



STEPHEN GARRISON

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Psychological warfare was not new to the Army in 1975. The discipline had been put to operational use routinely since World War I. In fact, psychological warfare traces lineage back 2,000 years, but by '75 the practice for the U.S. Army had been codified as Psychological Operations. In efforts to improve the quality of their analysis, the 4th Psychological Operations Group began hiring civilian analysts - cultural and linguistic experts capable of providing in-depth analysis of targeted groups.

Stephen Garrison was one of the first civilians hired. Specializing in Russian language, literature and culture, Stephen spent the next 40 years as a specialist on Russia, the Baltic States, Belarus and the Ukraine. Splitting his career between the original PSYOP analyst

think-tank on Fort Bragg and with 4th MISG's 6th Battalion, he literally wrote the book on Russia. Multiple books would be more correct to say. In September 2015 he retired, receiving the Army Meritorious Civilian Service Award for his years of professional service. Spotlight on the Regiment had the opportunity to hit the wave tops of the last 40 years with Stephen in March 2016. Excerpts of his interview follow:

SPOTLIGHT: It is difficult to figure where to begin with 40 years of career to cover but the beginning tends to be the best place most of the time. Can you describe what was going on when you joined the organization?

GARRISON: The Group was inactivated in 1971 and reactivated in 1972 and then civilians came on board, the first cohort, in 1975, so that was scant three years or so after the reactivation. It was a Group still searching for a real-world mission. It was still facing the massive negative repercussions of the downsizing post-Vietnam. A lot of personnel turbulence within the Group. A lot of people thought Psychological Operations is mind control, it's a kind of strange entity here.

SPOTLIGHT: "The Men Who Stare at Goats" type thing?

GARRISON: Yeah yeah, right. A lot of people thought it was not a good place to be to serve your time in terms of career progression. We did have a lot of people come through from many different branches, and many without knowledge. It was an interesting mix as things were starting to coalesce after that reactivation. By coalesce I mean defining a real-world mission. Bringing in people with psychology backgrounds, social science backgrounds, these kinds of things. But it was very much lean years, from '75 to '79 as far as the Group was concerned. The first cohort of civilians hired was about eight people. I was the second person hired. We were brought on as subject matter experts, and also to write a document called the Basic Psychological Study, and this was a tome like volume. It was written by military people, enlisted, NCOs, who had no experience in the countries that they were writing about. So, a lot of times the sources tended to come from encyclopedias and it was country summaries more or less. When civilians first came on board we streamlined it to a nine-chapter document. The chapters included government, politics, history, foreign policy, society and culture, economics, military, communication processes and effects, and target groups. We were assigned to different countries. The first BPS was on the Soviet Union. Second BPS was on the People's Republic of China. We were charged not to write country summaries but psychologically relevant documents. By this, we tried to minimize descriptive material and maximize psychologically relevant material that is, material that is issue oriented. What were divisive and cohesive issues in a country, in an economy, within a military, within a country's politics? We actually pioneered the use of issues, psychologically relevant information. All of these were a result of the civilians coming on board. It was an evolutionary process.

SPOTLIGHT: How did you find yourself as the second person selected? What was your background, what made you a good pick?

GARRISON: I had finished graduate school at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in Russian literature and Russian history, with Slavic linguistics as a minor. After one or two years of deciding which way I was going to go, either academia or find something else, I saw a vacancy announcement that civilians were going to be brought on board in 4th Group. Not expecting anything, I came down to Fort Bragg from Raleigh, Chapel Hill and interviewed with the Group commander and was brought on board.

SPOTLIGHT: At that time, Psychological Operations was not a branch yet, there was a course taught at the Special Warfare School but people kind of came into the field and went out of it. It wasn't a matriculation process, is that correct?

GARRISON: That's true, it was very much later that the PSYOP branch was stood up. Very much later, decades later. This is significant. It was only the John F. Kennedy Center off of Ardennes [St.], a two-star was in command, and PSYOP was this little entity to one side and Special Forces was to the other side, and never the twain shall meet in terms of integration.

SPOTLIGHT: It takes time to figure out those relationships.

GARRISON: A key factor here for civilians, we were originally in building 2719, which is across from the JFK Chapel off of Ardennes. It was originally a 5th Special Forces Group holding area built in the 1950s. As local civilian strength began to increase we were put into this building. It was a think-tank environment. What I would like to stress is that there was only infrequent or episodic contact with military. The 4th Group had its SCIF [secret compartmentalized information facility] and 2-Shop [intelligence analysis cell] downstairs but not many analysts at the time had TS [top secret] clearances. We knew the military was there, we could go in, but there wasn't much contact and many of the analysts had minimal contact with the military being over there. Civilian strength grew in the early 1980s to about 44 and were still in [building] 2719. Things began to change for the group and for the Army as a whole with the advent of the Regan administration in 1980 mainly with significant budgetary increases enabled us to increase our hiring actions. All of the COCOMs [combatant commands] were supported by strategic studies detachments made up of civilians. We had sufficient strength on the teams when we reached the mid-1980s.

