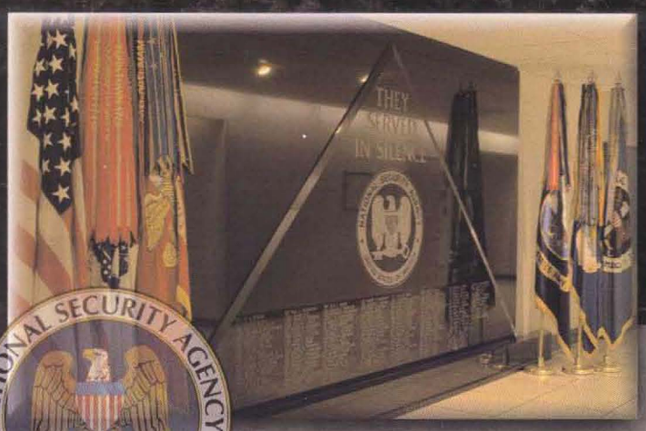


THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Sacrifice of a Cryptologic Hero
SSG Gene Arden Vance, Jr., ARNGUS

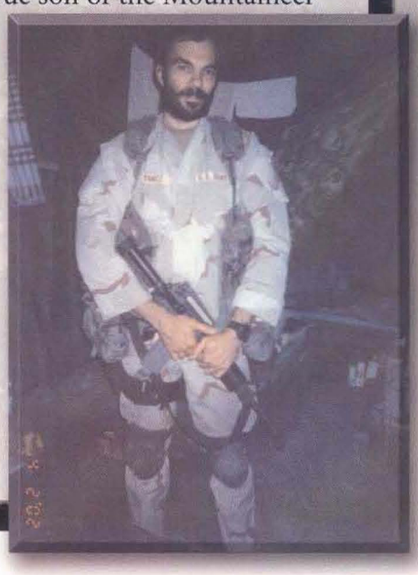
Since the dawn of the Republic, our nation has depended on the skills and devotion of the citizen soldier. The individuals who stood against the British army on the Lexington Green and at Concord Bridge were not professional warriors, but brothers, sons, and fathers whose main concerns lay not on the battlefield, but on their families and livelihoods.

However, when the actions of Great Britain threatened their ability to live as free men, these patriots put their hopes and dreams on hold, and responded to their nation's call. In the end, their sacrifice played a critical role in bringing a great nation into existence; a nation that, to this day, continues to depend mightily on the work of citizen soldiers. Without the service and sacrifice of these individuals, the great victories at Saratoga, Gettysburg, Argonne Forest, and Normandy, to name but a few, might never have come to pass.

Today, our nation is again in a battle to preserve freedom, and once again, America's citizen soldiers have made an immeasurable contribution. Sadly, as was the case in the past, some have paid the ultimate price in the defense of freedom.

In this regard, the National Security Agency honors today the service and sacrifice of a fallen silent sentinel, Staff Sergeant Gene Arden Vance of the 19th Special Forces Group, West Virginia Army National Guard, who lost his life in the performance of his duties on 19 May 2002.

Gene was born in Frankfurt, Germany, but in many respects he was a true son of the Mountaineer State of West Virginia. He attended high school in the town of Oceana and after graduation embarked on a 7-year career in the United States Army. After mustering out, he returned to civilian life and, in time, made the decision to join the West Virginia Army National Guard.



But his partial return to military life was far from routine. Gene's desire was to not only become a citizen soldier, but to earn the Green Beret of America's Special Forces. Through hard work and dedication he achieved membership in the 19th Special Forces Group, which contained United States National Guard elements from several different states. The 19th SFG had its beginnings in the Devil's Brigade, the joint U.S.-Canadian World War II unit that had pioneered the concept of special forces warfare. Their moniker had been based on words found in the

captured diary of a German officer, which noted "the black devils are all around us every time we come on line and we never hear them."

From the beginning of his career as a "snake eater," Gene trained hard and, in time, was able to more than live up to the proud traditions of his unit. When he was not involved in his military duties, Gene attended college courses and worked long, hard hours as a manager at the Whitetail Bicycle and Fitness shop. In many ways his life was typical of a young man in the America of 2001, working to build a life for himself and his family.

In September of 2001, he was in his final year at West Virginia University, but his school year would only last until the evening of September 11th. After the devastating attacks of that day, SSG Vance, along with countless others, was called upon by our nation to use his skills and training to carry the fight to the enemy.

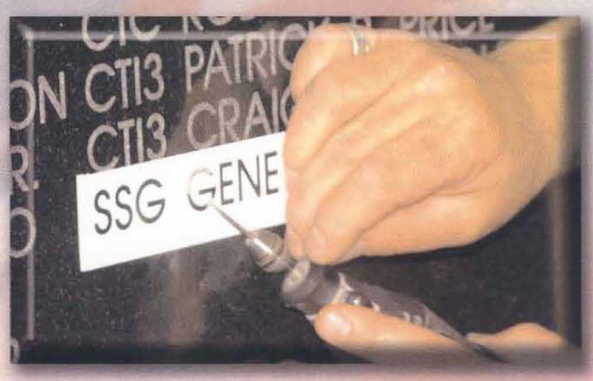
He would never return to his beloved West Virginia, but his service and sacrifice would serve as a stark reminder of the price of freedom. He would be the first West Virginia Army National Guardsman to lose his life in combat since WWII.

Many times Americans make the mistaken assumption that those who serve in our nation's reserve forces are involved mainly in combat support positions that place them far from the battle's fray. Many also make the same assumption about those who practice the art and science of cryptology in the defense of our nation. The fact is that both reservists and cryptologists must, at times, place themselves in harm's way in order to get the job done. SSG Gene Vance was both a reservist and a cryptologist. In this respect, his life will always serve as an inspiration to those who must risk their lives in order to gain the information required to save the lives of others. On this day, we honor his life, his work, and his devotion to his country.

Staff Sergeant Gene Arden Vance, Jr.

Army National Guard of the United States

30 November 1963 - 19 May 2002



Photos courtesy of the Vance Family

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