

USAFSS AND THE YOUNG (at the time) AIRMEN - by Don Lehman

Time has a way of getting by and it's hard to believe that a quarter of a century has passed since my Security Service days between 1955 and 1975. Nostalgia-fueled net-search met with some success but I couldn't get "the feel" for USAFSS, as I knew it, in the 50's, 60's and early 70's. In particular, any report of contributions and accomplishments by first- and second-termers in the communications intelligence field seemed remarkably absent while generals and colonels, if one were to go by honors bestowed by some organizations, would appear to have carried the day for Security Service. The roles of these airmen were not only significant but, indeed, were the critical element of our successful intelligence operation.

First, and foremost, Security Service was an enlisted man's (and woman's) organization until at least the early 70's. By this I mean that all activities, from the commanding general's on down, were in direct support of the collection, processing, analysis and reporting of communications intelligence. All of these activities, plus most ancillary missions, were conducted by the 201 (Cryptanalyst), 202 (Radio Traffic Analyst), 203 Language Specialist) and 29X (Morse Intercept and Printer Ops) who were, to a man, enlisted personnel. Conversely, an officer's organization would be one that all activities are in direct support of a mission that is carried out by officers. A fighter unit would be a good example where the mission would be to put the pilot and plane on target. In Security Service, the 20X's and 29X's were the "pilots" who delivered the "goods." (As an aside-and I won't mention this again-when a pilot downs five enemy planes he becomes an ace. His commander and those above him in the chain-of-command do not become aces by proxy.)

Secondly, the Security Service that I remember was Air Force but very few mistook us for the military. Many military traditions tended to be at odds with mission efficiency and some personnel who transferred into Security Service often had a difficult time dealing with the free spirits and the flexible, get-the-job-done atmosphere. For example, in Misawa, circa 1963, a captain submitted his request for a transfer back to his old command because, as he stated, he had never seen such a group of unmilitary-like enlisted people in his life. Who could forget, in 1957 at Zweibrucken, the 1stSgt announcing to the assembled troops that he was going to, "make everyone soldier, by God!" The laughter he received in response pretty well summed it up. The idea was so incongruous it was, well, just funny. In

Taiwan, in 1962, an E-4 who had crossed-trained from another career field took affront when he learned that he would be trained by a lower ranking E-3, the person he was replacing. (Training/orientation by the person being replaced was the customary practice in Security Service at the time.) The cross-trainee was offered an apology for being put into such a demeaning position and was told that the next day he should report for duty less the number of stripes on his sleeve it would take for him to be comfortable with the situation. Even though it was non-military, Security Service was definitely an elite organization-without the individual elitists. The intelligence specialists came from all walks of life, representing all ethnic groups and every social-economic strata of our Country. They were in the top ten percent of all enlistees in the Air Force. They were involved, intelligence-wise, in every international situation that was a threat, or had a potential threat, to our Nation. When their shift came up, they were there and performed like the true professionals they were.

Sputnik was launched in 1957 and our space program didn't get up full steam until shortly thereafter. In the 50's we didn't have the cyberspace technology now available and, consequently, if there was a pretty-good-sized remote hill in the proximity of a target nation's communications we likely put an intercept site there. Throughout Europe and Asia and from the Mediterranean to the Pacific and in Alaska and down the Aleutian Chain these collection sites were manned by-you guessed it-enlistees, mostly first- and second-termers. They chased those dits and dahs all over the ether and they intercepted and transcribed voice intercepts of many tongues. This massive amount of data was screened for perishable intelligence by the analysts and reported to the appropriate national-level consumer. The technical knowledge and communications intelligence expertise this required were the enlisted man's domain. As anyone who manned the intercept sites during the tense Cold War period knows, a sense of well-being for the Country could only come with the knowledge that there was always a damn-good intercept operator or voice specialist sitting in front of that console.

Our operations were directed by NSA (The National Security Agency). NSA, of course, had the horses and did the heavy lifting when it came to cryptanalysis, long-term and in-depth analysis. We had our Command Headquarters at Kelly but, to the troops in the field, it was almost a non-entity (except at assignment time). I'm sure Command played an important role in planning, budgeting, logistical and other support activities but to the

field locations their light was well hidden under the proverbial bushel as we dealt primarily with NSA and other operational units.

Throughout the years, after I turned "lifer," the first-termers continued to provide the bulk of personnel for manning our positions and they always performed admirably. They came in hurt and sick (but mostly hung-over) when necessary and did the job at hand-they were the best of the best. I know they went on to successful careers in civilian life after their stint in Security Service and it was my privilege to have known and worked with them and I thank them. So when you see the lists honoring the colonels and generals give them the due they deserve, but remember-always remember-that it was the young (at the time) airmen who produced the intelligence in Security Service and it was the young (at the time) airmen who stood watch for the Nation. Then, as you view the list, pencil in hundreds of names of young (at the time) airmen and you will have created a pretty good image of what Security Service was like in the 50's, 60's and early 70's.

The above are the opinion of the writer based on his observations and are not to be construed to be an official or unofficial history of Security Service. But it's his story and he's sticking to it.

For the record, the writer completed six overseas tours in Germany, Japan, Taiwan and Korea during his lackluster career. He also completed stateside tours at the Air Force Special Communications Center (Remote Intercept Recovery), Air Force Electronic Warfare Center and The National Security Agency. He trained and worked as a cryptanalyst and also served as a radio traffic analyst, flight analyst, flight reporter, flight commander and in a ground-support role for an Airborne Communications Reconnaissance Platform unit. He also pulled a tour of duty as a watch NCO at an All-Sources-Indications-Center. (NOTE: In the above job titles, "flight" has nothing to do with flying and "watch" has nothing to do with a timepiece.) He took his turn at burn detail and through good luck, the grace of God and with more than a few heads with a blind eye turned, received the Good Conduct Medal. He retired as a MSgt in 1975.