home BASE

Growing up as a military kid overseas during the Cold War was often a rootless existence. But one teacher helped give the author a solid footing that endured for decades.

Buried somewhere under what's now known as Patch Barracks, a U.S. Army base outside of Stuttgart, Germany, is a statue of a buffalo. I've seen grainy photos of the monument, which was the mascot of the Nazi tank regiment that called the same fenced-in warren of white-washed concrete buildings *Kurmaerker Kaserne* during World War II. Legend has it that as the war drew to a close, the statue was torn down and pushed by a bulldozer into a nearby bomb crater, along with other debris from the dying regime. Chances are the bison could have just as easily been scrapped, but when I arrived at Patch Barracks with my family as a rising 8th grader in summer 1982, it was an image that drew me in with surprising power.

As an "army brat," the son of a career military officer, I had been used to packing up my life and moving to a different base, a different state, or a different country every few years. At age 12, I'd already lived on three continents and attended a half-dozen schools. This wasn't even my first time in West Germany as my father had had an earlier tour of duty there when I was just 4, on a helicopter airfield near a small village a few hundred miles north.

Most military kids will tell you that their early years are a blur, and in many ways, mine were. Before moving to Patch, the places I'd lived were virtual way stations that, like boring rainy afternoons, were more to be endured than enjoyed. But moving to Stuttgart was different—I was about to start high school, a defining moment in any kid's life, and as I walked around the base, Alexander M. Patch American High School jumped out at me. It would have been hard for it not to; it was one of two buildings on base that didn't resemble World War II holdovers, most of them with whitewashed concrete walls and tiled roofs, like Swiss chalets on steroids. Instead, Patch High was all odd angles, glass, and gleaming metal, more an architect's dream of a school than the real thing. Inside, chimes announced the change of classes in hushed tones, every classroom overlooked either woods or a courtyard, and the newness of the building

by **MARK TONER**

illustrations by **MATT COLLINS**

made me all the more excited about starting high school in a very different place.

At the same time, I was struck by the notion of being educated on an old, half-forgotten parcel of the past—it hinted at something lasting, just waiting to be unearthed. As I wandered the base that first summer, I often glanced at the ground. I didn't really expect to see a chunk of the granite buffalo, but I wouldn't have been surprised if I had. For me, that summed up life as a military kid, a life that can be as transient or as immersive as you make it. Some of my friends would end up spending all their free time exploring Europe on cheap chartered buses, and others would rarely leave base, passing the days watching six-month-old sitcoms on American Forces Network. The experience could be exhilarating or melancholy, lonely or filled with the camaraderie that comes from sharing a unique experience, and my time at Patch High was all of these things.

It also took place more than two decades ago, when the Cold War was gradually coming to an end. By the time the Berlin Wall fell, I'd been back in the states for years, my former Patch classmates scattered around the globe. Although the military is now fighting a different kind of war, 104,000 students still attend about 220 schools operated by the Department of Defense in 13 countries and some half-dozen states. With military personnel rotating in and out of duty stations every few years, many of these students will attend several DOD-run schools before graduating. And in the blur of bases and school buildings, it'll be the teachers—no-nonsense spouses of career military personnel as well as American expatriates with a love for living abroad—who help keep the kids grounded.

That was definitely true in my case. In fact, after the recent passing of one of my Patch teachers, I was reminded of just how extraordinary those educators can be.

"The Soviet system," said the narrow-eyed, uniformed officer as he paced in front of the history class, "is based on the premise of"—and here he threw in a lugubriously incomprehensible Russian word that must have clocked in at just under a dozen syllables. "That means 'Everyone screws everyone.'"

