

# THEY SERVED IN SILENCE



## The Story of a Cryptologic Hero Staff Sergeant Robert Franklin Townsend, USA

Staff Sergeant Robert Franklin Townsend was born on Friday, July 3, 1936, in the Detroit, Michigan suburb of Royal Oak. The town takes its name from a stately oak tree located in the area.

Robert would attend the local high school and after graduation, join the United States Army. Initially trained as an infantryman, he would eventually gravitate to cryptologic work. During his career, he would serve in such diverse places as France and Ethiopia. In 1965, knowing that many of his fellow soldiers were headed for Southeast Asia, he volunteered to go to Vietnam as part of the Army Security Agency's 10th Radio Research Company (RRU). Sergeant Ray McKnight, who would eventually be promoted to Command Sergeant Major during a distinguished career in Army intelligence, served with Robert during the deployment. He noted that over the length of his career Townsend had developed a sterling reputation for taking many soldiers "under his wing." He also was adamant that Townsend was "one of the finest soldiers he ever served with."

The year 1965 had been a struggle for the armed forces of the fledgling Republic of Vietnam. Not only had the Viet Cong increased their attacks but for the first time North Vietnam had sent regular army troops into battle. It was becoming clearer every day that U.S. support levels to the South Vietnamese armed forces would have to be ramped up exponentially to deal with the increased threat. That support would come in the form of additional infantry personnel, as well as in the form of additional cryptologic support both in the way of resources and manpower.

The 10th RRU had been formed in 1962, and for most of its existence had been attached to the 1st Cavalry Division. The deployment to Vietnam of the 1st Cavalry would be the first test of the Army's use of air mobile assets to carry the fight to the enemy. In addition, it would provide an opportunity for the 10th RRU to provide the unit with meaningful and real time signals intelligence.





In mid-October, U.S. intelligence began to detect heavy North Vietnamese Army activity near the U.S. Special Forces base of Plei Me in the Central Highlands. On the 19th, the base was attacked by both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regular army forces. The initial attacks were repulsed but the base remained under siege. While several attempts to send relief forces were thwarted by enemy attacks and ambushes, by the end of the month both South Vietnamese and US Army units were able to reach and relieve the embattled defenders of Plei Me. The men involved in the fighting did not know it at the time, but the engagement at Plei Me would be the beginning of the larger and more well-known fight for control of the Ia Drang Valley.

During the siege of Plei Me, the officers and men of the 10th RRU were on the job supporting the various efforts needed to win the battle and the critical intelligence supplied by the unit proved crucial to success of the operation. As the helicopters of the 1st Cavalry took off to pursue the fleeing North Vietnamese unit, CSM McKnight related that Robert's unit issued a warning the enemy force was possibly much more than originally thought. Their analysis would prove to be correct. The 1st Cavalry would soon find themselves in pitched battle with a large Vietnamese force. The engagement would go down in history as the first major battle of the Vietnam War and would be described eloquently in the now famous book, *We Were Soldiers Once and Young*.



Sadly, SSG Robert Townsend would not live to see the end of battle. On 4 November, SSG Townsend was killed in action by an enemy sniper. CSM McKnight remarked that he died "trying to protect his fellow soldiers." His body was returned to the states and buried with full military honors in White Chapel Cemetery in Troy, Michigan.

Decades later in 2013, a visitor to the virtual Vietnam Veterans Wall would comment on Robert's service and sacrifice by noting that "As an American, I would like to thank you for your service and for your sacrifice made on behalf of our wonderful country. The youth of today could gain much by learning of heroes such as yourself, men and women whose courage and heart can never be questioned."

Robert left behind his loving wife Mary and his three children, Richard, Katheryn and Daniel, ages 4, 2 and 11 months respectively. The example of his dedication to duty and his efforts to assist his fellow soldiers in helping them to achieve their goals and to save lives will never be forgotten.



## SSG Robert Franklin Townsend

3 Jul 1936 - 4 Nov 1965



Photographs courtesy of the Townsend family

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