

## The Mission

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Tom Favia is one of the very few veterans whose distinguished service record includes Combat Missions during Peacetime, and we are fortunate he chose AWWYP to share this exciting story. When I first read his story, I was captured by the cat and mouse games he played with the Soviet Army. He faced down the Stasi – the official state security service of East Germany, Soviet troops and artillery, and he was armed only with a Maglite and a camera. Tom's story is a day in his life espionage and intrigue. The *real stuff*, the kind of job we've seen in movies and thought, "Dang, that would be fun!"

So, here's Tom's story. Read and enjoy. I sure did.

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Berlin, a cold autumn morning in 1989. We checked our kit and personal gear, made sure we had our passes then drove our Mercedes G-Wagon out of the compound. Our destination, East Germany.



Driving toward the Glienicke Bridge the Tour Officer and I discussed matters pertaining to our targets as we approached the official crossing point from West Berlin into Potsdam. Both of us were experienced in this kind of mission but knew that this, like previous tours, sometime take unexpected turns.

Crossing into East Germany was like entering another world. I turned and took one last look at the grass and trees lining the roads and the explosion of colors of the houses in West Berlin as we approached Glienicke Bridge. Across the bridge, East Germany spread out into a grey, colorless, dirty landscape where a poignant stench always filled the air.

Approaching the Bridge, the Berliner Polizei smiled and waved from his small guard house on the right corner of the sidewalk. He walked passed us and raised the red and white barrier allowing us to continue onto the bridge. At a second gate, just past the center of the bridge, a Soviet Guard took note of our Soviet issued license plate number and opened the gate. All doors on the vehicle were locked per procedure. I lowered my window and handed the Soviet guard our Soviet credentials. He recorded and verified our information, then returned our credentials. He opened the gate and after the customary salute, we proceeded on our mission.

Exiting the bridge and entering East Germany, we observed a large group of border troops in the area because Potsdam was a significant garrison for both the East German and Soviet Army. Often the Stasi, or Secret Police of the DDR, would already be tailing us as we headed toward the official residence of our organization on the outskirts of Potsdam. It was our standard procedure to check into the Mission House in Potsdam before heading out on the tour. The United States Military Liaison Mission to the Western Group of Forces was staffed with a duty NCOs or Officers who pulled 24 hour rotating duty. A villa located directly on the lake in Potsdam, it had belonged to a German Army officer who died before the war.

After reporting to the Duty NCO/Officer, we left the compound, driving past a small guard house outside the compound staffed by East German Police. It was their job to report movements into and out of the compound. The entire road leading up to the compound had an "Alice in Wonderland" feel. Trying to remain unnoticed, we knew the locals watched and reported our movements to the State Police. In East Germany, one in ten citizens worked unofficially for the Stasi as informants. Big Brother was truly watching!

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Having begun the operational part of our tour, the Tour Officer readied his cameras, video cameras, binoculars and the rest of the gear. Side curtains were always pulled shut and a poncho liner covered the gear behind our seats. I kept my Nikon F4 camera at my side and used it as a backup or for targets of opportunity. We were unarmed except for a huge Mag-Lite next to my seat and an entrenching tool behind it, just in case we needed it. We were behind enemy lines with no communications to headquarters.

Driving west, we took the scenic route to the first target knowing it was our best opportunity to encounter military convoys along the way. The G-Wagon, our super-modified work horse, bounced across cobble stones and potholes in the poorly maintained road. That made drinking a Coke or coffee very challenging at times.

I kept my eyes opened and as we turned into a small village I could see the ever-present military vehicles approaching from the left on a tank trail that cut across the center of the town. I slowed our vehicle down and pulled into a position which gave us a clear view of the convoy but still gave me enough room to maneuver and quickly get out if necessary. Mounted high on the roll bar on a special platform behind the Tour Officer, the video camera recorded all the action. The Tour Officer began taking photos of the passing vehicles. All vehicle markings were included in the photographs, allowing us to identify unit levels. The Soviets had noticed us already, but were paying little attention to our activities.

I was responsible for identifying the kit and began calling out, "T-80BV, again, again, again, BMP2, again, again, 2S6, again...."

The Soviet convoy passed our position leaving a cloud of dust and debris covering the torn up road in the village. We continued on to our target area passing Ludwigslust along the route. That is the same route where one of our Tour Officers was shot and killed by a Soviet guard in 1985. His death was a constant reminder to all of us that our job was a dangerous and unpredictable one.

