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A Berlin Veteran Remembers 26 June 1963

by John Parmenter

At the time, it didn't seem like a big deal. Yet, in light of Cold War history, it was a day of remarkable significance. In later years, I've taken a measure of pride in having played a small part, but realize it was just my good fortune to have been there.

Colonel Joffre H. Boston's 1st Battle Group, 28th Infantry, "Black Lions of Cantigny," 1st Infantry Division, augmenting Berlin Brigade from Ft. Riley, Kansas, was confined to quarters on alert for civil disturbances. Steel helmets, M-14 rifles, bayonets, bullet-proof vests, M-17 gas masks, and other gear were laid out, prepared for quick utilization. "Deuce-and-a-halves" of our Task Force's light truck company (444th Trans.) lined up outside the billets of Andrews Barracks, ready to rush riot control-trained Infantrymen to any location in West Berlin. We learned that President Kennedy would visit Berlin that day and we might be called upon to suppress communist demonstrators. It was Wednesday, June 26, 1963.

Tempelhof U.S. Air Base wasn't capable of handling a Boeing 707, so that morning "Air Force One" landed at Tegel in the French Sector. Greeting the President was a very "spiffy" 6th Infantry Honor Guard and a 1st Division Artillery Battery (A, 2/33rd) firing a 21-gun salute with 105mm towed howitzers. The 298th U.S. Army Band performed traditional honors: four "Ruffles and Flourishes" and "Hail to the Chief." President Kennedy was shown through Tegel by French military officers and spent the next four hours touring West Berlin with his German hosts, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and West Berlin's Regierender Bürgermeister Willy Brandt. Along with Presidential Envoy, General Lucius Clay and other American escorts, he inspected formations of Polizei and stood, in rapt contemplation, on an observation platform peering into communist territory over the infamous Wall.

With little else to do, we gathered around, listening to an Armed Forces Radio Network (AFN) commentator describe a huge throng of "predominantly blond" Berliners crowded into Rudolf Wilde Platz to see and hear the American President. It was there that President Kennedy delivered what may have been his most memorable and eloquent speech.

Like his predecessors Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, President John F. Kennedy was cognizant of Berlin's Cold War significance. Symbolically, West Berlin was an "in your face" island of freedom in the cesspool of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. Moreover, West Berlin amounted to a gaping capitalist wound in the rotting carcass of an evil collectivist system. Early in his administration, Kennedy voiced support for West Berlin's defense. Shortly after construction began of the Berlin Wall, in August 1961, he strengthened Berlin's U.S. garrison as a symbol of America's determination to remain in the Divided City. Now, the President visited Berlin as confirmation of his and his nation's, resolve.

John Kennedy was known as an outstanding orator; perhaps the finest English language political speaker since the great Winston Churchill. His Berlin speech was not disappointing. The historic address at Rudolf Wilde Platz was inspiring, even to cynical G.I.s listening at Andrews Barracks. Standing before thousands of Germans at Rathaus Schoeneberg, West Berlin's City Hall, President Kennedy delivered what has been described as "a ringing tribute to West Berlin and the spirit of freedom." It was also a stern indictment of communism:

"There are many people in the world who don't understand, or say they don't what is the great issue between the free world and the communist world. Let them come to Berlin!"

"There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin!"

"And there are those who say, in Europe and elsewhere, we can work with the communists. Let them come to Berlin!"

"And there are even a few who say that it is true that communism is an evil system, but it permits us to make economic progress. Lass' sie nach Berlin kommen! Let them come to Berlin!"

"I know of no town, no city, that has been besieged for eighteen years that still lives with the vitality and the force, and the hope, and the determination of the City of West Berlin."

Kennedy described the Wall as "...an offense not only against history but an offense against humanity, separating families, dividing husbands and wives and brothers and sisters, and dividing a people who wish to be joined together." "In eighteen years of peace and good faith," he declared, "this generation of Germans has earned the right to be free, including the right to unite their families and their nation in lasting peace, with good will to all people."

As his speech progressed toward its dramatic climax, Kennedy asked his audience to "...lift your eyes beyond the dangers of today, to the hopes of tomorrow, beyond the freedom merely of this city of Berlin, or your country of Germany, to the advance of freedom everywhere, beyond the wall to the day of peace and justice, beyond yourselves and ourselves to all mankind." In conclusion, the President proclaimed, "All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin. And, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words, Ich bin ein Berliner."

Hearing the crowd's roar of approval on AFN, troops at Andrews were relieved that we'd not be dealing with anti-American demonstrations that day. As we stowed riot control weapons and equipment, platoon sergeants ordered us into our parade gear because we were going to go meet the President. Within thirty minutes we stood armed with M-14 rifles; uniformed in starched khakis, gleaming black boots, pistol belts, Infantry blue scarves, white gloves, and glistening "Spandau Green" helmet liners (we were quite proud of those fancy Berlin parade helmets: high-gloss, deep green with a famous "Big Red One" insignia on the left side and a white & black "Lions of Cantigny" shield on the right). Following a truck ride to Clayallee near U.S. Military Headquarters, we assembled in three ranks on the street's edge to await our Commander-in-Chief. Security was tight. Uniformed West Berlin Polizei, walking patrols and on stationary posts, were much in evidence. Also present were high ranking law enforcement officials in uniforms and plain clothes. Men wearing civilian suits scrutinized everyone, including us. On roof tops were men with binoculars and sniper rifles. Company Commanders issued last-minute instructions regarding Presidential Honor Guard drill and ceremonies.

