



## Point of Inflection: Military

I recall the entire process of investigating which branch of the military to join. It was a surreal experience, much like what I would imagine it might be like trying to negotiate the building of an Islamic Mosque in the most isolated parts of the Mississippi countryside. Once I had decided to toss aside any sense of hope I had for a life that included any sustained moments of pleasure, the process of enlisting in the United States Air Force ended up being more like the uncomfortable equivalent of haggling with a used car salesman who specialized in reselling repossessed cars. So, I signed up to be a Cryptolinguistic Specialist, a "208," functionally known as a "code-breaker spy," in more simple terms. I had no idea what that meant in terms of what I'd be doing. But whatever it was, I was committed to doing it.

To be fair, at the time I was both deeply disappointed and mildly excited about what my life might be like in the Air Force. It would be disingenuous to say that I joined the military out of any sense of "patriotism" or "devotion to country." Like many that decided to join the ranks of the military, it seemed like the best—strike that—ONLY option open to me for guaranteed steady employment at the time—in what some have referred to as the "economic draft." How I felt about my service after serving is an entirely different issue, that I will discuss elsewhere.

After months of doing a used car lot style do-si-do with the Recruiter, and after taking a battery of tests to make certain I was qualified to be a "Cryptolinguistic Specialist," I ended up at the "MEPS," the "Military Entrance Processing Station," where a "doctor," whom I'm certain had well-hidden webbed feet, was examining a line of recruits for potential intestinal herniation. He was "armed" only with a gloved hand and a small sponge with alcohol on it. Fortunately, I was second in line, and the person in front of me at least appeared to be clean. But things got worse from there.

The flight to San Antonio and the first night of basic were "wonderful." We left Los Angeles International Airport hours later than expected and flew through what the pilot referred to as some of the "worst turbulence I've ever seen." Fortunately, it was my first airplane ride ever, so there wasn't any expectation of any "perfect flight." At 4:00 AM in San Antonio, at Lackland Air Force Base, the drill instructor was





barking out the “pick it up” and “put it down” routine with our luggage while I was desperately struggling to process the heretofore unknown situation I found myself in—playing a military version of “Simon Says” with someone whose notion of “fun” included tormenting dumbfounded young men at 4:00 in the morning.

Aside from that first night, basic training wasn’t such a horrible an experience. There is almost a logic to process of dehumanizing and deconstructing recruits. The military concept of breaking down the “spirit” of a recruit, then “rebuilding” it to comfort with “military order and discipline” makes sense in light of the wide range of “personalities” that enlist in the different branches. I knew that I was an undisciplined and “unmotivated individual” that needed a lot of help to “get on track.”

Like many of the other duffle-bag toting “slick sleeves” that filtered the various military facilities that conducted such training, I knew that I just needed to follow instructions to the best of my abilities to get through basic training. I hadn’t been good at conceding to authority prior to that, but I learned quickly to forget my ego and just let the winds of chaos blow me where they might during the process. What I hadn’t expected was the idea of developing a sense of camaraderie with the numerous “Rednecks,” philosophically confused “Surfer” types, northeastern “Jaded Cynics,” and the ubiquitous “Bible-Muffins” that I trained with.

Even more surprising to me was that I came to respect some of the drill instructors that I encountered. Some of them offered me more useful life lessons than I had ever been offered before, and in a manner that I couldn’t easily reject. In spite of myself, I actually learned some things of value in basic training. There were times later in my life when I wish I could have conceded some of the more difficult decisions I needed to make to the certainty and simplicity of someone barking out regimented “orders” at me, alleviating the need for me to get lost in soul-crushing anxiety. That never happened, however.

Then, I was transferred to “Defense Language Institute,” otherwise known as “DLI,” on the Presidio of Monterey in California, considered to be one of the “best language schools in the free world.” The school stands on one of the most beautiful pieces of real estate on the West Coast but featured the military’s usual ugly-as-a-horse’s ass buildings. I was extremely uneasy about living around all the rich people in the area, and even more uneasy about the fact that I was going to be married within three months of joining the military. But I was there to learn

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Spanish, so I had to focus my attention on learning how to navigate the military, while going to school "military style."

