



2022

Active to Reserves

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As we crossed the huge parking area toward the PX, my buddy, First LT Frank Sharp elbowed me. “Look over there, at those Reserve assholes.”

I glanced past two rows of cars, toward the Commissary; two sorry-looking excuses for Soldiers, in soiled BDU fatigues, their long hair tucked under their caps, shuffled toward the PX and Commissary complex. We couldn’t see their boots, but doubtless, they looked like shit also.

“Yeah, I see them. We ought to go over and jack ’em up.”

Frank replied in a slow drawl, “Shit. We could get their names, and report them to their unit, but it won’t do a bit of good. Their CO is probably a brother-in-law, and their First Sergeant is, I’m guessing, a first fuck’n cousin.”

I couldn’t argue. Reserve units, mostly National Guard but some USAR, rotated into and out of Fort Knox from April to October for their annual training. They’d draw M-60 tanks, M-113 APCs and other armor unit equipment from post depots, then use it to conduct their annual range qualifications, along with some platoon and company-level field exercises. While on Main Post, and that seemed awfully frequent, a few reservists appeared squared-away according to Army standards, but most had a deserved reputation as a sorry lot.

Seeing the reservists didn’t trouble us for long. Frank and I were in a perpetual good mood. It was the early fall of 1979 and we’d both just returned from 3-year tours in USAREUR armor units, me in a border armored cavalry regiment, he in a battalion of the Third Armored Division. Both units were high-priority, outstanding units, although some morale and equipment problems still lingered from the Vietnam War. Basically, we’d worked our asses off for three years, keeping our equipment and crews ready in case the Cold War turned hot.

Now, we worked easy hours in the directorate of training developments. This cushy assignment differed greatly from being in Cold War West Germany as junior officers. I joshed

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Frank that as an armored cavalry officer on the East-West German border, I'd worked twice as hard as him. He didn't disagree. But he'd had plenty of challenges too, as a tank platoon leader and company XO. He'd admitted that he felt lucky; he'd been newly married when posted to Germany and was one of the few who hadn't faced divorce amid the turmoil of Army life. We were both glad for the Fort Knox down time, living on easy street, with long lunches and getting off early from work on most days. Instead of manning and maintaining tanks seven days a week, we commanded cushy armchairs and desks.

We were both due for promotion to captain within a few weeks. At that point, we had to decide whether to continue our army careers or resign our active-duty commissions. I was no "water-walker," so I knew that if I stayed in, chances were I'd find myself at Fort Hood, TX, for another three fun-filled years with tanks. Another alternative was to resign from active duty and join the reserves, which desperately needed the bodies, according to what we read and heard.

But at this point, joining the reserves seemed crazy. The reputation of the reserve, both USAR and National Guard, was lower than whale-shit. Reserve units were full of misfits and good-old-boys, along with a smattering of Vietnam draft dodgers. Jokes circulated about the nepotism in the reserves, sometimes with three generations looking after each other in the same unit. The Fort Knox newspaper, *The Turret*, often carried articles on reserve units. Many highlighted the Citizen-Soldier aspects, and the sacrifices made by these them and their families. Some articles also covered how reservists often out-scored active-duty units in gunnery. But that was a joke also—it was rumored that some reserve tank crews had served together for periods of five or more years! Active crews were rarely together for a year.

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My good times came to an end too soon. By mid-September, I found myself face-to-face with a no-nonsense chief warrant officer at the Fort Knox PAC. He held my DD-214 that would release me from active duty and give me my honorable discharge from military obligations.

Unexpectedly he asked, “Are you interested in continuing your service in the Guard or USAR, Captain?” Clearly, he’d asked that question often, and he expected a fast yes or no response.

“Not really ... But maybe I’ll want to look into it later.”

The Chief snorted slightly. Not the yes or no answer he sought. “I’ll put you down as yes and give you a number at ARPERCEN in St. Louis, in case you want to find out about units in your hometown area. How’s that sound?”

“OK. Thanks, Chief.” Since I’d been an army brat almost 18 years, a West Point cadet for four, and on active duty for more than five years. I was glad to not cut all ties with Uncle Sam.

“Next!” Shouted the Chief. A lot of other guys like me needed processing.

