



A1C Phillips back home in Phoenix, Arizona, shortly after Basic Training, December, 1996.

I only wore the uniform because my mother insisted that my grandmother would love to see me in it, since my grandfather (rest his soul) had retired out of the Air Force after a lengthy career, including flying a P-47 Thunderbolt in support of the D-Day invasion and a C-47 Skytrain in support of Operation Vittles during the Soviet Union's blockade of Berlin.

Hilariously, while she was happy to see me, my grandmother didn't even mention the uniform.

By the way, I think all branches of the U.S. military should give their boot camp graduates a laminated card with the following message: "You will never be this thin and handsome again."

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A1C Phillips on the flightline at Kaneohe Bay, Marine Corps Airbase, Hawaii, ca. 1999.

While stationed in Hawaii, a few of the best Russian linguists in the building had the opportunity to go on an “incentive ride” aboard a U.S. Navy P-3 out of Kaneohe Bay. We were practically falling asleep during the lengthy mission brief when the briefer mentioned that the aircraft would “pay a visit” to a Russian signals intelligence (SIGINT) ship that was parked off the northern coast of Oahu, “just to let them know that *we* know they’re listening.” Suddenly, the four of us perked up and started asking numerous questions. Until that moment, the plane’s crew had no idea who we were. Because of our interest, they made several passes by the ship; I was astonished at how terrible it looked, how much rust I could see on it, even at an altitude of a couple hundred feet. We were allowed to take pictures, and I’ll never forget my boss’s reaction when I showed one to him: “Hey, they really cleaned her up!”

The Russian Federation has a total of seven naval SIGINT platforms (*Vishnya* class). SSV-208, the *Kurili*, was commissioned on 16 October 1987. This is how it looked approximately 12 years later:



‘Nuff said?

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SrA Phillips during the Defense Language Institute's intensive, 47-week long Russian interpreter training course, at a winery just outside Monterey, California.

The range of missions faced by Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) interpreters is very broad, so the training must match that challenge. My class of six joint military personnel went on weekly interpreting excursions, visiting many locations, including a winery (pictured above) [Point Pinos Lighthouse](#), the [Monterey Fire Department](#), the [Monterey Police Department](#), the [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#), [U.S.C.G. Station Monterey](#), the [Monterey Museum of Art](#), and (the class's favorite) a local brewery.

Every week, we had to learn *dozens* of new, specialized words and phrases related to each facility and its mission (think: "jaws of life," "multi-stage pumping operations," and the unique history and characteristics of a [Fresnel lens](#)).

This training precisely mirrored what we would have to do for actual DTRA missions: it wasn't uncommon to get a short-notice requirement for a mission we'd never worked before, and we would dig deep into both English and Russian terms about topics we were perhaps reading about for the first time. Quick, in-depth learning about new subjects is something I've dealt with my entire career.



SrA Phillips and classmates as “foreigners” for training U.S. Army personnel on Fort Ord, November 2000.

This one was pure fun. During our interpreter training course, we were detailed to Fort Ord to play the role of non-friendly locals for U.S. Army units that were training for possible deployments to former Soviet republics.



SSgt Phillips in- and outside the former anthrax production facility in Stepnegorsk, Kazakhstan.

In 2000, I was assigned to Team X, comprised of Russian interpreters for the Chemical and Biological Weapons section of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) division under DTRA. In 2002, I deployed to Stepnegorsk, Kazakhstan, a formerly closed city that didn't appear on a public map until the 1990s. I went with a team that was reviewing the progress the Kazakhs were making in demilitarizing a former Soviet-era facility that produced genetically engineered, [weaponized anthrax](#). In bulk. The stainless-steel vats they used to make the brew were two stories tall.

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And this is where they tested it, on what used to be an island in the Aral Sea, between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The facility, called Aralsk-7, was abandoned by the Russians after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1992, they buried the anthrax in several spots, marked them on a map, and tossed the keys to the Uzbeks. Soviet mismanagement of the rivers feeding the sea meant the island would soon be easily accessible, and after Sept 11th, 2001, the U.S. was alarmed that Al Qaida might dig up the anthrax and use it for terror attacks. The race was on to find the anthrax, dig it up, and decontaminate it. I served on a team with a two-fold mission: escort a senior military team to provide the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) with a first-hand view of the scope of the project, and scout the facility for a good campsite and stock it with water/supplies for the main mission.

