My Russian Destiny and UMUC

Duncan Butts
October 2020

Where to start? I hate to brag; however, I believe that my connection with Russia started before anybody else in the UMUC world. My connection started in 1937; I was seven years old. I was looking through some books in my parents' library. I found a picture of some regal-looking guy in a uniform.

I asked my dad, a history teacher (and a good one), who was this guy. The photo was of Czar Nicolas II. My dad gave me a brief history of Russia. I was hooked. I can still see that photo in my mind. I had no idea how much of my future would be involved with Russia, thanks to the USAF and UMUC.

Jump to 1953 when I was flying combat missions over North Korea. My home base was Kunsan AB. There might be a MiG in the North Korean sky. If the MiG were piloted by a Korean, we did not get too worked up. If the pilot were a Russian, the adrenaline flowed. Yes, the Russians were there. (As a side note, in 1971 I would meet some Russians at American Embassy events in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I must admit that it was a bit awkward)

Forward to 1958. I was now a member of the "Great" Strategic Air Command's B-52 fleet. The Cold War was on. I was sitting in one of the rooms in the Alert Shack, as it was called. What was I doing? I was studying a map of the Soviet Union. This was not a map that a civilian might use. This was a map with colors that showed the structures of the various cities in the Soviet Union. Red meant a structure that would have a good radar return, which was important if you were trying to find a specific target. For example, the Kremlin showed red—as did the hydroelectric dam at Irkutsk.

So, what were some of the cities on my map? Leningrad, Moscow, Simbirsk (Lenin's birthplace), Ekaterinburg (where the Czar and his family were murdered), Magnitogorsk {(largest tractor (read tank) factory in the Soviet Union)}, Stalingrad (now Volgograd), Novosibirsk, Yakutsk, Irkutsk, Angarsk, Magadan, Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, Blagovizhensk. There were many others, but I will spare you the boredom.

So, what was important about these cities? They were some of the targets for our B-52s in case the Soviets attacked the US. We built 750 of these aircraft. My usual target was the Kremlin. Remember the Hiroshima bomb? It was a firecracker compared to the H-bombs we carried.

I retired from the USAF in late 1983 after more than 32 years in uniform defending the West from the East, in other words, Korea, Cold War (Russia and China), and Vietnam. I did not know what to do with myself. A former military comrade suggested that I get a doctorate. It clicked.

In January 1984, I headed to *The College of William and Mary,* about sixty miles north of Hampton, Virginia, where Langley AFB is located. I received a doctorate from that institution in 1988. I spent the next nine years teaching for St. Leo's College at Langley AFB, Virginia, next door to Hampton, Virginia.

Despite being employed by St. Leo's College, I was looking for something more substantial. In 1989, I had an interview with the Vice-Chancellor of Finance at UCLA. After small talk about my trip from Virginia, he hit me with a stereotype. He asked me how I would answer to the idea that military people were rigid and could not innovate. The interview went instantly cold. I was angry. How could this bastion of liberalism think of a stereotype?

I was not hired. It was a blessing. Had I been hired I would never have joined the Siberian-American School faculty in Irkutsk. The Russian Program changed my life. I have often thought that it was my destiny to be in Russia.

In 1996, I was still job hunting. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, to which I subscribed, was a small ad with this headline: *Teach in Russia*. The ad, a UMUC ad, proclaimed that you did not have to speak Russian. I was certainly qualified. Wow, to be in Russia after my earlier life. I sent my papers to UMUC.

I did not hear for some time. I suspected that my cover letter was too much, as we might say. I omitted any reference to my thirty-two-year military career. This took a bit of doing; however, I was motivated by my UCLA experience. Perhaps UMUC had similar prejudices. If you remember, there was a lot of anger with anybody attached to the Vietnam War. I did not need to irritate any potential UMUC interviewer. I never received a reply to my papers. I guessed that the UMUC folks were suspicious of me.

Then I received a phone call. It was interview time. I departed Hampton, Virginia, and headed for the great event at College Park. The interviews started with Dr. Hoffmann at 08:30. They continued without letup the whole day, including lunch. Dr. Hoffmann closed my interview day at 16:32. How did I do? Well, I did not hear, and I did not hear. I suspected that she knew I was an odd ball.

I also suspected that I had irritated one or more of my interviewers. For example: The Business interviewer asked me why I wanted to go to Russia. I gave him a twenty-minute or so lecture on Russian history. He asked the question; I gave him the answer. This was my code of ethics. Perhaps I should have been less educational in my answer; however, deference was not in my long suite.

Well, guess what. I was hired. I was elated. I was assigned to Irkutsk. I already knew Irkutsk. How? The Soviets had built a hydroelectric dam there. It was red on my map. It was ground zero for an H-bomb that I or some other B-52 crew would deliver if the Soviets attacked the US. Loss of the dam would plunge a whole slice of Siberia into darkness. I almost hated to leave St. Leo's,

in view of the fact that they named me *Teacher of the Year;* however, Russia was beckoning, Russia was in my destiny.

