

Fifth Special Forces — My Gig With The Green Berets

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The way I remember it, Steve did all the driving, and in exchange the rest of us — Leroy, Daphne, and I — paid his share of the gas. Steve had a new VW Bug, I had a crappy old Ford Fairlane station wagon of uncertain reliability, and, poor graduate students as we were, neither Leroy nor Daphne owned a car.

Steve was our cheerful chauffeur.

Every weekday morning I drove to Steve's place on Linnaean Street in Cambridge at about the same time Leroy managed to arrive, 6:30 AM, and the three of us would drive up Mass Ave to Daphne's apartment. She usually made us wait a few minutes while she frantically finished getting dressed, still struggling with her jacket as she dashed to her accustomed place in the back seat next to Leroy, full of breathless apologies.

Steve would point his Bug west to the Mass Turnpike while we groggy passengers dozed off. He would wake us at Athol, the turnoff that takes you to Ft. Devens where we would begin another grueling day of teaching German to Green Berets.

This was a heavily wooded region near central Massachusetts, the towns old and uninspiring. "Athol," I would announce routinely as we exited the toll highway, "a perfect name for the town if you lisped."

It was the summer of 1969. We had been recruited by the Harvard German Department to take this job at the handsome pay of \$10/hr. — a lot of money then. Enough money, anyway, for me to quickly swallow my antiwar principles and sell out to The Man. Hey, I had a wife and little baby to support...

The first inkling I had there was a Harvard German Department-Military Industrial Complex nexus occurred when I walked past the glass-enclosed office of the Department Chairman, Jack Stein. From the hallway I could see sitting opposite Stein two Army officers with a lot of decorations on their chests.

My reaction to self: *What are those fuckers doing here?*

It was gutsy for these uniformed men to even enter Harvard Yard, where noisy sit-ins and gleeful campus office take-overs were occurring on a regular basis. I was usually right in there among the protestors, feeling good about myself, skipping classes to hand out leaflets redolent with rage and moral superiority.

I hadn't yet gotten to the point of burning my draft card, but I was thinking about it.

An hour after I spotted The Enemy in Stein's Boylston Hall office, he had me summoned and said he had a summer teaching opportunity for us graduate students. It would be good experience, he said, and given how well it paid, he wanted to offer it to the married students first: four teaching jobs for the Army. Was I interested?

Tested for the first time in my life on the strength of my principles, I flunked. Once I heard what the pay was, I folded like a cheap suit, as they say. I would earn enough in eight weeks to pay the rent for a whole year.

Steve and I had worked on the Eugene McCarthy presidential campaign in New Hampshire the previous year (“Get Clean for Gene!”), so I figured I could make an excusable withdrawal now from my morals bank account. And the four of us who accepted the job offers had the ready help of many powerful human genes dedicated to self-deception, so useful for survival: during our first commute to Athol, then on to Ayer where Ft. Devens stands, we rationalized and laundered our decision — we would use this teaching moment to subvert the soldiers. We would find moments between language instruction to slip in our views about the war in Southeast Asia and sow seeds of doubt, puncture their morale, perhaps, who knows, even start an insurrection.

In the big picture, we convinced ourselves, we were working behind enemy lines. We were still, after all, morally pure.

Colonel Green

Ft. Devens has been the site for several forts and camps throughout history, going back to 1656. By the 1960s it had become not only a sprawling Army base but also a major training center.

The only fort I had ever entered before was Ft. Snelling in Minnesota, and all I could remember of that as a small boy was the handful of soldiers present who for some reason fired off some big artillery pieces. The fire, smoke, and noise were impressive. There was something both exciting and unnerving about the fury and the smells.

The rest of what I could remember of Ft. Snelling was a huge field of neatly placed white crosses where dead soldiers were permanently lined up in military fashion underneath. The sad, solemn quiet bespoke unfathomable losses, so many of those buried beneath the grass still boys themselves, not that much older than I. As sad as their deaths was their collective loss of individuality here.

It is the first and last business of armies to destroy individuality.

But as the VW Bug entered Ft. Devens for the first time, the place was bursting with all kinds of activity despite the early hour. At the guardhouse astride the main entrance, we were asked to state our business.

