

### XXIII. BERLIN AND THE MPS

The 100th Division's days were numbered. It eventually went home in December, and was officially deactivated in January 1946, but without many of us who didn't have enough service points for discharge. On October 12, 1945 I found myself, along with a few other 100th Division veterans, on the way to Hofgeismar, near Kassel, a day's journey north on the *autobahn*. We had been transferred to the 78th Infantry Division, whose immediate destiny lay in Berlin, where it was to relieve the 82nd Airborne division—which had in its turn relieved the 2nd Armored Division, the first American unit in Berlin.

The 78th Division's Military Police Platoon was being beefed up into a Company for the Berlin assignment, and I found myself one of the recruits for this duty. The qualifications seemed to be: combat infantry experience, over six feet tall, and few enough service points to ensure some months of availability. At least those were the qualifications all the newcomers shared. I qualified on all counts, and so was off on about six months of the most bizarre and fascinating life I'd had in the Army—and, to be truthful, before or since.

Our first duty as new MPs was some rather cursory orientation and training at 78th Division headquarters. Shortly, however, we were sent as advance party, a month ahead of the rest of the Division, to be attached to the 82nd Airborne Division for further training and to learn our way around the city. We were issued .45 caliber automatic pistols, ever infamous for their short range and inaccuracy at any range. We also got night sticks, arm bands, and gaudily marked helmet liners along with our training.

Berlin in the Autumn of 1945 was kind of a wild place, and there were lots of tensions in the air. The U.S., British, and French occupation zones of the city were parts of an island in a sea of Russians, dramatically isolated from the rest of their respective military occupation forces. Although we had permanent passes, in four languages, to go anywhere in the city officially, in point of fact we didn't. Visits to the French and British Sectors were rare, and to the Russian non-existent. In fact, in those early days stories of G.I.s who had ventured into the Russian Sector, only to disappear and never be heard from again, were persistent. There were always feelings in that atmosphere of fascination, apprehension, stress. You felt you were somewhere centrally significant, and that you could never know what would happen next.

There seemed to be a general, if unspoken, consensus that Berlin had been the life center of the evil that had brought us all so far from home and caused us and the world so much misery. After all, one could easily go and look at the ruins over the

bunker where Hitler himself probably lay dead. So there was the feeling among the occupying troops—particularly the Russians and Americans—that anything went that one could get away with. *Amis*, as American occupation troops were called by Berliners, were also known as “Russians with pressed pants”—just as wild, but neater looking. There was a tale in circulation that some of the 2nd Armored Division troops had sold a Sherman tank to some Russian adventurers in the early occupation days not so long past.

Another thing about Berlin was that, even though bombing damage was widespread, it is a large, cosmopolitan city where a lot of things could go on without attracting immediate, widespread public notice. And even though there were terrible shortages of things like soap, food, tobacco, fuel, and even drinking water, there were a lot of things available that most of us hadn't seen for a long time—if ever, for some. Things like nightclubs, a large population imbalance in favor of young, mostly attractive, women, down to little things like barbers and tailors—and relatively affluent people who were quite ready to sell fine cameras and jewelry for what seemed to us like nearly nothing.

Cigarettes were the major medium of exchange. The city was flooded with occupation currency artificially pegged at ten marks to the dollar. Through an apparent oversight—which was rectified soon after we got there—this inflated paper could be sent home at that par value. To show what this meant, we were allowed to buy a carton of cigarettes a week at the PX for 50¢ a carton. Then these could be sold on the black market for ten marks—one dollar—each *cigarette*, thus turning 50¢ into \$200 in the twinkling of an eye. You could buy a Leica or Contax camera, or a diamond ring, for three or four cartons of cigarettes. You could also turn your 50¢ investment into \$200 cash, real money, and send it home—until the rules were changed and we were no longer allowed to send home any more money than the net amount of our pay each month. The going rate was one mark per cigarette in the rest of American-occupied Germany, but Berlin was special, and wide open in many other ways too, I was to see much of that changed in the next five months.

The 82nd Division MPs were quite professional, real veterans at their job, and they needed to be. The airborne troops had a reputation to maintain of being rough and tough—like the Marines—and they were hard to handle off duty. It was not true that the great majority of them were bona-fide combat veterans. Paratroopers' casualty lists were appallingly long, and the few true veterans left were happy to be left alone in peace—which was true of most combat survivors—but the replacements felt constrained at any opportunity to demonstrate how macho they could be. Thus the month of orientation we spent on patrols with the 82nd was eventful.

As I've indicated, it was a time of nervousness. One Saturday afternoon we got word that a riot was in progress at the 1936 Olympic Stadium, in the British Sector. There was a football game going on between the 82nd and another Division—most of the best professional and college athletes were in the Services in those days, so these were good games, well attended—and trouble had broken out in the stands with some Russian spectators. We piled into our trucks and rushed off, heavily armed and outfitted, to find—nothing. There was a large crowd, including many Russian soldiers, but for the most part everyone seemed good-natured, if a little boisterous. Someone

had apparently witnessed a minor argument and, assuming the worst, had pushed the panic button. We stayed until the game was over anyway, and I got to meet my first Russians. They didn't seem very friendly, but they were certainly not antagonistic either.

#### **XIV. MP ROUTINE**

Eventually the rest of the 78th Division moved in, the 82nd moved out, and we settled in to a routine that was to last for most of us until our service-point level was enough to get us home. The MP Company lived in a small garden apartment complex of row houses on a quiet, tree-lined street in a pleasant, mostly undamaged section of the city. Across the street was a parking lot that had become our motor pool. I was designated a Jeep driver and was assigned my own Jeep, for which I became responsible. We patrolled in these, in two-man teams, every other day from about 4:00 p.m. to 12:45 a.m. Thus we had 40 idle hours for every eight that we worked, or so it seemed much of the time. We had to service and maintain our vehicles, keep our living quarters clean, and perform other small military chores, but our off-patrol duties were not onerous. On patrol, we rode the streets looking for traffic violations, made the rounds of drinking spots to put in our appearance, and did what sometimes seemed to be our most important duty, enforcing the midnight curfew imposed on all 78th Division troops. This we did mostly by being a presence, though often we'd give an errant potential violator a ride to his billet. We surely were not strained by over-work, and we began to make varied use of our off hours. Because of our Jeeps (which we could use as we wanted, not just on duty) and the nature of our work, we had total mobility and got to know our part of the city very well. This gave us full access to the three most popular