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Coast Guard History

Frequently Asked Questions

Elizebeth Smith Friedman, Coast Guard Cryptanalyst

Elizebeth Smith Friedman, born in 1892, was one of the most remarkable women to ever work for the U.S. Government. The National Security Agency described her as: "wife, mother, writer, Shakespeare enthusiast, cryptanalyst, and pioneer in U.S. cryptology." **(1)** While not a member of the Coast Guard *per se*, Mrs. Friedman was the Treasury Department's cryptanalyst, hired in 1924, who assisted the various departments of the Treasury with code breaking. Her work with the Coast Guard began soon after the passage of the Volstead Act. Liquor smugglers frequently made use of radios to coordinate their activities and began to encode their messages. Ms. Friedman was then detailed to the Coast Guard and so began a remarkable career with the nation's oldest sea service breaking these illicit codes. She was quite successful and is credited with "breaking" the code of over 12,000 different encoded radio messages.

She was also a star government witness at a number of smugglers' trials, including the famous *I'm Alone* case. In 1938 she "cracked" the code used by an opium smuggling ring operating out of Canada. In this instance she assisted the Canadian government. A newspaper article noted:

"Mrs. Elizabeth [sic] Smith Friedman, Coast Guard cryptanalyst, returned to Washington with the story of how the solution of Chinese code broke up a Canadian opium smuggling ring. Mrs. Friedman, who was lent by the U.S. Government to the Canadian Government, was a key witness at a trial in which five Vancouver, B.C., Chinese were convicted of trading guns and ammunition for opium. Her job was to turn such messages as 'Uuooa masan aguso gukuu juuia ety' into the order list of Wat Sang. She declined for professional reasons, however, to say how this was done, although she admitted the message was a code of Chinese words and that she does not know Chinese. After she solved the code, a Chinese interpreter helped translate the message. Mrs. Friedman has been the cryptanalyst since 1924 and handles deciphering work for all agencies of the Treasury. During prohibition days, she sometimes had hundreds rum runners' code messages to solve." **(2)**

Her husband was also a famous cryptanalyst, William Friedman.

Sources:

- 1) U.S. National Security Agency's website.
- 2) "Cracks Chino Code," *Coast Guard Magazine* Vol. 10 (August, 1938), p. 60.