Three months later, I’d made the move back to my “home of record” in Falls Church, VA. I quickly settled into a pretty nice job as a military contractor developing Army training systems, had bought a refurbished condo, and found myself with mostly free evenings and weekends. I thought I’d call the ARPERCEN number to see if there were any good reserve possibilities.

They provided information on units within an hour’s drive of my home. One was a psychological operations unit near Andrews AFB. I’d read about PSYOPs in various military journals. I knew they often worked closely with Special Operations units, and with Foreign Area experts. Looking it up, I found, ‘PSYOP units use intelligence skills in foreign cultures and languages to develop messages and disseminate information to foreign audiences in support of .S

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policy and national objectives.’ That seemed intriguing. Maybe this wouldn’t be a run-of-the-mill bunch of reserve yahoos.

I called the ARPERCEN guy back, and soon after received orders to the 7th PSYOP BN. I called their full-time POC, MSG Simpson, the battalion operations NCO, to arrange a visit. Taking along several copies of my orders, I found myself in front of a large brick building. The sign outside indicated the facility housed the 12th PSYOP CO and 7th PSYOP BN. The facility resembled a school, with a huge gym-like building at one end. I soon learned the large part was a ‘drill hall’ common to almost all reserve centers. MSG Simpson showed me around a little and introduced me to a couple of other full-timers, one in Supply, another in Admin. He told me to show up at 0730 in fatigue uniform for a unit drill the next weekend. He told me there was a slot open for the Battalion S-1, or possibly for HQ Company Commander.

The morning of my first drill weekend was confusing. My in-processing proceeded in a manner, going from one section to another, sometimes processing, but mostly waiting around. I met most of the chain of command and learned in a round-about way that I’d be the BN S-1 (Personnel and Admin Officer) for now but might be the HQ Company Commander soon. From whispered conversations, it seemed that the current CO had dropped out of sight.

During my in-processing tour around the building, I took note of the various sections and activities. Outside the main building, in the unit garage and storage facility, I encountered something familiar, the Motor Pool and its maintenance personnel. This was a loud place, with the sounds of a pneumatic drill and other tools, and a boom-box reverberating in the depths of the building. Several mechanics, mostly young inner-city dudes, worked enthusiastically on a deuce-and-a-half, a Jeep, and a generator. They looked sloppy in greasy coveralls and T-shirts, but everyone here was concentrating on their jobs and it all seemed familiar. Maintenance.

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I then visited the supply section, again encountering mainly young Blacks from the local area, but quieter and including some females. Here everyone seemed to be trying to look busy. Later I found the mess section consisted of more mature males, most looking overweight, working intently on preparing lunch at a series of tables and stoves, as best as I could see from the hallway looking through an open serving window.

Upstairs in the main building, I discovered the guts of the PSYOP mission. Three large rooms contained safes, along with dozens of desks and tables covered with papers, some with classified covers. Half the walls were covered with maps, charts, and posters. Dozens of people worked and deliberated over the piles of papers and files. In some corners, sloppy soldiers struggled to look awake and involved. I would come to learn that many of the PSYOP research and analysis officers and NCOs worked in government jobs in DC, such as the Departments of State, Defense, Commerce, or the VA, AID, USIA and so forth. Some were clearly not fully motivated for more work after a week at work.

A huge room in the center of the building held two large machines, Heidelberg printing presses, that I learned could rapidly produce hundreds of posters, leaflets, and other materials. Two of the oldest and most unhealthy-looking NCOs I'd ever seen sat in comfortable chairs, smoking, and gulping from huge mugs of coffee. It was rumored they were the only guys in America who could make the machines work. My glance into an adjacent room revealed shelves full of tape recorders and electronics, and a TV camera on an upright stand. A group of soldiers were engaged in animated discussion around a table. Snatches of their conversation revealed they were involved in a priority mission to prepare for an upcoming AT exercise. I made my way back downstairs with a real sense that this could be an interesting place to work.

