

Mini-skirts and jackboots-two kiaps retained by Russian soldiers

By Chips Mackellar

It was 1960, at the height of the Cold War. Germany was divided into two separate countries, East and West, including the Berlin enclave inside East Germany which, itself, was divided into East and West Sectors. West Germany was a western democracy. East Germany was a Russian controlled, communist state.

John Cochrane and I, both Patrol Officers from the 1953 CPO intake, were on our first six months long service leave, on a grand tour of Europe. As neither of us had been there before, it was for us like an extended exploratory patrol.

We were in West Germany. It was fifteen years after the War, and we could roam around freely although it was still heavily garrisoned with Allied troops. The autobahns were crowded with American army convoys going this way and that way, and there were Allied soldiers in uniform everywhere. We couldn't understand the German language radio stations, so we had our car radio permanently tuned to the United States Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS).

This gave us excellent news coverage although of course, heavily biased towards the USA with baseball scores and all that. And so it happened one day while we were in West Germany that AFRTS announced that a US Army convoy was about to approach Russian check point Alpha at Helmstedt, for transit through communist East Germany, down the corridor to Berlin.

The significance of this was that, as part of their Cold War strategy and whenever they felt ornery, the Russians were in the habit of detaining US Army convoys inside the check point. This was contrary to the treaty which stipulated free access for Allied garrisons in Berlin. Sometimes the detention lasted for weeks, with US troops held inside the check point, unable to leave in any direction. You can imagine the Cold War tension this generated. And the reason for the delay was that the Russians would ask the US troops to dismount and be counted. The US refused because there was nothing in the treaty which stipulated they had to be counted. British and French convoys were also asked to dismount and be counted, and they also refused. But the Russian troops would walk past the British and French vehicles and count the troops inside, then release the convoy. However, US troops could not be counted this way, because the tail boards on the US trucks were so high the Russians could not see inside. So, with US troops

refusing to dismount, and Russian troops unable to count them and therefore refusing to let them pass, a most sensitive and volatile Cold War incident could easily develop.

On this occasion we happened to be in Helmstedt, so with sublime kiap curiosity I suggested to John that we drive down to Checkpoint Alpha and sit outside and watch what was happening. We saw the US convoy approaching, about ten vehicles of various kinds, so we fell into line behind the last truck, intending to stop outside the check point when that last US truck entered. But alas, we weren't quick enough, and with a loud crash the barrier came down behind our car and there we were trapped together with the US convoy inside Russian controlled East Germany.

There was nothing we could do except wait and see what happened. And while we sat there contemplating our fate, we could see Russian soldiers approaching each vehicle in the US convoy, calling the US troops to dismount to be counted. Of course, the US troops refused to dismount.

Our car was the last in line, and eventually a Russian soldier approached us. Standing beside my car door the Russian soldier saluted, and said in perfect English with an American accent, "Good morning, gentlemen, may I see your army movement orders please?"

"We are not in the Army," I said, "We are patrol officers from New Guinea."

Unfazed he said, "May I see your passports, please." So, we handed over our Australian passports. He looked at them and said, "Stay in the car, gentlemen, until further ordered." And he walked away with our passports and entered what looked like an admin building.

The US troops sat in their trucks and the Russian soldiers stood around guarding them, and we sat in our car for maybe an hour until the same Russian soldier returned to our car but without our passports. "Follow me, gentlemen, if you please," he said. It was all nice and polite but, trapped behind the Iron Curtain, we had no option but to comply, so we followed the soldier to the building. He opened the door and motioned for us to enter, but he stayed outside and shut the door behind us.

The interior of the building looked like the usual Army orderly room – phones and filing cabinets, radio sets, lists pinned on notice boards here and there, maps on the walls and so on. And there in the middle was a table with nothing on it

except our passports. Behind the table two Russian girl soldiers were seated. Our perception of Russian female soldiers, gleaned from wartime newsreels, was that they were all hard-faced Soviet battle-axes. But not these two. One stood up and walked around to lock the door behind us, and I could hardly take my eyes off her, because she was so beautiful.

In fact, they were both beautiful, captivating, and stylishly uniformed in mini-skirts and jack boots. It was the first time I had ever seen girls in mini-skirts wearing jack boots, and, unlike our female soldiers whose hair is worn above the collar, Russian girl soldiers then, like Israeli girl soldiers now, wore their hair down, and these two Russian girls looked so glamorous with their ice blue eyes and their long blonde hair.

Both girls were young, maybe mid-twenties, and they both spoke perfect English, albeit with American accents. Both John and I were amazed. But you see, Check Point Alpha on the Soviet border with West Germany was the Communist window to the West, so the Russians made sure that their best was on display and they had obviously picked the best- looking girl soldiers to do the interrogations here.



But I digress, you see, because, really, we were in deep trouble. Politely, but persistently, the girls began to question us. “Why are you out of uniform and not driving an army vehicle?” “Because we are not in the army. We are patrol officers from New Guinea on leave here in Germany”. “Why are we attached to this United States convoy?” “We are not attached to it we just followed it to sticky-beak”. And on and on, the questioning continued.

From time to time the girls stood and walked around the orderly room, and I was fascinated by their beautiful legs and boots, mini-skirts, and their beautiful blue eyes and long blonde hair, so I had a hard job concentrating on the questions they asked. These questions seemed to go on for hours and seemed to imply that we had some clandestine connection with the convoy we had followed into the check point.

But finally, the girls must have concluded that we were just a couple of dumb tourists caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, because their last question was, “So what do you propose to do now, gentlemen?”

“Right now, go back to West Germany,” I said. “That is impossible,” one girl said, “that frontier is closed by order of the Kremlin.” “Can you ring up and ask them to open it for us?” I asked. Both girls looked at me without expression, and there was a long, pregnant pause. “Sorry,” I said, “stupid question.” “We could give you a visa to transit out of the checkpoint,” the other girl said. It seemed to be the only option, so we agreed. The girls stood up and began to process visas into our passports. Then they handed our passports back to us.

“How long are the visas valid for?” I asked, expecting they might let us stay for a few weeks, so we could look around communist East Germany.

“One hour,” one girl said.

“One hour?” I asked in amazement, “What could we do in one hour?”

“You could drive to Berlin,” she replied, “It is exactly 110 miles from here down the Berlin Corridor to the East German frontier with West Berlin. You will drive at exactly 110 miles per hour and you will take exactly one hour to make the journey. If you take less than one hour you will be detained, for speeding, and if you take longer than one hour, you will be detained for loitering. Do you understand?” We got the message. We were going to Berlin whether we wanted to or not, and no stopping along the way.

The girls walked over to the door and unlocked it so we could leave, and as John and I went through the doorway one girl said, “Have a pleasant journey, gentlemen.” And I couldn’t resist the urge to comment, so I said to her, “I like your boots, honey.” and I will never forget the look in those beautiful Baltic ice blue eyes as she closed the door behind us.

So, at the height of the Cold War, that is how two kiaps went to Berlin – that is, by involuntary patrol down the Berlin corridor, assisted by two beautiful members of the Red Army.