

CHRISTMAS, 1963, BERLIN, GERMANY

In December 1963, I was serving as the Heavy Mortar Platoon Leader in Headquarters & Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry in the Berlin Brigade in Berlin, Germany. Berlin was 119 miles behind the Iron Curtain and was still occupied by the military forces of the United States, United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union. East Berlin was the Soviet sector. The three allied sectors comprised West Berlin. Each of the allied powers maintained access to East Berlin and surveillance along the border. The Berlin Wall had gone up in August 1961, and the city was considered one of the few hot spots in the world where US forces served. An incident in Berlin, during that time, usually became an international crisis.

I was a bachelor and it was a tradition in our outfit that single officers perform the duty of battalion staff duty officer on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day so that married officers could spend that time with their families. The staff duty officer is the battalion commander's representative during non-duty hours.



I volunteered to be staff duty officer Christmas Eve. Also, our battalion reconnaissance platoon had the requirement to conduct a jeep patrol along a portion of the Berlin Wall between the American sector of West Berlin and East Berlin and the Sector-Zonal border between the American sector and East Germany. Our company commander did not want the enlisted men to have to pull this duty on Christmas day so he, the Recon Platoon Leader and I conducted the patrol.

I was relieved of my staff duty officer duties at 0730, Christmas morning, grabbed some breakfast in the mess hall and reported for duty as the machine gunner on the jeep patrol. I was the junior man, having just made 1st Lieutenant on 10 December. The CO drove, the Recon Platoon Leader acted as the vehicle commander and patrol leader and I stood behind the pedestal mounted machine gun. We wore our combat gear. Temperature in Berlin was in the low twenties and the wind chill in a moving vehicle put the temperature around zero. I wore my long johns, parka with liner, field pants with liner, thermo boots, gloves, and an

insulated mask on my face to cut down on the wind chill. I was still cold. The patrol took about three hours. Along the patrol route, we stopped at numerous observation posts to observe into East Berlin and East Germany. Whenever we mounted an OP, the East German guards on the other side grabbed their binoculars and looked back! We checked them out and they checked us out!

The CO brought along a thermos of “Stump Blower” which was equal parts coffee and bourbon. It helped to take the chill off the morning. When we encountered West Berlin policemen along the route, they were given a shot of “Christmas Cheer” which was greatly appreciated.

Afterwards, I went back to my BOQ, showered and changed into Dress Blues for the traditional Christmas day meal in the mess hall. Officers always wore their dress uniform for both the Thanksgiving and Christmas day dinners. After dinner, I repaired to the Officers Club with my bachelor cohorts to quaff more than a few beers and critique the day. It was my second Christmas in the Army and a memorable one.

