

# Ft. Hood

## March 1982 to December 1982

By Allen Lawless



Things became problematic enough that I was ordered to vacate quarters and send the family back to the States. I complied with this order and the family went back to the States in January, 1982. I remained until March, clearing quarters and preparing for my next assignment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division Band at Ft. Hood, Texas.

I returned back to the States in March, 1982. My sister and my mother drove with me to Texas, taking a few days to get there. This was uncharacteristic for my mother to do this much travel. I daresay she did not travel that far for the rest of her life. When we arrived in the Dallas area, she flew back to Detroit. Terina and I continued on to Ft. Hood.

Upon arrival at Ft. Hood, I wasn't surprised to learn that the band had no idea I was coming. Somebody at DA had dropped the ball, or perhaps, somebody at 2AD slipped up. In any event, I was horrified to find that the building the band worked out of had been condemned some years before. The building, dry as a tinderbox and dating from the early Fifties when it was built as a temporary theater for troops training for duty in Korea, was infested with flying cockroaches. Most of Texas was infested with cockroaches, so I shouldn't have been surprised. But one day when I was attacked by a cockroach, I knew that they meant business.



Now the only person whom I knew who had a motorcycle that was up and running in February of any given year was Tom Frudd. Tom was the husband of Janice, who had babysat me as a child and for whom I read while she babysat. Tom owned a rather large, rather intimidating Harley. As most of us know, Harley owners are extremely particular about their bikes. They don't allow people to touch them (other than those they know and trust) and they certainly don't appreciate it when somebody they barely know allows the bike to drop gently to the ground while precariously coming to a stop at a stop sign, struggling to maintain balance and failing to do so.

Tom had graciously allowed me to practice on his motorcycle for the upcoming road test and I simply wasn't accustomed to the heft of the bike and lost my balance while coming to a stop. The bike wasn't hurt, but that ended my practice for the day. All's well that ends well and I passed my road test (on Tom's bike – I'm sure he was much more nervous than I was).

I had to take care of an unpleasant thing while in Michigan on this brief leave before leaving for Texas. An attorney preserved my testimony to be entered into the court record pursuant to my divorce from Arnetta. It was quite clear that we could not maintain a relationship so it became my less-than-desired task to arrange for the legal split.

The other euphonium player in the band was SP5 Leonard Robinson. I would later serve with Leonard in Berlin, but for now he was a young player without a lot of experience. He recognized his shortcomings and diligently practiced, but he didn't have adequate leadership. Without sounding like I was the gift of all musical gifts to him, I did work with him to help him develop a sound and an acceptable level of technique. I wasn't surprised to learn that he read only treble clef. On this score, I made it clear that he and I would switch folders and pouches in one month. After that period of time, I expected him to read only bass clef and while I did not expect that he would read to the same level as on treble clef, I was confident that in time, he would do fine. And that is indeed what occurred – we switched folders and pouches and he began reading

only bass clef.

My roommate in the billets was SSG Randy Hamilton. Randy and I would serve again with each other in Berlin, but for now, Randy was in a depressed condition. He had suffered yet another divorce from a woman who had insisted on cheating on him and with paying child support for three children from two different mothers, he didn't have a lot of excess cash. This was readily apparent in that he drove a Chevy Vega that looked like somebody had taken it to a demolition derby – as a participant! The car was pretty well trashed and rotted out with rust, so while it ran, everybody knew it wouldn't run forever.



Randy was a very religious person and while he was in a tough financial position at the moment, his difficulties did not result in his forsaking God. Randy told me his story many different times to the point that I would occasionally have to escape the room. Once I went out to my car and fired up the CB radio, intending to talk to whomever I could in much the same way as I had done at Ft. Devens. It wasn't long when an MP pulled up and tapped on my window. He politely informed me that I was not permitted to sit in my car and talk on the CB radio. Completely disgusted by this point, I drove off post and talked anyway. Friggin' MP Nazis.