The classes were comprised of students from all branches of the military. The instructors were a "melting pot" of malcontents from across the Spanish speaking world—with all those not from Mexico taking turns hurling insults at Mexicans and Mexican culture. The bigotry was as thick as the walls of a military bunker. The irony of the situation was that all the instructors, at one point or another, ended up having to ask the head of the Spanish department, a Mexican man with a Ph.D. in Spanish, questions about the finer points of Spanish language. The complete lack of dissonance on their part was mind-numbing in its completeness.

My fellow students were an odd mix as well. There was an angry woman from Scotland who had moved to the USA and married a black man, only to find that he, and everything else on Earth, irritated her. The rest were either receiving their initial training for their "military careers," or being retrained into other jobs. The range of personalities was what one might expect to find in the crowd at a major league baseball game in the "nosebleed seats," even down to those whom you really would prefer not to have to sit next to. Some of the regional eccentricities demonstrated by my peers were almost worthy of scientific study, however. It was "culture shock" on calm days, and "existential panic" on less than calm days.

One of the instructors was a veteran of the "Bay of Pigs" operation, and he had all the warmth of a massive rocky iceberg. He and I sparred with words in class, and he called me aside once to tell me that my priorities in life were "all wrong" because I placed my marriage and relationships above advancing my "military career." My unfortunate response was, "Go fuck yourself," which landed me in front of the Marine Major in charge of my section. Mercifully, the Marine Major was a lot wiser than either myself or my "gung-ho" instructor, so after congratulating me on standing up for my loyalty to my wife and family, he advised me that there were better ways to react to such incidents in the future. He also warned me about my lack of sufficient progress in my studies and assigned a Marine NCO assistant to help me pass my coursework. His intervention proved to be a major blessing, and I remain thankful to that Marine Major for his mentoring and discipline, in that incident and others at DLI, to this day.



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In the end, despite my inability to fully focus down on my Spanish studies, I absorbed enough Spanish to pass my proficiency exam—with the help of “a relaxing shot of alcohol” for the spoken section. With no thanks to the overtly incompetent Air Force command staff at DLI, who were later prosecuted for a number of unexpected civilian legal offenses and military infractions, I managed to complete my studies at DLI. I passed the first part of my background investigation, and was shipped off to Goodfellow Air Force Base, in San Angelo Texas, the place where even the brightest of dreams get eclipsed by the unique shadows of “Texas attitudes.”

Goodfellow is where the advanced “Intelligence training” took place. All the military’s branches send their trainees there to learn “SIGINT,” which is short for “Signals Intelligence Collection.” Tom Green County Texas was worlds apart from anything I had known in California. For me, it was almost like being in another country. Texas is the buckle on the “Bible Belt,” and “Mecca” for “Chronically Patriotic People Who Talk Loudly in Denny’s.” There is no middle of the road in Texas. A person is either “all-in” for “American Exceptionalism” or “The Enemy.” I didn’t end up on right side of that distinction, apparently. I decided to address this “challenge” by drowning it in alcohol, like a large percentage of military members did.

There isn’t much about the nature of the training there that can be talked about. The training there is all classified. The process of being indoctrinated into “Intel” is an odd one. There is a dark admixture of lofty lure and haunting threats that is employed by the trainers there to get people used to the world of SIGINT, and its relationship to “HUMINT,” which is short for “Human Intelligence Collection.” This is the first encounter that a trainee will have with the “Stone-Faced Black Bag Boys” that work in Intel. Doing part of the work inside a “vault” only adds to the oppressive nature of the training.

If one wasn’t already cynical about the nature of the work to come in Intel, their time in training at Goodfellow would push them abruptly into the realm of the perpetually hypervigilant. The further along in the training one ventured, the more the threats were made in the open. The upshot of the threats was simple, “if you fuck-up, you die, and maybe it won’t be the ‘enemy’ that kills you.” You hear messages like that throughout the process, with the voices getting louder and louder as you approach completion of the training.



