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A Story about Tom Springfield

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A Story about Tom Springfield

by **donellac**

Page 1 of 1

Posted: **Tue Apr 07, 2015 8:24 am**

Hi all,

Here is another piece I have written recently. You might wonder, at first, about the connection with Dusty. But read on. I hope you will enjoy it.

I would not have been able to write this piece without the help of 'The Coder Special Archive' by Tony Cash and Mike Gerrard, and also 'Secret Classrooms' by Geoffrey Elliot and Harold Shukman.

The Inter Services Languages Sub-Committee of the Joint Intelligence Committee was held in Conference Room 'G' in the Ministry of Defence, Great George Street in London. There they sat round the vast highly polished light oak board room table weighed down by the regalia of their rank, lost in a fog of smoke from their cigars and cigarettes. In the Chair Brigadier Page in his khaki army dress uniform trussed up with his Sam brown belt and swagger stick tucked under his arm, red flashes on his collar, and crown above three pips on his epaulettes. Here was an imposing array of military chiefs of Staff gathered to discuss what was to be done to ensure Britain had sufficient Russian linguists to fulfil the needs of the country.

It began with the Joint Intelligence Committee and subsequently there had been a profusion of different sub committees; from the Ministry of Defence to the Army, Navy and Air Force. All discussing the problem: 'Britain does not have enough people able to speak Russian'. So many meetings had been held over a period of two years, one participant waspishly observed: 'there are at present too many people calling too many meetings on this subject'.

What was the pressing need for Russian linguists?

The Cold War had resulted from the breakdown of the relationship between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies at the end of WWII. The British Government and Military Chiefs of Staff were terrified that Stalin planned an invasion. Very few people in Britain were able to speak Russian. With tens of thousands of displaced people in Europe who could speak and understand Russian, there should have been no problem. But these weren't considered suitable; there was no way to vet them, if there was a war it may be necessary to intern them, and if they had friends or relations in war zones, they could be open to coercion by enemy agents.

There appeared a simple solution to this problem. Conscription was in full swing in 1951; young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty one were called up for National Service. These men were available, they were willing, they were British born, and they were required to sign the 'Official Secrets Act'. The Joint Services School for Linguists was set up and first operated in Bodmin in Cornwall and Coulsdon in Surrey. The recruits were given an intensive one year course in Russian and then acted as translators or at the higher level as interpreters. Most of the students, when training was done, saw out their National Service sitting in airless and windowless wooden sheds on the fringes of Russian controlled countries listening in to Soviet military radio traffic, recording and logging it long-hand for onward despatch to GCHQ for analysis.

The Joint Services School for Linguists was set up in a remarkably short space of time; Elizabeth Hill (known as Liza) was the director of the JSSL throughout its working life. This redoubtable lady came from a family that had been trading coal for 200 years. Her mother was a member of the Russian nobility and her father was educated at Lancing College. By the age of eight she was fluent in four languages. The Russian Revolution had brought the family from a sprawling apartment to the brink of destitution in two rooms with a gas-ring in Earl's Court. Liza's determination and her languages helped her to gain a teaching post in a girls' school in North Wales and from there to battle her way into the heart of this critical undertaking.

It was due to the drive and determination of Liza that, in the ten years of its existence, this initially muddled operation succeeded in teaching a total of more than four thousand young men competence in Russian. Recruitment to the scheme was haphazard with recruiting offices not always informed of it. Keen young men

would hear about it on the grapevine and ask to be considered. The Navy's methods were different but Army and RAF conscripts were selected only after they had been put through the horror of basic training. One young recruit knew about the Russian course but said that nobody at Pontefract Barracks had heard of it. He did finally succeed in joining the course.

A group of bemused students were gathered in a large hall on their first day. On the stage was an easel and a board with a huge map of the Soviet Union. A neatly dressed man with a military moustache walked on stage and greeted them with a smile and a bow. What followed was delivered entirely in Russian. A former pilot of the Polish Air Force, Shatunovsky pointed at the map and with short sentences, sign language and facial expressions gave an hour long lecture - 'We began to realise that although we knew none of the words he was using we now knew quite a lot about the geography and physical characteristics of the Soviet Union'. This application of the 'Direct Method' of language learning was a feature of the training system used to teach Russian to the young conscripts. The training system was rigorous. For five to six hours a day, five days a week students had contact with staff, then there was regular after-hours 'homework'. There was the Semeonova grammar, passages for translation and lists of vocabulary which had to be learned on a daily basis. Liza Hill's prescription was that there was to be 50% oral work. Grammar in classes of about 25 alternated with conversation in groups of about 8 where no English was to be spoken by the instructor. Pressure was on to maintain a place on the course. Those who failed the weekly tests faced the prospect of being RTUd (returned to unit).

