college in Massachusetts. The Navy recruiters came to the college to recruit for the cryptological thing. We had a course in college my senior year — which was when it started — on codes and ciphers and encoding and so forth. We got credit for it. I think they were interviewing mostly Phi Betas to see if they could entice them into the service. I was not a Phi Beta. So, I went and told them I'd like to be there, too. "Could I please?" So, I was. When we went to Washington, there were classmates of ours... Well, we went through officers' training first in North Hampton in the summer after we graduated from college. Then we were sent to

Washington. To Nebraska Avenue.

Wilcox: What year was that? That you graduated from college?

Corrin: '43.

Wilcox: Thank you.

Corrin: Yes. In July of '43, we finally got our orders on where to go. My mother was

living in Washington at the time. My father was off fighting the war. So, it was quite comfortable. We worked around the clock. Shifted from day watch

to mid watch. Anything else?

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Wilcox: No. [TR NOTE: Laughs.]

Leumas: Did your father know that you were going to do this? Did you have an

opportunity to tell him before he [TR NOTE: XB due to laughing.]

Corrin: Yes, because he knew somebody who was engaged in this... at the head

of...

Leumas: When you came down here, did you go to live with your mother then?

Corrin: I did.

Leumas: Stay with her?

Corrin: Yes.

Leumas: Because there have been a lot of stories about ladies bunking together and

all... things like that.

Corrin: Well, we did at first. Then we moved. And then, classmate of mine and I got

an apartment within walking distance of where we were working.

Leumas: Oh, wow!

Corrin: Which was really handy. It was on Wisconsin Avenue. You could walk at

night then without worrying about being mugged.

Wilcox: Now, the recruiters came out. You said they came out for the Phi Betas. I'm

sorry, I'm not a sorority girl. Is that specifically Phi Beta Kappa?

Leumas: Phi Beta Kappa, I'm sure.

Wilcox: Yeah. Okay. See, I'm not a sorority girl.

Leumas: The smart ones. That's the National Honor Society.

Wilcox: Okay.

Corrin: Yes, right. That's all over. Well, actually, it's not all over, because some

colleges don't have them.

Wilcox: But it wasn't specifically for math students? Or were they specifically...?

Corrin: No, I think they just wanted people who could think and reason. I was a

math student. So, maybe that's why they let me in. [TR NOTE: Laughter

heard.

Wilcox: So, they were recruiting specifically for cryptology or they were just looking

for bright women?

Corrin: They were looking for bright women — for cryptology though. I mean, once

you were in this... When we went through officers' training, at the end they asked us what we'd like to do. I had heard of other things that sounded interesting. So, I put them at the head of my list — and they sent me to

cryptology anyway.

Wilcox: [TR NOTE: Laughs.] Mathematician. You had no choice. You were going to

cryptology.

Corrin: That's right. "You cannot go into weather or you know...

Wilcox: In the Navy, did you actually take courses on cryptology or did they just...

OJT?

Corrin: We had the one course in college. That was it.

Wilcox: That was it?

Corrin: Yes.

Wilcox: Okay.

Corrin: Which may have been why they put us in the one without the machines.

Wilcox: I assume you had no Japanese training?

Corrin: None at all.

Wilcox: Yeah. And that didn't pose a problem?

Corrin: Well, it did a little, but we would look for (B% hatsu) and (B% chaku) or

whatever it was. "Leaving" and "arriving". If you could decode those, then you were in good shape. Of course, we did have lists of numbers and made up our own code books. We'd line up messages and apply the numbers to the columns. If it scanned for the whole column, then that was a good number. It was very mathematical, which was fine with me. I liked that.

Wilcox: Did you have to worry about the message decodes being double enci-

phered? Coded and then ciphered on top of that? Or coded and with an

additive that you had to strip off the additive, or anything like that?

Corrin: The additive was what we stripped off.

Wilcox: Okay. So, that's what you were doing?

Corrin: There was an additive.

