

A Dangerous Business:

The U.S. Navy and National Reconnaissance
During the Cold War



Commemorating Silent Sacrifices

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Commemorating Silent Sacrifices

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During the Cold War, the U.S. Navy was a full participant in the secret war in the ether against the Communist bloc. For decades, Naval aircrews waged a daily struggle against enemy air defenses to gain desperately needed intelligence regarding the military capabilities of the Soviet Union and its Communist allies. This conflict, hidden from public view, constituted an integral component of America's national security strategy throughout the Cold War, and was fraught with risk for the sailors who took to the air to defend freedom.

Many Naval aircraft and lives were lost in this secret struggle – to enemy fighters, to the elements, to mishaps – and 90 men who gave their lives are commemorated in this publication. This brochure is published by the National Security Agency to celebrate the dedication of the U.S. Navy memorial at National Vigilance Park. It is hoped that it will provide readers with a glimpse into a world that was long hidden from view, a world of dedication, heroism and sacrifice. This brochure outlines the history of Naval aerial reconnaissance during the Cold War, and commemorates the many veterans of that long, secret struggle, especially the sailors – fathers, husbands, sons, and shipmates – who gave their lives.

The Beginnings of SESP

The origins of the Navy's national reconnaissance program exist in the victory over Japan in the Pacific War. In the last year of that conflict, as the Navy pursued the Imperial Japanese fleet into its home waters and destroyed it with coordinated aerial, surface, and submarine campaigns, electronic intelligence – known in the espionage business as ELINT for short – became an important force-multiplier for America's fleet.

ELINT, principally information on enemy radar systems, gave the Navy highly valuable data on Japanese air defenses and ship dispositions that could not be obtained from any other source. And by 1945, the Navy was employing aerial platforms, land-based reconnaissance aircraft like the PB4Y Privateer (the Navy's version of the Army Air Force's famous B-24 Liberator heavy bomber), to conduct ELINT missions against Japan, with great success. Aircraft like the Privateer,

though vulnerable to enemy air attack and only lightly armed, offered long ranges and impressive payloads to carry large amounts of electronic monitoring gear.

The Navy's national reconnaissance program was significantly scaled back after the defeat of Japan, but it did not disappear altogether. Naval aviation patrol squadrons retained modest ELINT capabilities, and soon the need for a renewed electronic reconnaissance effort would become obvious.

Deteriorating relations with the Soviet Union – recently America's wartime ally – forced the Navy, and the Pentagon, to reassess national strategy. Aggressive Soviet actions in Europe such as the Berlin blockade and the Czechoslovak coup in 1948 gave rise to justifiable fears that conflict with the Soviet bloc might be inevitable, indeed imminent. Such fears of Communist aggression grew acute the following year with two events that stunned Washington: the fall of China to Mao's Red armies and the USSR's exploding of an atomic bomb years before the Pentagon believed that possible, thanks in part to Soviet espionage in the U.S. Together, these events altered the global strategic playing field, to America's disadvantage.

In the early years of what would soon be known as the Cold War, America's strategy to stave off Communist aggression relied on massive retaliation with nuclear bombing by the U.S. Air Force. Yet this was a precarious policy since it depended on targeting information about Soviet military forces and industry – intelligence that late 1940s America did not possess. Regarding internal events in the Soviet bloc, the newly established U.S. Intelligence Community knew very little indeed.

Unlike the situation in World War II, the U.S. had very little signals intelligence (meaning ELINT plus communications intelligence or COMINT), no real human intelligence or HUMINT, and no photo intelligence either, since overflights of Soviet territory were impossible. Although America's Cold War strategy depended on knowing what to bomb and how to penetrate Soviet airspace, American intelligence in the late 1940s was essentially flying blind.

Therefore, national policymakers, fearing war with the Soviet bloc could erupt at any time, embarked on a high-risk strategy to gain desperately needed intelligence about Soviet air defenses and military industries. This required the Air Force and Navy to dispatch vulnerable reconnaissance aircraft close to the enemy's frontiers to collect ELINT against Communist targets. This was a gamble, putting crews' lives at considerable risk, but the payoff was deemed worth the potential cost. This highly secret program was given the euphemistic title of the Special Electronic Search Project (SESP) by the Navy, which began outfitting aircraft from its patrol squadrons for these missions.

