

I should have figured it out

Alex Randall June 2020

I should have figured that out when Dean Julian Jones ran a windup mechanical cockroach across the desk during my intake interview.

I should have figured it out when I got to Fort Dix, and my suitcase was declared “too big” for the MAC flight, so I spent four years living out of an overnight bag.

I should have figured it out when the snack bar at every military airport was called “Terminal Inn.”

I should have figured out when the administration brought in coaches to walk us through our German driver’s license exam and the next day my first assignment was to drive across most of Germany, all of France, and all of Spain to get to NavSta Rota. A solid week of driving. And when I got to the education center, my textbooks had not arrived yet, and I taught the first week with no book, no idea what the book would be, and I had not read any of it yet.

I should have figured it out sliding on the Glatteis between Hahn and Spangdahm in the depths of winter in the Hunsruck of Germany.

I should have figured it out after a long evening at the Bier Museum in Heidelberg on New Year’s Eve, walking along the fussaengerzone with fireworks zipping inches above my head.

I should have figured it out when my wife sent to teach at Vicenza, Italy, and I got sent to teach at Gissen Germany. She got sunshine and I my car spent the whole semester in the shop.

I should have figured it out when the classroom at Baumholder was the daytime kindergarten room and I had 6 foot 6 inch tank sergeants sitting in tiny chairs with their knees to their chins. And then one came up to me at the midterm and asked, “Doc, it says here ‘NAME’ now do you want yours there or mine?”

I should have figured out when I got to the base in the Azores, and the Air Force ran the land facility, the Navy flew the airplanes, and the Army around the port and my wife and I were the entire University of Maryland at that base. And oh yes, it rained sideways.

I should have figured it out when the dull-witted student talked nonstop about zany topics that I had at the base of Hahn showed up again at the base of Misawa, and I realize that some base commander figured out how to transfer him out.

I should have figured out trying to drive from Misawa Japan to Kyoto with a paper map, and my wife, the navigator, yelling things like, “get off at the exit where the kanji thing looks like a horse with a water buffalo hat.”

I did not figure it out. I never figured it out. But now, I can see this was the greatest adventure of a lifetime.

Four years on the full time faculty; working on more than 25 bases, visiting more than 40 countries, getting flat tires in almost all of them, learning how to get a tow truck in 12 different languages, flying over the Pacific on my birthday and losing the whole day, flying a MAC freight flight from Yokota to the

Philippines stopping at every island, base and atoll in between with a cargo load of Coca-Cola in cans that shook and rattled with every bump. Imagining the **Snarls and Snipes** headline, *“University Professor drowns in a sea of Coca-Cola at 35,000 feet”*

It was great, tremendous, fantastic, overwhelming, terrific, huge, phenomenal, incredible, unimaginable... It was the University of Maryland’s Overseas Division, and was the greatest adventure ever.

When I first was offered the job, I went to visit my old dissertation advisor, Dr. Margaret Mead, to ask her advice. *“Of course you go. It’s a crash course in the planet. You’ll be in dozens of different cultures. Think of something to collect in each one that is the same thing only culturally different. And don’t forget your lineage.”*

Tough assignment. I picked up a fresh piece of paper money in every country. I found a post office mail drop box in every place and took a photo. I found a street festival everywhere and took pictures. Mainz for Fastnach. Venice for carnival. Jerez de la Frontera for the sherry festival. Kyoto for the Jidai Matsuri and the Kurama fire festival. Tokyo for Bon, Rottenburg ob der Tauber for Christmas. Malta for the agricultural fair. That material has worked its way into all of my teaching ever since. I made web sites of the comparison photos.

How could I forget having *Status of Forces* in my passport in Berlin so I could traverse the Berlin wall, and walk around in the East zone. I suddenly saw it; a massive social science experiment; one culture, one language, one people, divided down the middle with the experimental group on one side of the wall, and the control group on the other. They ended the experiment in 1989, and around that time, I devoted a decade to recycling American computers and sent computers the people east of the Iron Curtain. Had I not seen Berlin with Maryland, I would not have known or cared. Instead, I fed thousands of computers to the organizations struggling to create Civil Society in the former Soviet Union. We called it **Freedom Technology**.

The University of Maryland experience has reverberated through the rest of my life. My Anthropology classes are enriched with the stories of things seen on the ground in each culture. Photos, videos, artifacts have been part of every class since then. I set up my Intercultural Class in Misawa Japan to meet for 4 hours every Saturday. Each week a student was assigned to line-up four adventures around a theme; agriculture, temples, school, fishing and we would take off – 30 students mashed into a half dozen cars to travel all over the region taking in the REAL Japanese culture. At the final meeting, over a traditional meal at a traditional restaurant, we got up one-by-one to recall what we liked most about the class. Everyone was teary eyed. Everyone loved everything. It was so real. It was so rich. It was an education. I went last and embarrassed my Japanese hosts with a pure show of emotion. Tears streaming down my cheeks as I said, *“This has been the best class I have ever TAKEN,”* I was just a professor. We made Japan the teacher. I have been teaching with that material ever since.

The Maryland students are the best in the world. So many bases I’d get kids who were smart enough for Harvard but due to circumstances at home, they had to join the Army for an education, and they had me. They worked 12-hour days for Uncle Sam and then three hours working for me. Nothing elevates a professor’s heart like a devoted student doing hard work to learn. I’d do anything for those kids.

