Soldiers prepare a howitzer for firing at Wildflecken Training Area, Germany, in February 1965

The Cold War Was Just That

By Brig. Gen. Richard Allen
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I had been cold many times before; after all, I spent two winters in northern Illinois while growing up. There, it would be so cold when I walked to the school bus, the mucus dribbling from my nose would freeze, only to thaw as I breathed out. But nothing prepared me for the winters in Germany, where I seldom broke a sweat even in the so-called summer.

The Army sent me "over there" in December 1963 on an old World War II troop ship—the U.S. Naval Ship General Simon B. Buckner, affectionately called "the Bouncing Buckner" by all who made the transit. The moniker was a perfect fit, especially when crossing the cold, rough North Atlantic in the dead of winter. It was so rough and cold that a day out of New York, we were not allowed outside, and, for part of the trip, we were confined to our staterooms except during mealtimes.

The Buckner made one stop before disgorging us in Bremerhaven, Germany — at Southampton, England. Officers were allowed to go ashore for a few hours, so several of us second lieutenants scrambled down the gangplank to see the town. Two things are etched in my memory about Southampton — the bitter cold wind and the song *Twist and Shout*.

One of our number led us to a department store where he wanted to buy a record to send to his sister. He said it was by a new group called the Beatles, and we listened to the record in a booth to see if we liked it before he put down cash.

We thought it was pretty good, so he sent it. After a nondescript English dinner, I was glad to scamper back up the gangplank to my warm room.

Wartime Mission

We docked at Bremerhaven late the next day, which was overcast and cold. Upon disembarking around

midnight, officers were assigned sleeper cars on a nonstop train to Frankfurt, Germany. After changing to a "local" that picked up and dropped off children going to school, I was met midmorning in Budingen by 2nd Lt. Jack Nelson, one of the officers of the artillery battery to which I was assigned. He took me to meet the battery commander, then to battalion headquarters to meet our battalion commander.

As I waited for the colonel to complete his rounds, the battalion executive officer cautioned me that there would be no heat in the commanding officer's office — he wore insulated underwear to fight off the cold outside and did not want to get too hot inside. I thought he must be eccentric, but it turned out not to be the case — he was just practical.

The commanding officer told me about the battalion's wartime mission of using tactical nuclear warheads to slow, not stop, a Russian attack through the Fulda Gap and how we trained to preform that mission. He also told me his standards and what he expected from his officers, a sobering yet typical briefing for newcomers.

As I was about to leave, he told me to take advantage of my 18-month stay in Germany, but I pointed out that as a Regular Army officer, I would be there for three years. "Oh," he said, "then you will be able to see a lot of Germany." Little did I realize I would see much of Germany from an open jeep with snow blowing in my face.

Nelson then took me to the battery's supply room where I was issued such field equipment as was available (helmet, sleeping bag, pistol belt, etc.), but not essentials such as long underwear and gloves.

Then-1st Lt. Richard Allen, left, perches on the fender of a jeep in an assembly area in Germany in February 1965

Moving Out

At 4 a.m. the next day as I lay asleep in my snug, warm bed, a blast from an alarm bell just outside my door echoed through my brain and the rest of the Bachelor Officer Quarters. I had been warned that this

might happen. Once a month, the Army in Europe practiced the start of World War III with an unannounced "readiness test." Units were expected to assemble, count noses, load equipment, secure ammunition (but not the nukes) and move to a secluded assembly area and prepare to move out to wartime defensive positions, all within two hours.

Within minutes, Nelson stuck his head in my door and told me to hurry and to keep my pajamas on, since I had no long johns. Through the open door, I could hear the sound of boots running down the hall, and my across-the-hall neighbor was jumping up and down on his bed saying, "I don't want to go!" But he did. It was just last night's beer talking, and he reluctantly acquiesced. Nelson reappeared in a few minutes. I put on my steel helmet, grabbed my duffel bag and trotted after him into the cold German night.

