

1965 – 1966

WHY WIN THE GREEN BERET?



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As a Private, E-2 (one rank up from a basic trainee), I was assigned to the Company A, 2-148th Infantry (Dragoons), 2nd Brigade, 3rd Armored Division, in *Gelnhausen*, in what was then called West Germany.

Gelnhausen is a town in the Prussian province of Hesse-Nassau, on the Kinzig, 27 miles E. N. E. of *Frankfort am Main*, on the railway to *Bebra* (map). It was a quiet, little, romantic town that I used to enjoy walking around when I had earned time off. Even though I had to wear my Class A uniform, I was treated with respect by the villagers.

When I had enlisted, the recruiter had promised me that I would see Europe. In a way, he didn't lie. I got to see *Hoensfeld*, in Bavaria — a desolate mountain training area (map, page 5). I saw this less-than romantic scene

mostly from the vantage point of a the prone position in snow. We were not allowed to dig foxholes in this training area.

I got to see *Grafenwoehr*, in Bavaria, another more desolate training area (map, page 5). I saw this scene mostly from the vantage point of laying in snow-covered ground. (We were not allowed to dig hoes at *Grafenwoehr*.)

Even as I rose in the ranks to become a sergeant, I was always disappointed in the way we were treated by our superiors. It was as if we had little or no sense — or value. They seemed to be enamored with the motto, "*To seem rather than to be.*"



Figure 1 — *Gelnhausen*, Germany, about 27 miles north-northeast of *Frankfurt am Main*

Above all, we hated the rifle range.

No matter where you were on the rifle range — whether on the firing line or in the chow line; up front or well to the rear — you had to have your helmet on at all times. Taking it off, even to scratch your head, could result in a requirement to do 10 pushups. If you have ever done pushups, you must try doing it in six inches of snow. Every time you went down, you lost sight of the sky as your head went beneath the snow.

Sergeants would move up and down the line correcting your appearance. We were more afraid to have our shirts pulled out of our trousers than we were of missing a target. The penalty for the slightest deviation of the uniform of the day was being yelled at and doing pushups.

On the firing line, at each position, there was a shooter and an ammo bearer. The Range Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) would yell, “Ready on the Right? Ready on the left?” If he received a ready signal from both, he would yell, “Ready on the firing line. Fire 10 rounds down range.”

It reminded me that *“speed is of the essence, but there’s no hurry.”* Whenever we had to reload, all firing was halted, weapons were laid down, the ammo bearer would hand the shooter one magazine of 10 or 20 rounds of ammo (bullets), and we would begin the process described above.

It would, literally, take all the daylight hours for 200 men to fire.

Not only that but the regulations were quite specific. You had to be on the range for 6 hours with each man firing “x” amount of ammo or the unit could not qualify. Rain, sleet, snow, or hail, you had to be on the range — suffering the indignities of the weather and the berating of your sergeants — in order to be a “real” soldier.

I guess it never dawned on our superiors that it was more important that a man could hit the target than how long he laid in the mud shooting his weapon down range. (In fact, it would take the Vietnam War to teach us that the amount of time was less important than the quality of the shooting.)

I remember that on one occasion, a small deer ran from the left-side of the target area to the right-side during our firing. All 50 soldiers on the firing line unloaded (fired) a full clip of 20 rounds at that fear-filled deer. Dirt popped up all around him. Not one bullet hit that deer.

The silence, from the tower, at the end of that demonstration of our abilities — or lack thereof — was deafening. Finally, the sergeant (regaining his composure) said, “Thank God the Commies can’t run that fast.”

We lined up for everything. We lined up to draw weapons. We lined up to draw ammo. We lined up to use the latrine. We lined up to eat. We lined up for the latrine. In a six-hour period, 3 hours must have been spent in one line or another.

Then, one day, the God smiled upon me.

As a Private, I was used to being put onto details. These are small groups of men assigned to some mundanely inane task such as sweeping the streets, picking up trash, painting fences that didn't need it, peeling potatoes just like soldiers did in World War I, etc.

