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## OPERATION LONG THRUST

*Cold War Troop Surge Behind the Iron Curtain*

by John Parmenter

### A SLEEPING GIANT RISES

Summer 1961 found 1st Infantry Division settled into a comfortable recruit-training routine at Ft. Riley. Having returned just six years earlier from its World War II deployment, the renowned Big Red One established a home at the old Cavalry post and reduced its units to professional cadres, tasked with turning civilians into Soldiers. Cycle after cycle of young men, recruited and drafted, reported to Ft. Riley for Basic Combat Training and Advanced Individual Training. Following at least four months arduous physical and mental preparation, most were assigned to combat units of the U.S. 7th Army, guarding Central Europe's Iron Curtain or the 8th Army whose two combat-ready divisions guaranteed an uneasy truce along Korea's infamous Demilitarized Zone. A fortunate few received orders to U.S. Berlin Command, garrisoned 110 miles behind the Iron Curtain in communist East Germany. The Cold War was on every mind as thousands of young men, sweating and swearing under a relentless Kansas sun, endured rigorous training to defend America.

The evening of 25 July 1961 was memorable for B Battery, 2nd Howitzer Battalion, 33rd Artillery. The long day had begun early on a rifle range preparing for the live-fire, night-combat course. Shortly after evening chow (delivered in mermite cans) Trainees were ordered to sit in the Kansas dust and listen-up as loudspeakers broadcast President John F. Kennedy, live, describing America's latest Cold War challenge. The President's words were grim. Leaders of the Soviet Union once again demanded that Western Allies abandon Berlin. The disputed former Nazi capital was still under military occupation of France, the United Kingdom, United States, as well as the U.S.S.R., President Kennedy stated, firmly, that we would not withdraw; proclaiming West Berlin to be "...the great testing place of Western courage." Discussing the Divided City's defense, he remarked, "I hear it said that West Berlin is militarily untenable. And so was Bastogne. And so, in fact, was Stalingrad. Any dangerous spot is tenable if men – brave men – make it so." As darkness fell on north-central Kansas, sobered Trainees returned to their firing lanes. One was heard to ask, "Sergeant Baumann, is there going to be a war?" "I'm afraid so, son," the grizzled combat veteran solemnly replied. For B Battery's Recruits, Basic Combat Training had just become deadly serious.

Less than two weeks after Kennedy's speech, communist forces sealed-off Berlin's Western Sectors and began construction of the shameful Berlin Wall to keep East Germans from seeking refuge in the West. These actions dramatically influenced 1st Infantry Division and Ft. Riley. Leaves were cancelled and thousands of enlistments extended. Ft. Riley filled up with Citizen Soldiers, as Reserve and National Guard units activated. Training was intensified. Eight week cycles were "compressed" into seven. Recruits from Ft. Ord arrived to complete Basic Training at Ft. Riley. The Big Red One phased out its recruit training mission; preparing to become a TO&E (Table of Organization and Equipment), combat-deployable, Pentomic Infantry Division. Soldiers returning from overseas rushed to join 1st Infantry Division. Others, who had just completed recruit training, remained in Big Red One units rather than transferring elsewhere. The Third Berlin Crisis transformed Ft. Riley's and the 1st Infantry Division's mission from recruit training to combat readiness.

## THE CALDRON

4,861 air miles away, West Berlin Mayor Willy Brandt penned a letter to President Kennedy expressing his concerns, and West Berliners' outrage, at Western Powers' lack of response to Communists' border closings. That letter was the genesis of Operation Long Thrust. In it, Brandt encouraged the Allies to initiate several dynamic responses, short of war, including: (1) Immediate reinforcement of Berlin's three Allied garrisons. (2) Immediate movement of Allied troops along the Autobahn between Berlin and West Germany; emphasizing a continued right of Allied access. (3) Immediate arrival, in West Berlin of a prominent American personality, preferably a ranking government official. And, (4) Appointment of General Lucius Clay as America's Commandant in Berlin. General Clay had been in charge during the 1948-49 Blockade and was extremely popular among West Berliners. After consulting Cabinet and military officials, President Kennedy ordered Berlin's U.S. garrison reinforced immediately.

From its Kaserne in Mannheim, West Germany, 8th Infantry Division's 1st Battle Group, 18th Infantry "Vanguards" convoyed to Check Point Alpha at Helmstedt on the East German border. The Task Force then advanced without incident, on the Autobahn, 110 miles through hostile communist territory to Berlin. Greeting the American reinforcements there were Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and General Lucius Clay who had flown to Berlin the previous day. General Clay had just been appointed Kennedy's personal representative in Berlin. Thousands of West Berliners turned out to cheer the "Vanguards" as they paraded through the city that day. Just two months later, a diplomatic matter caused U.S. and Soviet forces to engage in a heavily armed, nearly catastrophic confrontation at Berlin's Friedrichstrasse border crossing; Check Point Charlie. Some historians consider that "Tank-to-Tank Stand-Off" more volatile than the Cuban Missile Crisis a year later. 1/18th Infantry, remained in Berlin until December when it was relieved, in place, by another unit from West Germany: 1st Battle Group, 19th Infantry "The Rock of Chickamauga," an element of 24th Infantry Division.

