

Where No Band Had Gone Before

July 5, 2017 is the 50-year anniversary of my band “The Thunderballs” 133-day tour of Vietnam – the culmination of an epic journey that began August 9, 1966 – taking us to England, Germany, and then – Vietnam! The whole thing happened when my best friend Barry Lipsker (age 19) told me he had big news – his parents were moving their family of six to England for his Dad's new job. Then he told me about the wild idea he came up with that his folks actually went for: the only way to entice his rebellious brother Scott (age 17) to make the move with the rest of the family was to invite Jeff Scarborough (me) and a drummer – instant rock band ready to play gigs there and maybe even get famous like our idols The Beatles did! Barry (rhythm guitar) and Scott (bass guitar), and myself (age 19 – lead guitar), had been playing rock n' roll together ever since we met in 1963, when I began teaching them guitar (I started in 1959). The Lipsker brothers were naturals, so in a few months I was fronting our new surf band at Frat parties. Early in 1966, Leon Allison (age 17) did studio-musician recording sessions with Scott and me – best drummer we ever heard! And like Scott, he was a terrific lead singer too. He had just graduated high school and was about to sign his enlistment papers with the Marines – but when he heard Barry's convincing offer of possible fame, fortune, and adventure in England – he decided the Marines could wait (they did – he returned to Vietnam as a Marine, was seriously wounded – received a Purple Heart).

We got our passports, bought our one-way airplane tickets; and sent our amps, drums, and all other band gear via ship to England because it was much cheaper than air freight. We carried our guitars on the plane, hoping to spend our time rehearsing until the ship arrived with our gear – in order to be ready to start gigging right away. Seemed like a good plan – but when the British Customs Agents saw our guitars and we told them we were rock musicians planning to perform, they made us spend the night in detention lock-up, stamping in our passports that we had 30 days to leave the country, engaging in no employment paid or unpaid. The Lipskers rented a rustic old farmhouse in Buckden – perfect for the entire family with the two older boys with their rock band. Would have been a nice base of operation – had The Thunderballs not been deported!

We soon found out that the only country in Europe not requiring work permits for musicians was Germany, which is probably why The Beatles decided to play there. The ship with our gear also docked in Germany, so Germany it was – but our money was running very low; so after taking the ferry from Dover, we had to hitchhike to Germany, going through Belgium and Luxembourg. The first German town we came to was Trier. With our guitars in tow, people directed us to the big club in town called “The Shohe” (pronounced “shoe”), assuming we were playing there. The Shohe was isolated on a big hill on the outskirts of town, making it perfect for loud live rock bands playing seven days a week, from 8P to 3A. With two big American military bases nearby, The Shohe was a huge attraction for off-duty G.I.'s; so when it's owner Max saw an American band with guitars walk through the door, he knew he had a gold mine. The Image, a terrific British band playing there, let us audition on their gear – and now we were launched!

Max wanted us there A.S.A.P., but The Image had about two more weeks booked, and so did another British band after them. Not wanting to lose us – and not allowing us to play anywhere else – Max found us a cheap place to live until we could officially start (his bands roomed on the third floor of the club); he got us a deal on a used VW bus, advancing us the money for it; did the same for a used PA system (we only had our own mics and stands – most L.A. clubs had a house PA, but bands in Germany were expected to provide the PA). By the time we started, word about an American band at The Shohe was widespread, and the place was continually packed with American G.I.'s; as well as German locals – Max's “Gold Mine” had come to fruition. His booking agent came to see us, presented us with a two-month contract at The Shohe, signed us up as one of his bands; and soon booked us all over Germany! We owed it all to Max – and perhaps fate.

The next club we played was The Trocadero, in Amberg; and like Trier, two U.S. bases were nearby. It's German owner Pete had served in the U.S. Marines, and liked us straight away. Like the Shohe, we packed the place every night; and Pete too signed us for two months. Meanwhile, with two of their sons living in Germany, Mr. Lipsker arranged a transfer to Germany and the family moved near Amberg. Our agent booked us at many more venues across Germany, but with re-bookings at The Trocadero and the Shohe, those became our main ones. By playing seven hours a night, seven days a week, and no days off – we now understood how The Beatles got to be so good (and perhaps how they came to write “Eight Days a Week”) – as we too reached our full potential.

