Training and Deployment of America's Nuclear Cold Warriors in Asia

Training and Deployment of America's Nuclear Cold Warriors in Asia:

Keepers of Armageddon

By

Steve Rabson

With other veterans of the 137th Ordnance Company in Okinawa, Japan: John Bero, Tom Foshag, Skip Hull, Lou Nunez, Roy Powers, Bob Poznanski, Bill Riley, Stephen Sawyer, Bob Signoretti, Donald Sweet, and Tom Wylie

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For William Manning
Security Platoon
137th Ordnance Company, Okinawa, 1967-68

“A nuclear war cannot be won, and must never be fought.”
—President Ronald Reagan, January 26, 1984

"Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.”
—President John F. Kennedy, September 25, 1961

“The use of [the atomic bombs] at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons ... The lethal possibilities of atomic warfare in the future are frightening. My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children.”
—Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy, Chief of Staff to President Truman, 1950

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PREFACE

This book grew out of memories shared on an email group by veterans of the 137th Ordnance Company, a nuclear weapons storage base in Henoko Village, Okinawa during the 1960's. Members of the group, founded and organized by former First Lieutenant Roy Powers, write about our experiences on duty at the 137th and off-duty in Okinawa. We also describe our entrances into the Army, training, leave times, and re-entry into civilian life. Members' contributions to the book were sent to me by email. It includes many photographs we have exchanged that were taken at the time mostly by Roy, and some taken recently of the base and Henoko. All contributors are identified by name, as are Shiroma "Sam" Yoshimasa, manager of the 137th PX, and Gima "Koko" Yoshiko, owner of a popular restaurant in Henoko. For all others a pseudonym is used. Japanese names are in their customary order, family name first.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first acknowledgment goes to Roy Powers, without whom this book never would have happened. Starting in the early 2000's, he founded and organized the veterans' email group. Since then, members have regularly exchanged memories of the 137th and Okinawa, along with opinions on current events of the day. Roy has contributed photographs from the many he took in 1967-68 on base, in Henoko and elsewhere in northern Okinawa. They show us at work and play as well as scenes in Okinawa of the late 1960's, photos called historic by local journalists.

Gratitude also goes to Rob Oechsle, who was stationed in Okinawa during the 1980's and resides there today, for his research on conditions in Henoko during the time we were there and today. In 2000 he published a book of annotated drawings and photographs from Okinawa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *Aoi me de mita "Dai-Ryukyu"* (Ryukyu Kingdom in the eyes of Western visitors; Nirai-sha Press), and is currently writing a history of photography in Japan.

We also wish to acknowledge Gima "Koko" Yoshiko for describing the history of her popular restaurant in Henoko and conditions in the village during the early 1970's. Shiroma "Sam" Yoshimasa, former manager of the 137th PX, provided information on businesses in Henoko during and after the time we were there, one of which, Ocean Sushi, he now owns and manages with his daughter.

CHAPTER 1

DRAFTED INTO NUCLEAR SOLDIERING

I first learned I was to be a nuclear cold warrior the last week of basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, in early September, 1966. Our platoon sergeant handed me the orders for my next duty station, Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama. I was to train there for the military occupation specialty (MOS) 35-F20, Nuclear Weapons Electronics Specialist. Sergeant Shepherd said he had never seen orders like this before, and referred me to an Army manual where I learned that, after completing a "Missile Electronics" course at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, I would go for further training to the headquarters of the Defense Atomic Support Agency at Sandia Base in New Mexico.

At first I thought my orders might have been a mistake. I had majored in English and minored in music at the University of Michigan, playing jazz piano gigs in the Detroit-Ann Arbor area that helped cover college expenses. After graduation I was working as an advertising copywriter at John Wiley & Sons publishers in New York City when I was drafted. Nothing in my education or job experience had the slightest connection with electronics, let alone nuclear weapons. Two theories occurred to me. Maybe a clerk at Ft. Jackson had accidentally typed "engg" (engineering) instead of "eng" (English) as my college major on one of the countless forms they filled out on us. Or, maybe I had inadvertently scored high on the science and math portions of the seemingly endless series of aptitude tests we all took in basic training.

A few weeks earlier the headlines of the Columbia, South Carolina *Columbia Star* had announced a sharp increase in U.S. troops going to Vietnam. Yet few in our basic training company received orders for places like the Jungle Warfare School at Ft. Polk, Louisiana, or other advanced infantry training units. Of course, those who were assigned such military occupations as clerks or cooks could end up in Vietnam, a possibility that

now seemed less likely for me. Much later I learned that a nuclear-capable missile, the Hawk, was deployed there, but the Johnson administration squelched the Army commander in Vietnam's proposal to use nuclear weapons during the Battle of Khe Sanh in early 1968. Service in Vietnam was also unlikely for others of us who became nuclear cold warriors, though they too faced this possibility when they entered the Army. Like me, Bob Poznanski was much enjoying civilian life after graduation when he was drafted in July, 1966.

