

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE



The Story of a Cryptologic Hero Sgt. 1st Class John F. Stirling



The motto of the Military Intelligence Corps is "Always Out Front." It was precisely because ASA was out front that signals intelligence enjoyed the success it did in Vietnam.

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Sgt. 1st Class John F. Stirling was born in Los Angeles, California, on June 26, 1931. He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1951 and initially underwent infantry training. In time his career took him into the field of cryptologic operations with the Army Security Agency (ASA). The ASA served as the signals intelligence branch of the U.S. Army from 1945 to 1984 and provided critical support to both tactical and strategic operations during the Vietnam War.

In December of 1966, John deployed to Vietnam with the ASA's 335th Radio Research Company. The lineage of the 335th goes back to WWII and the establishment of the 112th Signal Service Company (112th SSC). History notes that the 112th distinguished itself in countless places in the Pacific Theater during the conflict. In July of 1951, the 112th SSC was re-designated as the 335th Army Security Agency Company. Once in Vietnam, the unit was assigned to the 303rd ASA Battalion of the 509th Radio Research Group, and attached to the 9th Infantry Division.

During their time "in country," the men of the 303rd provided critical communication and intelligence to countless operations conducted by the 9th Infantry Division in the area of operations. The work of the officers and men of the 335th allowed the soldiers they supported to discern future enemy intentions. These efforts not only assisted the 9th Infantry Division in gaining a critical advantage on the field of battle, but also saved countless lives.

Despite having an initial military occupation specialty (MOS) of 11B20 (infantryman), John became the site chief for a detachment of 335th personnel at Tan An, the headquarters of the 3rd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, in the IV Corps Tactical Zone of Long An. Over time his extensive experience and leadership came to be greatly appreciated and admired by his fellow soldiers. During his time at Tan An, John—along with the other members of the 335th—learned that in Vietnam, asymmetrical warfare was the rule rather than the exception. Brave men died in firefights, but they also fell prey to enemy attacks that seem to come out of nowhere.

On the evening of March 8, 1967, after another challenging day, John headed to his bunk for some much-needed rest. During the night the base was subjected to an intensive enemy mortar attack. Sadly, the wall of sandbags around John's billeting area was not high enough to provide adequate protection during the attack, and he was felled by the flying shrapnel that engulfed the area.





John was remembered by his fellow soldiers as a special person. One noted that "he was a hero. ... John taught me and kept me alive in Vietnam. He was tough on me, but I knew it was for my own good. I will always admire the man he was. I cried when I learned he had been killed.

John's comrades in arms are not the only ones who remembered him well. John's stepson recalled him as a "great role model and friend. ... My fondest memory is when one of the two boats we were using while fishing sank in the night—with us in it. It was scary, but John was right there to take control. It wasn't a surprise when we were informed that he was awarded the Bronze Star for services above and beyond the call of duty."

Sgt. 1st Class John F. Sterling was buried in the cemetery at Ft. Devens near his Shirley, Massachusetts, home. On the day of his burial, Colonel Harry L. Murray posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart to his widow, Maxine.

Unlike many of the brave men who served in the ASA during Vietnam, John never returned to his wife and family. But like so many of the brave and dedicated men of the ASA, his legacy of service and sacrifice established a standard that every member of the cryptologic service, both past and present, should forever aspire to uphold.

