

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

SP5 Gary P. Westcott

SP4 Bruce A. Crosby



The EXPLORER Program initiated a trend in SIGINT collection that promises to enjoy widespread future expansion. It is a safe and economical method for acquiring line-of-sight tactical communications, providing high-quality intercept at low risk to the persons involved in acquiring.

From "Ground Based Remote in the Far East"

From the earliest days of the Vietnam conflict, the Army Security Agency provided indelible cryptologic support to friendly forces in the battle space by providing and protecting critical communications. These efforts allowed for commanders to understand enemy intentions, and saved countless lives. The reasons for the organization's success were due to a host of factors, one them being the application of advanced technologies. One of the most creative of these was the Explorer program.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the US Army relied on manned listening posts placed on the forward edges of the battlefield. The sites collect enemy voice communications that could be monitored and analyzed by cryptologic professionals in secure areas well to the rear. This was done in Korea with positive results, and was used again in Vietnam to collect electronic communications that, due to topography and other factors, would otherwise not be available.

By 1972, the combination of reduced ASA personnel and increased attacks on forward cryptologic listening posts spawned an effort to locate remote-controlled intercept systems on isolated hilltops where they could be controlled from safe SIGINT (signals intelligence) sites in rear areas. The first of these systems was developed during the early months of 1970 by a team of National Security Agency professionals and was aptly cover-named EXPLORER.

In December of 1972, new EXPLORER sites were established at fire-support bases, Sarge and Alpha-4 in Quang Tri Province near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The new system greatly reduced the number of men needed to man the forward sites; however, due to the complexity of the devices, cryptologic professionals were still needed to conduct required maintenance, and troubleshoot problems if and when they developed. In time the job of keeping EXPLORER up and running at the firebases fell to two ASA professionals, SP5 Gary P. Westcott and SP4 Bruce A. Crosby of the 8th Radio Research Field Station (RRFS), 509th Radio Research (RR) Group.

SP5 Gary Westcott was born in 1959 in Pomona, California, and after graduation from the local high school, enlisted in the US Army. Westcott was an expert Vietnamese linguist, but was also a technical whiz. January of 1972 found him working on and coordinating the technical arrangements needed to have the antennas on the forward fire bases link back the 30 miles back to the signals intelligence analysts at Phu Bai. This system required a great deal of "tweaking," and Gary quickly became known as a problem solver who was dedicated to keeping the system up and running.



Crosby was a native of Buffalo, New York, and after graduation from Griffith-Springfield High School in 1970, enlisted in the US Army. After ASA-related training, he was posted to Vietnam. He had been at Firebase Sarge since November of 1971, and like Westcott was part of the small but critical cadre charged with maintaining and repairing the sites. Also like Westcott, he had a reputation as a competent and knowledgeable cryptologic professional.

On 29 March the daily rocket attacks on the fire bases began to intensify, so much so that leadership considered evacuating the sites. Also assigned to the area, but at a distance from the EXPLORER sites, was Major Walter Boomer. Boomer would later go on to become Assistant Commandant of the US Marine Corps, but on March 30, 1972 he was concerned about the safety of Westcott and Crosby. His concerns were prescient, because by midday both fire bases were subjected to what seemed to be never-ending rocket and artillery attacks, as well as the presence of 30,000 North Vietnamese soldiers who swarmed over the area.

Boomer found out through radio contact that both men had managed to gain the safety of the nearby bunker next to the site. He ordered both men to stay put, and furiously radioed for assistance to help stem the tide. But it was to no avail. 30 minutes into the attack, all contact was lost with the men. Putting his own safety at risk, Boomer made it up to the bunker. He found it consumed by a raging fire resulting from a direct hit from a 122mm rocket. He made several attempts to rescue the men, but was unable to reach them due to the extreme heat and flames. The blaze was such that no trace of either man was ever found.

Both fire bases were abandoned on April 1, but Gary and Bruce and the rest of men could take pride in knowing that for four years they had kept the system running under dangerous and demanding conditions. Gary and Bruce would be the only casualties of the unit, and the last ASA soldiers to die in Vietnam.

Both men were remembered by their friends and loved ones as special people. Doug Stannard, a fellow soldier, noted that "Gary chose to go to a fire base instead of ...me. A fatal decision. A horrible loss." Thomas Lane, Bruce's roommate, related that "I had the honor of gathering his personal effects and sending them home. I think of him daily. I still feel guilty that I am alive and he is not."

SP4 Bruce Crosby has a military marker in his memory at Fairview Cemetery, Springville, New York. SP5 Gary Westcott's memorial marker is in the National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona in Phoenix, Arizona. Both men are also honored and remembered at "The Courts of the Missing," a national cemetery in Honolulu, Hawaii.