> My senior year in high school I turned eighteen and had to register for the draft two months before graduation. I had already applied to Illinois Bell Telephone for a job and, as soon as I got my diploma, they hired me. I was basking in the glory of earning an income on which I could afford an enjoyable life-style. But it was all shattered in July, 1966, when I got the "greeting" letter [order to report for induction from the President of the United States]. This was before I could start school in September and apply for a student deferment. I thought at the time, "Well, o.k., I'll just go and do my duty and get it over with," but it seemed strange to have to prove one's patriotism by being forced into service, and in an undeclared war at that.

Bob Signoretti, who also became a nuclear cold warrior in Okinawa, arranged a temporary reprieve from his draft board after initially receiving his "greeting" letter.

> I was drafted once in 1965 and scheduled for induction in March, but was offered the chance to go to Mexico City and teach hockey. Numerous phone calls were made, and finally the Selective Service office in the Lincoln/Belmont area of Chicago gave me the go-ahead for travel to Mexico, rescinded the draft notice and, since I would also be attending the University of Mexico, gave me a 2S [student] deferment. I lived in Mexico for six months, then returned to Chicago. There I worked at a hockey rink as a paid referee for games played by what we called "hatchet leagues." My brother Jim was drafted in 1966, followed a month later by my brother Don. Of course, the draft board found out that I was back home and not in school, so I became 1A [available for military service] and was drafted a month later.

What my future would be in the Army, something beyond my control, was much on my mind when I left Ft. Jackson following graduation from basic training. Wearing my khaki dress uniform, I showed my travel orders

at the ticket window of the train station in Columbia and received the government-paid ticket back to New York for the first of a two-week leave before my next assignment at Redstone. On the earlier train trip south in July with other newly inducted troops, the African American conductor had announced when we passed Hamlet, North Carolina, “birthplace of John Coltrane,” and Cheraw, South Carolina, “birthplace of Dizzy Gillespie.” This time I slept for most of the trip back north to Penn Station. I had departed the city despondent two months earlier as a newly inducted private headed for basic training. I was leaving behind a job, a girl friend, and the joys of hearing live music by the likes of Coltrane, Gillespie, Cannonball Adderley, Wes Montgomery, and Bill Evans in what turned out to be a peak time in the mid-1960s for modern jazz performances in America. When I returned to New York again two years later, after my discharge in June, 1968, John Coltrane and Wes Montgomery had died as had many of the jazz clubs I'd frequented before, replaced by rock and disco joints.

CHAPTER 2

ON LEAVE

Bob Signoretti recalls, “I went home on leave at Christmas time in 1966 from advanced infantry training at Fort Ord, California.”

There had been an outbreak of spinal meningitis at the base, but I “avoided it” by coming down with pneumonia. They wanted to confine me to the hospital, but allowed me to go home since I was able to walk and talk, though I couldn't quite breathe like a normal human being. I had earlier refused an offer to go to Officers Candidate School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Now the Army told me I was supposed to go to Vietnam when I got back to California. I joined a bunch of us at Fort Ord on an Army-chartered flight to the Midwest from the Salinas airport. When we took off on the ancient plane bound for O’Hare, we could see wonderful displays of Christmas decorations on green lawns below.

It was snowing when I arrived in Chicago which, of course, guaranteed my recovery from pneumonia. I went reluctantly with my girlfriend to her college prom where she was up for queen and wore a formal dress. This was the kind of affair I always tried my best to avoid. I knew I would also have to wear formal attire but didn't own a suit, so I decided to go in my newly issued Army dress uniform. It had green leadership tabs on the epaulets, a national defense ribbon affixed to the jacket, and the blue ropes of the Infantry Corps on my shoulder. (I couldn't find a Congressional Medal of Honor for sale at the PX.)

I was not particularly welcomed in my uniform by the other guests at the Loop College prom in Chicago’s Old Town section until they learned I had been a folk singer drafted at gunpoint. Only one other guest wore a uniform, a guy who promptly called me “sir” every time we passed each other. I did manage to get better while in Chicago, and skated a few times. I met former hockey teammates telling them war stories from my basic and advanced infantry training.

For Bob Poznanski, too, “my two-week leave fortunately came at a time that included Christmas and New Year’s 1966-67.” And he had also been offered an appointment to Officers Candidate School.

> While still in basic training, five in our company were selected for OCS. On January 2nd we reported, as ordered, for AIT (advanced infantry training) preliminary to entering OCS But, in all that time, we were never informed that the OCS commitment required a two-year extension of service which would double our time in the Army to four years. When finally learning of this at the end of AIT, we all turned down the OCS appointment, having no intention of staying in the Army and delaying our return to civilian life. In the meantime, the FBI had shown up at my parents’ home asking questions about me for the security clearance required of officers in the U.S. military.