A half hour after our arrival, a hush came over the gathered crowd and the street cleared. The Presidential motorcade was coming! An officer-in-charge issued verbal commands: "**ATTENNNNN-HUNNN!**" Followed by, "**PREEEEEZZENNT HAAARRMS!**" Simultaneously, heels of several hundred spit-shined black leather boots locked, then M-14 rifles were raised to "present arms;" positioned vertically before each Soldier's body. Because the street was narrow, guidon bearers did not dip their banners horizontally, but saluted with left hands across guidon staffs. From our left, several Polizisten wearing white uniform jackets and crash helmets rolled quietly past on motorcycles, followed by sedans filled with plain clothes security personnel and finally, an open-top Lincoln limousine with the President accompanied by a general officer. Gazing past my M-14's flash suppressor, I saw that President Kennedy's hair had a reddish glint I hadn't noticed in

photographs. Immediately following the President's limo was an open Cadillac with members of his entourage, then a huge sedan bristling with antennae, loaded with communications gear. Another verbal command: **"HORRR-DERRR HAAARRMS!"** As if one, steel butt plates of hundreds of rifles clacked on Clayallee pavement. Then, **"HI-EZZZ HRITE! STANN-HATTT HEEEEEEZZ!"** Soles of several hundred highly polished left combat boots crashed, as white-gloved left hands snapped to the rear and helmeted heads turned right – toward where President Kennedy stood behind a podium. Major General James K. Polk, commander of U.S. Forces in Berlin, introduced the President of the United States to Berlin's American Community.

As President Kennedy began speaking to assembled American military personnel, diplomats and civil servants, the unexpected occurred. Throngs of German civilians, primarily young adults and teenagers following on foot, caught up to the motorcade. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people surged down Clayallee and its sidewalks; some actually running between ranks of the Presidential Honor Guard, decimating our precise military formation! Using night sticks as intimidating pointers, West Berlin Polizei swung into action, directing this swarm of civilians off the street and onto the sidewalk behind what was left of our formation. Our own "Black Lions" Infantry officers ordered us to break ranks and stand tightly, shoulder-to-shoulder on the curb, preventing the good natured crowd from spilling back onto Clayallee. The President's remarks were brief. He lauded efforts of Americans who labored tirelessly behind the Iron Curtain on behalf of freedom and thanked them for their dedicated service in that unique, critical, sometimes dangerous outpost. Following the Presidential party's departure and the crowd's dispersal, we trucked back to Andrews Barracks.

That day, chronicled in Cold War history, began grimly with our determined preparations for violent confrontation. We encountered only a joyous mob of beleaguered, adoring Volk whose continued liberty and very existence had just been assured by the Free World's leader and who, in turn, was "treating him like a rock star." That evening, walking down a busy West Berlin avenue, I noticed a colorful sidewalk chalk drawing of the President exclaiming, "Ich bin ein Berliner." A young German woman with me interpreted that many Berlin residents had learned to love President Kennedy that day, and truly appreciated his comment "that he is one of us!"

When "Air Force One" lifted off from Tegel that evening, enroute to Ireland, President Kennedy was so inspired by Berlin's enthusiastic crowds that he remarked, "We will never see another day as this one so long as we live." Five months later, he lay dead. Three days after the assassination in Dallas, Rudolf Wilde Platz was renamed John F. Kennedy Platz in his honor. Twenty-six years later, the Berlin Wall fell and today Berlin is the capitol city of a free, dynamic, prosperous, reunited German nation. The hateful ideology confronting civilization today is different from that of Kennedy's time. However, as President George W. Bush more recently observed, "Freedom is the desire of every human heart." Whether in Berlin or Baghdad or Boston or Bombay, all mankind aspires to those values and ideals articulated by John Kennedy in Berlin. In recognition of that reality and perhaps in contradiction of his assessment that a "day as this one" wouldn't reoccur; annually on June 26, citizens of Berlin gather at John F. Kennedy Platz to hear an audio recording made at that very location in 1963 of an American President proclaiming "Ich bin ein Berliner."

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: A popular American canard suggests that President Kennedy's statement, "Ich bin ein Berliner" translates to, "I am a jelly doughnut." That may apply in parts of Germany outside Berlin, as there is a German pastry referred to as, "ein Berliner." Long time Berlin residents assure me, however, that in the formerly Divided City, a proper English translation of Kennedy's comment is, "I am a (free) Citizen of Berlin."]

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