

THE ROAD TO NEW HAVEN

(The journey from Raw Recruit to Chinese Linguist)

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This account is my story. But after comparing notes with countless others who have gone through the program, I found that it isn't all that different from what they experienced. So consider it to be typical.

The road began at the time I was inducted into the Air Force for military service and ended when I was selected to be a part of the Chinese language program.

I was inducted into the U. S. Air Force on June 17, 1957 and sent to Lackland Air Force Base, Texas for basic military training.

There were several isolated exceptions, but for the most part all of us came to IFEL directly from basic training. For some there was a period of "casual" status to fill the interval between completion of basic and the scheduled start of the next class. But we were essentially right out of basic. Many came into the Air Force right out of high school and there were even a few who dropped out before graduation but who had that certain "something" that made them good prospects for succeeding in the study of Mandarin. A few of us were older – I was 22 when I joined in order to avoid being drafted into the Army and there were others who had finished college. I just worked after high school having a good old time of it until the day that I would be drafted into the Army approached.

Because I didn't have much in the way of career prospects as a civilian, an Air Force recruiter talked me into signing up with him in order to acquire training in some sort of useful trade that I could use even if I decided not to make a career of it. The cost to me amounted to two years of my life. It was either be trained as cannon fodder as a draftee in the Army and get out after two years or go into the Air Force for 4 years and learn a trade. As the recruiter said, "For every one person who flies, there are close to two thousand people on the ground doing specialized jobs to support him (There weren't any hers back then. Only him). None of the support people is trained in digging foxholes."

Everyone who joins the Air Force went through a process of "career counseling" during the first four weeks of basic training. The process consisted of taking a battery of aptitude tests oriented toward different lines of work, and then sitting down with a career counselor to review the results and decide on a career path.

At the time I and many of my contemporaries went through the process, the Air Force was ramping up its language program to develop linguists to serve as "Voice Intercept Processing Specialists,:" as the job was called, with Security Service. Security Service was a relatively new command and the nature of its mission so secret that the counselors knew little about it other than that it involved learning languages.

Based on my test results, I ended up being told that when the time came, I would be sent to become either an airframe repairman, avionics equipment maintenance specialist or some other less "glamorous" pursuit depending on the needs of the Air

Force at the time. Jet pilot? Not with my eyesight. They wouldn't even let me within 50 feet on an uninflated weather balloon. Nothing at all was said about languages up to that point.

Then, almost as an afterthought, the counselor asked me, "How are you at languages.?" While I was never an academic giant, I had breezed through 3 years of high school Spanish hardly cracking a book. It came to me naturally. That is what they were looking for. So, to confirm it, they scheduled me to take a generalized language aptitude test; the Psi-Lambda Test." Those who passed would be sent to learn any one of the languages needed by Security Service. That is, except for one; Chinese.

The other languages were taught either at selected civilian universities around the country or the Army Language School (Now known as the Defense Language Institute) in Monterey, California. Chinese was taught at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. In order to qualify for Chinese, you had to score fairly high on the Psi-Lambda and successfully complete what was called the "Chinese Screening."

When I heard "New Haven," my ears perked up and what really made points was that I'd be in New Haven for the next eight months, a mere 83 miles from home. What a deal! It had nothing to do with any special desire to learn Chinese other than it was indeed a unique accomplishment for a young American in the 1950s. I had my work cut out for me. Today the Psi-Lambda. Tomorrow the screening. Bring 'em on.

I made the cut on the Psi-Lambda and was scheduled for the screening. It was conducted by several of the senior staff from the Institute of Far Eastern Languages at Yale. They came down to Lackland and brought with them, 2 or 3 of the top students from the next class to graduate. The purpose of bringing the students was twofold. First was for them to assist the faculty people with administrative chores and the second was to banter with them in Chinese in order to impress the people taking the test with how much Chinese they could speak after less than 8 months of study.

The screening itself consisted mainly of subjecting us to the first three lessons in the first textbook used in the actual course. The only difference was that they were covered in half the time that they would be covered in class. Its whole purpose was to assess the candidate's ability to absorb the material. They didn't expect us to learn it as they would if we were in class. It was just a benchmark. The people from the institute had some idea as to how much was acceptable and that's what they aimed for. They were looking to select 70 people for the next class. But after the screening was finished, only 59 made the cut. So, they lowered the bar a bit and took the top eleven people from the remainder. Nevertheless, the technique worked amazingly well. The extremely low rate of people washing out of the course attests to that.

I was one of the eleven. BINGO! This kid from the mean streets of New York I was off to be an Ivy League airman for the next 8 months and a mere 83 miles from home, at that. All was right with the world.

What followed during the next 8 months was the most defining period of my entire life. It resulted in my mastering something that I never would have thought I could do. It was due largely to the extremely well crafted curriculum and the talents of an excellent faculty. To the man who engineered the entire package, the late Robert N. Tharp, I will be eternally grateful. In short order he took his place among those I consider my heroes

where he shall always remain. I don't believe I am alone in that opinion. It is probably shared by everyone who has ever completed the course. .