

2-5-86

BIOGRAPHY - ALVEAR

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Military intelligence?

She'd rather talk shopping

BY FRANCES FLINT

To hear Yolanda Alvear tell it, her four years in military intelligence were just a shopping spree.

"I can tell you about Berlin. I can tell you about the people I worked with. I can tell you I did shift work," said the 22-year-old Alvear, who then proceeded to tell about the fantastic bargains she found in East Berlin stores but absolutely nothing about the work which has kept her busy since she joined the Army in 1982.

Alvear did confide that her enlistment in the Army came as an after-thought.

"When I graduated from Wapato High School in 1981, I planned to go to college but the summer job I was planning on to pay my way fell through, so I went to Texas with my parents who visit there every couple of years.

"I didn't know what I was going to do but a cousin was enlisting in the Army. We got to talking and I said 'Sure, I'll enlist with you.' It was finally decided my sister, three cousins and I would enlist. All but one cousin copped out. That one dropped out during basic training, so eventually it was just me."

She laughed at the memory. Her own basic training at Fort Leonardwood in Missouri went smoothly enough, she said. She then went to Monterey, California, where she spent a year at Defense Language Institute learning Russian. As a former student of French and Spanish who also has a strong home background in Spanish, she seemed to do well with the new language which directly influenced how she spent the next couple of years.

"In one year you don't become fluent in Russian. It did give me the all-around basics and idea of the language. You know enough to piece together what someone is saying," is the way Alvear explains it.

Another 10 weeks of language study in Texas completed the training Alvear needed before she left for Berlin two and a half years ago.

How she used the training she received is something she refuses to discuss. Discharged now (she returned to Wapato January 14), she evades answer when asked if she spoke much Russian during those years in Germany and

she laughs when it is suggested that maybe she only listened to voices speaking Russian.

"You don't see many Soviets in West Berlin," she said with a grin.

"But I did go into East Berlin to shop. The exchange rate was about 13 East German dollars to a dollar. Civilians were told they could bring in only 30 East marks but that didn't apply to the military. They didn't seem to pay any attention to how much we brought in, and that caused some resentment. We'd come over with tons and tons of money like it was going out of style.

"You could buy fantastic things. I mean really nice things. Feather deckers, all kinds of china, silverware, tea sets."

Alvear paused to explain that a feather decker is a comforter stuffed with layers and layers of feathers.

"It is so big and soft and beautiful. I have two . . . and a tea set," she said.

Her grin made her look like a little girl with her hand in a cookie jar.

On those trips beyond the Berlin Wall, Alvear—like others in Military Intelligence—had to remove the shoulder bars that identified her as MI personnel.

"There were a lot of regulations about going into East Berlin. Removing our shoulder insignia was one. But since MI were the only ones who removed them, it seemed a little silly—and obvious—but it was 'whatever you guys want,' she said, grinning again.

She said those trips beyond the Berlin Wall were strictly shopping sprees.

"And, yes, the wall is still threatening. More so, because they are building a second wall behind the first one. There's barbed wire and little things that look nasty. The part you see you don't want to go any further. There's graffiti on the wall. Some in Russian, some in German, some in English but it's all there," she said.

Alvear said peace symbols have a prominent place amid the graffiti, which also contains the earthier variety which might be found on paint-smeared buildings here in the Valley.

"There's also some that looks just like all colors. Written over so you can't read any one thing," Alvear said.

"You had the wall right there, an hour from where I lived. You could go on your bike an hour and run into the wall," she said. The thought still brings a frown to her face.

Trips on Berlin's efficient buses and U-Bahn (underground trains) were more comfortable than confronting the wall.

"A ride on any bus put you into a shopping center," she said. "Berlin is six or seven cities, six or seven downtowns, six or seven different shopping centers. There are



Sgt. Alvear—today in Wapato

shops here, there, underground, on top of each other. Unbelievable.

"What was really strange to me is that in front would be a shop and in back or overhead there would be a home. What was really something was walking in residential areas and seeing—poof—a bar at the bottom of a house. You could walk along, drop into a bar and have a drink and walk along to the next one."

While styles were changing at home, Alvear saw them begin . . . or follow . . . in Berlin.

"There were the Mohawks and painted hair. They sprayed the color on like mousse. There was a place called The Jungle, for punk rockers. I went in there and I saw this girl with spiked hair painted red. She had a white mouse on her shoulder. It was moving around and I said to myself, 'Hey, wait a minute. What's this?' It was strange," said Alvear.

"Some of these people hated us. They'd just as soon spit on you, but the older people were different. They could be just as nice and talk to you, but you couldn't do anything about the ones who resented having us there. That's just the way it is."

In spite of the fringe benefits (a week-long skiing trip to Austria), Alvear doesn't think she'll pick up her option to re-enlist during the next six

months.

"It's hard to say. I want to do something but I don't know what. When I graduated in '81, I didn't know what I was going to do and now I still don't."

There was no grin on her face when she said that.

"The training I received in the Army won't help me a bit now. What can I use my Russian for? Anything I did in the job is not useful to anyone but the Army or the National Security Agency. Maybe if I had taken pilot's training—something like that—it would be different. I think I'd like to get into business management, take some business courses."

"But everything now is pretty much wait, waiting for the next quarter to start."

Home now, looking back on an experience few Wapato High School graduates will have, aware of what the experience did and did not do for her, Alvear offered a piece of advice to this year's graduates: "If they're not sure what they want to do, enlisting wouldn't be a bad idea. You meet a lot of people. I have lots of friends now. I can go to just about any state and it'd be 'Come on in,' no problem. I know people everywhere."

"The military helps you grow up too. You have to make your own decisions, pay your own bills. No one else will do it for you."



After basic training