

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE



The Story of a Cryptologic Hero Sgt Thomas J. Tomczak



The men of the SOD units were extraordinary soldiers who progressed to rate among the most highly trained and proficient men in the U.S. Army.

From "Unlikely Warriors, The Army Security Agency's Secret War in Vietnam,"

by Lonnie Long and Gary B. Blackburn.

Over the last two decades in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. uniformed cryptologic professionals have accompanied units in the battle space to provide "combat support." These individuals play a critical and indelible role in assisting leaders in tactical environments to understand what the future holds. Over time, their efforts have helped to increase the odds of victory and saved lives. This is not a recent innovation; these elite cryptologic warriors have been serving on the front lines for decades, Vietnam being no exception. Sgt Thomas J. Tomczak was one of these highly skilled and dedicated individuals, and during his time in uniform, he more than upheld the distinguished legacy of those who provide and protect critical information on the battlefield.

Tom was born on April 2, 1948 in New Berlin, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee, not far from the shores of Lake Michigan. He attended Franklin High School, and after graduation enlisted in the U.S. Army in July 1965. After initial testing, he was selected to serve in the Army Security Agency (ASA), the cryptologic element of the U.S. Army during the Vietnam era. After basic and advanced training at Ft. Devens, Massachusetts, he was assigned to the 400th Special Operations Detachment (SOD) (Airborne).

All members of the ASA were highly trained cryptologic professionals who were dedicated to providing and protecting critical information in the battle space, but some, like Tom, operated in units that went above and beyond the norm. Only the top five percent of enlisted soldiers were good enough to serve in such units. They were truly a special breed. In order to join, one had to qualify for and undergo rigorous training, including becoming airborne qualified. Between the years of 1962 and 1975, 208 of these highly skilled soldiers served with the 400th SOD on both classified and covert missions.

Over time, through hard work, talent, and dedication, Tom developed a reputation in his cryptologic duties, and by the time he volunteered and deployed to Vietnam in 1968, he had earned both his jump wings and a combat infantry badge. It takes dedication and talent to become an effective cryptologist and equal amounts of talent and ability to become an effective infantry soldier. By the time he arrived "in country,"

he had become an elite warrior who was superbly competent in both arenas. May of that year found him supporting the Green Berets of the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Dak Pek in Kontum Province in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Tom's specialty was airborne direction finding (AFD) and his work combined highly skilled direction finding with the lethal firepower of mobile airborne warfare. AFD had the potential to cover larger areas and to get in close with the enemy. Once a target was located, firepower could be properly applied to the detriment of hostile forces.



Dak Pek was home not only to Green Beret units, but contingents of Republic of Vietnam Special Forces as well. The mission of the installation was to monitor enemy movements along the nearby Ho Chi Minh Trail, and due to its location, the area was often subject to both probing and direct attacks by North Vietnamese forces. On July 23, 1968, during one of these attempted incursions, Tom was killed when a mortar round from the position he was firing from exploded as it left the tube. He had only been in Vietnam for three months.

Sgt Thomas J. Tomczak was buried at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery in Cudahy, Wisconsin, but was not forgotten by those he left behind. A good friend posted on a digital tribute site, "Tommy - it's been more than 33 years and not a day has gone by that I don't think of those times. The photos may be starting to fade but not the memories -- and certainly not my admiration for and debt to you. I'll continue to visit the Wall and say hello, to you and the others who gave it your all. Thank you." Finally, in an effort to memorialize him, the physical training area at Okinawa, where Tom trained so hard to get and stay combat ready, is named Tomczak Memorial Field in honor of his exemplary service and sacrifice to his country.

