

Reflections of George W. Kepler
Air Policeman at Stony Brook Air Force Station
3084th Air Police Squadron

After completing basic training at Lackland AFB in December-February 1958, I reported to my first active duty assignment as an Air Policeman at Stony Brook Air Force Station, near Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts. To get to Stony Brook I had to drive through the large Westover AFB, home of the 99th Bomb Wing of the Strategic Air Command that included B-52 heavy bombers, KC-135 and KC-97 refueling tankers, and a squadron of F-104 Starfighters of TAC's 337th, commanded by Col. James Jabara, famed Korean War ace. Westover in those days was bustling with activity supporting its mission of keeping B-52's loaded with nuclear weapons in the skies enroute towards the Soviet Union. At this point, having no idea of the Stony Brook mission, the sights and sounds of Westover were exciting for a young airman who was looking forward to being a part of Cold War action.

After asking directions of several folks on Westover, I finally found someone who not only knew about the existence of Stony Brook, but also how to get there! An access road led away from Westover proper and toward one end of the huge main runway, a distance of a few miles. Signs of activity became less and less the further along that access road I drove, until my old car was the only vehicle in sight in what appeared to be woods and brushland. I passed another Westover entrance gate that was closed and locked, obviously used as an extra entrance during morning and afternoon rush hours. By now it became obvious Stony Brook Air Force Station was "in the sticks".

Continuing on the access road, I noticed one of those signs reading, "Caution -Low Flying Aircraft -Stop Until Clear" and only then realized I was crossing just 100 yards or so from the very end of the main Westover runway. Looking left, I saw the largest aircraft I'd ever seen heading out of the sky directly at me, its huge bat-like wings stretched wide from a massive body and gigantic tail and its multi-wheeled landing gear down and locked. Before I could react, the B-52 passed about one hundred feet over my car with a high-pitched whistling noise from those eight big engines and then, except for that huge vertical tail fin, disappeared from view behind the brush along the side of the road as it touched down to begin its long trip to the taxi apron. Sights like that were common on the access road and you soon learned to heed those warning signs!

Finally, the access road ended at a high chain-link fence with an electric entrance gate manned by Air Policemen with side arms and carbines. It took several minutes for me to get clearance to enter the Stony Brook administration area after my Air Force ID card was checked and rechecked. I was given a temporary Stony Brook ID badge with specific instructions to proceed directly to the Personnel office for processing in. Security seemed extremely tight and I wondered why this installation was so cloaked in secrecy that very few of the Westover people I'd asked for driving directions had any idea of what I was talking about. My curiosity about Stony Brook's purpose would soon be answered.

I was assigned to a comfortable two-man room in one of four barracks buildings that lined a central grassed open area with a mess hall building at one end and an administration building on the other. The two-story barracks buildings were fairly new and in excellent shape, with the typical central latrine and showers on each end and a dayroom on each floor equipped with television, pool table, ping pong table, lounge chairs and Coke machines. My roommate was an Airman First Class who was about to end his four-year enlistment within a few days of my arrival. After he left, I'd have the entire room to myself during the



Barracks 104 to right
(Photo by Charles Moore – 1959)

twelve months or so that I was at Stony Brook. Since he was getting out, my short-timer room-mate gave me all sorts of Air Police gear he had collected over the years, such as an Air Police arm brassard, Sam Browne leather gear and other assorted items that were commonly worn by Army and Air Force police, particularly on Far East assignment. Most of it wasn't "official" gear and probably wouldn't have passed a full dress inspection on a General LeMay SAC base, but it looked sharp and I was glad to have the stuff.

The next morning I was escorted by the NCOIC of the 3084th Air Police Squadron, MSgt Dave Roberts, a tall, raw-boned redhead from Maine with an accent to match, through the heavily guarded gate that led to the ultra-secure "Q" area of the base. My administration area badge was exchanged for a temporary secure area, or "Q" badge. Both forms of identification would later be issued to me in permanent form with an ID photograph and other information, such as the Q-area facilities to which I had access. Badges were to be worn at all times, regardless of where you were on Stony Brook.