My strongest emotion back in New York as a soldier on leave in the late summer of 1966 was envy. I felt it especially meeting friends who were still civilians, enjoying the life I had been rudely snatched from two months earlier. I stayed in the small apartment with two rooms and a kitchenette I had shared on West 75th Street with Phil Reimer, a friend from college, during those exciting months in New York. He worked as an assistant program manager for WCBS radio station, and we rented the place from an elderly couple who had moved to Florida years before. We each paid fifty dollars a month in what was then a decidedly seedy neighborhood, but has since drastically gentrified with apartment rents now in the thousands. Phil's chronic asthma, though not an active problem, had disqualified him from the draft.

The first night back in New York it seemed like old times as we fired up joints, listened to records, and pigged out around midnight on dinners delivered in cardboard cartons by the 24-hour "Chicken Delight" fast-food chain. In this one-bedroom apartment Phil had kindly let me sleep in the bedroom with my girlfriend, Johanna Weis, during the weeks leading up to my induction while he sacked out on the studio couch in the living room. She had also been a copywriter at Wiley. My first night back in town I telephoned her and my former co-workers, making appointments to meet them in the days that followed.

My boss Ted Walters, chief of the copywriters, had also studied music at the University of Michigan where he met his wife and moved to New York so she could pursue a career in opera. He warned me to be careful

about what I volunteered for in the Army. He had served during World War II in the Navy and volunteered for "small craft" duty thinking this would keep him safe and off a battleship only to discover that "small craft" meant the LST's (Landing Ship Tanks) that ferreted Marines to the beaches under heavy enemy fire at Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. He welcomed me back to town and offered to arrange a reunion lunch a couple of days later with other copywriters and artists I had been close to at the company.

I met Johanna the next day at a coffee shop uptown on the West Side near Columbia University where she had started graduate school in biochemistry and was working in her department's laboratory. A biology major in college, this was the opportunity she was hoping for, and a few weeks earlier had quit her job as a copywriter. The letters she'd sent me in basic training were noticeably lacking in emotion, so it wasn't exactly a surprise when she said I shouldn't expect to renew our romance, and that she was dating someone else. It reminded me of the ditty we'd chanted marching out to the firing ranges in basic training at Ft. Jackson where we heard the "pop-pop-a-pop" sounds of rifle rounds: "Hup-two-three-four. Got a letter in the mail. Go to war or go to jail. Ain't no use in calling home. Billy's got your girl and gone. Hup-two-three-four."

Johanna and I took sips of our ice coffee.

"That was a completely bull-shit job, you know," she said.

"Yeah, a real sham, but it was a way to live in New York."

In fact, the copywriters wrote ads and jacket covers for the technical and scientific books Wiley published that were incomprehensible for most of us who had majored in fields like English and music. We never read the books we promoted. The authors would fill out forms summarizing them in three paragraphs and we would "yeast up" the information. I could remember lifting the first sentence from one form, "This is a book about polymer chemistry;" and changing it to "Here is a groundbreaking study of polymer chemistry."

"They actually tried to get me to stay, offering me a raise and part-time work I could do at home," Johanna said. Clearly, as someone who actually understood scientific terminology, she was especially valuable to the company.

"And you turned it down?"

"Of course. I need to concentrate on what I'm doing now. By the way, Steve, how long did you plan to hang around there? Didn't you have any better ideas for a job?"

The question caught me flat-footed. Yes, I had dreamed of publishing fiction after drawing praise in college from teachers in creative writing courses and an award nomination for a collection of short stories. But the "bull-shit job" seemed to sap my energy, and after more than a year I hadn't even started on a plan to polish up the stories and send them out to magazines and publishers. It was easier to come home after work, fire up a joint, and put on a record. Week-ends were for dating and hearing live music.

The reunion two days later on Friday was at one of the up-scale restaurants in midtown on the East Side where the copywriters and artists enjoyed long, leisurely, high-alcohol lunches on the occasions when our meals were paid for by one of the Wiley's contracted businesses. That day our host was Vern Rafferty, owner of the company that printed the flyers and book jackets we wrote and illustrated. Since Bill Reynolds, manager of the Promotion Department and our ultimate boss, was always with us, there was never any pressure to get back to the office even after two hours of drinking, eating, and lively conversation. These were classic three-martini lunches except that Bill, who later developed a serious alcohol problem, always had five or six. Even after two, my head would be spinning and I could only pretend to work after returning to my cubicle. I would roll up the Wiley copy paper with the company logo into my typewriter to look like I was working, and write long letters on it to family and friends for the rest of the afternoon. Once, when I had tried to keep up with Bill's drinking at lunch, I ended up passed out sitting on a toilet in the men's room. At 5:00 Bill, realizing what had happened, came pounding on the door of my stall. "Time to go home, Steve," he shouted, laughing uproariously.

