



'IN THE EYE OF THE COLD WAR HURRICANE'

DETACHMENT A, BERLIN BRIGADE

Clandestine commandos of the legendary Green Berets served east of the Elbe River and behind the Iron Curtain to confront communism between 1956 and 1984.

Until this year, their role in the Cold War was unheralded. With the 25th anniversary of the Berlin Wall's fall, now is a good time to provide them with long overdue recognition.

BY BOB CHAREST • *Photos courtesy Bob Charest*



Berlin was a dangerous place during the Cold War. A preserved piece of the Wall containing a mural memorializing 146 Germans killed trying to escape communism stands in stark testament.

As the grand central station of East-West espionage, the city was a playground for all sorts of secret agents. And its place in the history of the 20th century far outweighs its size. Indeed, 37% of Americans viewed the fall of the Berlin Wall as the single most important event of the 1980s.

That Wall came down after 28 years because Americans in uniform stood as a barrier to Soviet aggression. The vast majority of those GIs were clearly visible. But a small

ABOVE: Team 1, Scout Swimmer cadre of Detachment A undergo training in 1974 in Grossenbröde, Germany. They are, back row: Kevin Monahan, Bob Charest, Richard Lahue, Ralph Ormes, Willie Headon and Ron Bruce; front row: John Silk, Ernie Kirk, Frank Midill, Lee Dickerson, Paul Piuysz and Sparky Airhart.

contingent operated behind the scenes, not even acknowledged until long after the Cold War ended. Only this year were they fully and publicly recognized.

BORN IN THE MID-'50S

Though the Status-of-Forces Agreement signed by all four powers occupying Berlin prohibited elite forces, each country had its own prowling the city. It was 10 years after WWII ended, however, before the U.S. had such a unit formally in place there.

In August 1956, the elite 10th Special Forces Group, based in Bad Tolz, Germany, stationed the secretive 7781 Army Unit (also known as the 39th Special Forces Operational Detachment) in West Berlin. It consisted of six modified detachments

that became part of the Headquarters Company of the 6th Infantry Regiment. Each team had six members.

Two years later, the unit was renamed Detachment A and assigned to the Headquarters Company of the U.S. Army Garrison, Berlin. Then in April 1962, it was attached to the Berlin Brigade. Its area of operations was primarily that city, but it could undertake missions elsewhere in Europe.

“Detachment A was literally in the eye of the Cold War hurricane,” said Lt. Gen. Charles T. Cleveland, commanding general of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command.

As an unconventional and classified outfit of 90 men (a normal tour of duty was three years), Detachment A carried out clandestine operations. Originally operating in small cells, by the late 1960s it expanded to 12-man “A” teams.

Unit members were as unique as the U.S. Army ever recruited. Many were German or East European refugees who still had families trapped behind the Iron Curtain. In the early years, a significant number were WWII vets, too. Hence they brought much-needed skills along with knowledge of other nations and languages to the unit.

TRAINING & TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Physical training was wide-ranging and progressively intense. For instance, winter warfare training in Bavaria consisted of downhill and cross-country skiing equivalent to extreme skiing.

Specialized demolition training was required for various targets in Berlin. Some teammates attended the CIA’s specialized demo course at Harvey Point, N.C. Scuba diving was another required skill. Every month, members made parachute jumps staging out of Tempelhof Air Base in Berlin.

Detachment A participated in NATO escape and evasion exercises. Exercises exclusive to Berlin included dead drops, live drops, primary meetings, surveillance and communications.

Team members trained with the elite West German Federal Border Guard and Border Protection Group 9, British Special Air Service and special police units. But they also taught an urban course to other 10th SFG personnel, as well as SEAL Team 2 based on Crete.



As masters of spy craft, team members carried items reminiscent of a James Bond movie. Coal filled with C-4 explosives was used to potentially sabotage the rail ring surrounding Berlin. One-shot cigarette-lighter guns, vials filled with metal shavings for destruction of turbines and noise-suppressed weapons for eliminating targets were all part of the arsenal. The German Walther MPK 9mm SMG that fit in a briefcase was the weapon of choice. All scuba gear was German-made, including the one-man portable decompression chamber.

Every member spoke fluent German and dressed mostly in authentic German civilian clothes. They sometimes carried non-American flash documentation and identification. Dual passports, or dual nationalities, were part of the deception.

Adversaries in this potentially deadly game of cat and mouse included the notorious East German Secret Police (Stasi), Soviet KGB (Committee for State Security) and even Spetsnaz (Russian Special Purpose Forces). Being vigilant of Soviet surveillance was a given.

The KGB had members under constant watch and possessed dossiers on everyone in Detachment A. Yet the Green Berets always deceived their adversaries into believing they were an exponentially larger force than they really were.

MISSION AND MONUMENT

During the mid-1970s, the unit’s mission began to evolve. Though the classic Cold War enemy always remained, a new one reared its ugly head in the form of terrorism. The lethal Red Army Faction—a rabid Marxist group targeting the U.S.

military starting in 1972—came into play, killing six GIs in all. That meant being prepared to take on terrorists with snipers and SWAT tactics.

“They were very brave men and took on some tough missions,” recalled Sidney Shachnow, who led Detachment A from 1970 to 1974.

Still, the Soviet threat hovered over the divided city. In 1978, the unit was tasked by the CIA with digging up several mission sites positioned throughout Berlin for stay-behind operations. Also, to maintain the equipment in them—weapons and demolitions, for example.

Within six years, however, the mission of this unique outfit was deemed unnecessary even though the Cold War was far from over. At the end of 1984, Detachment A was disbanded. “I knew when I closed the door,” said Eugene Piasecki, the detachment’s last commander, “I would no longer serve in a unit like that.”

To preserve that legacy, the idea of erecting a permanent tribute was born. It was the brainchild of unit veteran Jimmy Spoo. On Jan. 30, 2014, a monument was dedicated on the Army Special Operations Command Memorial Plaza at Fort Bragg, N.C.

“This is the true legacy of the men of Detachment A,” Gen. Cleveland said. “They played a crucial role in vanquishing an existential threat to our way of life. We bring this unit a bit more out the shadows by dedicating this stone.” ★

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