Administrative area badge
"As I remember, it was light-green and white." – Clarke Ketter

We proceeded to the Air Police Operations building which housed the offices of the Air Police commander, the NCOIC and administrative staff, the arms room, desk sergeant, ADT operator and a small coffee room. I noted that smoking was permitted only in designated areas and that open flame from matches or cigarette lighters was not allowed. Instead, small electric lighters were placed on the walls of the building where smoking was permitted.

It was then that I was given a fairly detailed briefing on the Stony Brook mission and my role in it. In short, our little air station was a staging, storage and maintenance area for nuclear weapons that would ultimately be loaded aboard the B-52's of the 99th Bomb Wing at Westover. Personnel assigned to Stony Brook's Q-area had to qualify for a security clearance of at least Top Secret and were constantly cautioned on the need for absolute secrecy regarding anything about the mission. Access to certain highly sensitive buildings was not allowed until Top Secret or higher security clearances were confirmed. (I recall hearing from my family about visits from FBI agents to neighbors and family friends with questions about my character and credibility. Needless to say, a few of them wondered just what awful crime I'd committed!)



Triple security fencing – middle electrified
(Photo by Clarke Ketter – 2002)

The Q-area itself was a fort within a fort (Stony Brook proper) within a fort (Westover AFB) and probably represented one of the most highly secured sites in the United States military at that time. Enclosing several hundred acres, the Q-area perimeter consisted of three concentric chain-link fences, each about 10 feet high, with about ten yards of soft loam dirt between them and V-barb wire topping each fence. The posts or supports for the middle fence were mounted on large ceramic bases which, in turn, sat atop a two-foot wide concrete slab that was buried several feet deep to prevent tunneling underneath. The middle fence was electrified with enough amperage to fry small animals such as foxes that had tried to crawl

between the fence bottom and the top of the concrete slab. Any human coming in contact with that fence and the ground at the same time would have been instantly and fatally electrocuted.

Banks of large floodlights were positioned on high posts about every forty yards next to the innermost fence for the entire length of the five-mile perimeter. If the electrified middle fence was grounded for any reason (small animals would occasionally set it off and die in the process) several of these floodlight banks would automatically light up the perimeter fence line for at least one-hundred yards in both directions from the spot of the grounded fence. Air Police patrols would be radio-dispatched to the area to investigate before the lights and fence alarm would be turned off.

The Q-area was a "community" consisting of various types of structures, most of them made of solid concrete several feet thick. There were approximately fifty "igloos" or squat storage structures, each shaped roughly in the form of a triangle, but with very short sides, sharply sloped roof with a narrow flat top. The shape was designed to deflect any explosive blast upward.

Each igloo was made of solid, thick concrete and entirely covered with three feet of earth and grass. The two gigantic doors of the igloo were made of solid steel and several inches thick. The hinges of each door were designed to allow a hydraulic jack to be inserted for the purpose of raising the multi-ton door several inches until it cleared the metal-lined groove in the cement so it could be swung open. However, before that could happen, certain procedures had to be followed.



Typical storage igloo
(Photo by William Lindstrom – 2002)

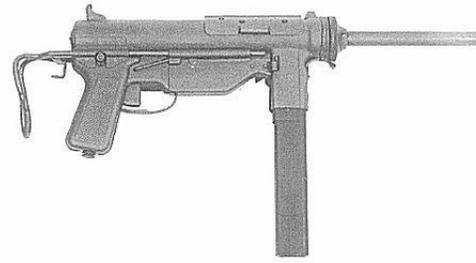
Any authorized person wishing to enter any of the Q-area buildings had to have at least one additional authorized person with him. Under no circumstances was any individual allowed access to a structure alone. To that end, each structure was equipped with electronic sensors and motion detectors which were controlled by a central operator at the Air Police Operations Center. Persons wishing to gain access to a building had to first plug into a phone jack on the outside of each Q-area structure and give the Air Police the correct access code which was based on a matrix formula that changed the code at least once per day. Once the entry request was received and the code verified, an Air Police patrol would be radio-dispatched to the scene for verification that more than one individual with proper access identification on his ID badge. After radio confirmation by the Air Police, the electronic sensors would be deactivated and a key inserted into a huge steel padlock linking both igloo doors that would then be jacked up and opened.



