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Flunking a Test & Hiroshima

Lydia Franz

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Story: "Flunking a Test" & "Hiroshima"

Storyteller: Lydia Franz

Town: Owl's Head, ME

NA 3230 C2335

Collector: Angela Nickerson

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The stories recounted here by Lydia Franz concern her experience in the United States Army as a cryptanalyst during World War II. The first is a humorous account of how and why she intentionally failed a test to help ensure that she would be assigned to her desired unit. The second is a recollection of reading Japanese messages after the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945, and the disbelief within her unit upon reading the descriptions of the devastation caused by one bomb. (She continued in the full interview to discuss the reaction to the bomb dropped three days later on Nagasaki as well; the combined death toll of these two bombs sits close to 500,000 people.) Franz had a unique view of World War II in her position as a code-breaker, often reading and passing along information that lacked context or seemed completely mundane. At other times, however, she had a front seat to history.

Franz was assigned to Arlington Hall, Virginia as a cryptanalyst deciphering Japanese code. Her job required her to memorize 500 four-digit numbers, and then scan numeric intercepts to identify letters. Arlington Hall was a former girl's school and the headquarters of the US Army's Signal Intelligence Service (SIS) code-breaking effort during World War II. (The site now houses the George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center.) Throughout the war, the cryptanalysts at Arlington Hall sent ten thousand messages to the Pentagon per day. Based on her experience, Franz thus believed American military leaders in the Pacific theater had an incredible amount of detailed information on which to base their actions. Franz's job as a cryptanalyst was also significant because World War II marked a major expansion of women's roles in the United States military. WWII was the first time American women, other than nurses, were allowed to serve within the ranks of the United States Army. Women had been involved with many of these non-combat or support roles, but until the early 1940s they had not been officially included in the military.

One point of clarification may prove helpful. In the first story, Franz mentioned a "Rube Goldberg," which is the term for a complex gadget or machine that performs a simple task. The name comes from Reuben Goldberg (July 4, 1883 – December 7, 1970), an American cartoonist, sculptor, author, engineer, and inventor. He is best known for a series of popular cartoons depicting these types of machines.

Transcript:

When I joined the Army, they gave me a battery of tests even before I joined, before I was sworn in, and they gave me a battery of tests. And I had been told and promised by the recruiter that I would be considered for this code-breaking program, so I had my heart set on that. Now they give me the battery of tests, I did very well on them except for *typing*. Now, I was a superb typist but I realized that if I did well on that test I might become a typist and I can't have that. So I flunked the test deliberately. I probably got a negative score on typing; I sure tried to! Then there was a mechanical test, and I am, honestly, poor at mechanics. I am *zero* at mechanics, and there would be drawings, like "Rube Goldberg" kind of drawings that would say, "If you press 'Lever A'" - and there would be all kinds of things in

between - "What happens over here at 'Lever Z'" or whatever. Well, I don't know; things go up or down, in or out, I don't know. I have no idea, I'll never know! So I flunked that easily, just naturally. But on the IQ thing I did very well, and, so they kept their promise. But I was very cautious because I had some friends that were in the service who said, "Look out, you know. They can promise you things but you never know!" And I was scared to death they'd put me in the motor pool or make me a cook or something awful like that, so I just, I had my heart set and I succeeded at that!

...It was a phenomenal experience. Things like, well, Hiroshima when that bomb hit. We decoded the message from the Japanese to their... the other Japanese; it was from Hiroshima to Rangoon [, Myanmar], I remember that message, describing the devastation caused by *one single bomb*. We couldn't believe it. We were given the message to read and we're all just, our eyes are like this, you know? What do you suppose that is? Because we knew about "Project Manhattan," you know, it was unreal.

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