Friday nights in the springtime featured boxing smokers in the gym. Brigadier General Bahnsen, Assistant Commanding General of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division, acted as emcee for these gladiator-type events. They were every bit as ridiculous as the band being there to support these things. Playing "Rocky" for the 15<sup>th</sup> time was not my idea of fun, especially on a Friday night.

Fridays also featured the weekly Retreat ceremony over at Hell on Wheels (HOW) Field, a smallish, graveled area the size of a large parking lot. We would get suited up in our new BDU uniform (two sets and one BDU field jacket were mandatory for each soldier by June, 1982, and dressing in these uniforms was a new twist from the old fatigue uniform.) The Retreat ceremony was done like many I had done before. However, the inclusion of a wailing siren when the 2AD March was played was new and exciting. According to legend, General Patton of WWII fame was so tone deaf that

he needed a non-musical "trigger" to know that the piece being played was the Division March. This song, originally entitled "Song of the Armored Force" was composed by Patton's wife and initially featured pistol shots and a siren. The march became the official 2AD March, however the pistol shots were removed from the musical score. I guess it was best to do that because replacing horses was getting expensive.

Randy and I worked together in the Operations section. While Randy was the Operations NCO, SP5 Gibson, a sax player, had been in the gig longer and apparently knew everything there was to know. The tiny, cramped office – room enough only for a desk, a file cabinet, and a chair, got stiflingly hot. Writing documents usually resulted in smudged ink because of sweaty hands. But Randy showed me the ropes (this was not my first experience in operations, having done it at Ft. Devens) and I would clean up the mess left by Gibson, mostly because of his laziness.

Randy came down on orders for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Army Band in Heidelberg, Germany. He was anxious to leave Ft. Hood, if for no other reason than to find a better way to live. He left in late summer, 1982, and I took his place in the Operations section. I received no replacement roommate, which suited me just fine. The room was ideal for one – it featured a private bath and was just large enough for me and my stuff – and that wasn't much more than a modest stereo system and my clothes.

At Ft. Hood, a truly dismal place in comparison to Germany, I quickly learned to escape Killeen (the local sewer pit thinly disguised as a town) and see some of the United States that I hadn't seen before. I took some leave money I had cashed in (never having taken leave while in Germany) and bought a new motorcycle, a 1981 Suzuki 650E. I had dreamed of owning a motorcycle for many years and while I was home on a short leave between assignments, I obtained my motorcycle license.

Now in Texas and outfitted with a new motorcycle, I took every available opportunity/free weekend and traveled throughout Texas. No distance was too great. I took the bike down to Big Bend National Park, the distance to which WAS too great. I remember being exhausted, not too far from Ft. Stockton, Texas, out in the middle of nowhere, where I came upon a trailer park. I was looking for a patch of grass to lay out my sleeping bag so I could rest. One fine fellow, seated on

the porch of his trailer, called out to me, “Yo, you lookin’ for anyone?” I responded as politely as I could that I wasn’t looking for anyone in particular, just some place to lay out my sleeping bag. His response was priceless. He said, “Well, (in that soft, slow Texas drawl), Ah wouldn’t do that ‘round cheer. Peoples shoot first and ask questions later. Besides, they’s rattlesnakes all over the place. Ah wouldn’t be laying out no sleeping bag nowheres ‘round cheer.”

I went on my way, but found a nicely manicured small village park where I laid out my sleeping bag and got some rest – until about 2 A.M. I awoke suddenly and became conscious of something watching me. I reached for my Smith & Wesson .38 special revolver and looked up. The desert was located maybe 20 yards from my spot and just into the desert I could see some kind of animal whose eyes were glowing red. It was truly spooky. I just laid there for a time watching this animal and it eventually moved away, deciding eating me might be more trouble than it was worth. I eventually fell asleep again.

Glenn Clokey, a tuba player and a fellow motorcyclist (he owned a Honda Sabre V65, one of those new V-4 engined bikes that everybody was talking about) and I took a weekend trip to Houston. On that Friday night when we arrived and got our motel room, we checked out the local happenings and caught Steve Ray Vaughan’s act. This was before Stevie became famous. There’s something about hearing the blues in Texas. It’s haunting, but raunchy at the same time. There’s no room for pretense and you leave your crap at the door. Nobody wants to hear it anyway.