If the work to learn Russian seemed hard then it was nothing to the humiliation recruits had been subjected to in Basic Training. As well as the endless polishing, parading, running, jumping, climbing and eating, sadistic NCOs apparently revelled in handing out punishments for perceived misdemeanours - cleaning the parade ground with a toothbrush was a good one and scraping the barracks floor with a razor blade was another; punishments to be avoided. Trainees had no wish to go back to such a system nor to be sent to fight in Suez, Korea or Malaya.

The conscripts lived in huts heated only by coke stoves. Those sent to Bodmin or later to Crail had to contend with extremes of cold. In Coulsdon the weather was better but could still be pretty nippy. There were no decent meals in the camps: food came with a fine coal dust condiment from the coal fired stoves in the cook house. If a student at Coulsdon needed medical attention he would attend the medics - Captain Blood, Lieutenant Butcher and Captain Savage - in the Guards Depot of Caterham which was next to the Coulsdon camp.

Life in the JSSL was dominated by Russian teachers, clever, slightly crazy, émigrés who fought off their boredom by talking about their passions and drilling students in complex Russian swear words. The non-British teaching staff were the essence of the JSSL experience. They were drawn from a wide variety of professions and walks of life; many of them were landed gentry, diplomats, officers and lawyers; they included a prince, a baron, a couple of counts and a senator.

But students weren't just taught Russian, they were also served up a cultural feast; Russian literature, movies, and plays, some of which they performed. They were enlisted to learn Russian in order to defend their country, but they learned to love Russian culture; its music above all. Coulsdon had choir singing in 1953; both informal classes held in the NAAFI during service hours, and a formal choir that welcomed all students. There were auditions to join but not many attended. One young Army private, Dion O'Brien, joined the choir. A talented pianist and musician, he was also a member of a five piece jazz band that performed in the NAAFI at Coulsdon. The choir sang many different songs, one in particular was 'Stenka Razin' - the story of a Russian Cossack leader who led a major uprising against the nobility and Tsar's bureaucracy in South Russia. The song relates that one night he is seated in the prow of his long boat embracing his newlywed Persian Princess. He hears his men muttering that he had deserted them for a woman. To show his manhood and prove his loyalty to his men he thrusts his hapless bride into the waters of the Volga.

Back home on weekend leave from his National Service Dion O'Brien formed a group with three friends. They were known as the Pedini Brothers; a name that came from the first two letters of their first names. They sang mainly Latin American, which was very popular at the time, Early 1900s popular songs and Barbershop. They also sang Russian songs; learnt at his Russian studies and adapted by Dion. The group sang and performed gigs together as often as possible but in the end they were pulled apart by National Service. Both Dion and his sister Mary were taught about music from an early age by their intensely musical parents. They played piano and guitar, sang for neighbours and even recorded their performances on an ancient tape recorder. While Mary was still at school, Dion began performing in Belgravia drinking clubs. He sang the standards of the day, the Latin-American songs he loved, but he also wrote songs and adapted others from foreign languages. In time he joined with a young Etonian, Tim Feild, to form the Kensington Squares. The duo performed in West End Clubs and Coffee Houses.

Meanwhile, sister Mary O'Brien, after serving her apprenticeship playing in Clubs and Coffee Bars, joined an all girl group called the Lana Sisters and was known as Shan. Next came two years of rehearsing, touring, performing; all over Britain and in Europe, as well as appearances on radio and television.

