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The GI Who Came In From The Cold



Secret negotiations bring
back intelligence trooper
who spent 82 days in a
Czechoslovakian jail. Full
story on Pages 4-5

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THE PANEL truck slowly edged up through the woods toward the dividing line, the no-man's land of the Iron Curtain — from the Czechoslovakia side.

The four figures who climbed out into the gray, half-light of the mid-European winter were identified by western observers as a Czech army major, a driver, an ominous man in civilian clothes and a long-missing American GI. Sp5 Fred Ben Rider.

For nearly 12 weeks, Rider had lived behind the lines of the east bloc country — viewing the world from inside a Communist jail.

What he did there, what he told them and why he went over the big hill in the first place were questions that Army intelligence investigators were probably asking him hours after his sudden return to western control last week.

The questions puzzling observers here are:

- Did Rider defect and then change his mind? or,
- Was Rider so drunk he didn't know what he was doing? or,
- Was this highly-trained intelligence soldier sent across the border on some mysterious spy assignment? and,
- Regardless of why he went, did U.S. diplomatic officials, during the behind-the-scenes negotiations to get Rider back, convince the Czechs to return this errant U.S. soldier before the Communists realized they had a gold-mine of intelligence secrets in their hands? A man who, no matter what his training and resolve, could have been broken by modern brain-washing techniques and chemicals. or,
- Did the Czechs use the 82 days to pick Rider's mind clean and then return him to the West?

And they are questions that, due to the tightness of intelligence operations on

On Oct. 20, Fred Rider got out of a cab near the Czech-German border. Eleven weeks later he crossed back into Bavaria. What happened between October and January is a question every intelligence agent in Europe would like to have answered, for Fred Rider knew too much to be wandering around in a Communist country.

both sides of the border, may never be revealed in full to the public.

But it's clear that during his lengthy absence from U.S. control, Western military spooks lived with the fear that Rider had taken a lot of secret papers with him.

And, they feared, even if he'd gone across the border drunk or in a fit of rage, that the 23-year-old Ardmore, Okla., soldier was nothing less than a walking goldmine of classified data, which he'd gathered simply by doing his job.

For Rider, who held one of the Army's highest security clearances — Top Secret Crypto — and who was down in the official books as a simple teletype operator, was reportedly especially trained in the Czech language and was actually deeply involved in the operations of a hush-hush Army Security Agency site in Western Germany just six miles from the Czech border.

He had undoubtedly been exposed to some of the military's most sensitive secret information — information that, given freely or drained forcibly from his mind and compiled, could have exposed much of the inner workings of the Army in Europe.

No matter why he'd gone, authorities were worried stiff.

And it was for that reason that high-ranking Pentagon brass two months ago put through a rushed, top-priority, 11th hour telephone call to *The Weekly's* main office in Oakland, Calif., when they

learned that the newspaper was about to publish the complete and detailed story of Fred Rider's disappearance.

As the stone-voiced official explained it during that mid-November phone conversation, the reds just might not realize or discover who Rider is and what he knows — if the story is not printed.

The story, gathered in detail by *The Weekly's* Paul Mungo, was fully printed in the Stateside editions of the paper and ready for distribution, the entire edition was destroyed and another story was substituted.

For, in the eyes of the editors of *The Weekly*, it was not just a question of national security. Rider's very life, they figured, depended on whether or not his identity and knowledge were revealed during secret negotiations to get him out.

Rider's activities the night he disappeared seemed suspicious.

Early in the evening of Oct. 20, he went to the nightclubs in Farnim Wald, about two miles from his base in Rimbach, east of Regensburg.

Around 2 a.m., he called a taxi from the Lido Bar where he reportedly knew German waitress Louise Gette.

A cabbie picked him up at the Marktplatz, the main square in the little town and about a minute's walk from the Lido.

As he was climbing into the waiting taxi, waitress Gette had a few words with him and, according to the cab driver, Rider handed the girl a brown

envelope and told her goodbye.

The driver also remembered that Rider, instead of naming the place he wanted to go, directed him by giving specific instructions to turn left here or right there.

At a point about 300 meters from the no-man's land at the Czech border, Rider told the driver to stop and paid him the fare.

The trooper got out of the cab and by the time the back had turned around, was gone.

"I don't know where he went," said the cabbie later. "He just disappeared."

But where did he go and why? Informed sources say that Rider was "pretty drunk" that night. Drunk or out of his skull.

"It doesn't make sense for a guy who'd done three-and-a-half years of his time and was due to get out in April to do what he did," said a soldier from Rider's unit. "All I can guess is that he was blown out."

"Maybe he was really drunk or he'd blown a fuse," added another GI from the spook outfit.

Whatever the case, it was pure hell for Rider to cross at that point or to cross into any east bloc country. Because of his ASA job, he was even forbidden to enter any such country for a period of up to five years after his release from the Army.

And besides that, the frontier at that point along the border is guarded by 500

meters of no-man's land and studded with land mines and trip wires attached to flares.

Czech border patrol guards are stationed in towers and armed with search lights that make it almost impossible for anyone to cross either way without being detected.

Riders' Detachment "K" unit buddies just couldn't figure it out.

"Fred . . . wasn't the type of guy to defect," said one of his friends just days after Rider's absence had been discovered by *The Weekly*. "He was a real quiet guy. If he went over, he must have been drunk or something."