Further down the road, a speeding four door East German sedan approached us from behind. A large antenna swung over its trunk and it was occupied by four passengers wearing "Blues Brother's" sunglasses. I smirked and looked over to my Tour Officer as we both said: "Stasi---". The secret police, not so secret any longer, were trying to follow us. I kept my speed up on the road and saw an opportunity ahead where I could lose them on a muddy trail leading off into the woods. I sped up to approximately 120kms then slammed on the brakes and put the vehicle into 4 wheel drive. Turning sharply to the right and driving up onto the trail, the G-Wagon kicked up mud as I veered sharply into the woods. The Stasi chase ended abruptly as their sedan came to a slippery halt in the mud. Their activities were documented in a series of pictures taken as the pursuit came to an abrupt end in the mud.

We approached our first target, a large Air Defense unit training area, from the south through a wooded area. Knowing such training areas could be occupied and well-guarded, we always entered cautiously. I slowed the vehicle and turned off the engine, rolling quietly to a halt without having to use the breaks. At the same time I rolled down my window so I could look at and listen to the area we had just entered. That was the first step in determining if the approach area was safe. The Tour NCO was responsible for the overall security so it was my call to determine if we could safely continue.

After determining we could safely enter the target area, I restarted the engine and continued driving into the training area. Like most training areas it was very large with major tank trails crossing throughout, and this time it was occupied.

Several hundred meters directly ahead of us we could see 2s6s, SA8s, BMP-2s, other Kit, trucks and troops. We paused to determine the reaction of the Soviets. It appeared we were ok at the moment. Our cameras and video recorders captured the scene as I slowly drove along the trail keeping my distance.

Suddenly an Officer frantically directed his troops to take action against us. A BMP-2 and BTR-80 turned toward us and I knew it was time to move! Quickly turning our vehicle around, I drove as fast as I could on the tank trail, keeping an eye on my rear view mirror at the same time. I knew the BTR-80 and the BMP-2 would have an advantage on such a trail and I could see that the BTR-80 was quickly gaining on me. The Tour Officer leaned over his seat and filmed the chase through the window of the back door, a job made extremely difficult due to my driving on the bumpy trail. I knew I only had once chance and that was to get off of that tank trail as quickly as possible. Looking ahead of us, I found a small, paved bridge off the trail on the right. I turned sharply, slid through the mud and got onto and across the bridge. The BTR-80 slid a few meters then stopped abruptly at the turnoff for the bridge. Soviet TC got out and stood on top of the vehicle. He smiled and waved at us

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reassuring us that we were safe once again.

Driving safely out of the area and avoiding detention by the Soviets, we knew we had earned a lunch break. Being detained always delayed the rest of the mission and in worst case scenarios it could delay us for hours waiting on the arrival of the local Soviet Commandant who would always accused us of being spies and taking part in illegal activities.

We pulled onto a field over-looking a rail line and heated up some chow on our gas cooker. Even when we ate we never gave up a target of opportunity since the Soviets moved their military kit constantly by rail throughout East Germany. It also gave us an opportunity to reorganize, clean the vehicle windows, do some maintenance and check out our gear. I also took advantage of such stops to stretch my legs, exercise and take care of personal issues if necessary. During rest stops, one person always stayed in the vehicle and kept it secure since we never knew who could suddenly pop up behind you even in some wooded area.

After our break, we moved toward our next target. Entering a small town along the road, a group of children waved and ran up to our vehicle. Even though they were indoctrinated to have no contacts with whom they called 'the bad guys', the inhabitants of small villages often took time to talk with us. We knew that in many cases such folks were working for the Stasi but those contacts with the local people allowed us to show them how and who we were as Americans. That kind of liaison effect was not taken for granted nor lightly by either side. Over the decades it helped spread the longing for freedom among many East Germans. In our vehicle, we always carried a trunk box full of giveaways for the locals that included many American products the locals could not obtain or afford. We gave away Coke and Marlboros and lots of items in between.

We were extremely proud of being part of that small, unique and secret organization within the United States Military. Our missions were unknown by the majority other United States forces and to most American citizens. We were, in fact, the only Combat Veterans of the Cold War. We were "The Mission".

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