Detachment 3, 7th Weather Squadron, Heidelberg Army Airfield, Germany, 1961-1964

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I flew to Germany from McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, arriving at Rhein-Main Air Base in Frankfurt in December 1961. This was my first real assignment in the US Air Force. Up to now I had been in training, so I didn't know what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised when, upon arriving at Rhein-Main AB, my name was called and I was greeted by a friendly Technical Sergeant (TSgt) by the name of John Lahey who introduced himself as the Chief Observer of Detachment 3, 7th Weather Squadron, my new duty station. I was flabbergasted that I was being personally picked up by my immediate boss. In addition, he had come in an Army staff car with driver and we sat in the back seat and chatted on the one hour drive to Heidelberg.

Next I met the Detachment Commander, Major Edward Badger, which was just as surprising as meeting the Chief Observer, because when I reported to him and smartly saluted while standing at attention in front of his desk, he said something like "...we don't believe in all that protocol around here" and reached out to shake my hand. A few weeks later he co-signed a loan for a couple of hundred dollars for me when I wanted to buy a 1955 VW Beetle from the Chief Forecaster who was being reassigned. The bank required a co-signer and Major Badger unhesitatingly agreed to go to the bank with me when asked by the major who sold the car to me.

The Heidelberg Army Airfield (AAF) was located about 2 miles outside the city of Heidelberg on the eastern edge of the Rhein Valley. To the east of the airfield were hills, about two miles distant. But, the weather was so dreary with low clouds and rain that it was not until about a week later when the weather improved that I realized that the hills were there.

The weather station was the focal point of our lives. We worked there, received our mail and our pay there, and when we were off duty and had nothing better to do we went there to read the paper and to chat with our comrades who were on duty. The detachment consisted of about 15 to 20 people. Besides the Commander, Major Badger, there was a Chief Forecaster, Major Thompson, three or four other officers (lieutenants and captains) who were forecasters, three or four Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs), also forecasters, and then there were ten to twelve observers (lower ranking enlisted) under TSgt Lahey, the Chief Observer.

The weather station operated 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. We were part of a worldwide network of observing and forecasting stations which existed primarily for aviation safety purposes. The shifts the observers worked consisted of two mid shifts (midnight to 0800), two day shifts (0800 to 1600) and two swing shifts (1600 to midnight). When the weather was good, the observer on duty had little to do except to keep an eye on the weather and to record and transmit an observation once per hour. During the day and night shifts another observer was on duty to plot maps and to help with the "tearing and filing."[1] During peak flying activity a third observer assisted the forecasters by plotting a number of the latest weather reports on a map behind Plexiglas on the wall. If the weather became really bad, especially if it was changing rapidly from one condition to another, such as a series of thunderstorms with intermittent clearing, or snow showers off and on, any of us who were off duty and hanging around the barracks

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[1]. Tearing and filing entailed removing incoming weather observations, forecasts and other weather-related bulletins from the teletype machines and maps from the fax machine and posting them in the forecast section in a prescribed order.

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would go to the weather station and help the people on duty.[2]
The weather station was just a few steps from the building in which we lived, making it convenient to get to work. Some married men lived in Army housing or rented apartments in town ("on the economy" as it was called). The drawback to living on the airfield was that when we worked a night shift, sleeping during the day was difficult because of the constant aircraft noise. Sometimes helicopters would hover at the level of our windows on the first floor for what seemed like hours. In addition to airplanes and helicopters landing and taking off, mechanics were testing engines, refueling airplanes, etc., making it hard to sleep. But we were young and resilient. Some time after I arrived, heavy curtains were installed to dampen some of the noise and to darken the room for sleeping during the day.

During holidays, if possible, the schedule would be arranged according to what kind of holiday it was. On Christmas single people would man the weather station, if possible, to let the married members celebrate with their families. On New Years the single people would be off, if possible, so they could celebrate. On holidays, the single people not on duty usually were invited to the various married members' houses for dinner. There seldom was an occasion when anyone had to sit around the barracks during a holiday. In addition, someone usually brought leftovers, desserts or especially prepared plates of the holiday dinner to the weather station for those (especially the singles) who could not partake of an invitation.

