

“A Peerless Secret-Keeper in Every Way” October 1

A recent publication reviews previously unknown aspects of Ann Caracristi’s life

Published in 2017, *Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II* describes the detailed personal stories of American women who volunteered to serve their country during World War II by performing cryptologic work. Of course, most of these women did not realize the kind of work they were signing up for – nor had they ever heard the term cryptology. These young women joined the enlisted and officer ranks of the military services as Army WAACs/WACs (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps/Women’s Army Corps) and Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), and many others were hired as civilians. In addition to the desire to



Cover of the March 1965 NSA Newsletter featuring Ann Caracristi as a recipient of the Federal Woman of the Year Award.

support their brothers, boyfriends, and friends, many saw an opportunity to get away from their small towns, taste some independence, and do something interesting.

In addition to researching government records at the National Archives and Library of Congress and relying on programs such as the Freedom of Information Act and Mandatory Declassification Review, author Liza Mundy interviewed over twenty former codebreakers who worked at Arlington Hall Station and the Naval Security Station. One of those interviewed by Mundy was NSA’s own Ann Caracristi. Well known publically and a member of [NSA’s Hall of Honor](#), Caracristi

became NSA’s first female deputy director. She started her career in 1942 as a civilian with the Army’s Signal Intelligence Service.

This was not the first time Caracristi had been interviewed. After her retirement in 1982, she gave interviews to the [NSA oral history program](#) and the Library of Congress Veterans History Project. She also spoke about her time working during World War II to various groups within the intelligence community. However, Mundy asked Ann personal questions that no one before had asked and highlighted in her book a topic that no one before had pointed out: the fact that Ann had been in a long-time committed relationship with another woman from Arlington Hall, Gertrude “Gert” Kirtland.



Personnel photograph of Gertrude Kirtland, circa 1952.

Ann passed away in January 2016, thirteen years after Gert. They lay side-by-side in a cemetery near the town where they bought their second home in Virginia. The *Washington Post* obituary written by Ann’s extended family identifies Gert as Ann’s “longtime companion.” Mundy, who attended the funeral, states the following in her book:

“This meaningful phrase came as a bit of a surprise to some in the national security community, who thought Ann and Gert were simply single ladies living together as dear friends. Her family never knew what the nature of the relationship was, and never felt they could ask. She was a peerless secret-keeper in every way. But it was a decades-long committed partnership. During the [funeral] service, the minister talks [sic] about how Ann will be able to join Gert in eternity. Their relationship is worth remarking upon only because, for much of the postwar Cold War era, for a man working in intelligence or national security to be living in any kind of committed domestic relationship with a person of the same sex was a career deal breaker. In England, Alan Turing was persecuted until he poisoned himself. In the United States, NSA employees, like those at other federal agencies, for many years

would be obliged to resign if they were found to be homosexual. There were purges.”

This detail about Caracristi was as much of a surprise to the Center for Cryptologic History (CCH) as it was for others who were not in her innermost circle. In her post-retirement speaking engagements, Caracristi stressed that she preferred being remembered for her professional accomplishments, rather than for the fact that she was the first woman to do anything. It is obvious that she would have also felt the same way about this intensely personal aspect of her life. Those who knew her well would say that while she was not public about her relationship, she never took steps to hide it either. Historians in CCH respect this about her but also feel compelled to research the working environment and security policies during the years in which Caracristi rose to prominence with the understanding that many in society viewed homosexuality much differently than they do now.

Sources: Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II by Liza Mundy (Hachette Books, 2017), Ann Z. Caracristi collection at the National Cryptologic Museum library.