

Berlin American High School Reunion

Berlin, November 10, 2014

DCM Jim Melville

Maj Gen (USAF) Frederick "Rick" Martin, class of '77; Teachers and friends of the Berlin American High School, It's a privilege and a real pleasure to join you this evening for the reunion of the Alumni Association from the former Berlin American High School.

I have a great fondness and appreciation for the DoDDS system. My late uncle was a DoDDS administrator in Germany for over 30 years. My sister taught in a DoDDS school in Karlsruhe and I have a cousin who teaches in one in Bahrain. Most particularly, though, my son Daniel graduated from DoDDS London Central High School, Class of 2006.

Sadly, like the Berlin American School, LCHS closed its doors a few years ago as well, as the U.S. military presence in Europe drew down. Or not so sadly, for these closures reflect the great success of U.S. policy to promote a Europe whole, free and at peace.

The Cold War is over, but we can never forget the sacrifice that our men and women in uniform made – and continue to make – to protect our freedom. Every soldier or airman who served in Berlin can be proud of the role he or she played in bringing an end to the Cold War. I'm sure it's no coincidence that you chose this very special weekend for your reunion here.

As all of you know and some of you witnessed personally, on this day 25 years ago, the Berlin Wall was open. The evening before, beginning at the Bornholmerstrasse Crossing, East German citizens demanded the right to cross over into West Berlin.

It was an historic moment. Authoritarian regimes were beginning to crumble; and after weeks of massive and peaceful protests, the East German government bowed to popular will and allowed people to travel freely across the border that had divided West and East Germany: a border over which more than 200 East Germans had lost their lives in the search for freedom.

Through the long and dangerous years of the Cold War, American troops stood firmly by the German people and their quest for reunification. The U.S. Military's Command in Berlin existed from 1945 to 1994. During that time thousands of soldiers and airmen served as members of one of the most prestigious units in the U.S. Military. Over time, the Berlin command was known by several different names. No matter by what name it was called, however, the members of the Berlin Brigade – soldiers, airmen and their families – were the face of the United States Military, and the face of the United States to the people of Berlin. They stood steadfast with their German friends to face the forces of an oppressive regime and to keep the citizens of Berlin free.

In July 1945, when the U.S. Army came to Berlin, it was necessary to re-train battle-hardened soldiers in the techniques of civil police duties to cope with the problem of maintaining order in a war-torn city. During the winter of 1945-46, U.S. forces faced the practical problems of keeping two million Berliners in the Western Sectors of a destroyed city, alive. Under the U.S. Military Government, the soldiers of the Brigade went to work and quickly restored basic services that set the conditions for rebuilding this city. In 1948 the Soviets imposed the Berlin Blockade and attempted to starve Berlin into surrender. For 15 months, Berlin was supplied by air by Allied forces, for as General Clay made clear, and I quote: “When Berlin falls, Western Germany will be next. If we withdraw our position in Berlin, Europe is threatened.”

On the 13th of August 1961, the government of the German Democratic Republic sealed the crossing points between the Soviet Sector and West Berlin. Twenty-eight miles of barbed-wire and barriers went up across the city and construction of the Berlin Wall began. Three days later, President John F. Kennedy ordered the reinforcement of the Brigade. He ordered that the reinforcement be accomplished in a way that would convince the Soviet Union that the United States had no intention of backing down from its commitment to a free Berlin.

Due in large part to their professionalism, in an incredibly short time, the United States evolved from a conqueror of Berlin to the city's protector. The same thing occurred in the broader relationship with West Germany. We became committed to the economic recovery and political rehabilitation of this country. It was crucial that the Federal Republic, beginning with Berlin, not

slip behind what Winston Churchill was the first to call “the iron curtain.” Here in Berlin, the Soviet and Western approaches were on daily display. For both the soldiers who served here at the frontier of the Cold War and Berliners, the contrasts between communism and capitalism, authoritarianism and freedom, were visible and palpable. And alongside other Western allies – and also Germany, we worked together to maintain the peace.

