

Chapter Six

A numbing cold greeted my return from an abbreviated sleep, and the cramped condition of two men living in a car only added to the discomfort. We were nestled away on the edge of a wooded landscape monitoring a section of the Cottbus-Finsterwalde rail line. It was infamous for its steady stream of Soviet military paraphernalia that would move to and from the Soviet Union on a bi-annual basis. This activity was known as troop rotation, where fresh recruits would be sent to East Germany to replace their worn and tired comrades. Soldiers were transported like cattle in boxcars referred to as 'M-wagons', almost identical to the railcars which moved Holocaust victims to their respective labor camps three decades earlier, with one striking dissimilarity. The 'M-wagon' had wooden slats mounted on the walls, which served as beds, and a coal-fired pot bellied stove to provide heat for the precious cargo. It must have been a miserable trip traveling from various Soviet republics to the Western front, but the conscripts had no choice in the matter. They did as they were told or they would suffer the consequences. Corporal punishment was exercised when a recruit needed to be disciplined. They were not even allowed to possess civilian clothing while stationed in East Germany, and unless you were an officer you could not have your family stationed with you.

Theirs was an extremely meager existence, second only to the misery index ranking of a Soviet prison. The human cargo was not the only item of interest on these trains. We were able to estimate the number of troops coming and going by counting cars, with each holding approximately twenty soldiers. The trains also brought in fresh or upgraded military equipment, which sometimes meant newly introduced hardware or modified weaponry. This was of particular interest to us, and we stood ready to capture the objective on film. Day or night was of little concern to us, as we had special night vision lens that used available starlight or infrared beams to light up the target like a Hollywood gala, and at the same time remaining invisible to the unsuspecting occupants. That was the whole point of these particular missions. Remain invisible until your replacement team provided relief. In order to accomplish this aura of invisibility we would rely on available foliage to attempt to camouflage the vehicle from passing trains or the occasional passers-by who would wander around in the woods for no particular reason. From time to time we would be discovered by a curious woodsman or wood nymphs, seeking a private spot to facilitate an amorous encounter. When this occurred, we would simply relocate to another position along the rail line and hope our presence in the area would not be reported to authorities.

Lt. Colonel Baxter was pouring a cup of coffee from his thermos and suggested I start the car to warm the passenger compartment. As I turned the key, the solenoid rattled off a clicking sound, which only spelled trouble. I paused for a minute, and tried again to engage the starter, only to be greeted by a clicking sound of the battery draining off its final volt. The car was not going to start, and we were stranded in the woods.

Normally a dead battery was of no major significance. It was simply a matter of finding a willing participant to share the power from their vehicle via a set of jumper cables we carried along with other assorted tools in the trunk. This approach worked fine if you were broken down in a populated area or even on a roadside, but the chances of someone driving by in an automobile where there were no roads was as remote as our hiding spot. We discussed our options, which was quickly reduced to a single one. I would venture out in search of assistance. I studied the maps carefully to determine our

precise coordinates and to establish a route, which would lead me to a nearby town. Since my trek would take me across hill and vale I would need to have a good sense of the topography, at least to the nearest town, which was about five kilometers east of our position. It would be there that I would attempt to convince an East German citizen that it would be well worth their time to offer a helping hand, into which I would eagerly stuff a wad of East German currency upon successful completion of our joint mission. It was specifically for these reasons that we would carry large sums of East marks with us to help soften the hardened communist hearts. Actually, a large number of East Germans that I met were not fond of their communist handlers, and would jump at the opportunity to demonstrate their feelings if they thought they could do it safely. But the cash always helped.

The official exchange rate was one West mark for one East mark, and East German law required all currency transactions to be made through official channels, that being East German banks. The flaw in their plan was that East marks could be purchased from West German banks at a rate of four East marks for one West mark, so guess where we bought our East marks. Since we had diplomatic immunity at the borders, smuggling in the cash was of little consequence. This blatant disregard for authority would serve as a model for decisions made later in my life, and I can thank my government for this behavior modification. But that's another story.

As I left in search of help Lt. Col. Baxter wished me success, and I returned the acknowledgement with a thumbs up and a smile. We both knew we were in a precarious position by not being able to simply start the car and go, but what added to the dimension of risk was the fact that we were separating, and I was leaving the bulwark of sheet metal which served us in much the same way that a knight's coat of armor rendered a layer of protection. Away from the automobile I was completely exposed, a situation I never looked forward to when operating in a hostile zone. Hopefully things would go smoothly and we would be out of the area within a few hours. My route took me across the rail line in a northeasterly direction towards the city of Calau. The weather was cool and damp, but the ground was firm, which made my passage through several unplowed fields easier than what would have been the case during planting season. Since there were no private farms operating within the country, agricultural cooperatives, which were state-owned, dotted the rural landscape. Hopefully I would be able to find a farmer willing to earn more in a couple of hours than he would make in a month's salary by driving a tractor to our location and giving us a jump. At least that was the plan.

