

Getting Clobbered – United States Military Liaison Mission Incidents

Ms. Brewer Thompson, NDC

The Huebner-Malinin Agreement of 1947 allowed for the reciprocal deployment of military staff in the United States and Soviet zones of Germany. This was ostensibly to allow for monitoring of post-war Germany and the furthering of cordial relationships between the occupying forces. After the Cold War got going in earnest, the U.S. and Soviets used the Liaison missions to keep tabs on each other. Both sides (as well as Liaison Missions in the British and French zones) used their personnel as overt intelligence gathering units. Both sides were generally free to roam through their respective areas of accreditation, so long as they did not enter one of the many permanent or temporary restricted areas. The U.S. Military Liaison Mission staff (USMLM) were based in West Berlin, but generally started their “tours” of East Germany from Potsdam.

For the U.S. staff, being caught and detained by either Soviet or German Democratic Republic (GDR) forces was known as getting “clobbered.” Getting clobbered was generally more of an inconvenience than anything else, but there was always the possibility of physical harm coming to both vehicles and staff members.

“An average of 10-15 USMLM detentions/incidents occur annually, of which two or three may be considered serious. Considering over 600 tours are dispatched each year, the percentage of incidents could be much higher. Tour officers and NCO’s are extremely well-trained and versed in all aspects of touring techniques; it is impossible, though, for all contingencies to be anticipated while operating in East Germany. Consequently, decisions as to the conduct of a tour in a given situation must be based on experience and judgement (sic); at no time, however, is the safety of USMLM tour or Soviet/East German personnel to be placed in jeopardy. Thus, a certain trade-off must be realized between aggressive intelligence collection and compromise of the tour (safety, discovery, etc.); prudent judgement (sic) from the tour officer is essential, with safety as the overriding concern.”¹

There were more than twenty serious incidents between 1975 and 1987. These included detentions of U.S. personnel by Soviet forces, ramming of vehicles, assaults and shootings. Side-swiping, ramming, or reversing trucks into USMLM vehicles was a fairly common tactic employed against American and Allied mission staff, and major injuries could result from such actions. One case on 13 March 1979 ended up with the tour vehicle rolling over twice and the tour officer being incapacitated for four weeks. In 1984, French Mission officer Philippe Mariotti was killed in a ramming incident with GDR troops. Some of the shootings were clearly simple warning shots, while some came very close to harming USMLM personnel. (Figures 1 and 2) An incident in 1973 left a bullet hole in the boot of a USMLM driver, barely missing his foot. The most serious shooting incident resulted in the death of Major Arthur D. Nicholson on 24 March

1985. Maj. Nicholson was the last American casualty of the Cold War and the only USMLM tour officer to die in the course of his duty. (Figure 3)

Reports of all incidents were quite detailed and there was always a great deal of discussion as to the most appropriate U.S. response. There was always a desire to keep tensions with the Soviets to a minimum, while pointing out the eastern forces' responsibility for their actions. The Soviets offered an outright apology for the shooting incident of September 17, 1987 in which a USMLM driver was injured. Such incidents continued to occur until the Missions ended in 1990 just before German reunification.

¹ Memorandum from DCSI USMLM to Chief of Staff, 6 Jun 1983, MH1-2007-99-0001-0003, USMLM, box 99, United States Army Heritage and Education Center.