

Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

William Coffee

(U) From the late 1930s, through World War Two, and into the 1950s, African-Americans employed by the cryptologic services experienced what African-Americans in the country at large were subject to as a result of both legal and social restrictions. Nevertheless, there were innumerable instances of African-Americans who, in spite of these restrictions, became highly productive and respected contributors to a larger cause. This is the story of one of those individuals.

(U) William (Bill) Coffee had once been a waiter at the Arlington Hall School for Girls. Born in Abingdon, Virginia, in 1917, Mr. Coffee studied English at Knoxville College in Tennessee. From 1937 to 1940 he served in the Civilian Conservation Corps. He began working for the Signal Intelligence Service, the predecessor of the Signal Security Agency (SSA), in June 1942. Coffee was initially hired as a junior janitor and later was promoted to messenger, as high as he could expect to go under the then prevailing employment practices.

(U) In early 1944 Colonel W. Preston Corderman, chief of the SSA, and Lieutenant Colonel Earle Cooke, head of the cryptanalytic branch of SSA, probably under the direction from "someone in a high place," arranged the creation of a segregated unit of black cryptologists at Arlington Hall Station. SSA was required to ensure that 12 to 15 percent of its personnel were "black and gainfully employed." Colonel Cooke was having trouble hiring people for his unit until he talked with William Coffee, whom Cooke commandeered to hire the appropriate number of personnel. To Colonel Cooke's amazement, Coffee quickly carried out his assigned mission, and about a hundred people were brought on board.

(U) After he was tasked by Colonel Cooke, Mr. Coffee's job title was changed from messenger to cryptographic clerk, and by November 1944 he was made Assistant Civilian in Charge of B-3-b, with nineteen civilians under his direction. B-3-b's mission was the exploitation of nongovernmental commercial coded messages originating from several European, Asian, African, and Latin American countries. Several military officers briefly served as chief of the unit before the position was assumed in mid-1944 by Benson K. Buffham, who held it until 1947, as both an officer and a civilian. (Buffham would later become a deputy director of NSA.) Mr. Buffham recalled in an interview that Coffee was "really the operating head of the unit. I had other jobs to do at the same time. He was full

time in that job, and he was really the expert."

(U) For several months B-3-b continued to expand in mission and resources under Bill Coffee. In April 1945 it was assigned responsibility for exploiting the diplomatic systems of Belgium, Haiti, Liberia, and Luxembourg, though there is no evidence that this mission went past the research stage. By June Bill Coffee was managing thirty people in six sections. Most were engaged in code identification and decoding, researching and analyzing unknown codes, and translating. In the two years he was assigned to the Commercial Code unit, he had advanced from a CAF-3 (\$1,620 a year) to a CAF-5 (\$2,430 a year).

(U) In February 1946 Bill Coffee was transferred to the Intercept Control Branch to supervise a new typing unit which had been formed to augment the automatic morse transcription section of Vint Hill Farms in Warrenton, Virginia.

(U) On 3 April 1946 General W. Preston Corderman, who had set in motion the organization in which William Coffee distinguished himself, presented Mr. Coffee with the Commendation for Meritorious Civilian Service.

(U) Mr. Coffee continued his cryptologic career through the early 1970s, serving in the old GENS organization and later in A Group and M3, apparently in various administrative positions. Our records are not entirely clear, but it appears he retired around 1972.

(U) (For more information on the African-American experience in American cryptology, read The Invisible Cryptologists, WWII to 1956.)

(U//~~FOUO~~) [Barry D. Carleen, Center for Cryptologic History, 972-2895s, bdcarle@nsa]

Horizontal Line

Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

Content Owner: Feedback

Web POC: Feedback

Last Modified: by nsr
Last Reviewed: February 28, 2003
Next Review: 365 days

UNCLASSIFIED//~~FOUO~~ OFFICIAL USE ONLY