I arrived in Irkutsk in 1997. I was 67 years old. Many people at that age are retiring. Had I lost my mind? In Irkutsk, I did not talk about my previous life. I figured the Russians would not be too pleased. It did not take long, however, for the Russians to suspect that I was hiding something. They always suspected that I was a CIA plant. There was at least one person in UMUC headquarters in Heidelberg who had similar suspicions.

I was now in Siberia. I was now in the Evil Empire. I was now in the land of my destiny. This began a whole new adventure (a great one) —this one with the Russians; however, I must now depart from this part of the story and write about the students at the Siberian-American School (SAS).

For those not familiar with the Russian Program, here is how it worked. The first two years of college were with Irkutsk State University. The next two years, the Junior and Senior years, were with the Siberian-American School. The fifth year was back with Irkutsk State University.

By the time a student had finished the five years he or she was a highly desirable applicant on the job market. They spoke English. They knew something about a market economy. They knew something about marketing. They had some experience with actual Americans.

Getting selected for the SAS was not easy. Prospective students had to pass some tough exams to be admitted. They had to be fluent or near fluent in English. Their math and science abilities were first-rate. Despite their first-rate abilities as students, there were some problems with Russian students. Cheating was rampant. The Russians thought that this was okay. We did not. We had to separate the students during exams. They had a couple of tactics to facilitate cheating.

One tactic was that one of the students would come to the front of the class to ask me a question. I noticed that it was always the same guy. The question usually involved an interpretation of the English. This person would then block the teacher's view of the class where cheating would be in full swing.

I mean whispering the answers to each other, showing their own answer sheets to each other, and various hand signals. My countering tactic was to stand in front of the asking student so that I could see the class. I would then tell the student to ask his question.

Another tactic was to pass around a dictionary. This was initially permitted to help the students with their English. We discovered that the answers to the exam were in the dictionary. We countered this tactic by using quite simple English in our exams thereby making a dictionary not needed.

Other issues surfaced. Our students received money from the state for high grades. An A got the most money, a B received a lesser amount, a C received the smallest amount. Ds and Fs received nothing. As you might imagine, every student wanted an A whether they had earned it or not.

At the end of the term, when it was time to turn in grades, the less-than-A students would appear in our faculty office. Here they would argue endlessly—I say again, endlessly—for an A, even though they had earned a lower grade. The idea was that we would ultimately tire of the arguments and cave in. In other words, give them an A so that they would shut up. They had the wrong guy if they thought I would cave.

One female student had a different tactic but probably the oldest in the history of mankind. She told me that she would do anything for an A. I knew what she meant, and she knew that I knew. Dean Alex was a good boss. He supported us. I did not want to give him any problems that would arise from my failure to do the right thing. I did the right thing. The female student received the B that she had earned. My mother would have been proud of me.

My Stats class had 42 students. Five received an F, eleven received a D. The rest received As, Bs, and Cs. I failed two students for cheating. One of the two students was a relative of the man who killed Rasputin. The other one of the two students was upset that he failed. He wanted a meeting with Dean Alexander. Again, the bullying tactic might work. It did not. This student had the wrong guy to bully.

This student had a couple of complaints. He claimed that he did not cheat. He also claimed that I graded some of the students easier than I graded him. So, we had our meeting with the Dean. I showed the Dean the two exams written by the failed-for-cheating students. The exams were near mirror images of each other. Wrong answers to the fourth decimal place convinced our Dean that the two students had cheated.

What about my favoritism to some of the students? I explained to the Dean that I graded papers by first covering up the name of the student. I would then grade the paper. I did not know who the student was. I showed the Dean the exams that I had graded. He was impressed with my grading system. Dean Alex promptly rejected the student's complaint.

The Dean then asked the complaining student the showstopper. Had he been absent more than three times? I kept good attendance records for such meetings as this. The answer was yes. The Dean then said to the complaining student "you fail." That was the end of the meeting.

Let me digress for a minute. In 2007 I returned to Irkutsk for a visit. Some of the former SAS students were working in Irkutsk. They had a dinner in my honor. The complaining student was there. He thanked me for failing him. I was astounded. I expected a punch in the nose.

He explained that he still needed Stats to graduate. So, he took it again. This time, however, he decided to study Stats. He did well. He liked the subject. He did well in the class. He had a talent

for Stats. He now had a job in Irkutsk crunching numbers for some firm. His point? Had I given him a D just to shut him up, he would never have discovered his talent for Stats. BTW, can you imagine an American student thanking a professor for failing him or her? This was Russia.

