

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

The Loss of Ranger 12

25 January 1987



CTI₃ Patrick R. Price

CT₁₃ Craig R. Rudolf

... The missions themselves, with their long ranges and heavy payloads, were highly precarious, particularly EA-3B operations off carriers. Flying off aircraft carriers is a hazardous undertaking in ideal conditions

John R. Schindler from "A Dangerous Business: The U.S. Navy and National Reconnaissance the Cold War."

There were many factors that led to the free world's victory in the Cold War. One element that often escapes notice is the important role played by aerial reconnaissance. During the conflict, the information culled from airborne cryptologic intelligence missions greatly assisted policy makers and warfighters in accurately ascertain the capabilities of the Soviet Union and its proxies.

Whether these missions were conducted on land, sea or air, the majority of them were dangerous due to the fact that the aircraft were unarmed, and often times had to fly near the periphery of hostile airspace. While all were dangerous, those who flew these mission from U.S. Navy carrier decks were particularly vulnerable. The EA-3B Skywarrior aircraft used was capable of taking off and landing while at sea, however the size of the aircraft and the payload it carried made routine landings a challenge for even the most gifted pilot. Most disturbing was the fact the aircraft had no ejection seats, and a small escape hatch was the only option in an emergency situation.

All of these factors were part of the tragic loss of an EA-3B aircraft, codenamed Ranger 12, on 25 January 1987. In early January, 1987, the pilot Lieutenant Alan A. Levine and crew were informed that they were being deployed to the U.S.S. Nimitz for operational purposes. They suspected they would be involved in collecting intelligence related to the ongoing crises in Lebanon. The Ranger 12 cadre consisted of seven men, including two experienced cryptologists, CT₁₃s Patrick R. Price, and Craig R. Rudolf. Both men were members of the Naval Security Group, the U.S. Navy 'cryptologic element at that time.



Price was from Opp Alabama, and was a bit of a renaissance man. He was fluent in Russian and Spanish and a gifted musician. During his time at South Alabama College, he found time to join the band, rifle squad, cheerleading team, and volunteer regularly at the nearby Baptist Children's Home.

Rudolf joined the Navy in hopes of becoming a radar operator, but due to color blindness, transitioned over to linguistics. He first studied Russian, but was forced to drop out of the class due to illness. By the time he recovered, there were no slots left in the Russian language class, and he had no choice but to pursue Arabic, a far more difficult task. Undaunted, he persevered, and in time became a proficient Arabic linguist. At the time of the Nimitz mission, he had just been promoted, and was looking forward to a bigger and better future for himself.

EA-3B missions were never easy, but as the crew left the ready room that day they had no reason to believe that the upcoming flight would be anything more than a routine operational mission. It was a moonless night, with a calm sea, and at 1900, Ranger 12 lifted off the deck. Hours later when the plane returned, tragedy struck. On its first approach, the aircraft came in too high, and was forced to power up and go around again. Levine tried four more times to get the plane down on the deck, all to no avail. Finally, flight control ordered him to give up, and head to an 8000 ft. land based runway in Crete, where it would ostensibly be easier to land.

The problem was the plane was running low on fuel. In order to reach Crete, Levine would have to refuel while airborne. During the effort however, mechanical issues caused a crimp in the plane's refueling line, making it impossible to replenish enough fuel to get them to the airfield. Now, there was no choice. They would have to try one more time to get the plane onto the deck. Landing crews made every preparation to get the plane home safe, but once again, the aircraft came in too high, this time with devastating consequences.

As the crew of Ranger 12 made what they hoped would be their final approach, the plane's front wheels caught the top of the emergency landing net, slamming it down onto the deck. The aircraft broke in two, careened off the deck, and dropped 60 feet into the sea. Rescue crews from the Nimitz searched for three days but found no trace of the men. On January 28, the search was finally called off. The crew would be the last fatalities of the U.S. Navy cryptologic aerial reconnaissance program during the Cold War.

The Palm Beach Post reported that the crew's home base of Rota, Spain, "clung to itself in grief for a week. Flags flew at half-mast. The small base church filled to overflowing for a memorial service. Since there were no bodies, and no caskets, the seven flags that would have covered them lay folded on a table by the pulpit. The aviators' anthem, High Flight was read, "Oh, I have slipped the bonds of earth."

CT13 Patrick R. Price is memorized at Barancas National Cemetery in Pensacola, Florida. In addition, in January 1989, Rear Admiral McFarland, Commander Naval Security Group Command, dedicated the new fitness center to CT13s Patrick R. Price, Craig R. Rudolf and five others who perished in the crash.

LT Stephen H. Batchelder
LCDR Ronald R. Callander
AT2 Richard A. Herzing
LT Alan A. Levine
CT13 Patrick R. Price
LT James D. Richards
CT13 Craig H. Rudolf