The sergeant in charge was crisp and efficient, his politeness a bit of an act, but well-presented. He wore white gloves and his uniform looked like thin sheets of perfectly smoothed cement.

We gave him a letter signed by the commandant of the fort, Colonel Joshua H. Green, Jr., directing the reader thereof to let us pass. The sergeant made a phone call, then returned from his post and leaned into Steve’s window to give us directions to the fort’s HQ. He spoke with perfect diction.

The traffic barrier was lifted, and we drove into an open, well-manicured terrain that at first looked like a golf course. Then we realized it was a golf course.

As we followed the directions to Col. Green, we could see all along the route several gaggles of smartly moving, sweating troops who were doing “PT:” jogging or doing calisthenics or simply marching around and exchanging shouts with their master sergeants.

There was a heavy dose of testosterone in the air, and the sound of things being banged against or moved around. Hustle and muscle were everywhere.

It was a far cry from Harvard Yard.

In the distance were the sounds of helicopters and converted DC-3s taking off, heading for one of several parachute jump runs that these warriors would make more than once every day.

We continued to drive past sparse-looking, two-story wooden buildings painted a shiny white. Two of these austere, no-nonsense buildings housed the equally austere little classrooms where The United States Army Fifth Special Forces, our group of Green Berets — just freshly back from the battlefields of Vietnam — were expected to learn basic German in just eight weeks.

Steve, Leroy, Daphne, and I figured this goal was a fool's errand. Nobody learns German in eight weeks. We had spent years in German-speaking countries and at Harvard and other schools, and we still felt less than completely fluent in German. It is not an easy language to learn. But if the DoD wanted to blow its money on us instead of buying more napalm for Vietnam, well, then that was a good thing.

We would play their silly game and afterwards laugh at them behind their backs.

We were ushered swiftly into Col. Green's office. It was a big room but most of it empty space except for one very large table off to one side under a big light with a green lampshade, probably the place where maps were rolled out and officers leaned over to point at things and strategize.

Col. Green was tall, beefy, and spoke in a confident, clipped baritone. He had a big jaw, big hands, and a close-cropped military haircut. He looked like he had killed a few people, maybe more than a few.

"You see everybody here in fatigues," he said, after introducing us to two aides who stood behind him and said nothing. They gave us hard, expressionless looks. "That's because we are always combat-ready. The Fifth Special Forces is ready to engage in combat anywhere in the world in less than 24 hours' notice from the President."

That impressed us. These guys apparently reported directly to the President. Col. Green let that message sink in.

Who were these guys?

He looked at us four young civilians with something like pity. Had Steve and I not recently shaved off our beards for Gene, Col. Green might have taken us for the hippies we often thought we were (pure nonsense, of course; we were *poseur* hippies only at times when there was fun to be had; then we'd show up for class at Harvard wearing jacket and tie).

Col. Green told us our next meeting was to be with Harry Spence, a civilian, who would deliver some introductory remarks about the Army's language program and give us our course materials. Staff Sgt. Pearson would show us the way.

With that, Col. Green reached for a cigar butt in an ash tray and relit it. We were dismissed. The aides gingerly moved us out of the room and back into Steve's car.

“Can the mayor read?”

Harry Spence was waiting for us, as were three rows of folding chairs set in a small semi-circle outside Building 4B in a grassy area within the building’s shade. The nondescript white wooden building reminded me of the “temporary” wooden buildings erected on the campus of the University of Minnesota during World War II that were still there when I was an undergrad.

Harry looked happy to be there and thrilled to see us. He introduced himself, along with his job title, which we immediately forgot. He explained how he had several “facilities management” responsibilities at Ft. Devens, of which the language program and the language lab were but just two.

Harry said he was pleased that Harvard was willing to share so many of its distinguished faculty in the service of our nation, and he went on about that for some time. I could see he had in his hand a list of things he planned on saying. This could take a while.

In the distance there were the sounds of rifles being fired. I didn’t care about Harry’s droning on. I was already on the clock and imagining how I would spend my first paycheck. I daydreamed while staring at Daphne’s calves placed crossways under the chair in front of me. Two warbling birds helped to drown out Harry’s monotone voice.

