

Caeden Tollefsen
Julia Child and the “Shark Chaser”: The Newsworthy Conflict
with a Hidden Compromise
Junior Historical Paper
1,557 words

“In the blood-heat of pursuing the enemy, many people are forgetting what we are fighting for. We are fighting for our hard-won liberty and freedom; for our Constitution and the due processes of our laws; and for the right to differ in ideas, religion and politics. I am convinced that in your zeal to fight against our enemies, you, too, have forgotten what you are fighting for.” - Julia Child, My Life in France

Thesis

Julia McWilliams, known today as Julia Child, the famous chef with a high-pitched voice, not only made French cooking available for “mainstream Americans,”¹ but in fact created one recipe that was almost completely unknown to the public. Created by a team working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency and also a secret spy organization run by the government—the recipe saved multiple lives. Child’s love for adventure brought conflicts throughout her personal life, job changes, and multiple international transfers, along with the overall struggle with being a female during wartime and therefore not allowed to be out in the field and get her hands dirty. As a woman living in the 1940s, Child was often given office jobs. While working at the predominantly male government organization, Child was led to live a life as a secretary or assistant for her male counterparts². Child’s decision of changing her career path not only caused an abundance of lives to be saved during World War II, but also allowed her to break barriers given by social standards of the time.

School Years

From early on, Child’s parents knew that they did not want to send their daughter to a public school, so Child attended a Montessori School. In 1927, Child was sent to boarding

¹ Biography.com Editors. "Julia Child." *Biography.com*. A&E Networks Television, 28 Apr. 2017. Web. 2 Nov. 2017.

² Spitz, Bob. *Dearie: the Remarkable Life of Julia Child*. Vintage Books, 2013.

school. Although her mother and aunts attended Miss Capen's School in Massachusetts, Child was sent to Katherine Branson School in California, a local school for strict college preparation. Within the strict environment, Child still found fun in daily life, becoming involved in multiple extracurricular activities including basketball and archery. After her completion of studies at the Katherine Branson School, she applied to Smith College—where her mother and aunt both attended—and got accepted. Smith encouraged its students to reach their goals, no matter how difficult and regardless of current societal convention.

Her Movement Begins

From the beginning of her career, Child struggled to find jobs that were enjoyable for her whilst accepting her lack of qualifications. She hadn't learned a second language nor had any major experience in the workforce. She had a job "in the advertising department of the prestigious home furnishings company W&J Sloane"³. Although it was a fairly good paying job, she still thought she could have a more adventurous one. She decided she was going to achieve the title of becoming a "great woman novelist," as she put it in an broadcasted interview that aired December 17, 1995. Her career goal of becoming a famous author ended when publishers refused her works. As World War II broke out in America following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, she felt the need to help out more. She applied to both Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES)—a women's organization to allow women to train like the Navy men for emergency needs as additional recruits during the war⁴

³ Biography.com Editors. "Julia Child." *Biography.com*. A&E Networks Television, 28 Apr. 2017. Web. 2 Nov. 2017.

⁴ "WAVES." *United States History*.

—and Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC)⁵—an organization created to allow women to take over the war-related office jobs so more men could join the combat⁶. Being a six-foot-two female, she was denied by both agencies for being “too tall”⁷. Her eagerness to maintain involvement in the war effort led her to move to Washington D.C. Ultimately, this compromise brought her to a position at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) as a typist. The typist position was not fitting to her outgoing personality, so she needed a change. After exploring the other departments, she noticed a project in the Emergency Rescue Equipment (ERE) department required more help. Child took on the project with open arms. The project was creating a shark repellent to be used by the United States Navy.

World War II

As the war conflicts increased, the Navy realized an immense need in their equipment technologies. At the time, Julia Child was working for the OSS and had multiple friends within the Armed Forces. With ships being blown apart and airplanes being shot out of the sky into the oceans below, the Navy noticed that they did not have the necessary equipment to keep their men safe. After over twenty naval officers had been involved in shark confrontations; the rising news media took over and boosted the fear levels of the public over these stories. The increased attention to this issue caused airmen and sailors to have a fear of going overseas. This fear brought up a new problem that had not arisen before. The Navy then realized they needed to “boost morale”⁸ in order to save their men and their public image. Keeping the project a secret

⁵ Patrick, Jeanette. “The Recipe for Adventure.” *National Women's History Museum*, 8 Nov. 2017.

⁶ Roussel, Meg. “WAAC Created” *The National WWII History Museum*

⁷ “A Look Back ... Julia Child: Life Before French Cuisine.” *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 14 June 2017.

⁸ “Julia Child and the OSS Recipe for Shark Repellent.” *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central

from the rest of the Armed Forces for unknown reasons, the Navy enlisted the help of the newly formed OSS to create the shark repellent that was necessary to protect their officers.

