

In Memoriam

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September 2024

In many of my previous memoirs, I have discussed my time as an English instructor for the UMUC European Division, especially my several years at Kagnev Station in Asmara, Ethiopia. However, I was not only a teacher with UMUC but also a student in their quonset-hut classrooms while I was stationed there with the U.S. Army. I began by taking two terms of Italian from a local Italian woman, who taught the language for the Maryland program there, almost as soon as I arrived in June of 1967, having fallen in love with the culture, the climate and eventually one of its citizens named Antonietta Rosalba Vitali, to whom I have now been happily married for over fifty-three years. I even had UMUC's own Dr. Julian Jones as my best man and his lady friend at the time Taru as a bridesmaid in July of 1971. In addition, I took a one-term course in sociology taught by the late Ted Sullinger and a one-term course in introduction to theater. My final six credit hours were earned by taking two terms of Russian taught by a fellow Maryland instructor GI at the Kagnev base.

Being stationed in Africa was a far cry from possible duty in Vietnam, an assignment that did in fact fall to several members of my AIT (Advanced Individual Training) course which I took at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. Fate played a hand in my not being part of that Vietnam group that was sent to Phu Bai because when it came time for my assignment to be determined, our class was visited by a very straight-laced Army major who had only one question that he asked of the group in the classroom about ten days before assignments were to be doled out: "Is there anyone in this room who currently has a family member stationed in Vietnam?" I looked around and very timidly raised my hand as the only one in the class of thirty to do so. The major then asked, "Who is it?" To which I replied, "My brother." He said, "Well, then, you can't go," spun on his heels and left the room. The military was still being very careful with the Sullivan Law, enacted after WWII, because five brothers from the same family in Iowa had been stationed together on the *USS Juneau* and on November 13, 1942, the ship was hit by a Japanese torpedo during the first battle of Guadalcanal and all five siblings were killed.

My brother Jim had been stationed at Phu Cat AFB for six months at the time of my AIT class, and my knowledge of that fact was still very vivid because one day while I was standing in the chow line at the Ft. Devens mess hall, I held a letter in my hand from him and felt a sharp tap on my shoulder, to which I turned to find the base commander, Colonel Lewis Lee Millett Sr., hovering over me, an imposing figure with his large gray handle-bar mustache quivering while he asked, "Who sent you that letter?" He had recognized the very distinct free postage mark on the envelope. I shook as I said, "My brother, sir!" He then clapped me on the back and said, "Good man!" I was quite relieved at that point. (As an aside, Col. Millett was affectionately known by everyone on the Ft. Devens base as "Louie the Blade" for having received the Medal of Honor during the Korean War for leading his men on the last major American bayonet charge up a hill in any American war.) I still thank my brother Jim every time we visit.

Life at Kagnev Station was fairly easy-going, enough that I did my best to manage staying on well past my initial assigned eighteen months, so that all twenty-one months then remaining of my four-year military obligation were served there up to September 5, 1970. Not only that, but thanks to English Department Coordinator Dr. Robert Speckhard, along with a

push from Kagnew's Education Director Fran Sullinger, I managed several long and extended returns to teach at the base and became the last UMUC instructor to be teaching there when Kagnew shut its gates forever in May of 1973. It was not a war zone, but it was also not without some scary moments for a few unfortunate Americans stationed there. One such incident occurred when a popular downtown pizza joint was attacked by ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) rebels and a couple of Americans were unfortunately in the wrong place at the wrong time.

One other horrifying incident occurred while I was there, and it is the direct occasion for my "In Memoriam" title. The subject of that tragedy was an MP named Ricardo (Rick) Echandia who came to Kagnew Station from New York City. One of his police duties was to drive a jeep down the mountain to the halfway point on the road to Massawa, where he would meet a jeep coming up from Massawa. His task was to deliver mail and packages to those American personnel stationed in that Red Sea port city and to pick up any mail and packages that they were sending back home to the States. Normally, this task was relatively easy duty. He made that run every ten days or so. However, one afternoon on his way to Ghinda, that midway point, he was stopped by a group of ELF. No one really knows what happened next. Perhaps the rebels demanded that he surrender his mail sack, which request he certainly would have refused. In any case, he was shot dead in his jeep and left to be found there by the driver coming up from Massawa. The reason that I tell this tragic incident is that E4 Rick Echandia was also a UMUC student in my Russian class at Kagnew Station. In addition, I studied the language with him in small group sessions after class was finished. We were all completely shocked when news of this tragedy was passed along to us in class.

Tragedy can suddenly hit any one of us at any time, especially while on duty in a foreign country such as what all UMUC students and instructors certainly know, even if it did not happen to be in a war zone. So in memory of one fellow UMUC student whose life was cut short that day on a dusty road in Ethiopia, I offer this memoir as a reminder. I do so with the certainty that other Maryland teachers have also had horrific incidents happen to them. As such, I encourage those who read this memoir to unstick their own memories and perhaps add a personal written addition to this Memoirs Project.

(As another personal side note, after this roadside murder of MP Ricardo Echandia, mail between Kagnew and Massawa was handled only by helicopter. The pilot, ex-Vietnam vet Capt. Leemon, was from my hometown of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Further, his sister Gayle was a member of my graduating class at L.P. Goodrich Senior High and for a time even dated my brother Jim. It's a small world after all.)