

ARMSTRONG AS “RUSSIAN INTERPRETER”

Part 2

Independence Public Library

By Michelle Toale-Burke

One night, as Robert was engaged in routine surveillance just outside Germany’s largest Russian playground in the world - “The Betonka,” the chatter began to escalate and became very concerning. Robert had just intercepted four Russian MiG fighter jets loaded with nuclear bombs heading towards London. The jets were ten minutes out when he alerted the General standing next to him what was happening.

As they stood in a moment of heightened alert ready to make the call to wake up President Gerald Ford, Robert said to the General, “forget it, they turned back.”

The General quipped “how do you know?”

Robert didn’t waste any time telling him “I was the one that alerted you to the situation in the first place and now you don’t believe me?”

The fighter jets did in fact turn back, but it was a hair-raising moment for both of them. “It was probably the most exciting thing I had ever intercepted, Robert said. “It was just like you see in the movies!”

According to Robert, the Russians and Americans would test each other's capabilities all the time to see how long it took one another to respond. Thankfully, this situation turned out to be only a test.

When Robert was training at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey California, he had a classmate who also went through the program but didn’t have the same qualifications the rest of them did, so the military deployed him to a border site as a truck driver. Perplexed, Robert wondered why the military would train someone to be a Russian linguist and then send him to be a truck driver. When Robert got the chance to speak with the guy, he told Robert that he was stationed there to drive the truck with all the radio equipment in it.

Robert's classmate went on to say that the Military issued him a gun with one bullet in it. He told Robert “ya, if we get captured, you’re dead.”

“Thanks a lot buddy!” Robert said, as Robert had no way to defend himself since interpreters weren't issued weapons. But in all seriousness, Robert knew that’s how it worked.

Robert really wanted to stay in the military as an interpreter. Although, as much as he loved his work, he didn't think he should stay in it long-term due to the possibility of a shortened life-expectancy. "It seemed like the more you knew the more expendable you were, which is not a good thing" he said. Robert understood that if he was captured with other American soldiers that, as a Russian interpreter, he would be the first to go. "It's too big a risk to let an interpreter be captured; they would be tortured by the enemy to spill the beans," he said.

Therefore, Robert decided to enlist in the Army Reserves as Military Intelligence for a security agency. They dispatched him to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, a military installation of the United States Army in North Carolina. Fort Bragg is one of the largest military installations in the world, with around 57,000 military personnel. Robert trained there to be a Russian Interrogator. With his training completed, he was transferred to a National Guard unit where he was then part of the Calvary! At that time the Calvary traveled in armored military personnel carriers, not on horses like they used to. Robert was once again able to use his radio skills and was in charge of all the radios and signals.

While growing up Robert always wanted to be a spy and loved watching James Bond movies. Looking back at his time in the military, Robert said it worked out for him as he was a sort of electronic spy in the military. Dreams do come true, but perhaps not exactly as planned. Robert may not have had all the fancy sports cars, etc. like James Bond did, but it was still very exciting and rewarding work.

Robert would have probably stayed in the reserves for thirty years if it had only been up to him, but his wife didn't like all the traveling he had to do on weekends and during the summer months. It's a lot for a spouse because of the extensive travel and absences.

In parting, Robert reiterated that he loved being in the military. He feels like everybody owes two years of service, in some form, to our country. He suggested something like the Civilian Conservation Core (CCC) that was founded by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 as part of the New Deal, which provided jobs that helped build trails and national parks, or some other form of service. "It doesn't have to be free labor either. The government could pay people in order to make it work. They could build bridges, or help repair our aging infrastructure" he said.

Thank you, Robert, for your service and for sharing your story and giving us a glimpse into the fascinating world of a "Russian Linguist".