That day everyone wanted to hear about basic training at Ft. Jackson and where I was headed next. To my surprise, Ted and Bill had some idea I would be doing "classified" work because an F.B.I. agent had visited both their offices and interviewed them as part of a background investigation for the security clearance also required for Bob Poznanski as an Army officer candidate. Later, I found out that others I had known in the past, including my high school principal, were also interviewed. I will always be grateful

to Ted and Bill for covering for me when the agent asked them a routine question about "narcotics use." Both knew I smoked weed and had tried it themselves, but decided they preferred alcohol. For Bill booze was especially easy to come by because companies doing business with the publisher would regularly send him free cases of top-shelf scotch and gin. That day he recounted his time in the Army assigned to an infantry unit in West Germany in the late 1950's. He said he had no intention of fighting the Red Army if it invaded, and had picked an isolated grove where he would hide if that happened. This brought a disapproving look from Sam Kellerman, the chief artist, who walked with a limp, the result of a wound he'd suffered at the Battle of the Bulge.

Suzanne Morris, a copywriter I'd always found attractive but seemed somewhat standoffish, was especially friendly at lunch, sitting next to me and listening attentively to my conversations with the others. When the lunch finally broke up around 3:00, she walked beside me on our way back to the office where I would make the rounds of cubicles to chat with the other copywriters I'd worked with. Suzanne accepted promptly when I asked if she would come with me to hear some music and have dinner on Saturday night. This was a surprise because everyone knew her boyfriend who had recently finished a history masters and been offered a part-time teaching job at a college in Canada where he intended to move in case the draft blew his way.

The following Monday I went to the New York Public Library to read up on nuclear weapons. I remembered my parents' anger when Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed based on disputed testimony in 1953 for allegedly passing atomic secrets to the U.S.S.R. (In 2009, after the fall of the Soviet Union, formerly secret KGB records showed that Julius Rosenberg was not considered an effective intelligent agent and that Ethel had not been directly involved in passing information.)[1] At the time my father, a mathematics professor at Purdue University, explained that Soviet scientists were able to develop their atomic bomb, first tested in 1949, without the help of information from foreign intelligence sources. I also remembered my mother's outrage during the McCarthy era witch-hunts of the 1950's when Robert Oppenheimer, leading scientist on the Manhattan Project that developed the U.S. atomic bomb, had his security clearance pulled for alleged "communist" sympathies. She pointed out the irony that

he was being denied access to material "he had written himself." Oppenheimer had opposed development of the hydrogen bomb and the Air Force's plans to fight a nuclear war. He proposed international controls over atomic materials, a concept that remains relevant today. These ideas were anathema to Atomic Energy Commission Chairman Lewis Strauss and staunch H-bomb advocate, physicist Edward Teller, who maneuvered behind the scenes with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to pull Oppenheimer's security clearance. [2]

I learned later from one of his daughter's classmates at Oberlin College how these charges had plagued the life of Katherine "Toni" Oppenheimer. Born in 1944 at Los Alamos, NM where her father was working on the Manhattan Project, she had studied languages at Oberlin, but was denied a position as a translator at the United Nations because the FBI dredged up the charges against her father to deny her a security clearance. Devastated by this experience, and after two failed marriages, she committed suicide in January, 1977, a month after her 33rd birthday,

At the library I also learned about U.S. hydrogen bomb tests in the Pacific, starting in the 1950's. They spread radioactive contamination sickening Marshallese and driving them from their home islands that became permanently uninhabitable. A 1954 test also sickened the crew of a Japanese fishing boat, one of whom died in the hospital. During this period, besides the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons were developed by England and by France, which also tested hydrogen bombs in the South Pacific starting in 1966, affecting an estimated 110,00 residents of Polynesia with nuclear fall-out. Two years earlier, in October of 1964, the Chinese tested their first nuclear bomb in the Gobi Desert. I read about a U.S. nuclear accident two years later. In January of 1966, a nuclear-armed B-52 bomber had collided with a tanker refueling plane and crashed in a field near Palomares, Spain, killing seven crew members with its four hydrogen bombs falling into the Mediterranean Sea. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October,1962, had been headline news my sophomore year in college. Now I read that President Kennedy had secretly agreed to remove U.S. nuclear missiles from Turkey as part of the agreement ending the crisis. There had been one positive development the following year: the signing of the Test Ban Treaty in Moscow on August 5, 1963 which entered into force in October, 1963, one month before President Kennedy's assassination. The Treaty prohibited

nuclear weapons tests "or any other nuclear explosion" in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water. While not banning tests underground, it did prohibit nuclear explosions in this environment if they cause "radioactive debris to be present outside the territorial limits of the State under whose jurisdiction or control" the explosions were conducted. The nuclear powers at the time—U.S., U.S.S.R., U.K., and France--accepted as a common goal "an end to the contamination of man's environment by radioactive substances."[3]