Of the two dozen folding chairs set up, less than half were taken. There were three instructors for Farsi, one for Thai, one for Rumanian, one for Turkish, and the four of us for German. I wondered why we were meeting like this outdoors, but in time I would learn the answer: the classrooms in Building 4B were too small and without air-conditioning, and the fort’s other “facilities” rooms were being exclusively devoted to the more important arts of killing people.

Behind Harry stood a long metal table with neat stacks of large three-ring binders that looked identical despite the different languages that were about to be taught.

Before passing these binders out to their new owners, Harry got serious: “Before I get into the nuts and bolts of what you are to teach — and you will find our system refreshingly simple. There are no grammar lessons, no verb declensions, no homework assignments, no grades to pass out. Your job is done when you leave here each evening. But a word of caution: please do not discuss outside these walls (*walls?*) what it is you teach here or to whom. That may seem silly to you, but everything we do here is meant to be secret. So please keep it that way.”

Oh-oh. Now I was worried. Under the guise of being “instructors,” were we in fact going to be slowly seduced into some kind of nasty clandestine work and now there was no way out?

But then he smiled, as if what he said was a joke. “Well, I have no idea why I have to ask you that, but the Army does what it does, and I sing their tune. So please indulge me.”

He handed out the binders, and there was momentary silence while we each took in this strange set of documents.

The three-ring binders were organized so that always on the left side there was a page with ten panels of drawings that were meant to serve as mnemonic devices to help memorize the corresponding ten sentences of the foreign language set out on the opposite, right-hand page. The left-hand pages were printed on a sturdy cardboard stock that had an odd, shimmering silver tone to them. The illustrations were crudely drawn but unmistakably linked to the words the soldier students were expected to memorize.

The geniuses at the Pentagon created these binders with the same drawings and phrases for all foreign languages they wanted taught, even though the world depicted was clearly Southeast Asian village life. So the students we were to teach German to would have quite an adjustment to make. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong they had just come back from killing didn't speak German.

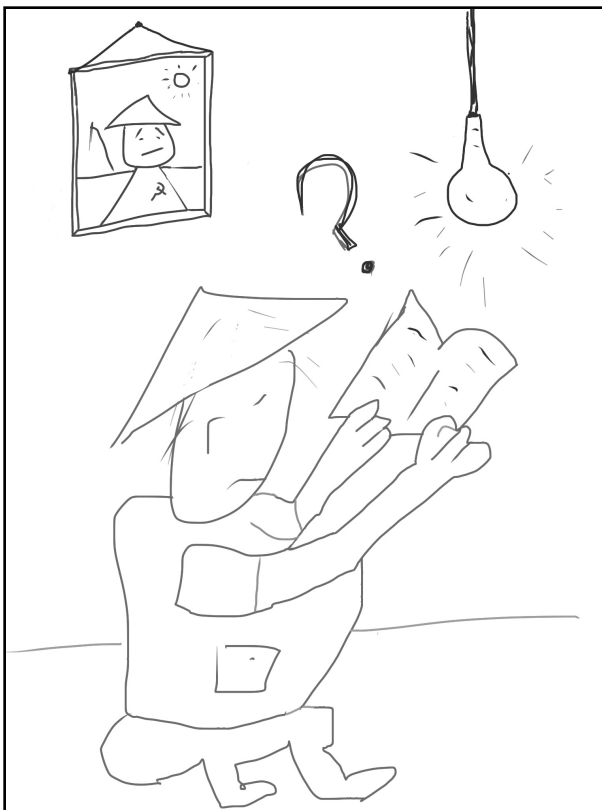
The black-and-silver, wordless comic-book cells in the binder were not for your usual traveler's phrases, like: "Can you tell me the time, please?" or "Is the main train station far from here?" No, no, we were to drum into our charges' heads, like so many trained parrots, the sounds they needed to memorize in case they encountered in combat a situation that called for those words. "Learning a foreign language" was secondary to nonessential.

I couldn't help myself as I looked at the pictures, I started laughing uncontrollably. "You serious about this?" Steve and Daphne started laughing, too, as we looked at some of the phrases we were supposed to "teach."

Harry shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

I would give a lot now to get my hands on that binder again; but in the end, I did memorize all these phrases by constantly repeating ten of them every weekday, over and over again, to surprisingly willing students (who may have just enjoyed a restful change of pace).