Defense officials expressed concern over reinforcing Berlin with 7th Army troops; arguing that it weakened NATO's West German positions while offering little in Berlin's defense. It was decided to augment West Berlin with CONUS (Continental United States)-based forces. Operation Long Thrust was born! Ironically, the first such mission was officially dubbed, "Operation Long Thrust II." It originated as a 4th Infantry "Ivy" Division deployment test. In 1961 the 4th, at Ft. Lewis, Washington, was the Army's only CONUS-based TO&E Infantry Division. Along with 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, it made up America's quick-reaction force known as STRAC (Strategic Army Corps). Under "Pentomic" concept, Infantry and Airborne divisions were organized around five battle groups, each with lineage of a historic regiment. Beginning in January 1962, Operation Long Thrust II flew three 4th Infantry Division battle groups from Ft. Lewis to West Germany where they obtained pre-positioned heavy equipment and engaged in "war games." Troops arrived to find Central Europe an armed camp. Expecting a Warsaw Pact invasion at any time, serious war preparations were underway. Military convoys of four NATO armies choked West German Autobahns. Armored vehicles, some with white stars, others displaying black crosses, rumbled along secondary roads. Combat units engaged in endless tactical exercises while maintaining "alert" status.

After maneuvers in Germany, 4th Division's 1st Battle Group, 22nd Infantry flew back to Ft. Lewis. 2nd Battle Group, 39th Infantry remained in West Germany to temporarily reinforce 7th Army. 2nd Battle Group, 47th Infantry advanced to West Berlin where it replaced 1/19th as Berlin Brigade's reinforcement. 2/47th Infantry's movement to Berlin transformed Long Thrust from a deployment test into a real world, Cold War operation; augmenting the U.S. Berlin garrison from CONUS. The unit arrived in Berlin under-strength. A deuce-and-a-half full of "Blue Spaders" from 8th Division's 1st Battle Group, 26th Infantry stepped-up to serve with 2/47th in Berlin; returning to their own unit, in West Germany, when 4th Division troops redeployed to Ft. Lewis. Subsequent Long Thrust operations demonstrated improved planning as CONUS-based battle groups fleshed-out thin ranks by accepting permanent transfers of Soldiers completing duty tours in USAREUR (United States Army in Europe). In June 1962 another 4th Infantry Division unit, 1st Battle Group, 8th Infantry relieved 2/47th in Berlin. 4th Division's Long Thrust role ended when 1/8th Infantry withdrew to Ft. Lewis that autumn. For the next year, reinforcement of the U.S. Berlin garrison was a 1st Infantry Division responsibility.

## THE BIG RED ONE RETURNS TO BERLIN

Back at Ft. Riley, after a busy year training and equipping, 1st Infantry Division was declared combat-deployable. Troops received the latest gear and would soon have new M-14 rifles and M-60 light machine guns. For months they'd conducted field training at Ft. Riley, and as far away as California and Virginia. All Big Red One Infantry tested in Colorado the previous autumn. Guided by its motto, "No Mission Too – No Sacrifice Too Great – Duty First," 1st Infantry Division performed its Long Thrust challenge with dispatch and military efficiency. Beginning September 1962, The Big Red One conducted quarterly rotations of four battle group task forces into Berlin. Air Force Military Air Transport Service (MATs), flew each task force, non-stop, from Forbes Air Force Base, near Topeka, to Rhine-Main AFB in West Germany. Units trained three months at Wildflecken, reinforcing 7th Army before advancing to Berlin. Major elements involved were, in turn, 2nd Battle Group, 12th Infantry "Warriors;" 1st Battle Group, 13th Infantry "Vicksburgers;" 1st Battle Group, 28th Infantry "Lions of Cantigny;" and 2nd Battle Group, 26th Infantry "Blue Spaders." Each 1,500-man battle group was commanded by a colonel and reinforced with a light (105mm) towed howitzer battery, a light (2 ½ ton) truck company, and lesser support elements. Ammunition and supplies for initial combat engagement were maintained with each unit. Troops of 2nd Battle Group, 12th Infantry were the first to display Big Red One insignia in Berlin since 1950, when 3rd Battalion, 16th Infantry rejoined the Division in West Germany, following a four-year tour as the only U.S. combat infantry behind the Iron Curtain during the First Berlin Crisis; the 1948-49 Blockade and subsequent Air Lift. (A Second Berlin Crisis, "The Khrushchev Ultimatum" of 1958, was rejected by Western Powers following negotiations in Vienna.)