One week later the family got together in Chicago where my sister, her husband, and their five-month-old daughter lived on the North Side not far from Wrigley Field. He worked in the grants office of University of Illinois medical school at a time when fathers were still exempted from the draft. My mother came up from West Lafayette, Indiana, where she was finishing a Ph.D. in psychology at Purdue. She and my father had divorced eight years earlier. He had remarried and was now teaching mathematics at a university in Brazil on an academic exchange program funded by the Agency for International Development under President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress initiative. My parents were on reasonably good terms despite their divorce and had visited me in Ann Arbor. Later, I spent a few days in New York with my father on vacation in the U.S. from his job in Brazil. He had been sending me records of Brazilian jazz, popularly known in the U.S. as "bossa nova," and later wrote me long, morale-boosting letters during basic training at Ft. Jackson where I had spoken to my mother often on the phone.

She and her mother were life-long pacifists. My grandmother refused to look at the medals the Army sent her in April of 1945 after her oldest son died in the crash of his Army Air Corps plane on a bombing mission he had flown in the Philippines. Fire destroyed all the wreckage, and only the crew's dog tags were recovered, so it was never known whether enemy fire or engine trouble caused the crash. Her younger son, who had served in the Navy during World War II, found the medals buried under some old clothes in a drawer after she died in 1965. That year I had initially failed a draft physical due to a functional heart murmur. A few months later when, unbeknownst to me, the standards had changed and this was no longer a disqualifying condition, I was re-classified 1-A, "available for military service."

My mother had wanted me to apply for conscientious objector status when my college deferment ended. Though I'd once attended a Quaker meeting, I was not a member of any church and had no record of pacifist affiliations or inclinations. Now I wished I had taken her advice, or at least tried harder to join a reserve unit and avoid two years of active duty. The truth was that I was so wrapped up in my life in New York, and high much of the time on weed or alcohol, that I put the draft out of my mind and just let the time slip by. Then one winter morning the "greeting" letter, with orders to report for induction, arrived as a most unpleasant surprise in my mailbox. After reading it, I remembered that Suzanne's boyfriend had moved to Canada. Since arriving in New York, I had gotten to know several of my relatives who lived in the city. All the men of my father's generation had served in World War II, and insisted it would be wrong for me to dodge the draft. An aunt and uncle whose apartment was only a few blocks from mine invited me for dinner with their son who had been a Green Beret (Army Special Forces) in West Germany and a nephew who had just finished his Army service and returned from what he said was an enjoyable one-year tour in South Korea.

On Christmas leave in Chicago three months later, I told my family that the Army would be training me for work on nuclear weapons. My mother seemed relieved to hear that the job made it unlikely I would be sent into combat, though adding that many of her friends predicted nuclear war was inevitable in the near future.

Bob Poznanski's family, also in Chicago, "was resolved to the fact that I was "doing my civic duty."

> They never expressed much more comment than that, but I know my mother was not pleased, like most mothers, mainly because of the war raging at the time. My friends, on the other hand, seemed shocked initially when I left home, as the realization set in that they, too, were fodder for the war machine, and stood as much chance as me to get "the call" as they eventually did. A few never came back.

CHAPTER 3

LEARNING MISSILES IN ALABAMA

Headquarters Building, Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama. U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command photo

Leaving Chicago after one week with family there, I arrived by bus at night in Huntsville, Alabama, nicknamed “Space Capital” and "Rocket City." In those days it was a center of the U.S. space program, beginning with development of the Redstone rocket and later the Jupiter-C launcher that carried the first American satellite, the Explorer, into space in January, 1958. This followed a number of spectacular lift-off failures on national

television that seemed to underscore America's lag in the space race with the Soviet Union which had successfully launched Sputnik in 1957.

Huntsville Arsenal opened in 1941 as a chemical weapons plant in anticipation of U.S. entrance into World War II. After the war, it was used mostly to store chemical weapons, gas masks, and incendiary bombs until 1949 when it became the Army's Redstone Arsenal Rocket Center for the research and development of rocket propellants. In 1950 it became the Ordnance Guided Missile Center which expanded rapidly, occupying a large land area with many new buildings. The name was changed again to the Missile and Munitions Center & School in 1966 where thousands of students from the U.S. and several NATO countries took courses in missiles and munitions. I studied electronic circuitry for missile systems in classes with NATO non-commissioned officers.

