

# THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

## The Loss of Flight RG-407



CTO1 Donald E. Dickerson

CTRI Walter R. Woods

CTM2 Gregory K. Zeller

CTO3 James M. Coon

CTOSN Stephen H. Elliott

CTISN John M. Deremigio

During the Cold War, the U.S. Navy was a full participant in the secret war in the ether against the Communist bloc. For decades, U.S. Navy aircrews waged a daily struggle ...to gain desperately needed intelligence...This conflict, hidden from public view... was fraught with risk for the sailors who took to the air to defend freedom.

From John R. Schindler's *A Dangerous Business: The U.S. Navy and Reconnaissance During the Cold War*

The Vietnam conflict was fought in many different arenas. For certain, the war was fought on the ground and in the air, but it is important to understand that it was also fought in the electronic spectrum as well. During the war the Army Security Agency (ASA), Air Force Security Service, and Naval Security Group (NSGA) all played important roles in this effort. Despite immense challenges, all three organizations conducted robust cryptologic operations from land, sea, and air-based platforms, to help friendly forces to gain foreknowledge of enemy intentions and ultimately to save lives.

On the morning of December 12, 1971, four members of the Fleet Tactical Support Squadron FIFTY (VRC-50) out of Cubi Point in the Philippines headed for the runway. The weather was suitable for flight operations. A light wind blew across the base, and it was sunny, (and for the region), a cool 77 degrees. The pilot, LT Vetal C. LaMountain, and co-pilot, LTJG Gale V. Woolsey, had orders to have their C2A "Greyhound" aircraft (call letters RG-407) airborne by 0900. Assisting them in their efforts were ABH3 Richard C. Gaynor and AN James M. VanBussum.

C2As were built to provide cargo delivery to aircraft carriers, but this flight would not be carrying cargo but personnel in the form of six experienced and highly skilled cryptologic professionals, five of whom were out of the San Miguel Naval Station in the Philippines. CTO1 Donald E. Dickerson was 34 and from Keota, Oklahoma. Two other members of that group hailed from the "Golden State" (California), CTRI Walter R. Woods was 25 and born in Long Beach, and CTM2 Gregory K. Zeller was 23 and hailed from Pasadena. The other San Miguel assignees were from the Midwest. CTOSN Stephen H. Elliott was 21 and from Rock Island, Illinois. CTO3 James M. Coon, the youngest of the group, was 20 years of age, and a native of Van Wert, Ohio. CTISN John M.

Deremigio, from Logansport, Indiana, was 25 and the lone Misawa, Japan, assignee scheduled to be on the plane.

The ultimate destination of the flight was the deck of the USS Enterprise; however, at the time, the "Big E" had been ordered to temporarily sortie to the Bay of Bengal to monitor hostilities between India and Pakistan. This meant pilot and crew would have to lay over at Tan Son Nhut air base until the ship returned to Yankee Station off the coast of Vietnam



on the nineteenth. At the time, the cryptologists were not aware of the exact nature of their future mission, but surmised that if they were being sent to the Enterprise it was likely to be both important and highly classified.

Takeoff commenced at 0844, but the crew never reached Tan Son Nhut. When it was discovered that the flight was overdue, both US Air Force and Navy rescue authorities were alerted, and a series of extensive air and water searches were conducted. The next morning, a deflated life raft and other small pieces of debris were retrieved (some of which bore signs of being in a fire), but there was no sign of the aircraft or crew. Using the scant evidence available to them, a board of inquiry estimated that the flight had only been in the air for a little over an hour. Pilot error, sabotage, and enemy fire were ruled out, and while the evidence was negligible, what they did have seemed to suggest that the loss of the plane was due to a serious mechanical failure.

The loss of the men, compounded by the dearth of information on the crash, made the disaster all the more devastating to the friends and loved ones of the lost crew. Despite the loss, ceremonies and memorials were held and created to honor the memory of the fallen cryptologists. On 10 September, 1976, the NSGA contingent at Ft. Meade honored the memory of CTOC Donald E. Dickerson by naming their BEQ (Bachelor Enlisted Quarters) in his honor. The formal dedication ceremony was presided over by then-Director of the National Security Agency/Central Security Service LTGen Lew Allen. In addition, memorials were established for the following individuals in their respective hometowns:

CTM2 Gregory K. Zeller – Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego, California.

CTOSN Stephen H. Elliott – Rock Island Memorial Cemetery, Rock Island, Illinois

CTR11 Walter R. Woods – Rose Hills Memorial Park, Whittier, California

CTO3 James M. Coon – Woodland Union Cemetery, Van Wert, Ohio

**The sacrifices of the U.S. Navy aircrews who gave their lives during the Cold War deserve to be remembered by a grateful nation. John R. Schindler**

