

~~~~~Air Team, USMLM~~~~~

By Paul Nikulla

While I was in the 6912th Radio Squadron Mobile in Berlin from 1959 to 1962 I met some of the guys in the Air Team of the US Military Liaison Mission in Potsdam. There was Matt Warren, the Air Team Chief, Ed Zvetina and Pendergast. They looked kind of spooky and were always looking over their shoulder like somebody was after them or something. This was true especially of Ed Zvetina, who also chain-smoked. They told me a little about what they did. Just enough to make me curious. Later, at the Academy, John Donaho and Pete Davison, who both had been assigned to the USMLM told me more. That was it. I just had to get assigned there. Ted Heine, who also had taught German at the Academy, was assigned to the USMLM about two years before my Academy tour was up. I kept in touch with him and he helped me get the assignment. Ted could attest to my fluency in German and Russian and knew I liked to drive sports cars.



So, in May of 1967 we were packed out and headed for Wright-Patterson AFB where I attended a course in photography and identification of Soviet and East German military hardware at the Foreign Technology Division (FTD) of the Air Force Systems Command. Loretta and the kids left me there and drove on to Long Island to see her brother Louie, Lucille and their kids. It was there, while jumping rope, that Loretta ruptured her Achilles tendon. That put her left leg in a cast up to her hips, and when it was time for me to fly over to Berlin, Loretta had to stay in Florida with her folks till her leg healed enough for her to travel. So, I went over alone. This was not all bad as it let me do my in-office and on the road training practically 'round the clock. The Air Team Chief at the time was Col Augustine Puchrik, the Operations Officer was Maj Al Broz. The tour officers were Capt George

Kolt, who was on his way out by the time I got there, and Capt Igor Vishnevsky. The drivers at that time were Ben Kutz and "Stan" Stanbridge.

Receiving the Outstanding Unit Award (With Ben Kutz and Igor Vishnevsky)



The US, British and French Military Liaison Missions in East Germany and the Soviet Military Liaison Mission in West Germany were established at the end of World War II to sort things out among the victorious Allies in the occupied and divided Germany. Some of the issues resolved by the Missions were the repatriation of lost and missing personnel, registration of graves, relocation of war munitions, resolution of disputes that arose in connection with the military occupation of Germany. The Missions served as a conduit of communication between the US and Soviet headquarters. As time passed, the emphasis of the Missions shifted more to that of military observation. Our first task was to detect the first indicators of any imminent hostilities. Any indication that the Soviets were getting ready to attack US forces in West Germany. Secondly, we were to update and verify the air and electronic order of battle. What type and how many of each type and the location of all aircraft, radars and SAMs were deployed in East Germany together with an assessment of their state of training and overall readiness. Thirdly, we made every effort to obtain technical quality photography of every single aircraft, radar and SAM.

In one respect each Mission served as kind of an undeclared guarantee or demonstration of good will indicating that the opposing occupation forces had no hostile intention toward each other. (At least that was what we told the Soviets when we found ourselves in some delicate situation.)

The Huebner-Malinin Agreement and The Potsdam House



The Potsdam House

The official seats of the three western Missions were in Potsdam. However, each also had offices in West Berlin. The members of these three Missions also lived in West Berlin. Each of the three Western occupation forces worked out separate but similar agreements with the Soviets. The agreement under which the USMLM operated was the Hubner-Malinin Agreement named for the US and Soviet generals who negotiated the agreement. Under the terms of the agreement the US was authorized 14 passes. That meant that at any one time, fourteen American officers and enlisted members had the right to enter the Soviet Occupied Zone of Germany and were the official representatives of the US Army, Europe and the US Government. The French and British were permitted a different number under their

agreements. Under the terms of the agreement, the accredited USMLM members had the right to travel throughout the Soviet Occupied Zone of Germany "whenever and wherever" with the exception of military installations without hindrance or escort. We did not recognize any part of the East German regime. Not the Volkspolizei (VoPos), not the "Stasi", Ministerium fuer Staatssicherheit or Ministry for State Security (MfS) [East German State Secret Police] nor any other East German authority. We acted as if they simply did not exist. When confronted by any of them, we always demanded a Soviet officer from the closest Kommandatura. The Soviets would usually immediately dismiss the East German and settle things with us. This really irritated the East Germans. The number one goal of the USMLM was to enforce the terms of the agreement. This meant we would not let anybody or any circumstance interfere with our right to travel wherever and whenever we wanted. Over the years a very strict standard operating procedure (SOP) for the conduct of tours and relations with the Soviets and East Germans had evolved. There were specific things we did and did not do while in East Germany. Any attempted defection by any Soviet or East German person was to be considered a provocation by agents of the MfS or KGB in an attempt to discredit the USMLM. No matter how heart rending the story, we dismissed the person as a provocateur. Another rule was that we would not permit anyone to impede our travel by any means. As long as it was physically able to move the vehicle we continued the tour. My personal pledge to myself was not to injure anyone - especially myself - if possible. An operational element of the SOP was never to permit any person access to our vehicle. Our vehicles were considered to have the right of extraterritoriality - they were part of the United States.



