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On Leave in Europe in 1955. Tom and Mel's Excellent Adventures in France and Spain..

At the 7th Army Symphony Orchestra Reunion in Columbus< Ohio in August, 2010, I saw Mel Flanzman for the first time in fifty five years. He played first trombone and I played first trumpet in the orchestra in 1955.

We were good friends and in the last summer of our army service we went on a month's leave together to France and Spain. The first thing Mel said to me in Columbus was that his service with the Seventh Army Orchestra and particularly our month-long leave were the most interesting times of his life. This may be an exaggeration but I feel pretty much the same way.

Fifty five years is a long time, but before the smoky trails of memory grow any fainter I want to reconstruct what to us was an exciting time, the summer of 1955. A G.I. *Recherche de Temps Perdú*, without Proust's neuroses, *madeleines* or writing talent.

In the spring of 1955 we had already played many concerts in Germany, made a five week tour to the principal cities of Italy and had a very successful tour of Great Britain, playing at the Edinburgh Festival, the Royal Albert Hall in London, a concert in Swansea Wales and finally a concert in Belfast Ireland.

Mel and I were scheduled to be discharged from the Army in September and we decided to wind it all up before then with a thirty day, (our army leave for the year), trip to France and Spain. Neither of us had been to Paris or Madrid and they became the cornerstones of our trip in July 1955.

Planning in those far off years was not difficult. We made no plans. We got our official leave papers, wore and packed only civilian clothes, got on the bus from our army base at Vaihingen, went to Stuttgart and took the train to Paris. My French vocabulary at the time consisted of *bon jour*, *sandwich au jambon*, *bière* and *merci*. (I have since learned French.) It must have been about a ten hour trip. According to the Internet we would have arrived at the *Gare de l'Est*.

We must have walked a bit from there until we spotted the *Hotel St. Roch* on *Rue St. Roch* across from the *Eglise St. Roch*. It looked good. It was a simple, clean, cheap, threadbare hotel with toilets at the end of the hall. *Petit déjeuner* consisted of *café au lait* and *croissants*. We ate lunch at *Le Welcome*, next door to the hotel, a plain workingman's restaurant, with many noisy local residents seated at a long single table dividing the room and a menu that depended on what the cook had made that day. There were few choices but the food was excellent and cheap. Mel remembers: "Not being able to interpret any thing on the menu, I simply pointed to a dish and nodded to the waiter. What arrived was a fish head in some slimy sauce with the eyes of the fish staring up at me. I could not even look at that stare, no less eat it." It might have been *Poisson en Gelée*, (Jellied fish) I made a better guess and had *Coq au vin*. (Chicken in wine sauce). Some fifteen years later, with my wife Donna on another trip to Paris, we ate at the same restaurant and it was just as I remembered it, bedlam and good food costing next to nothing.

What did we do each day besides sleep and eat? We must have gone to the *Louvre*, seen the *Tulleries* and *Notre Dame*. Walked a lot. Done the tourist's Paris.

We did meet up with Earl Mitchell, former timpanist with our orchestra, who left the orchestra in June 1955 and went to Paris

to study at the Sorbonne and the Conservatoire. We somehow met him and went out to lunch. I remember him complaining about how difficult it was to learn French compared to learning German. He didn't seem to know more French than I did, even after a month in Paris. He and I had *Sandwich au Jambon*, Mel, being Jewish must have had a *Sandwiche au Fromage*. We had *trois bières*. Earl seemed disappointed with his stay in Paris and was looking forward to being back in the USA..

A memorable day for me in Paris was when I went to the Couesnon factory and bought two trumpets, a C and a D. They were the typical small bore French trumpets of the time. Simply made, valve springs at the bottom of the valves, but with a beautiful bright French sound and good intonation. I used the D trumpet ten years later on a twelve week run of *West Side Story* at the Erlanger theater in Chicago. It was the perfect trumpet for the show.

Having done Paris, we decided to move on to our next destination, Madrid. Google says that trains from Paris to Madrid depart from the Chamartin station in Paris and arrive at the Attocha station in Madrid. They do now and probably did then. It is about a fourteen hour trip.

Settled in our 2nd class compartment, we were soon joined by a young man about our age, (I was 26, Mel 24). He was a Welsh mining engineer seeing the continent. He was traveling to Spain for the first time, spoke not a word of Spanish and had much less idea of what he was doing than we did. He soon attached himself to us. He would join us in our travels in Spain.

