



**Willis Al Smith**  
Specialist Fourth Class, U.S. Army  
303 ASA (Army Security Agency) Battalion  
Peacetime  
Berlin Crisis/Cuban Missile Crisis

A 21-year-old working college student and subject to being drafted at the time, I volunteered for the service in 1961. Because Khrushchev, the Russian leader, had ordered the Americans to get out of Berlin in six months, a buildup of troops was in process. Instead of Europe, I eventually was sent to the Far East. For basic training, I went to Fort Leavenworth. My next stop was at Fort Gordon in Georgia for field training before shipping out to the 9th as a Field Station in the Republic of the Philippines for 17 months. I was there during the Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis. While overseas, I also spent 30 days in Japan. I was a Teletype repairman maintaining transmission equipment at communications centers. In fact, I was standing in the communications center in Japan when the CritCom Alert about Cuba was broadcast.

My unit was not a fighting unit, but an intelligence unit. We were intelligence gatherers with top-secret crypto-graphics clearance. Getting into our secured areas was unbelievably complicated. When a Filipino electrician came into our area, we had to cover up all our equipment and materials. I'm not sure if he got out alive or not.

Before my assignment overseas, I had been outside of Texas only twice. We traveled all over the Philippines, where people called us GI's and wondered why we were not in uniform. They had not seen GI's since the 1940s. Because the United States had maintained a presence in the Philippines since taking the islands from the Spanish, many Filipinos spoke English well and used an English-type alphabet. The official language was Tagalog, but people spoke many dialects. One interesting form of the Chinese language was spoken with a Spanish accent. Japan was interesting, too, but very difficult because I couldn't read the language.

When I returned to the States, I was based at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas, and served in

the 303 ASA Battalion. Though I had signed up for the East Coast, the Army sent me to Texas. I had a lot of fun in the Army, but I would not want to do it again. One time around was plenty.

In those days, men had to have their military service behind them before they could have any kind of job future. "What is your draft status?" was a very important question then. Many picked up job skills in the service that they used for the rest of their lives. When I was discharged, I went to work using the skills I had learned as a soldier and have spent my whole life in the telecommunications field. So my training was very beneficial. Eventually, I took advantage of the GI Bill and studied at the University of Texas at Arlington. Though things were fairly inexpensive then (about \$78 per semester for books and tuition), it was financially difficult for me as I had a wife and two children. The costs doubled after I graduated and have risen fantastically since.

My Army salary had been \$68 a month at first and rose to \$78 two or three months later. My overseas E3 pay was \$99 per month. I finally made it to an E4 classification with a salary of \$140 a month.

When I left the service, I returned to Ft. Worth for a while before meeting my wife in Kansas City, Missouri. After we married, I worked for Western Union Telegraph in Dallas for 24 years (1964-1989). Then at the age of 50, I found myself jobless with a wife and one child in college. Luckily, I got a job with DSC Communications, where I worked for several years. Later I spent 11 years with Alcatel, a French manufacturer. During my career, I spent three years in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and I traveled all over the United States, Canada and Mexico. I retired in July 2001.

We came to Tyler about eight years ago after living in Canton for 24 years. Small towns are great, but my wife's medical problems made it easier to live here. I grew up in Fort Worth attending the German Church, which was similar to the Methodists. Throughout my life, I always looked for a church on Sundays. In Puerto Rico, I attended the Isla Verda Baptist Church and became friends with the minister. Pastor Mike Smith, a retired black man from New York, baptized me in "God's Pool" — the Atlantic Ocean. Two or three years ago, I joined Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler.