

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Hero
Airman 1st Class Daniel Reese USAF
Airman 1st Class Charles Land USAF
Tech Sergeant Raymond Leftwich USAF



EC-47 Flight 43-49201

The EC-47 reconnaissance missions were top secret, unarmed, and extremely dangerous. It was inevitable that some men would sacrifice their lives for what had to be done. The back-end crews, like their Army Security Agency counterparts, were all enlisted volunteers and the cream of the crop. For decades their stories have been locked away... their contributions unrecognized and unremembered.

6994th's Unit History

For the 6994th Security Squadron, March 9, 1967, began in much the same way as every other day on the Nha Trang Air Base. The weather was far from perfect. Hazy, gray skies hung over the base and a stiff wind blew off the runway, but — just like other days — normal flight operations were commencing. For Airmen 1st Class Daniel C. Reese, Charles D. Land and Tech Sergeant Raymond F. Leftwich, however, March 9th would prove to be a day of destiny.

All three men were proud members of the 6994th. Based in Nha Trang, Vietnam, the unit had been in the Southeast Asia area of operations since 1966. Its mission was to utilize modified WWII-era EC-47 aircraft to conduct airborne radio direction finding (ARDF) missions. Known as back-enders, their job was to monitor and collect critical intelligence. Operating literally in the rear portion of the aircraft, their work not only supported real-time tactical ground operations but strategic initiatives as well. Over time the work and contributions of the unit resulted in its becoming the most decorated squadron in the history of the 16th Air Force.



Reese hailed from Bluefield, West Virginia, and had enlisted in 1963. By the time he joined the unit in the fall of 1966, he had become an experienced Morse code intercept operator. Land, a native of Madera, California, had been in the Air Force since 1962 and was assigned to the 6994th in the late summer of 1966. Like Reese, Land was a well-trained and experienced intelligence professional. Leftwich, the senior member of the group, was a native of Treece, Kansas and also an experienced back-ender, but unlike his comrades,

he had served previously in the Navy in the Pacific Theater during WWII. Postwar stints in the Army Air Corps and Air Force Reserve led to his enlisting in the regular Air Force in 1954. Like the others he had been in the unit for under a year.

At 1430 hours that afternoon, all three men would be onboard EC-47 Flight 43-49201. Other than the bleak weather, there was nothing to indicate that the mission would be anything other than routine. The plane was due to land back at the base at 2100 hours, but when the aircraft failed to return that night, the unit initiated a search-and-rescue operation.

Two days later an observation plane discovered the strewn wreckage of the downed aircraft about 10 miles south of Duc Pho. A team was airlifted to investigate and secure the site, but by the time they arrived, enemy forces had stripped the area of clothing and equipment. The back-enders had perished in the crash, along with Majors Ivel D. Freeman and Leroy P. Bohrer, Captain Roger P. Richardson, and Staff Sergeant Prentice F. Brenton.

The results of the investigation that followed concluded that, due to the plane operating in hostile territory, the crash could have been caused by engine problems, battle damage, small-arms fire, or a combination of all three. No one could confirm exactly what happened.

Though Reese, Land, and Leftish died tragically in the performance of their duty, their service and sacrifice was not forgotten. Misawa Air Base (Japan) renamed the road leading up to the base ski lodge in honor of Reese, as well as the lodge itself to honor the memory of Land. Finally, in an effort to honor Leftwich, a dormitory in the Security Hill area of the base was named after the fallen tech sergeant.

The modern military often refers to the concept of "purple," meaning that all elements of the U.S. military should work together to prevail in the battlespace. This is not necessarily a new concept. Reese, Land, and Leftwich were proud members of the U.S. Air Force, but the work they and their fellow back-enders did in-country resulted in lives saved across the services — not only their fellow airmen but countless soldiers, sailors, and Marines. Their work remains to this day an incredible example of the worth of cryptologic operations and of the character and dedication displayed by all of the brave men who flew "Unarmed, Alone, and Unafraid."

