

Chapter 14 Additional Material

Showdown at Checkpoint Charlie

On October 22, 1961, East German border guards stopped E. Allan Lightner, Jr.'s car. Lightner, the senior U.S. diplomat in West Berlin, was on his way to the state opera house in East Berlin. The border guards demanded that the diplomat present his passport but Lightner refused, stating that only Soviet officials had the right to do so. As a result, Lightner was denied entrance into the East and ordered to go back. American officials in Berlin cried foul and argued that diplomats had the right to freely cross the border between West and East Berlin.



President John F. Kennedy meets with E. Allan Lightner, Jr., Minister and Deputy Chief of the United States Mission in Berlin. Oval Office, White House, Washington, D.C., May 2, 1962.

Credit: Kennedy Presidential Library Photo No. JFKWHP-AR7201-A.



The view that American tankers saw from their positions at Checkpoint Charlie, looking at Soviet T-55s, October 28, 1961.

Credit: National Archives ARC Identifier 6003170.

Incensed, President Kennedy's Special Advisor in Berlin, Lucius D. Clay, wanted to show American resolve by sending a diplomat, Albert Hemsing, through a border check, escorted by U.S. Military Police. It worked. By October 27th, though, the border crossing situation seemed to have spun out of control, and the world watched as the most dangerous moment of the Cold War in Europe played out. U.S. Army M48 tanks were positioned at the Friedrichstrasse border crossing, otherwise known as Checkpoint Charlie, and were quickly joined by Soviet T55 tanks. In a narrow street in Berlin, American and Soviet tank barrels pointed at each other, with orders to fire back if fired upon, while secret negotiations between Washington and Moscow took place.

At the heart of the crisis in Berlin that October, and how Lightner's car and the superpowers' tanks were joined to a larger conflict, was the dispute over the city itself. At the end of the Second World War, Berlin became a jointly governed city between the victorious

powers. When tensions between East and West birthed the Cold War, the situation in Berlin was less-than desirable for the Soviet Union, as it meant a constant antagonizing presence of the Western powers 110 miles inside East Germany. Yet Berlin was also an exposed position for the Americans, British, and French, and the Soviet Union had the ability to pressure the western allies when it liked. It did just that in 1958, when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev attempted to force the western powers to recognize the German Democratic Republic by threatening to conclude a separate peace treaty with the East Germans. That crisis was peacefully settled, but by 1961, a new crisis arose. East German officials sought to stop the flow of their most intelligent citizens out of their country and into West Berlin. They reasoned the best course of action was simply a physical division. At midnight on August 13, 1961, East Germany began building the Berlin Wall, effectively dividing the city in two.

Alarmed by how quickly the situation at the border crossing had become tense, American officials reminded Lucius Clay that Berlin was not worth risking war over. President Kennedy opened up back channel communications with Khrushchev and offered that the United States would be amenable over Soviet and East German suggestions about Berlin in the future. In exchange, he asked that the Soviets back down first at Checkpoint Charlie. The Kremlin relented. On October 28th, into the sixteenth hour of the showdown at the border crossing, one T-55 slowly reversed, which was followed by one American M-48 doing the same. Slowly, the tanks left the area, and the crisis at Checkpoint Charlie came to an end. Ultimately, the United States had given their consent that a wall would continue to divide Berlin, which effectively reversed decades of American rhetoric about Washington's stance in the city. As Kennedy said, though, "a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."

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The 1st Infantry Division and Combat Operations in Vietnam, 1965-1970

During the Vietnam War, the United States Army's First Infantry Division was one of the most distinguished units to fight. Even before U.S. troops deployed to Vietnam, the division boasted a proud heritage of being the first to arrive in the combat theater. In June 1917, the

division spearheaded the American Expeditionary Force's arrival in France during the First World War. There they earned the moniker the "Big Red One" due to their distinctive shoulder patch, bearing a large numeric red one. During the Second World War, the division was among the units to take part in Operations TORCH and HUSKY, and went on to land at the beaches of Normandy during Operation OVERLORD and pushed the Germans eastward, back all the way to Czechoslovakia.

Arriving in elements, by October 1965 the Big Red One was in-country, one of the first two divisions sent to the Republic of Vietnam. They began operating in III Corps, a crucial sector of the Republic of Vietnam that included the capital city of Saigon near the Mekong Delta. For the next five years, the First Division operated in the territory north and west of Saigon, seeking out and engaging the enemy in varied terrain to keep Saigon secure. The border areas between Vietnam and Cambodia also became key battlefields as the enemy attempted to infiltrate personnel and supplies along the traditional invasion routes to Saigon. The First Division encountered both irregular troops of the Viet Cong as well as North Vietnamese regulars who fought mostly a conventional war.

As part of the efforts to maintain offensive actions against sanctuary areas across the border in Cambodia and Laos, and clear enemy bases in the Iron Triangle while also providing local security, the division took part in some of the biggest search and destroy and clearing operations of the war. The aggressiveness of the division was partly the result of its demanding leader, General William E. DePuy (who led the unit from March 1966 to February 1967), known for his no-nonsense attitude. Seeking to find, fix, and destroy the enemy, or simply drive them away from populated areas, operations like ATTLEBORO (September 14 to November 24, 1966), CEDAR FALLS (January 8–26, 1967), JUNCTION CITY (February 22 to May 14, 1967) and MANHATTAN (April 23 to May 15, 1967) allowed the First Infantry Division to balance the two needs of offensive operations and security for the capital city. Alongside Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers in combined operations, after the Tet Offensive, the Big Red One also spent a considerable amount of time in pacification efforts and civic actions designed to win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese civilians.