Wilcox: Again, I'm afraid I'm a liberal arts major. So, talk to me like I don't know math

- because I don't. How did you go about determining what the additive was

and stripping it off?

Corrin: Well, they lined up messages horizontally. So, what you tried to do was to

get the additive that would work with the whole column. Sometimes the messages were where they were supposed to be, but you could find that out quickly enough. The encoded... The code had to be divisible by three. So, if you added up all the digits – the five digits – it had to be divisible by three.

So, that helped.

Wilcox: Why was that? Was that something the Japanese imposed?

Corrin: Their code numbers were all divisible by three.

Wilcox: Well, that makes it easier doesn't it?

Corrin: Yeah. You knew where to break it.

Wilcox: Okay. You said you had to build your own code books. As time went by, did

you start to memorize parts of the codes?

Corrin: No, because they changed them.

Wilcox: They changed them?

Corrin: There would be a new one that came in and all the others were...

Wilcox: How did they do (2G)?

Corrin: I don't remember that.

Wilcox: Okay.

Corrin: Often enough.

Leumas: [TR NOTE: Laughs.] Often enough so that you didn't want to memorize

them.

Corrin: Then we searched for Japanese words that you looked for. In English. The

Japanese letters are characters.

Wilcox: So, were you ever aware of the actual content of the message?

Corrin: Yes.

Wilcox: See anything interesting go by?

Corrin: Not really. I think that the people who worked in the priority rooms saw the

more interesting things. So we did, sort of, the grunt work.

Wilcox: What was the most interesting part of your job?

Corrin: I don't know. Just making it work. Trying to line everything up and find out.

Wilcox: You just enjoyed your work. That's great.

Corrin: Looking for gold. Finding the answers.

Wilcox: You mentioned earlier that they showed you a code book. Can you talk a

little bit more about that?

Corrin: It was one that they had captured. It was not in great shape. I think it had

either been burned partly or something. It looked, not flat like the one out

there, it looked weathered.

Wilcox: How did people in the office feel when they saw a real code book?

Corrin: It was like gold because they could apply it.

Wilcox: So, the Japanese continued to use that code book for a while?

Corrin: They had been using it. So, we did have those messages. I don't know.

Wilcox: You were, at least, able to go back and fill in some gaps that you may have

had in the past?

Corrin: Right. I think that some of them would study the way things worked. If they

had the whole picture, it was easier for them to interpret.

Wilcox: Did you find that as they changed the code books, the basic system behind

it carried over – even though the numbers and what-not may have been

changed? The system was pretty much the same?

Corrin: The system was the same. Right. They had a different set of additives.

Wilcox: Did you communicate at all with people doing the same type...? Like,

maybe the people who were working on the Japanese and stuff out in

Hawaii?

Corrin:

No.

Wilcox:

No? Not at all?

Corrin:

I was just a little old hen.

Wilcox:

How many people were in your office?

Corrin:

A lot. A lot. I really couldn't...

Wilcox:

Couldn't even begin to count?

Corrin:

The whole place was quite large. I don't know. We worked in three shifts.

Wilcox:

And your shifts rotated? So, you weren't always the day shift?

Corrin:

Right. We rotated.

Wilcox:

Every...?

Corrin:

Every week. Or two weeks. I don't remember. I think it was every... I don't

remember.

Wilcox:

But your shift stayed together? You didn't have people... When you moved

to night shift, everybody on your shift moved to night shift?

Corrin:

I think so.

Wilcox:

That was probably the simplest way to do things. You never stayed at WAV

Quarters D? You were always off-campus, so to speak?

Corrin:

Yes. Where was WAV Quarters?

Wilcox:

It was across the street. Up from Nebraska Avenue.

Corrin:

Oh, okay.

Wilcox:

Actually, you're probably quite fortunate there, because the WAV Quarters

were built to house 80 women on a floor in bunk beds with a footlocker. So,

you sound like you had a life of luxury there.

