

## Timing Beyond Our Control

“It’s all timing. Timing over which you have no control.”

My best friend, partner and spouse of 32 years has long said this. Herself a retired officer, she experienced that as a truism many times. The corollary truth is that sometimes the timing goes your way and sometimes it doesn’t, and usually we can’t tell which category it falls into until years later.

Every veteran would recognize and agree with the mystery of timing. Each veteran has their own version of how timing affected their journey serving in uniform.

For my father it was volunteering to enlist during the Korean War. He was aware it was the only time in its history the Marine Corps actually had to resort to drafting men to make their quota—rather than just making numbers by those who wanted to join. My dad knew his chances to survive the war were improved by going into the Army. The “no control” kicked in when surprisingly he not only didn’t go to Korea, but aside from schooling, spent all his duty time in Stuttgart, Germany.

For an American Legion friend of mine, the haunting “no control” moment was at graduation from basic training when his drill sergeant went down the line identifying every other soldier for duty in Vietnam. For him, the seemingly random selection of a man on both his right and left for immediate departure to that war zone remains a traumatic memory. He lives with unanswered questions about whether either of those men, their names unknow to him, survived.

As timing would have it for me, I entered college just as the Women’s Army Corps was disbanding and the transition of women into the All-Volunteer Force had begun. Cadre recruiting for ROTC programs across the nation were meeting their enrollment numbers by turning to female students. Those recruiters then, as now, found collegiate women athletes such as myself had attributes that fit well with military service.

My first assignment was ideal for a farm girl from South Dakota. While Ft Polk, Louisiana had a reputation for being one of the least desirable postings in the Army—including being far removed from the closest urban area—being sixty miles from the nearest stop light was nothing new for me.

During those three years I had the great, good fortune of being mentored by two exceptional senior raters. Both were combat wounded veterans of Vietnam. They approached their officers, NCOs and soldiers with full faith and confidence we were up to the task of our missions—until you proved otherwise. In the next ten years I experienced leadership that took exactly the opposite tack—assuming you were inadequate until you proved otherwise. (I found the first approach much more inspiring and productive.)

Timing found me in central Europe for my second tour (arriving six weeks after the Chernobyl disaster). More specifically, I was assigned to Darmstadt, south of Frankfurt, in what was then the Federal Republic of Germany. There were over 300,000 members of the U.S. Armed Forces

assigned within the American Zone of Occupation at that time. You couldn't throw a rock without hitting a U.S. kaserne, installation or housing area. Travel in our host country was always enjoyable and made even more so by the fact a "Little America" was never far away.

Looking back, it's apparent my tour coincided with the three-year height of the Cold War. November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989 marked the fall of the Berlin Wall. That day was also my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Seven days prior I had taken command of a Military Police Company near Stuttgart (only miles from where my father had been stationed).

On that milestone day I had called in a zero-dark-thirty unannounced EDRE (Emergency Deployment Readiness Exercise) in order to do my commander's assessment of the unit. I did not yet know a spokesman for the Communist Party had only hours before announced a suspension of the travel restrictions between East Berlin and free West Berlin.

As I was observing my soldiers performing the well trained and habitual tasks of preparing to depart the installation for movement to our GDP (General Defense Position) we were simultaneously monitoring the unfolding events taking place 400 miles away in Berlin.

That day itself was awash in high and varied emotions. Initially it was disorienting. Could this actually be happening? Was this a ruse or a feint? What kind of subterfuge might be at work? The suspicion was a natural and logical response. Thankfully none of our worst fears materialized.

Seeing exuberant Germans was itself unnerving. The absence of the usual stoicism that is the predominately fixed emotional state of the German people was proof itself that a historic moment was upon us. The sheer joy of seeing the reunion taking place between a people previously long separated was contagious.

Even though my military career spanned 26 years—including six years after 9-11—I've always considered myself primarily a warrior of the Cold War. That identity was cemented because my "boots were on the ground" in the years leading up to that eventful day on which the Berlin Wall fell.

It would be a year later, October 3, 1990, when the reunification of Germany became official, meaning that for literally millions of US forces serving throughout the previous 45 years a strategic mission was accomplished.

The mystery of timing. I didn't perceive it in those heady days, but when the Cold War moved into the "win category" the push to reap the "peace dividend" began immediately. Less than four years after that memorable day for Democracy, a third of all U.S. military had received their pink slips and I was one of them.

That timing was nothing short of difficult. Yet the gift—only discernable with the passage of time—was the better-than-even trade to begin a life together with my beloved. I was also able to follow a long-held calling to attend seminary.

Like many service members—who not of their own choosing—left active duty in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I was relegated to simply being a name in a computer data base. But the wheel always turns, and only two years later I got the call saying I was needed back on active duty. Seems the drawdown had been a bit too effective and it really hadn't been “the end of history” after all.

I also got the call at home after 9-11. On the Sunday after that awful Tuesday I was walking through a virtually empty airport terminal that felt all together like a morgue. The next two years was mostly sitting at a computer pushing emails around. At least the monthly Airborne jumps reminded me I was still a soldier, supporting the mission from afar.

The only timing I ever really influenced in my career was the date and place of my retirement. I decided that having “put my grain of sand on the beachhead of freedom” and before I became “part of the problem rather than part of the solution”, I would choose the details of my own exit strategy. That event really was a “time of my life” moment.

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All the duty stations, all the missions, all the comrades-in-arms met along the way—the timing wasn't my own, but I wouldn't have had it any other way.

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