Allied military convoys enroute to Berlin, from West Germany, were subject to Soviet inspection. Inside the East German border, at Marienborn, U.S. troops dismounted their vehicles to be counted by Russian officers. Soviet tanks and other implements of war gathered along the Autobahn; clear evidence to each American Soldier that he and his unit were outnumbered and might be annihilated at any time.

Augmenting troops in West Berlin were quartered at historic barracks; sharing unique duties with Berlin Brigade's organic 2nd and 3rd Battle Groups, 6th Infantry "Gators." They patrolled Sector and Zone boundaries separating free and communist territory. In conjunction with British and French Allies, numerous "show the flag" parades were held in the face of potential adversaries. Early morning alerts were common as troops in full combat gear rushed to establish defensive positions at critical Allied facilities in a massive city surrounded and outgunned by strong Soviet and East German mechanized forces. Consistent with its occupation mission, Berlin Brigade spent hours practicing riot control. "Combat in Cities" and weapons training were conducted at several West Berlin ranges; sometimes under close observation by communist border guards. In the presence of international press, America's Berlin troops displayed superior military bearing and appearance even while engaged in tactical maneuvers in the Grunewald, West Berlin's city forest. Military personnel serving honorably in West Berlin from 14 August 1961 to 1 June 1963 were awarded U.S. Armed Forces Expeditionary Medals along with World War II Army of Occupation Medals.

When nuclear war seemed imminent during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, 1st Division's 2/12th Infantry, attached to Berlin Brigade, manned positions encircled by formidable communist forces. 1st Battle Group, 13th Infantry was in West Germany reinforcing 7th Army, and preparing to advance into Berlin. Eight months later, 1st Battle Group, 28th Infantry was in the Divided City during President Kennedy's historic "Ich bin ein Berliner" visit. The last Big Red One unit serving in Berlin was 2nd Battle Group, 26th Infantry which withdrew in October 1963. By that time the Army was reorganizing from Pentomic (five battle group) to ROAD (three brigade, Reorganization Objective Army Divisions). A fifth 1st Division task force, primarily, troops of 2nd Battle Group, 8th Infantry, flew to West Germany to reorganize as 1st and 2nd Battalions, 16th Infantry before returning directly to Ft. Riley.

Considering West Berlin's exposed position, it was fortuitous that Operation Long Thrust concluded without combat engagement. None-the-less, the Long Thrust operations were 1st Infantry Division's most significant Cold War deployments until 1965, when the entire Division moved to Republic of Vietnam. With the Third Berlin Crisis concluded, in 1963 Berlin Brigade reorganized, acquiring its own self-propelled howitzer battery (C, 94th Field Artillery). The Brigade's

Company F, 40th Armor traded its aged M-48 medium tanks for state-of-the-art M-60 main battle tanks with 105mm guns. Until 1966, when Berlin Brigade augmentation ended, 24th Infantry Division rotated non-reinforced ROAD Infantry battalions from West Germany to Berlin.

## MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Historians remember Cold War Berlin as “flashpoint of the world;” the only spot on earth where armed forces of conflicting superpowers were locked in bitter confrontation for nearly a half century. Operation Long Thrust was a profoundly successful component of America’s Cold War strategy. Its primary mission, the reinforcement of Berlin’s U.S. garrison pursuant to President Kennedy’s August 1961 directive, was carried out by disciplined, highly trained, well equipped, CONUS-based ground forces. Long Thrust demonstrated, to friend and foe alike, America’s determination to defend Western interests and the free People of West Berlin. This series of real world, Cold War missions answered planners’ questions about the Army’s ability to quickly deploy significant combat elements from North America to Europe. In that sense, Long Thrust was a precursor to much larger REFORGER (Return Forces to Germany) training exercises of following decades. With support from USAREUR and 7th Army, Operation Long Thrust rehabilitated thousands of derelict vehicles and crew-served weapons stockpiled in West Germany to be employed in the event of a Soviet Bloc invasion. For decades, the Berlin Wall stood as a grotesque monument to state-collectivism’s failure. In 1989 it crumbled, followed two years later by the mighty Soviet empire; a resounding Free World triumph. Cold War victory was made possible, in large part, by the United States Military’s resolve, dedication, and courage in the face of hostile forces, as exemplified by Operation Long Thrust.

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Portions of this article are the author’s recollections & from numerous conversations and email correspondence with Berlin Citizens and U.S. Veterans of Berlin military service; especially Dr. Stephen L. Bowman, COL, U.S. Army, Infantry (Retired), a professional Soldier, historian, and scholar. The author is a 3-year 1st Infantry Division Veteran who undertook Basic Combat Training with 2nd Battalion, 33rd Artillery and served in Operation Long Thrust VI, January-July 1963, as an

enlisted Soldier of 1st Battle Group, 28th Infantry. (He was recently appointed Distinguished Member of the 28th Infantry Regiment.)

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