

**Richard (Rick) Armstrong** interviewed October 24, 2007

Captain, US Army, April 1981 – July 1988

Rick joined the Reserve Officer Training Program (ROTC) when he began attending Penn State at the Ogontz campus as a Civil Engineering major. For the first two years, there wasn't any post graduate commitment for being in ROTC. After the second year, however, it was possible to receive an allowance while attending school if you were in the ROTC program and this is the route Rick took. Committing to ROTC meant an eight year obligation: two years while in college and then six years after graduating.



During the summer between his Junior and Senior years, Rick attended basic training for ROTC at Fort Bragg, NC. The training was similar to regular boot camp, but geared toward officers. There was marching, running and rifle training. The training was a little more low-key than the usual basic training because everyone already had some military experience through ROTC. They were set up in a platoon structure and the leadership positions were rotated in order to give everyone a chance to lead. At Bragg, they were split up so that the attendees from Penn State were mixed in with those from other schools. Rick recalls that they kept a duck named Major Mallard in the barracks bathroom. Although they got into trouble for this, they were able to keep Major Mallard until the end of camp at which time the duck was given to a local farmer.

In his senior year at Penn State, Rick was a platoon leader for a group of younger cadets. Because more responsibility meant more of a time commitment, Rick had to juggle his time carefully. Upon graduation from Penn State, there was a separate ceremony where the cadets were commissioned as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants. Rick chose to fulfill his commitment on active duty rather than in the reserves and was assigned to the Army Corps of Engineers. On April 1, 1981, Rick reported to Engineering Officers School at Fort Belvoir, VA.

At Fort Belvoir, the three month course consisted of learning how to build things and how to blow them up. The class of 60 included students with engineering degrees and West Pointers. The training included classroom work where they learned how to use the various Army manuals which are available to cover most engineering situations. They also learned about manpower requirements and the capabilities of a bulldozer, according to the Army, and other equipment. They would go out into the field and learn how to use explosives like C4 and TNT. Engineers are also responsible for laying mines and they learned how to lay the mines and also keep track of them so they can later be safely removed.

Assignment to Germany...

Rick had requested Germany for his next assignment, and after Fort Belvoir, he was assigned to Bamberg, Germany and the 82nd Engineers Battalion. Rick squeezed in one last day at the beach before heading to Germany and ended up flying in his class A dress uniform with a head to toe sunburn. Upon arrival in Frankfurt, he was met by a fellow 2nd Lieutenant who took him to Bamberg. One of the nice things about the military community in Germany, according to Rick, is that the people you serve with

become your family. Rick was welcomed and made part of the group right away. He ended up moving into an off-base apartment with some other Lieutenants who had been there for a few years. Rick wanted to live off-base in order to fully experience the German culture.

Rick was a platoon leader in charge of 30 men and some vehicles and equipment. His responsibility was for their training and well being. Rick spent the first week in the war room, getting up to speed on battle plans should the East Germans and Russians come across the border. His second week in Germany was spent out in the field practicing their local General Defense Plan (GDP). While on this exercise, Rick was assigned a driver who was not very good and they were even involved in a minor accident. Rick replaced the driver after the exercise was over.

Defending the Box...

Rick's platoon was part of a battalion assigned to defend a "box" where each side of the box was about ten miles long. Part of the box was along the East German border in what was known as the Hof corridor, a likely avenue of attack. When the alert was given, the battalion's first move was to leave their base since that was a likely target in an attack. Rick's platoon was to assemble in a forest about two miles from the base and then pick up munitions to distribute to the rest of the units before moving out to the front edge of their assigned area. Their mission was to create road craters, knock out bridges and set up mine fields as they retreated across the box to the far corner which was known as the Die In Place (DIP) position. There were pre-planned targets that had been worked out with the German government. These included "pre-chambered" roads and bridges where there were hidden chambers that could be filled with explosives in order to quickly destroy the road or bridge. They were told there was only a 20% chance of surviving for seven days and getting back to the DIP position once hostilities started.

While Rick was in Germany, he was with a very field oriented unit which meant they would spend about one week to ten days each month out in the field. One of the big exercises which took place every year was the Return of Forces to Germany (REFORGER) practice. Different scenarios would be run and the German countryside would be filled with troops. One of the pressing needs for the troops would be to find a place to sleep while out on exercises. Rick would have to knock on the door of farm houses and ask if the farmer was willing to let Rick's platoon sleep in their barn. After one night in a barn, Rick woke up with a cow licking his face. Food would have to be delivered to the men while in the field. While the exercise was not like war games where there would be an opposing force, it was still interesting to watch the Air Force planes with their part of the exercise.