That this was a dangerous business was obvious from the start. In the first place, the aircraft were slow and vulnerable to attack, being lightly armed with machine guns. Seldom would fighter escort be available to protect aircraft on SESP missions. Moreover, the missions were very long and mostly over water. If aircraft were lost due to enemy attack or mechanical problems, the odds were against successful crew rescue due to the distances involved and the high secrecy of the missions.

Nevertheless, it was a terrible surprise on 8 April 1950 when the Soviet Union shot down a Navy SESP aircraft over the Baltic Sea; an unprovoked attack that shocked the nation. The Cold War had not yet gotten hot – the Soviet-backed North Korean invasion of South Korea was still two months off – and such a wanton act of Soviet aggression against a U.S. aircraft flying over international waters provoked anger in Washington.

The lost aircraft was “Turbulent Turtle,” a PB4Y2 Privateer (BuNo 59645), part of a secret SESP detachment assigned to Patrol Squadron 26 (VP-26). This was a typical reconnaissance mission in the early Cold War, consisting of a modified heavy bomber hosting a 10-man crew and heavily laden with top secret intelligence collection equipment. Like most SESP missions at the time, most of the crew were aviators and electronic specialists, assisted by one or more sailors from the Naval Security Group (NSG) who were specialists in ELINT and cryptology. On this flight, the NSG sailor was CT3 Edward J. Purcell.

There was no complacency when “Turbulent Turtle” took off early on 8 April 1950 for what was supposed to be a very long intelligence-gathering mission that would take the aircraft from North Africa to the Baltic Sea and back again. Mechanical problems were routine – a year before, a VP-26 PB4Y2 on a SESP mission ditched only three miles out from base when it suffered engine failure immediately after takeoff. Luckily, the entire crew was rescued. Over the last few years, several Navy reconnaissance aircraft flying near Soviet airspace had been confronted by aggressive Soviet fighters, who sometimes fired cannon bursts near the U.S. aircraft, but as yet, no lives had been lost.



PB4Y-2 BuNo 59645 VP-26 “Turbulent Turtle”

The eighth of April 1950 would prove tragically different, for reasons never fully clarified. The Privateer was shot down by Soviet MiG fighters about 80

miles southeast of Liepaja, Latvia; an unprovoked attack that took the lives of all 10 sailors aboard “Turbulent Turtle” (NSG personnel are denoted with an asterisk):

AT1 Frank L. Beckman
AL3 Joseph J. Bourassa
ENS Tommy L. Burgess
AD1 Joseph H. Danens
LT John H. Fette

*CT3 Edward J. Purcell
LTJG Robert D. Reynolds
AT3 Joseph N. Rinnier
LT Howard W. Seeschaf
AD1 Jack W. Thomas

Although some wreckage was eventually recovered, there was no trace of the missing men, who were presumed dead due to the fact that the lumbering PB4Y2 was blasted out of the sky, as evidenced by the bullet-ridden state of what wreckage was found. Soviet authorities were unhelpful about the missing men. The Navy had little public comment on the incident, as the SESP missions were top secret and considered of vital importance to national security. Establishing a precedent for the remainder of the Cold War, the Navy told the families of the missing sailors little about the loss – in part because the Navy did not know much, as there were no survivors – but the lack of information gave rise to unfortunate yet unsubstantiated rumors that the missing men might be alive in Soviet captivity.

The Years of Living Dangerously

The young men of “Turbulent Turtle” became the Navy’s first casualties in the secret reconnaissance war with the Soviet bloc, but they would be far from the last. Yet despite the considerable risks involved in the SESP program, there was no question that it had to continue. The Cold War had just begun, and the need for intelligence on the Communist enemy only grew more pressing with the Korean War, when the Pentagon feared that a global atomic conflagration could break out without notice. The SESP program expanded, and soon the mission would be taken over by specially trained Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadrons (VQ), with VQ-1 for the Pacific Fleet and VQ-2 supporting the Atlantic Fleet.



