

For decades they kept mum about their roles working in the top-secret government facility that existed for 34 years in the subbasement of Lewis Hall of Science. Now they share their story.



# The Ladies of Lewis

BY KIM ASCH

*Betty Mathias, 96, and  
Jackie Hering, 87, know  
how to keep a secret.*





*To our friend Jeanne, with appreciation and best wishes. John Stauber*

A commemorative photo given to the women after they were debriefed in Washington, D.C., in 2000. In the front row on the far left is Jane Twigg Willis '35. Jeanne Herr is in the front row, second from the far right. Jackie Brown Hering '51 is third from the left in the back row wearing glasses and Marjorie Spangler Zerkel '46 is next to her, fourth from the left. Betty Mathias is in the back row standing between the two men.

Jackie Hering '51 is 87. Jeanne Herr is 89. Betty Mathias is 96. Now widows and great-grandmothers, the longtime friends were recruited and trained for jobs that spanned more than two decades. Shaped by their memories of World War II, the strife of Vietnam just barely ended and the ever-present threat of the ongoing Cold War, the women say they felt honored to be asked and stepped up to do their jobs as a matter of patriotism and civic duty.

Explains Mathias: "It was peace time, but not an easy time."

They were the women responsible for sending and receiving coded messages between federal agencies in the event of a cataclysmic attack on Washington, D.C.

They practiced their work in the subbasement of Lewis Hall of Science in a classified mission so cloaked even their own families were not privy.

The facility itself was perhaps the worst-kept secret on campus, but the story of what actually went on inside the bunker secured behind vault-like doors, and of the women who faithfully carried out their work there, remained a mystery until now. Years after the program ended and was declassified in 2000, three of the women recruited and trained to maintain the operational readiness of the facility feel they can safely share their story.



The threat of atomic annihilation arising from the Cold War inspired the government's national continuity plan, a strategy for the mass evacuation and relocation of every federal government agency including the White House and the military. In 1956, the government leased space in the basement of Thompson Hall, at that time the College's infirmary, as part of the effort. A decade later, the government designed and paid \$100,000 for the creation of the subbasement facility during the construction of Lewis Hall of Science.

The three women, among the later recruits, were hired and trained in 1977 by the late Marjorie Spangler Zerkel '46, then WMC's assistant registrar, whose first husband was the long-serving music professor Oliver Spangler. Each had strong ties to one another and to the College. The Herrs and the Herings, having known each other since childhood, built homes on the same street within an easy walk to campus. Herr's late husband, Ober '49, was grandson of College namesake William Roberts McDaniel. Mathias' late husband, Kale '35, a decorated veteran, was a College Trustee for 26 years. Zerkel, Hering, Herr and Mathias were longtime members of the Woman's Club of Westminster.

None of the women know how Zerkel came to be involved in the federal facility, which paid rent to the College, as a tenant to a landlord.

"Marjorie said there was something to discuss in private," Hering recalls. "I went to her house, but



“It was peace time, but not an easy time.”

Marjorie wouldn't say much because until you agreed to do it and had the top-secret security clearance, you weren't supposed to know.”

Zerkel told each of them about a part-time job that would require a commitment of one full day per month, plus a couple of hours each day for a week or two every few months. She didn't mention anything about the government until the women confirmed they were interested. “You'll have to trust me,” Hering remembers Zerkel telling her.

They did. “We all respected Marjorie so much,” Hering says. “If Marjorie said it was OK, you trusted Marjorie.”

Once they learned that the purpose of their work was to support a plan to ensure the continuity of government if a calamity forced the evacuation of the nation's capital, the women realized the seriousness of their assignment — and why it was necessary to keep mum about it. The FBI interviewed the women's neighbors during the vetting process for their top-secret clearance, but the women found ways to deflect the curious questions that came after.

Says Hering: “I had no connection whatever with the government. But when they said top-secret clearance, I have to admit that was weighty. I thought, ‘Oh my word.’ I didn't know what was going to happen to me if I said anything, but I sure didn't want to find out.”

Their silence on the matter extended to their families, including their husbands. “My husband knew it was in Lewis Hall — we were allowed to tell our husbands where we were going in case we should fall down the steps or something (this was in the days before cell phones) — but he did not know what I was doing. And he did not keep asking.”



When Herr, Hering and Mathias joined the team, they were surprised to find many familiar faces already at work, including their friend Jane Twigg Willis '35 and Eloise Ensor, wife of the College's fifth president, Lowell Ensor.

Once each month, they reported for two consecutive eight-hour days in the facility to run what were

referred to as “exercises.” The exercises involved training and practicing on various pieces of equipment that could be used to send and receive communications to and from other Emergency Operating Facilities. “That's the first time I typed on an electric typewriter,” says Herr, who had worked as a secretary on a manual model. The women became early computer users, long before the College or most any other civilian institution adopted them. They also learned to send encrypted messages on the KL-7, a cipher machine developed by the National Security Agency. They became adept at decoding incoming messages.

“There were other facilities practicing on the same day,” Herr recalls. “Some were the Department of Interior, the Defense Department, occasionally the Department of Commerce.” The women understood that their facility was to be an emergency base for the Department of Agriculture.

“There was a little room with a secure phone and handset that we used to send practice messages,” Herr says. She can still recite the entire NATO phonetic alphabet she learned for those encrypted phone messages: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie ... Papa, Quebec, Romeo ... Zulu.

“It was just practicing. In the case of an emergency, we would do the communicating for the people who came who knew what was going on,” Hering says.

The facility was also equipped with provisions that could sustain a staff in the event of a nuclear attack. There were canned goods, beds, a kitchenette. “We had a decontamination room with a shower,” Herr says.