M2 Carbine

At least two, two-man Air Police patrols were operating at all times in the Q-area, using pickup trucks equipped with two-way radios, spotlights and alert lights. These patrols would cover not only the streets among the igloos and other structures, but also the perimeter road that ran beside the innermost perimeter fence. Air Police on these patrols usually carried M-2 Carbines, .30 caliber gas-operated weapons that could be fired either semi-automatic or fully-automatic at about 750 rounds-per-minute. The firing pins of these weapons had been painted white to make any firing of the weapon easily checked. Carbines were issued as patrols went on duty and collected by the armorer as they went off duty.

An assortment of other arms was available for use if need be, such as the .45 caliber submachine gun ("grease-gun") and .30 caliber light machine guns. Sidearms, such as the 1911-A1 .45 semi-automatic pistol, were usually carried by the flight NCO's and gate guards.



M3A1 Submachine Gun

One of the first things a new AP had to learn was the lingo of "10-codes" for radio communication between patrols and Operations. For example, a "10-19 India 427", meant go to igloo 427 for a routine check of persons wanting entry. However, the pulse quickened when the radio crackled, "10-10 India 427", which meant either the motion detectors had been triggered or someone had tried to gain entry by giving the wrong ID code. At that point, weapons were locked and loaded, and warning lights activated as at least one or more patrols sped to the scene, assuming that hostile entry was underway.

As the patrol arrived, it was not unusual to see two or more "tech" folks who had given the wrong ID code to Air Police Operations standing in the middle of the road with hands high in the air. They stayed that way until positive identification had been made by the AP's and clearance given to Operations via radio. Because of the potential for sabotage, all Q-area personnel were keenly aware of the seriousness of maintaining the tightest security and most of them willingly, if not gladly, complied with the "routine". I should say at this point that, although we Air Police were never given direct shoot-to-kill or shoot-first orders, it was made clear that any obvious attempt at sabotage would justify the use of deadly force. Everyone I knew said he would not hesitate to shoot in that event.



Alert building on Stony Brook
(Photo by Ketter, 6 June 2002)

The 3084th Air Police Squadron (APRON) operations section consisted of six flights of about ten men each, with an NCO in charge. Four flights would alternate six-hour shifts between alert status and duty status for a twenty-four hour period. When on alert the AP's would be issued weapons and remain together as a unit in the Q-area alert building equipped with dayroom and sleeping area, or in the administration area mess hall at meal times. Duty posts would include four men on motor patrols in the Q-area, electronic detection operator (also known as the ADT operator), desk sergeant, two Q-gate guards, main gate guard and flight NCOIC.

Except for the main gate guard who wore Class A gear; uniforms were fatigues with jump boots. Air Force arctic parkas were issued to all personnel to ward off the intense cold of western Massachusetts winters.

Because of the Stony Brook mission, Air Police personnel were sometimes given briefings on the nature of the nuclear weapons we were responsible for protecting. With the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs fresh in our minds, we were shown camera footage of state-of-the-art test explosions which, by that time (late 1950s) had reached the mega-ton yield range with atmospheric and underwater testing of thermonuclear weapons occurring in the South Pacific and Nevada. We were given



King shot of Operation Ivy
November 16, 1952
Eniwetok Atoll
500 KT – pure fission weapon

rudimentary understanding of how self-contained devices worked and what it would take to trigger a full nuclear explosion. True or not, we were told that a person with knowledge of the weapon and a few basic tools could actually activate the detonators on a nuclear device.