My inexperience as a rider resulted in Glenn dropping his bike behind me. We were on our way back to Ft. Hood when he called out something to me and I suddenly stopped. He wasn’t prepared for that and slid on some gravel. His bike was a little less pristine after that. I apologized profusely, because I knew how much he treasured his bike, and he acknowledged my apology.

We didn’t ride any more together after that, though. The next year I learned from Leonard Robinson, fellow euphoniumist, that Glenn had drowned in a tragic swimming accident in Belton Lake.

In contrast to parades in New England, parades in Texas were very short. One parade I recall very clearly was all of two blocks long. This parade, which began at noontime on a Saturday, featured a number of motorcyclists most of whom were there to party. In fact we saw plenty of evidence of partying. After we arrived on site at 10 A.M., one could see relatively clean streets with only a few crushed beer cans here and there. By the time the parade ended at 1 P.M., the streets were absolutely covered with crush beer cans. This high rate of alcoholic consumption unquestionably led to an amusing, though somewhat dangerous, situation.

While waiting on the bus for other band members to return from their generous meal (loved that BBQ, beans, and cole slaw), I noticed a Harley parked very close to the bus. Since I was now a licensed, practicing motorcyclist, I took it upon myself to inspect this motorcycle up close and personal. Being relatively unfamiliar with the world of motorcycles, despite racking up a significant number of miles in a short period of time, I was not aware that even touching a piece of ratty electrical tape that hung off an equally ratty-looking

handlebar was tantamount to wishing oneself an early death. Merely putting a finger on this ratty piece of electrical tape elicited a howl and a shriek, whereupon I was verbally accosted by some drunk chick who called me every name in the book. I ignored her, retreating to the sanctity of the bus, yet when Randy came along and was eyeing the same motorcycle I had almost lost my life over, I got up from my bus seat and caught Randy’s eye.

“Randy,” I said, gesturing over at the drunk chick who was still looking at me venomously, “be careful. She bites.”

No sooner were the words out of my mouth when the drunk chick had gotten hold of her “man” (presumably



the ratty electrical tape perpetrator) and convinced him that I was a threat to Biker Society. He began posturing and swearing, threatening to beat me up. Once again I retreated to the sanctity of the bus, laughing the whole time, refusing to mix it up with some drunk dude while I was in uniform.

When we returned to Ft. Hood, I got on my own bike and headed to this town, located not far from College Station. The drunk chick and her “man” were gone. The number of crushed beer cans littering the street had grown to monumental proportions, but at this time of the evening (about 6 P.M.), everybody had pretty much drunk themselves into a stupor. The place was fairly empty.

My sister Terina came to visit me while I was there. I had bought a camera and had become a bit of a photographer. We visited the Texas Ranger Museum up in Waco, Belton Lake, and other local sites.

The highest-paid CQ in the Army was Master Sergeant Bobby Birdwell. MSG Bird was a clarinet player by trade and an individual who was somewhat lost. Bird had a bad heart, couldn't march gigs, smoked, and was overweight to the dangerous point. He didn't have long to retirement, but I feared he would not make it long past retirement before passing on.

Other notable events at Ft. Hood:

- ◆ Studying euphonium with Carlton Morris, co-owner of “The Band Room” in Harker Heights and former Army bandmaster. Carlton refused to accept payment for his instruction, a part of which I still use to this day in my daily practice. Carlton was most influential in my developing a powerful, rich, sonorous sound that has a true core to it, something that had eluded me to that point.
- ◆ Being fortunate in participating in two rehearsals of the Harker Heights Concert Band (conducted by Carlton Morris) in which the conductor and teacher throughout was the venerated Dr. William D. Revelli. While he was remarkably restrained (he was notorious for being rather vocal in addressing musical issues with any given band) he personally singled me out, telling me not to play. I simply couldn't play softly enough for his taste and this lack of control in my playing prompted him to issue a directive – “Don't play!” This was a humbling experience.