Here are just three examples, along with my recreation of the drawings that are really not that far from the originals as I remember them:



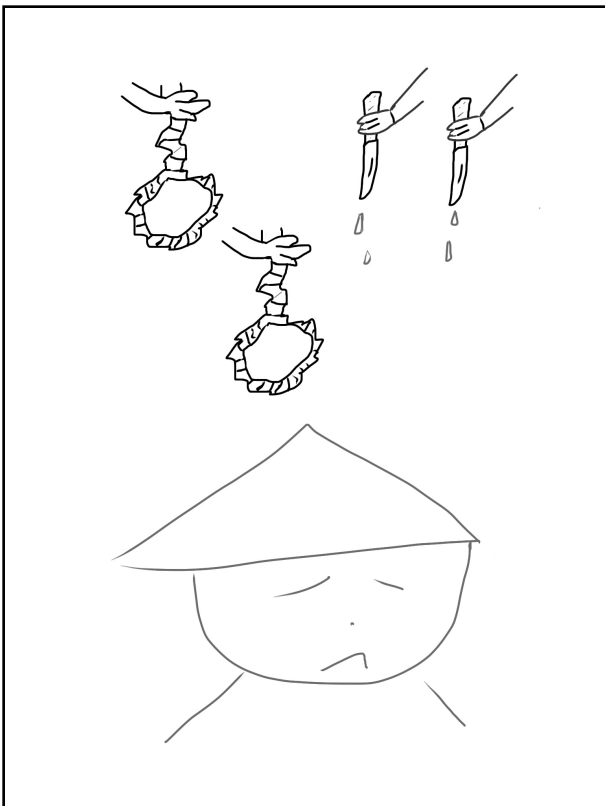
"Kann der Bürgermeister lesen?"

("Can the mayor read?")



“Ich habe die Ruhr.”

(“I have dysentery”)



“Wir werden Messer und Stricke benutzen.”

(“We will use ropes and knives.”)

In the side pockets of each binder were larger versions of the drawings which were to be used as flashcards. After “teaching” the day’s ten useful phrases, we were to test retention by using these flashcards to prompt the right responses from the class of twelve (a Green Beret team consists of twelve soldiers: six specialists (e.g. radioman, medic) plus six identical backups).

Steve and I soon discovered that the way to keep our students engaged was to scream at them and then they would scream back.

Some of our students were very quick to learn, and they were put to helping along the others. Some were always hopelessly lost, but they enjoyed the screaming and often got an occasional word or two right.

The monotony and the yelling sapped energy. This was going to be a rough eight weeks.

Soon Steve’s class and mine got so loud that we could hear each other’s students from different ends of the flimsy building. Our classes turned into good-spirited shouting matches back and forth, like echoing choirs. Between these two warring groups was the poor meek little guy “teaching” Turkish. He complained to us until his class started screaming, too.

Steve and I thought our little “sabotage” would get us in trouble, but neither Col. Green nor Harry Spence seemed to give a damn. In fact, after that first day of “orientation,” we never saw Harry again.

Gutierrez

The big break, the longed-for oasis in every working day, was the hour-long lunch in the Officer’s Club. One day, one of my students, a Capt. Gutierrez from San Antonio, Texas, asked me to join him. He encouraged me to drink the cheap beer along with my sumptuous, free lunches; nobody would mind since I was a civilian.

Gutierrez and I had long and interesting conversations, and other friends of his in the Officer’s mess came over to join us from time to time.

These conversations were among the many I had with the men of the Fifth Special Forces, including the “kids” in my class who came from very diverse backgrounds but, to a man, were highly dedicated professional soldiers, and all of them strong, smart, and resourceful. They won my respect. I had no further interest in subverting any of them.

Gutierrez’s story was typical for many, especially the Hispanics and African-Americans. He enlisted to get an education and to get out of the barrio. The Army discovered he had a high IQ and was talented in many areas. He was promoted as far as a noncom could go, including Officers Candidate School. He joined the Green Berets from there because the Army was beginning to bore him.

Say what you will about the military, it is perhaps the most egalitarian and merit-driven institution in America.

Gutierrez and others like him soon found all the action they could handle. They were sent into hot spots (and some not so hot) all over the world. Some literally had scars to prove it. Their stories gradually made it clear to me that the Green Berets, or at least this branch of it, worked for the CIA.

