

Ft. Devens

By Allen Lawless

The Pontiac made it all the way and I found my unit – the 2nd Battalion of the US Army Security Agency School Brigade. I reported in, signed in off leave, and then checked in over at the company to which I was assigned. Most of each company consisted of students, but I was assigned to the barracks room on the third floor, somewhat removed from the rest of the student population. I guess they figured I might be carrying some kind of disease.

And with that and the idea I'd had since I first saw that Army band at Ft. Jackson, I began to make plans of somehow making it over to the band. It took a couple of weeks to realize that Ft. Devens had a band, too. In fact, Joanne Berben, one of the female soldiers with whom I worked in the dining facility, was married to a percussionist in the band. I began asking questions about how best to get in the band and they told where to find the band so I could ask.

I went over one afternoon and explained my plight. I talked to a nice guy by the name of Bill Chambers, who also played euphonium in the band. He in turn talked to the supply sergeant and I was allowed to sign out a euphonium to practice prior to taking the audition that would hopefully spring me from the dining facility and into the band.

A few weeks later, I took the Watkins-Farnum audition with the bandmaster of the 18th Army Band, a rather imposing older man by the name of Chief Warrant Officer Howard Shaffer.

I realized after all this that I should've looked into the Army band program before I had enlisted as a cook. I had heard of the military music programs since a high school acquaintance named Tim Collins had told me that he was looking into it. The truth is, I was afraid of actually having to audition and that, coupled with the facts that I just wasn't that serious about music and was more interested in smoking dope in the parking lot (without being known as a druggie), well, I thought I would just pass on the music thing.

During my initial discussions with the recruiter, I had expressed an interest in cartography/mapmaking. About the closest thing he had toward that angle had something to do with the artillery and being a forward observer. I said, fine, let's look into it. And then he informed me that my less-than-stellar vision precluded me from that particular job. Oh well. I learned later in my career by being in close contact with an artillery battalion that the artillery wasn't necessarily the element in which I wanted to serve anyway.

Just a brief word on my fascination with maps – they had always been interesting to me and I think this was part of my urge to leave Michigan and see what else was out there. My mother called it "Wanderlust" and she said I got it from my father who had evidently also exhibited some of those traits. I didn't press her for the rest of the story. In my off time from the mess hall, I took a number of correspondence courses that dealt with topographical

maps and photo reconnaissance. It was entertaining.

At any rate, I passed the audition and was jubilant. (I later learned that Sergeant Bill Chambers was the senior euphoniumist and drum major with the 18th Army Band. For whatever reason he took a liking to me and coached me on the audition.) His coaching certainly did help, but I still remember struggling a bit with 3/8 time.

The next step was to get all this documented. My plan was to take this letter and go to my commander, after just a few weeks into my brand-new assignment in the 2nd Battalion Dining Facility, and politely inform him that I didn't want to cook in his mess hall.

The admin guys at Battalion HQ laughed at me when I told them I didn't want to cook for a bunch of secret-type guys in a very exotic sounding place like Ft. Devens. Nope, they said, you're gonna have to put in your time 'cause you did the crime – you enlisted as a "spoon". Uncle Sugar spent all those bazillions of dollars teaching you how to burn food, so you're gonna have to do that for your time of enlistment (3 years). After you're done and if you want, you can go down there again and audition and reenlist for the band. So that ended that. I was resigned to working in the dining facility so I did my best to deal with the situation.

Let's put some time perspective on this – I enlisted on 17 Jan 75. I went to Ft. Jackson, SC for basic training and cook school, finishing my training in late April 75. I arrived at Ft. Devens in early May. The Army policy was to promote Privates in the grade of E-1 automatically to Private E-2 after 4 months of service. So I was now a mosquito-winged Private E-2 and destined for duty in the dining facility.

I began working the short order line in the "dining facility" (big fancy term for "mess hall"). My immediate supervisor was Specialist 5 Jim X. Now Jim had some problems, but I won't go into that right now. We roomed together in the barracks and he confided in me enough to know that his problem would be an Army show-stopper. We had it easy – we'd go into work at 0730 and we'd be out of there by 1600 at the latest. It was our job to make sandwiches, prepare grilled burgers (for a while we were force-issued these nasty burgers made from vegetable protein that smelled like dog vomit), hot dogs, and grilled cheese. French fries. Potato chips, salads, jello, yellow cake. Pretty dismal fare by today's standards. The Dining Facility Manager (big fancy term for "mess sergeant") was SFC Marvin Miller, a big guy who was approaching retirement. I distinctly remember overhearing him when he responded to SP6 Saldi, a shift leader, when Saldi was informing Miller of a problem, "Jesus Christ, Saldi, can't you see I'm tryin' to sell my BOAT??"