There were frequent invitations to the quarters of the married people. Besides holiday dinners there were parties on various occasions. However, there were still many times that we single airmen were left to our own devices and so we went downtown frequently, mostly to the bars frequented by American soldiers. We also went to eat in various restaurants, but mostly we went to the "GI bars" (watering holes frequented by American soldiers). An occasional movie or a short sightseeing trip to some castle or cathedral were about the extent of our cultural experience. The pictures taken in front of a cathedral or other auspicious building always made great items to send home to make the folks back home feel good.[3]

One of the first things I was told was that there were two rules that were irritants. These rules had been imposed on all US Army units in Germany by the Commanding General, US Army, Europe. One rule was that anyone leaving an Army post in civilian clothes had to wear a tie and a sports coat or a suit. The reason for this rule apparently was the general's displeasure with the American soldiers' appearance when in civilian clothes.[4] Although the general could dictate what to wear, he couldn't dictate good taste. Therefore, all kinds of hideous combinations could be seen that met the basic criteria of coat and tie. Later on the requirement to wear a tie was dropped.

The other rule was that there was a curfew between midnight and 6 A. M. The reason for this was readiness. The Berlin wall had been erected in that year, leading to the Berlin crisis, which put US forces in Germany on a continued state of alert. The general wanted to have all his troops within easy recall (with a good night's sleep).

The US Air Forces, Europe, did not have either of these rules. But, since we were at an Army installation, supporting the Army, our squadron commander was eager to show that we could be as well-dressed and as ready as the Army was, therefore he imposed both rules on the members of his squadron. The Military Police (MP) would enforce both rules rigorously as some members of our detachment found out. We resented the curfew because it seemed that when we were downtown, just as the atmosphere was getting

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[2]. For aviation purposes, certain weather thresholds have been established which, when crossed either up (improving) or down (deteriorating), require a weather observation to be taken, recorded and transmitted long-line (teletype in those days) and/or locally (to the control tower and other airfield operations), making for rather hectic activity at times.

[3]. One time three of us went skiing at Garmisch, although none of us could ski.

[4]. At that time Germans dressed a lot more formal when going to public places, t-shirts and jeans were virtually unknown.

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good we had to leave because midnight was approaching.[5]

The MPs patrolled the well-known GI bars regularly, appearing in pairs two to three times during the evening. Maybe coincidentally, maybe not, one MP was big and the other was smaller. The big one usually stood by the door so that no one could escape while the smaller one would go from table to table and demand to see "pass and ID." We surmised that he could read. When they were satisfied that all was in order they would leave. If something wasn't in order, as insignificant as having taken one's sports coat off because one got warm while dancing, the MPs had a rehearsed text they would recite: "You will not drink the rest of your beer, you will wait outside by the jeep." So, the accused would have to go outside (sometimes in the cold) while the MPs finished making their round in the bar. Fleeing was useless, because the little MP held the pass and ID cards of the accused. One might get off with a verbal reprimand to keep his coat on at all times. Others could be less lucky and would have to take a ride to the MP station in an open jeep and then be picked up by someone from their unit.

The single and unaccompanied[6] men lived in a fairly large room in the main building on the airfield. In that room lived eight to ten men. The ranks ranged from Airman Third Class (A3C), such as I was, to Senior Master Sergeant (SMSgt). I didn't know any better because I had just come from tech school, but others who had had previous assignments to Air Force bases complained about the poor living conditions. At an Air Force base the senior ranks had their own rooms. Here they were crammed in with the lower ranks. But little by little the higher ranking people moved out because they were married and opted to bring their families over to Germany at their own expense and finally the ban on dependent travel was lifted.

Life in the barracks room at the Heidelberg Army Airfield was as much devoid of any privacy as it had been during tech school. We had metal Army wall lockers which we arranged so that the open bay was at least divided into sections. There was always someone trying to sleep after a midnight shift while others who were off duty tried to lead a normal life such as talking, playing cards, playing records or listening to the radio. After all, this was our home, we had nowhere else to go. This led to some friction, but all in all, we got along. These conditions notwithstanding, we were one big family of blue (Air Force) living in a sea of green (Army). This helped to weld us together as a team.

Next to the airfield there was a group of farm houses, arranged in a sort of rectangle. Prominently situated in the middle of this quadrangle was a large manure pile. One of the houses contained a "Gasthaus," the German version of an inn or restaurant, although restaurant is too flattering a term for the place that everyone referred to as "Mutti's." Some wicked tongues called it the "Horsesh** Hacienda" because of the manure pile.

Mutti, of course is German for Mom and this Gasthaus derived its name from the elderly lady (maybe 80 years old) who ran it. The Gasthaus consisted of two rooms, the main room and a back room where card players would gather. The tables were without tablecloths and scrubbed to the grain. The chairs were equally as spartan. Suspended from the ceiling hung an immense number of model airplanes, all US Air Force or US Army aircraft, built and donated for decoration by US Army soldiers who had been stationed at the airfield and who had frequented the place since 1945. On the wall hung a picture of Frau Schmitt's (her real name, Mutti was a nickname assigned her by American soldiers) deceased husband on a white horse with someone's Army uniform coat on. The gentleman in the picture was also advanced in age.

