

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

EC121 Shootdown



The Shootdown of US Navy Flight 135749 15 April 1969

"In the days before satellites and the Internet, the best way to get information about enemies was to put cryptologists on airplanes and fly them as close as possible to hot spots. It was particularly dangerous duty. Forty of those spy planes were shot down during the Cold War, killing 64 cryptologists and 45 crew members...peace and security have prevailed, in large part due to the vigilance and sacrifice of those we honor here today."

Lt. General Ken Minihan on the occasion of the dedication of National Vigilance Park, September, 1997

For the aircrews and cryptologists assigned to CVQ-1 stationed at Atsugi, Japan Naval Air Faculty, April 15, 1969 started out as a typical early spring day. The temperature was a less-than-comfortable 64 degrees with rain and a heavy wind whipping down the runway. Despite the less-than-perfect conditions, they knew that it would not be long before they would be airborne and heavily engaged in making Operation "Beggars Shadow" a continued success. "Beggars Shadow" had come about due largely to the ongoing geopolitical events on the Korean Peninsula. The armistice signed in July of 1953 brought the Korean conflict to a tenuous pause, but it was by no means the end of hostilities between the two countries. In the late '60s, an ongoing series of provocative raids by the North and the seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo caused great concern and prompted American policymakers to keep a close watch on the region.

Since the early days of the Cold War, the United States had sought to implement a policy of "containing" communist aggression. Obtaining accurate intelligence on the Soviet Union and its proxies was an indelible part of this policy. One of the key elements of this effort was the gathering of critical information via aerial reconnaissance activities conducted by both the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy.

The Air Force conducted its programs using a variety of aircraft to monitor trouble spots around the world, one of which was the Korean Peninsula. In time, the U.S. Navy was also using an assortment of aircraft, including the EC-121, to monitor and collect intelligence in the area. "Beggars Shadow" was a foundational effort to collect the information needed to gain a better understanding of the future intentions and activities of both the Soviet Union and North Korea.

Early on the morning of the fifteenth, eight officers and 23 enlisted men, nine of whom were assigned to the Naval Security Group as cryptologic technicians and linguists, headed for the flight line and boarded EC-121M flight 135749 (radio call sign Deep Sea 129). The aircraft had twice as many cryptologic professionals on board as would usually be the case due to the fact that the current crew was using the opportunity to train their replacements. The aircraft lifted off the runway at 0700 for what was expected to be a routine electronic intelligence-gathering mission. The expected flight path had them headed to a point near the North Korean border with Manchuria and then beginning a 120-mile elliptical path off the coast of the peninsula. The entire flight was to be conducted over international waters and was due to conclude at Osan Air Force Base later that afternoon.



The aircraft entered the Sea of Japan around 10:30. Two hours into the flight, friendly ground stations advised that two North Korean MiG 21PFS fighter planes had taken off in the direction of the plane's flightpath. At 1344, squadron headquarters issued a warning of a possible impending attack. Wanting to avoid a confrontation, pilot and crew quickly ended the mission and turned back to base. But it was too late: the MiGs closed in and fired on the unarmed aircraft. Concern about the plane's fate turned to grief when a North Korean broadcast later that day confirmed that the aircraft had been shot down for allegedly intruding into that nation's air space.

Over the next few days search and rescue operations discovered floating debris and the bodies of two crewmembers near the reported shoot-down location. The search was finally called off on the nineteenth. Senior U.S. leaders reacted with a combination of anger and frustration and considered retaliatory strikes on North Korean installations. However, a lack of timely, accurate information regarding the incident combined with the general geopolitical circumstances at the time made them hesitant to take any drastic action.

The cryptologists lost that day represented a cross-section of America. They hailed from Wisconsin, Missouri, Mississippi, Massachusetts, Arizona, Washington, Illinois, and Ohio. The oldest was 45, the youngest was 21. Eight were members of the Navy; one, SSgt Hugh Lynch, was a Marine. All of them had paid the ultimate sacrifice to provide their nation with the critical information needed to not only prepare for war but to keep the peace.

The historian Stephen Budiansky in his cryptologic history of the Cold War notes that: "The Cold War offered little opportunity for moments of glory that WWII abounded with...the greatest victory was not getting the world blown up along the way...the American cryptologist[s] of the Cold War deserve as much credit as anyone for the fact that Americans, Russians and the rest of the world were never vaporized in a cloud of radioactive ash, without them it is hard to see that containment would have lasted long enough to matter."

With this in mind, we will forever remember and honor the men of United States Navy and Marine Corps who gave their lives that day in defense of freedom.

CT3 Gary R. Ducharme, USN Delavan, Wisconsin
CT3 John A. Miller, USN St. Louis, Missouri
CTI John H. Potts, USN Forest, Mississippi
CTC Frederick A. Randall, USN Hanson, Massachusetts
CTC Richard E. Smith, USN Williams, Arizona
CT3 Philip D. Sundby, USN Camus, Washington
LT Robert F. Taylor, USN Chicago, Illinois
CT2 Stephen J. Tesmer, USN Upper Sandusky, Ohio
SSgt Hugh M. Lynch, USMC Canton, Ohio