Even though I was the most junior-ranking interpreter on the Chem/Bio team, my superiors recognized I had the discipline and self-possession required to represent the mission to a general officer from OSD.

The helicopter we flew in and out on, a Soviet Mi-8 Hip, offered a shockingly smooth ride. It was painted blaze orange so it would be easier to find/recover in a crash.

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Being coined by the Commander of the U.S. Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences in Bangkok, Thailand in May 2002.

Because the U.S. had so many military personnel stationed in Central Asia in the early 2000's, we were concerned about the local pathogens our troops would encounter. We turned to our hosts, the Uzbek government, and asked them to share the data they had gathered at their two premier biological research facilities, the Research Institute of Virology and the Center for the Prophylaxis and Quarantine of Most Hazardous Infections. As one might imagine, decades of habitual secrecy were not easy to unlearn, but we found a way. In exchange for samples of their most common and virulent local pathogens, DTRA arranged for their top scientists to travel to Bangkok, Thailand, where they were able to train with scientists from the U.S. Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences. I was one of two interpreters on that mission.

This was among my most mentally challenging assignments, but once again, the Air Force had prepared me for it. In 2000, I attended a course at the University of Alabama that crammed four years of biology studies into two weeks. Day one, hour one began with "this is a cell," and the last hour of the last day ended with polymerase chain reaction (PCR), which is a way to amplify DNA. I remember walking out of there thinking "I'll never use that." But sure enough, there in Bangkok, I was using that training to help the Thai scientists explain to the Uzbek scientists how they use PCR in their research.

Even though the Uzbek scientists had been using research modalities that were badly outdated and hadn't been used in the west for decades, their western counterparts were surprised to learn that the results of their research almost exactly matched those of more modern western models.



Masks slung.



Masks donned.

In the city of Novocheboksarsk, Russia, there is a former chemical weapons production facility that produced VX (and a derivative known as “Novichok”). I served on a team that was tasked with monitoring its demilitarization. This was by far the most physically challenging mission I ever had in the Air Force. We would don thick butyl rubber suits and enter the facility, which was very dimly lit. As the team’s sole interpreter, I had to shout through the butyl rubber mask and strain to listen to my American and Russian principals. At one point, we tried a throat microphone, but it was unreliable. Upon exiting the building, we stepped into a hydrogen peroxide shower, after which we went down a line of employees who wore their own PPE, and who would remove our suits for us, piece by piece, right down to our skivvies, since we couldn’t safely touch anything that had been inside the facility. Then we had to take a shower and scrub ourselves down with soap. We did “two-a-days,” one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

I remember what looked like a cupful of sweat pouring out of each of my gloves when they were pulled off.

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SSgt Phillips celebrating his promotion to TSgt at U.S. Embassy Moscow, ca. 2006. The TSgt stripes are wonky because they were just “tacked on” (with tape) minutes before.

The job I had at the embassy was normally held by a MSgt, and it was usually their “final ride” in the Air Force. As a SSgt, I was pleased to be chosen by a board to fill a small but critical role in the Cooperative Threat Reduction mission. My counterpart in the Russian Ministry of Defense was a lieutenant colonel. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the secret behind the power of the U.S. military—the range of authority and responsibility it gives to its NCO corps is unparalleled, and what makes us such an effective fighting force.



TSgt Phillips receiving an award at U.S. Embassy Moscow in front of the much-maligned “Fried Egg” artwork. The gentleman on the far right is SMSgt Timothy Russell (ret.), who became an incredibly important mentor and dear friend while I was stationed in Moscow. He still works for the DoD in WMD non-proliferation. I was happy to host him here in Grey Forest last year when he needed a break from life inside the Washington, D.C. beltway.

The way the beauty and tranquility of our little city amazed him reminds me not to take it for granted.

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