The SAS did have a practice that raised our eyebrows. Sometimes the Dean would ask us to name our top five students. At the top of our list was usually a female. She was Jewish. For those of you not familiar with Russian History, read about the *Pale of the Settlement*. We never knew whether our Jewish student remained on the list or not. A year later, at a graduation ceremony, her parents approached me. They thanked us for giving their daughter the eminence she deserved. This was Russia.

The Russians honored us in many ways. I was invited to give a lecture at the *Irkutsk Economics Institute*. Another honor was the arrival of a journalist from Moscow to do a video about the SAS. Yes, the SAS was a very big deal. I was a bit jittery about appearing because I knew that my past would be brought up. My part of the video started with my playing the piano. This was okay. Then came my speaking part.

Eventually, I was asked point-blank who would win a nuke war between Russia and the US. I replied that nobody would win a nuke war. Secretly, however, I knew that the Russians would not be able to stop a horde of B-52s heading to their assigned targets. Russia would be obliterated; the USA, though damaged by Russian missiles would survive. I was glad when the video project ended.

I am reasonably certain that earlier UMUC teachers in the Russian Program were unique; however, I believe that our group of UMUC teachers was more unique. Okay, so I am biased. Here is one example of our uniqueness.

Our master organizer, Dr. Gae Holladay, suggested that the SAS should have a Job Fair. What is a Job Fair, I wondered? Doc Holladay knew. The SAS brass approved the project. This was a way to showcase our students to possible future employers. Doc Holladay managed the whole shebang. She got the students involved in the project. They were great. They prepared a slide program, they had skits, they sang, and so forth. One of the students who worked at the local radio station advertised the Job Fair on the radio.

The big day arrived. The SAS auditorium was nearly full. Russian bigwigs attended. The students did their thing, which was to suggest why they should be hired following their graduation. The Job Fair was a huge success. Doc Holladay had done the near impossible. She deserved a medal.

More uniqueness was at hand. The SAS had a fancy recruiting poster. The Russians printed a 3 ft by 4 ft poster in color about the SAS. It was an attention getter for sure. Whose picture was on the poster? You guessed it. The picture on the poster was the photogenic Gae Holladay in her

doctoral robe. The message was clear to Russian parents: Send your girls to the SAS where female students could succeed and would be welcomed. This was Russia.

More uniqueness and honor to our group were to come. In October of 1997, Dean Alex asked me to give a piano concert. It would take place in May 1998. I would have time to practice. The Russians would find a piano for me on which to practice. I agreed. I was soon practicing five or six hours per day—or more.

May 8, 1998 was the great event. I was terrified. I had not played in public for years. I would do it all from memory, the usual concert style. Why did I ever agree to this idea? It was too late to back out. I had signed up to play a two-hour concert. The first hour would be classical music; the second hour would be showtunes. The concert hall was filled to capacity. Fire regulations? They were ignored. The piano was a 9 ½ foot Steinway Concert Grand. Its action was smooth as silk.

The first number I played was the *Chopin Etude in C Minor*. This piano piece was all over the piano. It was a knuckle buster. The piece went from one end of the piano to the other. Fast and slow, loud and soft, back and forth the music went. Finally, the piece ended. I sat quietly. The silence in the concert hall was total—and deafening. My heart almost stopped beating. I wondered if I had played so badly that the Russians would not applaud. Then, suddenly, the entire audience stood up and started applauding. They clapped rhythmically, the ultimate compliment in Russia. Some guy in the balcony shouted "bravo, bravo." I was inspired.

I also played a couple of preludes by Rachmaninoff. I wondered why I ever thought I could play a Rachmaninoff piece of music in Rachmaninoff land. Later, a Russian told me that few foreigners "got" Rachmaninoff. He told me that I "got" Rachmaninoff. Some Russians suggested that I had Russian ancestors. This was Russia.

For the second hour of my concert I played American show tunes. *The Shadow of Your Smile, Misty*, the *Dr. Zhivago theme,* and *Yesterday* come to mind. Five women, total strangers, approached me during the concert—a Russian custom—with kisses and bouquets of flowers.

The concert finally ended; however, the audience would not let me go. I had to keep playing encores. I even reached back into my childhood to play hymns from the Methodist Hymnal. I dedicated one of the hymns to my deceased mother. The audience ate it up.

Finally, the Concert Hall Commissar, as I called her, made a throat-slitting movement. This meant that I had to quit. Another group had booked the hall for a rehearsal. So, I bid adieu to the audience. It was a great evening. The concert was a huge success. I thought that I had died and gone to heaven. Russian audiences are the greatest. A year later at a social event I attended in Irkutsk, a woman approached me. She was singing *The Shadow of Your Smile*. I was quite surprised and pleased. This was Russia.

To change the subject, the Russian faculty was interesting. One particular woman was too haughty to speak to a mere American. She discovered that her husband had a family in Moscow. She became less haughty.

