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Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

Wilma Z. Davis

(U) The Center for Cryptologic History is saddened to report the death of another early American codebreaker: Wilma Zimmerman Davis died last month at age 89. Davis was hired by William Friedman in the 1930s and worked for NSA and its predecessor agencies, with two breaks, until her retirement in 1973.

(U) Wilma Davis was born in March 1912. She grew up in West Virginia and attended Bethany College, graduating with a degree in mathematics in 1932. She taught for about four years until her first marriage. She and her husband moved to Washington, DC, in about 1936.

(U) Davis first became interested in cryptology after reading about the American codebreakers William and Elizebeth Friedman in *The Washington Star*. Her brother-in-law, a U.S. civil servant, managed to enroll her in some Navy correspondence courses in cryptology, which she greatly enjoyed and apparently did quite well in. After holding a variety of jobs in the DC area, Davis took the Civil Service exam and was hired as a cryptanalyst by William Friedman in 1937 or 1938.

(U) She quickly became part of the tight-knit cadre of prewar cryptanalysts who both worked and played together. When Davis' husband died less than six months after her employment by Friedman, it was her friends at work who got her through the difficult times. "I was a very lucky person that I happened to be there when I lost my husband," Davis recalled later, "...these people gather[ed] around like family and it made life really worth living and going on." Davis' cryptologic family also supported her through other crises later in her life.

(U) Initially, Davis was assigned to the team attacking Italian diplomatic ciphers, which she later recalled as fun because they were readily exploitable. She remained on the Italian problem until 1942 when she was transferred to the Japanese problem. By 1944 Davis was head of "Department A," the team responsible for solving and processing all addresses on all intercepted Japanese Army code messages. She remained in this position through the end of the war when she transferred to the Chinese team and then to the Russian problem now known as VENONA.

(U) Davis left cryptology in 1949, when she married her second husband, John Manson, and moved to Canada. Unfortunately, this marriage was also cut short when Manson died

in 1952. Upon hearing of Manson's death, William Friedman sent Davis a telegram urging her to return to her old job on the VENONA problem. Davis happily accepted. Later in the decade, she married Lieutenant General John J. Davis, who was Assistant Director for Production, the equivalent of today's Signals Intelligence Director. She left the Agency again briefly in the 1960s to cope with family pressures until the lure of codebreaking in support of a new war, Vietnam, drew her back once again. Davis finally retired in 1973.

(U) Wilma Davis remained in the area after her retirement, living in Fairfax, Virginia. In a 1982 oral history, Davis recalled her work at NSA fondly, noting that she could not think of another profession that would have been so interesting. "It's just, I think, a terrific, terrific work, and maybe it's unethical but I like it." She died on December 10, 2001, and was buried next to her third husband, Lieutenant General Davis, at Arlington National Cemetery.

~~-(U//FOUO)~~ Jill Frahm, Center for Cryptologic History, 972-2893s, jefrahm@nsa]

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