Redstone and its related subcontractors were Huntsville's major employers. Its Marshall Space Flight Center was named for General George C. Marshall. However, the personage with the most ubiquitous presence in Huntsville was former Nazi scientist and SS member Wernher von Braun who had supervised development of the V-2 rocket. Called *Vergeltungswaffe* (the retribution weapon), it was intended to retaliate for Allied bombings of German cities. Beginning in 1944, V-2 attacks killed an estimated 9,000 civilians and military personnel in London, Antwerp, and Liege. In a program called "Operation Paperclip," American intelligence officers brought 1,600 German scientists to the U.S. in 1945 at the end of World War II to work for the U.S. military. Assigned to Fort Bliss, Texas in 1946, the 127 rocketry engineers among them were transferred three years later to White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico, site of the first atomic test explosion called "Trinity" on July 16, 1945. Moving to Redstone in 1949, von Braun later became the rocket designer hero of America's space program. (The Soviets had recruited 177 German rocketry engineers for their program, including von Braun's boss, which might explain their early lead in the space race.) But his work at White Sands was far from heroic. There were notable failures among the live-fire rocket tests he supervised in 1946. One rocket crashed just south of nearby Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. According to an Army veteran of White Sands, later stationed in Okinawa, this led to ridicule from soldiers there who took to calling him "Mr. Paperclip."

As a Jew, it troubled me to see his name and picture everywhere on signs and billboards in the city. He stood flanked by smiling Army brass in photographs at the entrances, on the walls, and in the offices, laboratories, and classrooms of the buildings at Redstone Arsenal where we took the Missile Electronics Course. How much was his involvement and knowledge of the worst Nazi crimes has been a subject of debate. He claims he was apolitical. Slave labor from the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp was used for the construction he supervised of the V-2 rockets he designed. After the war, he admitted that several times he had been inside the camp where 20,000 prisoners died. The title character in the 1964 film “Dr. Strangelove,” a German scientist working for the U.S. military who had a pompadour hairdo and a lingering habit of giving the Nazi salute, was modeled, at least in part, on him. Today Huntsville has a "Von Braun Center" with a sports arena for football, ice hockey, basketball, and rodeos, a concert hall, a movie theater, a playhouse, a conference center, and a rooftop bar and restaurant.

U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command photo

At Redstone we marched daily in fatigues and formation to and from our classes. The NCO’s and warrant officer instructors taught us how to read schematic diagrams along with the functions of coils, capacitors, resistors,

and transformers, but with special emphasis on what were then called transistors or, more commonly today, semi-conductors. We assembled circuit boards, practiced soldering, and took regular quizzes. At this stage we were not taught any specific applications because everyone would be heading for further training on the circuitry of various missile systems or, in my case, nuclear warheads. Many were headed for West Germany to work on Pershing missile crews. A few of the better students had experience repairing televisions, radios, and other home appliances. Some had chosen the electronics school when they enlisted in the Army with an eye to a future career.

Enlisted men attending courses at Redstone lived in concrete dormitory-style barracks. We slept in open bays with bunk beds and kept our possessions in metal lockers. Conditions were a little better than in basic training, but not much. We had virtually no individual privacy except inside the toilet stalls. In my row of bunks was Rick Wakabayashi, a Japanese American from Seattle, and Daryl Stanley, an African American from Georgia, both training for Pershing missile crews. Daryl had a portable phonograph and introduced me to James Brown and his Famous Flames. He let me borrow it to play jazz records I got out of the post library, including John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" and "Bill Evans at the Village Vanguard." On the second floor of the barracks were the NATO troops, who lived in semi-private rooms. I got to know Nick Petrakis, a sergeant from Greece, who called me "priest" because, even at the young age of 22, I had a balding spot on the back of my head where Orthodox clergy wear a skullcap.

Another barracks friend, Bob Walker from Tennessee, and I got into trouble for being late to class one morning. We had both been out drinking the night before at a bar in downtown Huntsville where a small jazz combo made up of enlisted men from the base was playing. There was no one on piano so I sat in for a couple of sets. It was especially fun playing with the tenor saxophone player who sounded a lot like Dexter Gordon. For the closing tune, Bob requested his favorite song, Floyd Cramer's "Last Date." I was surprised to see tears in his eyes when I returned to our table. It was then that he told me about his recent divorce.

I left the bar soon after that to get a ride back to the base with Jerry Spencer, the guitar-player from West Virginia. But Bob did not return to the

barracks until much later that night. He told me that a man at the bar and his wife had offered to drive him back, but that on the way the man pulled over on a deserted side road and asked him to have sex with his much younger wife in the back seat. (This was at a time when Viagra was still thirty years in the future.) Bob obliged, but the man seemed to get angry when his wife became wildly excited, moaning and groaning. At that point he told Bob to stop and drove him the rest of the way to the base. The next day after being late to class we were ordered to report with our platoon sergeant to the company commander's office. Bob said he'd felt sick that morning, but I can't remember my excuse. In any case, the c.o. assigned us extra clean-up duty and issued a stern warning that the next time there would be worse consequences. He told our platoon sergeant to "work that sickness out of Walker."