One thing you had to give my 8th grade history teacher: His guest speakers were rarely dull. The more this particular one talked about the evils he'd witnessed on the streets of Moscow, the tighter the line he paced became; the only thing missing was the obligatory chain-smoked cigarette dangling from his fingers. Even then, as a naive 12-year-old, I was reminded of the overblown scare talk I'd heard on television and in movies, only the dangers weren't sex or drugs but the menace of international communism—like *Scared Straight!* meets *Dr. Strangelove.*

These monologues should have been funny, but it was hard to find much humor beyond the gallows variety. ("Try not to think about what would happen if a hung-over Russian janitor accidentally dropped a wrench into a missile silo" was a common faculty joke.) Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were high—the year before I arrived in Germany, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which has monitored the threat of nuclear holocaust since the advent of the Cold War, moved the hands of its Doomsday Clock forward to four minutes before midnight; in 1984, it would move them ahead to three. And at the time, a few years before President Reagan started worrying aloud about Nicaraguans being a one-day car ride from the Texas border, Western Europe was the clear flash point.

The summer after I arrived, antiwar protesters formed a human chain from the front gate of the base to a cruise missile silo more than 100 miles away. And when the made-for-TV movie *The Day After,* which depicts a nuclear attack on the United States, was shown on base, it wasn't the notion that Kansas City would be nuked that seemed far-fetched; it was the idea that Stuttgart wouldn't be.

Almost 20 years before 9/11, terrorism was already more than a color-coded abstraction in Western Europe. Along with the usual back-to-school assemblies, we had the what-to-do-if-terrorists-attack talks. We weren't issued duct tape, but our house had shatter-resistant Mylar on its windows, and bomb threats were a common occurrence at school, with students filing out as uniformed MPs with bomb-sniffing dogs rushed in.

Being immersed in a military environment also offered opportunities for what's now called character education, not the least of which was the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps, the high school equivalent of college ROTC. It wasn't exactly mandatory, but lots of kids wound up taking it anyway—kind of like PE, only with brass on the uniforms. In the course of a year and a half, I rose through the ranks, ultimately making it to sergeant, where instead of drilling, I was tasked with grilling: I supervised the lunch-time bratwurst stand that JROTC ran as a fund-raiser, urging my charges to load up the charcoal and keep the sausages turning. This was Germany, after all.

Lots of U.S. high schools offer JROTC, but taking it on an actual military base has one big drawback, at least to a self-conscious teenager. JROTC is considered an adjunct of the military, making the aforementioned uniforms "real" in a way that, say, a Boy Scout uniform isn't. That means your shoes had better be clean, and when you see an officer, you'd better salute. I managed to get through nearly 18 months of walking to and from school in uniform every Tuesday without bumping into my father, who, adding to the tension of the father-son salute, was a two-star general at the time.

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But one day, walking back from lunch, I saw him heading home for an unscheduled break. I suppose I could have bolted across one of the baseball fields, but instead I offered up a snappy salute as he walked by. Also, traipsing through dirt and grass would have meant scuffed dress shoes and God knows how many push-ups back at school.

Despite the Cold War mind-set and my

vaguely Pattonesque stint as a grill sergeant, Patch was definitely *not* a military school. The Department of Defense Education Activity system is run by civilians, with bits and pieces of the curriculum picked up from across the United States. During my time there, my English textbook, as I recall, was simply known as the "Nebraska curriculum," while the science program had been developed by an association of independent schools.

The teachers, too, are virtually all civilians. Today, there are more than 8,700 in DODEA schools, with about 6,500 working overseas. The job requirements and salaries are comparable to those in big urban districts, starting around $33,000 a year. And despite the regimented elements of student life—or maybe because of them—most of my teachers tried to make the school experience similar to the stateside one, with perhaps a bit more slack thrown in for good measure.

Consider the senior prank. One morning each fall, administrators would find a VW Beetle parked in the school's lofty, cathedral-like lobby—a lobby entered through decidedly smaller-than-Volkswagen-size doors. It was a mystery: Was the car disassembled and brought inside in pieces? Was there a hidden loading dock?

Given that a good number of seniors arrived at Patch just months before school started, I always assumed that a teacher was the mastermind, or at least the font of institutional memory that kept the prank alive. But I never found out for sure. We moved back to the states the summer after my sophomore year, a full 12 months before I would have been inducted into the ranks of the knowing.