Then one day when we were driving in our VW bus to our gig in Kaiserslautern, Barry reads out loud an ad in English, in a German music magazine: “Wanted – bands to entertain U.S. troops in Vietnam.” Because we were an American band and G.I.'s were our biggest fan base, we had developed a bond with them, and become close to many G.I.'s over the now nearly nine months we had played in Germany; and of course we knew some who got orders for Vietnam. So when Barry read us that ad, we all knew without question that would be the next logical step for us – so we answered the ad!

When we met with the German agent to sign the contract, we did not expect one proviso: two Go-Go girl dancers were required to tour Vietnam with us. We were opposed to that, but the agency insisted; so Scott put in a call to his German girlfriend who reluctantly agreed to do it, but only if the other dancer was her close friend, whom she was sure she could convince. That was good enough for the agent and it was a done deal. The agency put us in touch with the USO, which was officially in charge of all entertainers in Vietnam. We were playing again at the Trocadero, so the USO sent us to a nearby Army base for the ten vaccination shots the Army required to go to Vietnam.

On the Fourth of July, 1967, Barry and Scott's parents and younger brother and sister bid us a tearful goodbye as The Thunderballs plus two Go-Go dancers boarded a commercial plane for Saigon, Vietnam – tickets and cargo paid by the German agent. Their parents initially had gone apoplectic when they learned about us going to Vietnam, but they finally came around; and were in the end proud of all of us. Due to their adverse reaction, I chose not to upset my Mom with that news until much later – and she never forgave me for shocking her with a letter from me postmarked U.S. ARMY, VIETNAM.

July 5, 1967 we landed at Tan Son Nhut airport, located on the outskirts of Saigon. As you exited the cabin of the plane, stepping on the stairs, you could see flares going off in the distance through the smoky haze of war; and you could hear the bombs and gunfire. When the two German girls exited and saw all this, they froze in their tracks shaking with fear and cried in German “I want to go home!” A woman from the German agency met us at the airport and realized she had no choice but to agree to send the two hysterical girls home A.S.A.P. – and accused us of breaking the contract. She forced the girls to do some shows with us for a few days until the return flight, but one girl fainted in the tropical heat while dancing. We figured we would all be fired and that was it!

But before doing any shows, all bands were required to play for a USO committee who would rate your show and put a price tag on it. During that performance, Ray, an American booking agent, was in the audience. He approached us afterwards, offering us a better deal, sans the girls. Given our troubles with the German agency, we called him back, said yes, and let the two agencies work it out. Ray and his brother Bob's agency operated out of a large villa in Saigon, so we moved in. Because the agency was in tight with the USO and the U.S. Army, we began doing shows right away; and as the only American band in Vietnam (most were Filipino) – we had again become a “Gold Mine”!

When we signed with their agency, we agreed to perform anywhere U.S. troops were; and to play any USO show anytime, anywhere. The Army issued us each a U.S. Army Entertainer I.D.; and sent us to three days of military training – mostly about Army rules and regulations, weapons familiarization, what V.C. booby-traps to look for, and what to do if shot down, etc. The Army provided transportation – usually two Huey helicopters – one for our gear; one for us. They also gave us helmets, shrapnel vests, boots, socks, shirts, t-shirts – to wear at our discretion since we were civilians; and a G.I. friend unofficially snuck us a 45-caliber pistol and ammo for the band's protection.

When word got around that there was an American rock band “In Country” that wasn't famous and would play anywhere – not just the big secure bases where the big-time USO stars like Bob Hope played, we suddenly found ourselves in constant demand. Often we would play up to three shows a day, mostly at different bases and/or fire bases – frequently where no band had gone before. Due to V.C. activity under the cloak of darkness, travel at night was forbidden; so we slept in cots and tents alongside the G.I.'s; looking like Army grunts, but with long hair and guitars. Because we risked our lives to join them “In the Bush”, the grateful G.I.'s absolutely loved us – hoisting us over their heads after our finale song “We Gotta Get Outta This Place” – and we loved them back!

Touring Vietnam from the MeKong Delta to the DMZ – enduring mortar attacks, sniper attacks, V.C. terrorist attacks, perimeter breaches; and an emergency landing in a shot-up C-130 transport plane due to heavy ground fire during landing approach – changed us from boys to men! Then, at an E.M. club sporting a big Dixie flag above the stage, a race riot broke out when we violated the club Sgt.'s orders by letting a black G.I. singer sit in – he incited the crowd, riot erupted; we got blamed – tour over! Not how we wanted it to end – but nevertheless, I am proud of our small role in the Vietnam War!

Jeff Scarborough