

**Dress Right**

8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 1983

What do they care  
what we wear?  
BDUs and combat boots  
tennis shoes  
with fine dress blues?

What do they care  
what we wear?  
As long as we come  
with our guns that shoot.

Really now!

Your left, your right,  
your left,  
What do they care  
what we wear? #

## **Background for the poem “Time Out”**

The Cold War was full on in Germany during the author’s assignment as an infantry brigade chaplain.

NATO forces had explicit and detailed plans for any attack into West Germany by the opposing Eastern Bloc forces. The brigade mission, quite frankly, was to meet, absorb, and destroy any attack—in a narrowly defined corridor called the Fulda Gap—to prevent Russian troops from reaching Frankfurt.

The battalion’s tactical operations center (TOC) orchestrated the battalion’s battle plans in support of the parent infantry brigade operations. The training was routinely done at 3–4 major training areas in West Germany, and in the open German countryside in exercises called “Compass Points.”

The voice in this poem is a battalion commander explaining the complex array of weapons and fighting systems to support the battalion’s combat operations.

Additionally, about a year earlier the brigade had lost a battalion commander in a bout with cancer.

This encounter—in the TOC, in the snow of winter—was a heartfelt expression, however brief, of that loss.

Notes:

- ADA is Air Defense Artillery.
- Alpha 6 is the call sign for the Alpha Company Commander.
- “To jump” is to move the battalion to a new position.

**Mainz/Baumholder**

**Time out**

1st Bde, 8th Inf. Div, 1984

*Jesus Christ!*

*Just what*

*we need:*

*a chaplain!*

We're kinda busy here.  
This TOC is where we lay  
plans for the next war,  
the holy fight.

You believe that?  
Maps and overlays,  
radios and call signs,  
battle positions, and

firing points, ready  
to go. We're tied  
into the artillery  
and the ADA.

Got the engineers.  
Even the US Air Force.  
A part of the brigade slice.  
We've got Intel higher,

and can talk  
to the whole goddam world.  
If those sonsabitches  
ever come, we're ready  
for 'em. You believe that?

Who's that on the horn?  
Alpha Six? Tell him  
I'll call back. I'm tied  
up right now.

Ah, Chaplain,  
I don't know, it's been  
months now, and you'd think  
I'd be over it. But he

was one of the best.  
Maybe the only honest one.  
Stood right up to the old man.  
Had his priorities straight,

and didn't take any crap.  
Really cared for his troops.  
Ah, McGee!  
We were a real team.

Goddamn!  
How I miss him.  
Get Alpha Six on the horn;  
we're ready to jump. #

## Mainz/Mz-Finthen

The 27 parachutists,  
from 8 or 9 nations—  
an international gathering,  
died on a Mannheim Autobahn  
on a Sunday afternoon,  
trying to get in  
one last jump,  
when the engine quit  
on the Chinook,  
and down they went,  
and by Monday  
the pilot's wife went  
to her husband's closet,  
and boxed up all  
his uniforms  
his BDUs,  
his khakis,  
his Class A's,  
his Dress Blues,  
his web belts with polished buckles,  
his, low quarters, spit-shined,  
his boots, spit-shined,  
his caps,  
his hats,  
his uniform's accoutrements,  
his brass,  
his patches,  
his insignia,  
his ribbons and awards,  
in little boxes,  
carried into  
the chapel  
saying that that he—  
and they—belonged to the Army,  
and the Army could have them all. #

## Mainz II

Too young  
to know  
better,  
two young  
soldiers,

so close to  
the Thanksgiving  
weekend, on a pass  
from Baumholder's  
field training,

a reward for hard work,  
a job well done,  
so they had a few,  
and hoofed it to town  
down the tracks,

and they never heard  
the train that hit them,  
the trains in Germany  
being electric  
hardly making  
any noise  
at all. #

### **Mainz/Graffenwoehr, III**

Something told the  
NCO that he needed  
to make one  
last check, before it  
was their turn to  
offload the APC.