As a younger kid, I'd always assumed that students were generally a blur to most teachers, and I'll sheepishly admit that my teachers were pretty much a blur to me, too, easily sorted into the archetypes that have filled comic books since the days of Archie and Jughead. That wasn't the case at Patch, though. During my three years there, I had a PhD-toting English teacher who claimed to have come to Stuttgart by way of Beverly Hills and dropped the names of film industry folks to prove it; a gruff, bearded humanities teacher who tackled Renaissance art and freshman torture with equal relish; a former football coach turned algebra teacher who, we were convinced, lived in a rusted old camper in front of the base cafeteria; and a German French teacher—that is, a German citizen with a love of all things French (which seemed odd, given the past several centuries of European history), who taught us to stress our e's and u's with a decidedly Teutonic flourish.

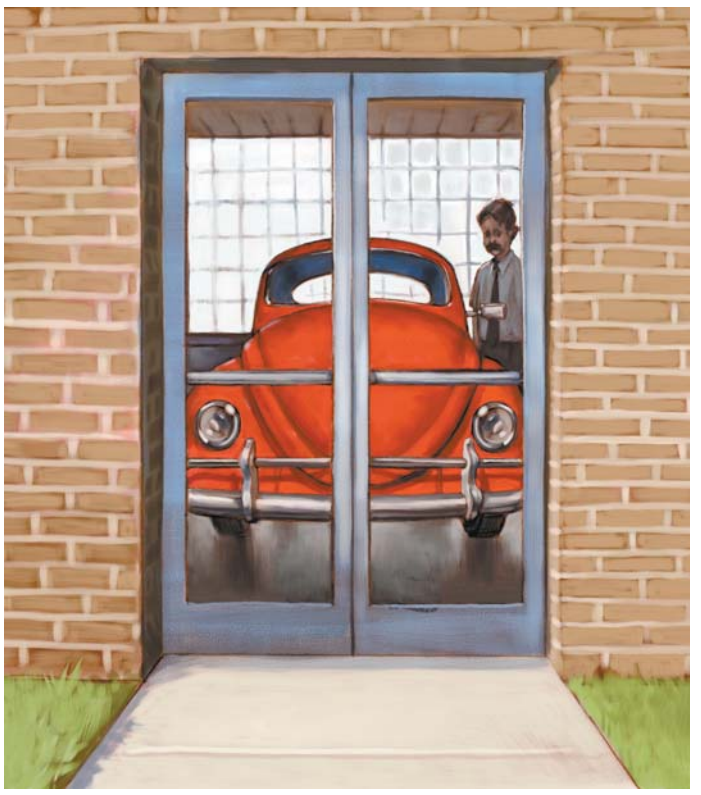
But when it came to high drama in the classroom, none could top Robert Hanks, my 9th grade science teacher, who looked every bit the mad scientist, and it wasn't just the white lab coat that did it. What little hair the 40-something teacher still had was molded into a frizzy patch atop his forehead; he also wore what looked like government-issue glasses from a 1950s edition of *Popular Mechanics*. What kind of scientist he actually was, though, was less clear.

A friend of mine had Mr. Hanks the year before I did, but all I'd learned about the teacher's classroom demeanor was that after my classmate wrote his name on a table using the wick of an alcohol burner and then set it ablaze, the resulting conflagration didn't cause any great damage to his grades or disciplinary record. So I assumed Mr. Hanks had to be at least somewhat easygoing.

It took only 15 minutes of my first day of class for this notion to be dispelled. "That," the science teacher boomed as he pointed to a student who'd made an innocent comment, "is pure, unadulterated garbage!" That was pure Mr. Hanks, aggressively but good-naturedly picking on the distracted and the distant, sometimes throwing their notebooks across the room or threatening to chuck their work out the window. In a typical class, he'd rip through a section of a biology unit, touching on a half-dozen other topics in the process, then round out the hour gossiping happily with a handful of kids.

At the time, my in-class distraction was drawing detailed, if poorly rendered, cartoons in the style of *Mad* magazine, with my teachers often serving as subjects. Mr. Hanks' likeness usually wielded a box of Pop-Tarts, a prop used to discuss healthy diets, and I'd draw him with spittle coming out of his mouth as he railed about the evils of junk food. I think he may have seen one of my drawings—in fact, I may have shown it to him. Either way, he found it hysterical.