The rest of the dining facility was manned by five civilian cooks, one of which had been a dining facility manager and had retired out of the very dining facility we were working in. There were a few military cooks such as myself, and civilian KPs. I'll never forget the civilian cooks. Despite my interests elsewhere, I learned a great deal about cooking from them. I even grew to enjoy it after awhile.

There was Dave Marcotte, who was the older brother I never had.

Dave was a Nam veteran who had served as a LRRP infantryman. He told some pretty fantastic stories, but omitted some of the tragic ones. There was Henry, a gentle giant of a man, also an Army retiree. There was Mrs. Waterman, an older, gracious lady who was kindly tolerant of us younger types. There was Mr. Simpson, the retired mess sergeant, and there was another man named Joe. He drove a new Ford pickup truck.

Our mission was to provide food service support for the US Army Security Agency School Brigade's Second Battalion. The school trained their students in high-speed Morse intercept, radio repair, and other intelligence-type missions. When the students finished their course of instruction, they'd head off to some really exotic places like Sinop, Turkey (on the coast of the Black Sea); Shemya, Alaska (the real last frontier because this place had an airstrip, barbershop, and a small PX); and Field Station Berlin (lots more on Berlin later). Very little else. The really odd thing about this was, I and one other guy in the First Battalion dining facility, were the only two ASA cooks in the entire School Brigade. He and I had had Top Secret Background Investigations done on us by the FBI. Prior to enlisting and even afterwards they kept brow-beating me, "If you've ever done drugs, even smoked pot, you'd better admit it now." Finally I did admit that I'd taken great delight in my high school days in occasionally going out to a car in the parking lot and smoking a reefer. Then I was subjected to "random" urinalysis examinations. They'd call me and I'd go and urinate in a bottle. Of course, my pot-smoking was done completely on an experimental basis and it had been several years since I'd last tried it. They didn't know that and wanted to be sure that my pot-smoking was indeed experimental.



I went to whiz in the bottle and they never found anything because I didn't smoke anything but cigarettes in those days.

The nifty thing was, I had an ASA patch on the left shoulder of my cook whites and on my cotton fatigues, which I never wore but kept starched stiff as a board. I was proud of that patch, even though I'd done nothing to be proud of. I mean, burning food isn't something to be proud of and while I had this high-speed Top Secret security clearance, I certainly wasn't privy to any classified information. I just didn't pal around with any of the students.

One day I was over at the cafeteria. Feeling a bit affable on this fine day, I approached a fellow soldier who sported a very short haircut. I asked him, quite innocently, if he had recently completed basic training. He sneered at me and said, "I got more time in the goddamned chow line than you have in the Army." I couldn't argue with that analysis, so I just sneaked away and said no more.

Right on the corner of Jackson Road, the road that came in off Route 2, and Givry Street, the terminus of Jackson Road, was the Ft. Devens Guest House. Next to it was a recreation center which featured a number of pool tables. It was usually pretty quiet in there and I would go up there to shoot pool from time to time. I also shot pool in the barracks, but this was much more competitive. The winner of each game stayed on the table while the challenger would rack up the next game. Nobody played for money. This was strictly for fun, but it was competitive. I became

a better pool shooter, but there were still lots of guys who were better.

One of the authorized solicitors was an insurance salesman. He was always very nice to talk to and one day I asked him about his business. It didn't take him long to sell me a whole life policy. I didn't keep in very long.

Life in those early days on Ft. Devens was pretty easy. I went to work, did my job, and found things to do to occupy my free time. While the Pontiac was holding up pretty well, there was a requirement to register the car on post. Registration required a Massachusetts vehicle inspection and I had no confidence that the car would pass such an inspection (though I never even tried). Without the state inspection, I couldn't register the car on post. Without registration, I couldn't properly enter Ft. Devens at either the Jackson Road gate off Route 2 or the Ayer Main Gate. So that left only the Shirley gate (unmanned) to exit and enter the post. The Shirley gate was closed after a certain time, so I had to plan my off-post activities accordingly.

