

## Dateline Athens, Greece, June 1976

Karen Olsen  
August 2020

The telegram from Heidelberg is a model of brevity: “Are you free to go immediately to Çakmakli, Turkey to teach English 101?” Broke and hungry, I wire back the only possible answer: “Yes. If you advance me the money for the ticket, I’ll be on the next ferry to Istanbul.”

Three days later my arrival at this small, dusty US Army base causes initial consternation. “You came on a *Russian* ferry??” Immediate fingerprinting followed by brief but pointed interrogation, to include questions re my Russian middle name. “And you brought your *dog*?” A flurry of calls until a room off base can be rented to me and my pooch. Consternation on my part too, as I’ve just learned that I’ll be teaching in the mess hall, with thirty students, no chalkboard and so far no textbooks.

At this point a lieutenant, who looks even more flustered than I am, announces that I am to report to the base commander.

When I am ushered into his office, the commander (think jowls, buzz cut, starched fatigues) looks less than pleased to see me; I am clearly too young, too blonde, too *female* (On this all-male outpost only two other women have base passes—the ESO and the Turkish language instructor). But he is relieved when I agree to take on an extra class teaching his NCOs how to write personnel evaluations. This, I later discover, means introducing 59 synonyms for “walks on water.”

The interview is now going quite well. But then he asks an innocuous question:

“Are you prepared to begin teaching this evening?” “Oh yes, Sir,” I say brightly. “As a graduate student I taught composition courses, I’m sure this will be similar. (*Ah, the innocence!*) And I brought with me a good supply of red pencils.” An immediate and precipitous drop in temperature ensues, and I am dismissed in glowering silence.

“What happened? What did I say??” The lieutenant is by now beet red. “I’m sorry, Ma’am, the commander is the only one on this base allowed to use a red pencil. Ummm, I use a blue one myself.”

And thus begins my 31-year career with the University of Maryland European Division.