The break-up of Bob's marriage and the aborting of his career as a professional golfer had led him to join the Army at age thirty-three. He explained that, after captaining his high school golf team and winning a series of amateur tournaments, the PGA had invited him to become a member and join their tours. When he submitted his application, the PGA ran a background check on him and I was reminded of the one I had just passed, with some help from my former bosses at Wiley, for a security clearance. Bob was not so lucky. He had once spent time in jail for drunken disorderly in Florida, and the police record disqualified him from PGA membership. A few days after telling me this, we went to the post golf course to play a few holes. He showed me, a total novice, how to hold the club which I had been swinging like a baseball bat and we began a round. I soon ended my futile, blundering efforts, however, and just watched him play. Since I didn't watch golf tournaments on T.V., I had never seen such skill and precision. He knew exactly which club to use for every shot, sailing straight and true for his calculated advance along the fairway, and carefully measured the lay of the greens for his putts, all of which went in or near the cup.

Bob had become a regular at the post golf course and one day he came back to the barracks with some exciting news. Word had gotten around the base about his remarkable skill, which brought out the commanding general and other top brass to watch him play. As a result, he was to be taken out of the missile electronics course and re-assigned as the post golf instructor at

Redstone, likely for the remainder of his time in the Army. He said he'd been reluctant at first because he had joined the Army to study electronics with an eye to a future career but couldn't miss the chance for a job playing the game he loved. We exchanged letters after I left for New Mexico, and I often wonder what he's doing today.

The night we spent at the bar in Huntsville also resulted in something that could have similarly changed the course of my life in the Army. It turned out that the tenor saxophonist I had enjoyed playing with was Sergeant First Class Clifford Lawson, a senior NCO in the Redstone Army band, along with the trumpet-player that night, Master Sergeant Ted Schafer who was its director. MSG Schafer asked me a few days later if I would be interested in applying for a transfer to the band that was currently without a piano-player. Of course, I was delighted at the chance to play with these skilled musicians. Moreover, the soldiers in the band were assigned as "permanent party" at Redstone with very easy duty, living in private rooms and wearing civilian clothes most of the time. They were responsible only to make rehearsals and to put on their uniforms for base ceremonies, for concerts at Redstone, in Huntsville, and at other venues in the area. Off-duty, they played gigs regularly in the evenings at the many watering spots around town. I asked him, by all means, to apply for my transfer. About a week later, Sergeant Schafer met me in the mess hall to tell me that base personnel had turned down the request because I was training for a "critical MOS.[military occupation specialty]." Maybe to assuage my stinging disappointment, he said that at some point he expected to be sent to Vietnam. (I learned later that the duties of an Army band in a combat unit were to retrieve corpses on the battlefield and perform funerals.) And he assured me that I would find the work in my MOS interesting and important. At that point, I had met only one other soldier, Ron Pierce from Michigan, who would be going from Redstone to New Mexico for nuclear weapons training.

The barracks where we lived had only one phone for our use which was on the wall in the hallway next to the stairs. Private conversations were impossible since anyone in the vicinity on the first floor where my bunk was located heard what was being said on the phone whether he wanted to or not. Dan from California was constantly getting calls from bill collectors. Apparently, they were also calling the company commander who told him

he would face Army disciplinary action for misconduct if he didn't straighten things out. One day a call came for Carl, a fellow-student at the electronics school from New Jersey. His side of the conversation went something like this:

"No, ma'am, I don't know anything about that."

"I don't care what your daughter says. I wasn't with her that night."

"Well, I'm not the one responsible for it."

"Marriage? No, ma'am. You see I'm Catholic and . . ."

"If you do that, ma'am, I know three other guys who were with her and would testify. So in this state she would be declared a . . ."

The conversation continued for some time, but I left for dinner at the mess hall.

The barracks had a well-equipped recreation room on the ground floor that also housed the orderly room, where the company clerks kept the unit's records, and the offices of the company commander and first sergeant. It was furnished with a pool table, a large color television, easy chairs, and wooden tables for playing cards and board games, or writing letters. One evening when I returned from the mess hall there was much hub-bub coming from the recreation room. I went downstairs to find an astonishing sight. The pool table had been ripped in many places, several cue sticks were broken in half, the television screen had been kicked in, and furniture was strewn over the floor. The individual responsible was Wayne Henderson from New York. He was one of two soldiers I met from the city, the other at Ft. Jackson, who had been convicted of serious crimes there. At a time of rising draft calls, local judges had given them, and probably others, a choice between jail and a three-year enlistment in the Army. Marvin Russell, the soldier at Ft. Jackson, was a high-degree black belt in karate and had performed extremely well in basic training, which he even seemed to enjoy. The cadre had been much impressed, and after basic he was assigned there as a drill instructor. For Wayne, on the other hand, the experiment ended badly. After missing a pool shot and pocketing the eight ball, he had flown into a rage of destruction. It had taken the first sergeant and three others to finally subdue this stocky nineteen-year-old. The MP's were called and he was escorted in handcuffs to the stockade. Now, I was told, the F.B.I. was on the way to take him into custody.