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It is 1960, young men and women are still expected to dress like their parents. There are changes in popular music; Cliff Richard has already enjoyed several years of success. A new young group bursts onto the scene: called the Springfields they have a fresh, vibrant sound. The group, made up of Dion O'Brien, (now calling himself Tom Springfield), with his sister Mary, the lead singer, (now known as Dusty Springfield) and with Tim Feild as the third member, enjoy phenomenal success. Five singles enter the top 40 in the UK, 'Island of Dreams' and 'Say I Won't be There' (both written by Tom) reach number 5 in the charts. They record four albums and six EPs. Their recording of 'Silver Threads and Golden Needles' goes to number 20 in the US charts. As a result they travel to Nashville to record an LP. They are voted top vocal group by NME readers in 1961 and 1962. Before them the Mudlarks with their jaunty novelty version of 'Lollipop' were top vocal act. Then came the Beatles! The Springfields split in 1963; Dusty Springfield (Mary O'Brien) now solo, goes on to become Britain's finest female pop singer. Tom Springfield (Dion O'Brien) has a successful career in song writing, arranging and production.

In 1965, after travelling to the UK from Australia in 1964, The Seekers stand on stage performing their latest hit. Classically trained Judith Durham sings 'Say goodbye my own true lover'; with heavy black rimmed spectacles, Athol Guy cuddles his double bass, Keith Potger plucks at the strings on his twelve string guitar, and Bruce Woodley strums his acoustic guitar, all add their voices in the chorus. 'The Carnival is Over' is the Seekers best selling single in the UK, it sells one and a half million copies and stays at number one for several weeks. In time the song takes on special significance; it is sometimes used to close special events in Australia. With a new arrangement and English lyrics inspired by his time at the Carnival in Rio, Tom Springfield has adapted the melody from 'Stenka Razin' - the song he learned and sang twelve years before in the choir at Coulsdon whilst studying Russian at the JSSL.

Re: The Joint Services School for Linguists

by **pat.dunham**

Posted: **Tue Apr 07, 2015 8:50 am**

Thanks Donella, what a great read. I admire your patience and research in your endeavours. Keep up the good work. and I look forward to the next episode.

Re: The Joint Services School for Linguists

by **karen**

Posted: **Tue Apr 07, 2015 10:09 am**

Yes a lot of information there Donella from you , well done , 🍷

Re: The Joint Services School for Linguists

by **darren2722**

Posted: **Tue Apr 07, 2015 5:40 pm**

That's really lovely Donella 🌟 I love the way you linked everything up and saved the 'punchline' right until the very end. 😊

Re: The Joint Services School for Linguists

by **trek007**

Posted: **Tue Apr 07, 2015 6:22 pm**

Thanks for posting your article Donella. It makes interesting reading.

Re: The Joint Services School for Linguists

by **donellac**

Posted: **Tue Apr 07, 2015 7:56 pm**

Thank you all 🙏 for your kind words, Pat, Karen, Darren and Trek. 😊

Re: The Joint Services School for Linguists

by **dig123**

Posted: **Wed Apr 08, 2015 12:06 am**

Much time put into this piece. Thanks for posting Donella. Enjoyed the read.

Re: The Joint Services School for Linguists

by **FionaJ**

Posted: **Wed Apr 08, 2015 1:18 am**

Very impressive and factual writing Donella. Really enjoyed reading it, many thanks for posting 🙌

Re: A Story about Tom Springfield

by **IWannaBeABluesSinger**

Posted: **Wed Apr 08, 2015 12:54 pm**

Way to go - great read.

Maggie

Re: A Story about Tom Springfield

by **donellac**

Posted: **Thu Apr 09, 2015 7:07 pm**

Thank you 🙌🙌 Di, Fiona and Maggie. 🌹

Glad you enjoyed the read! 😊

Re: A Story about Tom Springfield

by **RenegadesEPC**

Posted: **Thu Apr 09, 2015 10:57 pm**

Gee willakers!! I can't think of a better exclamation, Donella, and 'wow' doesn't seem like enough. I do enjoy good writing, and this piece is without a doubt EXCELLENT!! 🌟 You weave words in a manner I only wish I could, and the information is just so interesting to read. Sometimes, with articles, I feel as though I'm reading a text book (and who likes that?!) but yours was breathtaking and kept me interested. What will the next episode be?! 😊

Re: A Story about Tom Springfield

by **Cas19**

Posted: **Fri Apr 10, 2015 12:10 pm**

Just read this Donella, very interesting.

Casx

Re: A Story about Tom Springfield

by **donellac**

Posted: **Sat Apr 11, 2015 8:08 am**

Thank you Cas and Claudia for your very kind reviews! 🙌🙌🙌🙌

Re: A Story about Tom Springfield

by **RenegadesEPC**

Posted: **Sat Apr 11, 2015 2:44 pm**

Are you planning on writing another one, Donella? 🌟