Rick spent three years in Germany and he travelled as much as possible. As an officer, it was difficult to take advantage of the 30 days of leave he earned each year. Despite limited time off, Rick was able to tour France, Belgium, Italy and Austria. As a member of the ski club, he would go on ski trips in Germany, Austria, Italy and Switzerland. Soldiers were not permitted to go near the border for fear of starting an international incident, but Rick did have the opportunity to go to East Berlin after receiving special permission. Because Berlin was located inside East Germany, access was through a narrow corridor along a highway into Berlin. Once in Berlin, Rick went on a bus through the Berlin Wall at Checkpoint Charlie and was able to see East Berlin which hadn't been very well rebuilt since the war.

Rick met his wife, Elaine, in Germany. Elaine was a civilian 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher with the Department of Defense on the base at Bamberg and she had been there since 1980. Elaine was also a member of the ski club and this is how they got to know each other. They were married in 1983 at Willow Grove Naval Air Station while on leave.

The further one went from base, the more positive the German people were about the American military. Rick would sometimes come across people who had been there in WWII. Their attitude was usually one of embarrassment over the treatment of the Jews and they would sometimes say they didn't know what was going on at the time. Rick took some German classes and found that if he tried to speak German, the locals were more receptive.

Rick's time in Germany came to an end when the Army decided that Rick should attend the Advanced Officer Course at Fort Belvoir, VA. The course consisted of bookwork and theory and was more like a college atmosphere. Also attending the course were officers from allied nations. One member of Rick's group was an Israeli Major. This Major had a lot to share with the group about his experience in combat with the Israeli Army. Because of this experience, Rick recalls that he had a practical way of looking at things and he was willing to share them with the class. When this course ended, Rick wasn't ready to Leave Fort Belvoir so he signed up for an Atomic Demolition course which kept him there until January of 1985.



Rick Armstrong's uniform from his time as Test Officer.

The next assignment was for Fort Knox, KY where Rick took command of a company of 146 men. They were an Engineer Corps combat unit in support of a tank division. The primary mission was training and Rick tried to get his unit out into the field at least once a month. Stateside duty was different from Germany in that they were always near their home base on training so it made it easier to return to base if there was a meeting or if something was needed.

#### Rebuilding a Road...

During this time, the American Government was giving support to the government of Panama and one of the ways they were doing this was through the building of infrastructure. As a result, Rick's battalion was deployed to Panama to help with reconstructing a road that National Guardsmen and Reservists had built the year before, but had been washed out. Rick went on an advance scouting mission in order to work out the logistics of what equipment and supplies they would have to bring themselves and what would be available from the engineer battalion they were going to support. Some of the Battalion's equipment was loaded on trains at Fort Knox and taken to Panama. Once in Panama, they headed to the work area which was about eight hours south of Panama City. The mission was to re-build the road and drainage areas and a wooden bridge. The base camp was established with tents and cots for

sleeping, a water plant, outside showers and a mess tent. Rick's Company finished their mission within the original 30 days allotted and were asked to stay longer to help the rest of the battalion who were not yet done. Rick really enjoyed the mission as it was hands on and he was proud of his unit's accomplishment.

Elaine had gone into the hospital, pregnant with Brian, on the day Rick left for Panama. She was there as a precaution. While in Panama, Rick received a message one night saying Elaine had been moved from the military hospital to a civilian hospital, but the message didn't say why. Rick grabbed his driver and a Panamanian guard and set off to find a phone. The guard was needed because of the danger of driving on isolated roads at night and because the US Army was not allowed to carry weapons. Unknown to Rick, the Panamanian phone company was on strike so the search for a phone was in vain and Rick ended up making the call via AM Radio from the camp. It turned out that everything was fine with Elaine. Rick's commander called him back to Fort Knox a few weeks later so he could be there when Brian was born. Rick was home for about a week before heading back to Panama.

Once the mission in Panama was over, Rick returned to Fort Knox for about a month before heading to Fort Irwin, CA as an opposing force for war games at the National Training Center. Here they camped out, set mines and dug holes for tanks to hide in. The desert turned cold at night and the fine sand got into everything. At one point, Rick popped his head up to watch a mock battle and had artillery called in on him "14 million times." He learned a valuable lesson about keeping his head down.

Back at Fort Knox, Rick was transferred to a new position, Test Officer for the Armored Engineer Board. The job was to look at potential new equipment and see how soldiers could use it. He would have to develop a scenario for testing and test conditions and how the device could be maintained in the field. The results had to be statistically analyzed and a report written. Among the items Rick tested was a chemical agent monitor and a personal fire extinguisher. The Board also tested to see how long a crew could live in a tank if there were chemicals in the air outside the tank.

Rick didn't like this job very much. He preferred the job of Company Commander, but the Army had a certain path that officers would take and it would be awhile before Rick would be in line for another command. He was also coming up on another overseas tour, usually to Korea at that time. This would be an unaccompanied tour and he would not be able to take Elaine and Brian with him. Rick had already put in his required six years of service so he resigned in July of 1988.

Rick is proud of his service and never regretted his decision to enlist.