

Witnesses Recall Berlin Wall's Fall

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 6, 2009 – A divided Berlin symbolized the Cold War.

The Berlin Wall was a concrete example of the divide between East and West, between totalitarianism and democracy, between communism and capitalism.

For millions of U.S. servicemembers, the celebratory scenes at the fall of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989, were cause for deep satisfaction.

Since World War II, millions of soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines held the line in West Germany. Their very presence was enough to secure half a continent for freedom. When the wall fell, more than 300,000 American servicemembers were in West Germany, witnessing history.

"We were watching developments for weeks as events unfolded," said Jeff Anderson a building contractor in San Antonio who was an Army infantry sergeant in the Berlin Brigade near Checkpoint Charlie at the time.

Restrictions had been loosening for weeks, he recalled, as Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Germans and other captive people streamed out of Eastern Europe to freedom in the West. After several weeks of unrest in East Germany, officials there announced that all citizens could visit West Germany and West Berlin.

"As soon as the East Germans made the announcement, thousands of people came down to the wall in both the East and West," Anderson said. "We weren't sure what was happening.

"In the East, the border guards at first were pushing people back, they were trying to check identity cards," he continued. "But then the pressure became just too much, and they just let people stream through. When they met West Berliners, it was the start of the most joyous celebration I have ever seen."

The first wave of people came at night, and thousands more came the next day. People climbed atop the wall, and East German border guards finally knocked a hole in it to ease transit, Anderson said. Tens of thousands of people drank champagne and threw flowers. U.S. soldiers just waved everybody through. "We were as happy as they were," he said.

While the Berlin Wall was the most obvious symbol, the fence between East and West Germany was equally deadly, and opened just as quickly.



A West German man uses a hammer and chisel to chip off a piece of the Berlin Wall as a souvenir in November 1989. DoD photo

(Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

Army Lt. Col. Rich Dow works in the Joint Staff's operations section of the Pentagon now. In 1989, he was a second lieutenant platoon leader working military intelligence in the 5th Corps area of responsibility. "My job was to help stop the Soviet horde from coming through the Fulda Gap," Dow recalled with a smile.

"It was hard for us to believe it was happening, and we were all amazed at its speed," he said. "It was almost a fatalistic attitude when you consider that if we looked across the border, we saw they had a huge advantage in infantry and tanks and artillery. We fully understood that our job was to buy time until forces could come in to reinforce us."

As events proceeded, Dow and others realized just how hollow the forces were that faced West Germany. But they remained concerned about how events might play out.

"During all the changes, the idea of internal disturbances in East Germany had us all up on our guard," he said. "We feared the Soviets were losing control and that they might do something against us unilaterally. We were probably more at higher alert because the static situation that had existed since 1961 was far more dynamic. We were very concerned about a war happening inside East Germany, and that kept us awake at night."

But events proceeded well, and Dow and his wife actually went on a family trip to Berlin. "We stayed in West Berlin," he said. "There were still a lot of crowds. I took a small sledgehammer out of my trunk and took out a fist-sized chunk of the wall. I still have it."

One side of the piece of wall is decorated with graffiti; other is plain, gray concrete. "The one with the graffiti faced the West," Dow said.

Army Command Sgt. Maj. Delbert Hoskins was based with the 1st Battalion, 68th Armor, on the Fulda Gap that Nov. 9. He, too, came away with a souvenir.

"I have strands of razor wire," he said. "This is the kind of wire where if you grab hold and try to hoist yourself up, it will cut off your fingers."

Hoskins said he was surprised that no massive recall of U.S. forces took place when the media reported that the wall was coming down. But the sight of East German-made cars made a distinct impression. "What I remember was the number of Trabants that suddenly were on the road," he said.

The difference between East and West Berlin when the wall was in place is something that Tara Jones, now at the Pentagon's defense policy office, remembers.

"East Berlin was very gray. There was no color, and even the sky seemed gray," said Jones, who was in middle school in 1989 at the State's Department's John F. Kennedy International School in Berlin. "West Berlin was ablaze with lights. The streets were crowded, and there was a mystery associated with the city."

When the wall came down, Jones said, she was not afraid, but was astonished. “We went down to the Brandenburg Gate the next day,” she said, “and my sister and I tried to count the Trabants parked on the side of the road and just gave up.”

The day was emotional for Jones and others who witnessed it firsthand. “It was very emotional - hearing the stories of all these people who had been affected by the Iron Curtain, because that's what it literally was,” she said.

Her father, Randy Jones, was chief of the regional contracting office in Berlin. “I was on site living in Berlin when the wall came down,” he said via telephone from Austin, Texas. West Berlin was a magnet for Poles and Czechoslovaks leaving their countries. “It appeared to us that the East German border guards were being far less scrupulous in their examination of travel documents than they were in the past.”

Mostly, Jones remembers a jubilant people. “As I remember, the next day was a holiday, and we had planned to go to East Berlin, just to see the people,” he said.

The family loaded into their Jeep Cherokee with U.S. military identification and went to Checkpoint Charlie. “We processed through the American side just like we always did, but then we were surprised by being allowed to go right straight through the East German section,” he said.

The family shopped and had lunch, and about 2 p.m., Jones suggested the family head home. “We drove our way back, and it took us hours and hours to get back through,” he said. “As we neared Checkpoint Charlie, there was a wall of people clapping and cheering and seeing a car marked with a U.S. license plate, the people cheered even more loudly and yelled thank you and poured beer and champagne and flowers on the car.

“They were so happy, and I will never forget the wonderful celebrations, he said. “[The Berliners] demonstrated real gratitude and thankfulness, and it was for the American people. We just happened to be the Americans there.”

The fall of the Berlin Wall paved the way for German reunification, which formally concluded on Oct. 3, 1990.

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West German citizens gather at a newly created opening in the Berlin Wall at Potsdamer Platz in November 1989. DoD photo

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