The project moved into the ERE department of the OSS, and brought in help from Captain Harold J. Coolidge (Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology scientist), Dr. Henry Field (Field Museum of Natural History Curator) and Child. Beginning in July of 1942, approximately ten months of strenuous testing ensued to find the most fitting substance for their requirements. Child, along with Coolidge and Field, devoted their time to work with stinky, questionable chemicals. The team studied the effects of over one hundred different substances including household chemicals and common poisons. Child even once stated in an interview with her producer Margaret Sullivan "...my first big recipe was shark repellent that I mixed in a bathtub for the Navy, for the men who might get caught in the water."⁹ The final choices of extracts for further testing included decaying shark meat, organic acids, and copper salts.

The field tests led them to their final decision of copper acetate, a type of copper salt. The acetate was shown to be over 60% effective in deterring sharks. This led the team to do additional tests for other fish. Though the copper acetate was useless against other carnivorous fish, the ERE decided that would be the final shark repellent¹⁰. The Navy, however, wanted the ERE to continue their test on possible substances to get the truly best product for their men. In a correspondence between Edward Howell, Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics, and the Navy

Intelligence Agency, 14 June 2017.

⁹ "Julia McWilliams (Julia Child)." *Washington Post*, 15 Apr. 2008. *The Washington Post [ProQuest]*.

¹⁰ "Julia Child and the OSS Recipe for Shark Repellent." *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central Intelligence Agency, 14 June 2017. Web. 21 Nov. 2017.

Research Department, Howell stated that “it is illogical to expect that such effect as was shown in normal feeding behavior would give any promise of affecting the voracious behavior of the few species known to have attacked man.”¹¹

The product was made into three-by-three-by-one inch block and put into a sealed plastic casing. The sealed repellent was then placed in a fabric blended bag and attached to a life jacket using a large safety pin. The product would only smell after submerged in water, to prevent the product from being too pungent while storing. The shark repellent was used from the time it was released in the mid 1940s through the late 1970s.

The Cooking Began

While amidst her work overseas in China, Child met her future husband, Paul, who was another American OSS worker. After the couple was transferred back to the United States, Paul and Julia married. Shortly after their wedding, in 1948, Paul was once again transferred overseas to Paris, France. Not wanting to live apart, Child moved with Paul over three-thousand miles across the Atlantic. Having left her job to move with her husband, Child needed a new hobby to keep her busy while Paul was at work. Since she was a wreck in the kitchen, Child took on cooking classes at the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu school in Paris. Learning how to make French food opened a new set of doors for Child. Her enjoyment of the cuisine led her to become the famous chef known today, taking on roles in tv shows such as her own in 1963 entitled *The French Chef*.

¹¹ "Julia Child and the OSS Recipe for Shark Repellent." *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central Intelligence Agency, 14 June 2017. Web. 21 Nov. 2017.

Conclusion

Many may say that Child's multiple career choices may not have affected her later life as a chef. She had always had a love for food and enjoyed good cooking. Her grandmother thought that she would be a famous chef since Child was a child¹². She may not have been a good chef from a young age, but she learned many skills quickly. Her love for learning and food could have ultimately led Child to learn to cook, but there is no doubt that Child would not be the person she is known as today if she would not have been in these situations. Julia Child's ability to persevere through the struggles and her conflicts shows that anyone can persevere through any situation. Her perseverance through all her career struggles made her personality stronger. She built off these many separate career struggles that led to her legacy today. Child's involvement with the OSS not only broke gender barriers of the time, it also allowed her to take on roles that made her who she is known for today. Bon appétit.

¹² Spitz, Bob. *Dearie: the Remarkable Life of Julia Child*. Vintage Books, 2013.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

McIntosh, Elizabeth P. *Sisterhood of Spies: Women of the OSS*. Vol. 1, Naval Institute Press, 1998.

This informational biographical style book by Elizabeth P. McIntosh noted the experiences

of her peers and coworkers as they worked at the Office of Strategic Services. After reading the stories that were in the book, I was easy for me to see certain traits that followed women throughout the 1940s. I was also able to get more information about Julia Child and her time during the wartime and in the OSS.

United States, Congress, Office of Strategic Services. "McWilliams, Julia C." *McWilliams, Julia C.*, pp. 1–130.

These previously classified documents were released into the National Archives and posted on to their website. The documents helped show me the little unnoticed details that Julia had gone through. I saw that many are just either transfer papers through the minor departments within the OSS and were not really useful for my research. The documents were helpful to find specific dates of certain events that happened within her time at the OSS.

