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Distributing the Stars & Stripes

Patrick Potter

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My paper route provided good money, close to twenty bucks a week with tips. Not bad for an eleven-year-old in '65. The easiest part of my job distributing the European edition of *Stars and Stripes* were weekday deliveries in our army housing area, the '*Petit Citti Americaine*' as the local French called it. Our Citti was only thirty duplexes sitting around two circular streets.

From the time I stepped off the olive drab army school bus, I could have the papers delivered in little more than a half-hour. That left plenty of time for outdoor good times with my buddies, and my other activities like Boy Scouts and Little League. Some Fridays took me longer because I had to collect from families who didn't want to pay monthly. Lots of the young NCOs and even some officer families had trouble stretching their funds from payday to payday. But getting *Stars and Stripes* was a real value; it had as much national and world news as anyone needed, plus lots of news on military affairs, promotion lists, pay raises and so forth. A great value at less than a dollar a week, I always said.

My real profits didn't come from the daily deliveries. They came from the Sunday edition, a lot more expensive at thirty-five cents a copy. This edition ran to almost fifty pages, with comics and AFEES advertisements. At the end of most Sundays, my pockets were heavy with change, with lots of dollar bills and a few fives and tens mixed in. Lots of the change went to filling the holes in my blue coin collecting albums. Most of the rest eventually went into savings bonds and comic books.

My Sunday mornings generally went like this: my mom, sister and I would have a small snack before going to church on the Brienne Army Air Base less than two miles away from the citti. It was always a thrill going onto the base, a small slice of America in the middle of French countryside and culture, with the red, white, and blue flag of the USA proudly waving, visible from the French highway. Meanwhile, my dad, like most, would sleep in due to the typical

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routine of heavy drinking most Saturday nights. He'd get up when we returned from church, when my mom made the real breakfast—usually eggs and bacon or pancakes. In the meantime, I delivered the Sunday papers in the housing area.

After breakfast, my mom or dad would drive me back to the air base with my biggest newspaper bag filled with the Sunday edition. Our air base had two major units, the 352nd Aviation Company and the 301st Avionics Company, each with a long, two-story barracks housing the enlisted men. The two barracks sat at opposite ends of the base; I'd quickly discovered that sales were better at the 352nd, so I'd start there and hope for strong sales, to lighten the load of papers I'd have to haul across the base.

I generally liked being on base, especially on my own and with money in my pockets. We had the AFEES Snack Bar, which was the only place you could find a banana split (35 cents) while living overseas. You could also get cheeseburgers and grilled cheese sandwiches (also 35 cents) or fountain cherry cokes (just 15 cents). Happily, the Snack Bar also featured two revolving banks of comic book and a small display of kid's books. A comic book cost the same as the Sunday paper, but had much better content!

We kids in fifth through the eighth grade took the bus to a consolidated elementary school at another, larger Army base. The trip from home to school at the Vitry-le-Francois logistics base took an hour each way. The distance wasn't that great, but we had to side-track through the countryside to pick up kids whose families lived 'on the economy' in the many small French villages. It was a long ride, but we didn't mind. We had time to get rowdy, show off, try out new jokes and wisecracks, maybe learn a little more about the other sex, and, in extreme cases, to study or finish homework.

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The GIs who drove the bus were mostly unmemorable. They usually got the job because they'd messed up in their maintenance work, or they were short timers. Some wanted to get away from their normal duties which involved long periods standing on the cold, hard floors of the flight line or the hangers. In a few cases, their name just happened to come up on a duty roster.

The bus driving job had its challenges, what with thirty to forty unruly kids and narrow roads winding through little French villages. You needed patience, as the roads were shared with French farmers getting their cattle herds to and from pastures. With cow dung mixing with frequent French rainstorms, or moist morning fogs, the drivers had to really focus on negotiating the narrow, slippery roads.