After some months of this kind of stuff and not getting into any trouble about it, I finally gave the car away to a guy I was working with in the dining facility. Dave Boudreau's brother needed a car and didn't care what kind of shape it was in. So now I didn't have a car at all, but I flew home for Christmas a month or so later and bought a 1973 Nova. The Nova was in good shape (it at least had a suspension system that worked), but it didn't have power brakes. I would have to just about stand on the brakes to get the car to stop. How somebody could have ordered this car without power brakes was beyond me, but the price was right. The car also featured a 305 cu. in. V-8, automatic transmission, and no radio.

Dad and I drove the car back to Ft. Devens together and he stayed in the Ft. Devens Guest House. We took a few trips in it, one of them being to Cape Cod. I had been down there a few months earlier since a good high school friend of mine named Dave York was a Coast Guardsman on a lighthouse out in Buzzard's Bay just off West Falmouth. Now Dave happened to be a very talented trumpet player, had in fact studied with the principal trumpet player of the Detroit Symphony, but had partied his way out of a full-ride scholarship to Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti.

While we didn't visit Dave this time, we did just drive around and eventually stopped in someplace and got some clam chowder. Dad seemed to have a pretty good time. When we got back to Ft. Devens, we went and saw a movie at the post theater, played 9 holes of golf at a local course that was extremely hilly, and took another side trip into Boston where we walked the Freedom Trail. On the way back from that, we stopped off in Concord and saw the site where the American Revolution started. While Dad was no history buff, he seemed to enjoy himself for a few days before I took him to Logan Airport for his flight home.

I seemed to be filled with a desire to see as much of the surrounding area as possible. I took trips up into New Hampshire, took a drive just barely up into Maine on a cold, rainy day (just to say I'd been there), and also headed back out to western Massachusetts to the Berkshires where I saw the essence of New England. I

had read Norman Rockwell's autobiography *My Adventures as an Illustrator* and while he was still alive, I wanted to see where he called home in his twilight years – an idyllic little town named Stockbridge. I managed to get there and visit the town not long before he died.

I didn't have a lot of money for these little adventures, but they were important for me nonetheless. I had gotten an Amoco credit card for gasoline and it didn't take long for me to get in over my head. I learned a very important lesson about credit cards at that time and vowed never to live above my means. So while that curtailed my travel to some degree, it didn't completely eliminate it.

I eventually moved off the short-order line and became the dining facility storeroom man. It was my job to inventory the foodstuffs that were ordered by the dining facility manager upon arrival and to properly store them. We would get in shipments on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I also ensured that the freezers were thawed out when ice grew within them. We didn't have the modern-day frost-free freezers at that time. So I still had a relatively cushy gig – I worked Monday through Friday from about 0700 to about 1600. It was during this time that I won the Ft. Devens Cook of the Month competition for the first time. Everybody was surprised, not the least myself, since everybody knew I didn't really do any cooking. What did I know about cooking?, they wondered.

Well, if I didn't know from a practical application, I soon got my chance to learn. After about six months as storeroom man, I moved to one of the shifts. Shifts would rotate – my shift and I would come in at 1000 hrs on Monday. We'd work from 1000 to 1900, preparing the supper meal. At 1900, we'd tear down the chow line, clean up, and we'd go home. At 0300 on Tuesday, just a few short hours after we got off work, we'd be back in to prepare the breakfast meal. At 0430, the students would start coming in and we'd better be ready for them since their classes began at 0600.

Following breakfast, which ran from 0430 to 0730, Monday through Friday, we'd tear the chow line down. Of course, the lunch meal was already well under way by the time breakfast ended. At 1000 hours, one of the other shifts was in and both shifts would operate simultaneously in running at least two chow lines (one for a hot meal and the other was short order). The doors would open at 1030 for lunch and would run until 1300, whereupon we'd assist in tearing down the chow lines and then go home.

We'd have the rest of the day off. Since I usually didn't get much rest the night before, I would typically crash the rest of the afternoon, then get up ready for the evening and the next day off.

Thursday morning at 1000, the process would repeat itself.

