

The Jewish Personnel

By: Ralph Gilbert

All events and characters are factual.

Bio: Ralph Gilbert, (88), an engineer, a businessman,

an accomplished writer, and a sometime soldier was a past president of Temple Emanuel. He holds two degrees from M.I.T., a Certificate of Completion from Hebrew College and was a benefactor of the American Friends of Technion in Israel.

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The big props of our military Douglas Dakota DC-3 began to wind down. We all made an effort to stand. It had been a long flight. The year was 1959. Soviet Premier Khrushchev had slammed his shoe down on his desk at the U.N. and vowed to bury the West. The Cold War was on. Soviet long range nuclear bombers flew regular patterns over the globe. American men were being drafted. Citizens trembled. President Eisenhower needed a plan. Nike Missile defense posts were built all over America.

At the time I was employed by Bendix Aviation working on inertial navigation systems. The job provided me with 'critical skills' military deferment. I would never be drafted, but I hated the job. I felt unsettled. I wanted some physical challenge. I wanted to know myself better. Growing up I had no real core, no Jewish life. I yearned to belong somewhere. At 23, I feared that I was slowly slipping into unresolved complacency. I had had a belly- full of academics at MIT. I needed to find something different. I did. I quit my job and enlisted in the U.S. Army as a Nike Missile Crewman. Unexpectedly, however, a few months before I was required to report, something equally momentous occurred. I met my future wife.

At basic training, in Ford Dix, New Jersey, we were forced, through sleep deprivation and intimidation, to internalize the brutal methods of combat. Later, I would be trained at Fort Bliss, Texas in missile defense. My eventual deployment would be in a Nike Missile radar van, searching the New York City sky for Soviet bombers. Well... that was the plan, any-way.

The Dakota's doors opened. Then, one by one and all together, we pushed and grumbled, cursed and staggered and made our way towards the open door. I blinked back the intense glare and humped my duffle down the stair. An outside thermometer stood at 102. The tarmac smelled of urine and burning sulfur. My face was on fire. My eyes teared. My boots stuck to the runway.

"Where in Hell are we, Mac?" I asked.

"Welcome to West freaking Texas in the summertime," Mac answered. Sergeant Mac was not from our outfit. He was lean and hard. His eyes were red. His teeth were stained. His breath reeked of nicotine and gin. His regulation military buzz cut showed gray around the ears. His sleeve carried so many service hashes that I figured that he must have joined up during the Civil War.

"Well, son, you're in El Paso del Norte, as the explorers called it. See over there," he pointed. "Over there, 'cross the Rio Grande', between them glimmerin' hills, that's Meh-ico, City of Juarez. You can get anything you want over there...over at the White Lake Saloon," he said with a wink, "abs-freaking-lutely anything...grab them blood-red steaks, them ice-cold Coronas and them big busted, brown-eyed, bar girls".

"I really don't want anything, Mac," I said. "I just miss my girlfriend."

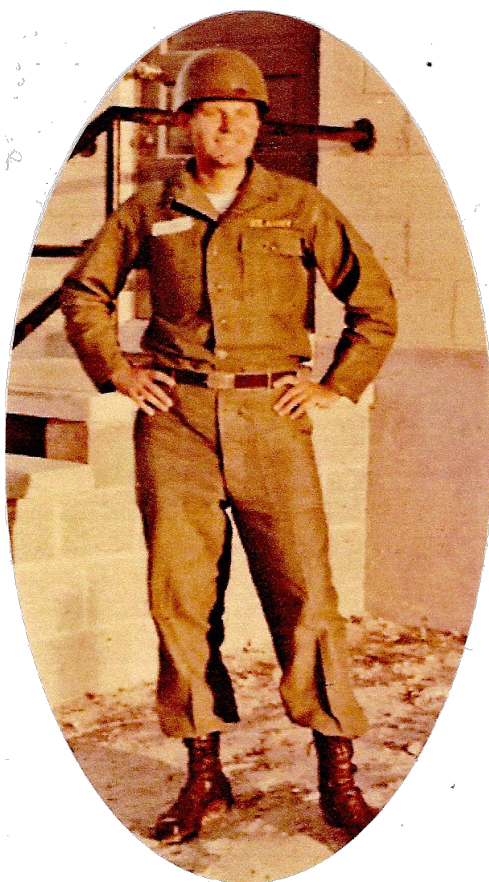
Fresh from the mountains of Western North Carolina she was now making her way in the Big City. As our days together ticked down towards my induction, our passion for each other increased. We talked about all the trips and adventures we would take together. Finally, on our last day together, in my dress uniform, I held her in my arms at the New York City Port Authority bus station.

"I'll miss you," I said. "I really will. Please wait for me. I'll be back before you know it."

"Oh really? Don't take yourself so seriously, big boy," she answered. "Why would I wait for you? It's not like we're engaged or anything."