As I approached the farm co-op building noticed several of- the locals eyeing me over, and I tried to observe their body language to determine if they would be likely candidates for solving our problem. I decided against approaching them, and instead found an individual who was working alone on a piece of machinery. After making small talk for a couple of minutes, I asked him how difficult it would be for him to take off for an hour or so to help me get my car started. Before he could respond I reached into my pocket and flashed a large wad of cash. I told him America was all about opportunity and today was his lucky day. He smiled and nodded, and said he would be back in a few minutes after making arrangements with his supervisor. He assured me there would be no problem. I tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, but as the minutes passed I began to get a sense that something was amiss. His return was taking longer than I anticipated, and with each passing minute I became a bit more nervous.

After waiting about twenty minutes I decided I had worn out my welcome in this place, and it would be best to move on quickly. I stepped out from around the corner of the building towards the road and noticed a black sedan parked on the roadside across the street. It contained four occupants, and I immediately knew I was in trouble. It was the Stasi, the East German Secret Police. They eyed me intently, as I ignored their glances and began to walk in a direction opposite from the location of our automobile and the orientation of theirs. Things had become seriously complicated at that moment, and I had to come up with an alternate plan than would not jeopardize the vehicle and its equipment, while at the same time trying to remain composed and find a solution to our predicament. I decided my only option was to get to a city that had a telephone and call for a recovery team. This would be no small task, as they would be on me every step of the way. I began to walk away from the tiny burg, which amounted to little more than a few quaint houses and the agricultural co-op building, and noticed a couple of people cast an ominous look my way. Even they knew the gravity of the situation, but with a smile and a nod I tried to send a signal that everything would be all right. I think the gesture was more for myself than their benefit.

I continued on my way, and as I walked along the two-lane country highway, the Stasi car took up position about fifty yards behind me on the shoulder of the road. They were creeping along at the same pace as my stride, but giving me ample distance so as not to crowd me. They were simply intent on following me to my destination, believing I would eventually lead them back to the automobile. But that wouldn't happen under any circumstance. I continued my journey towards Calau, and grew concerned with the notion that they might become weary of my wild goose chase before I could make it to my destination and simply grab me. Or worse, perhaps they would take revenge on me for an incident that happened a few months earlier between a French Mission team and some of their officers. A high-speed chase had ended in a fatal accident where one of the Stasi members in the pursuit car was killed. It was certainly worth considering, although there was little more I could do beyond my current undertaking than to get to a phone.

A telephone was considered a luxury item in East German society but you could always count on the post office as being a place where a telephone was available. The question was whether I could make it to one before they had their way with me, but I remained optimistic. From behind me I could hear the sound of a vehicle larger than a passenger car approaching. I turned, and realized it was a bus with a marquee in the display window above the windshield that read 'Dresden'. I decided to make a move, and giving the bus enough time to make a quick stop, I jumped out in the middle of the road and waived it down. The driver applied the brakes hard, and as it came to a halt I boarded and explained to the driver that I needed help and could pay him well. The Stasi car immediately pulled around in front of the bus, blocking its path. One of the agents got out of the car and walked up to the driver's window, ordering him to demand that I get off the bus without delay. It was a simple request and one the driver understood all too well. He looked at me, and with a shrug of his shoulders, politely asked me to step off. I followed his suggestion and as I disembarked, the door closed with a whoosh, and the car blocking the right of way moved to allow its departure. A second agent got out of the vehicle and the pair followed me on foot, leaving two remaining agents in the sedan.