A brilliant kid in the Azores working in the Army explained to me that if you are smart, you can run the whole thing. She was planning to be a general.

A brilliant kid in Rota, living in the village off the G.I. Bill had devoted thousands of hours studying the bullfights and could tell me all the details of what I was seeing. Then sauntering into the “Move over bar” for tapas and sherry.

The base commander in Zaragoza inviting me to dinner, recalling his Vietnam era in a Hanoi prison, and me, the guy who organized the anti-war protests at Princeton. He shook my hand and thanked me. I was thunderstruck. “Thank you. Gomer couldn’t understand why we were fighting for your right to denounce the war. The days you all held protests were the days I didn’t get beaten. Thank you so much.” We had served each other. Then go see Belchite, a city left as it was after the Spanish Civil war.

The teaching was great, the students were great, but there was nothing to compare with the side adventures. What kind of job gives you three months in the summer and makes you live in Europe with cheap gasoline coupons? Every weekend was an adventure. We’d drive from Heidelberg to Strasbourg in Alsace Lorraine for dinner. Take a weekend and go see Keukenhof gardens in Holland. Long weekend? Let’s hit Paris. Christmas break? We’ll start in Rottenburg, then hit it Oberammergau, Garmish-Partenkirchen, take in Neuschwanstein and Herrenchiemsee and keep going until we get to Vienna, then back by a different road and hit Munchen for a few beers before getting back to Heidelberg just in time for the Schnitzel Day at the cafeteria across from Im Bosseldorn 30.

And such housing. When the BOQ had no room in the inn, Maryland faculty had a long list of dives and bunkers that rented in two month chunks; The wine cellar Dreigabelhauskelleri in Traben-Trarbach, the Hof in Heidelberg, Towers in Rota, a box with bars on all the windows in Zaragoza, Villa Angela in Sicily with twenty rooms and no furniture, and the times it all failed and we slept in the car...

Another exotic assignment – this time Sigonella Italy. OK, drive from Heidelberg down through Swizerland, down the whole boot of Italy, stop to find the ancestors village in the Apennine mountains, before crossing from Reggio Calabria to Messina. 110 degrees on the base, 50’s up on Etna, so live on a volcano around the corner from the gas station that pumps red wine not gasoline. Weekend off in Sicily – that means a trip to the Aeolian islands and climb the volcano on Stromboli. Another break – go to Malta... stand on the battlements where the Knights Hospitaller withstood the siege with too few men and no supplies. Every break was an opportunity to sojourn.

Okinawa. Teaching marines at camp Hansen. Five guys in the class. Four are getting A’s and one getting a C-. The four soldiers spoke as one, “We can’t have you getting a C, Jose. This class is our unit and we don’t leave anyone behind. We are going to tutor you until you’re getting an A. This unit is all A’s.” I’d never had a “unit” of marines before. I’d have done anything for those guys. Oh, and the sushi places in tiny Aha village with the grass growing on the roof and caves full of ghosts of Japanese soldiers.

In the far east, two semesters in Subic Bay meant a vacation break to do the south east Asia loop; Bali, Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur (It actually sound like you have been somewhere exotic when you say “Kuala Lumpur”) ride the train into the Malaysian highlands, on to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, then Hong Kong and back to Manila and back to Olongapoo City. Footloose and free to travel, see, taste, touch, smell and explore.

We are in the new Maryland program in the Philippines. Let's take this long weekend and have the whole Maryland gang rent a Navy van and go see Baguio and the rice terraces of Banaue. Oops, a hurricane went through overnight and took out the bridge across the river – so the ONLY way to get back to Subic was to drive all the way to the top of Luzon, across the top of that island and down the coastal highway. The main highway turned into a wooden pile roadbed, there were stories of bandits in the area and shelter was questionable. Two days later we got back to Subic having seen ALL of Luzon.

I created two one-credit seminars with universal appeal. The *Psychology of Sleep and Dreaming* and *Creative Problem Solving*. The administration figured we could offer these pretty much everywhere so I spent one whole summer just doing weekends of different bases; places that didn't need me for a whole semester... Lakenheath, Mildenhall, Munich, Bremerhaven, showing the Maryland flag at outposts. Pirmasens Germany where I was the only class that year. Does every base have a bowling alley? Does everyone have variety of stores to give the illusion of shopping?

And such wonderful colleagues; The top men, Mason Daly and Joe Arden. The area directors; Rosemary Scholl and Wally Knoche of the Med, Paul Hamlin and Larry Heppenstall of Germany, Bill Berglof in Japan... and fellow teachers like Susan Foster Kromholtz, Mike McGowan, John Golembe, John Gustafson, Lois Mohr, Barbara and Ralph Millis and the Dean himself, the wind-up cockroach man, Julian Jones.

Thank you, Maryland. You were the best adventure ever. I have no regrets.

No, I have one regret. I wish I could have done it longer. I wish I could have made a lifetime of it. And now as an old man, retired from being Chairman of a department at the University of the Virgin Islands, I wish, I hope, I pray that Maryland will let me come back as an old man and do another round for the Global campus.

Please.