Special Forces Berlin: Clandestine Cold War Operations of the US Army's Elite, 1956–1990

James Stejskal (Casemate, 2017), 333 pp., notes, timelines, appendices, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

The goal of any historian worth his or her academic salt should be to either plow new ground or rearrange the furrows with newly-planted facts or interpretations. Author James Stejskal has satisfied that goal with this brief volume on the history of Special Forces Berlin (SF Berlin). Known by various names throughout its three-decade existence, the unit—initially known as "Det A" (unclassified), formally the 39th Special Forces Detachment (then classified)—has been described by the former commander of the US Army Special Operations Command, Lt. Gen. Charles Cleveland (Ret.), as a unit that "remained in the shadows until history and discretion allowed a public accounting." (vii) The author, who served in the unit in the 1970s and 1980s, volunteered to write this book—dedicated to the 800 members who served in SF Berlin—seeking to preserve their stories while they are still alive to tell them. Understandably, there were few extant official records concerning the unit during its existence and fewer now, which amplified his challenge.

The warriors of SF Berlin, located 110 miles inside East Germany, knew their primary responsibility in wartime was to conduct unconventional warfare (UW)—specifically, missions targeting the Berlin road, rail, and canal infrastructure. In a larger sense, their mission was to buy time for the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR), who had only 10,000 US troops in West Berlin to temporarily fend off 575,000 East German and Soviet troops. Additionally, they were to train whatever local guerrilla forces could be located or organized, using the extensive caches of weapons, explosives, radios, and dollars buried in the area; the theory was that a 12-man team could train 1,200 guerrillas.

As Stejskal notes early on, the first SF units were patterned after those of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in World War II. After some experimentation with structure, SF settled on 12-man teams, each member crosstrained in several areas to add depth to the limited manpower. Besides being SF-qualified, each unit member was required to hold a Top Secret clearance and to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in German or an Eastern European language; those with the best language skills and who represented the bulk of the unit early on tended to be "Lodge Act" soldiers, ethnic Eastern Europeans welcomed into the US Army in the postwar period.

Two external developments affecting Det A were the 1961 construction of the Berlin Wall five years after the unit arrived in Berlin, which heightened the tension and potential danger, and the Vietnam War, which decreased the pool of potential replacements for the unit. From a high of 10,000, the number of SF troops declined to 4,200 by the mid-1970s. As the author points out, the unit also had to deal with the constant challenge of missions other than its primary UW one: underwater operations, in which only one team was trained; counterterrorism operations, which involved close coordination and training with the German police and anti-terrorist force GSG-9; and close quarters battle training, in concert with the FBI, the Israelis, and Britain's Special Air Service (SAS).

As the author notes, Det A was training for participation in the Iranian hostage crisis following the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979. Even then, its primary mission was intelligence collection and the rescue of the three Americans held captive at the Foreign Ministry. Again, the Det's mandatory support to Army exercises limited personnel available for the Iran hostage rescue mission. The collision of a helicopter and a C-130 at the Desert One landing site in Iran aborted Operation EAGLE CLAW and led to widespread adverse publicity; an unintended consequence was that team members were left in Iran to find their own way out. Afterward, the Det A contingent began training for its own follow-on, SNOWBIRD, inside the Foreign Ministry. The 20 January 1981 release of the hostages made the task superfluous.

In 1981, SACEUR Gen. Bernard Rogers visited the unit for a briefing, the upshot of which was a refocusing on strategic intelligence collection and reporting and an emphasis on CT operations—the latter both an "oppor-

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tunity" and a "problem," according to Stejskal—rather than UW, which he notes was still perceived as counter to "the American way of war." (5) Fatefully, the shift also triggered an OPSEC survey of the unit that uncovered irregularities. Adding insult to injury, the unit's OPSEC was compromised by a *Newsweek* article focused on a team member who had participated in the hostage rescue operation and mentioned an "SF unit in Berlin." As a result of that disclosure, the OPSEC survey judged that the unit should be shut down and a new unit be created in a different location, which happened in 1984.

The new unit was designated the US Army Physical Security Support Element-Berlin (PSSE-B), its classified designator the 410th SF Detachment. The PSSE-B was ostensibly an MP unit tasked with conducting vulnerability surveys on US government facilities. This renaissance brought with it two significant problems, however—first, Det A and the PSSE-B were never divorced from one another, not in the eyes of the German police, with whom they trained and not with the German public, with whom they had interactions, and most definitely not in the eyes of Soviet and East German military and intelligence entities. Second, PSSE-B's Regional Survey Teams found themselves doing little else; thus, the unit was spending 60 percent of its time on its cover rather than on its true mission. Although the unit was able to participate in a full urban UW exercise in 1985, other missions still intruded, including CT (such as TWA 847, the Achille Lauro cruise ship attack, and the La Belle disco bombing) and the fatal shooting of Military Liaison Mission (MLM) member Maj. "Nick" Nicholson by a Soviet border guard.

The other unexpected development was the fall of the Berlin Wall. The event prompted security concerns and the withdrawal of all SF and Military Intelligence (MI) units in Berlin until a decision could be made concerning future dispositions in Germany, if any. In the meantime, the unit's extensive linguistics capabilities came in handy when a flood of refugees from the former East Germany began inundating the West. The unit's last mission was to provide linguistics support to the Joint Allied Refugee Operations Center in Berlin. In this radically changed environment and with no need for its mission, PSSE-B was officially disbanded on 15 Aug 1990 and the UW mission would fade for a decade.

In retrospect, did it matter that Det A and PSSE-B had ever existed? While the author clearly thinks so, his statements that Special Forces "contributed greatly to the end of the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe" and that "principal Warsaw Pact commanders were aware of its existence and respected its capabilities" (268) are largely unproven. Stejskal does admit, however, that since Warsaw Pact forces never swept through Western Europe, it is impossible to say if the unit could have performed its wartime mission. He notes, for example, that OSS had the benefit of pre-existing resistance movements to work with in Europe; these did not exist in the Soviet satellites.

Stejskal concludes *Special Forces Berlin* with a look at how the Soviets and the East Germans viewed the SF unit and what they knew of its mission and operations. He notes, for example, that the Military Liaison Mission, Field Station Berlin, CIA's Berlin Operations Base, and the 766th MI Group were prime targets of Soviet and East German intelligence, as was the SF unit. The Stasi's first report on Det A was produced in 1975, with a fuller one in 1982—while the adversary services apparently never knew specifics, Stejskal writes that they had a good idea of the general SF mission in Berlin.

Given the unit's secretive nature, its limited manpower, and the passage of time, it is not surprising Stejskal's book is the only one on this somewhat esoteric subject. An extensive selection of photographs adds to the volume's value, but readers will need to have a tactical bent to appreciate the numerous weapons references. The SCUBA jargon (85) will leave non-Woods Hole researchers in a haze, and the near-glorification of alcohol use and abuse does not redound to the credit of an elite military element. The author also spends pages (101–103) explaining how sergeants major "choose" brigade commanders, which will come as a surprise to the US Army, and he clearly has no use for such skills as Soviet uniform recognition, described as a "stupefyingly monotonous subject," (107) despite its proven value in ground order-of-battle and related intelligence collection and reporting. Finally, the repeated appearance of "[Redacted]" in the text serves no useful purpose and is frustrating for readers.

Despite some flaws, *Special Forces Berlin* is a decent and valuable study of a little-known topic whose significance is enhanced by the continuing challenges in the US-Russia strategic relationship in Europe and elsewhere. In short, if we did not have the information in this volume, we would be the worse for it.

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