

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

CTO₁ John R. Ball
RM₃ Emil E. White



"A despicable act of murder."

President James Earl Carter

In the early part of the 20th century, the US Navy began a robust program to establish listening posts throughout the world. These stations proved their worth during World War II, and due to their success, more were established during the Cold War. The work done by the men and women at these locations provided valuable, and at times critical intelligence, not only to warfighters, but policymakers as well.

In the early 1950s, a listening station was established at Sabana Seca in Puerto Rico, and by 1971 it had become part of the vital cryptologic mission and operations of the US Navy's Naval Security Group. Like any military operation, hard work was the order of the day, but the good news was that despite the demanding routines and schedules, the post was on the island of Puerto Rico, where most perceived the threat level as almost nonexistent. No one at Net Control Station at Sabana Seca on the 3rd of December, 1979 had any idea that the day would bring terror and death.

At 0630, a group of 17 enlisted sailors headed for the yellow school bus that would transport them the few short miles to the communications transmitter for their day shift duties. Driving the bus that day was CTO₁ John Ball. John was a native of Madison, Wisconsin. Born in 1950, he had been in the navy for 11 years. Navy life agreed with him. He served in Hawaii and Naples, Italy, and by the time he posted to Puerto Rico he was an experienced and exceedingly competent cryptologic professional. John loved the navy, but was also deeply devoted to his wife Patricia Ann, and their children, David and Karen.

Sitting directly behind Ball was RM₃ Emil E. White. Born in 1959, Emil hailed from Charlotte Amalie in the US Virgin Islands. After graduating from high school, he joined the US Navy, attended radioman school in San Diego, and in May of 1978, arrived at Sabana Seca eager to go to work. Over time he became a sought-after expert in the realm of radio communications, and also became known for performing disco shows for his fellow sailors and lending a hand to the Navy's recruiting efforts in the Virgin Islands.



Ball and White were accompanied by 15 other enlisted personnel, who like them, were dedicated to providing and protecting the US Navy's most important communications. The group departed the main base at 0640, and less than a half-mile down Route 867, the bus

was overtaken by a green truck that appeared to be a typical utility company vehicle. Suddenly and without warning, the truck pulled abruptly in front of the bus, prompting Ball to come to a stop. Seconds later, a small group of gunmen emerged from a white van parked near the left side of the bus and for 15-30 seconds poured automatic weapon fire into the vehicle. Ball and White perished during the onslaught, and 10 other members of the group were seriously wounded.

Later in the day, several Puerto Rican separatist groups claimed responsibility, and asserted that the attack was in retaliation for the death of an individual who had died in custody after protesting US Navy maneuvers on the island of Vieques. The vicious and senseless attack was denounced by President Carter, and Puerto Rican Governor Carlos Romero Barcelo, but it would be over three decades before the assailants would finally be brought to justice.

John and Emil's families and friends were devastated by the tragedy. Ball's father noted that John was "A very fine man ... a good family man and an exceptionally fine Navy man." Emil's friends would miss the joy and happiness he brought to others, and the unbridled enthusiasm he brought to his work. The command newspaper noted that he, "was a giver, a friend, a person whose willingness to help and whose interest in base morale and welfare enriched us all."

Both men were sterling examples of the kind of individuals that serve as the foundation of our nation's armed forces. They and their shipmates will never be forgotten for their service and sacrifice that day.

RM3 Emil E. White (Deceased) Posthumously awarded Purple Heart
CTO1 John R. Ball (Deceased) Posthumously awarded Purple Heart
CTRC Warren Smith (Wounded) Meritorious Service Medal/Purple Heart
CTT2 Cynthia C. Edwards (Wounded) Purple Heart
CTO3 Sandra L. Seaton (Wounded) Purple Heart
CTM3 Joseph R. Key (Wounded) Purple Heart
CTRSA Monique A. Ritter (Wounded) Purple Heart
CTRSN Bradley D. Clark (Wounded) Purple Heart
RM3 Cottie A. Allen (Wounded) Purple Heart
CTRSN Allen Bush (Wounded) Purple Heart
CTOSN Richard D. Sauter (Wounded) Purple Heart
CTM2 Debra J. Whitehurst (Wounded) Purple Heart