Let's call him Lloyd.

A short time later we were joined by an older man, probably about thirty five. He was French, a Spanish teacher and spoke perfect English. Lets call him Pierre. He was on his way to Madrid to

teach a class at the summer session for foreign students at the University of Madrid. (*Cursos de verano para estudiantes extranjeros*)

I had studied Spanish in high school, as had Mel but that was a while ago. In my case almost ten years. I had been a mediocre student but nevertheless, once in Spain my brain started to reload my Spanish vocabulary. I remember looking out the window and seeing a cute little animal with long ears running alongside of us. It was a *conejo*. My first Spanish rabbit and the first Spanish word to come to mind.

Pierre talked a lot about the upcoming summer session in Madrid. He suddenly asked us where we were staying in Madrid. We, of course, had no idea. We had planned on walking around a bit and hopefully spotting some likely hotel. He said, “why not come to the university”. He would register us, we would have free room and board and could attend the Spanish classes. What a deal that was! Lloyd was eager to come too but never went to any classes.

Pierre helped us to register. Mel and I were assigned to room with two different Spanish students, probably so we would have more practice in speaking Spanish. We started classes the next day. I remember the first class was a lecture on Spanish grammar and idioms with a class of thirty or more. I understood a word here and there. I learned why the word *moto* (motorcycle) is *la moto* and not *el moto*. *Moto* is an abbreviation of *motocicleta* and thus is feminine, *la*, not masculine *el*. It was a grammatical insight that has had very little influence on my life. At classes I was continually afraid I would be called on to say something in Spanish. All the other students, Dutch, German, French, Scandinavian seemed to be completely fluent in Spanish. I was a phony student, a G.I. out of uniform who couldn't say much more than *Buenos dias*, *conejo* and *cerveza*.

(I exaggerate and I also later learned Spanish reasonably well)

Madrid in the summer of 1955 was scorchingly hot. It was in the high nineties in the daytime and not much cooler at night. I came to hate Spanish food, particularly gazpacho. I never ate a *conejo* but I saw many Spaniards eating bunnies at the outdoor restaurants at midnight or later. The way to attract a waiter was to clap your hands together once, like a gunshot. It worked for Spaniards, but I never had the nerve to try it. They would recognize my gringo palms.

I had a date one night. It was with an American girl I had met somewhere in Madrid, but not at the University. I'll call her Elizabeth. The only memory trail left is Elizabeth and I walking down a wooded street returning to her lodgings at some protestant women's school. How I met her and what we did that night I will never know. I am sure it was nothing too amorous as we parted with a handshake and a promise to get together again. Elizabeth, I am sorry I never called. I hope you are having a happy old age.

My other experience with a young lady in Madrid was more exciting but probably potentially more dangerous. I was waiting at a corner for the traffic light to change so that I could cross the street, when a taxi pulled up, the rear door opened and a young lady invited me in. We talked a bit, she telling me what a good time we could have together. I let slip that I was a US soldier, probably not hard to guess from my lousy Spanish. She liked this but I finally politely declined, *no, gracias, adios*, closed the car door and she was off, her *proxéneta* (pimp) driving. My mother would really have been disappointed in me if I came back from Europe with syphilis.

My Spanish room mate asked me one night to play taps. "*Toca silencio, por favor*" and I did, on my new Couesnon C trumpet. It was a bittersweet moment. Mel and I knew we had to leave soon

as our leave time was running out. We decided to sneak out late at night to avoid seeing the other students and being discovered as imposters. The three of us, Mel, Lloyd and I, took a cab to Attocha station. We went to Tarragona. My memories of Tarragona are thin. We lost Lloyd in the train station on arrival. One minute here the next minute gone. I am sure he wanted to stay with us. Sorry we lost you, Lloyd. I hope you got back to Wales safely and hope you are having a good retirement.

We stayed in a pension in Tarragona and maybe went to Barcelona before returning to Stuttgart. A month later, in the middle of September, I was out of the army, back home in Chicago and playing once again at W.G.N. Radio-TV.

Tom Crown

Mel comments:

“The thing about the trip that I remember was that neither of us had any apprehension about anything going wrong. We took things on a day to day basis, simply adjusting to the conditions of that day. Nothing bothered us. And as I said, it was, in retrospect, the greatest experience of my life. I guess that doesn't say much about all the other experiences I've had in my life, but IT WAS GREAT.”