

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cold War

The world feared communism and its military state and dictatorships. The United States and the USSR represented both sides of this struggle between freedom and tyranny. In the war against Hitler and his Nazi regime, the Soviet Union and the United States found themselves on the same side of the fence. Towards the end of the war, the Soviet Union advanced on the Nazis from the east while the United States and NATO advanced from the west. The big fear at the time was that these two forces that despised each other would eventually meet in Germany and nobody wanted that to happen.

At the conclusion of World War II in 1945, Germany was divided into two countries with the larger western portion becoming the Federal Republic of Germany and the smaller eastern area became the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The west was then divided into three sectors to be controlled by the occupying countries at the end of the war - the US, Britain and France, while the east would be under the control of the Soviet Union. The former capital city of Berlin was located completely within the GDR and was similarly divided into sections with the eastern half of the city controlled by the Soviets and the western half by the US, Britain and France. Years later, the Soviets would build the Berlin Wall which completely surrounded the NATO side of Berlin, resulting in further isolation from both East Germany and its allies in the west.

Shortly after World War II, the U.S. found itself battling the growth of communism in the Korean War (1950-1954). Immediately after this, communism would get a foothold in Northern Vietnam. In 1961, the United States began significantly expanding its role, becoming actively involved by 1965. An extremely unpopular war back home, troops would eventually get pulled out in 1973. Saigon would fall in 1975 when the communist north completely took control of the country. While the United States had been spending huge amounts of money in these conflicts, the Soviet Union was putting most of its resources into growing its military into the largest in the world.

The United States and its NATO allies maintained a nuclear arsenal larger than that of the Warsaw Pact during the early years of the Cold War. The United States followed a military strategy known as the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine. The basic premise of this doctrine was the belief that if both sides had enough nuclear weapons, neither would use them out of fear of retaliation from the other. A full nuclear war would wipe out both sides, negating any advantage from the use of nuclear weapons. This nuclear dominance had shifted to the Soviets by the end of the Vietnam War, shifting the balance of power and making the threat of a nuclear war a real concern.

The General Defense Plan (GDP) was implemented as part of our Cold War strategy and laid out measures to protect Europe in the event of a Soviet invasion. West Germany would have a significant role in these plans since it bordered communist East Germany and Czechoslovakia. It was determined by military leaders that an area in Western Germany near the town of Fulda had the most likely terrain the Soviets would use to move their huge armored divisions through if they were going to invade. This area was known as the Fulda Gap. The 3rd Armored Division was located at various posts in Western Germany and was tasked with the responsibility of defending this gap until our European allies could get there.

Communism didn't grow through elections but by force. This is why the Soviets put so much money into growing their military during the cold war. World War II was still recent history and the ease that Hitler had been able to conquer Europe was fresh in everyone's mind. A Soviet invasion into Europe and the spread of communism could not be allowed to happen. If this occurred, it would likely lead to World War III, and inevitably a nuclear war.

Since an invasion was more likely to come without warning, the military had an alarm system in place in Europe known simply as "alerts. The alerts were designed to ensure the readiness of all units to deploy rapidly in the event of a Soviet attack. There were two types of alerts I had to be ready for. The first was the muster alert which only required that I return to my unit and sign in within two hours of the alert activation. The second was the full combat readiness alert which gave me four hours from activation to be ready for deployment. I had to have all my gear and weapons loaded in my vehicle and be in my assigned position ready to mobilize. No matter where I went or what I was doing, I had to be ready for this.

Alerts could be given from division, brigade, or battalion level at any time. They were sometimes activated when there was a scheduled deployment, and once everyone was accounted for we would depart. To ensure unit readiness and remind us of the seriousness of our jobs, there were unexpected alerts where I would actually roll out the back gate to a designated location and then return to post that same day. A few times this happened, I remained deployed for a couple days of training before returning to The Rock. Everything was designed to keep soldiers on their toes and remind us of the seriousness of our mission. I rarely knew in advance when one would happen and I certainly never knew when one was activated whether it was a test or the real thing. I did know it was not pleasant if the time requirements for these alerts were not met.

On March 30, 1981, the alert notification was given in the wee hours of the morning. I quickly grabbed all my gear and reported to the motor pool with the rest of the guys. Once everything was fully loaded on the vehicle, I got into my assigned position and waited for the “all clear” to be given. I became more and more nervous as each minute passed. Finally, the order came, but not the one I had expected. Instead, I was told to form up in company formation right there in the motor pool.

Not a good sign.

I stood there nervously while the company commander blistered us for not meeting the deadline. Once he released us, I was chastised again by my platoon sergeant in much more colorful language before being released to begin the process of unpacking.

Later that day, I learned that President Reagan had been shot. The only source I had for major news was AFN which had a radio and TV station. I watched some of the news updates on the TV in the Rec Room. The room was packed with nervous young men anxious for news on the president. The entire unit seemed to have remained in the building that day, closely following the news.

Every room in the barracks had at least one huge stereo system in it. Most weekends there was always a variety of music blasted throughout the barracks as rooms battled to see whose system was the loudest. On this day, every radio was tuned to AFN to hear updates on the attempted assassination. Unlike today, news was more controlled as it was released to the public. It was

even slower when there was only the one source for news leading to all sorts of speculation and rumors traveling through the barracks. The most believable rumor was that the Soviets were behind this. Since we had been groomed to hate the Soviets, there was a lot of chest beating going on and talk of how we were going to kick their communist butts for this. When I went to bed, I still had no news confirming who was behind this assassination attempt so I went to sleep confident that the Soviets had carried out this unfathomable attack on our president.

While I slept that night, the full combat alert order was sounded again. Immediately wide awake, I began the task of loading my vehicle and preparing for combat. The silence throughout the barracks was unsettling. Absent was the small talk, laughter, or any of the usual conversations that normally occurred. I made my way to the motor pool and the silence seemed even quieter-if that's possible. The air was heavy with the fear everyone felt. I just knew deep down that I was being sent to fight the Soviets. Locked and loaded in my armored vehicle, I waited nervously for the order to roll out. I have never been more scared in my life yet, at the same time, I was ready and committed to teaching the Soviets a lesson.

I silently sat there, we all sat there, each of us with our own thoughts and fears going through our heads as we waited. Finally, the order came to stand down. Shocked, I exited my vehicle anxious to learn what had just happened. No information was forthcoming so I began the process of recovery. Eventually, I heard that the alert order had been a mistake. This was supposed to have been a muster alert but had erroneously been passed down the chain of command as a full combat alert. Needless to say there were a lot of unhappy people upon learning this. Unhappy, but relieved. The only consolation was the knowledge that somewhere a lieutenant was getting a good butt chewing for messing this up.

The bottom line here is that this was the reason why the United States maintained a presence in West Germany during the Cold War. As a soldier, I quickly learned this when I arrived there. This is what I trained for every day. The likelihood of a Soviet invasion during the early 1980's was probably at its highest level and I was a part of the first line of defense. I had to be ready.