'Engaged or anything?'...the idea had never occurred to me. I made some mumbled reply then I kissed her and climbed onto the bus.

“That right? Your girlfriend? You miss your girlfriend?” Mac repeated. “I miss the war... back in '43... Seventh Army, General Patton.” “Really?” “Yeah, got some battlefield promotions over there in Messina...lost lots of buddies, can you feature that? Officers were killed... promotions were made, and I got, all the way up... all the way up to Lieutenant freaking Colonel.”



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“No kidding? Lieutenant Colonel?” I said, looking at his sergeant stripes. “Got rified down again, son.” He laughed. He took out his smokes, popped on his shades and then, without another word he ambled towards the clutch of NCO’s idling near the trucks. I never saw old Mac again, that is except for that one terrifying moment when I thought I saw his leering face on my radar screen.

Up ahead, at the end of the runway, four high-wheeled troop trans-ports waited.

“Fall in, you sorry-ass troopers,” a staff sergeant shouted.

Fort Bliss was the center of America’s rocket program. Its former director was the past SS-Sturmbannfuher, Dr. Werner von Braun, developer the V- 2 rocket. I first heard Von Braun’s name in a satirical song in a coffee house in Harvard Square. Sitting at the piano was a young, Jewish, MIT, Mathematics instructor. Tom Lehrer’s lyrics were:

‘Gather round while I sing you of Wernher von Braun, A man
whose allegiance is ruled by expedience.
Call him a Nazi he won't even frown, Nazi, Schmazi says
Wernher von Braun.’

When the Germans lost the war, Von Braun made it a point to surrender to the Americans. After the Blitz, the British were not his friends nor were the Russians. Von Braun and other German scientists were smuggled into America by the US Military on troop ships. This deception was required since the US State Department officially barred former Nazis.

According to a WBUR, 1945 radio interview with a young American soldier: ‘We arrived at Boston Harbor in the worst weather and roughest seas. From the giant troop ship to the deck of the Boston whaler far below, each German was lowered by a shaky bosun's chair, a little harness hanging by a rope from the davits and lowered like a lifeboat, swinging in the storm.’ Von Braun and the others were taken to an island in Boston Harbor, then to a secret base in Virginia and eventually to Fort Bliss. It would take Von Braun less than nine months from being a Nazi, user of slave labor to become America’s leading rocket expert.

The next morning. Well before the Texas sun arose, we were called out for rollcall. The Company Area was the parking lot in front of our barracks. We struggled to stay awake and to listen to our sergeant who shouted to us from somewhere in the dark.

“Now men, watch your step out here. Them rattlesnakes leave the cold desert in the evening for the warmth of the tarmac.”

“Where...what, Sergeant?”

“Right there, soldier, where you’re standing.”

What followed next was the sound of a chorus of Army boots dancing to the music of ‘Stomp.’

“Also don’t forget. Look into your boots in the morning before you stick ‘em on. They like the warm moisture of your boot.”

“What does, Sergeant? What likes it.” “Them scorpions and tarantulas.”

I was suddenly wide awake, my eyes darting, my feet dancing.

Our training was conducted in two radar vans deep in the Texas desert. Fat, black cables snaked their way from the vans to three huge rotating radar discs. The vans were super air conditioned and dimly lit. Inside, on either side was a row of circular radar screens. They glowed aquamarine. Our missiles were buried deep in concrete silos waiting to burst out of the earth. Later versions had tactical nuclear warheads. And whom should the Army choose to put in charge of these ultra-dangerous toys: half asleep troopers like me, dreaming about our girlfriends back home.

We were each assigned a screen. Our instruction began. Told to monitor the screens for potential targets shown as electronic blips, we were then to manipulate our cursor to coincide with the target blip and then to lock-on by pressing a button. Once locked-on we were then to challenge the suspected target by pressing a second button which sent out an electronic challenge. If the suspected target was, for instance, an American Air- lines plane packed with women and children, the commercial jet’s preprogramed transducer would send back a signal for us to stand down. If, on the other hand, our challenge was ignored we were then to press the red button that would begin the process to launch our missiles.

The problem was that in order to move my cursor fast enough to coincide with the target blip I had to turn two tiny cranks on the console. They moved my cursor in the X and Y axis’s. The blips moved so quickly, however, that I didn’t have the ability to turn my tiny crank fast enough. By the time I caught up with one blip another showed up on the opposite side. I just couldn’t crank fast enough. I tried. I just couldn’t do it! The only thing that I reckoned I could have tracked successfully and brought down was a bi-winged mail plane with Snoopy at the controls. The Army had turned us into a barrel of crank-turning monkeys. I wondered what in hell would hap- pen if the Soviets were actually on their way. Sitting in the van, listening to the hum of the electronic equipment, I slipped into an uncontrollable sense of dread. Oh no! The damn system didn’t work! This is insane! Oh, the damn, Army! I visualized a mushroom cloud over the Upper West Side. I was horrified. Then, blank staring into my radar screen, I thought I saw an

image. It looked, for all the world, like old Mac's leering, winking face. I wanted to scream.