This, too, is part of the story of Berlin. From 1945 to 1994, when the Four Power military occupation of the city formally ended, over 200,000 Berliners had worked alongside Allied soldiers as civilian employees. The relationships they formed with American soldiers and their families represent a special chapter of the German-American partnership. By definition, when we read history, it is from a distance. In terms of the dramatic history that Germans – and in particular, Berliners – share with Americans, it would be impossible to manufacture today the same emotional sense of commitment that developed during the long years of the Cold War.

We can, however, find ways to promote a 21st century trans-Atlantic relationship.

For the soldiers and airmen of the Berlin Brigade – your parents (and some of you as well) -- Berlin was more than a posting – it came to be home. And many, like some of the veterans and family members here today, liked it so much they decided to stay in Berlin to build their own families. Of those who returned to the United States, many still maintain contact with their extended Berlin Brigade family. The bonds that the soldiers and airmen of the Berlin Brigade formed over the course of the almost fifty years here, with one another and with the citizens of Berlin, are unique. They are symbolic of the very special connection that so many Americans have with Berlin – myself included.

In many respects, my wife Joanna and I have a lot in common with you and your families.

Our first foreign service post was here in Berlin, and our children were born here during that tour. In fact, right here in Steglitz, at the U.S. Army Hospital. They each still proudly have their plaques as Honorary Members of the Berlin Brigade. So we too are a family of Berliners.

Also like many of you, our family, has served in other countries around the world.

But no matter where we have lived – abroad or at home in the States – we have carried with us our experience in Germany. We’ve stayed in touch with friends made during our tour here, and

we know what a joy it is to reconnect – in particular, here in a reunited Berlin. My assignment was to our Embassy to the German Democratic Republic. So we lived on the other side of the Wall, on Leipzigerstrasse, about 3 blocks from Checkpoint Charlie.

We were here when President Reagan visited Berlin in 1987. I was on the press riser directly in front of President Reagan when he called on President Gorbachev to tear down the Wall that divided this city; In hindsight, we all know the cracks in the Wall were already there, but they were still hidden. We were proud to serve our country. And we were proud, as you all are, to be part of the larger story that began in July 1945 when President Truman came to Berlin. He presided over the raising of the Stars and Stripes at the U.S. headquarters building, now our Consulate, on Clayallee. President Truman stated then his hope that one day Berlin would be part of what he called a better world, a peaceful world, a world in which all the people will have an opportunity to enjoy the good things in life. And he held true to that commitment throughout the months of the Soviet Blockade and the Berlin Airlift.

Subsequent America Presidents showed the same measure of resolve – as did your parents, and you as well, the personnel and families of the American military under the command of these Presidents. And as the history of this era has shown, with all the many reminders we were given over this weekend, yours was a job well done.

So last night, as I was waiting to send my balloon aloft from Ebertstrasse, right next to the Brandenburg Gate in front of our Embassy – I was the Balloonpate for Balloon #2,229

I remembered going to Alexanderplatz on August 13, 1986 for Erich Honecker and his Politburo’s celebration of the 25th Anniversary of the construction of the “Antifascist Protection Barrier.” And I marveled at all the incredible changes that have taken place since then.

But this was the work of generations and it’s a result of the tireless effort that your parents and their parents –

and our allies, friends and partners –

particularly and most importantly –

our German friends –

put into the effort and struggle. Many of us have tried to do our part as well, as we continue to do in what is still a dangerous world. But we can and should celebrate our successes, too.

When President Kennedy came to Berlin in 1963, he specifically said “All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin” before going on to his more famous statement “as a free man, I take great pride in the words, Ich bin ein Berliner.” By the force of those words and the very real presence of the United States in Berlin, for almost fifty years, we stood by our promise. And for us, the opportunity to come back to a united, prosperous, peaceful Berlin has been a gift.

For those of you who are returning to Berlin, and for those of you who for whom Germany is your home, that’s what I see when I look at all of you – a strong relationship with a foundation in the past and the present, but also the dynamic potential of a hopeful future. I hope you’ve had a wonderful reunion, and thanks for letting me share a part of it.

James D. Melville, Jr.

Embassy of the United States of America

Deputy Chief of Mission