It was the NCO's creed  
of getting it right,  
providing the leadership,  
setting the example,  
looking out for his troops--  
that prodded him to climb

on top of the armored  
personnel carrier--  
to tighten a strap,  
check the chocks,  
or secure an antenna--  
during a rail

unloading operation  
at the railhead in Graf,  
and his head  
just touched  
the overhead

high-voltage wires  
that literally  
smoked  
him.

Mind you:  
he just  
*touched*  
the wires. #

## Mainz IV

The call came  
in the middle of the night  
an armor battalion soldier  
had died in his apartment,  
and when we got there,  
the MPs were questioning  
the pregnant wife,  
with the *rigor mortis*  
already setting in  
with more yet to come.  
And somewhere  
there's a man  
or woman,  
grown now,  
who never  
got to know  
his or her  
father. #



**Mainz/Hohenfels, V**

Every day  
soldiers die,  
somewhere,  
somehow,

but on this day,  
one of ours  
died,  
dead,

OD'd  
in a Frankfurt  
HBF\* latrine,  
shot up  
with an

overdose  
of heroin,  
even while  
under arrest

and under  
MP escort  
to be  
discharged  
—*get this*—  
for drug use. #

\*HBF, the German abbreviation for *Hauptbahnhof*, or Main Train Station.

## Nice work if you can get it

Ten million US soldiers/military personnel were in Germany and Europe from 1950 to 2000. In the '80s, the talked-about number was about 400,000 soldiers and families, in Germany alone. Assignments were two years for a single soldier (i.e., an unaccompanied tour; three years for accompanied tours with family-sponsored dependents, except they weren't called "dependents" but "family members." Three years in family housing meant stairwell living, three- to four-story walkups, with shared laundry rooms, shared stairwell cleaning schedules, and shared common areas. Building coordinators fielded complaints and kept order for schedules and noise. They noted whose kids needed watching. Accompanied tours were three years in family housing areas named after American patriots like Patrick Henry Village, Mark Twain Village, Dr. Martin Luther King Village, and Benjamin Franklin Village—shortened to King Village and BFV. Most Americans didn't recognize unfamiliar host nations' namesakes. Occasionally a housing area was saddled with a name from a local village, a street, or a district such as *Perlacher Forst*, *Aukamm*, or *Mainz-Finthen*. Sometimes the names fortuitously denoted the mission of the base or barracks, as in Panzer Kaserne, Artillery Barracks, Lindsey Air Station—no runways but definitely Air Force qualified—or Wiesbaden Air Base, ironically a home to Army Aviation. Four hundred thousand soldiers with or without families meant close quarters, literally living on top of one another. Seasoned service members or with the rank to justify living "on the economy" opted for "off-post housing"—nicer, quieter, perhaps more normal quarters than the potluck stairwells. Those who were experienced at living overseas quizzed newcomers as to whether they were going to live "in quarters" or "on the economy," a one-upmanship query to sort out who knew the nuances of rank and privilege. There were always some who could not adapt to being away from the USA for one reason or another. For those there was the option of "early-return of dependents," not a guaranteed right but an option if things didn't work out. Although an early return of dependents was never high on the commander's get-out-of-Dodge list for family crises, commanders relented in extreme cases. Consideration was duly given for unavoidable issues back home or for failing marriages. The priorities for an early return went up when children were out of control, or a spouse was in trouble with the command or with civilian authorities. The commander's first choice was to send couples for counseling with the hope that a face-to-face with a professional doctor/therapist/counselor/chaplain would resolve the crisis. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't.

One couple with 3–4 small children announced that the wife couldn't take it anymore, and she was leaving to return home to Montana. She made it clear that *nothing* would make any difference. Forthwith she left husband and kids. Her poor infantry husband somehow found child care from compassionate neighbors. A few months later the wife was back, walking arm in arm with her husband, the kids trailing behind. She and her husband both grinned bashfully—with no explanation—while she said, “Yeah, I came back.” Montana must have been the cure. Who could have known?