Corrin:

When we were in training, they had taken over the North Hampton Hotel and two of the dorms from the college. In the hotel, I think there were bunk beds and there were more than eight people in that. It was like a dormitory. It was lovely and the food was delicious in the dorm. We spent part of the time in one place. Then they moved us to the other. I think there were eight

of us in a room with bunk beds and bare floors.

Wilcox:

Did you find anything that you learned in basic training was applicable to

your actual Navy work?

Corrin:

I don't' think so.

Wilcox:

So, you didn't have to go out and do marching and...?

Corrin:

We marched every place. One time, I lost my platoon.

Wilcox:

You lost your platoon?

Corrin: The platoon. It went off without me. [TR NOTE: All laugh.]

Wilcox: Were you (1G) the ladies?

Corrin: No, thank goodness. No, they wouldn't have done that.

Wilcox: Now, you came in as an officer?

Corrin: Yes.

Wilcox: Did you get promoted anytime?

Corrin: Yes. Well, I went out as a Lieutenant. I was an Ensign. Then I was promoted

to (LT) JG. Then I retired and they promoted me.

Wilcox: Now, what did they tell you when you were discharged about the secrecy

issue?

Corrin: They said you couldn't talk about it. So, needless to say, I haven't thought

about it either.

Wilcox: How long were you in?

Corrin: Just from '43 to '46.

Wilcox: So, the duration plus six months?

Corrin: I guess.

Wilcox: That was the standard then.

Corrin: Well, I was getting married. So, that was when I...

Wilcox: So, you got out and got married?

Corrin: I think it was duration plus six.

Wilcox: Yeah. That was generally the standard. Where did you meet your husband?

Corrin: Actually, his mother and my mother were roommates in college.

Wilcox: Okay. So, it wasn't through your Navy service?

Corrin: No.

Wilcox: So many of the women that I've talked to met their husbands in the Navy.

Corrin: In the Navy, yeah. That's not surprising because there were young men

there, too.

Wilcox: Probably one of the few places where sailors were actually stationed and

not shipped overseas.

Corrin: Some of them were Navy and some of them were civilians actually.

Wilcox: Speaking of which, did you have civilians working with you?

Corrin: Yes.

Wilcox: Now, they would have been put on an all day shift? Permanent day shift?

Corrin: I don't know. The wife of one of the officers there worked. I'm not sure if she

was in the same... She was a friend of mine by the end of the war. I'm not sure that she was in the same division that we were in. So, I think they kept

them separate.

Wilcox: Does the name Agnes Driscoll, or Agnes Meyer Driscoll mean anything to

you?

Corrin: No.

Wilcox: She was a civilian cryptanalyst who... Her heyday actually came before

World War II, but she continued on. I wondered... She worked a problem

called (1G).

Corrin: They didn't give us any information about any other division at all. That was

part of the security thing.

Wilcox: She worked Japanese. I just thought maybe you'd run into or something on

the way. Do you know what happened to your work? After you did your part of the job, do you know where it came before you and where it went after

you?

Corrin: Who got (1G) office? People who were affected by it. I would assume that it

went out to the ships and it might be affected and so forth. No, they didn't tell

us that. Tunnel vision.

Leumas: That doesn't surprise me. Who did you report to? Who was your boss for

most of this time?

Corrin: I don't remember. There was on person who was a boss who was a friend of

my fathers. Just happened that way but I never saw him or anybody else

actually.

Leumas: What was his name?

Corrin: What?

Leumas: What was his name?

Corrin: I can't even remember his name.

Leumas: Okay.

Corrin: If you mentioned it I might be able to remember. So, we just came to work.

We showed our badges, sat down at the long tables and did our work. I worked with a couple of friends who had been classmates of mine in

college, which made it very nice indeed.

Leumas: I have a picture here. Other than it's Navy World War II, I can't identify (it). If

it looks anything like your office that would... Or is that not even...? [TR NOTE: Shows picture.] It appears had those long tables with conveyer

belts.

