

THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of Cryptologic Heroes

Staff Sergeant Donald G. Hill, USAF

Airman 2nd Class Earl W. Radlein, USAF



Korean Peninsula, 1953

It was the 29th of July, 1953. Forty-eight hours earlier at 10:01 a.m. the Communist and Allied negotiators had brought a tenuous, but nonetheless official, finish to the hostilities on the Korean Peninsula. For the first time in three long years it appeared that the “Land of the Morning Calm” was finally going to have an opportunity to live up to its name. However, for Staff Sergeant Donald G. Hill and Airman 2nd Class Earl W. Radlein of the 1st Radio Squadron Mobile based at Yokota Air Base, not much had changed. They had a morning mission, and despite the news of the armistice, they were focused on the task at hand. For thousands, the Korean War had ended. But for others, a new “Cold War” was just beginning.

The 91st

Sergeant Hill and Airman Radlein were still hard at work partly because, since the spring of 1947, American policy makers had faced a perplexing problem. The Soviet Union, an ally during WWII, had become America’s chief adversary. To make matters worse, because the USSR was a closed society, Washington faced any number of challenges in discerning the capabilities of the Russian Bear. Only effective intelligence work could provide the necessary answers.

Radlein and Hill played an important role in this effort. The role of these “back-enders,” as they were called by other crewmembers, was to serve as the cryptologic component of the aircrews assigned to the RB-50 flights of the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron. The RB-50 aircraft used for many of these missions were WWII era, B-29 bombers reconfigured for reconnaissance work. The purpose of these, and countless other reconnaissance missions flown throughout the world, was to help Washington understand the nature of the Soviet threat. As would be expected, there were constant protests from the Kremlin that these activities violated Soviet air space. As a result, it was not uncommon for Soviet forces to challenge the aircraft engaged in these activities.

Unfortunately, on some occasions, these altercations took a deadly turn for the individuals involved. The brave Americans who flew these missions were from all walks of life. Each man had his own story.

The Men

Sergeant Donald Hill spent most of the morning preparing for the mission. A native of the town of Yakima, Washington, in the great Pacific Northwest, he was a veteran back-ender, a born linguist, and very good at his job. During the conflict, he had spent countless hours flying recon missions. A veteran of the Merchant Marines during WWII, he was no stranger to dangerous situations.

Sitting next to Hill in the cramped spaces was Airman Earl Radlein. Like Hill, Radlein was a product of the newly formed U.S. Air Force Security Service and an accomplished linguist. Radlein’s family hailed from Chattanooga, Tennessee.



Donald G. Hill



Earl W. Radlein

Due to his success in the academic realm, his parents encouraged him to transfer from the local high school to McCallie Prep, a private military academy, with an excellent reputation for academics. Its stated mission was to encourage young men "to pursue excellence and to take pride in one's work and achievements." Since childhood, Radlein had wanted to be a pilot. Much of his youth was spent assembling every model airplane he could get his hands on. But given his linguistic skills, Radlein was destined to fight the Cold War, not from the cockpit, but from cramped compartments in the back of reconnaissance aircraft. He had not been at this game as long as his friend, but his past performance clearly indicated that he had more than lived up to the philosophy of his alma mater.

The Shootdown

After takeoff, their aircraft climbed to 20,000 feet and leveled off. In time they would once again be over the Sea of Japan. As the mission progressed, everyone aboard went to work. In most cases, the "back-enders" had little or no contact with the rest of the crew except for required operational communications. Near the end of the run, pilot and crew made one final check to ensure the requirements of the mission had been fulfilled. Satisfied that they had what they needed, the RB-50 made a slow turn to the south and headed for Japan. They were on their way back.



But Airman Radlein, Staff Sergeant Hill, and 14 of their fellow crewmembers would never return. Forty miles off the coast of the Soviet port city of Vladivostok, despite being in international airspace, the plane came under attack and was fired upon by Soviet MIG fighter jets. The plane's tail gunner was able to fire a few rounds at their attackers, but the superior speed and maneuverability of the Russian aircraft made the RB-50 an easy target. Within minutes, the aircraft had sustained heavy damage. As a result, Captain O'Kelley, the plane's pilot, and his men moved quickly to exit the aircraft. The RB-50 crashed violently into the Sea of Japan. Although 16 of the 17 crewmembers successfully exited the plane, only the co-pilot, Captain Roche, survived the attack.

Service and Sacrifice

President Harry Truman once stated that one of the major goals of his administration was to avoid a third world war. In this endeavor, he and his successors were able to achieve their goal. But only so much information can be gleaned from the window of the oval office. Good intelligence is a must. Sometimes in the effort to collect critical information that saves lives, the individuals involved must give up their own. Such was the case for Don Hill, Earl Radlein, and the rest of the brave men of RB-50 47145 who died on that tragic July morning.* We should never forget that their work, as well as the service and sacrifice of countless others involved in reconnaissance missions, provided American policy makers with the intelligence they needed to keep the peace and preserve freedom for generations to come.

Donald George Hill

Staff Sergeant, United States Air Force

18 March 1924 - 29 July 1953

Earl Wilbur Radlein, Jr.

Airman Second Class, United States Air Force

10 August 1930 - 29 July 1953

** As the keeper of America's cryptologic legacy, the NSA has produced this historical work for purposes of honoring the efforts of SSgt. Hill and Airman 2nd Class Radlein. It must be noted however, that the National Security Agency honors not only those aboard RB-50 47145 involved in crypto-linguistic activities, but all of the members of the crew who sacrificed their lives in the defense of freedom.*



Photo of Earl Radlein courtesy of the Radlein Family
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