- ◆ Taking part in the annual Hell on Wheels Association reunion, which was held at Ft. Hood in 1982. It was an opportunity to meet briefly with former veterans of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division Bands (they had two – one for Combat Command A and one for Combat Command B).
- ◆ Performing as euphonium soloist in the 2AD Band. The bandmaster, WO1 Gareth Mark, was gracious enough to give me room in expanding my potential as a soloist.
- ◆ Taking part in a recruiting trip to Hutchinson, Kansas. I was fortunate in hearing several aspiring young musicians as they auditioned for the Army band program.
- ◆ Running my first half-marathon right on Ft. Hood. My time was a little less than 2 hours.
- ◆ Sampling the good Texas barbecue and Tex-Mex fare.
- ◆ Enduring the brutal heat and humidity of Central Texas.
- ◆ Visiting the LBJ Ranch in the Texas Hill Country and the gravesite of President Johnson on the banks of the Pedernales.
- ◆ Riding in an Abrams M1A1 tank on one of Ft. Hood's tank ranges.
- ◆ And finally, reenlisting for the second time – this time, for an assignment to Berlin, Germany, in the 298<sup>th</sup> Army Band.

The enlisted bandleader of the 2AD Band, Master Sergeant Sam LeClere, desperately wanted me to go on a field problem with the rest of the band. I had somewhat childishly had pointed out that it was my



fervent intention to vacate Ft. Hood as soon as humanly possible. While I had spent just a brief period there lasting less than 9 months, I was intent on leaving. Sam, when presented with the band's next field problem

which was scheduled for early December, 1982, saw an opportunity for me to eat my words. He was serious about it – I think he resented my being able to leave Ft. Hood so quickly when so many other career musicians seemed to rot at Ft. Hood once they landed there. Just to illustrate how awful the facilities were, the very building in which the band operated out of was initially built in 1951 as a theater. It was built to fill a temporary need for the soldiers working at Ft. Hood. Thirty-two years later, the building is not only still in service but had been condemned by the Army Corps of Engineers two years prior. Allegedly, the command was trying to locate another area for the band to work out of, but it never happened when I was there.

Since Sam was so obstinate (curious, because he was generally a very affable sort of man, and a good enlisted bandleader not to mention a very solid trumpet player), I found it necessary to move up my leave a little bit to ensure I would not be taking part in a field problem.

Some notable people I remember: Augie Gonzalez, Melinda Whitman, Henry Busby, Larry Finnen, Walt Captain, Herb Fontenot, Carla Ruffin, Gary Pearce, Jim Spraker, . You can imagine my surprise when I walked in the band hall/dump one day and saw 1SG Billy C. Patterson who was there with his son, trying to get him in the band as an on-the-job-training drummer. I don't think it worked.

In late December, after out-processing, I packed up my motorcycle and put it on a U-Haul trailer, hitched it to my 1978 Chevy Nova, and drove north to Michigan where I would spend some time before flying to Germany for my second tour – destination Berlin.

My sister and I drove my car out to New Jersey in preparation of shipping it. We spent a delightful weekend in East Rutherford, NJ, interspersed with an even better time on Manhattan. She and I drove through one of the tunnels on Saturday morning and we braved the traffic and the enormous potholes to get to Central Park. After some driving around during which we were almost run over by three taxis, cursed at by two jaywalkers, and ogled by some unsavory characters, we found a parking spot on the south end of Central Park.

The parking spot happened to be illegal, but I figured we'd be gone only for a few minutes. And based on my experiences in New York City up till that point, even

if I did get a ticket I had no intention whatsoever in returning to the Big Apple. (I prefer my apples small, thank you.)

So after we enjoyed a somewhat quick lunch in a nearby deli (and incurring a few verbal jabs from the waitress), we walked a few short minutes back to the car and sure enough, a parking ticket. Five years later, my parents were still getting threatening letters from the city of New York to pay that parking ticket. It eventually went away and as far as I know, they hadn't sworn out an arrest warrant on me.