

Chapter 6 - Germany 1950-1953

WWII had been over for five years and my thoughts of career in the Army were that I would most likely follow the same path as Pop's. All of the Captains and above had served in combat and were appropriately decorated. So it was with Pop. He was commissioned in 1921 and wore the WWI Victory Medal for his ROTC service during the war. It would be twenty years before he was awarded another medal, the American Defense Service Medal (The Yellow Jaundice) for service after mobilization but prior to Pearl Harbor. All of us in the class of '50 were awarded the WWII Victory Medal since the war didn't officially end until the end of 1946. I could see a downgrading of the Army with promotions very slow. There fortunately seemed to be little chance for a war in the future since the world had exhausted itself with WWII.

I chose Field Artillery as a Branch and Germany as my first assignment. The Army had decided that it might be a good idea to send 2nd Lieutenants directly to a unit for initial branch training rather than to their Basic Officers Course. This was an experiment to see if the Basic Course could be eliminated and thus save a few dollars and three months of a Lieutenant's career.

We were graduated on June 6th and I became married to Peg on the 8th. That was the first opportunity to book one of the chapels for thirty minutes. Weddings took place every thirty minutes in all chapels from June 6th through June 8th. The reception halls were likewise booked for a one hour period. Our reception was at Cullum Hall. I had met Peg the summer of '48 at Virginia Beach. Our class was having joint landing maneuvers with the Midshipmen from Annapolis at Little Creek, Virginia. We had the weekend off and we all descended on Virginia Beach. Peg and a girlfriend had driven from Bridgeport, Connecticut to spend a week in the sun. They had a transatlantic portable radio with them as they lounged on an oversized beach towel. A classmate and I moved in, attracted by the New England pulchritude and the portable radio. Peg and I swapped addresses and we became pen pals. Christmas of 1949 I gave her a miniature of my class ring and we became engaged.

We had 30 days of graduation leave. The honeymoon consisted of driving around New England in my new 1950 Ford and then to Dallas where Pop was assigned as the Division Engineer of the South West Division. On June 26th the Korean War broke out and my thoughts of a serving in a peacetime Army came to an end. Those in my class who were assigned to Japan and Korea had their leave cut short and were shipped to their units, many directly into combat. Those of us who had Stateside and European assignments completed our leave and then reported for duty. I reported to New York for shipment to Germany.

We flew to Frankfurt and spent the next few days behind what appeared to be a barbed wire compound. Frankfurt was a mess with bombed out buildings everywhere. The streets were clear, utilities were working, railroads were moving but the major reconstruction had not really started. Frankfurt was in good shape compared to Darmstadt and Munich. After a couple of days I received my assignment to the 519th Field Artillery Battalion in Sonthofen in southern Bavaria. There were two major units in Germany at the time, the 1st Infantry Division and the Constabulary. The Constab was organized after the war as an occupation force and was essentially a light armored division. It was a spic and span outfit with highly polished helmets and yellow scarves worn around the neck. No neckties were required.

We left on a train heading south to our first home. As the train rolled through the German countryside we were able to see the immense damage in nearly every town. Also, we could see the intense use of the land. Every patch of farm land was under cultivation and all of the fields were being tended by women. The men were trying to bring in money and the women were bringing in the food.

We arrived in Sonthofen, I called the phone number that was in my orders and we were picked up by the Battalion Adjutant who took us up to the kaserne. The Sonthofen Kaserne had been the Hitler Youth School and was now the home of the 36th FA Group and the 519th FA Battalion. After being assigned to a Battery we were driven about 20 miles south to Oberstdorf, where all of the family housing was located. The next day we were given the keys to several chalets located above the city in an area called Plattenbitchel. These chalets were all owned by the Nazis who had run the Hitler Youth School in Sonthofen. We picked out a beautiful three bedroom home just below one of Germany's highest mountains, the Nablehorn. It was fully furnished to include sheets, pillows, pictures and a maid. I thought of my father's first home in an unfurnished company mess hall at Fort Knox. If Army life was going to be anything like the way it was starting I had made the right choice.

Oberstdorf was at the very southwest tip of Germany, only two miles from the Austrian border. The area had been untouched by the war. The countryside is incredibly beautiful. There was a path that passed our house that let up to the mountain pastures. In the late fall all of the cows were herded down the mountain to their winter quarters. They were brightly decorated and had large bells on their necks which gonged with every step. This procession of musical cows lasted for almost an hour. On the outskirts of Oberstdorf there was a particularly attractive village named Schonblick with an umlaut over the "o". I was taken by the view as well as the name, "Beautiful view". Several years later I was sitting with Mother on the porch of her beach house in Delaware and she was talking about how beautiful it was looking over the dunes to the beach and ocean. She said that she needed to name the cottage and asked if I had a suggestion. I told her about the little village in Bavaria named "Schonblick". She had me write it down for her but I don't think she ever got around to naming the cottage. In 2005 we bought a condo in Steamboat Springs and named it "Schonblick" for the view was similar to the one in Bavaria. There is a carving of the view with its name hanging over the door that Tom Shea did for me.

The next morning I reported to the C Battery Commander, Captain Johnny Golden. He let me know that I was the first officer to arrive in the Battalion in about six months. I made the third officer in the Battery, the other being a senior 1st Lieutenant. I was assigned as the Assistant Executive Officer, the Mess Officer, the Supply Officer and the Maintenance Officer. I collected all of the Field Manuals I could find to figure out what I was supposed to do. All of this stuff was taught in the Branch Basic Officers Course that we missed.

