

SPECIAL FEATURE

COLD WAR TARGETS



Disgraced U.S. Air Force officers were set up, newly uncovered Stasi documents reveal
By Matthew M. Burke and Marcus Kloeckner | Stars and Stripes

For nearly 40 years, Bill Burhans has steadfastly maintained he wasn't drunk when, as an Air Force lieutenant colonel driving fellow U.S. military liaisons home from a holiday party with their Soviet counterparts in East Germany, he lost control of the car, careened up an embankment and slammed into a bus.

When the car came to a stop on Dec. 29, 1979, Air Force Lt. Col. James Tonge, his passenger, called to him to move the car to the shoulder. But Burhans sat frozen, except for his trembling hands.

It was as if he'd been "hit in the head with an ax at the slaughterhouse," Tonge would later tell U.S. investigators in a sworn statement.

"He didn't respond at all," Tonge said of Burhans, who at the time was set to replace him as deputy of the U.S. Military Liaison Mission.

Based in Potsdam, near Berlin, the USMLM's official mission was to serve as a liaison between the U.S. military command and its Soviet counterpart in post-war Germany, but its personnel also gathered intelligence, monitored Soviet forces and reported on readiness throughout the Cold War era. French, British and Soviet liaison missions did similar work.

After helping Burhans into the back seat, Tonge moved the car himself.



Retired U.S. Air Force Col. James Tonge, then a lieutenant colonel, far left, is seen here talking to his Soviet counterparts during a USMLM reception. Photo Courtesy of James Tonge

Police arrived in minutes. The two men would say the Soviet officers, including some they suspected of being members of the Soviet's Main Intelligence Directorate, had drugged them — a story that has remained unchanged in interviews for almost four decades. But the U.S. government did not believe them, treating it as a drunken-driving incident. Tonge and Burhans were fired and sent packing in disgrace.

Now, recently discovered documents from the archives of the former East German state security service — the Stasi — prove Burhans' and Tonge's version of events.

According to 250 pages of Stasi files obtained by Stars and Stripes from the German government, the Soviets plotted to target and discredit the men, then considered "high-value targets," culminating on the night of the crash.

Documents reveal a cat-and-mouse game between the Cold War superpowers' "military liaisons," who were effectively spying on each other in the open.

Both men, now in their 80s, and their supporters say they feel vindicated.

"I was thunderstruck to see that Stasi report," Burhans said after receiving a copy from Stars and Stripes. The incident "heavily impacted my marriage and returned me to civilian life."

The documents might not convince everyone of their innocence, he said, but he was glad the information was finally coming to light.

'The friends'

For 40 years, from its founding in 1950 until months after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Stasi built an extensive network of 189,000 informants, or one in 20 members of the East German Communist Party, according to estimates in a 2008 study by historian Helmut Mueller-Enberg.

After Germany was reunified in 1990, detailed Stasi records — enough paperwork to stretch 69 miles end-to-end, according to a government website -- were made available to the public. Burhans and Tonge didn't know about the release of the records at the time.

The dossiers on the two men include mundane details of their daily lives, but also reveal the extent to which the two were monitored by code-named informants — likely including East German cooks, cleaning women and handymen who worked in the U.S. mission house in Potsdam. The informants eavesdropped on the Americans' conversations, followed their movements and read their private mail.

The Stasi started a dossier on Burhans when he first served as an MLM reconnaissance officer in July 1971, until June 1975. They painted him as a bold officer with a knack for shaking his East German minders or turning the tables on them.

On one occasion, when he was on a reconnaissance tour — the term used for MLM missions — Burhans shook a tail between Cottbus and Hornow and managed to “not be under control for several hours,” one report states.

Another time, he reportedly chased down the people tailing him and photographed them.

“The only thing in our way was the crowd of soldiers,” Burhans later wrote of one incident involving an altercation with Soviet troops. The driver “simply plowed on through them in reverse” and the pair got away, escaping almost certain detention.

The Soviets monitored Burhans even after he returned to the U.S. in 1975, intercepting his letters and learning that he hoped to return to the mission. At one point, an informant reported that he might soon be promoted to lieutenant colonel and brought back.

He did return in July 1979. By then, a Stasi plan was well underway to discredit Tonge, who had first served in Frankfurt in 1970 but didn't join the USMLM until May 1976.

A veneer of goodwill

The U.S. and Soviet military missions were founded in 1947 as a two-way channel between the military commands in determining the fate of post-war Germany.

The 14 officers on each side were officially accredited as liaisons and often held social functions meant to build relationships and open dialogue.

“...it was disclosed that toward the end of 1979 (on Dec. 29, 1979, precisely), the friends had successfully carried out a targeted measure to discredit Tonge as well as his intended successor, Lt. Col. Burhans.””

— Lt. Col. Klebow”

“We celebrated New Year's, Christmas, Thanksgiving there was a big dinner and [we] invited people, there was a 4th of July,” said Stephen Hoyt, current president of the USMLM Association and an instructor at the University of Maryland University College in Germany.

But as relations soured, the missions began focusing on gathering intelligence on their adversaries.

“For the longest time the thought was the major function of the missions was to see whether or not there was going to be any kind of an invasion,” Hoyt said. “We would be able to see whether or not there were any indications of hostility.”

They were essentially licensed spies, according to a 2013 U.S. Army history. Uniformed and unarmed, they roamed each other's territory in pairs, driving vehicles with distinctive license plates.

As the only legally sanctioned U.S. representatives in East Germany, the American liaisons specialized in identifying and photographing new Soviet military equipment, Hoyt said. But some areas, detailed on maps they carried, were specifically off-limits.

