

# ARMSTRONG AS “RUSSIAN INTERPRETER”

## Part 1

### *Independence Public Library*

By Michelle Toale-Burke

*“It doesn’t take a hero to order men into battle. It takes a hero to be one of those men who goes into battle.”*

*-General H. Norman Schwarzkopf*

Robert Armstrong, Independence, enlisted in the Army in 1973 and became a Russian Linguist with the 502nd group, an air droppable group within twenty-four hours to anywhere in the world. Robert found himself based next to the biggest Russian playground in the world at that time called “The Betonka”. He also spent two years as a Military Intelligence Interrogator.

Previously, Robert had been attending college but due to the cost of education he could no longer afford to continue. In 1973, if you weren’t in school you would most likely be drafted and sent to fight in the Vietnam War, so he decided to go ahead and enlist. This decision would take him on an interesting path for the next six years!

First off, Robert headed to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to take the MET (Military Entrance Test) for enlistment into the military. Turns out he received the highest score out of the three hundred people that also took the exam. This was good news, as it enabled him to have his pick of jobs.

Curious, Robert asked them what job he didn’t qualify for? “You can’t be a pilot,” they said. Robert had previously been in the Civil Air Patrol and wanted to get his pilot’s license. Turns out he couldn’t be a pilot because he wore glasses. Being a pilot in the military required excellent “uncorrected vision.” Although, there was a loop hole to this rule. Apparently, after your first tour you can re-enlist and then become a pilot. Robert thought that was pretty neat.

Due to his high scores, they asked him if he would like to go to Monterey, California to study Russian. Robert was blown away. “Of course he wanted to do that” he told them. So they sent him to the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, a United States Department of Defense educational and research institution consisting of two separate entities which provide linguistic and cultural instruction to the Department of Defense located in Monterey. There they taught twenty-six languages, one of which was Russian. They wanted to make him a

Russian Linguist. Robert's reply to this news was "It beats the heck out of going to Vietnam!" After basic training, Robert would be on his way to a guaranteed four-year enlistment to go to school to become a Russian Linguist.

Robert finished his basic training and was told to check his orders. To his surprise, his orders were to go to Maryland to study Laotian. Robert was taken back and told them "I don't think so. I've got a card in my wallet that says I'm going to Monterey California to study Russian." They didn't believe him until he pulled out his card to show them. "By God you do. Your travel pay is screwed up but we will straighten it out once you get there." Robert told them that was a good thing as he didn't care if he had to hitch hike there, he wasn't going to study Laotian.

After finishing school in Monterey and now that he was fluent in Russian, he was dispatched to Texas for four months where they would give him his orders. Robert had a choice between Germany, Alaska, or Turkey; he chose Germany. Robert was stationed in Germany with the 502nd group for twenty-eight months. Normally, the 502nd group didn't take Russian Linguists, as they were air droppable anywhere in the world within twenty-four hours. Therefore, after he spent a few months based in Germany he was transferred to a border site along with the other recruits he attended school with. Here he would actually use the Russian he learned.

Robert was placed next to the biggest Russian playground in the world called "The Betonka" in East Germany, which in Russian means "concrete". The area was twenty-three kilometers long by one-kilometer-wide with scud missiles lined up from one side to the other along with all their armored personnel and tanks. This is where they did their military exercises.

Robert and his team were placed approximately twenty miles from the area, which was in West Germany. Robert spent the next fourteen months there listening to the chatter before being moved further back to Ausberg. There used to be three border sites they would be stationed at to collect intelligence, but do to the Bider Manhoff gang threatening to attack all three sites they decided to move further back to Ausberg. This was okay, as they would just transmit the radio signals back to Ausberg.

Robert and his team had radios set up where Robert was in charge of all the radio frequencies. According to Robert, the lower frequencies were the Army guys talking to each other and mostly swearing. The higher frequency was for the higher ups and where the conversations got more interesting. Robert started out listening to the chatter on the low end for about two weeks before switching to the high end. After about one month of listening only, he was ordered to begin transcribing the chatter as he listened. This required speed.

When Robert was listening to the high-frequency chatter, he would need to keep up with the conversation between two Russians, one in each ear, as well as transcribe both at the same

time. His buddies would give him a hard time by telling him to “get off the phone!” Robert would shout back, “don’t worry I’m listening to you too. I’ve got it under control.”

One night, as the chatter began to escalate and become very concerning, Robert was about to make the call to wake up the President of the United States, Jimmy Carter.

To be continued...