

B49 IN SEARCH OF AFN

PROJECT: EUROPE 2011

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We said our final goodbyes to Marlies and Benny Brown and headed down the highway that hugs the Mosel River. Benny's mechanic said the leaking water pump shouldn't be a problem as long as we monitored the water level. Following the Boy Scout motto "Be Prepared," we packed on enough water to be mistaken for a Sparkettes bottled water truck.

Our short-term goal was to reach Coleman Barracks just outside Mannheim, Germany, the new home of the AFN Radio and Television network. The strategy was to drive the autobahn until the water temperature rose to hot; stop for cooling off and replenishment and hit the slow lane again.



This stop-and-go approach bit quite heavily into our travel time and it was quite late when we pulled up to the guard shack at Coleman. I put on my genuine AFN ballcap, (thanks Judy Boysha) and approached the guards with an air of confidence. "No way, sir," was the response. "You gotta have somebody from AFN vouch for you." I spoke with an AFN civilian technician named Lance Milsted who said, "It's almost 5 o'clock sir and I'm the last one here. Can you come back tomorrow?" I explained our situation but to no avail. We were going to have to shelve AFN. I was thanking the guards when the phone rang. It was Lance saying, "Stay where you are. I'm comin' to get you."



He led us past a series of barracks, motor pools and even an airfield (this was a Luftwaffe field in WWII) to a somewhat non-descript building that housed the AFN Network Headquarters. “If I’d come a long distance for a tour, I wouldn’t want to be turned back either,” he said, explaining the sudden change of heart. “I can pick my up son later.”



I was a bit unprepared for the new AFN. The network-switching center greatly resembled MasterControl at KCBS-TV, the Los Angeles station where I worked for so many years. It even had the same easily recognized atmosphere of controlled tension.



The production control room was rehearsing the upcoming 6 o’clock news. The staff was so involved I don’t even think they knew we were there.

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In the studio the on-camera talent appeared to be a one-woman band. There were no cameramen or teleprompter operators. She'd apparently set everything up herself and applied her own makeup. I did notice that every military person was wearing fatigues; quite unlike my time when we were required to wear Class A uniforms while on duty...and that was just for radio.

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The radio studios looked as if they'd never been used. It's the result of being able to record all the day's spot announcements and insert them by computer. I asked if they had DJ's anymore. Was it possible even that came by satellite and the human being was finally superfluous? I was assured that wasn't the case. They just weren't on air at that moment.

Even though the grand old days of programs coming from AFN Frankfurt, AFN Munich and AFN France were over, remnants of the past remain. Each studio is named for one of the network's former powerhouses. This one honors AFN Berlin.





The hallways are lined with memorabilia as well. The poster on the left honors my old network, AFN France, before it was unceremoniously kicked out by Charles de Gaulle. Another salutes the former Blue Danube Network that operated out of Salzburg, Austria just after WWII. This one is dear to the heart of former AFN'er Steve Binder whom I regularly talk with at pioneer broadcaster functions in Hollywood.



And who else is memorialized on the walls of AFN? None other than Benny Brown sporting his SP5 stripes sometime in the 70's. The Army ranked them as Specialist Fifth Class. We called them Speedy 5's.

Benny says the picture came from an article published in "Stars and Stripes," the print equivalent of AFN. As we looked at other pictures Louise spotted my old commanding officer, Air Force Captain Chester Clark. "Look," she said. "Here's the man who gave me away on my wedding day." Lance was visibly moved. "These old pictures have never meant much to me," he said. "Now you've given them life and I'll never look at them in the same way. Thank you so much."

Of course things have changed at AFN and no one walks down the halls today talking about the "Good ole days at the castle" but, over yet another glass of wine, Benny and I agreed that spinning platters (yes, we used to call it that) on the radio is just about the best job you could ever have in the Army. For those fortunate enough to be assigned to AFN today, I bet it still is.

At this point I'd like to get personal about what I owe to AFN. As a draftee I fulfilled my obligation to our country but AFN not only allowed me to sharpen my career skills but to expand them. On my return to civilian broadcasting I hit the deck running and went on to a successful career in broadcasting and then formed a television production company with my wife, Louise. It allowed us to give our three daughters good educations and, for us, a nice life in Los Angeles.

I can speak the same for Steve Binder who parlayed his AFN experience into a hugely successful career as an independent Producer/Director in Hollywood. I'm sure there are many others but I am most familiar with Benny Brown's post AFN track record. I had a chance to browse Benny's basement and saw traces of two personal Billboard Radio awards, a bunch of gold records and CD's presented to him personally and winner of the Drake-Chenault Talent Search award. In addition, he's been employed on air in three languages and he's still working.

So, for those of you currently serving our country at AFN, your future is what you make it. If you choose to stay in, you'll be growing in your career while providing valuable support to our servicemen. If you decide to follow a civilian career in broadcasting, you'll be ready. I stand by my previous statement: It's still the best job in the military.

Saluted by the guards as we drove off post, we were now full of memories of days when we were young and ready to take on the world. Now our task was to find a place for the night and to spend some time working on Plan B.

Gute nacht from Deutschland.

Louise and Ray DeTournay