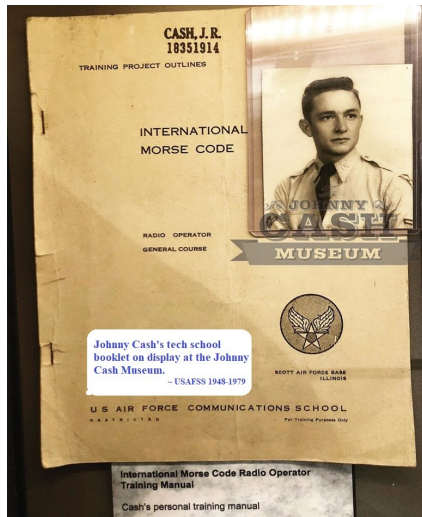


R. John (Johnny) Cash

b. February 26, 1932; d. September 12, 2003



Johnny Cash
Ditty Bopper
292x1



Class Photo: **79901 17 Apr 51**

The Facebook page, USAFSS 1948 - 1979 and its discussion group does not normally elevate any one USAFSSer above another or recognize individuals in the way of public fame, honors, medals, positions, etc. However it is natural for some people to want to know more about USAFSS veterans who have gone on to distinguish themselves as entertainers, authors, politicians, etc. Such a person was, of course, Johnny Cash, country music artist of fame.



During Cash's enlistment in the Air Force, he was just another USAFSSer doing his job, although he did form a musical band, The Landsberg Barbarians which entertained his fellow airmen. That, in itself, was not so important because several airmen were amateur musicians during their times in the service and many bands were formed at various bases which entertained the troops. Yet Johnny Cash's band and music was the root of, and laid the foundation for his future endeavors.

This document will serve as a brief and selective historical record of Johnny's time as a USAFSSer based on known information, records, personal reports by fellow airmen, and hearsay.

USAF (USAFSS) Veteran 7 July 1950 - 3 July 1954

Johnny Cash completed his basic military training at Lackland AFB and tech at Keesler AFB and Brooks AFB. He was assigned PCS to the 12th RSM, Landsberg, Germany, as a Morse code operator, AKA, a ditty bopper. While at Landsberg, it has been reported he bought a guitar and learned to play it, forming his first band, named "The Landsberg Barbarians", a take off on the base news publication, The Landsberg Barbarian.. He began writing music for the group and his song, "Hey! Porter." was published as a poem in the Stars & Stripes. He was honorably discharged as a staff sergeant on July 3, 1954, and settled briefly in Texas before moving to Memphis, TN with his wife, Vivian.

In the past few of years there have posts on individual users' Facebook time lines and various Facebook military and groups associated with U.S.Air Force Security Service concerning the fact that Johnny Cash was an Air Force veteran and, more significantly, a USAFSS veteran. Some USAF veterans seem to be rather fascinated, or are simply interested in the story of and the various vignettes of Johnny Cash, the ditty bopper as he became famous as a country and western singer and movie legend, and you know how that goes – Johnny Cash was a great ditty bopper as I was a great ditty bopper! Johnny Cash was a USAFSS veteran just as I am a USAFSS veteran. I knew Johnny Cash when . . . or I know someone who knew Johnny Cash. Be that as it may, for country and western music and celebrity fans, naturally we are proud to claim him as one of our ditty boppers. 🙄

Some say that the distinctive sound of his Tennessee Three backing band and unique musical beat style was based on his experience as a Morse Intercept Operator. To my knowledge, no extant proof exist concerning this theory.

Cash played a distinctive, what is described as a 'boom-chicka' beat that sounded similar to the fast, stomping tone from a freight train in motion. He also used a style of picking, where the melody is played on alternating bass notes (usually low E, A, and D strings), while the rhythm is strummed on the treble strings (G, B, and high E). His signature sound launched songs like I Walk the Line, Folsom Prison Blues and Ring of Fire.

It has been reported that it was Johnny's bass player, Marshall Grant, who brought the 'Boom Chicka Boom' style to his early music. ¹

After those early years of becoming established as a style, the sound of Johnny Cash diversified significantly according to particular songs, many which became hits, some unique in style and/or motif.

There is one particular story going around FB groups and USAFSS member's time lines entitled, "Johnny Cash was the first American to hear about Stalin's death." ²

The article states that, "On March 5th, 1953, while working on his post, Cash intercepted a very important communique from the Soviets. . . . While transcribing the Soviet Morse Code chatter, Johnny Cash became the first American to hear the news of the death of the Soviet leader. Sgt.Staff (*sic*) Cash immediately reported the important news to his superiors and the rest is history. Cash, himself, writes in his autobiography, ". . . I was the ace. I was who they called when the hardest jobs came up. *I copied the first news of Stalin's death.*"

So, was Cash the "first" American to "hear" of Stalin's death? According to him, he did, in fact, copy the news but whether he was the first or not, he doesn't say. He simply said that he copied the "first news", not that he was the first person to copy the news. Seems to me, a very important distinction, at least grammatically.

As the link has been posted in more than one USAFSS Facebook group, reactions of the post by various USAFSSers to the vintage news article, are for the most part skeptical of the claim.

