



OUR HEROES

**YOU'RE IN THE ARMY NOW
... WELL, MAYBE NOT!**

RICH WOJNAR
Commander Post 712

In July, 1964, I reported to the Army recruiter in Charleroi, PA. At that time, it was required that all high school graduates enter the Draft. I listened to his sales pitch and said that I would think about it without notifying my family. Well, about a week later I returned and asked what about the next step. The next step was to take a series of tests that would measure my intellectual ability. The following week my parents asked me if I had spoken to an Army recruiter. I asked "why" and they replied "because he called and said my test results were in". After he went over the results with me, the recruiter told me that I had scored well above the norm and suggested that I might want to go to listen to the Army Security Agency Recruiter who was located in Pittsburgh, PA. Driving to the "city" was a "big thing" back then and not like it is today.

The recruiter stated that the ASA was a highly confidential agency that even he could not explain. He stated that I will be in the Army, but not really in the Army. It was then that I learned the ASA reported to the National Security Agency (NSA) and not directly to the Army. He also said by choosing the ASA I would sign on to a four-year commitment. Not knowing what the military was all about the ASA sounded like a "cool thing". After speaking to the ASA recruiter, I decided to enlist.



On August 27, 1964, I was off to Ft. Dix, NJ for basic training. That evening, I spent the night in a Pittsburgh hotel (to assure I would be on the train the next morning) and traveled by train the next morning to Newark, NJ. From Newark, I traveled by bus to Ft. Dix, NJ. I arrived at night at one of the gates at Fr. Dix, NJ. Now I was on my own! An MP driving a jeep stopped me and asked me what I was doing walking around. I showed him the paperwork I was carrying and he said, "I know exactly where you are going." The next thing I know I was standing in line with hundreds of guys. With my shirt off, two medics, one on each side of me, began firing shots in both arms using air guns. Next I went to a holding company to wait for the next basic training company to begin.

While in basic training, I remember one morning, after our calisthenics were done, a soldier walked up to the drill instructor and handed him a sheet of paper with a few names on it. Our drill instructor yelled out the four names listed on the paper with one of the names being mine. We were told to "fall out" of formation and to go with this soldier. We got into a van. The soldier hopped into the driver's seat, looking back at us saying, "You four are the ASA guys, right?" We answered "yes" and then we were escorted to another training building. When we arrived at this training center we were led into a room that had padded chairs, small couches, and tables with various magazines on them. The soldier told us to relax and read the magazines if we so desired. After a short while, we began to get a bit antsy wondering what was next. Approx. one hour later, we noticed the same soldier had returned to the room and looked as though he

was making an exit. We asked him if we should be doing something. He said just for us sit back and relax. He then said they were lucky to get us out of that crazy basic training for at least a day. He went on to say that the Army Security Agency takes care of their own!

After basic, I attended ASA Morse Code Interceptor School (called "the bird cage") in Ft. Devens, Mass. The training was rigorous and failure wasn't an option. We learned that the recruiter may have forgotten to tell us that if we failed out of any ASA training, we would still have to honor our four-year commitment and would be placed wherever we were needed in the Regular Army. In order to graduate, you had to pass a final Morse code test, copying 20 groups/minute of varied dit's and dah's (dots and dashes) with 100% accuracy – yes, zero mistakes. A "group" consisted of five letters, numbers or special characters. For our exams, students were seated in two rows, about ten deep, with their headsets plugged into a receptacle in the front of their desk. The code was sent via code transmitter/recorders and your typing had to be exact! Each group had to be separated by a space. After five groups, a double space was required, followed by five more groups. The code was copied on a "mill". A mill was basically a typewriter that only has capital letter keys and the paper was "tractor fed" around the platen. Getting to type 20 groups/minute was not as easy as I had thought. We started out typing one letter at a time, one number at a time, and then one special character at a time. There were mini tests every day with a large test every Friday. If you failed the Friday test you attended a one day remedial session and retested the next day. Those who failed a second time were never seen again at school. All day and all night the "dits" (.) and "dahs" (-) echoed loudly in our heads. Upon graduation, I was able to copy 20 groups/minute. Even today, after all these years, I am still proficient at copying code at 35 groups/minute.

After approx. 15 months of training, I had orders to go to Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia. This tour would last a year and a half without R & R. When I departed the U. S., I was issued two passports which seemed a bit strange to me. A month or so later, I found out that one passport was for my personal use and the other passport stated I was on official business for the U. S. Government. This passport was to be used in the event my job function was compromised and I was being detained by a foreign government. The mission in Ethiopia was nothing short of being the most complicated job I could ever imagine, but also the most interesting job with folks counting on your expertise at the most critical moments in the history of that time period. As a Morse code interceptor I was involved with everything from our Gemini Space Mission to all phases of the Cold War. While Russia topped the list of countries we copied, I was involved in activities that may still be considered classified today. We never talked about what we were involved in, not even with each other. At that time, we were briefed that talking to anyone regarding our job duties was grounds for immediate imprisonment, no questions asked, as all of our daily activities were classified as Top Secret Cryptographic. Talking about our mission would put our government in an embarrassing and negative position by our allies and guaranteed to be a one way ticket to prison.