PB4Y2 in Flight

Naval crews began flying ELINT missions against the Soviet Union and its allies on a daily basis, attempting to give the fleet and the Intelligence Community a current picture of enemy air defenses and force dispositions. Such a high ops

tempo took a toll on sailors and their aircraft. On 7 March 1951, VP-26's special detachment (soon to be called VQ-2) lost another PB4Y2, this time to mechanical failure. The SESP craft abruptly lost three of its four engines over the Mediterranean and was forced to ditch. Although the Privateer went down only a few miles off the Italian coast, eight of its 14-man crew were lost and presumed drowned:

ET2 Russell Aiken

AOC Andrew A. Andrews

ADAN Ernest E. Craig

AOAN Frank J. Dacunto

ENS Elmer E. Jackson

AL3 Donald E. Jones

LT Richard E. Lampkin, Jr.

ADC Roy R. Radcliff

Although six sailors were rescued (including CT1 Robert Warner of NSG), the loss of the majority of the crew due to engine failure illustrated the hazardous nature of every SESP mission. Only a year later, on 7 September 1952, VQ-2 lost a P4M-1Q Mercator on an electronic reconnaissance mission over the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea due to engine failure. The aircraft ditched in the middle of the night just off the Turkish coast. Fourteen crewmen were saved after many hours in the water, but the pilot, LT Robert B. Hager, gave his life while saving others. Although the twin-engined Mercator was a more modern and reliable aircraft than the World War II-vintage Privateer, mechanical difficulties continued to plague the SESP program due to the extreme stresses the long-range missions placed on man and machine.



P4M-1Q of VQ-2 compared in size with an 18-wheel oil transport truck

For VQ-1 sailors in the Pacific, the risks were no less. Indeed, they were possibly greater since there was not just one enemy, but two. The People's Republic of China took unkindly to American reconnaissance aircraft operating off its coast and, like the Soviets, the Communist Chinese regularly challenged the flights and sometimes shot them down.

The first SESP loss in Asia came on 6 November 1951 when a P2V Neptune patrol bomber assigned to VQ-1 was attacked by two Soviet La-11 fighters over the Sea of Japan, about 18 miles from the Soviet coast near Vladivostok. All ten crewmen were lost – three days of search and rescue operations revealed no trace of them – and declared dead by the Navy in 1952:

AO1 Reuben S. Baggett
AD1 Paul R. Foster
LTJG Judd C. Hodgson
AL2 Paul G. Juric
AD3 Jack Lively

AT2 William S. Meyer
AT1 Erwin D. Raglin
LTJG Sam Rosenfeld
ENS Donald A. Smith
AL2 Ralph A. Wigert, Jr.

At the time, the Navy informed the public that the lost P2V was engaged in a weather reconnaissance flight when attacked; the SESP mission would remain classified until the Cold War ended four decades later. As with most shoot-downs, the only surviving witnesses to the crash were the Soviet pilots, who recalled that they downed the Neptune at about 10 a.m., approximately 18 miles off the Soviet coast, and that the U.S. aircraft exploded after it “fell, burning, into the water,” making it exceptionally unlikely that any crew survived.

The Soviets attacked and shot down another VQ-1 SESP Neptune on 4 September 1954, when a P2V was downed over the Sea of Japan 40 miles off the Soviet coast. The fatally damaged craft was able to ditch and nine of the 10 crewmen were rescued by an Air Force SA-16 amphibian aircraft, but one officer, ENS Roger N. Reid, was lost while saving others.



P2V Neptune of VP-19, circa 1950s

Two years later, Communist China proved that it could be just as aggressive as the Soviets. PRC fighters regularly tailed Naval reconnaissance aircraft and, on occasion, had opened fire, but they did not shoot down an SESP platform until 22 August 1956, when a P4M-1Q Mercator was downed in an unprovoked

attack 32 miles off the coast of China and 180 miles north of Taiwan. The aircraft radioed that it had encountered hostile fighters and was not heard from again. All 16 crewmen were missing:

AT2 Donald W. Barber

AO2 Warren E. Caron

AT3 Jack A. Curtis

LTJG James B. Deane

LTJG Francis A. Flood, Jr.

