

Jon Ritchey ~ 447th Signal Battalion ~ March 1964 to March 1967

After four years at Michigan State University, I was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U. S. Army. My wife had to remain there to finish her student teaching phase. But in January, I had to report to Fort Gordon, Georgia for Basic Signal Officers Basic Training. While there, I received my initial assignment, which ordinarily would have been a "plum" assignment ... to the Army Pictorial Center in New York City. But the Army, if I extended my two-year active duty obligation to three years, would send me to either Germany or Italy. I chose Germany, and by the end of April, I was flying to Europe. After a brief stop at my higher headquarters in Mannheim, 22nd Signal Group, I was on a train to Hilden, in northern Germany. My new unit was Headquarters, 447th Signal Battalion, a newly reactivated communications unit. All I knew was that our Battalion HQ was located on a British Army post. Arriving on a Sunday afternoon, I eventually met my new Commanding Officer, Ron Maglieri, another new 2nd Lt. like me! That shows you how new the unit was. My duty assignment was Battalion Adjutant ... I didn't even know what an Adjutant did! Basically, it was like an Army Chief Administrative Officer, and I had an experienced Chief Warrant Officer, John Bailey, who knew the "ropes" as my assistant.

My living quarters was a room in the British Officers Mess of the First Battalion of the Lancashire Regiment, a British Army Infantry unit, whose history went back to the Napoleonic Wars with France. We quickly adopted the British officers' time schedule and quit each afternoon at four, so we could make "tea time" at the mess. For us few Americans, that was either a beer served in a hundred year old silver goblet, or a Bloody Mary, along with a soft boiled egg, also in a silver egg holder. That lasted until Major Underwood took over as Battalion Commander, and then we were back to regular work hours.



Not long later, the Lancashire Regiment was reassigned to Swaziland in Africa, a British Protectorate at that time. Our 447th Signal Battalion moved a few miles north to Hubblerath, Germany to another larger Army post, located about ten miles east of Duesseldorf, where we were co-located with a British Artillery unit, also known as the "gunners." One day while walking down the main street of the "kaserne" I heard and then saw a Focke-Wulf Fw-190 (a WW2 fighter) begin a "strafing" run. I later learned that a woman was the pilot. With radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns, they hired her to practice their techniques. The "gunners" were a bit "stuffer" than the Infantry ... not half as much fun.

After a year there, our Battalion Hqs. and Co. B Hqs were moved about eighty miles southwest of Dusseldorf to near the town of Pruem, Germany, in the Eifel Mountains. There, we took over a former U. S. Air Force installation on a mountain top, with the married housing area about 10 miles away, next to the town of about 8,000 ... quite a contrast to the big city. The housing area had four large apartment buildings with eighteen apartments each. Three of the buildings were for enlisted and NCO families, and the fourth was for the officers and their families. In our building, we took part of the basement level and converted it to the Pruem Officers Club. Even with cheap booze, combined with about five slot machines, we had a comfortable place to relax out of uniform.

By this time, I had been reassigned as a Platoon Leader to Company B, commanded by Cpt William Ritchie II. For a very brief moment, our company sergeant was another Richie, but he left when promoted. Periodically, I would drive over to the Netherlands, Belgium and northern Germany to visit our communication sites, usually "manned" by eight to ten EMs and a NCO site chief. Each site was co-located with either an American

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Air Force unit or Army Artillery unit, maintaining several communication networks, using Collins single-sideband radios. These sites were on "host-nation" bases, and I got to drive my own car, staying "on the economy" which meant at a local gasthaus or hotel, and, on one visit, at a renovated hill-top castle. Good food ... great beer ... clean room.

After being at the company level, I was moved back to the Battalion level. My Battalion commander, LTC Lang called me into his office, and told me to report to the Pirmasens Communications Center, where as Battalion Asst. S-4 Officer, I was to "sign" for two AN/TSC-18 Communication Systems. For some unexplained reasons (that's just the way the Army works), our unit was to inventory and be accountable for these, while the Pirmasens Comm Center had the operational responsibility to see if they worked. Ultimately, they were under the control of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. As Col Lang told me, it would be like signing for "two-each- battleships." When operational, each of these systems could "blast" their signals to the other side of the earth! Each AN/TSC-18 consisted of one 40 KW transmitter in a semi-trailer, and three other vans, mounted on 5-ton trucks. Eventually, some other signal unit took over responsibility of the two "giant radios," thank goodness.

Some of my other duties included Headquarters Detachment Commander, Battalion Chemical-Biological- Radiological Officer, and Explosive Ordnance Reconnaissance Officer, besides others. In that last role, one Sunday morning, I was called by the Duty Officer to come up to the post and identify an old hand grenade that a GI had found out in the woods. Our mountain-top post near Pruem, was located right in the midst of the Germans' "Siegfried Line," which, in the Second World War, was a line of defensive forts and tank traps. After the war, the "pillboxes" for artillery and machine guns were blown up, but some of the structures went



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down three and four floors deep. The "dragon's teeth" tank traps were also present in the area. These were designed to tear off the tank treads, leaving them vulnerable. We had posted these areas "off-limits" but they still were tempting targets for bored enlisted men. There were still mines that were hidden in the woods as well, but the GIs were after souvenirs like helmets, etc. But this time, a GI, from the "Mash" medical unit also stationed with us, had found an American Mark II hand grenade and had it in a pocket of his fatigues, hanging from his bunk. Someone "ratted" him out, and had taken it to the Duty Officer. I ID'd it and found that it had no pin or handle but that the "striker" was "hung." This is the device that strikes the top and starts the chain reaction to explode the grenade. I left it out in the field where it had been placed, and called the EOD team out of Mannheim, Germany, about three hours away. They got there that afternoon, sandbagged it, and placed a plastic explosive next to it, and then "blew it up!" The NCO in charge of the team told me that it was still a "live" grenade, even years after the war. If it had fallen off the bunk in the barracks and dislodged the dirt holding the striker, it could have killed a number of soldiers. I could still imagine that American GI, attacking that bunker in WW2, throwing that same grenade and then cussing when it hadn't exploded.

Every year at Christmas, a few of the enlisted men would volunteer to cut Christmas trees in the forest, but we had to be led in, single-file, to the tree-cutting area by the local German "forestermeister," since there were still mine fields from the war. He told me that he would still occasionally find the remains of a deer that had stepped in the wrong spot. Even his longhaired dachshund was trained to follow behind him single-file.

At this point, I had been promoted to Captain . Every year or so, an officer fills out a form (today, probably electronically) and submits his or her preferences as to their next duty assignment,



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so nearing the end of my three years in Germany, I had to decide what to do. I had completed my active duty obligation, but I didn't want to return to the USA without finding a job first. I decided to try at least one more year and, with Viet Nam getting "hot and heavy," I expected to be sent there after Germany. I put in for the 200th Signal Company, doing photographic duties in 'Nam, but was pleasantly surprised to be assigned to the U. S. Army Aviation School at Fort Rucker, Alabama, as Chief of the Television Production Branch, producing educational videos for use in the School.