This day, I was put on an ammunition loading detail.

The ten of us were assigned to a range used by Special Forces — whatever that was. I had never heard of them before, but we were assured they were American soldiers.

Our sergeant was scared to death of them. He warned us, "Whatever they tell you to do, do it. Those guys are nuts!"

What a motley crew they were. Each had a kind of different version of the U. S. Army uniform on. The only thing they had in common was their hats — a kind of green floppy thing. Only the French had worn a hat like that, or so I thought.

They were firing all kinds of different weapons. One man would be firing a British Sten while the man next to him was firing a Russian SKS while the man next to him was firing a Chinese Communist Burp Gun. There were no commands from the tower, no ammo bears, and no sergeants correcting uniforms.

Each man came to us and picked up the ammunition magazine that fit his weapon. He walked to an empty position on the line and, when ready, fired his weapon at the targets down range.

I'd never seen ammo or magazines like this before. At one point, I was trying to load 7.62mm ammo into a 5.56mm magazine. One of these strange sergeants walked over to me, gently touched my shoulder, and said, "That ammo goes into that magazine," pointing to a magazine in the corner of the table.

There was no berating me because I didn't know; it was a gentle instruction to correct my behavior.

Throughout the day, these men treated us like we were somebody; not just privates. They shared their rations with us and even some German beer they had brought.

Yet, there was never any sloppiness. One could sense a real respect for the power of the weapons and the skills of the men.

The medics, when not firing themselves, always seemed to be scouting the line to ensure that any problems would be dealt with quickly and efficiently.

Our sergeant, revealing more about himself than he knew, was very stiff around these men. You could smell the fear as he perspired. If they mentioned something, he would “snap to” and order one of us to fulfill that need.

When the day was over, and we were pressed into the back of our 2½ ton truck for the ride back to our tents, those Green Berets were all we could talk about. Every one of us Privates was impressed.

When we arrived back at camp, our sergeant lined us up and, before dismissing us, said, “I don’t have much respect for those guys. I could have gotten a Green Beret but I wanted to be a *real* soldier.”

I remembered his trepid steps in the shadows of those men. I recalled the fear I smelled on him whenever one of them came near. I thought, “You couldn’t qualify to load their ammo.”

I did some research. In those pre-Internet days, research consisted of getting permission go to the Post Library. There I scanned through books, musty magazines, and edge-worn regulations.

My studies revealed these notes:

❶ In February of 1950, the United States recognized a quasi-independent Vietnam within the French Union and first began to consider granting aid to the French forces fighting against Communist insurgency in Indochina. (Rumor has it that the first American troops on the ground were from a little-known, classified unit from Fort Bragg, North Carolina.)

❷ In May of the same year, the United States agreed to grant military and economic aid. American involvement in post-World War II Southeast Asia had begun.

❸ Four years later, in May 1954, the French Army was defeated by the Viet Minh — the Communist-supported Vietnam Independence League — at Dien Bien Phu. Under the Geneva armistice agreement, Vietnam was divided

into North and South Vietnam. (Rumors were strong that among the dead at Dien Bien Phu were about 20 non-Frenchmen who wore uniforms without patches and without name tags.)

④ On 20 June 1952, the first of the Special Forces groups, the 10th Special Forces Group, was activated at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It became the nucleus of the Special Warfare Center, now known as the John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance, at Fort Bragg.

⑤ President Kennedy himself made a visit to the Special Warfare Center in the Fall of 1961 to review the program, and it was by his authorization that Special Forces troops were allowed to wear the distinctive headgear that became the symbol of the Special Forces, the Green Beret.

It was then that I made a commitment: “Whatever it takes, one day, I will wear a Green Beret. One day, I will walk with the best-of-the-best this Army has to offer.”

It took four more years, graduating from Officer Candidate School, Airborne School (parachutist), Jumpmaster School, and finally the US Army Unconventional Warfare School, but I won that Green Beret.

I would wear it proudly for 12 years, but that’s another story for another time.



Figure 2 — *Hoenfeld*



Figure 3 — *Grafenwoehr*