Corrin: Conveyer belts. Right.

Leumas: So, I have no idea what they're doing.

Corrin: Hmm. Having a good time. [TR NOTE: Laughs.]

Leumas: [TR NOTE: XG due to laughing and speaking over one another.]

Corrin: I thought World War II was just spectacular.

Leumas: Had a great time out there doing (2G) duty.

Corrin: Yeah. Well, it was... You thought you were doing your job and doing your

duty too.

Wilcox: Yes.

Corrin: No, I don't think we had a conveyer belt. We had a flat table.

Leumas: Which I understand was pretty much the norm.

Corrin: Okay.

Leumas: Everybody had those big long, 8' to 10' tables that they worked on. So, what

did you do for fun time? In your leisure?

Corrin: Dated and got together with friends and things.

Leumas: Now, you said you'd been on the East coast. So, you were familiar with

Washington to begin with.

Corrin: Yes.

Leumas: A lot of the women, this was their first trip to Washington. They did the

touristy stuff.

Corrin: No. We'd been stationed here. My father had been stationed in Wash-

ington. As I said, they bought their first house at the beginning of the war. Mother lived there. My sisters were there sometimes, too. Oh, I brought back some friends for my mother to take care of. She was very gracious

about it. So, some of them staved at the house.

Leumas: Well, that's good. It's probably better than being in WAV Quarters D.

Corrin: Yes.

Wilcox: Did you even consider continuing in cryptology as a civilian after the war

was over?

Corrin: Actually, I don't know that they offered us that option really. I guess, no, I

didn't.

Wilcox: So, did you get married immediately after the war was over then?

Corrin: Yes.

Wilcox: That took you elsewhere?

Corrin: Then we went back to the West Coast. My husband came from the West

Coast. He had to finish up his college work.

Wilcox: Oh, good. Honestly, I think most of the women that continued after the war

were civilians to begin with. They'd automatically (1G) work. So, they just

hopped right on (1-2G).

Corrin: Yeah. Well, that's true. They were working. I would still run into the WAVs.

after the war. My younger sister. She was in for...

Wilcox: What kind of work did she do?

Corrin: Not cryptology.

Wilcox: Since your father was off fighting the war and you were both in the Navy... I

did have one woman who was able to, occasionally, keep tabs on her brother who was on a ship. Were you able to keep tabs on your father at all?

Corrin: Not through work.

Wilcox: Just through normal standards?

Corrin: Right. He was stationed in Washington on Admiral (B% King's) staff a lot of

the time.

Wilcox: That was convenient.

Corrin: He didn't think so. He wanted to be out (1G). One did not want to leave the

fleet to go back to Washington at the beginning of the war. Then he kept

wishing for his own command. So, he did. He got several.

Wilcox: You enjoyed the work that you were doing. What did you like least about it?

Corrin: I didn't like mid watch. I never felt right.

Wilcox: Never got into a sleep routine.

Corrin: No, you'd get up... Time for dinner. To go out on a date. Insides didn't feel

quieted.

Wilcox: Was your roommate on the same rotation that you were?

Corrin: Yes. She was.

Wilcox: Okay. So, that worked out then. That's good.

Corrin: I'm trying to think. Most of the time. So, we may not have changed the

same. I had Monday off. That changed. Different people had different days

off. But that rotated. So, that probably affected who I worked with.

Leumas: Did you ever hear about any of the message that you worked on having any

great importance? Or did anyone come back to you and say, "Hey, that

message... "?

Corrin: No, but there was one time when we were involved in something that we

were able to decode things that affected the outcome of one of the big

battles.

Leumas: Can you tell us a little about that?

Corrin: No because I can't remember that much about it. But everybody was really

excited about that and everybody was working harder. So, we did get a little

feedback from that. Other than that, we never knew whether...

Leumas: So morale in the office, obviously at that point, was pretty high. Was there

any lows or disgruntled employees?

Corrin: I wasn't aware of any if there were.