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[5]. As we experienced later, the curfew was actually a blessing when it was in effect, because after the curfew was lifted and we could spend all night out in the bars, the good night's sleep was missing and we often went on a day shift sleepy and hung over.

[6]. At the time there was a ban on bringing families to Germany due to the Cold War situation; therefore, many married men came unaccompanied, while others brought their families over at their own expense.

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The beer and Schnaps were cheap, the sausages that Mutti would heat up were hardy, but other than that, there wasn't much to be said for Mutti's. Frau Schmitt ruled with an iron hand. She liked her soldiers, but she didn't like it when they brought women into her establishment, especially if she deemed them to be of dubious character. She would let them know in no uncertain terms that they were not welcome. We soldiers and airmen, on the other hand were welcome. She would keep tabs of what each of us owed with chalk on a slate. If at the end of the evening someone couldn't pay his tab (which happened frequently), she would enter the sum in a book and would wait for payment until the next payday. Some of my barracks mates would go to Mutti's for a couple of cheap drinks to "get into the mood" before going downtown where the real action was.

Many soldiers celebrated their promotions at Mutti's by providing free beer to anyone working at the airfield. Some of the soldiers were so familiar with the place that they were called upon to tap a new barrel of beer for Frau Schmitt because she didn't have the strength to do it herself. In fact, the airfield commander declared Mutti's as part of the airfield so that those of us stationed at the airfield could go there in our work uniforms (fatigues), which were not allowed to be worn when going downtown.

The weather station on the Heidelberg Army Airfield was housed in a long, low building. About half the building was occupied by the weather station, the other half by the Army Flight Operations Facility (AFOF), a flight clearing and following[7] office which handled all the US Army flights in Europe. As part of their preflight procedure, US Army pilots had to call AFOF to file a flight plan and get an AFOF clearing officer's permission to make the flight. When the flight was completed they had to call back and report their arrival to AFOF. There essentially were two rooms where this operation took place, a small room were the clearance officer, his assistants and a weather forecaster sat, and a large room where flight plans were received and tracked.

Flight plans were received over the telephone by a number of civilian employees who had headsets on and who typed the flight information unto strips of paper. These people were called "air traffic control communicators" and they sat around a circular table on top of which there was a turntable like a large "lazy Susan." The strips of paper with the flight information were fastened unto clips on this lazy Susan, which was then rotated to a section of the table where another group sat who took these strips of paper and posted them on boards on the wall. These people were called "flight followers." When a flight was completed, the air traffic control communicators would receive another phone call closing out the flight; this information they then passed on to the flight followers with a strip of paper via the lazy Susan. If a flight was not reported as completed in the estimated flight time, the flight followers would initiate action to find out what happened to the flight. Most of the time it was simply a delay in reporting the arrival.

Other than the US Army Clearance Officers and a few Army supervisors, the people working in AFOF were German civilians (one Scot was among them one time). Since all air traffic communication was and is carried on in English, they all spoke English very well. Furthermore, many of the civilians were young women, mostly single. They worked shifts similar to ours, 24 hours per day and 365 days per year. On many a night shift when the weather was good, the observer(s) and forecaster(s) on duty would spend as much time as possible, without neglecting their duties, in the AFOF section of the building conversing with the young ladies.

Several of the young ladies had nicknames given to them by the guys in the weather station, usually based on their looks. There was "Monica Red," because she had red hair, "Monica Blond," because she had blond hair, and "Bouncy" because of her large bosom. Also there was the young lady everyone called the

[7]. "Flight following" entails tracking a flight from takeoff to landing.

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"Swimmer" because it was known that she swam competitively and had won several titles. The Swimmer rode a heavy motor scooter. When she drove up, someone would yell: "The Swimmer is coming" and everyone would rush to the windows of the weather station to watch her dismount the motor scooter. If she was leaving, someone would yell: "The Swimmer is leaving" and everyone of us would rush to the windows to watch the Swimmer get on her motor scooter and drive off. She always seemed to be in a hurry, especially when arriving for work, because she was always on the verge of being late for her shift. Therefore she drove accordingly - fast. Some lucky guys got rides on the motor scooter with her, but I was not one of them initially. In late spring of 1964 I got to know the Swimmer better and we were married in November 1964 a few weeks before going to my next assignment.