The wife of an infantry first sergeant found that she could no longer rely on her husband for support other than the basic—and required—monetary support. There was, however, no emotional support to sustain the marriage or to provide a loving home for their two girls. Even a confrontation with the chaplain resulted in the husband's steely eyes and a jaw set in defiance. As a first sergeant, he flipped all the switches to get the early return approved. By the time the ink was dry on the orders authorizing the family's early return, he had cleared quarters, and moved back into the barracks, and basically abandoned his wife and their daughters. Mysteriously the military didn't have viable support for the wife's situation, but the first sergeant had the support of his own chain of command that didn't lift a finger to intercede on behalf of the “family members” who were literally “dependent.” At the end, the wife was out of quarters with no place to go. She and my wife talked at the chapel, and she accepted the offer to stay in our home for her last couple days in the country. She had been defeated in her home country by a mean-spirited husband, but she vowed to return to her home in South Carolina. She said she'd make it, and the last I heard, she had done just that.

Couples who grew tired of jumping through the hoops of obtaining the command's blessing for an early return sometimes managed to finance their own tickets back to the States, and the husband moved back into the barracks for the duration of his assignment. The mission of the soldier was always foremost; of course, the Army's mission was to support the German government against the encroachment of a threatened—and lethal—Soviet invasion. The US's stake: 400,000 soldiers and family members. Always the mission. And remember: dependents were not dependents but family members. #

## **On board, 1982**

### **Or getting with the program**

The community chaplain set up the briefing for the new community commander. The general, the community chaplain, and the brigade chaplain were all new, as well as at least two battalion chaplains. The community chaplain wanted to provide a briefing for the commander on the religious program for the units in his command/community. The military community's major unit was an infantry brigade consisting of two infantry battalions and one armor battalion with sundry support soldiers—about 2,500 soldiers in all, with about 7,500 family members, give or take. The chaplain assistants were keeping a low profile, wanting to know what changes the brigade chaplain had in mind for the programs and procedures that they had grown comfortable with. Somebody mentioned a rumor that the brigade chaplain's sole jeep was on the hit list to disappear with no replacement. This would effectively gut the unit ministry team's ability to move to areas where the soldiers were training, a major handicap to any field grade officer dedicated to serving troops who were often in the field. Additionally, the two infantry battalion chaplains had no dedicated vehicle. Whether the jeep would go, the assistants didn't know for sure, but they'd heard talk. Their suggestion was that I talk to the new brigade commander to see if there was any truth to the rumor. I did; he listened but told me that the jeep was going, end of discussion. The buzz in the brigade and battalions was always about the field exercises dubbed "Compass Point" and "Cardinal Point." No one bothered to explain the difference between the two—if they even knew! As a new brigade chaplain, I really didn't have much of an idea of what the religious program was since whatever program had been in place upon the previous chaplain's departure had disintegrated as he signed out. The community chaplain said that the previous brigade chaplain should have left a continuity file. Of course there *was* such a continuity file, but it was meaningless as personnel changed during the summer rotations. New people appeared with a spurt of interest and stories about what they had done at the last duty station. The implication was always that those old programs could be reinvented. The potential volunteers—who had suggested the programs—almost quickly disappeared when the unit mission cycle began to strain the leaders' energy and resources. Families began to downscale expectations about travel in Germany and other European countries as the realities of military obligations hit home. Schools were in flux during the summer break. There was no Army Community Service program to speak of. But of course there were

