

AN ARMY OF STORIES

Tales of a Cold War Veteran

ROGER MASON

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An Army of Stories
Tales of a Cold War Veteran
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Dedication

To Brenda, for her years of nonstop encouragement and unconditional love that make her the perfect sister. Too often she willingly dimmed her own light so that others would shine and always did it with a smile.

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Preface

My story is an account of my U.S. Army experience mostly during the Cold War but also in post-Cold War era Europe, North America, and Asia through the eyes of an American soldier who lived it. It is also a series of events in and out of the military as a world traveler that occurred in the many places that I visited, peppered with some unforgettable anecdotes of those experiences.

My military and civilian experiences were challenging but always rewarding. Many weird things in my life occurred on the ground, but some of the scariest things that ever happened to me occurred on airplanes, and I am glad I lived to write about them. My story highlights the most interesting, exciting, and important places and some of the funniest incidents of my life beginning about midway the Cold War in 1975 to the present.

I spent many years in the U.S. Army doing many things, but I don't claim to have been a hero; I was just a regular soldier. I have no need to overemphasize my career because sensationalism is for cowards. I do not make claims of having been awarded medals and decorations that I did not earn, or of having done other breathtaking things about which an ever-growing number of people seem to enjoy telling lies. Like anything in life worth fighting for, valor comes at a price, so it has to be earned--not stolen.

My job was keeping the movement in ground mobility; I was an army mechanic. I repaired light-wheeled vehicles, cargo trucks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, armored personnel carriers, and tanks. I stayed away from explosives, and I was never sent on a snipe hunt (fool's errand) because I was never dumb enough to believe I could find a box of grid squares, a bag of shoreline or a left-handed torque wrench somewhere in the motor pool. I spent my career in the maintenance shops, which was the most fun-filled place in the army because I laughed more there than anyplace else. Nothing was more fun than listening to soldiers telling unbelievable lies about everything under the sun just for a laugh.

Even though years of running on pavement wearing combat boots and fragmentation vests, maneuvering through thick-wooded areas, and climbing onto tracked vehicles ruined my knees, I loved the army, and I have no regrets. The

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things I liked most about it were the places it took me, the people I met, and the things I saw within an army that is worldwide. During my career, I was assigned to a number of army commands, including the U.S. Army Ordnance Corps, Military Police Corps, 1st Cavalry Division, 2nd Infantry Division, 3rd Infantry Division, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Armored Divisions.

Starting from my enlistment in 1975, foreign travel has been my most enriching life experience because it allowed me to see places that I had only read about or seen pictures of as a kid. Writing is also something that I have always loved, so I always wanted to write a book about my experiences, but I could never find the time. I visited so many places in and out of the army that I began to feel I had reached the point where I was no longer curious about what lay around the corner in the next place. It was sort of like finally reaching the end of the Internet with no more sites to visit. I knew there were more places to see, but I figured that I probably had already seen other places just like them.

It was only after I began to inaccurately blend people and occurrences from one travel destination or military duty station with other people I had met and places that I had been that I realized it was time to start documenting. I knew I probably should begin to write about my experiences while I still had some accurate memories of them. I felt like I was going to spend my life on an airplane, and I knew that if I continued to live my regular workingman existence, there would be no way that I could accomplish my writing project before forgetting too much of my past.

I finally made my decision to begin, so in the spring of 2011, I dropped the lease on my condo, moved into a smaller place, sold my gas guzzler, and bought a more economical car. I also quit my job and started freelancing from home. I shut off my high-speed cable TV and smart phone service and began living off the grid. I stopped ordering delivery food, going out to clubs and to dinner, and I stopped buying things that I did not absolutely need. I stopped spending discretionary funds and wasting gasoline traveling long distances just for fun. Then, I opened an account on one of the popular Internet buying/selling sites, and rented a 10x10-foot storage unit from which I sold the things that I no longer used.