Actions toward liaisons grew aggressive and continued that way well after Burhans and Tonge left. In 1984, the East Germans rammed a vehicle, killing French mission soldier Philippe Mariotti. A year later, the Soviets shot and killed U.S. Army Maj. Arthur Nicholson Jr., who was taking pictures of a remote Soviet tank shed.

The plot

Tonge's Stasi minders found that he consistently ignored signs marking restricted areas. GDR authorities were convinced he was a spy.

УДОСТОВЕРЕНИЕ ЛИЧНОСТИ № 190/А

Предъявитель сего ПОДПОЛКОВНИК
Джеймс М. ТОНДЖ

является членом Американской военной миссии связи при Главнокомандующем Группой советских войск в Германии.

Начальник штаба
Группы советских войск
в Германии

генерал-полковник
Д. ГРИНКЕВИЧ

24 " ЯНВ" 1979 г.

Данные о владельце удостоверения

Должность ЗАМЕСТИТЕЛЬ
НАЧАЛЬНИКА МИССИИ

Дата рождения 22 июня 1933 года

Национальность АМЕРИКАНЕЦ

Рост 185 см Вес 88 кг

Цвет глаз КРАСНЫЕ

Цвет волос СЕДЫЕ

Личная подпись

Действительно по 31 декабря 1979 г.
генерал-полковник Д. ГРИНКЕВИЧ

Действительно по 31 декабря 1978 г.
генерал-полковник Д. ГРИНКЕВИЧ

A copy of retired U.S. Air Force Col. James Tonge's USMLM credentials. Never-before-seen Stasi documents indicate that Tonge, then a lieutenant colonel, and another U.S. Air Force officer, Lt. Col. Bill Burhans, were subject to a "targeted measure to discredit" them in Germany on Dec. 29, 1979 by the Soviets. Photo Courtesy of James Tonge.

The first known "action plan" against him is dated Jan. 10, 1979, nearly a year before the fateful holiday party.

Just past the checkpoint, Burhans lost control. Several bottles of vodka — gifts from their Soviet friends — were smashed in the accident, making the car and its occupants reek of alcohol, Tonge said in a statement at the time of the crash. There was no sign that Burhans had been drunk before the crash, Tonge said: “All my observations were to the contrary.”

Goff, the second passenger, said in a sworn statement right after the accident that Burhans’ driving had been “faultless” before he’d swerved off the road. Goff died in 1985.

Burhans wasn’t taken to the hospital for a drug test until days later, on Jan. 2. Results showed the presence of a drug that can cause drowsiness, memory loss, lack of coordination and dizziness.

Bromazepam, “containing benzodiazepine derivative, e.g. Lexotanil, was ingested,” a U.S. military toxicology report states, referring to an anti-anxiety drug with side effects similar to Valium.

A drug test administered to Tonge five days after the accident found traces of a medication used to control an irregular heartbeat.

Neither Burhans nor Tonge were prescribed any such medications at the time, they said.

Burhans “may have been slipped a mickey,” Tonge wrote in his sworn statement after the crash.

Still, the test results, adamant denials and sworn statements were not enough to convince U.S. officials that the Americans were telling the truth and had been set up.

“The commander of the U.S. Army Hospital in West Berlin commented that he was unable to help me clear my name,” Burhans wrote in a personal memoir for his children that he shared with Stars and Stripes. “He could not verify that I had not drugged myself to escape responsibility.”

Burhans’ mental state deteriorated, leaving him so agitated that, when he took a polygraph test, the results were inconclusive, he said.



Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Bill Burhans is seen here in this official U.S. military photo taken upon his promotion to major in 1974.

Officials found him at fault for the crash and ordered him to pay damages, he wrote. They offered him the choice of court-martial or the lesser nonjudicial punishment. He took the latter. He was reassigned to his previous posting as deputy in the USAF Soviet Awareness Program at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C.

“To my knowledge, there was no standard operating procedure in place” to respond to being drugged, he said. “In my case, no one bothered to do any investigation other than to implement the [U.S. Command Berlin’s] directions” to pursue it as a drunken-driving case.

The incident all but killed the career of a man whose friends described him as a rising star. Burhans’ nonjudicial punishment was later thrown out and purged from his record by an Air Force official assigned to review the case, Burhans would later write. The lieutenant general had worked with Burhans in Potsdam and trusted his version of events, but the damage had been done.

“I remained depressed, shut myself off from my wife and children and began to live in an unreal world,” Burhans, now 84 and living in Lake Kiowa, Texas, wrote to Stars and Stripes. He told ColdWarSpies.com in 2007 that he became a “hopeless throwaway drunk.” After a stint in the hospital for mental health issues, he retired in 1985.

Tonge was also accused of drunken driving, he wrote in handwritten notes following the incident. U.S. Command Berlin ordered nonjudicial punishment, but an officer has to accept it. Tonge refused. They did not have enough evidence to pursue a court-martial.

Though Tonge was promoted to colonel, said he was forced into a dead-end assignment in Wiesbaden where he evaluated foreign scientific and technical information until June 1983. He retired from the military in 1985.

“I was humiliated and singled out,” Tonge told Stars and Stripes in December. “They relieved all three of us. Burhans suffered more than I did. There’s a bit of shame associated when the government says, ‘You’re bad.’”

Burhans and Tonge did not remain close, yet they remain forever linked. They agree that the discovery of their Stasi dossiers has helped to set the record straight and exonerate them.

“For me, the most unusual part of the story is finding written evidence that the Soviets drugged us,” said Tonge, now 85 and living in Charleston, S.C. “It would have been good to have had that information when Berlin authorities were treating it as an ‘alcohol-related incident.’”

In retrospect, Burhans said, despite the personal and professional price he paid following the 1979 incident, “I take it as a compliment that the Soviets considered me that much of a threat.”

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