scheduled religious services. Chaplains were routinely seeing soldiers and family members in counseling. Chaplains said they were visible in the barracks, and training and work areas, but nobody knew for sure. The DRE was new as well and had no real idea of what he was doing or how to do it. There was no youth program in place other than a vacation Bible school, which turned out to be the largest in anyone's memory—put together in less than a week by my wife—but nobody thought such a program all that important since they were just kids. Our Catholic priest was an older man, a native of Spain; he was determined to leave the Army as soon as his "time" was up. A dear, caring priest, he was the center of the Catholic program, and his focus was Mass on Sundays along with the various sacraments of the church, all of which involved counseling and availability to soldiers. The Jewish program was nonexistent since there was no rabbi and the closest Jewish community was in Frankfurt. The outgoing Protestant chaplain was focused on his move back to the States; his replacement was inbound, and the word was that he would take over the ever-important Gospel program that traditionally served the African American community. The armor battalion would not have its first dedicated chaplain until later in the year. The Catholic chaplain related that some retreats had been successful in the past. Various cultural and historical sites were in the immediate vicinity, but nothing was firmed up with funding or dates. There were no Bible studies in place; no men's group. The two women's groups—one Catholic and one Protestant, both small—were the most stable and united chapel efforts in the community. The Protestant music director had a small choir, and the organist's husband was in line for a move to another installation. On the first Sunday after the new brigade commander's arrival in the community, he, his wife, and children came to their first service at the brigade chapel. He carried a large leather-bound Bible. Roughly the normal contingent of worshippers were present—at best a subdued crowd, waiting to see what the brigade chaplain and his assistant would be like and what they might do to resurrect the former brigade chaplain's religious zeal and program. After the brigade commander's first visit in late summer, he did not return until later in the fall. It wasn't long after his visit that he asked why the soldiers were not in attendance at the worship service. There were, of course, sensible theories about the moral and religious development people as they aged from birth to end of life, but the commander wasn't big on social theory about young soldiers and middle-aged NCOs. As it turned out, no one else had an answer for that question, and not until later did it become apparent that the brigade's *intense* training schedule—dictated from on high, from Division and Corps and from USAREUR—drained the soldiers' energy so that when there was a weekend off, they crashed or spent

time with their family. Attending a worship service was not high on their agenda. Soldiers reasoned that God would understand even if the army did not. Oh yes, I did brief the community commander—along with the community chaplain—on his religious program, something to the effect that the most important thing that the chaplains did during the week was to conduct religious services. It seemed a better answer than saying, “Sir, there isn’t a whole lot.” And I should have added a qualifier: “. . . yet.” The commander looked puzzled at the importance I put on the religious services for soldiers and families but he let it pass. Things got better in time. #

## **Mightier than the chariots of legions**

Once upon a time, there was a bishop who had but a lowly jeep, pitiful to behold, and numbered HQ43 by army nomenclature. Truly, all who saw it said that it had seen its day, yet it was four wheels for the field, even when the wind did blow and the curtains did bang, and the rain poured in by the bucketful with every passing Mercedes and Opel on the Autobahn. Yet, 'twas a good vehicle and loved by the bishop and his minions for their work for soldiers of the king's brigade. Loved or not, the assistants breathed warnings that the king was not to be trusted, and that he wanted it—nothing personal, mind you—and so it was as good as gone. And so it was, that the jeep vanished, rumored to be yet another piece for cannibalization swallowed by one of the infantry battalions with their mighty fleets of tracks, trucks, and jeeps. The bishop's jeep was now more than four wheels for the field; it was now a pawn on the board of chess, where kings and queens ruled, and bishops and pawns held scant hope of privilege let alone right by function. As had been foretold, the jeep was gone, ephemeral as the morning's mist as the king made his move, and the bishop's steed was no more, an empty spot in the king's motor stables, and the bishop was sore wheel-less with no plea of mercy heard or helpful. The king's ear was deaf to arguments for religious support, or when subtly reminded that the king himself was responsible for providing the bishop access to his troops, needy as they might be in time of training, war, or personal stress. Naught made any difference. No relief was in sight, and clouds of confusion reigned as the bishop pondered what it meant that he had perchance lost his place in the king's council of knights. Time passed and the field exercises were drawing near, and one day the bishop, who had harbored all these feelings of inadequacy in himself night and day, complained mightily to the brigade S-4, a logistics dog in the lair of infantry wolves. The 4 listened and took pity on the bishop, and opened a door that was heretofore not seen. Said the logistics officer privily, Pray tell me, dear bishop, what you need, yea, 6 weeks aforesaid, and I'll fetch afresh that which is mighty in field or garrison, yea it shall be verily hidden in the king's own transportation requests, and the king himself would know naught other than it was just another piece of equipment paid for by lord of the land's own coffers. And so it was that the S-4 begat one each VW van for every brigade and battalion unit ministry team, for the duration of each field exercise, with a jubilee week of the use of the van on each end of the exercise. The bishop and his minions learned mightily—and rejoiced—that the power lay not in the almighty Table of Organization and Equipment, but in the

dollar dealing of the logisticians, and it was good. Yea, better than any jeep in the King's inventory! And it was so. #