During that time we had one of the visionary 4th Group commanders, Col. Alfred Paddock, who was a Ph. D. in military history from Duke University. He wrote his dissertation on the History of Psychological Operations after WWII, I believe, and one of the main points in that dissertation was that Special Forces derive from Psychological Operations and not the other way around. So many people have the misconception that Psychological Operations were born out of the SF capability and it was the other way around. It was post WWII that our PSYOP capabilities were fashioned, through the Korean War. When the center was opened John F. Kennedy came down in '61 to dedicate the center. It was a big deal in those years. The other thing that Col. Paddock did, which was significant, he raised the bar for civilian analysts and required an advanced degree. That winnowed out a lot of ex-sergeants major and captains, or other people applying.

SPOTLIGHT: Had there been an issue with the analyst pool being a retirement option rather than a career?

GARRISON: Yes, that was an issue. We had a high rate of turnover the first 10 years, somewhat attributable to the quality of the analysts. A lot of people left because they couldn't cut it as far as writing. That contributed to turbulence and turnover in those early years. Things started to stabilize, in regard to analyst tenure, in the '80s. By the early '90s the civilian analytical corps and support corps, editors, technicians, reached an apogee of about 60. This was a large group; too large for building 2719. There was a spillover building, a former mess hall, just across the way in front of the SF barracks. PACOM [Pacific command] battalion analysts went over there, some others as well. It was still a think-tank environment with some limits on interaction with the military simply because of the way we were located, sequestered as analysts. Decades from the initial hires in '75, the decision was made to push down the civilians to the battalions.

SPOTLIGHT: Before that, it sounds like for 20 years you had been working together, you had that concentration of analysis and experience. So when the “think-tank” was broken up around 2000 what was that like?

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GARRISON: The obvious and immediate effect was to increase interaction between civilians and military. The potential was there for daily, at least weekly, interaction which heretofore was not the case when we were sequestered. We started coming on MRXs [mission readiness exercises], team deployments, JRTC [joint readiness training center] rotations. We started going to staff meetings. It was a much higher level of integration between civilian analysts and the military. It's been that way for the last 15 years.

SPOTLIGHT: That's a significant change because you're going from an academic production of your data and sending it off into the wild to being able to see where the rubber meets the road and what works and what doesn't.

GARRISON: Those early studies were mailed out, no electronic dissemination in those years, and *poompf* they'd go out and sometimes we'd hear things back sometimes not.

SPOTLIGHT: You had no idea if your work was bearing fruit. That must have been difficult. You wrote it, sent it out and if you heard something then great. Either way you just started worked on the next one.

GARRISON: That's absolutely true. When the first BPS on the Soviet Union went out in '76 we got a call from a Department of State desk officer out of the blue. He said, "This thing just came across my desk and we've never seen this kind of product from a military unit before. I'd like to come down and talk with the analysts." This SES [senior executive services] person comes down for three days, talks with us, invites us to come up to see the INR [bureau of intelligence and research] analytical people at state to talk with desk officers, which my team did. It's interesting because we established a good relationship with State in those early years and he took the highly unusual step of coming to Bragg and telling us that he liked the BPS. Highly unusual and it sticks in my mind.

SPOTLIGHT: Why was this such a rarity do you think?

GARRISON: The Basic Psychological Study was a tome about one and a half inches thick. It was encyclopedic to a degree, in terms of psychologically relevant information, but it tended not to be read because it was a long document. A lot of people didn't read them, or only excerpted information from these. So we developed an SPS, Special Psychological Study, and also a Special Psychological Assessment. The SPS was much shorter and focused on a particular theme, problem or vulnerability in the country. The Special Psychological Assessments were maybe two to three pages long as opposed to 60 pages with the SPS, and were even more specific and would zero in on one issue.

SPOTLIGHT: So rather than a Cliff Notes approach where it was broad, you would just restrict content selection to a specific cultural aspect or location?

GARRISON: That's right, it wasn't a Cliff Notes approach. Today, I suppose, the BPSs would be regarded as Paleolithic documents. There are maybe two or three extant. The unit historians have got those in the archives if you'd like to see a hard copy of one, the rest are all gone. And I might say that there is a Soviet Union BPS that I saved it for all of those years. It has historical and possibly archeological significance [laughter].