My Soviet Pass

An overriding practical consideration was the philosophy of reciprocity. Whatever the Soviets did to us, we did to them - to members of the Soviet Missions in West Germany. It worked. They treated us they way they wanted to be treated for the most part. From what we heard, however, the "Soxmis", as we called the Soviet missions in the western zones of Germany, had an easier go than we due to the democratic form of government and the free society in the West.

Cars and Equipment

The Air Team used the full sized Ford Custom or Galaxy in the police interceptor configuration. The vehicle earlier came equipped with the 390 then later with the 429 cubic inch high output V-8 engine. Earlier it had a 4 speed manual transmission, but we found that the heavy duty automatic gave the drivers more freedom to concentrate on maneuvering out of tight spots. The factory police interceptor was modified at the US Army Quartermaster shop at Berlin Brigade. The springs were replaced with heavier duty station wagon/ambulance springs. Koni shock absorbers replaced the stock item. The fuel tank was

enlarged to 44 gallons. Quarter inch thick steel plates were welded in place under the front suspension, engine and transmission as well as under the gas tank. German-type tow hooks were welded on the front and rear bumpers. Halogen headlights replaced the stock sealed beams. Additional halogen driving lights were added into the grill. The electrical switches were modified to permit the horn, head lights, parking and signal lights, and tail/stop lights to be turned off individually or all except the headlights with the flip of one switch. Original tires were replaced with Michelin all-terrain radial tires all 'round. The whole vehicle, all but the glass was then painted a flat olive drab. A draw curtain was installed in the rear window. We also used the Jeep Wagoneer and the Ford Bronco modified in a similar manner. The all wheel drive capability of these two SUV-type vehicles gave us additional cross-country mobility.



The East German villagers would gasp in awe as we emerged at high speed from the woods in this low-slung, mud splattered green monster. Some asked me if it was some kind of armored amphibious vehicle. A yellow plate with the American flag and Russian lettering: "American Military Liaison Mission" on the bumpers front and rear made it clear who we represented.

In the trunk, standard equipment included a pup tent, two tarps, two sleeping bags and foul weather gear depending on the season, a heavy duty German-made hand winch with enough cable to reach any tree within 100 feet, a "dead man" winch anchor consisting of a steel angled plate with two rows of 4 holes for long steel spikes and an eye hook/turn buckle and a sledge hammer. (This was for when we got stuck and there were no trees within reach.) Other equipment in the trunk included a small camping stove and a case of C-rations for longer detentions. Gear in the vehicle included a map case with a complete set of detailed maps of East Germany. The basic navigation map scale was 1:100,000. At this scale each square kilometer was represented by about a one centimeter square on the map. We used the US artillery UTM grid system for recording locations. As we traveled, I made it a point to always know exactly in which one kilometer square we were located at any given time. For closer in navigation we used maps of 1:50,000 and even 1:25,000 scale maps for pinpoint location of objects of interest. We could routinely get within 10 meters accuracy. The maps we used were based on German military maps made before WWII. In some forests we could actually find trees numbered with the same number indicated on the maps. Each terrain feature that was the high point in the area had a trigonometric tower on it which was also indicated on the maps. This typical German attention to detail made it easier for us navigate.



Fishbed H with Recce Pod

Also, in the big leather map case we carried a cassette recorder to verbally record observations. In another large leather case we carried two or three Nikon camera bodies (each loaded with a different type of film) with motor drives, pistol grips, battery packs and an assortment of lenses: 50 mm, 135 mm, 500 mm and 1,000 mm. The 1,000 was the Soviet-made MTO, a mirrored "folded" lens. Ironically, this lens was the bread and butter lens for the Air Team of the 1967-71 timeframe. It was heavy and had a very shallow depth of field (focus range). Acquisition with this monster lens was not easy. The lens came equipped with an open "gun sight" for aiming prior to thru-the-lens

viewing. Fast moving objects required considerable practice and a rapid series of about 10 exposures to get one clear, in-focus picture. Hence, the motor drive which shot 4 frames per second.

