

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Hero
Specialist Four James T. Davis, USA

Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam

December of 1961 found Specialist James T. Davis of the 3rd Radio Research Unit hard at work. Since his arrival at Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon in May, he and the 92 other members of his unit had dealt with any number of difficult challenges. Life as a U.S. Army cryptologist was never easy, but the 100-degree temperatures and constant flooding in the old hangar they called home often made their task even more difficult.

In the field, the situation was even more demanding. For decades, the Communist North, led by the resourceful Ho Chi Minh, had battled to establish an independent and united Vietnam free from foreign influence. Ho's forces had met with great success against the Japanese in the 1940s and the French in the 1950s. By the early 1960s, many feared that if Indochina fell to the Communists, then the whole of Southeast Asia might follow. Mao Zedong had once noted that the way to win an unconventional war was to ensure that your forces had the capacity to "swim among the people as fish swim in the sea." Ho's forces had followed his advice and through their efforts had been able to overtake portions of the population of the South.

"Ambitions Unlimited... Fate Unknown..."

The series of events that had brought James T. Davis – his friends called him "Tom" – to this strange and dangerous land were anything but typical. In 1958, he had been pursuing his studies at Tennessee Technological University (TTU) in Cookeville, about 20 miles from his boyhood home of Livingston. The oldest son of a local pharmacist, himself a veteran of the European Theatre in WWII, Tom's childhood resembled a Norman Rockwell print. When he was not excelling on the football field for Livingston Academy, Tom spent most of his free time hunting and fishing in the deep woods that surrounded his hometown. At some point in his senior year at TTU, he made the decision to end his academic studies to join the United States Army. After enlisting, he was sent first to Ft. Jackson for basic training and then to Ft. Devens for instruction in "direction finding." In May 1961, he received orders to join the 3rd Radio Research Unit, Republic of Vietnam. During high school, Davis had once written that "my ambitions are unlimited, my fate unknown." His words would prove to be prophetic.

The 3rd Radio Research Unit

Davis' unit had a difficult and dangerous job. Since the First World War, the American Army had utilized direction-finding technology on the battlefield. Vietnam was no exception to this tradition. The 3rd Radio Research Unit provided technical advice to South Vietnamese units on locating enemy signals and provided valuable training and guidance on ways to get a "fix" on the insurgents' locations. These Vietnamese PRD teams, as they were called (they were named after the piece of





Specialist Four Davis with his radio direction finder

equipment used in the operation), hoped to increase the odds of finding the stealthy and quick-hitting Communist units that were making life difficult for the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam.

But while direction finding had proved to be a valuable tool in the past, like any technical process, its success was dependent on any number of external factors. In Indochina, climate and terrain made the art of direction finding extremely tricky. In many areas of operation throughout the world, their mission would have been far less difficult. However, due to the mountainous landscape and the high levels of humidity in the area, it was difficult for them to conduct their work in a safe and secure location far from the battlefield. The cold, hard truth was that, like so many cryptologists past and present, Davis and the units he worked with had to “get in close” to be successful.

Ambush at Cau Xang

On the 22nd of December, Specialist Four Davis received orders to lead a Vietnamese PRD-1 team to an area approximately 12 miles from the base in an effort to locate a Viet Cong guerilla force operating in the area. They would move by truck to the area, set up, and in concert with a similar team, attempt to locate the enemy. Even prior to the mission on the 22nd, Tom had understood the dangers of his work, noting in a letter home that “...it looks like the bad guys have gotten the word to start giving us hell...it could become a bit dangerous.”

Initially, the operation appeared to be routine; however, 10 miles outside the base, near the old French Garrison of Cau Xang, the hunter became the hunted. The truck carrying the team hit a strategically-placed land mine and was forced off the road. The group immediately came under attack. Davis and his men fought bravely, but eventually succumbed to enemy fire. A patrolling South Vietnamese Civil Guard unit quickly responded to the area, but it was too late. Davis and nine members of his team lay dead. He would be the first American to lose his life in combat, in what would come to be known as the Vietnam War. Two weeks later, in tribute to Davis’ service and sacrifice, his unit’s headquarters in Tan Son Nhut would be named “Davis Station.”

“And Now the Trumpet Summons Us Again”

Even today, the events surrounding the Vietnam War are roundly debated. But there are certain facts about the conflict that remain indisputable. One of them is that during this difficult and painful time – a time full of doubt and controversy - there were thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, who, like James Davis, remained above the political fray and simply went and did their duty for their country.

Davis’ sacrifice clearly demonstrates that those who defend America do not get to choose when and where they fight. They are given orders and are duty bound to follow them to the best of their ability. Tom and the example he set are stark reminders of this solemn duty and of the fact that the future of our republic rests on the willingness of such men and women to answer the call to arms in defense of freedom.

A2C CLEMENT O. MANKINS
A2C GERALD H. MEDEIROS
A2C ROBERT H. MOORE
SP4 JAMES T. DAVIS
PFC DONALD R. TAYLOR
SP4 ARTHUR W. GLOVER

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our words that one form of colonial government shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far greater tyranny... Now the trumpet summons us again... to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation.

John F. Kennedy
January 20, 1961



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