

Morris Fox- USN, Codebreaker 1942-45

Morris Fox was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1917. He spent his first 22 years there until he left in 1939 when he was offered a job with the Office of the Chief of Finance in Baltimore, Maryland. World War Two had started in Europe and even though the United States was not involved yet the military had instituted a draft in case the US was drawn into the war. Fox was informed that his job did not have a deferment exemption and he would be eligible to be drafted. This did not bother him as he was not looking for a reason to keep from military service. In fact it was the tail end of the Great Depression and he was just happy to get work!

On December 7, 1941 Fox was on a bike-riding date with three other couples in a park in Baltimore. It was about 11:00 am when they heard the news of the attack and he “knew we were going to be in a war.” He joined the navy in early 1942 and because of pre-war experience with early IBM punch card computers he was immediately given the non-commissioned rank of Petty Officer 2nd Class. Once he had joined he assumed he would be sent to Norfolk, Virginia for basic training, instead he found that he was sent directly to an old munitions building on Constitution Ave. in Washington, DC.

In April 1942 he was assigned to the Fleet Radio Unit Pacific or FRUPAC for short. FRUPAC was a cryptanalysis unit whose job was to break Japanese military codes. Fox’s experience with IBM punch card type computers made him valuable as a codebreaker. In the 1940’s punch cards were cutting edge technology and were being used to process the numerous mathematical and analytical calculations needed to break codes.

The work done by FRUPAC was considered highly classified and the members of the unit were not allowed to talk with anyone outside of the unit about what they did. In fact the unit itself was highly compartmentalized meaning that many times members would not know what work was being done in the room next door to them. This was done so that if information leaked out of one room or section of the unit it would not mean that other sections had been compromised.

The unit was awarded a unit citation for their work in breaking Japanese codes leading up the Battle of Midway in June 1942. FRUPACs work allowed the US navy to anticipate a Japanese attack on Midway Island in the Central Pacific and position three aircraft carriers to attack and sink four of their Japanese counterparts. Though the United States also lost a carrier they prevented the capture of Midway and inflicted a great defeat on the so far victorious Japanese.

The unit operated constantly with the members working in 48 hour shifts, two days on and then two days off. With this hectic schedule Fox assumed that he would not have time for dating and would remain a bachelor. He was wrong! In fact he met a woman from Asheville, North Carolina and “took it for granted” that they would be married. In fact they were married in 1943 before Fox had to ship out for Pearl Harbor. FRUPAC maintained detachments in Melbourne, Australia and Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in addition to its Washington, DC station.

Fox and his wife crossed the country by train to Treasure Island Naval Base in San Francisco, California. There they discovered that he was not to leave for a few days because his transport ship was late in arriving. He then discovered that a childhood friend of his, who had joined the marines and been wounded, was recuperating in a hospital in the area. He took the opportunity of his ship's late arrival to visit with him.

Fox then had to endure a seven day ocean crossing to Pearl Harbor in a 10,000 ton Liberty ship. He was slightly seasick and was quite glad to reach Honolulu. On arriving at the FRUPAC installation he found it was a different operation than what he had experienced in Washington, DC. For one his living quarters were located in a sugar cane field! The codebreaking unit was located nearby and, like the Washington unit, worked continuously. What was different was that they worked on a week shift, so members would have a week on and then a week off. Fox remembered it was a big installation but not as big as the Washington, DC office. Fox quickly adjusted and was in fact promoted to Chief Petty Officer during this time.

He recalled that the daily FRUPAC routine began with booklets of encoded Japanese radio transmissions being brought to different sections of the Pearl Harbor unit. These had been collected from a variety of radio listening posts throughout the Pacific. Each section was given a portion of an encoded message. No FRUPAC section worked to break an entire message. Once the section had broken its portion of the message, using a variety of the computers and other tabulators, it would be sent up the chain of command where it would then be united with the other portions of the message. Once united it would be analyzed for useful intelligence.

Using this process FRUPAC provided US military leaders in the Pacific the ability to anticipate Japanese moves, as at Midway, but also to discover the locations of Japanese garrisons on the islands of the Pacific. This allowed them to leapfrog certain, less important islands and isolate the Japanese garrisons there. The US would then only have to fight for the most important islands. In this way US and Allied forces were able to island-hop from one important island to the next, always moving closer to Japan. In the final stages the US captured the islands of Okinawa and Iwo Jima and were preparing to invade Japan when the two atomic bomb drops caused the Japanese to surrender.

With the end of the war Fox found himself out of a job. FRUPAC was not needed to break codes since the Japanese military communications system was not in use. He was given a three week leave to get home in late 1945. He arrived at a discharge center in Cleveland, Ohio and found it crowded with thousands of other sailors trying to get discharged and get home. The navy was using a point system to determine how to discharge personnel fairly, awarding points for longevity of service among other things. Forty points were required to be discharged and Fox had forty four, so despite having been offered nice post-war assignments in the navy he elected to go home. He had a two month old baby at home that he wanted to see her along with the rest of his family. Twelve hours after getting into Cleveland he was on his way to Washington, DC in a

snowstorm with six other sailors. None of them had wanted to wait for a train so they paid another sailor \$3 apiece to drive them!

Fox made his way to Asheville to meet up with his family. Taking care of his two month old daughter inspired him to start his own diaper cleaning service. Later he went to work for Pearlman's furniture store and even later established his own, successful furniture store in Asheville.

Fox's work with FRUPAC in the war was so secret that only recently was he allowed to talk about it. He could not even tell people about the Unit Citation he received for the Battle of Midway. Despite the lack of public praise, FRUPAC conducted incredibly important work during the war. They provided intelligence that allowed the US to stop early Japanese offensives and to conduct impressive counteroffensives that brought the Allies to the very doorstep of Japan. Most importantly they allowed the Allies to choose to fight for only the most important locations and saved the lives of many U.S. servicemen.