Leumas: You never had a morale problem in the office?

Corrin: Not that I know of. There were a lot of people who knew each other and a lot

of people who got together outside of work and so forth. So, there could

have been problems that I didn't know about.

Leumas: Doing the work that you were doing, you were more aware of the role you

were playing in the big picture, right? Some of the WAVES that I've spoken to were more technicians and they were just feed it in, pull it out, and didn't

see the whole big picture.

Corrin: No, this was kind of glamorous.

Wilcox: Did your husband know what you did?

Corrin: No. I told him that I was in communications. I didn't want to be shot.

Wilcox: Took that very seriously. How did they go about informing you of your

secrecy obligations?

Corrin: I think there was something printed that we were to read. Then I think they

reinforced that with verbal instructions on what we were supposed to do or

not do.

Leumas: What was the physical security of the building? The guards? Fences?

Corrin: Kind of like going through the airport except you didn't have any metal

detector. But up close passageway and your tags.

Leumas: Guards with guns?

Corrin: I don't know. I don't remember but I would assume so. You know, just

discreetly.

Leumas: I assume that there were rules against – or whatever – about wandering into

other peoples offices?

Corrin: Oh, you couldn't. There were blockades. You had to have the right colored

badge to get anyplace else. Some people had more badges than others.

No, we couldn't. They had a cafeteria kind of place there.

Leumas: Did you talk to each other as you were working on your messages? Did you

help each other or say, "Hey, look what I found"?

Corrin: Yes.

Leumas: Did that happen a lot? Daily routine?

Corrin: Well, you can't think and talk at the same time. So, it was just casually like in

a library. You had to be fairly quiet, otherwise you couldn't concentrate.

Leumas: But you worked, more or less, individually right? Not as teams?

Corrin: Right. We worked individually. There was a priority room and I think they

worked more as a team there. Sometimes they would pull us in there to help

if they needed some. I think, probably, if there was team work, that it

occurred there.

Leumas: Do you know how it was decided who got what message? First in, first out?

Take the next one on the pile? How was that done?

Corrin: I think it was take the next one on the pile unless they had one that they

wanted everybody to work on because it was important to decode that.

Then everybody would work on the same thing.

Leumas: Now, when you were compiling the code book – as you were beginning to

break it – what did that look like? Was it physically a book that you would make notations in? How did that... What did your version of the code book

look like?

Corrin: I never saw the code book.

Leumas: Oh, okay

Corrin: If we broke a message, we'd pass it to the priority room and they had the

code book, I think, there. We just did the manual labor.

Leumas: So, your job was to strip the additive and pass it on?

Corrin: Right. Did the mental labor. Right, that sounds better.

Collins: Was there every any friction between the service members and the

civilians?

Corrin: I don't know. I wasn't aware of it, but there could have been. I don't think so.

I think they worked pretty well together and between the enlisted people

and the officers. All of us were working on the same kind of thing.

Leumas: So, there were enlisted in your office? I assume that you were made an

officer because of your college degree?

Corrin: Yes.

Leumas: Did you have any supervisory role or anything?

Corrin: No.

Leumas: Purely rank for the job you were doing?

Corrin: Right. I don't know too much about the civilians. I assume they were

working on this for the war in that capacity and just continued. Some of them

would be in the priority room, too. The same is true of the enlisted.

Wilcox: Did you mention at the beginning what the name of your college was?

Corrin: Smith.

Wilcox: Okay. So, you were up at Smith. I think a lot of the women were coming out

of there and then, locally, they were coming out of Goucher.

Corrin: Yeah

Wilcox: What possessed the college to teach a cryptology course in the first place?

Corrin: The Navy.

Wilcox: Oh, the Navy encouraged them to do it. Okay. Was your instructor Navy?

Corrin: I presume it was a Navy person, though I'm not sure. I don't think it was a

college... It wasn't something Smith dreamed up.