I continued to walk along the roadside as they moved at my pace from behind, one having crossed over to the opposite side of the street. I suspect they did this to add an element of psychological pressure, but they were still unwilling to make an

aggressive move towards me. Time was on their side, and they would take all they needed. I knew I had to maintain my composure, but frequently found myself contemplating an eventual physical confrontation with this group. I knew they were armed and well trained, and I would have little chance against them in a struggle. Perhaps it would be best to cooperate rather than fight if they decided to take me into custody, and simply hope for the best. But if it looked like they were intent on taking me down hard, then the survival instinct would engage. I heard another noise, like some kind of heavy vehicle approaching from my rear. It was a large dump truck. Again, I made a move, getting the truck to stop on short notice, and as I jumped up into the cab the Stasi car repeated it's earlier performance by blocking the road and ordering the driver to make me vacate the vehicle. I pleaded with the driver to help, explaining that they were going to kill me and he was my only hope. I could see in his eyes that he wanted to do something but knew his life would radically change if he volunteered any assistance. I had no choice but to get out, and as soon as I stepped down the truck released its air brakes. With a loud hiss it left me stranded in an untenable position. It was obvious these guys were not going to let anyone intercede. I was on my own.

Cottbus was approximately twelve kilometers from where I had latched onto my sidekicks, and it took me the entire morning to traverse the rural landscape. As I neared the city limits I noticed an increased amount of human activity that put me at ease a bit, hoping that the Secret police would be less likely to bring harm to me as long as I remained within public view. But deep within my subconscious mind I knew they could do as they pleased, and no one would challenge their authority. I had to remain focused and get to a telephone. If I could do this without their interference I would be able to make an emergency call to the Potsdam House and order a recovery team to the location of the disabled vehicle. There was a special procedure that we followed in the event of such an emergency. We would simply say the words, "Recover. Coordinates to follow." We would then give the exact numeric coordinates indexed from a 1:25000 scale map that could precisely pinpoint our location to within a quarter of a kilometer. After the coordinates were reported it was usually just a matter of waiting for the recovery team to arrive. This situation was different, however, because I was about fifteen kilometers from my team member and the vehicle. Somehow I would have to make it back on my own before the recovery team arrived. I would have about five hours from the time I placed the call to do so.

My arrival into the city was greeted by a group of local citizens waiting at a bus stop. They watched with fascination as I strode into town shrouded in mystery. It was a scene straight out of a Hollywood movie, an American soldier being trailed by Secret police in leather trench coats, which struck me as being so absurd I whimsically made the comment, "Just like a Hollywood movie".

A few of town's folk let loose with a guarded laugh, but most stood frozen in silence. It was approaching the lunch hour and people were moving about the shopping district. I spotted the logo of the Deutsche Post and headed directly for entrance to the building. I knew I would have work quickly, and anticipated that any delay whatsoever could impede my ability to successfully place the call. I did the deed without interference, and much to my surprise, the Stasi simply stood by watching, knowing that I would have to eventually lead them to their quarry. Patience would deliver their reward.

The phone began to ring, and a voice at the other end answered.

"Potsdam House. Lt. Kimmel speaking." It was the housefather on the other end. Lt. Kimmel was a West Point graduate, but also bore the brunt of criticism by other Mission members as not being the sharpest knife in the drawer. I know this was true among the drivers in any case. There is book smart and common sense. Lt. Kimmel lacked the latter. I would have to rely on his academic prowess to handle this problem.

I winced at the thought. He repeated the coordinates I had proffered and the phone went dead with a click. Since we knew both the Soviets and East Germans tapped our phones, we would never discuss anything sensitive over them. With the completion of the call, the clock began ticking. Phase One of my plan was now initiated. Phase Two of my plan called for making Number One. I had to take a leak, was ready to burst, and now was as good a time as any. I walked further into the main shopping district and saw a restaurant open and doing a brisk business. I knew I would be able to find a public restroom there, and asking permission from a waiter, he directed me with a pointing finger to it's location. It was outside the main building in a small courtyard, which was typical in this part of the country. The building was rather crude, and the urinal within consisted on a pipe mounted horizontally along the wall drizzling a constant stream of water and into a trough that was part of the drainage system along the floor at wall's edge. Form and function, and not fancy, was the German way, and this design served the purpose. I relieved myself with diligence to the last drop, expecting my fan club to enter long before I had finished the task at hand. Much to my surprise they hadn't followed me immediately into the restroom, and I took a few minutes to consider my options, which were limited.

As time passed I knew I would have to make a move in some direction. Suddenly the door burst open as if it were kicked in from the outside. Two of the goons who had been following me on foot over the past several hours were now moving towards me, and I sensed it was now or never. I waited until each of the men flanked my position, and then without making a sound I simply grabbed the one to my right by the lapel of his trench coat and shoved him with all my might into his comrade. They both lost their balance, and as I was running out of the doorway, I left them lying in a pool where moments before I had contributed to the effluence. Now I knew they would be pissed, literally. I ran the few short steps that took me back inside the restaurant, as the small courtyard was completely enclosed and offered no other avenue of escape. The place was very busy, and I used the chaotic environment to my advantage.