I sold all of the things that I had shipped around the world for years, and it gave me a lot of free space. After a while, I had sold unneeded belongings to the point where everything I owned fit in a smaller 5x10-foot unit, which also significantly lowered the rental cost. I was saving money because I no longer

had to pay for electricity, water, and condo fees, or buy gasoline for two cars. I enjoyed not having to pay a phone bill and other utilities, and I intentionally muddied my tracks so no one could find me.

I helped the environment by reducing my individual carbon footprint and using far fewer resources. I made sure I had unfettered access to wireless Internet service as I gathered all of the thoughts and memories of the previous 35 years. I spent days viewing and taking notes from the 30-year-old 8-millimeter videos that I filmed in West Germany during the 1970s and '80s, and then I started writing. To trigger my memory, I matched names with faces in the photos and videos and I used social media to find people. Although they were not as well mapped then as they are today, I also used an Internet street view navigation site to drive the streets of many of the places that I had been stationed and/or visited, and it helped me enormously.

To make sure my plan would work, for the next 3 years, I lived on my freelance pay, savings, VA (Veterans Administration) disability compensation, income tax returns, and my military retirement pay, with the intention of not emerging until I was done. I completely changed my lifestyle by designing and living on a very strict budget while writing, reading, and proofreading my work, and in the process, I became pretty much a recluse.

I also stepped up my daily workout to the point where I eventually lost enough unwanted body weight to cause the photograph of the guy on my passport picture to look like a totally different person. As a result, after the first year, I finally began to get back some of the muscles that I once had when I was doing push-ups, sit-ups, and running every day on active duty in the army.

Family members could reach me via e-mail only, and I lost a number of friends because they had no idea how to contact me after I shut off my phone, but it allowed me to get a lot of work done. I had friends calling my siblings from various places around the country trying to locate me, but only one was successful, and the others were totally upset with me for temporarily shutting them out. I wrote for a year, and then I went into full-on editing mode, which proved to be a far more difficult task than the actual compilation of words about all of the anecdotal events and occurrences of my life.

The result of my 3-yearlong hermit lifestyle is not a tell-all book, it is not meant to highlight anything or make any one person outstanding, and it is not about me. Although they are all very real, to protect privacy and reputations, the identities of characters have been changed, fictionalized, disguised, and/

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or abbreviated, and some names are not used at all. It can be called a semi-autobiographical work, but only because I was the main character who witnessed the events in my military years and globe-trotting stories of people, places, and experiences that I encountered after the army. Because it was all seen through my eyes, I can easily describe it as a myriad of events from an olio of my world travels.

The stories here are an account of the places I visited, the characters I met, the friends I made, the things I saw, the languages I heard, the beers I drank, the cultures I encountered, the trash I talked, and the things I did as a young soldier in Cold War-era Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Asia. I thought they were stories worth telling because they represent an unembellished depiction of life as it happened. The stories here are also about some of the weirdest occurrences, the most unbelievable people, the funniest military colloquialisms, and the strangest things I experienced around the world.

Over the years, Uncle Sam has had a lot of nephews but not many were as hooked as I became. I spent 21 years on active duty, but I can truthfully say that I never really left the army. I was a lifer in many ways because I continued to work for and around the army after retiring from it. The army was my way out, my springboard, and my ticket to seeing the world. During my long career in the military through the mid-Cold War period and the ensuing years, I was lucky enough to have lived in and/or visited a number of countries around the world.

My travels were highlighted by the opportunity to visit the former Communist East Germany and by briefly setting foot inside Communist North Korea. I crossed, flew over, waded in, fished, and/or stood on the banks of the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Aegean arm of the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean proper, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. I have also crossed and/or seen the English Channel/North Sea, the Bay of Singapore, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Sea of Japan.

There also were some other places that I passed through along the way, and I am grateful to have seen them all. Some places and tours of duty were not as memorable as others, and some were uneventful and downright uninteresting, so not all are mentioned here. Through it all, however, the most memorable place I visited was the Federal Republic of Germany, formerly (West Germany), over four 3-year tours spanning from the mid-1970s through the official end of the Cold War in 1991.