The Bachelor Officer Quarters were about a half-mile from the battery area, and by the time we got there, Nelson's driver had retrieved his jeep from the motor pool and parked it near the front door. There, it was engulfed by the organized confusion of a battalion "loading out." We threw our gear in the jeep's back seat and dashed into the building — a former German army barracks that housed most of the battalion — only to be met by our battery commander, who was headed to the assembly area. He told Nelson to get to the ammunition dump to help get the hard-to-start 5-ton ammo trucks moving. I scrambled into the back seat on top of the gear, and as we took off, a blast of cold wind took my breath away. As we approached the ammo dump, Nelson wisely told me to stay in the jeep, since I knew nothing about starting a frozen 5-ton ammo truck in a pitch-dark ammo dump and would just be in the way. I obeyed without argument as he and the driver disappeared into the darkness.

Struggling to Start

As I sat there perched on duffel bags and other assorted equipment, but for the cold that was now penetrating to my bone marrow, I would have been entertained by the blend of shouting, cursing men scurrying here and there, and trucks slowly coming to life but seemingly backfiring with every other turn of the wheels. Suddenly, a figure emerged from the dark wearing two stripes on his sleeve, which I could see from the light of a truck struggling by.

"Get out of that jeep and help get these trucks started," Cpl. Duplantis yelled in his Cajun accent. Before I could say, "Lt. Nelson told me to stay here," the corporal realized his mistake and disappeared back into the night.

After what seemed like a frozen eternity, the last truck, carrying its basic load of 8-inch howitzer shells and the ammo from another truck that had simply refused to be roused on such a cold winter night, noisily rolled by. Nelson hopped back in the jeep, and the driver took off. Then it really got cold. Army jeeps came with a canvas top, but combat units left it off to better see enemy aircraft sneaking up. They also had windshields that folded down, but artillery units at least had the good sense to drive with them up.

Jeeps did not come with heaters, but enterprising motor pool sergeants managed to scrounge these unauthorized luxuries, and they illegally fitted low-cut wooden doors to prevent mud and frozen slush from splashing in.

The piece de resistance was a lap cover fashioned from a waterproof shelter half (a pup tent to civilians) lined with a wool Army blanket attached at the fold of the windshield and wide enough to reach just

under one's armpits.

Little Protection

With the unauthorized heater, the unauthorized lap blanket and the windshield up, a properly clothed driver and front-seat passenger could cruise along at 40 mph in relative comfort — or at least with warm feet. Not so a passenger in the back seat with no heat, no lap blanket, no boot overshoes and no long johns, sitting atop baggage piled so high that the windshield provided no protection from the frigid, gale-force wind. And there I was.

The concept of a wind-chill factor was not in vogue in 1963, but with a temperature of about 20 degrees and a 40 mph wind in my face, the wind chill was below zero. All I knew is that I was very, very cold. Fortunately, the run to the assembly area was only about 20 minutes, so I lived to fight, that is, be cold, another day.

By the time we got to the woods where the assembly area was, the mess sergeant had the field kitchen set up, and a cup of boiling hot coffee made the Army way (grounds dumped into boiling water) brought me back to life. Strong as it was, it was the best coffee I had ever tasted, before or since, maybe just because it was so hot.

By the time I thawed enough for my first of many breakfasts in the field in Germany, dawn was beginning to light the forest and the exercise was called off — one more time, the balloon did not go up (i.e., World War III did not start) — so, rather than a mad dash to our prearranged nuclear firing positions east of Fulda, we transitioned to the half-day Christmas holiday schedule.

I was deathly cold many more times during my 18 months in field artillery in Germany, like the night in Grafenwoehr when I had to remove a glove to manipulate an aiming circle (a device used to direct the orientation of cannons) and lost all feeling in my hand, or the first time I had to sleep on the snow in a tent with no heater.

But like the memory of your first love, the memory of your first seemingly near-death freeze-out is the one that lingers. It makes me shiver today just to think about it

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