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After getting “washed back” to additional training because the rigors of the rotating schedule and my difficulty dealing with the West Texas heat, I finally completed the training. I was already noticing fundamental changes in my attitudes towards life. The reckless abandon that I had towards my drinking and other poor habits had been replaced by an anxious paranoia about any and all things job-related. The unusual drunken interactions of military life notwithstanding, all the semi-crazy stuff I did while drunk only added to that sense of doom that had settled into my life. I knew that I had crossed a threshold into a place I would never escape. And sadly, I never did entirely escape that feeling ever again in my life.

From Goodfellow AFB, I was sent to my permanent duty station on Fort George G. Meade, Maryland, at the National Security Agency, “lovingly” known as the “NSA.” The NSA had a dark and ominous reputation, and it turned out to be well-earned. It may be one of the most paranoid places on Earth, if a metric could be developed for such ideas, and if the parties trying to measure that paranoia wouldn’t disappear into a hole in reality mid-task.

From my very first day inside NSA HQ, I was a changed person. Walking into a building where voices emanate from hidden speakers the ceiling, to where every office was cyberlocked and you needed to wear a color-coded badge to move about, was like walking into the middle of a freakish movie written by obvious psychopaths. Conventions of politeness and transparency were nonexistent. It turned out to be the tomb where some of my core humanity was laid to rest.

The very first day I was there, I was yelled at by civilians searching for something which was never disclosed to me. This happened repeatedly while I worked there. I was cursed at, ushered aside, and then thrust into the middle of intelligence operations that would boggle the minds of the average American. Reality inside the building was different than reality outside the building. I arrived on the day of a “pot-luck,” taking place in an office only half-lit because of the need to see dimly lit equipment, and where horrible acts of war, torture, and other horrors were being monitored from thousands of miles away. I honestly wondered if I had died and gone to Hell, but I later realized that I wasn’t dead.

This reality of the underbelly of the world was going on 24/7, and only the people experiencing the horrors directly, and those of us tasked with monitoring their activities, knew about it. The rest of the “civilized

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world" was obviously sheltered from it, and they slept like babies. I've never slept properly since entering that building, and probably never will.

Inside NSA HQ, I experienced things that most would find impossible to imagine. Worse than any bad spy movie, the things I experienced were all too real but difficult to understand, even for a young man who had grown up where drive-by shootings and crushing poverty were ubiquitous. I always felt in peril, both physically and spiritually. It is a place where there are many very good and committed people, but also a place where many people whose grip on reality is tenuous, and their moral compass is clearly "broken." It's a place where any consistent sense of decency dies.

Just as with training at Goodfellow AFB, the nature of the work at the NSA cannot be discussed in even minor detail. All that can be said is that I ended up being a central figure in "incidents" of major importance in history but having no decisive role in how they played out. I ended up seeing things I suspect few people would want to see, and I being in the middle of activities that were questionable in terms of ethics and appropriateness. I had been threatened with actions that I perceived as "existentially dangerous" in an "ex-officio" manner by high-ranking intelligence officials who shall remain vague here. I'm not talking about the day-to-day "office politics" that most officer workers experience. I am talking all the ugliness of the bloodiest, cruelest, and most graphic parts of guerrilla warfare, torture, and political expediency being an everyday part of life, and a key part of what I did. Being as I was the lowest ranking morsel in that food chain, I reached a point where I thought I needed to exit the situation as soon as humanly possible.

I applied to a program called "Palace Chase" by the Air Force, I was eventually granted a slightly early honorable discharge from active duty to serve the rest of my service as a member of the California Air National Guard. I was moved from one of the most prestigious jobs as an enlisted member in the military to "Services," a job that encompassed, food service, mortuary affairs, and billeting. I moved from the NSA in Maryland to March Air Force Base in Riverside, California, arguably a place that would depress even the most optimistic person on Earth. I knew that I was being punished for my desire to leave a position in the military that many deemed a "privilege" to occupy. Oddly enough, I didn't feel that being threatened could easily be viewed as a "privilege," but I suppose having a functioning moral compass can cloud one's view of the "niceties" in life.



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All-in-all, I ended up spending another three challenging years in the Air National Guard, during the period of the first Gulf War. It was a minor relief not to be at the NSA any longer, but my life had already gone into a tailspin that I am still working to recover from to this day.



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