In addition to this essential equipment we carried a "Kiste", literally a box of sandwiches and thermos bottles of black tea, prepared by the East German kitchen crew at the Potsdam house. We usually supplemented this Kiste with food from home as it was sometimes impossible to identify what animal the meat came from that was inside the sandwiches.



Air Team Motel

Each two-day trip required about two days of careful, thorough preparation. We would consult the latest requirements for information, prioritize them, determine the potential locations of each, review the latest available information on the equipment at each location to determine specifically what new information was required and the possibility of satisfying that requirement. We would then determine the most feasible sequence in which to visit each location and the best possible approach to the observation point to be used. Then we would plan our travel routes. These were memorized. We would select

alternate routes and alternate locations and alternate sequences to accommodate unforeseen developments once underway. Extent of potential surveillance, time of day, season of the year, the weather, the direction of the wind or condition of the roads were some of the factors given consideration. The presence of surveillance would require dramatic changes to the planned route and approach - even an abort of the whole effort if the full "wolf-pack" was on our tail. That's when we went "Gelegenheiten" shopping for antiques. Single car or half-hearted surveillance we could ditch with either speed or diversionary tactics or combinations of both. Sometimes we would lead the "narks", as we called them (this was a generic term the three Allied missions used to identify the professional, dedicated surveillance (MfS/KGB) as opposed to incidental local surveillance), on a merry goose chase thru the East German countryside then give the old Ford a kick in the rear end in a burst of top speed and lose the tail by darting off the road onto some obscure track we had previously checked out for just such situations. Deep in the woods, we would then drop into a depression in the terrain, turn off the engine and squat quietly sipping some Russian tea (as the East Germans would say; 'Tee trinken, abwarten') to be sure we were "clean". Then, later, we would proceed according to our plan.



The Ever Vigilant Tour NCO/Driver Stan Stanbridge

The "narks", we learned from people whose business it was to know, were usually in unmarked civilian Wartburgs, BMWs or even big American cars. Since the cars were unmarked and the occupants wore no uniform, our position for argument with the Soviet officers on duty was that these people bothering us were illegal 'hooligans' that had no business being there and they should be punished. The SERB (Soviet External Relations Branch) officers could not hide a smirk when we told them this. SERB was our go between with the Hqs, Group of Soviet Forces Germany. As an aside, we attended many social functions with the Soviet officers of SERB usually at the USMLM Potsdam House or at their Dom Offizerov (Officers Club) in Potsdam.

The big American cars were used when the narks intended to physically block us. We were told the MfS stole these cars in Munich. The Wartburg meant low-key, more lax surveillance. The BMW meant they expected to be able to keep up with us. A wolf-pack of all of the above with radio control meant you were

"it" for the day and had just as well relax and go shopping. The driver of the nark cars, we were told, was usually Stasi and the passenger a Russian officer of the KGB. Some narks were good at tracking and staying with us. Others, we could easily lose. We knew the area and the roads and trails better than they did. We spent more time out there than they did. And, our cars were faster. We could out run anything they had and our drivers were much better. Strange as it may seem, overall, surveillance was not that big a problem. However, everything we did and how we did it, we did with the avoidance or circumvention of surveillance in mind. Some of the ways we made the nark's job more difficult was to cross the Glienike Bridge at random times. Sometimes we'd depart around 1, 2 or 3 AM, sometimes we did not go to the Potsdam House but headed right out from the bridge - we had the driver stay overnight in Berlin. Other times we would head out in mid afternoon, scout around in some nondescript area then at sundown tuck in at some out of the way woods till the wee hours of the night. I found that at near sundown people tended not to be as acutely aware of their surroundings. They would wind down and relax and seem to not notice things or simply would not react as quickly. We'd take advantage of that. One of my standard techniques was to leave the primary road at dusk or after dark when we were sure no one saw us. Then, from this secondary road find a still smaller road, then find a trail or track, then find a draw or low spot, leave the track and drive cross-country into a secluded wooded draw and very quietly cover the car with branches and GI blankets. There we would have our evening meal and snooze till it was time to move into our observation point. This proved to be quite effective. In my four years traveling in East Germany I was not once discovered in the sack (We slept outside alongside the car in sleeping bags.) Sometimes we would find a growth of young pines some 8 to 10 feet tall and drive over them. They would spring back up behind us completely obscuring the car. Having done this, once we were awakened in the middle of the night by Soviet tanks running up and down the track we had just left - just a few feet from us. In this case we just hunkered down quietly like little field mice till the activity subsided and left before daybreak. Another time, again in the middle of the night, we found ourselves in the middle of an exercise with gunfire all 'round us. We remained unobserved but, as you can imagine, it was not possible to get back to sleep after that.