When our classes got their ten sentences for the day down pat, usually by 2 PM, the rest of the day Steve and I would simply stop the instruction and chew the fat with our students (nobody was checking on us, anyway, and hey, the daily brainwashing mission was being accomplished). Leroy and Daphne just kept on slogging away, as far as I could tell. By each day's end they would walk, zombie-like, to the VW Bug and collapse.

Steve and I also took a page out of Harry's playbook: we took our classes outdoors and into the shade of Building 4B. At first Capt. Gutierrez balked at the idea, something about discipline, but I told him I would take the blame if there was to be any, with the excuse the students would learn better in a cooler, more pleasant environment.

I guessed right, anyway, because when a major riding in a Jeep drove by and saw my charges seated in their chairs out on the grass and exchanging screams with me in German, he smiled approvingly and gave me the thumb's up sign.

Shortly thereafter, *all* the language classes came out of the classrooms, and outside Building 4B was one happy *al fresco* cacophony of strange tongues. Apparently the brass didn't care as long as the job was getting done. Or they just didn't care, period.

Maybe the "language classes" were just a form of disguised R&R for war-weary troops that needed to be kept occupied and rested until their next killing mission. The men had to have something to do, and possibly neither Col. Green nor Harry Spence gave ten shits about whatever that had to be.

Maybe both I and the Harvard German Department were being played.

Goethestrasse

I found out in our afternoon bull sessions that my students had done some amazing "Mission Impossible" wartime feats, such as sneaking in the night and over rice paddies into North Vietnam to either assassinate or kidnap enemy NVA officers or Communist leaders. My students had fought for months in forbidden places like Cambodia and Laos *long* before Nixon declared his "incursions" into those places.

I was appalled by these revelations, and yet awed at the same time by their bravery and audacity. These guerrilla soldiers probably committed a number of crimes under international law, but whenever does a war *not* become a crime at almost every point?

I came to see these guys as dedicated, patriotic professionals. If you are going to have an army, then have a damn good one.

Not that I didn't keep having my doubts. One of my charges was a big man who looked and talked like the famous boxer Sonny Liston. He always smirked a sinister smile that hinted at a menacing sociopathy close to the surface. His name was Sergeant Blue, and indeed his skin, though dark black, also had a blue sheen to it. The scars on his face and body came from street fights in Detroit, not from the Viet Cong.

On one occasion, I asked him, "What were you told to say or do if you ever got captured on one of your missions into North Vietnam?" He replied with a homicidal glint in his eyes, "Oh, no, sir, that would never happen. I would have just kept on killing as many of them as I could before they got to killing me." And then he added, with a laugh, "I do so love greasing gooks. And they give me medals for it instead of sending me to jail. Now ain't that somethin'?"

After six weeks of incessantly repeating nonsense Viet-Cong-oriented phrases that my students would never need in the event of a war with East Germany, everybody involved in this surreal exercise, student and instructor alike, became sick of it.

I decided (and Steve eagerly agreed) that it was time to teach our charges more useful German words and phrases we knew they would want to know. They were soon to be stationed next in Bad Tölz, not far from Munich, and every GI there knew of the famous brothel in the Goethestrasse that these boys would inevitably visit.

It was time to teach them words they would need for that mission. Inside my three-ring binder I smuggled into the fort a copy of Playboy magazine. Instead of showing drawings of communist peasants or exploding grenades, I unfurled the centerfold of the Playmate of the Month and started pointing at and teaching the German words for various parts of the female anatomy, along with phrases for what people do when they get naked. Class morale was suddenly back again!

They not only learned quickly, they did something they had yet to do the previous six weeks: they took out pen and paper and wrote down these important new words, followed by phrases that one would want to have handy when interacting with a hooker.

Steve followed suit with his class, and soon the two warring Green Beret factions were screaming obscenities and sexual propositions to each other across the grassy lawn. As fate would have it, the same major who had previously driven by and given me the thumbs up did so again, happy to see progress was still being made so enthusiastically.

Wallapaloozas

I was not subverting the Army, mind you. If anything, the Green Berets were subverting me. I truly liked and admired every one of them, even the shy guy with the freckles who kept to himself in a corner and had "Hayworth" sewn above his right pocket, just as everyone else's last name was put there. Turns out, his mother was actress Rita Hayworth, and he indeed looked a lot like her. Nobody could get him to talk about her, though.

