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"DAYTON CODEBREAKERS" DOCUMENTARY PREMIERES APRIL 15, ILLUSTRATES JOE DESCH'S INGENIOUS, HEROIC EFFORT DURING WORLD WAR II

DAYTON, Ohio — Joe Desch carried a secret to his grave. During World War II, the engineer headed a top-secret program at the National Cash Register Co. to develop a code-breaking machine that helped bring the war to an end.

Today, his daughter Debbie Desch Anderson, journalist Aileen LeBlanc and the Montgomery County Historical Society are bringing that remarkable story to light in an hourlong documentary, "Dayton Codebreakers," that will premiere at 7 p.m. on Friday, April 15, in the Kennedy Union Boll Theatre at the University of Dayton. It's a fitting setting. Desch earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from UD in 1929.

Tickets for the premiere are $4. Starting April 1, they can be ordered by calling the Kennedy Union box office at (937) 229-2545. The filmmakers will be available for questions and answers after the premiere. Refreshments will be served in the Torch Lounge after the film.

The piece will air on ThinkTV Channel 16 at 9 p.m. on Tuesday, April 19, and ThinkTV Channel 14 at 10 p.m. on Wednesday, April 20.

"I hope that one benefit of this video is that the story will reach a younger audience — in addition to the Dayton community — who might find in it a bit of encouragement, a bit of inspiration, in the power of pursuing what you love," said Anderson, a Kettering, Ohio, resident who served as researcher and associate producer. "In Dad's case, his love of science enabled him ultimately to save the lives of thousands. I'm pleased with the film."

Desch's remarkable role in speeding up the end of World War II started to come to light in the early 1990s when documents about the NCR project were declassified. Desch had received a Congressional Medal of Merit from President Harry Truman in 1947 — the highest wartime honor for civilians — but had taken a pledge of secrecy not to reveal any information about his role in the development of a high-speed code-breaking machine called a Bombe, which was used to decipher German Naval enigma codes and allowed Allied Forces to track
down and destroy German U-Boats. Desch left some documents, including the written pledge, to his daughter after he died in 1987.

"It was a puzzle that Debbie took on herself and spent more than 12 years researching her Dad's involvement," said LeBlanc, former news director for WYSO-FM Radio who produced a piece on Desch's ingenuity for National Public Radio in 2002. "These machines were breaking codes and reading messages they needed for the rest of the war. Joe Desch was an amateur radio operator and largely self-taught in the field of electrical engineering, which was just emerging. UD saw his talents in engineering, and NCR recruited him to start an electrical research laboratory. Then the Navy came to him for the Bombe project."

The Navy pushed repeatedly for an all-electronic code-breaking machine, but Desch insisted an electromechanical hybrid could do the same job and take less time to produce. Two dozen engineers and 600 WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service), who assembled the machines, worked with Desch on the project.

In all, 120 of these machines were built "under incredible secrecy, and no word of them leaked until declassification by President Clinton in the early 1990s," according to Anderson, who graduated in 1971 with a degree in English from UD, where she honed her research skills.

Anderson and LeBlanc used Desch's same "can-do spirit" to raise $100,000 over the past two years from local foundations and individuals to research and produce "Dayton Codebreakers."

"It was two women going into foundations and saying, 'Give us money because we have a story to tell.' Dayton has a reputation of breeding innovators and entrepreneurs but also one of not singing our own song. We'd like to change that with this documentary," said LeBlanc, who wrote, produced and directed the piece.

For more information on the documentary, see www.daytoncodebreakers.org.

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For media interviews, contact Aileen LeBlanc at (937) 767-9223 or aileenleblanc@hotmail.com.