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During the day, I participated in two company formations, and a battalion formation at the end of the duty day. Being used to active duty, combat arms formations, I was surprised by the sloppy uniforms, un-attentive attitudes, soldiers coming and going, and a general sense of scruffy disorganization. It was hard to hear given the large size and echoes within the drill hall, along with all the side conversations. At the back of the formation stood a file of soldiers in partial uniform or in PT gear. They were processing into or out of the unit and Army. The last file of the formation comprised the unit's officers. Many of them were inattentive and several looked like they'd never heard of the army weight control or physical fitness programs. The formation became less military as word circulated that this would be the last formation for the current First Sergeant, Kay O'Keefe. She seemed squared away and in control. Most of the unit seemed attentive when she spoke and appeared sorry that she was leaving. This struck me as new and unusual, as armor and combat arms units in general had no females, and certainly none in positions of authority.

I didn't depart immediately after the formation when most of the unit stampeded for the exits. 1SG Simmons sought me out. "Sir, I see you're just coming off active duty. It probably doesn't seem to be that way, but our company is really pretty squared away."

"Well ... it looks pretty raggedy." I wasn't about to argue on this point.

She clearly expected that, and patiently explained, "Yes, sir, but they work hard when you need them. This is a very diverse organization here. Nothing is very standardized. You have to go with the flow to make things work out."

My thoughts were all negative. 'This unit is still part of the US Army, right?'

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She continued, “Part of the problem is that I’m rotating out, and our HQ Company Commander is, well, he’s missing. We hear he has legal problems with people in his apartment building, but no one seems to be able to reach him.”

“OK, but you have an alert roster and you, or somebody, will figure out what’s going on, right?”

“Oh, yes, sir, we’re working it every day. Maybe we’ll know by tomorrow’s drill. Oh, by the way, sir, at our last staff meeting we picked a replacement for me as the HQ Company First Sergeant. SSG Joe Bauernfeind, the guy over there.” She pointed to an NCO who looked like a disheveled rag bag in his army fatigues, barely shined boots, and a mop of prematurely gray hair.

I wasn’t impressed but all I said was, “You’re going to have a Staff Sergeant as the company first sergeant?”

With emphasis, she said, “Yes, sir, and he’s a real good choice. He’s a little older than most NCOs, has a college degree and he’s been to Vietnam twice. You give him a chance, sir, and he’ll do a great job. Plus he’s really dedicated, and is due for promotion soon.”

“Well, I’m willing to give it a try. I’ll be glad to learn all about USAR procedures from him too.”

“By the way, sir, coming from active duty, you’re probably not familiar with the DA Form 1379, the RST form. I’ll be glad to explain it because we use it a lot. RST stands for Request for Rescheduled Training. So, whenever one of the soldiers has a conflict, they can replace either one, two, three or all four blocks of the training in the drill training schedule with other duties that benefit the unit and ...”

“Wait, wait, wait, First Sergeant! You mean this happens a lot?”

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“Oh, yes, sir. Lots of the government guys have jobs that require lots of travel, or have family vacations, or they have “use or lose” leave time. And lots of our junior folks have trouble getting transportation, or have family events like funerals, or kids’ activities, and so on and”

I didn’t hear the rest. Damn! What had I gotten myself into? I was going to have to make some serious attitude adjustments. Essentially, this army unit relied on a bunch of civilians, many with work or family issues, including maternal ones. In combat arms units, females were non-existent. A prevailing attitude in the active army of the time was, ‘If the army wanted you to have a wife and kids, they’d have issued them to you.’

Luckily, I had a chance to briefly speak to acting 1SG Bauernfeind a little later, and was quickly impressed with his knowledge, attitude, and clear maturity. In just a few sentences, he conveyed that he felt responsibility and concern for each and every member of the unit, and for getting the unit mission accomplished.

Driving home that evening from my first day of my first USAR Drill weekend, my initial middling thoughts were of how to get the hell back out of this USAR mess. I even briefly considered returning to active duty, where I knew the system. But I calmed myself and returned to a more rational and logical line of thinking. I was deeply impressed by the words and actions of both the departing and the new first sergeants. In addition, I sensed lots of pride in getting the job done by many of the PSYOP NCOs, soldiers and officers. On reflection, I sort of admired all these citizen-soldiers, who fulfilled both regular civilian responsibilities, and key military ones. I felt a surprising sense of commitment, after just such a short exposure. My next task—get the unit drill dates on my calendar at home, so I wouldn’t have to RST too often.