

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

IRENE 92



"IRENE 92"

DEDICATED IN MEMORY OF THE RIVET
AMBER CREW LOST IN THE BERING SEA
ON A FLIGHT FROM SHEMA AFB TO
EIELSON AFB
5 JUNE 1969

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The Loss of IRENE 92

5 June 1969

**Cold stepping stones into the sea
Form, link by link a chain
That binds the shore of Shemya Isle
To Freedom's honored Name**

From the poem "The Aleutians and Shemya," by Jack Hamm

For the officers and men stationed on Shemya Island, June 5, 1969, began like any other day. Despite the 40-degree temperature, a light snow was falling. The island's 10,000 ft. airstrip lies 1200 nautical miles away from the Anchorage, Alaska coastline, but despite its remote location, since WWII, it had served as a valuable waystation for both military and commercial aircraft. The "rock," as servicemen liked to call the island, had been American territory since 1943 when U.S. forces occupied the area and began a series of robust flight operations, first against the Japanese, and later, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union.

In 1962 several of the base's older hangars were renovated to allow for Detachment One of the U.S. Air Force's Sixth Strategic Wing to begin operating from the area. The unit, the third oldest unit in the United States Air Force (USAF), had a long and storied history. By the 1960s its missions were focused almost exclusively on the Soviet Union. Shemya was the closest American airfield to the USSR, and it was an understatement to say that Rivet Amber and Rivet Ball, the two RC-135s surveillance aircraft the unit brought to the island, would be put to good use.

Unlike previous wars fought by the United States, the Cold War, save for a few evident exceptions, was not characterized by pitched battles and the conquering of enemy capitals. It was instead an effort, short of war, to "contain" communist aggression around the world. One of the key requirements needed to allow for the containment policy to work was the providing of insightful and accurate intelligence. This kind of information could only be obtained by assiduous "monitoring" of Soviet movements, actions, and operations.

Aircraft like Rivet Amber and Rivet Ball were well suited for these missions. Quite simply, during this period, Rivet Amber was the largest,

heaviest, and most expensive reconnaissance plane of its kind. In addition, the aircraft was equipped with a state-of-the-art 35,000 pound radar whose power and sophistication were unprecedented. The high-tech equipment on board allowed for the gathering, analyzing, and transmitting of the kind of critical intelligence data needed by key policymakers and warfighters of the time.



Early on the morning of the fifth, 13 flight crew and six cryptologic professionals of the U.S. Air Force Security Service headed for the flight line to board Rivet Amber aircraft 62-3147 (Call Sign Irene 92). The mission was not operational in nature; the aircraft was headed to Eielson AFB, Alaska, for normal, routine maintenance. Takeoff was without incident, but approximately 40 minutes into the flight, the crew reported that the plane was experiencing extreme vibrations, and that they were donning their oxygen masks. That message was the last transmission from the aircraft. When repeated attempts to contact the plane failed, the Wing commander immediately ordered an extensive search and rescue effort. A weeks-long intensive hunt for survivors was conducted but no trace of the crew or the aircraft was ever found. The RC-135 had been a dependable workhorse of an aircraft for the USAF since the 1960s, and the tragedy marked the largest loss of life ever involving the plane.

The cryptologic crew lost on the aircraft was a true cross-section of America. They hailed from Connecticut, Hawaii, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Tennessee. Their loss was felt deeply by their comrades in arms. Half a century later, Lt. Col. Kingdon Hawes, the acting squadron commander on the day the plane was lost, was still haunted by the incident, noting that the event was personal to him, and that "He had never gotten over it."

The foundation of the victory over the Soviet Union and its proxies during the Cold War was based in part on the implementation of successful policy, bold persistence, and countless moments of courage, bravery, and sacrifice. But the victory was also due to the ability of America's cryptologic service to "get in close" to get the information needed to not only prepare for a horrible conflagration that never came, but to also know enough about the opposition to be able to keep the peace. It is in this spirit that we honor and remember the members of the United States Air Force's Security Service who perished that day.

Sgt Douglas Arcano, USAF
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Sgt Sherman E. Consolver, Jr., USAF
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