The Cold War began after World War II in September of 1945 and lasted until the official dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was a rivalry that sometimes got pretty intense involving perpetual political, technological, and military tension between the Soviet led Communist powers in ideological cahoots with its allies, and the Western World countries aligned with the United States.

The race for space was a big part of the Cold War in the scary decade of the 1960s, but the 1970s and 1980s were even more turbulent times for Americans in Europe. There were many bad guys in the Warsaw Pact countries that caused the Western World and its allies to do everything possible to impede the spread of Communism, while at the same time dealing with the proliferation of terrorism.

During the Cold War, we young naïve American soldiers in Europe were sometimes unclear about what it was all about, what was going on at the time, and what we could expect to happen next. In a nutshell, we saw the Cold War as threats and intimidation by one superpower in an attempt to rattle the other, and it caused a lot of people to live with thoughts of Armageddon almost daily. What became known as the *Fog of war* was very meaningful during the Cold War because there were many times when the United States and the Soviet Union continually morphed back and forth from cold war to the brink of an actual hot war. In fact, there were times when we Americans in Europe thought the Cold War could not have been much hotter.

Being the crazy young warmonger that I was in those days, I confess that my buddies and I always wanted the USA to just attack and get it over with, but it appeared that a preemptive strike was something that both sides feared most; it always seemed that in spite of the seemingly never-ending posturing, each side always looked for a way out of one conflict-threatening crisis after another.

It always seemed as though neither side really wanted armed conflict, and in the eyes of many of us young American soldiers, it seemed that both sides teased and pushed back, but each always knew just how far to push and how far the other would go. The Soviets never ceased to be provocative enough to bring us to the brink, but there was always a resolution. Because of the constant back-and-forth, I sometimes felt that each side did everything possible to ensure the Cold War remained cold because both knew it could very possibly mean Armageddon.

The two sides dealt with incidents such as the Soviet blockade of West

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Berlin leading to the Berlin Airlift, the creation and expansion of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), the Soviets test of the atomic bomb, the establishment of the Warsaw Pact, the Cuban Missile Crisis, spy swaps across Berlin's Glienicke Brücke (Freedom Bridge), and the Kitchen Debate between then U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, during which they debated the capabilities of the two superpowers. Although there was later an easing of tension or *détente* between the nations, things still were sometimes difficult.

It was not often that a young inner-city American like me had the opportunity to experience so many cultures and to have experienced history-making events, such as terrorist bombings of targets of American interest, the fall of the Berlin Wall, dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the crumbling of the Warsaw Pact. Also, my visit to a Communist country during the height of the Cold War in Europe was practically unheard of at that time, making it a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. The eventual fall of Communism and the opening/expansion of Eastern European borders allowed me to extend my travels even further, and because of it, my life was enriched beyond my wildest expectation.

I saw the events of the Cold War on television as a young kid, and it made me want to visit the countries where they took place. Even as a kid I had traveling in my DNA, and I always knew I would fulfill my ever-growing desire to leave home. I loved it at home, and I loved my family and friends, but I could not wait to finish high school so that I could finally go out on my own and see the world. Always the dreamer instead of paying attention in class, I can remember sometimes daydreaming; I would close my eyes and tell myself that when I opened them, I would be eating a giant pretzel in Munich, drinking ale in a London pub, or walking along the Great Wall of China.

As a young man, I had traveled to a number of states with my dad, but I had never left the country. All I thought about was traveling, so I explored my options and figured the best way for a kid my age to do it was to join the military. During my childhood, my younger brother and I always talked about one day becoming soldiers as our older brother had done, so we pretty much always knew we would someday join some branch of the military too.

Before I left home, as if it had been a really dumb thing to do, my buddies all asked why on earth I had decided to do something as stupid as joining the army. I told them that the conflict in Vietnam had ended some time earlier

so outside of the constant bickering between the superpowers, there was no longer much of a threat. The army, even back then, was very much more than civilians had always thought of it; they saw it as just walking a lonely and freezing-cold guard post in the middle of the night, or peeling potatoes in the mess hall. The reason they envisioned the army as a dictatorship was because it was the way they had always seen it portrayed in the movies, on television, and in the ubiquitous comic strip featuring a mean old sergeant with his ugly bulldog, and a young screw-up private who could never follow simple instructions.