While the odds of a nuclear explosion taking place accidentally were fairly low, we were told, the chances of accidental detonation of HE (high explosive) material used in the nuclear device were much greater which, in turn, could release lethal, highly radioactive material or tritium gas. The code for an accident involving a nuclear device was called "Broken Arrow", and we hoped never to hear those words spoken for real over our alert radios. Nevertheless, we all had Broken Arrow response training, although, to my knowledge, there were no serious incidents during my tour at Stony Brook.

On occasion, Stony Brook would receive shipments of nuclear devices from the Army, the Navy or the labs at Sandia, New Mexico, aboard specially designed steel railcars that arrived at a small railhead just outside the Stony Brook main gate. An overhead crane would lift the devices from the railcar onto the railhead, prior to being transported by truck into the Stony Brook Q-area. The sight of two dozen nukes arranged in a group on that railhead was rather sobering in light of the briefings we'd received on the potential devastation each of these weapons could wreak on an entire city. Of course, the Stony Brook Air Police would accompany these weapons at all times until they were safely secured inside the Q-area.

Similarly, the Stony Brook Air Police would accompany a heavily armed convoy of vehicles to a point on the Westover flight line for loading aboard a waiting B-52, when the Westover Air Police would assume protection responsibility. Some of the larger devices, such as the MK6 (similar to Fat Man) were carried from above by strange looking vehicles called straddle-carriers. These weapons had components that were stored and carried separately to the aircraft in containers we called "bird cages" or "nookies". The newer and more lethal weapons were much smaller and self-contained. Watching these powerful weapons being loaded aboard the huge bombers made quite an impression on most of us young troopers.



Straddle carrier

The need for secrecy was foremost in the minds of many of us, particularly when off-duty and off base in and around the Springfield or Chicopee Falls area. If asked by civilians where we were stationed, we'd reply Westover AFB to avoid any further questions. Yet, rumors abounded among the locals as to what was going on at "that rocket base on Westover". If only they'd known back then as to how many mega-tons of destruction were housed in their backyards..... !

Off duty time wasn't bad, considering how remote our site was from normal activity. We'd attend some of the Springfield Indians hockey games or (try to) date some of the girls at Smith College, not far away. A roadhouse/restaurant/bar/hangout named Ma Manning's was located not far from the Westover main gate and was the off-base watering hole for nearly everybody on Westover, including the jet jockeys who would saunter in wearing their flight suits and checkered neck scarves. Air Force memorabilia covered the inside of the place and war stories abounded, although, for war stories, you couldn't beat the first hand accounts of many of the Stony Brook NCO's who had seen combat action in Korea and WWII.

While at Stony Brook, a friend and I donned our Class A uniforms and took the train to New York City for the 1960 New Year's celebration in Times Square. If you haven't been there on New Year's Eve, it is an unimaginable event, so many people, so much noise that you literally cannot hear yourself yelling.

At that time, at least, wear a uniform and you couldn't pay for a drink. After a couple of days in New York, we were glad to get back to the solitude of Stony Brook.

I recall being on perimeter patrol a few nights later, when the cold and moonless skies were crystal clear. It was about 0200 hours when I stopped the truck, dismounted and saw, for the first time, the amazing displays of Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis, undulating curtains of colors lighting up the velvety blackness. The stark contrast of the dazzling natural beauty in the skies above Stony Brook which housed mankind's most destructive force was not lost on me. Yet, it became clear later that it was because of the existence of those very weapons that we would remain a free and unconquered people. To this day, I'm glad to have had a small part in Stony Brook's role in our national defense effort.

Epilogue

After only one year at Stony Brook, I was transferred to a USAF Security Service site at Karamursel AB, Turkey, followed by a tour of duty at the 6915th RSM at Hof/Salle, West Germany, another Security Service installation. While there, I worked during off-duty hours for General Dynamics/Electronics and subsequently left the Air Force to join GD/E full time. Following that employment, I joined the Army & Air Force Exchange Service, and remained on assignment in Germany until 1971. After twenty-five years, I opted for early retirement from the Exchange Service and now reside in the Phoenix area with my wife, Diane.

(Editor's Note: See Mr. Kepler's other stories of his experiences at Stony Brook in the Memories Section of this document.)