Ben Kutz with Jeep Wagoneer

Certainly, we did not want the "bad guys" to know precisely where we were going or what we were doing, but it came down to a matter of numbers. There were three Western liaison missions, each with as many as three or four teams out on tour at any one time. The narks simply could not keep up with all of us all the time. They had to be selective. So, if you did not antagonize them or do wild things to attract their attention, you just might be able to slip by and go about your business without surveillance. This was my goal and it worked most of the time. Local surveillance was

always present and always a consideration. In a police state there is no unemployment. People are easily coerced or co-opted into being informers on each other and certainly will report the presence of a foreign military liaison mission car. However, at times we could take advantage of this situation. If a citizen near our location of interest took particular notice of our car as we passed, we made certain that another local citizen saw us going in the opposite direction before we continued to our destination. That way the Stasi central control received conflicting reports on our progress and most likely ignored the reports. Of course, the opposition knew in general what we were interested in and often were there waiting for us. But, again, they could not be everywhere at all times. We remained flexible.

The Ford Bronco Navigating a Tank Trail



War Stories

I can't resist the temptation to tell a few "war stories" here. Most of my more hairy encounters with the opposition were in my first year. After a while I figured that, if I was going to continue to be successful and complete my full tour of duty, I had to change my modus operandi. I went from brash and bluster to stealth and cunning as a matter of survival. (Our boss, Col Puchrik, the Air Team Chief, and a real tiger, felt that if he had not been chased in hot pursuit, he had not been on a real tour. He also would not let his drivers drop below 100 MPH on the Autobahns.)

First Clobber

One of my earlier incidents, read "clobber", a formal detention, was in the fall of 1967. The Soviets had invaded Czechoslovakia. There were temporary restriction areas (TRAs) all over the map of East Germany. My assignment this trip was to probe the exits of the Berlin-Helmstedt Autobahn to the South to see if we couldn't get down there to get a better look at what was going on. I was in the Jeep Wagoneer with Stan at the wheel. (Stan was a tall, lanky Missouri farm boy who used to drive in destruction derbies. He was a natural behind the wheel. Had no fear of anything and was absolutely confident in his skills at handling the car.) Every exit was marked with a mission restriction sign and many had armed troops blocking the exits. About half way to the border with West Germany, we picked up a BMW 3200 coupe on our tail. We knew this vehicle to be kind of a high level "queen bee" nark because of its rapid acceleration and high top speed. We continued on, checking each exit all the way to the 5 Km border closed area then turned around and headed back east. As we continued along, the BMW stayed tight on our tail. As we speeded up, so did it. As we passed cars, so did it. When we slowed down behind a truck, it also slowed down. Finally, getting tired of this "mickey mouse" stuff, I told Stan to really step on it. We took the left lane and surged way ahead of the BMW. It sped up and soon was right on our tail again, even closer this time. Then, still in the passing lane, I switched off our tail and brake lights and told Stan to tromp on the brakes. We skidded to a quick halt leaving long skid marks on the Autobahn. Stan was able to keep the Wagoneer straight in our lane as we came to a full stop. The BMW was not as fortunate. It skidded all over the lane, not being able to go around us, it crashed into the tow hook on our rear bumper. The damage to the front end of the BMW was not that bad. It could still be driven. But from then on, it stayed a respectful distance behind us all the way back to the Bridge. By this time, I figured my mission was complete. It was dark and we were not going to get off the Autobahn headed south anyway. So, we came back to Berlin. When we got across the Glienicke Bridge from Potsdam to Berlin, I had Stan stop and took a look at our rear end. To my surprise I found a trophy of our encounter with the BMW: the chrome ring of the front parking/signal light was hanging on the tow hook of our rear bumper. We drove to the residence of Colonel Puchrik, our Air Team Chief and presented him with this trophy. He had had encounters with this particular nark vehicle. He got a big kick out of our story and the trophy. But, I was to pay for this bit of frivolity the next trip out.

Again with Stan, but this time in a Ford police interceptor sedan, we had been down in the southeastern part of the DDR getting some close-up shots of the Soviet columns of military vehicles; FROG missile launcher/transporters, tanks on low boy transporters, armored personnel carriers on transporters and all sorts of support vehicles including ambulances returning from Czechoslovakia.