Later, I revealed my fears. A good forty percent of our New York outfit happened to be Jewish. Garber, white-faced, pledged to go to the top of the chain of command. Greenberg warned: "My mom works in Congressman Javits' office..." Taub threatened: "I'll phone my brother. He's an editor at the Times." These highly articulate complainers were told to shut up. Nothing happened, then one day, while standing in formation our sergeant called out:

"At ease, now listen up...We have an announcement...now, would, would all.... ALL JEWISH PERSONNEL fall out!"

What? I never had heard those words spoken before excepting in a Nazi war movie. What in Hell do they want with the Jewish personnel? Oh no, it's happening again. For two thousand years when anything bad happens it's always been the fault of the Jews! I'm a secular Jew! Get it? Leave me alone! But there was no hiding, since my dog tags were stamped, with an 'H' for Hebrew. This, for the convenience of a possible battlefield burial. Were they planning on shooting us then burying us today? ... just for complaining? ...we complain all the time...that's what we do... we complain...Didn't they get that?

The Jewish Personnel were then directed to the office of our Company Commander Captain Grody. We stood at attention. Grody was a fastidious man. His office smelled of Lysol. His kakis were tailored, and his shirt was starched. He had a pug nose, plaid blue eyes and the dimpled chin of an emotionally unstable 'B' movie actor. He spoke to us clearly and slowly as though he was communicating with a group of sub-literate Rumanian prisoners of war.

"I been told that you people will be having your...er... Holidays soon. I have been authorized to make arrangements for you to be released forth with from active duty. You will have the opportunity to return to your families and enjoy your holiday. Would you like that?"

For the very first time in our collective lives, we were speechless.

Words, which usually came so easily were now unavailable. Then one husky trooper, whom we knew as Moe, spoke up.

"Yes Captain, we would like that. Thank you, Sir."

I had the image that if we handed Moe a staff and a toga, he would have become our own Moses ready to lead us through the desert to free- dom. The Jewish personnel were going to be dismissed, forthwith! Perhaps the higher ups wanted us out of the army because they didn't want to hear our public speculations about the Nike system. Why else would we be singled out?

I arrived home to Paula to find that our relationship was still very much intact. Her Rabbi explained the ketubah. I signed it immediately.

Years later, I had an opportunity to speak at my men's club about the Nike Missile program. After my talk, a member identified himself as an Academy man, whether Army or Navy, I don't recall. He had been Raytheon's representative to the Department of Defense.

"Well, Ralph," he began. "I enjoyed your talk, my apologies to the Jewish Personnel. Thank you for your service.

So, Denny," I asked. "Did the Nike system work or not? What's the story?"

"Well, Ralph, even after sixty-five years that's still classified, you know... all I can really say... is that whole project was a terrible headache. We had a heck of a time with it."

(I've since seen internet data claiming that the system was sound.)

Upon reflection, I theorized that if the Jewish Personnel were convinced that the system didn't work then the Army knew that as well. What mattered to President Eisenhower was that the American public felt protected. Also, my guess was that the Soviets really didn't want to start a world-ending nuclear war, so they did nothing. This bilateral inaction led the public to conclude that the Nike defense system was a major deterrent. Most folks are more interested in a simple, compelling narrative than the complex, nasty truth. Perception is reality. Folks believe in what they want and refuse to consider facts to the contrary. I take note of this with the realization that I, myself, from time to time would be subject to that error of thinking.

The Cold War ended. My military career was over. I started a small business. The Nike bases were all torn down, never having fired a single missile. Nothing remains of my time in the Service except for my 'Ground to Air

Missile Control' certificate. It hangs, framed, over my desk. I look at it from time to time and remember that day, long ago, when I was pressed together with the other Jewish Personnel in Captain Grody's office.

In retrospect, in a funny way, I had achieved my goals. My inclusion with the Jewish Personnel, made me feel I finally was part of something. Years later, in order to understand more, on the suggestion of my dear friend Charlie, of blessed memory, we found a Rabbi and spent the next seven years studying at Hebrew College. I had made the time by asking our comptroller to take over the day-to-day business operations. He loved being boss. My spiritual life expanded. My family life was enhanced and my journey towards understanding myself and my faith became mature. I'm grateful that I followed my youthful intuition. I was lucky. I finally found where I belonged. Just to think, none of this might have happened if I hadn't shown up at that recruiting office on Whitehall Street in Lower Manhattan and then much later, thinking that I was hiding my identity, to have nonetheless been called out to stand together with all the other members of the JEWISH PERSONNEL.