But I wasn't the only one drawing. One morning, the class, for reasons now forgotten, was discussing family crests, and Mr. Hanks chose to create one for me as an example. It had a dissected frog at the top that looked a little like me (I wasn't a big fan of dissection), a snail (because he knew I was taking French and, probably, because I was slow to get homework done), and a JROTC insignia (an homage to my grilling skills). This wasn't the first time Mr. Hanks had picked on me, a gawky only child who hated the spotlight—earlier in the year, he'd made a production of lending me a ludicrously complex college-level textbook that for years afterward gave me nightmares about what college might bring. I'd like to think that Mr. Hanks gave me the extra attention because he saw a gleam of promise, something that compelled him to try to reach me. But that wasn't the case. He did the same for every student.



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In many ways, he was the stereotypical teacher kids both hope and fear they'll wind up getting. But there was something else about him. Early in the year, the topic of discussion turned to evolution, as it often did in Mr. Hanks' classes, and one student asked a question about how religion played into it.

"There is no God," Mr. Hanks said matter-of-factly, staring at the class for a moment before turning back to the whiteboard.

At first, I was stunned. *Is he allowed to say that?* I wondered to myself. I'd had a lot of good teachers, and it was their impartiality, their dispassionate, even-handed approach to their subjects, that I'd remembered. Here was someone actually

expressing an opinion and doing so unflinchingly, without fear or embarrassment. While I didn't agree with him, it was the first time a teacher had ever challenged my beliefs head-on. And for a 9th grader at his sixth school, trying to fit in without rocking the boat too much, his conviction made an enormous impression.

Not surprisingly, Charles Darwin was Mr. Hanks' hero, and we were promised we'd learn about the 19th century scientist in excruciating detail when we took biology in 10th grade. I wound up getting another teacher that year, but the most memorable part of her class was the week we spent watching a Mr. Hanks-endorsed miniseries about Darwin's five-year journey around the world as a naturalist aboard the HMS *Beagle*, an expedition that paved the way for his groundbreaking work, *The Origin of Species.* Much of the miniseries centered on the ongoing disputes between Darwin and the *Beagle*'s religiously devout captain, Robert Fitzroy, who struggled with his convictions long after the voyage was over, ultimately taking his own life. It only reinforced what I'd learned in Mr. Hanks' class the year before—how important it is to question what you believe in as a way to find out who you really are.

Mr. Hanks' fascination with Darwin continued to grow. He eventually led "pilgrimages" to England, where he'd pay his respects at the scientist's grave. But, as was the case with placing the Volkswagen in the school lobby, I returned to the states before I got the chance to tag along.

I finished up high school outside of Washington, D.C., in one of the country's most competitive school districts. Much to my surprise, the biggest adjustment I had to make involved my time in JROTC, which Fairfax County, Virginia, refused to accept as a substitute for PE. So I spent my senior year schlepping up and down the soccer field with freshmen and taking health to learn about the puberty I'd hit a few years earlier.

I was in college when the Berlin Wall fell, a bit of news I learned at 4:30 in the morning after returning home from a long night of working on the student newspaper to find a copy of that morning's *Washington Post* at my door. I looked at the front-page photo of revelers tearing down the wall and immediately thought back to the buffalo statue somewhere under Patch Barracks.

Since then, the military has been redefining its role in a post-Cold War world, and that role could eventually make on-base, overseas schools less of a universal experience. Even before 9/11, there was an ongoing, if gradual, push away from garrisoning large numbers of troops on permanent bases across what's been colorfully called "Old Europe" of late. In the past decade alone, the number of students in DODEA schools has decreased by roughly 10 percent, from 116,000 to 104,000, and at least 17 schools have closed. These days, the military prefers more flexible, Spartan facilities for its troops in Eastern Europe and Central Asia—places less friendly to spouses and children. More tours of duty are now "unaccompanied" ones, meaning that families stay home.

