THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Hero

CT3 Edward Joseph Purcell, USN

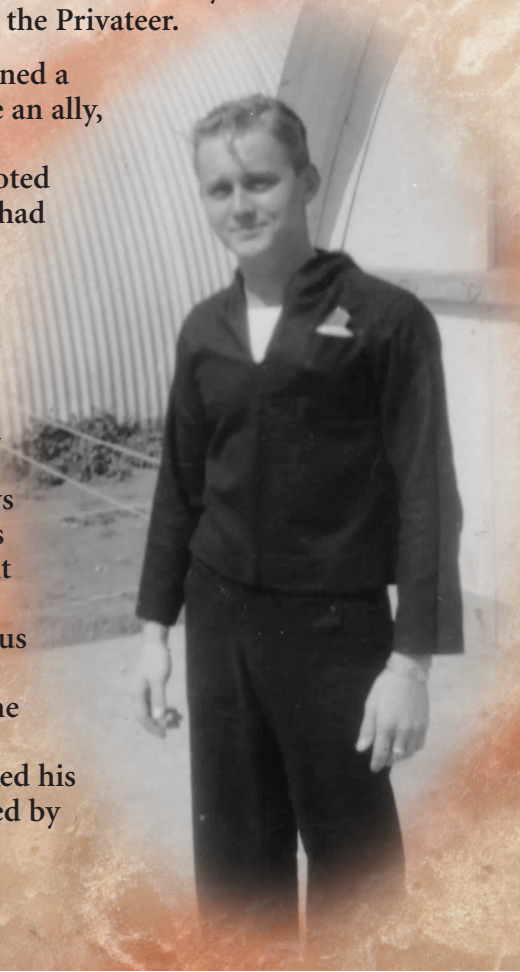
On the Flight Line

It was Good Friday, 7 April 1950, and Petty Officer Edward J. Purcell, USN, was getting "short." Ninety-nine days and a wake-up, and he would be headed back to the States. But, for the moment, he had work to do. As a member of a reconnaissance squadron, he was part of a crew of 10 whose job was to fly cryptologic missions to gather critical information on the Soviet Union. Purcell had originally planned to spend the Easter season in the headquarters area, but the need for a replacement for one of the upcoming weekend flights prompted him to volunteer for the mission. The tough part was that most of Saturday and Sunday would be spent in the skies over the dark waters of the Baltic Sea. On the positive side, the entire crew had been assured that they would get the day off on Monday before heading back to their home base on Tuesday morning.

The Squadron

Since its inception in 1943, Purcell's squadron had served with distinction, both in World War II and in numerous post-war operations. The workhorse of the unit was the B-24 Liberator bomber. The first Liberators used by the Navy had differed little from the original Army aircraft; however, by the mid-1940s, the plane had been modified to the point where it was worthy of a new name, the Privateer.

In 1948, his squadron was given another chance to excel when it was assigned a critical role in determining the true capabilities of the Soviet Union. Once an ally, the Russian Bear had turned hostile. In 1946, a few short years before the squadron's move to a new area of operation, Sir Winston Churchill had noted that, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain had descended across the continent." The job of Purcell and the men of the squadron was to somehow find out what lay behind that curtain.



From Pennsylvania Farmland to the Baltic Sea

The series of events that had brought Ed Purcell to the flight line on that fateful day were all too typical. Born in Camden, New Jersey, Ed's father, a dyed-in-the-wool farmer, had eventually moved the family to the rural community of Trumbauersville, near Quakertown, Pennsylvania. Ed's days on the farm were spent entertaining his brothers and sisters. When he was not serving as the master of ceremonies for the Purcell clan, he often spent his time taking care of his pet bull, Mojo, who was so attached to the boy that he once followed him into the family kitchen. But Ed also had a serious side and while he loved his family, he had a strong inclination to find out what was beyond the green fields of his father's farm. With this in mind, he did what so many other young American boys had done for centuries, he joined the U.S. Navy. At 17, he was too young to enlist on his own and asked his father to sign for him. Basic training at Great Lakes, Michigan was followed by

Communications Technician School in Washington, D. C. After initial training, he served in various short assignments aboard ships and at shore duty stations. In July of 1949, he was with his squadron, ready to go to work.

8 April 1950

On the morning of 8 April 1950, a light fog descended over the Baltic. Despite the less-than-perfect conditions, Purcell and the entire crew of flight 59645 were ready to go. Everyone aboard knew their jobs. Purcell would spend the majority of his time on the flight monitoring the all-important Russian communications.

At 10:31 a.m., the flight lifted off. The next 3 1/2 hours passed without incident. At 2:00 p.m., squadron headquarters received one last radio report. Fuel capacity would allow the aircraft to remain aloft until 11:30 that evening, but as the last minutes of 8 April ticked away with no further word from the crew, hope began to fade. On Sunday morning, authorities had no choice but to declare the plane missing.

Later that day, Soviet officials brought an end to the mystery when they confirmed that their fighters had fired on a U.S. aircraft near the coastal town of Libau on 8 April. After the official notification, U.S. authorities began extensive search and rescue operations, which sadly proved to be unsuccessful.

Requiem

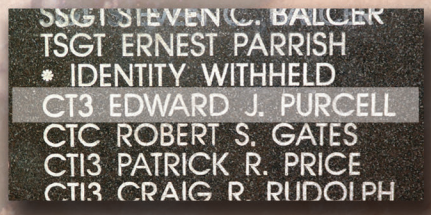
History records that in the summer of 1947, Ed Purcell left the small Pennsylvania area of Quakertown to serve as a cryptologist in the United States Navy. One hundred and seventy years earlier, Col. William Polk of the Continental Army had hidden the Liberty Bell in Ed's hometown to protect it from falling into British hands. Both men would likely agree that at times the cause of liberty is served by the wise but prodigious use of secrecy. Decades later, the nation would learn of the immeasurable contribution that the aerial reconnaissance program made in protecting freedom and in keeping the peace. As our nation continues to work to meet the challenges of the War on Terrorism, may the legacy of Petty Officer Ed Purcell, and the many other cryptologists of the past, serve as an inspiration to the silent sentinels of today.

Edward Joseph Purcell

Communications Technician Third Class, United States Navy

26 June 1930 - 8 April 1950

** As the keeper of America's cryptologic legacy, the National Security Agency has produced this historical work for purposes of honoring the efforts of CT3 Edward J. Purcell, USN. It must be noted, however, that NSA honors not only those aboard PB4Y-2 (59645) involved in cryptologic activities, but all of the members of the crew who sacrificed their lives in the defense of freedom.*



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MEMORIAL DAY 2003

NSA Creative Imaging-535970