In our SAS building was a cleaning woman. She told me that she had a degree in physics. Wow! Why was she cleaning our building? She was a captain in the Russian Air Force. She had not been paid for six months. She needed an income.

So, how about *my* experience with the local Russian Air Force? They invited me to their social events. They invited me to tour their local military academy. My Russian Air Force host, a Lt Colonel, said that years ago we were enemies; now we are friends. Russian social events include many toasts. Toasts start with a speech, perhaps five or ten minutes long. Then the glasses are lifted. I followed the Russian custom. Several slugs of vodka improved my Russian considerably. I could give a pretty good speech. I also got falling down drunk along with the Russians. They thought I was a great American.

My Russian Air Force Lieutenant Colonel friend had a second job on the local newspaper. He wanted to do an article on me. I was a bit jittery over this, but he was insistent. So, the newspaper came out. The front page showed me smoking a cigar. The front-page headlines proclaimed that I was ordered to bomb Irkutsk. I still have the newspaper.

It was about the end of my two years in Russia that our beloved president Gerald Heeger (do you notice the sarcasm?) closed the Russian Program. I then came to Germany for perhaps one term but then returned to Russia. As far as I knew, there would be no UMUC payroll; however, I wanted to stay in Russia. So, I made the Russians an offer. I would stay for half of what they had been paying me. The Russians accepted.

My one-year extension was rather interesting. I was teaching; however, Dean Alex asked me to help with recruitment. Why? Keep in mind that, as far as I knew, UMUC was no longer putting up any money; therefore, recruiting was necessary for the SAS to survive. If we were the Siberian-American School, Dean Alex must have thought that it would help to have an American at the recruiting events.

The SAS was not cheap. In fact, I was a bit shocked when Prez Saunin revealed the tuition numbers. I might add that UMUC raised the rates for online classes. I wondered how the Russian parents could afford the SAS. Selling the program to the parents was now a necessity if the SAS were to survive. So, on a Sunday afternoon the SAS held a recruitment meeting. The room was packed with parents and kids thinking about enrolling in the Great SAS. President Saunin said a few words. Dean Alex said a few words. The Dean introduced me as a former enemy who was now working to help Russian students and Russia. The Russians liked this sort of connection.

The parents usually wanted me to say something. They would ask me a question. I would look at Dean Alex. He signaled the go ahead. I would stand up and deliver a speech in Russian that

would proclaim that I wanted our two countries to be friends. Teaching Russian students was a good way to start toward this goal. Did I look like a tool of Wall Street, a Capitalist War Monger? The parents clapped at what I said. This was Russia.

More recruiting was in order. The Dean and I took a recruiting trip to Angarsk, a few miles northwest of Irkutsk. The Dean gave his usual introduction for me. I gave a short speech. I did not tell them that Angarsk was a target for me.

The ruble was now in free fall. I had to leave the SAS. It was 2001 or 2002. I left Russia with tears in my eyes. I still correspond with a couple of Russians: a former SAS professor still in Irkutsk and the now-retired Russian Air Force Lt. Colonel who lives in Smolensk.

I left Russia and joined the European Division of UMUC. After fumbling for a term in Germany, where I sensed that I did not fit, I discovered the Downrange operation. I applied and was accepted. I suspected that there were few volunteers.

Thus 2002 began my stays in Bosnia, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan. Afghanistan opened in 2006. I spent six years in Afghanistan and one year in Iraq. I sensed that I fit. At Eagle Base, in Bosnia, I logged more credit hours per term than anyone else at Eagle Base, perhaps in the entire Downrange. In 2013 we were ordered to pack up and leave Afghanistan. We did.

Then began stays in Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, Iceland, and England. In 2014, the obnoxious four-year rule kicked in. In 2018, I was put out to pasture. Where is UMGC headed?

I could write about teaching Downrange; however, I have gone on too long already. I believe that my credit hour record still stands. Should I tell you that I believe that I broke all records for the number of classes I taught per term? This would appear to be immodest.

Here is a final story about the Russian experience. Pete Richmond, another esteemed colleague, had a Russian experience unrelated to the SAS. A knock on his apartment door occurred one evening. Pete opened the door. There stood a Russian man asking for a loan of 100 rubles. Pete handed him 100 rubles. After all, this was about $3 US. Pete figured the 100-ruble note was gone. Lo and behold, the guy appeared at the door the next evening. He was returning the 100 rubles. Pete was astonished. This was Russia.

I told this story to our Russian Dean. He said that refusing to loan was a serious breach of etiquette and personal honor. Refusing to re-pay the loan was an even more serious breach of etiquette and personal honor. I figured that this was how the average Russian survived the tumult that was the history of Russia. This was Russia.

If you are still here, thanks for reading my treatise. It was made possible by the USAF and UMUC and the two people who created me—my parents.