

# THEY SERVED IN SILENCE



The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

## Sgt. Larry W. Duke



**Information about the radio battalion and its mission and capabilities was not taught at The Basic School or any of the various SNCO and NCO academies. What "spooks" did was very much unknown to most Marines, and most "spooks" liked it that way.**

**Scott Laidig, from, July, 2018 edition of Leatherneck Magazine (Pg. 51)**

Sgt. Larry W. Duke was born in Summerville, Georgia on January 31, 1948. After high school he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps and underwent training as a Special Radio Operator. Communications are a critical part of any military operation, but during the Vietnam era, "special" radio operators were responsible for providing and protecting the most critical communications. This required them to be experts not just in radio, but cryptologic operations as well.

Larry was stationed at Okinawa with the Marine Amphibious Force's 1st Radio Battalion for a short time before being assigned at Dong Ha Mountain in July of 1969. Located just south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the area was frequented by enemy units. Joe Armstrong, a fellow Marine with Larry at the time, noted that the post was located "In the middle of Charlie Country."

Two companies of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division were onsite to provide security to the cryptologic team, which included not only Marines, but assignees from the Army Security Agency (ASA). The purpose of the site was to collect critical information from enemy forces in the area to allow for friendly units to gain an advantage in the battle space.

In early 1970, Larry was selected to be part of a small but versatile team to set up a new listening post at Hill 370, just north of Da Nang. Cryptologic work during wartime is challenging and sometimes dangerous, but building a new site in hostile territory is even more demanding. Despite the threat of attacks, the area had to be cleared, and an array of supplies and resources had to be helicoptered in on an ongoing basis to allow for its construction. Larry and a fellow Marine were in charge of this the effort, and often rode the large supply helicopters back and forth from the various depots. Three weeks later the site was up and running, but replenishment, exchange and distribution of supplies to and from the area continued.

On March 10, 1970, Larry was aboard a CH-46 headed out on a re-supply run. Shortly after departure, tragedy ensued: the main rotors of the chopper snapped, causing the craft to plummet to the ground and become engulfed in a fiery conflagration. Somehow the copter's pilot and co-pilot were able to escape and survive the disaster, but Larry, along with three other servicemen, perished in the blaze. The disaster shocked and saddened his fellow Marines, particularly those who were present during the crash and could do nothing but watch the copter burn.



Armstrong remembers:

"There was a memorial service two or three days later somewhere down near China Beach. On a hillside, the sun shining and cool breeze from the South China Seas...I remember the inverted M-16 with helmet... and the quiet."

June Wilson Maxley, the sister of the woman who would have been his fiancé, remembered Larry as a kind and considerate person. In a tribute to him on a digital site, she noted that, "You loved my sister and the two of you were to marry. I was just a kid when you came to our home but I still remember how you treated not just my sister but our whole family with respect. Most of her boyfriends never acknowledged my presence, but you always smiled and said hello. I am sorry we lost you."

Sgt. Larry W. Duke is buried at Green Hills Memory Gardens, Pennville, Georgia.

It is prudent to remember that day-to-day life in the military is demanding, but also exceedingly dangerous. Those who die in battle are to be honored for paying the ultimate sacrifice, but in some sense, honor must also be accorded to those who fall victim to the perilous nature of military duty. It is in this spirit that we remember the service and sacrifice of Sgt. Larry W. Duke, his compatriots, and all those in the cryptologic service and our nation's military who have given their lives in the cause of freedom.