As for Russia, it's difficult to put yourself back in the '80s to fully appreciate what the Soviet PSYOP threat was. The massive threat the West was facing at that time in terms of anti-Persian missile deployments, massive demonstrations by students in western European universities and U.S. universities also. Huge demonstrations, with hundreds of thousands participating. The one factor that was never mentioned was that the Soviets had already deployed their missiles in Warsaw pact countries and also in Leningrad, so there was never any action taken for them to remove those missiles back further into the heartland of Russia. It was always this anti-western approach. In '84 I wrote a study called the Soviet Strategic PSYOP Threat, which analyzed all the Soviet campaigns and offered ways for PSYOP to counter these actions. I also wrote a shorter study, SPS, on the Soviet military tactical psychological operations threat, and this is a very arcane esoteric subject because there was very little open source discussion. The Soviets developed a superb tactical psychological operational capability in their military in the middle and later stages of WWII, just an amazing organization. It became a separate directorate in the military intelligence section of the Soviet general staff.

I'd also like to say, something that occurred to me, in the early years of doing the BPSs we were doing studies on NATO allies like Portugal and the Azores, maybe some Scandinavian countries. Something we'd never do today, of course. For example, in Portugal there was a danger of a communist political party taking over the country which was of great concern to NATO for the naval basing there. They wanted to know the strengths and vulnerabilities of the political party in the countries. We were concerned greatly about the airbase in the Azores, so we did a nine chapter study about the Azores.

SPOTLIGHT: Well, there is nothing inherently sinister about these studies

GARRISON: No, there was nothing sinister about that but in today's perceptual climate it certainly would be. From a larger view, these attitudinal sets to a certain degree, while not wholly cyclical, do tend to flow. With the backdrop of four decades you can see certain patterns emerge. Familiar terrain points.

SPOTLIGHT: Speaking of patterns and terrain points over time, while we certainly look different as an organization would you say that we are we seeing more than we used to or are we blind in some areas?

GARRISON: We see more, because in the '80s there was no cyber threat and no social media platforms with which to conduct influence operations. You can more highly saturate areas and target audiences. NATO has vowed to create TV stations to try and counter the Russian threat against ex-patriot Russians living in the Baltics and other NATO countries. Through soft influence operations and actual propaganda operations, Moscow TV is being beamed in to these areas, it's a clever mixture of high-quality movies and entertainment interspersed with local news which is pro-Russian pro-Putin. It's a hook and bait type of thing. You get the audience with the Russian versions of Discovery channel or History channel and then you turn on the influence.

Something like 84 to 90 percent of Russians living within the Russian federation get their main knowledge of outside world and news from the Russian press which is state controlled in terms of editorial policies. Hence, the great rise in xenophobic attitudes among Russians against the U.S. and NATO thinking that Ukraine was the aggressor, and they brilliantly labelled Viktor Yanukovych as fascist because that fit into the WWII idea. One of the great defining moments, to this day, for Russians, and deeply imbedded in the Russian psyche, is winning WWII. They believe they largely did it by themselves. That is heavily influencing, when you have an audience predisposed to that and you call the Ukrainians or Western Europeans fascists, already you have this emotionally charged appellation that is going to penetrate and resonate at various levels. It increases the effectiveness of their influence operations. I remember a large poster I saw that showed a swastika and the Russian federation flag next to each other and simply said, "This or That." Minimal words, great images, extremely effective. Minimalist, brilliant propaganda. Not as heavy handed as during the Soviet years.

SPOTLIGHT: My take away from this part of our conversation is an illustrated and documented importance of Psychological Operations but much of that is a case study of what other countries have done, and done well. What about us?

GARRISON: Truly impressive MISO [military information support operations] and PSYOP professionals, but we do need to address increasing the efficacy of our strategic effort to whatever extent. The old thing that the community has been wrestling with for decades has been MOE, measures of effectiveness.

SPOTLIGHT: That's always been the smoky nature of Psychological Operations and it is part of why so many people don't understand it. It's hard to point at an operation and say, "That right there, PSYOP made that happen." I think that's a strength that PSYOP is working so seamlessly with other agencies to have those needle moves be imperceptible and be done with a steady hand where necessary. It is a strength we've cultivated, but that's a hard story to tell.

GARRISON: It is, I agree with that, and I agree that's been part of the impressive success of MISO in the last 16 years - the ability to jumpstart again the relationship with the Department of State, to work seamlessly with entities across Fort Bragg, and with the Groups. Perhaps we've scored, perhaps we are scoring successes and moving the needle now. I think we are poised to move the needle in significant ways.

I want to underscore the significant increase in professionalism and the efficacy at all levels, enlisted, NCO and officer. It is truly impressive and I know they are doing impressive work today. Coming from searching for a mission in the late '70s more or less, then getting back on the radar screen with Grenada and Panama it started swinging us in the direction of increased professionalism and knowledge-ability. It's been capped off by the fruition of the PSYOP branch and the enlisted equivalent career track positions. Also, the PSYOP branch pushing down of civilians almost occurred at the same time. We are talking about injects which dramatically increased the professionalism on the military side of the house, it enables them to effectively conduct these seamless operations.

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