

Clara Amelia Riggs

U.S. Navy, Telegrapher Petty Officer Third Class

1923 - 2010

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Clara Riggs was born May 26, 1923, in Swea City, a small farming town in Kossuth County, Iowa. She was born to Joseph Frank Goraczkowski and Victoria Hattie Goraczkowski, both of whom were children of Polish immigrants. Joseph was born in Illinois but grew up in Minnesota, which is how he may have met and married the Minnesota-born Victoria in 1910. Joseph and Victoria moved out to Iowa on their own to take up farming.

The Goraczkowski household was typically large for farming families of the day. Clara grew up as the second-youngest of nine siblings: she and her older brothers, Stanley, Walter, Sylvester, David, Peter, Paul, and Clarence, along with her younger brother, James, all labored with their parents to keep the farm going.

Clara grew up during the Great Depression through her primary school years, though conditions in Kossuth County had been worsening for a decade before the 1929 economic crash. As early as 1920, the value of corn and oats had dropped by two-thirds per bushel. Additionally, droughts severely impacted Midwest farmers in 1934 and 1936. These difficult conditions may be what prevented the Goraczkowskis from owning their farm, which is listed as rented property in both the 1930 and 1940 censuses.

Clara graduated in 1941 from Swea City High School. She then attended classes at the American Institute of Business in Des Moines, Iowa, from 1942 to 1943. With



Clara Goraczkowski in her senior year, 1941.
Swea City (Iowa) High School Yearbook

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firsthand knowledge of a farmer's difficult life, perhaps Clara saw business school as a better alternative to the rural upbringing to which she was accustomed. Or perhaps it was a stepping stone toward helping her country fight the war that had broken out when Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Clara enlisted in the U.S. Navy on her 21st birthday, May 26, 1944, in Des Moines, Iowa. More specifically, she joined the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or WAVES. The WAVES were an all-female section of the Navy created during World War II to free up male personnel for sea duty. Advertisements for the WAVES were in every newspaper, and it is possible Clara heard about the opportunity through her local paper, if not through the Navy's other enthusiastic recruitment efforts urging women to "share the deeds of victory," or to find a "man-sized job for you."

Clara was not alone in her enthusiasm. Though the WAVES had only been established in mid-1942, they had recruited nearly 4,000 women in the first year alone. By 1945, the WAVES would be 86,000-strong. Clara also had the prerequisites—the minimum recruiting age was 20, and applicants needed at least a high school diploma or business degree.

In July 1944, Clara wrote to her hometown newspaper, the *Swea City Herald*, from Washington D.C. to ask for the free subscription offered to local men and women serving in the military. "We haven't had much to do yet, aside from getting used to navy life. ...The food is good



The Navy printed tens of thousands of copies of this 1944 advertisement, showing two WAVES walking in front of the New York City skyline. Similar ads might have inspired Clara's enlistment. NHHC, 45-127-M



Navy WAVES arrayed for inspection. NHHC, UA 45.01.01

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and just the right amount. We really were surprised how good it really is. We get our uniforms, I mean our dresses, two weeks from now. We have our shoes and hats.” Three of her brothers were serving overseas at the time, and one wrote in later that year to report on rounding up German prisoners in Italy.

A Pleasant Way to Salute Our Service Men is to Contribute to the Fund for Mailing Them The Herald

Through the generosity of the people of the community and friends elsewhere, nearly 200 of our defenders regularly receive the home town news in all parts of the world

In 1944, Clara asserted in a letter to her hometown newspaper that she deserved the same free subscription as other servicemen. *Swea City Herald*, 17 June 1943

In the WAVES, women were able to pursue many different specialties; they could become yeomen, storekeepers, aviation or radio technicians, parachute riggers, photographers, and more. Clara went to basic training at Hunter College in The Bronx, New York, and then on to the Naval Communications Annex in Washington, D.C. for training in telecommunications. Clara was a Telegrapher Petty Officer Third Class, or T3. While enlisted, Clara told the *Swea City Herald* in August 1944 that she enjoyed Washington D.C., as it was very green and beautiful in the summer. Clara stated “I like being in the service very much so far, and I even liked boot camp. It seemed like I sailed through it very easily.”

While working at the Naval Communications Annex, Clara learned and helped to work the BOMBES machine, an early form of computer used to recover the key to German ENIGMA ciphers. These keys were used to decode German messages intercepted by the Allies, revealing German troop movements and positions to British and American commanders in Europe.

While in Washington D.C., Clara met and married Meredith Riggs, a Navy Electrician’s Mate (EM1) from West Virginia. As an EM1, Meredith would have been responsible for the operation and maintenance of the Navy’s power stations and electric equipment. The couple were married by a Navy chaplain May 5, 1945, in a small ceremony at the Communications Annex hospital. After a brief honeymoon in New York, Clara returned to the Communications Annex and Meredith went to

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Camp Perry in Virginia to attend Interior Communications school.

Although the WAVES offered Clara a career, she joined the large-scale demobilization of women at war's end and left the service in November 1945. Meredith remained in the Navy and the couple relocated to Naval Air Station Jacksonville in Florida. With her husband constantly on assignment, Clara may have spent a great deal of time with her family in Iowa. The couple's first child, a daughter, was born in Estherville, Iowa, in October 1946.

After Meredith retired from the Navy, Clara and Meredith moved to Armstrong, Emmet County, Iowa. Emmet County borders Kossuth County, so it is likely that the Riggs moved there to be close to Clara's family. Clara worked at Stern Finance Company until she left to raise the five children she and Meredith eventually had together. They had three daughters, Vicki, Cindy, and Judith, as well as two sons, Randall and Thomas. The family later moved to Silver Spring, Montgomery County, Maryland, where Clara worked at Quanta Systems Corporation in Gaithersburg as a secretary for 23 years. She retired in 1990.

After retirement, Meredith and Clara settled in Inwood, West Virginia. As a West Virginia native born in Upshur County, Meredith may have wanted to return to



WAVES service dress blue uniform from shortly after World War II. NHHHC 2003-108-1

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his home state. Clara probably liked Inwood, as it was a small and quiet town like her hometown of Swea City. The couple were volunteers for Meals on Wheels in Inwood for many years. They loved to travel, visiting all 48 continental states and Alaska. She was a lifelong member of WAVES National and attended Inwood United Methodist Church.

Meredith and Clara were together for 49 years until Meredith's passing April 7, 1995. Clara later moved to the Homestead Manor, an assisted-living community, in Denton, Maryland, until her passing December 2, 2010. She was laid to rest alongside Meredith in the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown.



A fellow WAVES Telegrapher Third Class, Ida May Rowley, checks monitor tape at the Naval Communications Annex in Washington D.C. "Replacing male experts needed at sea or distant bases, these alert, competent members of the Women's Reserve are 'passing the word' for the men behind the guns," according to an official caption. NH 97518

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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section: 1
Site: 883

Date of Interment: May 9, 2011

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

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