Ron Pierce, the other student I'd met at Redstone who was also headed for nuclear weapons training in New Mexico, had bought a used Pontiac. One Saturday afternoon in January, 1967, he drove Bob Walker and me up to Nashville for a performance of the Grand Ole Opry. Huntsville is in northern Alabama near the Tennessee border so the trip took a little less than two hours. I had never liked country music. It always sounded to me like corn syrup with voices that whined boring melodies and mundane verses in a hillbilly accent. Moreover, I associated it with the South's history of slavery and Jim Crow. So I was mainly along for the ride, a chance to get away from the base and out of Huntsville. As soon as we arrived in Nashville with our short haircuts and shabby civilian clothes, we were immediately recognized as servicemen and greeted warmly. Passersby waved friendly hellos and asked where we were from as we walked with many other servicemen, some in uniform, from Ron's car to Ryman Auditorium. This was the Opry's home until it moved to a larger, more modern venue, the Grand Ole Opry House, in 1974. We were a little early for the show and stopped by a bar around the corner where the bartender and customers bought us rounds of beer, and the waitresses called us "honey" and stroked our shoulders.

We were in a relaxed mood when we got to Ryman Auditorium, a large, three-story brick building with chapel-style windows and a pointed roof, aptly nicknamed the "Mother Church of Country Music." In fact, it had been built originally for revival meetings. Inside it could hold an audience of three thousand in sharply banked rows so the stage was easily viewed even from seats high in the rear, and the acoustics were excellent. It was around three-quarters full. In a sense, the music I heard that night in the mid-1960s became as legendary in the world of country music today as was the music I'd heard during that period in New York for the history of jazz. Maybe hearing it live made a difference for me since I'd only heard recordings before. Or maybe it was my relief at being away from the Army and the effect of a few beers. But I found myself tapping my foot to the rhythms and connecting with the words of songs that, like jazz standards, poignantly express feelings from life and love, though in a rural, rather than an urban, setting.

Many of the famous performers we heard that night have since passed on: Earl Scruggs, Eddie Arnold, Johnny Cash, and Chet Atkins, the virtuoso

guitarist who led the Opry's back-up band and later made a country-jazz fusion record with vibraphonist Gary Burton. I had always thought that country music was exclusively white, so I was astonished when the announcer introduced singer Charlie Pride to an enthusiastic ovation. It was then that I noticed a few African American soldiers in the audience. The star of the evening was Loretta Lynn who sang her current country hit song, "Don't Come Home A' Drinkin.'with Lovin' on Your Mind."

We heard "Don't Come Home a Drinkin'" several times on Ron's car radio driving back to Redstone. That night completely changed my feelings about country music, especially songs by Loretta Lynn, a coal miner's daughter, and Johnny Cash that conveyed important messages. Lynn's "Dear Uncle Sam" (recorded 1966), perhaps the earliest popular song to articulate grief for an American killed in the Vietnam War, is sung from the viewpoint of a wife who has just received the telegram notifying her of her husband's death.

Two weeks later we set out for New Mexico in Ron's Pontiac along with Alan Chester, called "Chess" by everyone, who lived in Mississippi, about fifty miles west of the of the Alabama border. After dropping Chess off in Olive Branch, where his family was waiting for him, we continued west on Interstate 40 crossing Arkansas and Oklahoma. When we entered the Texas panhandle, the land gradually flattened and appeared to widen, expanding out to a far-distant horizon in a way I had never seen. It almost seemed like we were on another planet, and I was reminded that in Texas everything is big. Late in the afternoon we got hungry and decided to get off Interstate 40 at Amarillo. That put us on the legendary Route 66, little used today by long-distance travelers who take the interstate. It has now become a tourist attraction thanks mainly to the song "Route 66" composed by Bobby Troup and recorded by performers ranging from Nat King Cole to Chuck Berry and The Rolling Stones.

At Amarillo we ate at a Texas steak house, but the sirloin I ordered was tough and tasteless compared to the steak that came with those three-martini lunches the publisher's contractors had treated us to in New York. Ron speculated that Texas cattle ranchers export the best cuts of beef to places where they can get the highest prices.

Back on Interstate 40 again, we finally began to see low hills in the distance as we neared the Texas-New Mexico border. Having never been