For awhile, this system of three shifts covering seven days per week, 0300 to 1900 on Monday through Friday, and Saturdays and Sundays running 0600 to 1800, was terrific. You'd get two of three weekends off. But then shortages of personnel forced things to tighten up and we resorted to a two-shift schedule. This meant very long hours at work and not much time for anything else.

After working the rest of 1975, all of 1976 (went to Montreal, Quebec, Canada to see the Olympics over a weekend), and half of 1977, I'd been able to accomplish a few things:

- Was promoted to Private First Class in September 1975.
- Won Ft. Devens Cook of the Month sometime that year.
- Managed to get drunk and get in a hellacious fight with Dave Marcotte, the elder brother I never had, who in addition to his Vietnam service as a LRRP infantryman was a former Golden Gloves boxer. This resulted in me obtaining two shiners that lasted me 3 weeks. Had a hangover for about a month. Dave felt worse about the whole experience than I did. I still dimly remember his wife fussing over me, cleaning me up. That woman was a saint.
- Was promoted to Specialist 4 sometime in early 1976.
- Became a night baker, along with another guy, for a few months. Did this and moonlighted at the Denny's Restaurant in Leominster on a part-time basis. Our cinnamon rolls and donuts were legendary – most of them looked like truck tires.
- Won Ft. Devens Cook of the Month sometime that year.
- Got into a fight on the chow line with a lazy good-for-nothing cook for whom I was getting tired of covering while he flaked out.
- Was promoted to Specialist 5 in mid-1977.
- Won Ft. Devens Cook of the Month an unprecedented third time. I think I'd had the questions memorized by that time.
- Was selected to be one of two cooks to cook breakfast for the Commanding General, U.S. Army Intelligence Service, out of Ft. Huachuca, AZ. We actually packed up our stuff and drove to his quarters where we cooked for him, then cleaned up and left.



Sometime in 1976, probably associated with the deactivation of the Army Security Agency itself and the activation of the Army Intelligence and Security Command, I was reassigned from the 2nd Battalion, U.S. Army Security Agency School Brigade (USASASB) to the 1st Battalion, U.S. Army Intelligence Center and School (USAICS). It meant working in a different, older dining facility a little further south. We cannibalized a couple of stack ovens from a dining facility that wasn't being used further north. Then our lives changed forever when SFC William Walton became our next dining facility manager. His watchword was, "Everything for the troops." Another one was, "Technically, legally..."

Monday night's menu would feature surf & turf, with hand-cut tenderloin steaks. Cutting and trimming the meat was a huge part of Sunday's prep effort. He insisted on a self-serve ice cream bar during lunch. Self-serve just about everything else, too. Our headcount during breakfast was close to 400, lunch would approach 800, and dinner 250. We worked extremely hard, but we knew we were the best dining facility on post, the only other one being the Garrison dining facility.

Not being a real fan of living in the barracks, I shared a house with a couple of compadres. Specialist 4 Randy Hebert, alias "Radar" (a dead ringer for Gary Burghoff of "MASH" fame) and

Ft. Devens

Staff Sergeant Emilio R. Cinco, Jr., technically our shift leader and superior but good friend anyway, and I rented a ramshackle house in downtown Ayer, next to the train tracks. It's true what they say – even though a train rolls through your backyard at 0200, you can get used to it enough that it doesn't wake you up. That lasted a few months, then I rented an apartment in Fitchburg with a good friend, Charlie. Charlie and I had become good friends when I became involved in CB radio and joined "The 10 o'Clock CB Club." We'd all get on our radios and gab away at that time. Then after I became involved with Arnetta, I moved in with her in her apartment in Leominster.

All that changed in mid-1977 when I woke up and realize that my time in the Army was either about to close or I was going to take a major plunge in it. I asked Mr. Simpson, the civilian cook who had retired out of the same dining facility as its dining facility manager, for some guidance. His was simple. He asked me if I enjoyed the Army and if I'd learned anything of use. Besides telling him I'd learned how to get beaten up by a Golden Gloves boxer, I answered in the affirmative – that the Army had been a pretty good experience thus far. He suggested that I stick it out for another enlistment. And that made me think of what the Army had told me when I'd tried to forget about cooking and get into playing the euphonium in an Army band somewhere. Sometime that summer, I reenlisted for the U.S. Army Element School of Music (SOM) Basic Music Course, MOS 02C, euphonium player.

In September, 1977, my daughter Angela was born.