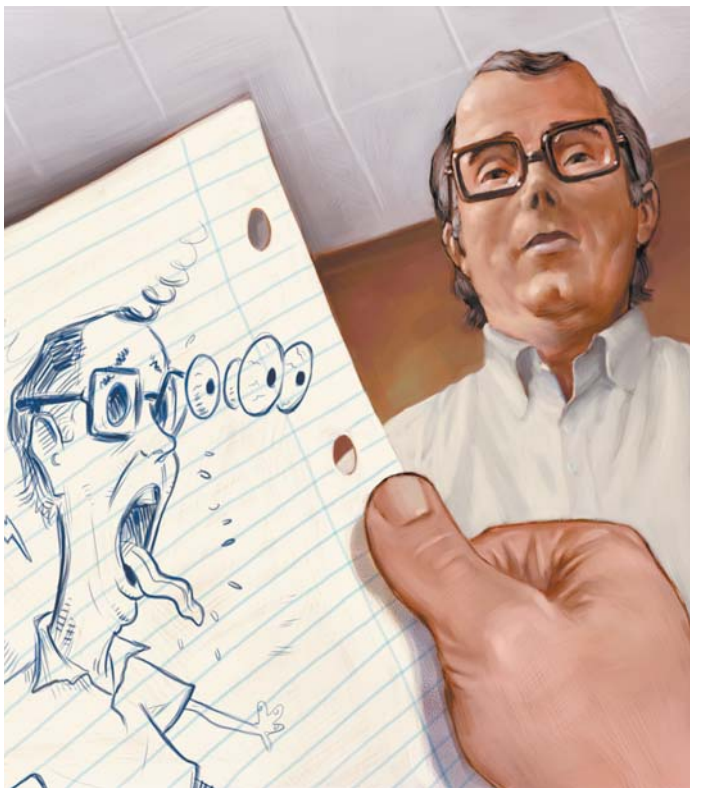
Still, because it's located at the military's European headquarters, Patch High continued to grow after I left, and Mr. Hanks, who'd been there since the school opened in 1979, stayed put. Over the years, he amassed a menagerie of animals, including a myna bird he'd taught to squawk "Charles Darwin," at which point he'd make the kids in his class stand up out of respect. In response, a renegade if not entirely serious group of students called the Anti-Darwin League, quite likely abetted by Mr. Hanks' friends on the faculty, retaliated by stealing the skulls, trinkets, and other Darwin memorabilia he'd collected over the years, leaving overwrought ransom notes in their place. I'd since lost touch with most of my classmates from Patch, but upon hearing tidbits thirdhand from other army brats returning from overseas, it was reassuring to know how little had changed.

Then, in April 2002, Mr. Hanks took his own life, inside the deserted school shuttered for spring break, not far from the classroom where he'd just fed his animals. He was 67 and had been teaching in military-run schools for 31 years; his wife was Patch's registrar. As commanding a presence as he was in the classroom, he'd always been an intensely private person, and his close friends would later say he had long struggled with depression. I stumbled across the news completely by chance—not in a newspaper but while surfing the Web, trolling a now-defunct site run by a Patch alum who'd received an e-mail from one of Mr. Hanks' colleagues.

An amazing thing happened next. Dozens of Mr. Hanks' former students emerged, posting to an otherwise sparsely trafficked alumni message board from places like West Virginia, Utah, Alabama, Germany, and Korea. Everyone had a story to share about being drenched by Mr. Hanks during a water battle, or stealing one of his Darwin relics, or being the victim of a practical joke he'd played. Teachers still at Patch, some of whom I'd assumed had long since retired, shared their own stories, which generally involved being the butt of his jokes. One, in a eulogy delivered at the school and later posted online, touted Mr. Hanks' "Technicolor/wide-screen/Dolby Surround-sound presence."

Schools are, by definition, transient places where students arrive, graduate, and move on. At military-run schools, that process is even more frenetic as kids come and go at the whim of their parents' duty orders—often long before they receive diplomas. It's no accident that Patch class reunions have been held in Las Vegas, a city defined by its own lack of roots. Yet Mr. Hanks was able to bring together a scattered group of alumni who paid their respects to his life, his school, and the experience of living and learning overseas.

Kids come and go, the world changes as empires rise and fall, but what made the Patch experience memorable for so many people was one science teacher with a roomful of animals, a penchant for mischief, and the courage of his own convictions. ■



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