Wilcox: Nowadays, a lot of colleges are offering cryptology classes and math.

Corrin: Oh. [TR NOTE: XG due to speakers talking over each other.]

Wilcox: I think that's relative... Even within the last ten to 15 years, I think that's a

relatively new topic for colleges. I don't really have anything else.

Leumas: I don't either. What... Now, looking back on it, how do you feel about the...?

Things have swung both ways now. We had a lot of loosening of security for

many years as evidence of the museum.

Wilcox: I was going to say... [TR NOTE: XG due to speakers talking over each

other.]

Leumas: Now, of course, we've clamped down yet again. From your perspective,

what do you think about all of this?

Corrin: Clamping down again or letting up when we needed it?

Leumas: Either way.

Corrin: I don't know. It seems logical to let up after the war and logical to clamp

down when it was necessary. So, I don't know if whether they lost anything

by letting up.

Wilcox: Was there any point...? I know it's been almost 60 years since the war.

Was there any point somewhere in those 60 years you've said to yourself, "Gee, I really would like to talk about this but I haven't got any notification

and I can't"? Or was it something that never crossed your mind?

Corrin: Well, it is kind of interesting to be able to talk about it. My children have no

idea of what I was doing all these years. What I was doing then.

Leumas: Do they know now?

Corrin: I think so. I think they do. I mentioned it. Just started talking about it briefly.

Thought they might be interested in a little history.

Leumas: Yes, we get both extremes here at the museum. We get people who come

in and say, "What do you mean you can't talk about Vietnam. It was 30

years ago."

Corrin: [TR NOTE: Laughs.]

Leumas: Then you want to say, "Well, I realize it was 30 years ago, but it happens to

be classified." As I told you earlier, we still get some World War II people in

who just panic because they were told never, ever to talk.

Corrin: Right. Absolutely.

Leumas: I'm sure it will be interesting to your kids if they... You might want to see if

they'd want to come down to the museum and you can just take them

around.

Corrin: I bet my grandson would like the museum.

Leumas: Oh, I bet.

Corrin: He's going to be a pilot he says.

Leumas: Well, we have some planes out in (1G).

Corrin: I told him that.

Leumas: Yeah.

Corrin: So, I'll bring him for sure.

Leumas: Well, I've guess we've finished. Do you have any closing remarks? You can

say anything you want now. You really are not going to get shot. [TR NOTE:

Chuckling.]

Corrin: Right. Well, it's really interesting because I hadn't thought about it for 50

years probably. And just, all of a sudden, to be able to is quite interesting.

It's too bad I don't remember more.

Collins: You did a great job recalling.

Leumas: I encourage you to tell your relatives. Anytime you can think of something,

tell them. Even better, say it on video tape or write it down. Please do talk about it to everybody and anybody – because these stories tend to get lost.

If somebody knows just one little piece, it can really help out.

Corrin: Right. I was thinking about a friend of mine. The civilian wife of one of the

officers – who is still alive if you wanted to... She's in Columbus, Ohio.

Leumas: Okay. We haven't actually spoken to many civilians. We tend to stick with

the military folks.

Corrin: Maybe you could talk to her on the phone. If you want, you could call me

and I can give you her name and address.

Leumas: Okay. I will.

Corrin: I have her old phone number. So, it may still be...

Leumas: Okay. I'll do that.

Corrin: Okay. Well, wait a while. I haven't found my address book yet from

unpacking. [TR NOTE: All laugh.]

Leumas: Okay.

Corrin: So, call if you want it. I'll be glad to get it for you.

Wilcox: Well, thank you so much for coming out today. I'm so sorry you got lost on

the way.

Corrin: Oh, me, too. I'm so glad I finally found somebody who knew where you

were. He said, "You can't miss it."

Leumas: Oh yeah. Right. [TR NOTE: XG due to laughing and speaking over each

other.]

Collins: Thank you, Mrs. Corrin.

Leumas: Thank you.

Wilcox: Thank you.

[End of Interview]