Two of the agents reached out and tried to interrupt my advance, but a group of hungry patrons crowded their effort. I slipped around another table that stood between us and daylight, and ran out into the open street, quickly trying to determine if there were reinforcements waiting in the wings. Nothing of the sort seemed apparent, so I continued my flight down several side streets and across a church cemetery, looking for any type of cover that could provide haven until I figured out what my next move would be. I was running out of options rapidly.

After running down several other side streets I had come to the proverbial end of the road. I was looking at a dead end. In front of me stood a four-story apartment building at the end of an alley. It appeared to me that no one had observed my route, but I had no idea how close my pursuers were and had to take a chance by advancing forward.

I tried the door and it opened. I quietly climbed the staircase to the top floor, which revealed the entrance to an attic. I entered and began to take inventory of my surroundings. I knew I had passed the point of no return with the Stasi, and if they

picked up my trail they would have me trapped like a rat. This rat had to find some big sharp teeth, post-haste. The attic served as a storage area; full of old furniture and boxes of assorted items. It looked like a garage sale in waiting, although most of the items would have probably been better suited for the dump. One man's junk is another man's treasure, so they say. I opened several boxes as quietly as I could, not knowing whether any tenants of the building were at home on the floor beneath me.

I discovered a box of old flatware, and selected several sharp knives from its contents. I was determined to go down fighting if challenged, and stuck them in my belt loop. I continued my search and noticed an electrical socket conveniently placed by the only door to the room. Against a wall stood table with an old lamp resting on its surface. I cut the cord with one of my newly acquired weapons, and proceeded to wire the metal doorknob with the frayed ends of the lamp cord. I left just enough length to insure that the cord would reach the receptacle, with the intention that by plugging the cord into the socket I could electrocute the first man through the door. The confusion might aid me in my escape back down the steps, since that was the only way out.

With everything in place, I peered out through the half-moon shaped glass window facing the street below, trying to get a feel for any activity. For the next hour I saw a constant stream of military vehicles along with a mélange of Volkspolizei and other unmarked vehicles presumed to be Stasi agents. This cavalcade of communists was sniffing for a scent, the sweet smell of an American completely vulnerable and exposed to the elements. All I could do now was wait for the cover of darkness and try and get out of town, but darkness was at least four hours away. My fear was that in the interim a door-to-door search would reveal my whereabouts. I thought about how Anne Frank must have felt hiding from the Nazis, and she had a better hiding place!

An hour passed, and no one had come up the stairs searching for me. I figured I would do a little exploring around the building. It was more a matter of looking for something useful than just being nosey, but my search through several apartments provided nothing that would aid in my escape. I returned back to my sanctuary in the attic and waited patiently until darkness fell. The only resources I had available were my wits, so I decided to turn my wool shirt/jacket inside out. This would hide the chevrons on the sleeves and the Mission insignia patch on my right shoulder. I found some greasy dirt on some of the junk that was lying around and smeared it on my face to give the impression that I had been working on some equipment. My instinct told me that if I faked a limp and pretended to be a bit mentally disabled I might pass for a local and be able to walk through the town without attracting too much attention to myself. Human nature dictates not to stare at someone who is a bit off kilter, so that would be the part I would play.

As I walked through the city my route took me past the bus station. I considered the possibility of taking a bus back to Potsdam, but discovered there were no buses heading in that direction until the next day. I was certain the Recovery team had already made contact with my Team member, but had no idea whether or not they would be looking for me. I also knew that the authorities would still be patrolling the area and had to be cautious with my movement. My anticipated route out of town would take me directly in front of the Volkspolizei headquarters for the area, and getting by that obstacle would be a challenge. I decided to steal a bicycle, which was a common mode of transportation, as automobiles were expensive and hard to come by. The bike would attract less attention than if I were traveling on foot, and allow me to cover a greater distance in a shorter period of time. The plan was to pedal as far as the point where the

rail line crossed the road, and then I would ditch the bike and go the final leg on foot back to where I left Lt. Colonel Baxter. Hopefully he would be waiting in the same spot I left him.