"Most of the guys here would consider themselves shafted if they got transferred out of this place," said another Rimbach GI, also unable to understand the reasons for Rider's possible defection.

The appeal of the isolated ASA site — the small unit lives in a Gasthaus — according to the soldiers is that there are very few GIs stationed there and they are well received by the local community.

"Rider used to make it with a lot of chicks," said another one of his friends. "He must have had about three or four girl friends here."

Waitress Geete said she was not one of them. She said she was just a friend and claimed she didn't even know that he was going to disappear that night.

"He didn't say anything to me," she told *The Weekly's* Mungo.

She also claimed that she only looked into the envelope he gave her and saw a picture of him along with some papers.

She said she doesn't know what the papers were all about because military intelligence investigators took them from her the next day.

The MI types also had apparently made the rounds of the town immediately following Rider's disappearance, since most people questioned by newsmen had already been told to keep quiet.

And as Mungo was investigating the incident, just days after Rider's sudden

absence, he spotted an overweight ASA noncom obviously assigned to tail him.

An MP assigned to the ASA Det K in Rimbach who had been seen talking to Mungo on the Saturday he was down there was called in by his CO on Monday and asked what he had talked about, reminding him that he had been given earlier instructions not to talk to any press people — especially *The Weekly*. Then on Tuesday he was called in by CID and asked the same questions plus: "Did you see his credentials?"

Unit leaders were apparently unaware of the GI's disappearance. They first told *The Weekly* they didn't know anything about Rider's supposed journey to the East.

"He's just on a three-day pass," said one outfit leader.

And, in fact, Rider was on pass from Oct. 21 through Oct. 23 when the honchos finally put him down as AWOL.

A later query, however, brought a swift, "no comment."

Subsequently the soldier was dropped from the rolls as a deserter because of Army regs that say anyone holding a secret clearance or higher should be listed as a deserter after a 24-hour absence.

Weeks after his apparent defection, Rider's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Howard Rider, who reside in Ardmore, said they had not been contacted by military officials or otherwise informed that their son was missing from his unit.

Mrs. Rider said she last heard from her son about Oct. 10 when she received a birthday card and a letter from him.

And when informed that there was some reason to believe her son might have jumped the border, she said:

"That doesn't sound like Fred. Are you sure you've got the right Fred Rider? Fred seemed to like the service real well — he liked the fellas and all."

She also said at that time that her son had been considering entering a seminary to become a "youth minister."

As the days and weeks and months

went by, the word began to spread: "Some soldier has gone across to the other side, possibly carrying highly secret papers."

Newsmen all over Europe began nosing around and word reportedly passed from Eucom headquarters in Stuttgart to both the *Stars and Stripes* and the armed forces radio chiefs that until further notice they were to doublecheck before using any stories of GIs deserting to the East.

The Weekly has learned from an informed source that Rider was just plain drunk when he stumbled across the border.

And when he awoke the next morning, on the other side, he was already in handcuffs and in the possession of uniformed Czech authorities who had arrested him for illegal entry.

He was supposedly transported first to Pilsen and then on to the Czech capital of Prague — to be stuck behind bars as a Communist prisoner.

U.S. Embassy officials apparently visited him on one occasion, according to international rules and a Merry Christmas message from his parents was supposed to have been sent over to the other side.

Whether or not he got that word is apparently unknown, but Rider did send word to his folks back home in Oklahoma saying that he was okay and for them not to worry, according to an inside source.

He was visited occasionally for talks or interrogation by Czech officials while he was in jail, but what they asked him and what he said will probably remain mysteries to the public.

He was not physically mistreated, however, according to sources close to the Rider investigation.

Just as military brass were beginning to suspect the worst — that the GI would never be coming back — word reached Usareur Hqs Jan. 7 that Rider would be returning to the West on Jan. 10.

The message didn't reveal just where or how he'd be shuttled back, the spokesman said, so West German border guards and the MI people were apparently alerted to watch all border crossing points.

And at a little before 2 p.m., Jan. 10 — 82 days after he was last seen in the Federal Republic of Germany — Western observers noticed the panel truck slowly edging up towards the frontier crossing point at Furth im Wald — only several hundred yards from Rider's taxi destination of Oct. 20.

Minutes later, Sp5 Fred Ben Rider hopped out, hesitated to listen to directions from his Czech army major escort, and then walked across the Iron Curtain back into the hands of waiting Bavarian border guards.

An hour later, his parents got the good word that he was back in the West, according to a Usareur spokesman, who added that they probably wouldn't be seeing their son for several weeks at least. "We are really happy," Mrs. Rider told a reporter. "... Overjoyed that he is safe."

Rider was escorted to the U.S. Army hospital in Augsburg for a medical examination. Army doctors reported that he was in "good condition," that he had apparently suffered no injuries or weight loss and that he required no medical treatment of any kind.

Now, according to Usareur officials, Rider is undergoing a "routine" debriefing in the hands of the military intelligence people at an unspecified place in Augsburg (ASA's EUROPEAN Hqs are in Augsburg).

And, added the official in answer to a query from *The Weekly*, pending outcome of investigations, "It's impossible to speculate" on whether or not any criminal charges will be made against the GI.

That, of course, probably depends on whether or not Rider spilled the secret beans or not — and why he crossed the border.