It had been a good, busy two-day tour. We were tired and starting to relax as we headed up route 2 from the Berliner Ring Autobahn back to Potsdam. Cresting a slight hill, we could see ahead of us what appeared to be an accident scene. There was a bus crosswise in the road. There were people standing all around the bus. We saw two or three other vehicles at odd angles on the shoulders and even into the ditches on either side of the road. More people were standing among these vehicles. As we got closer, it became clear to me what this was. Vopos had stopped the bus, made the people get out and then stopped some passing cars and made the people stand in places that made it impossible for us to pass. It was a roadblock specifically staged to "clobber" us! They had been laying for us! I almost felt honored. Stan was ready to jump the ditch and go around this faked accident scene. I quickly concluded that we very likely would kill some innocent East German civilians or also quite possibly hit a tree in trying to get around them. We were "clean" and in an open area anyway. So, I told Stan to stop. As soon as we did, a big, old American Mercury sedan from nowhere pulled right up behind us. Another nark car, this one a white Chevrolet Impala, pulled in front of us then backed right up to our bumper. We knew these cars as the narks' heavy metal used exclusively for physically blocking our big Fords. There we sat. The Vopos on the scene had everybody get back into the bus and into their cars and they all drove off. Now it looked like the narks had clobbered us all on their own. We would not talk to the Vopos or the narks except to demand that a Soviet officer be called. Soon two Soviet UAZ 69 jeeps inched their way into the front and rear of our Ford replacing the nark cars. Now it was just us and the two Soviet jeeps. It looked like the Soviets had clobbered us by themselves. The narks and the Vopos had left. After about two hours, another UAZ 69 arrived with an officer from the Potsdam Kommandatura. The Soviet officer took our passes and ordered us to follow him to the Kommandatura. At the Kommandatura we cooled our heels for another couple of hours before I was ushered in for an audience with the Potsdam Kommandant, a Soviet colonel. The colonel sternly lectured me on the dangers of high speed driving. Told me he had reports of my speeding on the Autobahn down in the southern area. He was militarily correct and rather polite. I returned the courtesy, but told him that some hooligans had blocked the road and interfered with our progress in violation of the Hubner-Malinin agreement which granted us free travel throughout the Soviet occupied zone of Germany. He ignored that and further cautioned me against driving too fast in the future. After the lecture, which lasted about 15 minutes, he dismissed me and said we were free to go. This was my first detention and clearly was pay back for the fun we had with the BMW coupe the week before.

Col Grishel', Deputy SERB Chief



Finsterwalde

This tour was also with Stan in a Ford police interceptor sedan. It was very foggy - no visibility at all. Our objective was to check the status of a SA-3 SAM site we knew was under construction some 4 km. west of the airfield. Was it operational already? We were certain we had gotten to the area clean - no narks on our tail, no one had spotted us in the immediate area - we were sure. Waiting for daylight and for the fog to lift, we backed into a heavily wooded spot hidden from the road and out of sight from the trail we came in on. As we're drinking Russian tea and munching black bread sandwiches which Dagmar had made for us at the Potsdam House, we hear a moped put-putting along the trail. We freeze. We're sure it will not stop, however, as there is no way anyone knows we are there. We're sure it will keep on going past our spot. But no, it stops right in front of us! We're still certain no one can see us. But somehow this Vopo on the moped, as if by some sixth sense, comes right toward us! Before he has a chance to block us, we jump into the Ford and bust out past him. We leave him - no problem, but the long trek in and our objective are all wasted. I just have to salvage something out of the situation. As we're moving out, I check the map and find a trail that runs north-south right along the eastern perimeter of the SA-3 site. So as not to waste all our efforts thus far, I figure we'll do a quick drive-by to visually check the status of the site. We circle around and come in from the south. We find the track and are heading north. It is deeply rutted and very muddy. Stan keeps the speed up so we don't bog down. As we approach the

southeast corner of the site, we see a Soviet guard with an AK-47 in the port position in the middle of the track. Stan looks at me. I tell him, "Don't stop!" Stan down shifts the 390 - it still had four on the floor - and accelerates. The guard hears the roar of the big V-8 and sees the big Ford bearing down on him, he realizes that we are not going to stop or swerve out of his way, so he jumps to the side just in time to save his life. Stan keeps up the momentum as the Michelin mud and snow tires kick up mud and turf. About 150 yards farther down the track, near the front gate to the site, stands a second Soviet trooper in the middle of the track with an AK-47. Same thing, only this time, seeing what had happened to his comrade,