I made my way past the Volkspolizei headquarters without incident, which was of great relief. I figured the rest of the trip would be less difficult since traffic was extremely light on this particular road during hours of darkness. My only concern was that of being confronted by some suspicious individual questioning my identity. If I could make it to the tracks I would be in a much better position to escape notice. However, I would have avoid the Traffic police stationed at the rail crossing, who would most definitely inform his superiors of my location. My senses told me I was getting close to having to leave the road and bicycle behind. I ditched the bike behind some trees and walked across a field that would lead me on an angle towards the rails. The light of a nearly full moon illuminated my way once my eyes completely adjusted to the surroundings. I estimated the distance back to the vehicle as being approximately four to five kilometers, which meant I had roughly an hour's hike ahead of me.

I had been walking between the rails for about a half hour when I heard the low frequency rumble of a train approaching. Most of the rail traffic on this line of track was of a military nature, and I had to assume the same applied to the one converging on my position. Intuition told me to take cover behind a fallen log about twenty meters from the edge of the rail line on a small rise overlooking the track. This would give me a good vantage point to observe the train without being seen by the engineer or any 'M-Wagon' occupants.

The train was now upon me and this one was loaded with goodies. Unfortunately I had no camera, so this one had a free pass. I counted fifteen T-62 tanks, numerous BTR-60 armored personnel carriers, and assorted communication vans on flatcars. Next came a long string of 'M-Wagons', chocked full of Soviet troops. Most cars had the sliding side doors open, and several troops sat in the doorway with their feet dangling freely. They were singing songs and laughing, causing me to wonder how they managed to cope in such a meager existence. Their trip was almost over, and soon they would be standing guard somewhere along the Western front, propping up the metaphorical yet all too real Iron Curtain. I wondered for a moment whether or not they would ever do battle with American forces.

For the time being they seemed content with taking a train ride through the countryside. I decided to have some fun. I yelled toward one of the last cars as it passed by me.

"Vwee Hoteetyeh?" I yelled out in my limited Russian tongue. I was asking what they wanted. Then I cussed them out.

"Yesh Goovno". It was a phrase that I had remembered from the days of DC when I lived with Russian language students. I had simply told them to eat shit. It was the best I could do on short notice.

A flashlight suddenly came to life, but the intensity of its spot was of little consequence as the train meandered down the track and eventually out of sight. I laughed to myself, wondering what they were thinking when a voice from nowhere greeted their arrival and departure from that desolate stretch of track. A little humor is always good to break the tension.

I got up and brushed myself off and continued walking down the line, looking up at the crystal clarity of the night sky. I could see the Milky Way and all the usual

constellations. I surveyed the horizon looking for the stand of trees that had provided camouflage for our Ford, but the field to my right was open and clear. I was not there yet. As my eyes fought to focus along the horizon I noticed what appeared to be a two-track path running perpendicular from the rail line. Were my eyes fooling me, or was there something setting in the middle of the path? This called for closer scrutiny.

I decided to come in at an angle rather than head on in the event it was something or someone who might pose a threat. I tried to stay low to the ground and use the tall dry grass as cover. As I moved closer I determined it was a vehicle, and to my complete surprise, it *was* a Ford LTD. I snuck up quietly on the occupants of the vehicle from behind and rapped loudly on the roof.

"Jesus Christ, Perk. What are you doing out here alone, and where's your car?" howled Major Spencer.

The encounter was surreal.

"That's a good question, Major. I left Colonel Baxter at seven a.m. He isn't with you?"

"Hell no, we're your replacement team. You should have been out of the area this morning. What the hell's going on?" he inquired.

I went on to brief him on everything that had happened since I left fourteen hours earlier in the day. We decided we had better go find Baxter and check on the status of the recovery.

We followed the trail back to the open road as I directed them to the turnoff that would lead us back into woods and to our hiding spot. After several minutes on the road we saw the taillights of what appeared to be another Ford ahead of us. We closed in on the LTD, which in turn began to pick up speed, and soon we were in a high-speed chase with the Recovery vehicle. With speeds approaching one hundred miles per hour we finally managed to pull along side of the confused Mission member, and signaled him to pull over. He complied, and we soon learned that Lt. Kimmel had been searching on the wrong side of the tracks for over six hours because he used a 1 to 50,000 scale map that put of the coordinates of the disabled vehicle on the opposite side of the rail line. Major Spencer made a comment about what a dumb shit the Lieutenant was, and with the Recovery car bringing up the rear we continued to the turnoff and into the woods.

We approached the vehicle containing Lt. Colonel Baxter, who assumed I was missing in action and had been rehearsing his condolences that would be delivered to my family if he managed to make it back to Potsdam alive. That little episode made me a legend at the Mission, and three years later when I visited with my wife while on vacation in Germany they were still talking about it. Napoleon Solo, eat your heart out.