AT1 William F. Haskins

AO3 William M. Humbert

LCDR Milton Hutchinson

AD1 Harold E. Lounsbury

AT1 Albert P. Mattin

AT2 Carl E. Messinger

LCDR James W. Ponsford

AE2 Wallace W. Powell

AT3 Donald E. Sprinkle

AT2 Leonard Strykowski

AD3 Lloyd L. Young

The VQ-1 aircraft (BuNo 124362) was lost at night and, despite an intense search and rescue operation, the body of only one of the 16 missing crewmen was recovered by the destroyer USS *Dennis J. Buckley*. The remainder were presumed dead (the PRC would later return the bodies of three crewmen). It was the costliest Naval reconnaissance loss to date. Unfortunately, the secrecy of the mission, combined with the Navy's lack of hard information about what happened to the aircraft, gave rise to rumors among families and the "secret sailors" of the SESP program that some of the missing aircrew were in Chinese captivity. Yet no credible evidence ever came to light to substantiate such rumors.



P4M-1Q of VQ-1

Less than a decade into its existence, the Navy's secret national reconnaissance program had delivered a great deal of badly needed intelligence on the Communist bloc, but at a steep cost. Six airframes and 46 lives had been lost to shootdowns or mission-related accidents, but the program would continue due to the pressing need for the sensitive and timely intelligence that only aerial electronic reconnaissance could deliver.

The Middle Years

Although the program would continue, it was evident that more had to be done to protect the crewmen who put their lives on the line by flying alone and exposed in the secret intelligence war with the Communist bloc.

Part of the solution was technical. Older platforms, such as the P4M-1Q, were phased out of squadron service by the early 1960s (the obsolete PB4Y2 left frontline service by the mid-1950s); they were slow and prone to mechanical difficulties. There were two replacements on hand which proved better suited to the role. The EC-121 was the Navy's version of the famous Super Constellation airliner and an ideal platform for long-range fleet reconnaissance. It could carry a large crew and an impressive electronic array. Although unarmed, the EC-121 was both faster and more reliable than the aircraft it replaced.

The Navy's other new reconnaissance aircraft was the A3D-1Q Skywarrior, the largest airframe ever to fly off aircraft carriers. Designed at the beginning of the Cold War as a nuclear bomber, the twin-jet-engined Skywarrior found its niche as a reconnaissance platform. Entering fleet service in 1956 and redesignated the EA-3B in 1960, the ungainly Skywarrior – known to its crews as the “Whale” – compensated for its small payload with high speed. Based on the losses of the 1950s, it was evident to the Navy that speed could get a reconnaissance plane out of danger.

Moreover, as the Navy's sole carrier-based national reconnaissance aircraft, the EA-3B could be deployed anywhere across the world's oceans, not needing land airbases. This gave the “Whale” exceptional operational flexibility that kept it in high demand to the end of the Cold War.

Fortunately for the “secret sailors” of the aerial reconnaissance program (the term SESP fell from use by the 1960s), both the Soviet Union and Communist China curtailed their aggressive confrontations with U.S. aircraft. Unwilling to risk a wider confrontation, Soviet and Chinese fighters would not shoot down another Naval reconnaissance plane. Although their tactics remained aggressive – virtually every veteran of the program earned vivid memories of Soviet or Chinese fighter pilots who would routinely get dangerously close to U.S. aircraft – no longer did they routinely resort to gunfire, not even during the most tense confrontations of the 1960s, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. During this crisis, Naval reconnaissance aircraft performed sterling service against the Soviet Navy and helped enforce the embargo of Soviet missiles from Cuban waters.

The 1960s proved an exceptionally busy decade for the Navy's national reconnaissance program. The crews of VQ-1 and VQ-2 were in high demand tracking multiple crises that put men and aircraft into harm's way from

confronting Castro's Cuba to the Southeast Asian conflict, where Naval cryptologists played a noteworthy role against North Vietnam. At the beginning of the decade, President Kennedy, a proud Navy veteran, exhorted Americans "to pay any price, bear any burden" in defense of freedom, and the sailors of the secret struggle in the ether did so across the globe, every day.