he jumps out of the way before we get to him. I take a quick look at the site as we speed by and see the LOW BLOW tracking/guidance radar up, but can't see any missiles in the revetments. Breathing a quick sigh of relief, we pick up a track leading to the black top road leading north and away. As we approach the road, we see a GAZ 66 truck and an UAZ 69 jeep with several Soviet troops dismounted blocking the road. With adrenalin still pumping and the glow of satisfaction of our earlier successful escape, we are not going to stop. Stan has no trouble whipping the Ford around the GAZ 66 jumping the ditch and scattering the troopers who dive smartly out of our way. As we pass by the jeep, we see a Soviet officer yelling and gesticulating to the troopers toward our pathway, ordering them to throw themselves in front of the Ford to block us. Taking a quick glance at the

roaring Ford, they, to a man, freeze in place - don't budge an inch. So much for strict Soviet obedience and iron discipline in the service of mother Russia. We zip by, jump the ditch back onto the road, and speed away expecting to be chased. But, it was a clean getaway. This time I was certain we had tweaked the nose of the bear too sharply. Taking a very circuitous route leading nowhere, and after putting several miles between us and the site, we duck into some thick woods and have our second cup of tea and some more black bread sandwiches while the dust settles. I never heard a word about this incident my whole four-year tour of duty at the Mission. However, a few years later in Moscow, at an attaché function, a Soviet officer from UVS, our Moscow attaché go between with the Ministry of Defense, Colonel Tikhomirov, referred to me once as the "Graf von Finsterwalde" and chuckled, possibly a reference to this incident in my KGB dossier, who knows?



Col Puchrik, Col Pinchuk & Col Grishel' at Potsdam House
(Soviet LTC name unknown)

Cochstedt

This tour was with Ben Kutz. We got into our OP in the dark and were hunkered down having some Russian tea and black bread sandwiches which Dagmar had made for our "Kiste" at the Potsdam House. Cochstedt was a prepared grass airstrip, which we had driven several times when it was unoccupied to check the length and condition of the runway. This time we knew the field was occupied and we were in a draw between the inner and outer marker beacons to the east of the grass strip. Having covered the windshield and grill and headlights of the Ford police interceptor with GI blankets to lessen the chances of being identified from a distance, we keep a close lookout for any intruders. While enjoying breakfast and quietly chatting the time away, we're suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a lone Soviet trooper. He's as shocked as we are. He stops short in his tracks and points at us calling out: "Shpiony!" 'spies!'. I reply: "Kak shpiony? My to'lko zavtrakaem." 'What do you mean spies? We are just having breakfast.' The trooper, somehow not convinced, turns and runs toward the inner marker beacon van. We know it's time to leave. We tear the blankets off the front of the car and dive in. Ben gets rolling in short order. (Ben was a perfectionist with a car. He always thought ahead anticipating every eventuality. He never let

anyone who looked the least bit hostile get a wheel on our car. Once at the Pasewalk radar site some Soviet guards jumped in front of us in an attempt to block us. Ben puts the Ford in reverse and does a sliding 180 on dry pavement, a “bootlegger’s jog” without losing any speed or forward momentum. The maneuver was so spectacular that the Soviets just stopped and watched in awe.) Back to Cochstedt: Since it’s still dark and since we had spent a lot of time and effort getting to the area, and hoping to salvage something out of this effort, I decide to circle around and maybe catch some activity after all. As we’re tracking around the fields out of sight of the airfield, we come upon a Schlagbaum (barrier pole) across our track with a fence preventing circumnavigation. I get out of the car to raise the barrier. No luck. It was fastened down and locked in place. As I’m struggling with the barrier, a Soviet UAZ 69 jeep races up to the barrier. So there we are nose to nose. The Soviet officer in the jeep jumps out, draws a pistol, points it at me and shouts: “Stoi!” ‘Halt!’ I ignore him and jump back into the car ducking down below the dash just in case he was serious. The Soviet driver gets out of the jeep and is somehow able to get the barrier up. He and the officer jump back into the jeep and charge toward us. Ben does not have to be told what to do. He has the Ford in reverse and picks up speed. He checks to see if he can swing the car around in a “bootlegger’s jog” so we can leave the area facing forward. Not a chance! The track is a narrow muddy farm road with deep water-filled ditches on either side. The Soviet jeep gains on us as Ben considers the turn. Seeing this, Ben floors the police interceptor in reverse carefully keeping it on the narrow muddy track and flat runs away from the UAZ. When we reach the black top road, it is no longer a contest. The Ford comes alive and we are long gone before the Soviets hit the hard surface road. This was the first time we had the opportunity to demonstrate that the big American Ford could outrun a Soviet jeep in reverse. Needless to say, we left Cochstedt for another day.