The moment my buddies heard the word army they became unglued and immediately had bad thoughts of me being yelled at for failing to peel a potato the right way, or some other misconceived notion. Civilians never saw the fact that the Department of Defense was one of the country's largest employers, and they never saw the army as an extremely economical means to get a college education. My buddies also did not understand that they could acquire highly sought after job skills in the army that would cost them an arm and a leg in the civilian world, nor did they see what I saw as the best benefit, which was travel.

Today, they are rightly regarded and treated as heroes, but the 1970s was a time when America's returning combat veterans were not treated as well as today's combatants in the GWOT (Global War on Terrorism) are treated. Even though the fighting had ended, most rebellious young people of the 1970s wanted more than they thought the army could offer. Most of my buddies were afraid of the discipline and authority in the military and because of its movie, television, and comic strip image, they also saw it as a loss of individual freedoms.

The fighting in Vietnam had officially ended just 1 year before I decided to leave home in 1975, and my brother and I had been exposed to the war on the television news every day, so we thought we had a pretty good idea of how life would be in the army. In reality though, all my brother and I knew about the Army, the world and the Cold War was what we saw on television and in the many anti-communism movies of the period, such as *Behind the Iron Curtain*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and the 1974 television movie, *The Missiles of October*.

Back home, before the army, I was in a dilemma because I was little more than a high school graduate not so intent on furthering his education. My

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parents attempted to send me to one of the local universities, but I got only as far as touring the campus and visiting one of the dorm rooms, because I had travel on my mind. I was making very little money working menial jobs and doing nothing with my life so I asked my younger brother if he was still interested in joining the army along with me as we had always planned, to which he replied, “*You must be crazy!*”

My brother’s life took a different path from mine, but a little while after high school, I joined the army, and it turned out to be the best move I ever made. I had high hopes that I wanted to fulfill, but I knew I could never accomplish any of them at home. It was sometimes tough being in the army, but if given the opportunity to do it all over again, I would not change the career choice I made all those years ago, because the army revealed to me many skills that I had never realized I had.

Another reason for joining the army also had a lot to do with my childhood desire to someday become a sergeant. I had always seen them on television and in the movies, I wanted to be just like them, and nothing was going to stop me. But more than becoming a sergeant, I mainly wanted to see the world, and the army became my vehicle for doing it.

In March of 1975, I entered the delayed entry program, which allowed me 3 months at home before leaving. Afterward, I left Washington, D.C., and spent my first few days on active duty at the MEPS (Military Entrance Processing Station) at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I spent the next 9 weeks in absolute hell training in the dense pine tree jungle of the sprawling army post, waiting to be shipped overseas.

BCT (Basic Combat Training) was no more than a mind game that the army designed and used to completely tear down its recruits to the lowest level possible, and gradually build them back up in accordance with army standards. The mental reconditioning was perpetrated by the army but administered on a daily basis by drill sergeants. I had always thought I was a tough kid, but Fort Jackson had some of the meanest drill sergeants in the army who brought my arrogance down a notch or two. The army’s recruit training system worked well because by the time I completed BCT, I was the most obedient creature in uniform.

After basic training late in July of 1975, I entered the automotive maintenance course, which represented my second-highest score on the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery of tests). I moved to the other

side of post to the wheel vehicle mechanics school where I did really well and eventually graduated with high scores. After training and a 30-day visit home, October of 1975 marked my first time leaving the shores of the USA, and I was beaming with happiness.

My first overseas assignment was more than just travel for me; it also meant that I was finally going to see what was across the big blue ocean that I had always seen on the globe back in high school. At the time, I had no idea that I would eventually stay in the army as long as I did, but I fully intended to see everything possible on the other side of the world, so I set out on my military journey and I never stopped learning.

