Dayton Codebreaker Highlights Pride in Contribution to WWII

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by Jeremy Dobbins

For some who serve in the military, their work is top secret, and the contribution they make to national security may never be publicly known. Today our Veterans Voice series continues with the story of Army veteran John Harshman who, unbeknown to him, helped crack the code of the German Enigma machines. Those machines were used to encrypt secret messages during World War II. Marine Corp veteran and Wright State student Jeremy Dobbins has the story.

In 1943, just one month shy of his eighteenth birthday, John Harshman's father died, so John had to go to work. He rode his bicycle ten miles each day to take a job at the National Cash Register Company in Dayton, Ohio. He didn't know it at the time but John was put to work in the highly secretive United States Naval Computing Machine Laboratory.

So I went over there and I gave the girl my name and she didn't write anything, she just said, 'See that gentleman over there,' it was a full dressed Marine, 'follow him,'” says John. "So I went down to building 26 and filled out some papers and I was about to sign my name and another Marine came over and he said, 'Do you know what you're signing?' And I said, 'I think I do.' And he said, 'Well, I'm going to make sure. This isn't only secret, it's ultra secret! You go home, tell your parent, your drinking buddies, whatever, we could put you in jail for the duration of the war, plus."

John had no idea what he was working on the whole time, and his family never questioned it. John's job was to assemble a series of code-breaking machines known as Bombes designed to crack the code of Germany's secret messages during World War II.

John joined the Army in 1945, and the secret work he did at NCR may have saved his own life since it's estimated that the war was shortened by two years because of it. John met and married Eva Charlett Harshman, who also worked at NCR on another top secret project called the Norden bombsight, a device used to accurately drop bombs from aircrafts. It was crucial to the success of the daylight bombing campaigns during World War II.

"...and I tried to talk to her about Norden bombsite, but she didn't want to know. Thank goodness,” he says.

It would be fifty years before John learned the significance of what he and the others were doing in Building 26 during WWII.
"In 1995, they had a three day reunion out at Wright Patt. The last night that we were there they were feeding us steak and the trimmings and this retired colonel came out and pointed his finger out to everybody and said all of you that are left can feel responsible for 800 German submarines being sunk - minimum per sub about 26 individuals. That's over 20,000, and that bothers me a little bit but war is war."

John Harshman is proud of his unique contribution to military history, and he is committed to sharing the story of the Dayton Codebreakers.

"I was down at the Dayton Mall and saw this guy spray painting and I asked him what he would charge me to paint a shirt. It cost me 63 dollars for two shirts."

John had the artist airbrush Dayton Codebreakers in script across the top of the shirts.

"I put on what I wanted, and he made it patriotic, red, white, and blue, and on it was: It might have saved your parents."

For more information on the Dayton Codebreakers, and journalist Aileen LeBlanc's 2006 documentary, visit http://daytoncodebreakers.org. Veterans Voices is part of Veterans Coming Home, a public media effort to support veterans, made possible by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The project is a partnership between WYSO and the Wright State University Veteran and Military Center.

Photo:
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