

## **Weapons for Peace - A New Start for a New Time**

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By the time the war in Europe ended, the US Army was sitting on a huge arsenal pile that was becoming out-dated before the last shot of the war was fired. The Atomic-Jet Age was well on its way, built on the technological and scientific advances made during the war effort. The American forces in Europe had more hardware sitting around than they knew what to do with. To ship it all back home would involve enormous shipping costs. Both post-war funding and the merchant fleet were limited. It was the Soviets who helped the Americans make a decision.

Russia had the Eastern Block smothered under a tight blanket, armed and ready to defend their socialistic ideas from a capitalistic onslaught. The shouting match between the two powers increased as time went on. The tension of another confrontation was real. The fence protecting the West from onslaught by the East started to sag under the pressure of Russia's political might.

It was the existence of the Atomic Bomb that put the damper on the fireworks. The Soviets were into the propaganda game but were cautious about pushing the US too far, as they were unsure how the US might react. For Germans, this new wrinkle gave our feelings an added scare. Were we doomed to suffer through another war - a nuclear war at that? Western European nations had to start thinking defensively. The fear of being swallowed up by another Monster had them thinking about their own protection. These nations all needed weapons to defend themselves. The Americans made a smart move and decided to sell their used arsenal to their allies. But before this US equipment went on the market, it had to be checked out and overhauled as needed. The US Army turned to the German people to get the work done. One such refurbishing plant was set up in a town near where we were living. This town was central to many smaller villages. The plant was set up to restore motorized vehicles of a variety of makes and styles - nearly every kind except tanks. The workers were a mix of refugees, farmers with no particular trade skills, handicapped war veteran's, and people like me who had training in an out-dated trade that had no future. We were all in need of help to get back on our feet. In the US Army-run facility they treated us well and paid us union wages. It worked out very well for everyone.

The plant did everything needed to get these vehicles back into shape. Part of the success story was the use of standardized parts that could be used on a variety of vehicles. The US Army had that down pat. Every vehicle left the plant running well, with a new paint job, upholstery and logos to suit the new owners.

The workers worked in shifts. All sorts of disabled people were employed in this effort, including war veterans who were blind, or were missing one or both arms or legs - we had them all. I was in the upholstery department sewing tarps. We had a guy with no arms who was our courier taking work orders from one department to the next. Then we had another guy with no legs who was our comptroller. A blind man sorted nuts and bolts. A guy who had lost touch with his world was our go-get pal. That man for years had been in a Russian war camp and when he came home he was a complete wreck. Then his wife left him and he was finished. All he did was talk to himself. By being patient with him and including him, we found he had a lot to say.

That first year, the army gave us a Christmas party. The company picked us up and got us back in buses. The hall was nicely decorated for the occasion. They gave us a nice dinner with a Santa in attendance all the way from the good old USA. He gave everyone a bag of sweets with each of us promising to be good. The Major gave a warm speech thanking everyone for the good work we did. We all gave him a standing ovation. The evening closed with all of us feeling good.

Two months later the company gave us a «Falschings-Party» - a Masked Ball. For this occasion, everyone showed up in a colorful outfit. This type of party is very popular in the German speaking Catholic areas of Central Europe such as Austria and southern Germany, but especially in the Rhine region. This custom seems to go back to very ancient times when the people felt the need to chase off ghosts and witches. Mask-makers past and present have shown great talent in the expressive masks they make for the «Falschings-Party. «Various dances are staged throughout the evening for the masked participants to enjoy. If someone showed up at the party without a costume, they were given a funny hat to wear so they could join in the fun. We young people went all out to dress for the occasion. I went as a pirate with black pants, a white shirt and a red scarf tied around my head. A bit of shoe polish did the trick for makeup - it was cheap and effective. I escorted the daughter of one of my co-workers who wanted to go to the party, but not particularly with her dad. So I was a good guy and "helped out." Linda was also a good sport who was a little older than I. She knew a little English, but I did not. For this event, the Americans were our invited guests and were seated in a select area to watch the evening unfold.

The first half of the evening involved some clowning around, showing off our costumes and silly tricks. This came to a conclusion with a vote of the "people's choice" for the best costume. After that we got a beer and a bite to eat. Then the dance band took over with traditional German dance music - Polkas, Waltzes, Folk Dances and all the Latin numbers. During the dancing I noticed a young American lady with a big smile sitting in the visitors' box. As my buddies and I sat down after one of the numbers, I bragged to my buddies that I was going to get me that lady for a dance. They thought I was nuts. "They'll grab you by the pants and throw you out" they teased, with grins and laughter all around. I wasn't afraid, and decided to go for it. Before I headed over to the visitors' box, my date gave me a quick lesson in English: "May I - Please - Thank you." . . . "May I - Please - Tank ju - " . . . I walked right up to my American lady and said, "Please." She just about jumped out of her seat - not because of me, but because she wanted to dance. Her beau sat there and didn't move a muscle. He had the looks of a Drill Sergeant. I gave her my arm and we made our way down the steps to the dance floor. Once we were on the dance floor, I noticed how well-dressed she was, in a pretty dress and high heels - she looked gorgeous. She was of a short build with a youthful look.

And so we danced. What a dancer she turned out to be. She swirled around with ease, her skirt flying. All I had to do was lead. All the time we danced, she talked. All I could say was, "jajaja, jaaa, " that was it. I didn't understand a word she said. She went through the Polkas and Waltzes with ease, never missing a beat. I was in good shape from doing sports, but she never missed a step, didn't break a sweat. After dancing a few rounds, I walked her back to her seat thinking, "What a nice lady she is." I thought by now the Sergeant would show some displeasure. He showed absolutely no reaction.

When I got back to my seat, my buddies swarmed all over me, patting me on the back and hoisting their beer glasses in celebration, as if I had just scored the winning goal in overtime. I was disgusted. What was the lady thinking of me now, with those fools celebrating on me like I was the "Deer Hunter". But there was nothing I could do.

As was customary, later in the evening the band leader announced “Damenwahl” - ladies choice. Here the ladies could have their choice of a dance partner. My lady didn't understand that at first. When she saw what was going on, she made her move to do the same. In hopes she might reciprocate, I asked Linda to wait - she didn't mind. My American lady came down the steps and walked straight to our table, took me by the hand and led me to the dance floor. At that moment, she put my heart and thoughts at peace.

We both reached out to have a good time, the American lady and the German refugee. We tossed aside the barrier of contempt and took down our masks to show our true feelings. When I walked the lady back to her seat, she smiled and squeezed my hand, and so did I. Now I could understand what she was saying. All humans have feelings. As it turned out, it wasn't a «Fool's Party» after all.