One day I was sitting in my office reading a manual and Captain Golden called me into his office and asked what the firing battery was doing. I pulled out the training schedule and said "They are having maintenance". He said "Do you realize that you should be out there supervising the maintenance?" I said that I did now, saluted and went out to where the guns were. The 519th was a truck drawn 155mm howitzer unit. I had never seen one up close before reporting to the Battalion. I spotted the senior NCO, Master Sergeant Konk, who had never returned to the States after the war, had a German girlfriend and several children. A soldier couldn't marry a German at that time. Sgt Konk was slim, trim and had a nose like W. C. Fields, big and red. I sided up to Sgt. Konk and asked

“What are they doing at the fifth gun.” He looked down at me rather disdainfully and said “do you mean number 5 piece, Lieutenant?” I said “Yes, number 5 piece.” He said “They are cleaning the equilibrator rods, Lieutenant.” I asked “What are they cleaning off the equilibrator rods, Sgt. Konk?” He said “They are cleaning Cosmoline off the equilibrator rods, Lieutenant.” I said “Why is there Cosmoline on the equilibrator rods, Sgt. Konk?” He said “Number 5 piece just returned from Ordinance yesterday and it had Cosmoline on the equilibrator rods, Lieutenant.” I learned in this five minute exchange that senior NCOs by using one’s rank could avoid using the term “Sir” when dealing with a new 2nd Lieutenant. After one earned the respect of the troops “Sir” was used.

I took my new found information about equilibrator rods down to the number 2 piece, looked it over and found some Cosmoline on the equilibrator rods and promptly called it to the attention of the Sgt. in charge. He responded that “We were just getting to it, Lieutenant.” I went back to Sgt. Konk and asked “What are they doing on the number 4 piece?” He said “They are cleaning the firing vent, Lieutenant.” I asked what are they cleaning out of the firing vent, Sgt. Konk?” and he replied anything that happens to get into it, Lieutenant?” So I went to number 6 piece. This went on until I learned “the maintenance of the piece.” It took about a year until I was referred to as “Sir.”

The same thing went on in the Mess Hall, the Supply Room and the Motor Pool. I have never felt so bewildered as in my first three months with the 519th. My Battery Commander knew exactly what was going on and helped me without my knowing. Two weeks after I joined the battery we went to the local firing range for service practice. As I was riding in my jeep I got a call on the radio to move the battery into coordinates ..., lay the battery at azimuth...and register it on coordinates...I had never seen these guns fire much less being responsible for where they fire. I pulled out my field manual, set up the aiming circle (I knew how to do this in MT&G at West Point), laid the battery and started firing registration rounds. The only comforting thing was that the range was on the upslope of a mountain and you could actually follow the rounds to impact. All of them fell within the range perimeter. I talked about this experience with the Battery Commander a couple of years later and he said he knew what was going on. He had people watching me. These were gut wrenching times for this 2nd Lt. I was lucky compared to those classmates who went directly to Korea. They had to learn under fire. Thirty nine of them were killed in Korea including two of my roommates. Another was severely wounded.

There was a sort of a black market that operated just below the surface. The scarcity of cigarettes and coffee in the German community was the demand. A carton of cigarettes and a pound of coffee sold for a dollar in the military commissaries. They were worth ten times that amount on the German economy. These were rationed items but the amounts authorized were well beyond what an individual would reasonably consume. The excess was bartered for things in the German economy. General Lucius Clay was one of the first CINCS in Germany after the war and his wife established a “Barter Mart” in Frankfurt where Americans could bring in items that were in excess of their needs, such as cigarettes and coffee, and receive credits that could be used to purchase items that Germans would bring in to sell. Everyone seemed to be happy with the arrangement. One thing that was frowned upon was to sell rationed items for cash. I obtained Schnipper from a German farmer for a pound of coffee. He was so small that I carried him home in the pocket of my field jacket.

I soon found out that the Army wasn’t all fun and games. We had a nice house when we could get home. There were Battery Alerts, Battalion Alerts, Group Alerts and 7th Army Alerts. These usually started with a phone call about 4 AM and required the unit to be packed and on the road in two

hours. There was at least one alert per week. In addition there were spring and fall maneuvers and two weeks every quarter at one of the training areas for firing practice.

There were only two 155mm howitzer Battalions in Germany at the time, one in the 1st Infantry Division and the 519th. Our alert position was in the "Fulda Gap" which was east of Frankfurt. I took us a 20 hour forced march to get there. Our battalion had been positioned in Sonthofen for occupation purposes, not for war fighting. We all knew that the Korean War was only a feint for the Russians and that the real war was coming through East Germany. The order came down from 7th Army that we were to move east of Darmstadt to Babenhausen. The Kaserne at Babenhausen was occupied by DPs, displaced persons from the war. They were relocated and the kaserne underwent a major renovation. There was no housing in the area so the families were located to the west of Frankfurt, about an hour's drive to Babenhausen. Because we were so far from the kaserne only fifty percent of those with families could go home each day and weekend. This with all of the alerts, maneuvers and trips to the training areas meant we had even less time at home. Barbara was born in Frankfurt in August of 1951. Peg went into labor on one of the days that I was required to stay in the Kaserne so a neighbor drove her to the 97th General Hospital where she delivered a few hours later. The next day was my turn to go home so I drove directly to the hospital to meet my daughter. Still, we in Europe were a lot better off than those in Korea.

Six months prior to my rotation back to the States the Army found that it had a substantial shortage of Company Grade Engineer Officers and encouraged officers in other branches to submit a request for transfer. I did, was accepted and reported to the Engineer School at Fort Belvoir on my return to the States. Again, I was following in the footsteps of my father in that he also transferred from the Field Artillery to the Corps of Engineers.