One particular driver was Specialist 5th Class Knight, so he was probably the highest-ranking soldier assigned as a driver. Maybe it was due to his rank or just his character, but he acted very authoritarian. He relished cursing and chewing us out if we misbehaved: but only for the boys. I guess rules weren't set in concrete as to who had what authority, so it wasn't unusual for him to stop the bus and stomp back and grab an unruly dude by the collar and shake him around some. We didn't like this, but no one really got hurt, so no one mentioned it to parents. I thought he'd get in trouble when he occasionally kicked guys in the butt as we exited the bus. I know he kicked Tommy Smith at the top of the steps. I remember Tommy didn't lose his balance, but I saw him wince in pain. After exiting Tommy turned and shouted, "You're an ass!" then ran off laughing, satisfied that he'd gotten the better of the exchange.

On the other hand, Spec 5 Knight acted real sweet toward the girls, even those who misbehaved. He rarely called down a girl, even Evelyn Keene, who most people steered clear of, because she had a reputation for shouting, hitting, and throwing things. Only a couple of the

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eighth graders had girlfriends, and they kept to themselves at the back of the bus. There was no love lost between us younger guys and Spec 5 Knight.

On a particular cool and sunny Sunday in late April, near the end of the school year, I'd finished my paper sales on the first floor of the Aviation Company's barracks. Sales had been pretty solid. An occasional ray of happy sunshine came in through a crack in the curtains, but mostly the barracks was quiet and gloomy. Sounds of a shower running came from a distance, and a couple of radios or turntables played somewhere deep in the building. I proceeded up the steps to the second floor.

Over time, I'd perfected my technique. I'd learned to knock briefly on each door, not too loud, then crack it open and put my head into the gloom. In a low voice, I'd say, "Paper boy, Sunday *Stars and Stripes*, only 35 cents." I didn't want to be too loud or strident. That kept most of the often-hung-over occupants from getting irate. Some GIs rolled over and went back to sleep. If I got that response or no response at all, I'd repeat my spiel, hoping to get a sale. Most rooms had bunks for four soldiers along with wall-lockers, desks, and chairs.

Occasionally I got the definitive "Shut the hell up and get out!" But mostly the GIs appreciated having someone bring in the Sunday paper. Many would just grunt, grab their pants off the floor or the bed, and beckon me over with a dollar bill, or two to three quarters.

I often heard, "Keep the change, kid." Near paydays, some of the bills were five bucks.

"Sir, ... it's five dollars."

"No, you keep it," he'd say. "But don't fucking sir me, kid. I'm a working man, I ain't no officer."

"Yes s... right."

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I made progress down the hall, selling a paper in every room or two. I got to the last three before the stairwell leading out of the barracks. As I grasped the door handle, I noticed one of the nametapes, 'Spec 5 KNIGHT.'

I thought to pass by, but by now the handle was down and the door was creaking open.

"Paperboy, *Stars and Stripes*, only 35 cents."

"Yeah, I'll take one," came a muffled call from a far bunk.

"Sure, here you are," I deftly handed off the paper and took the offered dollar.

"Here's your change," I said, picking out the 65 cents.

"Forget the change, kid."

"OK, thanks!" I turned for the door as I saw someone heaving himself over on another bunk.

"You're one of those dumb bastard kids riding the school bus, right?" came Knight's offensive voice, as he repositioned himself on one elbow.

"Uh, yeah, I ride the bus."

"Well, give me a paper. I'll pay you on the bus next week."

I thought that was reasonable, but I didn't like the tone and I didn't like the guy. "I can't give out papers for free."

The guy in the recesses of the room chuckled, "You ain't gonna shortchange this kid."

"Bullshit!" snorted Knight. "Give me a fucking paper! I'll pay you later."

I already had my hand on the door handle. I wanted to get rid of another paper, but I detested the guy. I opened the door and left without another word. To be safe, I skipped the last two rooms. I'd get farther away from Knight and try my luck at the Avionics barracks.

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As I started my trek across the base, I felt stronger than usual. I felt I'd dealt a blow to Knight, for me and the other guys on the bus. But those thoughts passed quickly. I drifted back into my usual focus on banana splits and comic books. I planned to enjoy myself after my work, while I waited for my parents to pick me up at the Snack Bar.