## Night Moves

The two soldiers,  
driving a 5-ton truck  
in a night move  
at the tail end of a  
convoy on a German  
Autobahn, were rear-ended  
by a trans-European freight  
truck whose driver apparently  
went to sleep, and did  
not see the 5-ton before  
he hit it, full on.

The two soldiers—driver  
and assistant driver—  
were taken to a hospital  
to be checked out,  
and apparently survived  
without a scratch.

One soldier happily  
reported that what saved  
them was that the driver  
and he had been reading  
and reflecting on God's Holy  
Word when the truck hit  
them, breaking it in half,  
and flipping the cab over,  
sending it skidding upside  
down about a hundred  
yards on the Autobahn  
roadway, and the assistant  
driver said, "The sparks  
was a flyin'!" But they survived  
by God's will, and nobody  
could tell him any different,  
and somewhere today  
in the US of A,  
there's an old veteran  
with God's imprint  
on his soul. #

## **What's mine is not necessarily yours**

The “terrain walk” was a command group exercise to acquaint officers and noncoms with geographical features of potential future battle grounds: hills on which to plant artillery, rivers to cross, bridges and airfields to maintain or blow, mountains that channeled approach routes, villages that blocked access, main routes that pointed toward goals and objectives, and farmland on which to plant mines. The “terrain walk” was often just that, a familiarization exercise to gain firsthand knowledge of maneuver requirements, for the unit’s mission in case of attack from the east. A major piece of ground, close to the German border, was known as the “Fulda Gap,” basically a straight shot for an Eastern Bloc offensive to drive deep into Frankfurt. NATO’s mission was to stop an invasion by East German and Russian forces by conventional weapons and by tactical nuclear weapons when necessary. An interesting feature of the “terrain walk” was the battlefield “deconfliction board,” a large map on which units located their battle sites and were able to compare their locations with other units that were assigned to be in the same area. Units found that the exercise offered a safe opportunity to relocate to other areas on the map, options that would not otherwise be possible in a real battle. Pins, Post-it Notes, and commanders meeting one another face to face—perhaps for the first time—prevented what otherwise would have been a battlefield mash-up with two or more units clawing to occupy the same piece of ground. The only conflict that was not deconflicted was the clash of West versus East—two ideologies with two wills poised to fight over one piece of ground. The military had been ready for years, but it was left to the politicians and statesmen to manage the probabilities and the outcome. Notably one—from the United States—posted his own deconfliction notice for the entire world to hear: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” #

## Where you walk, the enemy might

Engineers,  
yes, the builders  
and civil planners  
architects, and designers,  
pavers of roads and runways,  
builders of dams and overpasses  
—*Essayons!*—  
in the civilian world,  
here the Engineers  
took on a new role  
—combat--  
In war time  
the engineers could blow  
barbed wire, bridges,  
hedges, roads, or obstacles, such as wire,  
anything in the line of advance,  
cratering charges,  
Bangalore torpedoes,  
C4 and plain old dynamite,  
and to create more obstacles,  
deadly,  
where there were none,  
and implant mines,  
and mine fields,  
and more mines,  
and mines on mines,  
anti-tank,  
anti-personnel,  
anti-anything, living or moving,  
to prevent  
the Russian divisions,  
at a six-to-one advantage  
the tanks,  
the infantry,  
and artillery  
from driving on  
into Frankfurt,  
the heartland  
of Germany.  
Construction or destruction  
guaranteed. #