Naval cryptologists and the aviators and specialists who flew with them were especially busy in Northeast Asia. Kim Il Sung's North Korea, which had been at semi-peace with the United States since an armistice was declared in the Korean War during summer 1953 – there was never a formal peace treaty – grew increasingly aggressive as the American war in Vietnam reached its height. North Korea provoked numerous border incidents with U.S. and South Korean forces in 1966-69, with loss of over 300 South Korean and American lives.

Just how confrontational the North Koreans were willing to be became painfully evident on 23 January 1968, when they seized the USS *Pueblo*; a virtually unarmed U.S. intelligence collection vessel. The unprovoked assault occurred in international waters, killing one crewman, FN Duane D. Hodges. The 82 remaining crewmembers were taken prisoner. The captives, many of them NSG cryptologists, endured North Korean captivity and maltreatment for almost a year before being released.

The *Pueblo* incident arrived in the darkest period in the history of the Naval Security Group. Only a half-year before, on 8 June 1967, another Navy intelligence collection ship, the USS *Liberty*, was attacked and nearly sunk by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats in an incident that has never been fully explained. Thirty-three sailors were killed (most were NSG personnel), and nearly all the rest of the crew were wounded.

An equally tragic and inexplicable incident for NSG was soon to come. In the wake of the *Pueblo* seizure, an all-out war with North Korea seemed possible, even likely. The Pentagon, therefore, ordered increased intelligence collection against the Communist hermit kingdom, and the Navy played its part by adding additional reconnaissance flights. On 15 April 1969, one of those flights came to grief in the worst loss in the history of American aerial reconnaissance.

The doomed aircraft was an EC-121 belonging to VQ-1. For the aircrews, reconnaissance flights off the coast of North Korea had become an almost daily occurrence, and a degree of complacency is detectable with hindsight. The Navy had not lost a reconnaissance aircraft to hostile fire in over a decade, and there had not been a serious incident with North Korea in years, not since a VQ-1 P4M-1Q was shot up by two North Korean MiGs in June 1959 and limped back to its home base.

It was therefore especially tragic that the lost EC-121 (BuNo 135749) was flying its last mission with a double crew, 31 men in all, for training purposes. Nine of those aboard were NSG personnel.



EC-121 of VQ-1

The 15 April shootdown remains mysterious. Such aggressive North Korean tactics against U.S. reconnaissance aircraft were very much the exception, and the incident has never been fully explained. The shootdown came suddenly and without warning. The Navy knew little about the action, since there were no survivors to tell the tale, and Pyongyang offered nothing but gloating. All that can be said for certain is that the unarmed EC-121 was attacked suddenly and blasted from the sky by at least one North Korean MiG and downed over the Sea of Japan while performing its reconnaissance mission. The EC-121 was under orders not to come closer than 50 miles to the coast. Extensive search and rescue operations revealed only debris from the lost EC-121. It was impossible that there had been survivors among the 31 crewmen:

ADR2 Louis F. Balderman
AT1 Stephen C. Chartier
AT1 Bernie J. Colgin
ADR1 Ballard F. Connors
*CT3 Gary R. Ducharme
LT John Dzema
LT Dennis B. Gleason
ATN3 Gene K. Graham
AEC Laverne A. Greiner
ATR2 Dennis J. Harrigan
ATN2 Richard H. Kincaid
*SSgt Hugh M. Lynch, USMC
ADRC Marshall H. McNamara
ATR2 Timothy H. McNeil
*CT3 John A. Miller, Jr.
LCDR James H. Overstreet

LT Peter P. Perrottet
*CT1 John H. Potts
AN Richard T. Prindle
*CTC Frederick A. Randall
LTJG Joseph R. Ribar
AT1 James L. Roach
LT John H. Singer
*CTC Richard E. Smith
*CT3 Philip D. Sundby
AT1 Richard E. Sweeney, Jr.
LTJG Robert J. Sykora
*LT Robert F. Taylor
*CT2 Stephen J. Tesmer
LTJG Norman E. Wilkerson
ATN3 David M. Willis

In the aftermath of the April 1969 tragedy, the Navy would adopt new procedures to provide its unarmed reconnaissance aircraft with a higher degree of protection from the fleet and Naval aviation. In addition, the EC-121 would be withdrawn from service with VQ-1 and VQ-2, being replaced by the faster EP-3, which remains in service today.



