

WILMA ZIMMERMAN DAVIS

1913-2001

Wilma Zimmerman Davis, who died on 11 December 2001, could well be called one of the "Founding Mothers" of cryptology. Her career spanned the more than 30 years that saw the small cryptologic effort of the US Army Signal Corps tucked away in a few rooms in the old World War I temporary buildings on the Washington Mall grow to become the Army Security Agency and Armed Forces Security Agency at Arlington Hall and the National Security Agency at Fort Meade.

She was one of the treasured few personally chosen by William Friedman in the late 1930s to join his tiny crew of cryptanalysts. Wilma Z. Berryman, who had majored in mathematics at Bethany College and had taught math in a West Virginia high school, "aced" the cryptanalytic correspondence courses and convinced Mr. Friedman that she met his tough qualifications for employment with the Signal Intelligence Service. She was number 19 on the office sign-in sheet.

Wilma was assigned to work with Dr. Abe Sinkov on the Italian problem. Paul Neff remembers vividly the day in March 1941, when he and two other freshly minted reserve officers, Charles Girhard and Charles Hiser, first walked into the Munitions Building on Constitution Avenue to report for duty. Wilma was the one to take these tenderfoots under her wing. As their mentor and friend, she so inspired them that Paul, many years later, would say "We soon found ourselves dedicated members of a common effort—one that was destined to become our adopted lifelong working career." For Charlie Girhard, "From that time through forever my friendship and respect for Wilma has never and will never change."

They were joined by Betty Kirkman Laptook who describes herself as "young and dumb" in May 1941. When she looked around the two-room suite known as the "Italian Section," nothing looked to her like a proper office. The small group of workers all seemed to be poring over huge sheets of paper filled with numbers and words in Italian. Nothing made any sense to her whatsoever! Out of the confusion came Wilma, her mentor and, in a short time, her best friend. They joined in the easy social life of that tightly knit group; bowling in their league, partying, camping along the Appalachian Trail, lunching together, and enjoying all that went on at the SIS before Pearl Harbor.

Benson K. Buffham remembers that as a very young lieutenant during WWII he first became aware of Wilma "as the most glamorous lady at the Arlington Hall Officers Club." He learned that she was not only beautiful and a great dancer, but that she was one of Arlington Hall's most gifted cryptanalysts.



by Ann Caracristi
& several other admirers

By this time she was holding down a senior job on the Japanese military problem for Colonel Solomon Kullback (or "Kully," as she called him).

In July of 1942 Wilma had been moved from the Italian problem and sent out to Arlington Hall from Old Munitions to join Kully in the cryptanalytic effort against the high-level Japanese military systems. Newly assigned GIs and freshly recruited civilians had begun pouring into Arlington Hall and Ann Caracristi was among those clueless recruits sorting traffic in the hot and humid attic bedrooms of the school's old brick building. She remembers that Wilma had her own desk (not just a seat at one of the long tables) and inspired a certain amount of awe because she went about her activities in such a purposeful way.

Wilma was soon named chief of the unit which was to analyze and decrypt the enciphered addresses associated with Japanese military messages. It was a job that she would hold until the end of the war and always remember as the highlight of her career. She smoothly took charge of the problem, assigning tasks, training the just-arrived, moving her expanding team of cryptanalysts from the tiny Headquarters Building spaces to the back wings of A, and then B, Building. Wilma's beloved black Chrysler sedan, "Baby," could be found parked at Arlington Hall early in the morning until late at night as she touched base with the day, evening, and graveyard shifts. Fondly accused of wielding "an iron hand with a velvet glove," she won the hearts, admiration, and loyalty of her troops by her contagious *jole de vivre*, her total dedication to the "business," and her unwavering personal interest in and support of each and every enlisted, officer, and civilian member of the group. The total recovery of the servicewide Japanese address systems enabled the US to completely recon-

struct the Japanese Order of Battle. It also provided a powerful tool for prioritizing the exploitation of enciphered texts so that the most important messages could be the first selected for decryption.

At the end of WWII, Wilma moved to the Chinese problem. When army Captain Milton Zaslow reported to the Army Security Agency in February 1946, having served as a combat intelligence officer with the Marines in Tinian and with the Army in Okinawa, he was surprised to find that his Branch Chief was a civilian—and a woman, Wilma Berryman. It was totally inconsistent with his military experience to find a woman in charge of a sizable military organization. But it took him only a week or so to understand why she had the job: "She knew more than anyone else and was a most effective manager."

In fact, Wilma was always more interested in the job than in the job title. Above all, she was more interested in furthering the careers of her colleagues rather than her own. During the '50s, '60s, and '70s she would work as an analyst or as a manager in GENS, ADVA, A Group, and B Group, bringing to each assignment the skills and dedication she had shown from the start.

Charlotte Girhard knew Wilma best in the '50s and '60s when they were co-workers on several different projects at NSA. She had many opportunities to admire her work. "Even more than that, I never ceased to admire her 'people skills.' Never have I known anyone who was able to make other people feel better just being around her."

Wilma was married and widowed three times. John Berryman had been her classmate at Bethany College and they came together to Washington in the 1930s. He died within six months after she had reported for work with the SIS. Her second husband was John Manson who, as a Major in the British Army, had served as a liaison officer at Arlington Hall. John immigrated to Canada, where he was employed as a senior official at CBNRC, our sister agency at the time. They were married in 1949. When John died suddenly, Wilma returned to the US and resumed her career at Arlington Hall.

Wilma married again, this time to Brigadier General John Davis, who had served previously in NSA as a Colonel and was a protégé of LtGen Ralph Canine. It was a wonderful marriage and, when John's assignments permitted it, Wilma continued to work at NSA. General Davis had another assignment at NSA as DDO. He later became an avid customer of Sigint as the Army's Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, and then as the JCS representative to ACDA (Arms Control and Disarmament Agency), where he received his third star. In all these assignments Wilma served as his advisor and confidant, contributing to his success.

After working so many years as a leading cryptanalyst, Wilma ended her NSA career as the senior executive of the Cryptanalytic Career Panel, a job she dearly loved. She had an intense desire to nurture and help all the young people with whom she came in contact. In Benson Buffham's words, "She inspired and aided in whatever way she could all those she met, and she did it with such grace

and boundless energy that we were all mightily impressed. Above all, Wilma loved the Agency and the people in it. She was convinced of the great importance of its mission, and she did everything she could to ensure its success."

Don Markle said "Wilma was always very proud of her profession and very confident that her work and that of the building was, in fact, making a difference. NSA was her safe haven—a place where she could use her God-given talents and be among people whom she really admired and enjoyed, both as workmates and soulmates."

Don's daughter Anne grew up with Wilma as a "surrogate grandmother." Wilma was a role model for her and she saw her "as a high-powered executive who used not only her intelligence but her leadership skills through humor, hard work, passion, relationship-building, and dedication." Don's son Kevin described Wilma as "a carefree, loving person who seemed to engender a joyful 'spark' in people around her."

Perhaps Betty Laptok summed it up best for all of the many people whose lives were touched when she said "I can't recall a single critical remark about anyone that was ever uttered by Wilma. Always understanding, often very funny with her quick witty remarks, she had a quiet never-wavering wonderful spirit, so accepting of all. Words fail me when it comes to the depth of her character. All of our lives were enriched by her warm ways."



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