A retired USAFSS CMSgt, one of Cash's trick supervisors in Landsberg (12th RSM) in 1951 - 52. However, he left in September 1952 before the reported intercept in March 1953. Thus he was not there at the specific time. Nevertheless he writes, "What everyone must understand is, we were Morse ops. We intercepted encrypted code. We were not cryptographers. We would have no way of knowing what the encoded msg said. Just folk lore." Of course, if the incident took place as Cash wrote in the interview for his autobiography, he could, and probably would have learned later of the content of the coded message. He doesn't give details of the incident. He only says in his autobiography, "I was the ace. I was who they called when the hardest jobs came up. I copied the first news of Stalin's death."³

Young Johnny Case was a dittybopper, one of thousands over the years. He may have heard and copied the "chatter" but maybe didn't know what he copied until analysts got done with it. As this author understands it, Moree Code Intercept Operators copied Russian traffic during the time in locations such as England, Scotland, and Germany and one thing you never heard was plain text chatter and all admin traffic was in five character code groups which no intercept site could decode.

Others during Facebook discussions see it as no more special than the thousands of other Ops doing the job. From testimonials during the time, it seems there was never and talk about Cash being the one who first picked up on Stalin's death and perhaps he would have if it was true.” It is certainly possible Cash being at the station and on duty when the data on Stalin was intercepted and more than likely the intercept was voice related, not morse. It is certainly also true that Cash did not speak Russian so unless he was listening to radio Moscow in English and they would be the last entity in Russia to give out that information this story is just that a story.” Another factor to consider is that he could have possibly been on duty (siting a morse position), when the intercept occurred and had no direct association with the intercept. Finally, as stated early, those who remember being in the same location, have stated that ehy never even heard the story,”

Finally a factor to consider, aside from linguistic issues, if he was just copying morse chatter, how did some low level Russian radio operator know that Stalin was dead before it was officially announced by the Communist Party of the Societ Union {CPSU}? There was strict control of such and as a ditty-bop message received that could not be read without an analyst decoding it.

Other than the brief allusion to the incident in the autobiography and the link noted, there doesn't seem to be any collaborating evidence to substantiate the claim, thus the skepticism. If he were intercepting a transmission between two Soviet military operators, even if they were chatting in plain text, an understanding or the language would be paramount. So, Is it true that Johnny Cash, a ditty bopper at Landsberg, was one of the first persons outside of the Soviet Union to learn of Stalin's death? He said he copied the first news and we have no choice but to accept it as fact until some bona fide source proves, without doubt.

Johnny Cash's uniform – johnnycashmuseum.com



Photos Provided by Bob Mehaffey



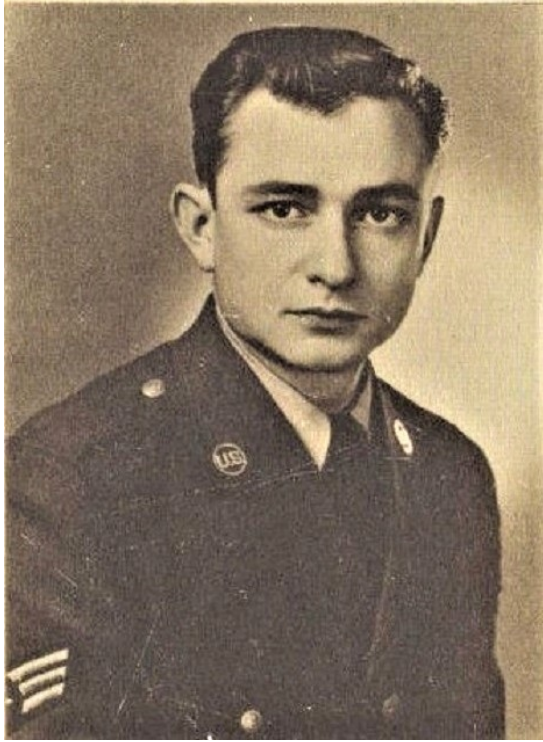
Photo Provide by Russell Collins, TSgt, USAF Retired

(during a refueling stop, site survey team from Germany on the way to Italy to set up a new USAF Security Service site, later established as the 6917th Security Groups near San Vito dei Normanni.)



Internet Photos

(unknown original sources)



Johnny Cash, one-time USAFSS ditty bopper evidently never bothered to re-associate himself with his former airmen veterans. It has been recorded that the FTVA (Freedom Through Vigilance Association) reached out to him with no success. I personally know one former ditty bopper who, upon attending a concert during Cash's musical career, sent a message backstage that he had been stationed together in Germany and had been on a site survey team together and would like to see him. Cash rejected the offer. Surely he had his reasons, but if you ran across a fellow veteran from back in the day, seems to me that, if no more out of nostalgia, it would be nice to chat a bit about old times.

Johnny Cash, American singer-songwriter Demographics:

Born: February 26, 1932, Kingsland, AR

Died: September 12, 2003, Saint Thomas Midtown Hospital, Nashville, TN

Spouse: June Carter Cash (m. 1968–2003), Vivian Liberto (m. 1954–1968)

Children: Rosanne Cash, John Carter Cash, Cindy Cash, Tara Cash, Kathy Cash

END NOTES

1.

<https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/468016/marshall-grant-who-brought-boom-chicka-boom-to-johnny-cashs-band-dies>

2. THEVINTAGENEWS.COM web site. URL as follows:

<https://www.thevintagenews.com/2016/08/07/johnny-cash-was-the-first-american-to-hear-about-stalins-death/>

3. Bob Mehaffey. CMSgt, USAF Retired

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