

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

The Loss of YUKLA 27 TSgt Ernest R. Parrish



"The crash left a huge hole in each of our hearts and psyches, which is still there to this day...I will never, and can never, forget their faces and their personalities. That is a personal treasure for which I am eternally grateful."

Retired U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Jim Rosado

TSgt Ernest R. Parrish was born in Tampa, Florida on December 17, 1962. He began his US Air Force career in 1980, and after basic training and studying at the Defense Language Institute, he traveled the world serving in a variety of cryptologic-related positions. In 1982 he was assigned as a radiotelephone operator and communications analyst for the 6912th Electronic Security Group at Tempelhof Central Airport in West Berlin. In March of 1985 he moved from the 6912th to the 381st Intelligence Squadron at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska.

During his time in the Operations Division at Elmendorf, he served as a Voice Systems Operator, Tactical Reporter, Plaintext Weather Processor, Voice Systems Controller, Voice Analysis Manager, and Airborne Linguist. By 1995, Ernest had been in the air force for 15 years, and over time had become a seasoned pro at providing and protecting critical communications.

As part of an AWACs (airborne early warning and control) E-3B Sentry Aircraft crew, Ernest was involved in providing long-range airborne surveillance, detection, identification, and command and control during deployed operations. These flights were not only used to collect and analyze tactical intelligence in real time, but strategic information as well during the post-Cold War era.

On the morning of September 22, 1995, the 24 members of the crew of flight 77-0354, call sign Yukla 27, were preparing for an upcoming routine training flight. It had rained heavily the previous night, but the inclement weather had subsided, and it was almost 60 degrees by the time they headed to the flight line. By 7:30 they were on the runway patiently waiting for a C-130 aircraft in front of them on the taxiway to take off. Pilot and crew did not notice that as the plane left the tarmac, it disturbed a large flock of geese near the end of the runway.

When Yukla 27 took off shortly after, the plane was airborne for less than a minute before two of the plane's massive engines ingested two of the birds, causing the aircraft to lose altitude, and prompting pilot and crew to quickly begin emergency procedures. Efforts were made to jettison fuel and to turn around for an emergency landing, but it was too late. At 7:47, the crew radioed that they were going down. Shortly after the final transmission, the plane crashed into a forest 3500 yards northeast of the base. It was the first time that an AWACs aircraft had been lost in the line of duty. Ernest, along with the other 23 crew members (including two Canadians), perished in the disaster.



The entire Elmendorf base community was devastated by the loss of the crew. A year later, in an effort to remember the service and sacrifice of those who lost their lives on that tragic day, Yukla 27 Memorial Park was constructed in front of the 3rd Wing Headquarters building on base. Twenty-four bronze plaques engraved with the crew members' names were displayed along the arcing memorial wall, encircled by 24 spruce trees — one for each of the lost crew members.

It is also worth noting that the crew is remembered in other (perhaps more practical but nonetheless important) ways. Due to the events of that morning, it is now required of all AWACs pilots and flight engineers to go through the Yukla 27 crash scenario on a flight simulator as part of their initial qualification training. The training is centered on preparing crews to follow the proper technical procedures should they ever find themselves in a similar situation. Thus, even though the crew of Yukla 27 is gone, they still continue to teach and inspire future generations.

TSgt Ernest R. Parrish is buried at Fort Richardson National Cemetery on Fort Richardson, Alaska.

