

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Service and Sacrifice **SSgt. Michael R. Conner USAF**



The time and effort that you and people like you put out for us boys over here is greatly appreciated. It is good to know that we are still remembered even though we are thousands of miles from home and especially at Christmas.

SSgt Michael R. Conner thanking the citizens of Meridian Connect for holiday gift bags sent to the troops in Vietnam.

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The Meridian Morning Record

SSgt. Michael R. Conner was born in the town of Rockwood in the "Volunteer State" of Tennessee on September 17, 1947. Raised in Knoxville, he graduated from that city's Central High School in 1965, and in November of 1966, enlisted in the United States Air Force. He underwent initial training at Lackland and Keesler Air Force Bases as an Airborne Morse Systems Operator, and served with the 6910th Security Wing, Darmstadt, Germany before deploying to Vietnam with the 6994th Security Squadron.

Based at Pleiku Air Base, the squadron, like most of the units that were part of the U.S. Air Force's Security Service during the Vietnam era, was dedicated to providing and protecting cryptologic-related communications to gain foreknowledge of enemy intentions and save lives. At times, these operations could be conducted from the ground, but the unit at Pleiku specialized in airborne collection of critical intelligence.

Utilizing specially outfitted EC-47 aircraft, the squadron, using radio direction finding and other electronic methods and techniques, sought to locate enemy units and then call in friendly, heavily armed airborne units to attack and destroy them. Over time, the enemy came to realize that the presence of an EC-47 unit meant that trouble was on the horizon. In an effort to turn the tables, fake radio transmissions were often sent out for purposes of luring the planes into their fields of fire.

In the early morning hours of April 22, Mike was part of flight CAP 53. The crew consisted of a pilot, co-pilot, navigator, linguist, and two "back end" Morse operators. The plane took off at 3:30 am from Pleiku Air Base and headed for an area that friendly intelligence sources had indicated was rife with enemy activity. The mission was slated for six hours, but as the hours passed, the flight was unable to get a fix. The prior intelligence was so convincing, however, that the crew asked for, and received, permission to stay in the air. Finally, after much hard work, they achieved success.

Shortly after obtaining the fix, however, the plane was struck by a 37mm missile. Despite being wounded by the blast, the pilot was able to keep the plane airborne, and turned the aircraft to the east in hopes of reaching the sea and making a crash landing. Tragically, minutes later, the plane lost altitude, hit a tree, and crashed. Three crew members survived the attack, but Michael, the pilot, and two others were killed in the crash. For his courage and bravery that day, he would receive the Distinguished Flying Cross.



One month to the day after Michael's death, his wife Judith gave birth to his son Michael Roy Conner Jr. Michael Jr. would never see his father, but upon hearing the announcement of his birth, 63 men from the squadron took up a collection and started a fund to help him one day attend college.

Despite his untimely death, Mike's service and sacrifice were not forgotten. Daniel Russell, who was with him the day he died, remembers, "25 years later we all went to the Vietnam Memorial for a gathering...We went to the wall at exactly at 9:35AM the time of our shoot down. We held each other and cried." Mike Belli, another fellow airman noted that Mike was "...a great guy...funny, happy always a joke and a smile kind of man... He spent more than one holiday meal with us ...Life isn't very fair when the good are taken so early."

Mike was remembered in other meaningful ways as well. In his honor, in November 1987, building 1574 on Misawa AFB was renamed Conner Memorial Hall, and in May 1973, a dormitory at Keesler AFB was renamed Conner Manor in memory. He is interred at Woodhaven Cemetery, Knoxville, Tennessee.



Conner Hall Memorial Hall Plaque

