

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice

PFC Henry N. Heide
SP4 James R. Smith



"I cannot overstate the highly valuable intelligence, reported on a near real-time basis, that the Cav [sic] has accrued as a result of this splendid system."

Maj. Gen. E.B. Roberts, Commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, Commenting on Project Left Bank

For the men of the Army Security Agency's (ASA) 371st Radio Research Company based at Phuoc Vinh in the Republic of Vietnam, November 29, 1969 began like any other day. It was overcast, and a stiff wind blew across the base, but the temperature was a comfortable 77 degrees. As one of the cryptologic support elements of the U.S. Army, the unit had been sent to Vietnam to support the battlefield operations of the 1st Cavalry Division. Currently the unit was heavily involved in Operation Left Bank, a robust airborne effort that employed innovative cryptologic methods to locate enemy units in the field and, once located, bring in airborne firepower to destroy them.

ASA units like the 371st had been in Vietnam since the early '60s, and conducted the majority of their work through ground-based stations. Operation Left Bank was a departure from this approach because it was conducted not from the ground, but from a small collection of helicopters lent by the 1st Cavalry. A Left Bank crew consisted of a pilot, co-pilot, and two highly skilled ASA radio intercept operators whose job was to locate enemy units, and then call in heavily armed airborne units to attack and destroy them. In the beginning of the effort, the operators would hold off "calling for fire" until an accurate fix was obtained. But over time, the gunship crews grew so confident in the teams' abilities that rather than wait to be summoned, they simply followed behind them.

The operation was highly successful; in one three-month period, Left Bank located 234 enemy targets, found 50 enemy base areas, and was responsible for 151 enemies killed. At the same time, the missions were extremely dangerous due to the fact that the intercept teams sometimes hovered over a potential target area for inopportune periods of time.

On November 29, 1969, Left Bank unit Tail Number 68-15246 departed the base on a mission to Phuoc Long Province. The copter was configured with the usual radio direction finding equipment and was unarmed. It held a crew of four, two pilots and two ASA Morse operators in the back, SP4 James Ronald Smith and PFC Henry Nicholas Heide.



Born on December 23, 1948, Heide was a native of West Palm Beach, Florida. During his years at South Broward High School, he was elected president of his high school class and played varsity football. After graduation, he attended Miami-Dade Junior College, before enlisting in the U.S. Army. Military life agreed with him. He was named "Soldier of the Brigade" during basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, and "Soldier of the Post" during his ASA training at Ft. Devens, Massachusetts. The end of May 1969 found him working as a Left Bank crew member with the 371st in Vietnam.

Smith was born in Amarillo, Texas on December 1, 1948, and was raised in Moore, Oklahoma. After graduation and marriage to his high school sweetheart Kathy, he enlisted in the U.S. Army in June 1968. After initial testing and training at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and Two Rock Ranch, California, he deployed to Vietnam in June 1969.

Over time, the enemy came to realize that the presence of a Left Bank unit meant trouble and began an effort to send out radio transmissions as a ruse to lure copters into their fields of fire. Previously, enemy forces in Phuoc Long Province had been devastated by the gunship attacks. Anticipating their return to the area, fake communications were sent out. As they Left Bank crew neared the area of Song BE, they picked up the signals and flew close to the treetops to try to sight the enemy antenna. Immediately, they were enveloped in a hail of 50 caliber machine gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades. The gunship assigned to the mission was shot down as well. All perished in the attack. Later that day, additional crews were called in to secure the crash site and recover the remains of their fallen comrades. For their courage and bravery that day, both Heide and Smith were posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Bronze Star.

Specialist 4 (Promoted Posthumously) Henry Nicholas Heide II is buried in Arlington National Cemetery next to Warrant Officer Dennis Bogle, the co-pilot of Tail Number 68-15246.

Specialist 4 James Ronald Smith is buried next to his parents at Moore Cemetery in his home town of Moore, Oklahoma.

In October of 2005, Clay Marston posted a tribute to James R. Smith on a digital Vietnam War honor page. His remarks were meant to honor Smith, but they apply to both men and to all the ASA assignees who risked their lives to get the information needed to achieve victory on the battlefield and to save the lives of others.

"The proud young valor that rose above the mortal and then,
at last, was mortal after all. You are not forgotten, nor shall you ever be."