In April 1970, the First Infantry Division returned home to Fort Riley, Kansas. Their time in Vietnam saw the Big Red One awarded the Vietnamese Civil Action Medal along with the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm. The division's soldiers won an incredible 11

Medals of Honor, 67 Distinguished Service Crosses, and 905 Silver Stars for bravery. The Big Red One's exceptional service, however, came at the cost of 20,770 soldiers either killed or wounded.

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The U.S. Army in Europe during the Vietnam War

When the United States began committing more troops to the defense of the Republic of Vietnam beginning in earnest in early 1965, its effects were felt by the United States

military around the globe. President Lyndon B. Johnson's decision not to call up the reserves—more for political reasons than issues of suitability or capability—required that the service branches provide the needed manpower from the regular units. Such a demand ultimately hit hard the American military presence in Europe, specifically the United States Army. Since the end of the Second World War, the service had focused on their presence in Western Europe, specifically Germany, as an occupation force and acting as the frontline of the growing Cold War. As relations soured between the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, and continuing for the rest of the conflict, American forces inside Germany were to serve as a deterrent of Communist aggression against the West. The situation had not changed appreciably by the outset of the Vietnam War, and acting as a conventional deterrence force meant that a large number of American troops remained stationed in Europe. As such, that available force became a sort of strategic reserve for the escalating conflict in Southeast Asia.

The change of focus from Europe to Vietnam had a profound effect on Army units stationed in Germany. At the time of the Berlin Crisis in 1961, U.S. military strength in Europe numbered around 420,000 overall. 272,000 of those officers and men belonged to the Army's command on the continent, the U.S. Army, Europe (USAREUR). The nature of the deployment system due to one-year tours of duty in Vietnam also necessitated a larger Army to keep up with the demand. From early 1965 to mid-1968, the Army grew from 973,000 personnel to 1.5 million, with many having served in Southeast Asia. NATO's supreme commander, U.S. Army General Lyman, understood that Vietnam was a priority, but believed that the movement of troops out of Europe would only be a temporary deviation from Europe remaining the primary focus for the U.S. military. With veterans returning from tours in Vietnam as well, he concluded that they would bring to Europe needed expertise. It certainly helped, as well, that soldiers rotated to Southeast Asia individually, not by entire units.

By September 1966, due to the reassignment of battalion- and company-grade officers to meet the demands of the combat theater, noncommissioned officers commanded some artillery batteries and other units in USAREUR. Such a dire situation was only temporary, and it was soon fixed within a month, but the long-term effects continued to be felt by the Army.



An M60A1 from the 8th Infantry Division in a German village during a training exercise.

Source: U.S. Army

Simply put, there was a severe lack of sufficient leadership in USAREUR since the command boasted only little more than 10,000 of the authorized 17,000 officers. Shortages extended down the ranks to military occupational specialists. Ultimately, the drainage of personnel to Vietnam affected support units the most. Although there were mostly enough combat units to fight in Southeast Asia and maintain an adequate posture in Europe, the capability of artillery, maintenance, and logistics commands suffered, while combat battalions slipped below 75 percent of their allowed strength and readiness levels. The effort in Southeast Asia also created personnel issues. Restrictions on hardship tours created personnel turbulence that created an annual turnover of 80 percent in units stationed in Europe. As a result, leaders found it difficult to create unit cohesiveness, since soldiers rotated in and out with unsettling regularity. In terms of equipment and supplies, Vietnam garnered the top priority in resources from Europe and other areas around the globe, and shortages of equipment compounded USAREUR's problems with maintaining motivation and capabilities.

The unpopularity of the Vietnam War both at home and in Europe engendered opposition on both continents and upset relations between Americans and Europeans. U.S. bases in Germany and the Americans stationed at them became targets of anti-Vietnam rage, even from organized terrorist actions by the Red Army Faction in the early 1970s. Insufficient and ineffective Army leadership is partly to blame for the sagging morale, increasing drug abuse rates from American personnel, and USAREUR's crime rates that increased markedly after 1967.

The United States further reduced their conventional Army presence in a plan first introduced in 1967 and supported actively by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. In order to reduce costs of forces in Europe—a perennial concern for Congress—two USAREUR brigades totaling 34,000 combat and support troops redeployed from Germany to the United States but remained technically part of USAREUR. In January 1969 and continuing yearly until 1993, NATO forces held annual exercises that utilized pre-positioned equipment, called REFORGER (Redeployment of Forces to Germany). One brigade, more than 12,000 soldiers, moved to Germany from the United States and took part in large-scale maneuvers that practiced airlifts and combat deployment while the other rotated to the United States. As the Vietnam War wound down, forces began returning to USAREUR. By the early 1970s, one-fifth of the Army's total personnel were in Europe. The conflict had damaged the U.S. Army, however, and the legacy of the strain placed upon the American military continued to be felt in Europe for some time in the form of morale, discipline, and drug problems. Working closely with European allies, the Army once again focused on preparing for conventional war in Western Europe against a highly mobile conventional enemy, leaving the irregular war of Southeast Asia a distant memory.

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