Bradford, Roark. "Shark Sense." *Shark Sense*, Aviation Training Division, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, U.S. Navy, 1944, 1944. *Sense*, pp. 1–22.

This booklet was helpful for me because it contains a lot of cartoons that helped show the worries and other opinions about the problems occurring under the noses of the public. I knew that people were afraid of the occurrences that came along with sharks, but I never thought that it was as bad as it seemed until I looked through the booklet.

Interviews

The Culinary Institute of America. *Julia Child at the CIA 1990*. *Youtube.com*, The Culinary Institute of America, 18 Aug. 2009.

In this interview with Julia Child, Julia talks less about her time at the OSS and more about

her time cooking. I may not have gotten much information about her time at the OSS, but I got a lot of information about Julia's personality and thought process on getting into cooking.

KTEHTV. 1995 Clip: *Julia Child Joining the O.S.S.* Youtube.com, PBS, 1995.

In this interview, Julia discusses her time finding the job at the OSS. She talked about her career path and how it impacted her thought process. This source ultimately helped me understand that her previous careers had impacted her so greatly. This source made me realize my final view on the topic.

Secondary Sources

Biography.com Editors. "Julia Child." *Biography.com*. A&E Networks Television, 28 Apr. 2017.

This biography gave me some basic background information about Julia Child's life. It gave me a good understanding of her life, fame, and legacy.

Jacobs, Laura. "Our Lady of the Kitchen." *Vanity Fair*, Aug. 2009.

Within this article the author discussed specific information about Paul and Julia's relationship. There was background information on how they met and how their relationship started. It also gave some information about possible other sources I could see like the museum exhibit at the National Museum of American History.

"Julia Child and the OSS Recipe for Shark Repellent." *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central Intelligence Agency, 14 June 2017.

This article was published and written by Central Intelligence Agency workers. Since the OSS was the forerunner to the CIA, I was immediately interested in the source. It gave me a lot of background information about the shark repellent, the Navy, and the people she worked with for the project. This article helped give some reasoning to why they created the shark repellent. It also provided information on the making of the shark repellent including their struggles, successes, and final product.

"Julia Child Biography." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, www.notablebiographies.com/Ch-Co/Child-Julia.html.

In this biography article, the author talks about Julia Child's entire life from her childhood to her husband's death. This biography was very helpful to see what was going on in her life towards Paul's death. This part of her life was almost completely left out of most of her biographies or stories about her life, so I felt like this was necessary information to know.

“Julia McWilliams (Julia Child).” *Washington Post*, 15 Apr. 2008. *The Washington Post [ProQuest]*.

This article gave me information on her jobs within the OSS. It also gives multiple facts on

her specifics in the OSS and some quotes that she had said previously about her job at the OSS and why she moved/transferred regularly from position to position and how.

“Julia Child’s Early Recipe: Shark Repellent.” *The Charlotte Observer*, 10 July 2015.

This article was able to give multiple quotes that I could use within my essay along with multiple quoted interviews that I could look into for further information. A lot of the information was restated from previous sources that I had annotated, but I still was able to pull some quotes that I had never seen before in any sources.

“A Look Back ... Julia Child: Life Before French Cuisine.” *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 14 June 2017.

This article gave a synopsis on Julia’s life both at the OSS and outside of it. It gave me information about her life before the OSS job and what jobs she had within the OSS. I was given information about her more impacting transfers (mostly the ones overseas).

Patrick, Jeanette. “The Recipe for Adventure.” *National Women's History Museum*, 8 Nov. 2017.

This article discusses Julia’s life at the point of finding her job at the OSS and why she decided to take that kind of career path. It talks about how she didn’t have any major skills

that made her stand out from another woman, and that’s why she was given an office job at first. It gave multiple facts about her career path struggles and her need for fulfillment of her adventurous side.

Roussel, Meg. “WAAC Created” *The National WWII History Museum*

This article talks about how and why the WAAC was created and what it did. It gave me background information about the organization which I very much needed because I did not know much about the side organizations for women during World War II.

Spitz, Bob. *Dearie: the Remarkable Life of Julia Child*. Vintage Books, 2013.

This book is a complete biography about Julia Child, it discusses her entire life, even including the information about her parents meeting and background information about her

family. This source helped me to get multiple facts about her family and parenting styles that her parents used for her and her siblings growing up. It discusses thoroughly Julia’s school life and what she was doing as extracurricular activities at the time.

“WAVES.” *United States History*.

This article discusses the organization and why it was created. It discusses the ways it was

used during the war and how women were helping the war effort through this organization.

Some of the facts were necessary for my research because these women’s organizations were widely common throughout the time, but are almost unknown today. I needed to fully understand what these organizations did during the war and what made them different

from each other.