

The Highest Civilian Award During World War II March 11

A little over one month after the United States trounced the Japanese at the Battle of Midway in 1942, the 77th Congress created two new decorations for exemplary service to the nation during the war. Public Law 77-671, passed on July 20, 1942, created the Legion of Merit for members of armed forces and the Medal for Merit for civilians. Both awards were created specifically for “exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services” done after the President issued a proclamation of emergency on September 8, 1939. The Legion of Merit was awarded to many in the armed forces who would later become household names within NSA’s civilian leadership. This decoration is still awarded today.

The Medal for Merit, however, was reserved for those in civilian status during the war, and was discontinued in 1952. At the time, it was the highest decoration for civilians and was approved by the President.

In August 1944, the Signal Security Agency nominated William Friedman for the Medal for Merit, but initially he was not “favorably considered” by the Adjutant General of the Army. Archival research thus far has not revealed the reason why his nomination was not initially acceptable, but it is possible that the reason was partly due to the fact that the Signal Security Agency did not then report directly to the War Department and therefore his nomination package faced too many approval layers. By September 1945, the Army’s signal intelligence functions were placed directly under the command of the War Department and rebranded as the Army Security Agency. Two months later, Brigadier General W. Preston Corderman, Commanding Officer at Arlington Hall, requested that Friedman’s nomination package be revised and resubmitted directly to the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2. This version eventually put Friedman over the top. He received the award on March 11, 1946, the only government cryptologist to do so.

This award put Friedman in the company of the likes of other notable civilians during World War II including National Cash Register Company engineer [Joseph Desch](#), who designed the cryptanalytic bomb but was honored for other wartime

engineering accomplishments, Assistant Secretary of State (during the war) Dean Acheson, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Manhattan Project scientists and mathematicians such as Robert Oppenheimer and John von Neumann, and even entertainers Bob Hope and Al Jolson, who tirelessly traveled to war zones to put on shows for soldiers.



The cover of the [Hall Herald](#) (left), [Arlington Hall's newspaper](#), featured the [Medal for Merit ceremony in 1946](#). The black and white photograph is a clearer version of the photograph used in the [Hall Herald](#) showing, left to right, John Friedman, the Friedman's eldest child, Elizebeth Friedman, and William Friedman.

What helped garner the award for Friedman was his cryptographic (i.e., communications security) achievements during the war, namely his contributions to the SIGABA electronic cipher machine (M-134) and the SIGCUM / SIGHAUD radio-teletype system (Converter M-228). In addition, his improvements to the efficiency and security of the ubiquitous strip cipher systems (M-138), and his

contributions to the idea of a “Crypto-Net,” which improved security in the distribution process by isolating systems based on a set of rules and keeping the levels of traffic within any given system below a certain volume. During the presentation ceremony, the Deputy Chief of Staff, G2 said, “Mr. Friedman’s work was equal if not superior to that of any one in the world operating in his field today.” Due in large part to his contributions, “the secret and confidential communications of the United States were never read by the enemy.”

Sources: Arlington Hall Hall Herald, 22 March 1946,

*Exploring the Medal for Merit, Philip J. Schlegel, 2012,
<https://web.archive.org/web/20131206234743/http://topicsinhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/EXPLORING-ONLINE-EDITION-January-2012.pdf>,*

Memorandum to Chief, Military Intelligence Service and Chief, Army Security Agency, “Establishment of the Army Security Agency,” 19 September 1945,

Memorandum for COL James M. Roamer from MAJ Henry H. Rankin, “Investigation of Work Done by Mr. William F. Friedman,” 21 December 1945,

[“Important Contributions to Communications Security, 1939 – 1945,”](#)



William Friedman being awarded the Medal for Merit.

508 Captions: 1) Hall Herald 508 caption: the front page of the Arlington Hall *Hall Herald* from March 22, 1946 showing the headline "War Service with this Agency Brings Medal for Merit to ASA Civilian Chief" and a photo of William Friedman with his family. 2) Black and white photograph of William Friedman with his wife, Elizebeth, and eldest son, John, just after the Medal for Merit ceremony on March 11, 1946. 3) William Friedman and a major general shaking hands, the Medal for Merit pinned on Friedman's suit coat, while a second general stands by gazing into the distance; an American flag and venetian blinds are in the background.