Neuruppin with Col Roche & Ben Kutz

It was the second day of an orientation tour for my boss, the new Air Team Chief, Col Bill Roche in the back seat. Ben Kutz was at the wheel of our Air Team modified full-sized Ford police interceptor. We had been up north checking the flight activity from airfields at Rechlin-Laerz, Neu Brandenburg, Rostock, and Wittstock. We had overnighted in sleeping bags in the woods and were more or less on the way home. It was a smooth trip. Not too much activity but a nice “Here’s where we go and this is how we do it” tour. Nothing scary. I thought we should show the boss how we checked on the progress of the new SA-3 SAM sites being constructed just west of the major Soviet airfields in East Germany. Neuruppin was not a high priority airfield. It was too hard to catch any good coverage of flying activity without penetrating the permanent restricted area (PRA) around the airfield, but we had been able to get a pretty good look at the SA-3 site being built. I found a nice road in that would take us to a trail just east of the site. As we reached the trail, due to recent heavy rain, it quickly turned into a deeply rutted and very muddy tank trail. Some of the mud puddles looked like small lakes. Ben worked his way in very carefully.

Knowing we were getting close to the site, he took it easy so as not to make any more noise than necessary. As we eased into a very large water filled mud puddle in the track, the Ford suddenly became mired in the deep mud and the wheels just spun with the underbelly of the car settling on the high center. We were hopelessly stuck. Bill and I jumped out of the car to help Ben with the winch. This was a German hand winch with about 100 feet of cable. We hooked one end of the cable on a tow hook welded to the rear bumper and the other end around a nearby tree. We soon had the car out of the mud hole and were in the process of putting everything back into the trunk



when a Soviet ZiL 157 6X6 truck from an anti-aircraft artillery deployment pulled up in front of us. As the truck stopped, two rows of Soviet troopers jumped out of the back and proceeded zombie-like toward us. As the first two soldiers came along the rear side of our car, I had just gotten the last piece of gear into the trunk and slammed it shut. I looked up at the young Russian boy’s face closest to me and said: “Ochen’ zharko, ne pravdo li?” (Really hot, isn’t it?) hoping to ease the tension. He looked more curious than hostile. He paid no attention to me and slowly kept on shuffling to our rear. At this point, a Soviet UAZ 69 jeep with officers on board came upon the scene. The officers jumped out of the jeep and ordered the troopers to block us. By this time we were back in the Ford. Ben whipped it around

scattering the troopers who jumped out of the way of the roaring Ford as it spun around to head away from the site. We were back on the same muddy trail we had come in on, but now we had the Soviet jeep hot on our tail. The UAZ 69 was no match for the Ford as far as speed goes, but the track was very muddy and had those same deep, water filled puddles. As we hit a mud hole, the Ford would sputter and cough while slowing down. The Soviets would gain on us. Then, when they hit the puddle, they would slow down and we'd increase our lead. We'd almost flood out, then surge ahead. The momentum of the big Ford carried us thru the mud. They'd hit the mud hole and the jeep almost stalled out and on like that. This went on for 5 or 6 mud puddles. Then, finally, as I looked back, I saw the Soviet jeep hit a particularly deep mud puddle with a big splash which obscured the vehicle, but this time it didn't come out! The Russian jeep evidently flooded out as it just sat there in the mud hole. Breathing a big sigh of relief, we sped away from the area and quietly settled down in an obscure spot in the woods several kilometers away and had a snack of Russian tea and black bread sandwiches. As we relaxed, I recall Bill Roche laughingly remarking: "Paul, that was pretty impressive, but what're you going to do for an encore?" Thus ended the orientation tour for my new boss.