I soon found out that like any job, the army had its good days, and it had some bad ones. Some people could handle it, some could not, and sometimes those who thought they could handle it found out that it was not for them. *Esprit de corps* (pride in serving) has a lot to do with the reason people spend 20 or more years in service, but it is also about doing the best job possible and surviving the challenges inherent in the military lifestyle. When a new recruit, such as I was, reaches his first permanent party duty station, he learns how to survive in the real army outside of the more disciplined training environment. I was learning a lot but permanent party was a very different army from basic training.

The two most beneficial things that I learned were management and training. I learned how to manage large and small groups of personnel and large operations, and I also learned how to be an effective instructor/briefer. The lessons I learned in the army were twofold: I became a good leader, and it molded and groomed me for reentry into the civilian world after leaving the army.

I was gaining a lot of knowledge as a soldier, but I also wanted to climb the walls of castle ruins, swim in the ocean, go to the top of the Eiffel Tower, and drink German beer at the Oktoberfest; I wanted to tour centuries-old castles and cross the English Channel, and luckily, I was able to accomplish many of those goals while seeing the cities of Europe.

The army took me to a number of locations, but I visited many more places as a tourist during my free time. I saw many things, and I met some interesting people. Some were memorable, some were unconventional, and some were downright bizarre, but they all became lasting memories of a lifetime. Over the years, I visited 31 states and met people from all 50, and I visited far too many countries, cities, little towns, villages, hamlets, municipalities, and townships

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to mention here. Some of the things I experienced were really cool, and some were not so nice; some were beneficial, and some were useless, but I saw them all as part of life's education.

There still are some places that I want to see, and there are places that I wish I had never gone; there are places that I have forgotten, and there are places and events I wish I could forget. Some of the places were clean, and some smelled horrible, but I learned to cope with them all. Some of the people were nice, and others hated my American guts, but I always managed to be respectful, if for no other reason than to get out alive.

Although I wanted to get away, I never forgot about home. I always had fond memories of it because to a young boy, home will always be the place where he cared for his first dog, bought his first car, and romanced his first sweetheart; it's the place where he went to high school and left behind all of his buddies, but more important than anything, home is the place where you can let down your guard because friends and family will catch you when you fall. Home will always be important, but I learned things in the army and around the world that I never would have experienced at home. My future was boundless when I left home, and I thought I was grown then, but the army truly is responsible for molding me into the man that I am today.

Herein, I have detailed some of the most exciting and memorable people, places, and experiences of my life, travels, and adventures. It has been said that art depicts life and fact is stranger and many times funnier than fiction, and over the years in the army, I found it to be true. Also, fiction could never fall into the right places as seamlessly as the truth did because the truth always makes a better story. No one could make up many of the things that I experienced over the years because no one could possibly be that creative.

I never dreamed I would drink a Singapore Sling in Singapore City, see a picture of myself in a magazine, party all night in Tokyo, sail past the White Cliffs of Dover, save a human life, and least of all, write a book about it. My only regret is the inescapable and trivial fact that every time I took off on yet another airplane, I immediately experienced the sinus headache from hell. Thankfully, though, my desire to see the world was always stronger than the pain in my head, so I continued to fly.

Many of the stories mentioned in these pages are hard to believe, but they all represent the unembellished truth as it happened. There are some unbelievably wild stories about some of the craziest things I heard and saw soldiers say

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and do, such as a buddy who, after coordinating with authorities, applied for 30 days of leave and flew home to Virginia to serve a 30-day jail sentence for nonsupport of his cheating wife.

Some of my experiences made me laugh, and some of them made me sad; some of them moved me to action, and some were best left to ponder. Regardless of how they affected me, I hope the experiences recounted here are as interesting to my readers as they were to me when I lived them. My story practically wrote itself because it is all true, and telling a good story requires leaving no stone unturned, so I have omitted nothing. I never encouraged anyone and I have not made up anything; I just wrote what I saw.

