

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE



The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice
The Shutdown of Flight BARON 52
5 February 1973



Sgt. Dale Brandenburg
Peter R. Cressman
Joseph A. Matejov
Todd M. Melton

...They were not allowed to mingle with others from their respective bases, nor were the pilots of the aircraft carrying them on their missions always told what their objective was. They were cryptology experts, language experts, and knew well how to operate some of the Air Force's most sophisticated equipment. They were the first to hear the enemy's battle plans...

"The EC-47 Experience" by James C. Wheeler

February 5, 1973, was a day of cautious optimism for the men of the 361st TEW Squadron (Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron) at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand. Since 1965, the base had been used by the US Air Force to provide substantive support to the war effort in Vietnam. A week earlier, the seemingly never-ending Paris Peace talks had finally concluded, and there was hope that the signing of a treaty might be the beginning of the end for US involvement in Indochina.

For the men of the squadron, however, the stark reality was the war had not stopped, and their mission had not changed. Since 1966, the Air Force had utilized specially reconfigured EC-47s throughout Vietnam to great effect. The Thailand operation was one of the later efforts, but due to its location, the base proved to be a perfect site for the squadron's Airborne Radio Direction Finding (ARDF) operations.

As evening approached, the eight men of the crew of BARON 52 (codename for the flight) began preparing for their upcoming flight. The pilot, Captain George R. Spitz, was assisted by 2nd Lieutenant Severo J. Primm III, Captain Arthur R. Bollinger, and 1st Lieutenant Robert E. Bernhardt at the controls. The remaining four personnel were all cryptologic professionals, whose purpose was "electronic intelligence gathering."



The oldest of the four, Sgt. Dale Brandenburg was born in the "Tar Heel" state of North Carolina in 1948, but spent his youth in Prince George's County just outside Washington DC. He enlisted in the US Air Force in 1971, and underwent training as an airborne electronic

warfare systems specialist. July of 1972 found him applying his craft in Vietnam, first at Da Nang Air Base (AB) and eventually at Ubon.

His fellow airman, Sgt. Peter R. Cressman, was a native of Wayne, New Jersey. Born in 1951, he had been in the air force since August of 1969. After training at Kessler Air Force Base as a Morse operator, he spent two years at Elmendorf Air Base in Alaska before volunteering for Vietnam. After service in Da Nang he was assigned to Detachment 3 (Det) of the 6994th Security Squadron in Thailand.

Sgt. Joseph A. Matejov was a year younger than Cressman, but like him, had been trained as a Morse operator. Joe was a native of Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, but grew up in the Long Island hamlet of East Meadow. He had been in the air force since July of 1970, and after a brief time at Misawa, AB in Japan had been posted to Ubon.

SSGT Todd M. Melton was the senior NCO of the group. Born in 1949 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Melton had signed his enlistment papers in March of 1969. Multi-talented, he underwent training as both a Vietnamese Linguist and a technical operator. Like Brandenburg, he spent time at Da Nang AB before coming to Det 3 at Ubon.

All of them, to a man, were dedicated to the squadron's goal of collecting critical communications to discern enemy intentions and save lives.

Their work was dangerous and nighttime operations were always challenging, but there was every reason to believe that today's effort was nothing more than a routine tactical mission. Tragically, the night turned out to be anything but routine. 50 miles east of the city of the Laotian city of Saravane, the aircraft came under fire and crashed into a mountainous, sparsely populated region of Xekong Province. Due to the conflagration that followed and the treacherous terrain, rescue crews could only remain on the scene for a short time, and despite a concerted effort, no remains were able to be recovered.

Friends and family mourned the loss of their loved ones, and in an effort to preserve the memory of those who perished, a communal headstone with the names of the fallen was established at Arlington National Cemetery. In addition, the Matejov Community Center on Misawa AB and both Melton Hall, and the Cressman Dining Facility at Goodfellow AFB, were all named to honor the memory of the four cryptologists.