EB-3B of VQ-1

Two-and-a-half years after the EC-121 shootdown, six NSG sailors would lose their lives in another unexplained aerial incident in Asia. On 12 December 1971, a Navy C-2A transport aircraft en route from the Philippines to South Vietnam was lost for undetermined reasons. No wreckage was ever found, and the cause of the mishap remains unknown. Six of the 10 sailors aboard the C-2A were Naval cryptologists:

*CTO3 James M. Coon

*CTISN John M. Deremigio

*CTO1 Donald E. Dickerson

*CTOSN Stephen H. Elliott

*CTR1 Walter R. Woods, Jr.

*CTM2 Gregory K. Zeller

Cold War Victory

Supporting the fleet and the nation with aerial reconnaissance remained a dangerous business to the end of the Cold War. Although Communist air forces shot down no Naval reconnaissance aircraft after the 1969 EC-121 loss, in-air confrontations were a regular occurrence.

The missions themselves, with their long ranges and heavy payloads, were highly precarious, particularly EA-3B operations off carriers. Flying off aircraft carriers is a hazardous undertaking in ideal conditions – to say nothing of nighttime operations in rough seas, as was often the case. The “Whale,” thanks to its large size, was a difficult aircraft for even an experienced carrier pilot to handle, and mishaps were frequent.



Two EA-3Bs of VQ-2 over Gibraltar

Fortunately, they usually resulted in a damaged EA-3B rather than lost lives, but an accident in the waning days of the Cold War revealed that aerial reconnaissance remained among the most dangerous activities undertaken by the Navy and the Intelligence Community.

On 25 January 1987, *Ranger 12*, an EA-3B (BuNo 144850) belonging to VQ-2, was lost while attempting to land on the USS *Nimitz*. *Ranger 12* was returning from an operational mission in the Mediterranean and crashed off the *Nimitz*'s flight deck. While the crews of other EA-3Bs that crashed off aircraft carrier decks had survived the ordeal, in this case, all seven aircrew were killed:

LT Stephen H. Batchelder
LCDR Ronald R. Callander
AT2 Richard A. Herzing
LT Alan A. Levine

*CTI3 Patrick R. Price
LT James D. Richards
*CTI3 Craig H. Rudolf

Despite this tragic loss, the last of the Navy's Cold War fatalities in the aerial electronic reconnaissance program, the EA-3B would remain in frontline service with VQ-1 and VQ-2 until October 1991, serving with distinction in one last conflict, Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM.

Counting the Cost

The Navy's national reconnaissance program did not disappear with victory in the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet empire. The nation and the fleet still require the sensitive and timely intelligence that only aerial platforms can provide. VQ-1 and VQ-2 remain on duty, as does the Naval Security Group. Most recently, they have served with distinction in the Global War on Terrorism in Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM. Current-day operations, however, like those bravely conducted during the Cold War, remain shrouded in secrecy by necessity.



EA-3B BuNo 144850 "Ranger-12"

That this remains a dangerous business was demonstrated on the world stage in April 2001 when an EP-3E of VQ-1 emergency-landed in China after a PRC fighter collided with the Navy aircraft. The Chinese pilot, conducting overly

aggressive maneuvers to intimidate the U.S. aircrew, collided with the EP-3E and was killed. Luckily, the Navy crew emerged alive, thanks to the bravery and skill of the sailors aboard.

Although aerial reconnaissance remains filled with hazards by its very nature, it is hoped that no more lives will be lost in defense of freedom – though old sailors know this is unlikely to be so. The sacrifices of the Naval aircrews who gave their lives during the Cold War, the 90 brave men remembered in this booklet and at National Vigilance Park, deserve to be remembered by a grateful nation. The missions they flew and lives they lost were shrouded in secrecy for decades. Now, at last, can their story of dedication and sacrifice – for fellow sailors, for the Navy, for the country – be told, celebrated, and commemorated.

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