And the students liked me. They kept asking, "When are you going to stop being a leg and jump with us?" A leg was anyone who had never jumped out of an airplane. They kept promising they would sneak me on board one of the DC-3s, suit me up with a parachute and hook me to the jump line, no problem, and then my leg-ness would be over and I would be truly worthy of their company.

I almost took them up on it, but thank God I still had some working neurons left in my brain.

But I did not pass up their other challenge, one which would gain me full comrade status. There was a dive not far from Ft. Devens where the standing challenge was to prove your manhood by downing two Wallapaloozas in immediate succession. They dared me, so instead of going home one Friday night, I took a room in a cheap motel near the bar and joined my buddies for the test.

The problem: a Wallapalooza was the equivalent of about five standard drinks, and it was some godawful combination of several kinds of alcohol and a red liquid that I guessed was Hawaiian Punch. It came in what looked like a big flower vase with no ice. A number of students from my class and Steve's were there to see how I would fare.

I now wished I had opted for the parachute.

I drank the first one as quickly as I could, because I figured if I could get into the second one fast enough the effects of the first one wouldn't have kicked in yet.

Well, that's all I can remember from that challenge. It must have been around 3 in the morning when a State Trooper shone his flashlight in my eyes and shook me awake where I lay among some weeds and bushes next to the now empty parking lot. I assured the trooper I was OK and staggered off to my nearby motel room.

The next Monday, my students and now new friends were relieved I was OK. They were all getting drunk, too, and they didn't notice until closing time that I was missing. They looked for but couldn't find me, so they called the police to put a lookout for me.

But the good news: while they on the one hand were about to accomplish their mission of memorizing all the stupid German phrases plus all the handy sexy new ones, I had for my part successfully passed mine. They assured me I had downed both Wallapaloozas.

Waste More Land

The eight weeks were nearly up when one final surreal moment would be added to all the others: it was announced that General William Westmoreland, the architect of so much evil in Vietnam, would be stopping by Ft. Devens to inspect the troops and take a tour of the training center, including the language lab.

Steve, Leroy, Daphne and I were dumbfounded. *He* would be here? Why *here*?

We were called back into Col. Green's expansive office. As before, he was direct and terse. "You know Chief of Staff General Westmoreland will be here Thursday. Among other things, he wants to see the language lab. You will be there with your students. Though he will be present you are to carry on as if he were not there. You will not look or stare at him. You *will* not speak to him. Understood?"

We understood.

He ended the meeting with, "You are all doing fine work," spoken as a dismissal.

Though in the evenings our students were supposed to go to the language lab to listen to audio tapes of what they had memorized in class during the day, I doubt many of mine did. The only time I was in the language lab was in anticipation of Westmoreland's visit. It was a show put on just for him.

When he entered the building, somebody at the door shouted, "The Chief of Staff!" But as instructed, everybody kept going about their business. Except me. When the Great Man was about three feet from me, I looked straight up at him from where I was sitting, incredulous that there he was in the flesh. I stared at his bushy eyebrows and clean jaw. His head darted this way and that to take in the room. He stood a while and looked bored, a desk jockey now, not noticing me, not really looking at anything. Then he left, Col. Green at his side, having never said a word.

Somehow, that staged Potemkin Village moment was emblematic of that fort, that Army, that crazy war.

Epilogue

I got my M.A. in German at Harvard, then I passed the oral and written exams for the Ph.D. part of the program. When I was halfway through my Ph.D. thesis, I decided a career teaching German wouldn't be "relevant," a big political buzzword then. So I went to law school thinking I'd become a social warrior.

Again, I would eventually sell out. I took the money path instead. Judging from the current dismal political landscape, my choice probably spared me many a heartache.

But I am still Keeping Clean for Gene, just in case he happens to show up again in a new incarnation.

As for my friends Captain Guterriez and a bright-eyed, intelligent Lt. Johnson and the scary Sgt. Blue and a religious Corporal West and so many of the others (maybe even Corporal Hayworth) — over the course of the next five years, they were all killed.

So much youth and promise and good humor. All of them gone, so long ago.

I pray they at least had a chance or two to use some of the German I taught them for the Goethestrasse.