“For me, it was kind of scary to think that we might have to use this and why,” says Hering. “Thinking that there might be high-ranking people actually communicating things that have to do with whether the country survived or not.”

*A stamp to mark official documents “secret” remains as an artifact from the Lewis facility.*





**Above:** Betty Mathias, 96, has never discussed her top-secret job with anyone, not even family members.

**Opposite:** John Willis, whose mother Jane Twigg Willis '35 served on the staff of the secret facility from 1968 to 1990.

Beyond the monthly exercises, the women recall week-long sessions of more intensive drills with high-ranking government officials at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Md. "Caspar Weinberger came up one of the times," says Herr. Weinberger served as defense secretary under President Ronald Reagan from 1981 to 1987.

"It was a large practice exercise. We had shifts, with three working at a time, and some of us stayed up all night," Herr says.

The week away meant a break from household responsibilities, spending time with good friends, learning new skills and doing something that seemed vital, if a distant possibility. Plus, adds Herr, "They had the best meals there."

Every day, one of the women arrived on campus to discreetly check that the doors to the facility beneath Lewis Hall were locked. They took rotating shifts two weeks at a time. Often, Hering recalls, suspicious students and faculty would be watching for them. "It became obvious that some were kind of waiting because they knew we were there to check the doors," she says. "You'd decide whether to go ahead and go down or just pretend you were walking through the building and come back later."

The compensation was modest, but beside the point. "It wasn't the money. We were paid minimum wage, no more than that," says Hering. Agrees Herr, "It gave us a good sense that someone had confidence in us to offer us this position. And we took it very seriously, we really did."

Hering says she felt "a greater sense of urgency" the one time she accompanied her supervisor, Marjorie Spangler Zerkel, to "the mountain," the nickname for the bunker nestled into a hillside at the Greenbrier Resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. That was the facility designed to house every member of the House and Senate in the event of Armageddon. "I don't remember exactly why, but I remember taking our work even more seriously after that."



few years before the women were hired, the facility became the subject of controversy and national newspaper articles following the 1973 publication of the book by journalist David Wise, *The*

*Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy and Power*. Wise reported that the Lewis Hall subbasement had been dedicated for use by the Wartime Information Security Program, or WISP.

Wise wrote that in the event of a national emergency, eight men assigned as civilian censors would have reported to the secret center to interpret and administer a "seven-page, single-spaced Censorship Code ... designed to prohibit the press from reporting about a wide range of military and diplomatic information." Wise warned that although the censorship program was described as "voluntary," it presented a threat to First Amendment freedoms. Congress defunded WISP following the Watergate scandal in 1974 but the Lewis facility remained in use until 2000, when it was decommissioned and declassified.

Among the men identified in the book as a designated censor was the late Col. Eugene "Stoney" Willis '34, who had recently retired from a career in the military and became the College's first director of the physical plant in 1964. He was designated in September 1966 as a member of the National Defense Executive Reserve for wartime service in the Office of Censorship by the Office of Emergency Preparedness in the Office of the President.

"My father reacted angrily to that book," remembers his son, John Willis, a former secretary of state of Maryland who is now executive in residence at the University of Baltimore's School of Public and International Affairs and senior counsel to the Maryland Attorney General. Both Stoney and his wife, Jane Twigg Willis '35, lived lives of service and were dedicated to America's democratic principles, says John Willis, and neither would have knowingly engaged in activity they believed would do harm to the country. Stoney served in Europe during WWII and his subsequent Army career included

assignments in Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Turkey. Jane, or JJ, as she was known to her friends and family, taught English to Turkish employees of the Joint United States Military Mission for Aid to Turkey.

Known for her sharp intellect, quiet strength, meticulousness and keen sense of adventure, JJ was among the first of the women to join the staff of the secret facility in 1968. She served until 1990, when she was in her mid-70s.

“Her job classification was cryptologist,” Willis says, adding that his mother continued to enjoy puzzling out cryptograms well into her 90s. “When she started on one, she would not let go of it until it was solved.”

Willis’ wife, McDaniel professor Kathy Mangan, says she knew her mother-in-law went to work in the Lewis subbasement, but not much more: “We would ask her, ‘Did you polish the red button? Did you stir the plutonium today?’ She’d just roll her eyes.”

The late political science professor Bob Weber had another nickname for JJ: The Cobra. “She never had a tell in card games,” Mangan explains. “You never knew when she would strike with a winning hand.”

Says Willis: “JJ was patriotic to the core. She could keep a secret. That’s one reason she had so many friends. I don’t think the Russians could have cracked any of her secrets.”



For decades, the women never discussed even the smallest details about their experiences with anyone. They never even reminisced with each other, though their various volunteer and social activities have regularly brought them together over the years.

“We just have never talked about it,” Hering says. “We were sworn to secrecy so long, I tried to forget.”

When the government facility in Lewis subbasement was closed and renovated for use by the College in 2000, the women were permitted to take some of the pieces of furniture with them as keepsakes. Hering and Herr both have a chair and a barrister bookcase. They also were invited to Washington, D.C., for a debriefing and an official group photo. They all received framed photos inscribed with an expression of appreciation for their service.

Hering says she is happy to finally share such an interesting aspect of her life. “I can hardly wait for my one grandson to read this story,” she says with a twinkle in her eye. “He thinks that if I was at Greenbrier for work, I must have been wearing a hairnet and doing food prep because I was a home economics major in college.”



C. KURT HOUTER

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Although the College’s involvement has ended, the government’s national continuity plan continues, with dozens of new facilities having been constructed since September 2001, *The Washington Post* has reported. Of course, the Lewis subbasement facility was never activated, and the women never had to use the skills they had been taught in a real-life scenario.

Says Hering: “We were so grateful for that.” ■