

# THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

**The Loss of Cobra Ball II -61-664**

**15 March 1981**



**SSgt Steven C. Balcer**  
**SSgt Harry L. Parsons**

**These men, six of this nation's best, gave their lives in defense of freedom.  
Our loss is irreparable; the meaning of their sacrifice, inescapable.**

**From Cobra Ball 664 Memorial Poster**

From the earliest days of the Cold War, American policymakers and warfighters looked to the intelligence community to provide information, to both help the nation prepare for war, and to keep the peace. The thinking was that the more US leaders knew about Soviet capabilities, the better equipped they would be to make wise and prudent decisions related to strategic actions and operations. One of the most productive tools in obtaining this critical information was the collection of electronic signals via aerial reconnaissance. From the end of World War II up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the US Air Force and other US service elements conducted successful airborne collection programs using a wide range of platforms. The missions were important but also exceedingly dangerous, largely because the planes were unarmed and often had to operate close to hostile air space.

One of the most effective aircraft used for these missions was the RC-135. The plane resembled a civilian airliner, but due to its size it could, depending on the mission, accommodate up to 27 intelligence analysts, including a number of cryptologic professionals. During the Cold War, the aircraft was used around the world in every major engagement the US was involved in during the decades-long conflict.

In the late 1960s, the US Air Force's technology development program (dubbed Big Safari) outfitted three RC-135s for Operation Cobra Ball, an effort to collect critical electronic intelligence on Soviet missile testing and development on the Kamchatka peninsula. The aircraft's collection of cryptologic-related equipment was designed to allow the intelligence crews to exploit the electronic spectrum. The program was run by the 24th Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron at Eielson Air Force Base (AFB) in Alaska, and was critical to understanding Soviet missile capabilities. The program also utilized the remote, but nonetheless strategically important, island of Shemya. Located 1200 miles southwest of Anchorage, the "Rock," as it was called, was in the perfect spot to perform reconnaissance on the peninsula. RC-135 crews flew between the two bases on a consistent basis for routine as well as operational reasons.



Early on March 15, 1981, RC-135 aircraft 61-664 was sent from Shemya back to Eielson for routine maintenance. Aircraft and crew were scheduled to fly back to Shemya on that same day. Bad weather initially delayed the flight, but at some point conditions improved enough to allow for take-off. The crew was a mixture of veterans and rookies, and the plan was to conduct a series of intensive training exercises on the return trip. Aboard the flight that day were two cryptologic professionals, SSgt Steven C. Balcer and SSgt Harry L. Parsons. Both were members of the Electronic Security Command, the cryptologic element of the US Air Force.

Balcer was 24 years old and hailed from Addison, Illinois. Trained as an Electronic Warfare Systems Technician, he had been in the Air Force since 1975, and had been with the 6985th Electronic Security Squadron since 1980. Parsons was a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Born in 1956, he enlisted in the Air Force in 1978, and underwent training as a Voice Intercept Processing Analyst. Fluent in Russian, he was the supervisor for the linguists aboard the flight, and like Balcer, had been with the 6985th since 1980.

Five hours later, the training exercise concluded, and pilot and crew began to prep for landing. A tanker aircraft had preceded the Cobra Ball flight by three hours, and had landed safely in good weather. However, by the time 664 started its descent toward the runway, conditions had deteriorated. One of the surviving members of the flight remembers, "All we could see was snow, all we could feel was the turbulence, and all we could sense was trouble." Cobra Ball crews are trained to handle bad weather, but there was doubt that it was going to be a difficult landing.

At 0230, as the plane made its final descent, the pilot lost his orientation, and as the aircraft approached the tarmac, the flight crew realized they were low, and off the runway. In desperation, pilot and crew struggled to get the plane set right, but it was too late: the aircraft's right wing impacted the ground, sending the plane over the embankment on the ocean side. The sudden impact broke off the RC-135's tail and back fuselage, and the entire area where the aircraft finally settled was engulfed in flames. The deadly crash killed six of the twenty-four member crew, including the two "back-enders," (the term was based on their position on the aircraft) Balcer and Parsons. Both men, and those who perished with them, were remembered by their friends, families, and those they served with as dedicated professionals who were dedicated to defending the nation.

SSgt Harry L. Parsons is buried in Glen Abbey Memorial Park in Bonita, California. SSgt Steve Balcer is interred in Clarendon Hills Cemetery in Darien, Illinois. In addition, a memorial dedicated to the memory of the men of Cobra Ball-61-664 who lost their lives that day was established outside the headquarters building of the 45th Reconnaissance Squadron at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska.

Maj. William Bennett  
Capt. Larry Mayfield  
1st Lt. Loren Ginter  
Master Sgt. Stephen Kish  
Staff Sgt. Steven Balcer  
Staff Sgt. Harry Parsons III