The Cold War was a very delicate assignment. When we intercepted various targets we put our finished copies called "traffic" thru a slot in a door at the front of our room. Who got it and where it went was none of our business. Just like in school, the rooms were long with 10-15 operators on one side of the room and 10-15 operators on the other side. An operator's "position" consisted of a gray desk with a mill on it and behind the mill there was a slot in the rear of the

desk for the 5-ply paper to be fed. To the left of the operator, side-by-side, were two radios either R390's or R390A's. Over the top of the receivers were two small containers that could swing back and forth. In the event our building came under attack, the containers were to be opened and the contents spilled over the receivers. The acid in these containers would partially destroy the equipment, making the equipment inoperable. Our building was called "Tract C". Tract C was a single floor building surrounded by over 2500 acres of antennas including deep dish space antennas. Walking through the halls of Tract C, there were 3-4 identical rooms (in size and shape), and each room was filled with operators who wore their headsets around their neck (instead of over their ears with the reason being many of the targets were hundreds and hundreds of miles away and if the headsets covered their ears and a storm with a lightning strike erupted anywhere between the operator and his target the sound through the headsets would be like going to a firing range without ear protection which might result in permanent ear damage. When you walked past these rooms all you would hear is the chirping from the headsets of the 60+ operators who were copying various targets. When we were in school, we copied "canned" code, or code that was near perfect, as it was sent via transmitters.



It was in the field where you got the real education because humans were sending code to one another, not even close to the perfectly canned code we copied, and I was intercepting their signals. Some code was absolutely horrible where you had to ride "side saddle" with a seasoned operator in order for you to decipher what the sender was sending. Both of you copied the same target. Once you showed that both of your copies of traffic matched, then you were on your own. This might take up to three weeks. The seasoned operator was not able to relocate back to the states until his replacement was proficient.

When the U. S. launched the Gemini rocket, we immediately began tracking the capsule. Usually the mission could only be tracked when the capsule was in our "window" of communication. The communication window was the time period when the capsule was coming into our tracking range. Our tracking range was roughly from the middle of the Pacific Ocean to areas of Eastern Asia. Once the capsule went to the backside of the earth, we normally should have lost transmission. We never lost transmission from the capsule due to the deep dish antennas around the world, the Advanced Range Instrumentation Aircraft (ARIA), and along with other monitoring methods. The aircrafts were C-135 Stratolifters that were modified for various space missions. They flew 24 hours/day and seven days a week. There were also various islands around the world that were equipped with deep dish space antennas. Another reason we never lost communication was because the capsule transmissions were bounced between various aircraft and the deep dish antennas all over the world.

My part began when the capsule flew into our window. There was one country specifically that sent out sound waves in order to jam certain frequencies so that the U.S. would lose communications with the capsule. While there was an attempt to jam the signals other classified frequencies were also being utilized. We would listen to the astronauts speaking to Mission Control located in Houston, Texas and Goddard Flight Center in Green Belt, Maryland.

Following my year and half in Ethiopia, I returned to the states. My next station was at Vint Hill Farms lo-

cated in Northern Virginia. Without getting into details, Viet Nam was a main priority of the United States. Our mission was conducted 24hrs/day, seven days a week. There was absolutely no down time. It was imperative that we completed our mission – minute-by-minute as soldiers' lives may depend on it. I worked in a building called "The Barn". It was an actual farm barn with two floors. The bottom floor was equipped with very large Mincom recorders (6' x 3' wide). As I recall, there were about six of them. We needed these reel-to-reel recorders for their "playback" function. We didn't use them to record any data. The reels were approx. 2' in diameter. The data on these reels were recorded from search positions deep in the jungles of Viet Nam. Intel was also gathered by small planes and helicopters. Once this data was captured, it was uncertain to us as to how they got onto these reels. The reels were then time stamped and immediately flown to an undisclosed location in the states on a daily basis, and then driven by an unmarked courier to Vint Hill Farms – straight to the Barn.

We received these reels daily. By the time I reached Vint Hill Farms, I had achieved the rank of Specialist 5th Class (Spec 5) and I was placed in the position of Room Supervisor. My assignment was to supervise the tape section. Two recorders ran 365 days a year, 24 hours a day and the tapes were changed in a staggered rotation changing one recorder every hour. We had four back-up recorders in the event of a recorder failure. The upper floor of the Barn was filled with Morse code operators in the same basic room format as it was in Ethiopia - same desks- same headsets and two side-by-side receivers to the left of each operator. Here is the big difference! The receivers to their left were Rycom Receivers, not R390's. So what is the difference? The giant Mincom Recorders on the first floor were feeding the "taped" signals to the top floor and the Rycom Receivers were scanning the data on the tapes. It felt exactly as though you were sitting in the jungles of Viet Nam copying the code live, although we were a day late copying this information. Their targets sent code using a certain frequency that never changed whether you copied that target off of a tape in the states or live in the jungles of Viet Nam. The enemy sent messages back and forth to each other via Morse code while we were intercepting those messages.



In late January, 1968, the USS Pueblo was seized in international waters near Korea and a portion of our communications went silent. We had direction finding stations located in numerous areas in Viet Nam. They moved to various sites when it was believed their presence was being compromised. We tracked enemy movement, via our linguists, on a wall-sized map of Viet Nam using various colored push-pins. This map was also not privy to all of our own operators. This was also the method used when we tracked what we thought may be massive amounts of North Vietnamese troop movement. When we believed these enemy troops were assembling in certain areas, we alerted yet another entity this time in our civilian chain of command that an enemy operation may be imminent. The only significant draw-back of this system that this was not a "live" mission as our data was a day late.

Everyone close to this mission took it more seriously than just another day at work. Every day we would come in wondering what happened the day before and by some miracle did we make a difference? Even today when I see various stories relating to the soldiers in Viet Nam I always wonder if that soldier was alive because of our mission. I guess I will never know, but one thing for sure is that I will never forget! One thing to remember is that the Army Security Agency Personnel were National Security Agency Personnel, but in uniform. If interested, Google Army Security Agency, Kagnew Station, Vint Hill Farms and Asmara Stone House.