Magdeburg with Stan

There was a thin layer of new snow on the ground. Light snow was still falling as Stan and I tracked down into the southwestern part of the DDR south of Magdeburg. The snow together with some fog reduced our visibility to near zero-zero. I don't recall our specific objective for the day, but due to the weather, we were in no particular hurry. As Stan came around a corner after leaving a small village, the Ford police interceptor went into a skid. Evidently there was black ice under the snow. As luck would have it, there happened to be a small Barkas van directly in the path of our skid. We were not going very fast, but there was enough momentum to pin the little van against a tree across the shallow ditch alongside the road. The Ford suffered slight damage. A headlight was broken and the left front fender was dented a little. The little Barkas van, however, was pretty well squashed. There were two East German civilians in the van. As the two occupants of the van got out, we noticed that the passenger had sustained a head cut that was bleeding profusely. Since we were not in a sensitive area and still had our equipment well buttoned up, we decided to see what we could do to help the injured man. We pulled out our first aid kit and, as we were treating the head wound, a crowd from the nearby village gathered around the scene. I had paid the driver of the van the 2,000 East Marks which we carried for just such eventualities for the damages to the van before the crowd had gathered. He seemed satisfied. The van probably belonged to the local LpG (the East German version of a collective farm) anyway. The gathering villagers were just curious. No accusations or threats were made. My plan was to continue on our way after we were sure that the guy was going to be alright. As we were about to depart, a Vopo vehicle arrived upon the scene and pulled up right in front of our Ford. The Vopos, seeing that we had patched up the injured man and were not trying to escape, were not hostile. They radioed for an ambulance to take the injured man to a hospital. The villagers told the Vopos all about the accident. Although, still not hostile, the Vopos would not agree to let us leave the area. At this point I demanded that they call for a Soviet officer from the nearest Kommandatura. That turned out to be Magdeburg. It took the Soviets about 2 hours to arrive from the Kommandatura. On the scene they listened to my story and looked the Ford and the van over very carefully. I told the officer that, since the injured man had been taken care of and, that since we had paid for the damages to the van, we would now be on our way. The Soviet officer, a captain, insisted that our car was not safe to drive. He would not let us go. We kept haggling for long time. It seemed that he was about to give in and let us go, but then decided that we had to follow him to the Kommandatura. It was getting dark by this time (the days are very short in the winter). The Soviet officer said we could not drive with only one headlight. He then took our passes and led us to the Kommandatura in Magdeburg. Inside the Kommandatura, a shabby office with a coal burning stove for heat, (in typical Russian style, the place was way overheated). Stan was made to sit in the outer office while I was escorted into the kommandant's office. The Soviet captain who had escorted us there tried to call the Soviet External Relations Branch (SERB) office in Potsdam to find out what to do with us. There were no charges. We were not accused of anything. Try and try as he might, the captain could not get thru to Potsdam. He became very embarrassed and frustrated. Finally after about an hour's effort he got thru to Col Grishel', the deputy chief of SERB, Igor's and my "old buddy" (a few weeks earlier we had taken Col Grishel' on an unofficial tour of the Berlin girlie clubs – he had dismissed his GRU lieutenant and tried to take all the pretty Schatzies home with him). After the captain explained to Col Grishel' what had happened, the colonel ordered him to let us go. I told the captain to give my regards to Col Grishel'. The captain then gave us our passes and said we were free to go. Since Magdeburg was in a permanent

restricted area (PRA) and since I wanted to show that we Americans followed the rules, I insisted that we be escorted out of the PRA to the Helmstedt Autobahn. Reluctantly the captain ordered a sergeant to lead us to the Autobahn in an UAZ 69 jeep. We returned to the Potsdam House late that night and chalked the day off as interesting experience, but we had lost a full touring day.

Conclusion

Each trip out was filled with adventure. There are too many incidents to recap here. We once blew an engine near Zerbst airfield. We were towed away to a neutral location by an East German tractor. Another time, we were towed out of a snowdrift by a Soviet tank commander in a jeep. We once got swamped in the middle of a peat bog. Got stuck in a pig pen. Encountered wild boar while in the sleeping bag. Skidded on ice and buried two East Germans in a snow-filled ditch, then pulled them out unhurt, gave them a few packs of Winstons and continued on our way (We carried a few cartons for just such eventualities.). Were shot at while lost at an unknown Soviet installation near Rechlin-Laerz.

Running around the countryside playing games with the Soviets was so much fun that I extended for a fourth year. In this assignment I got to do things with cars for which, when I was in high school, the authorities wanted to put me in jail. When Col Puchrik came along on a tour he used to remark: "Just think, we get paid for doing this." On a serious note, however, I believe the USMLM presence in East Germany helped maintain the peace and, by demonstrating American resolve to the Soviets, played some part in our winning the Cold War. I am also convinced that in a small way we helped keep the spark of freedom alive among the Germans living in this communist part of the country. The USMLM Association, much like the BIA, has a very interesting web site and we also have periodic reunions to keep in touch. <http://www.usmlm.org/home/>

