

# My Life in the Army

**Chuck Booker**

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In the fall of 1971, I was newly married to Claudette [DeRocher], a trumpet player, and attending St. Mary's University of San Antonio, majoring in Music Education. After having dropped piano for the third time, and tiring of school, I joined the United States Army as a trumpet player. After training my assignment would be as a member of the Fifth U.S. Army Band at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

I entered basic training in January 1972 and graduated in April. Claudette and I packed up our 1965 Rambler Classic and drove to Norfolk, Virginia to the Armed Forces School of Music. I attended the school until the first of September, during which time, I began to write music for the jazz bands that rehearsed everyday. My first attempt was disastrous, but a Navy instructor took pity on me, pointed out my mistakes, and told me to rewrite it. We did this over and over until I got it right. At the school and in my first two years in the Army, I must have arranged at least one new piece a week. During my stay at the "School," the Army's premier touring jazz band and part of the Army Field Band performed there. Known as the Studio Band, they later were renamed "the Jazz Ambassadors." I was really amazed and impressed

with the ability and high musical standards achieved by this group, and I remember telling Claudette that someday, I would love to be in that band. Also, while at the School of Music my son Erik Lee Booker was born.

After graduating from the School of Music I moved my family back to San Antonio and started my career as a trumpeter with the 5th Army Band. It is here I met future Texas band directors Gary Potter and Larry Schmidt. Bob Howard, my best friend from high school, was already in the band. John Pearson, band director at MacArthur High School, was kind enough to let me bring charts over to try out with his band. Occasionally, I played gigs on trumpet with Dale Schultz in the Paul Elizondo Orchestra. My high school band director, Al Sturchio commissioned me to write jazz charts for his jazz orchestra.

During Christmas 1972, President Truman was very ill and our band was put "on alert." We were to support any funeral ceremonies that would be held at the President's home. The day after Christmas we got word that President Truman had died. That evening we boarded a C-130 at Kelly Air Force Base and flew to Kansas. Two months later,

President Johnson died and we took part in that service too.

I continued with my writing and playing trumpet for the next two years, and even did some conducting at the Ft. Sam Houston Playhouse Theatre. I left the Army at the end of my enlistment and moved my family to Denton to attend North Texas State University in the spring of 1975, majoring in composition. After two months, I realized I missed the camaraderie and hands-on excitement of an Army band so I re-enlisted into my old unit at Ft. Sam Houston and we moved back to San Antonio.

That summer, Claudette and I bought a house and settled down (we thought) to the routine of Army life. In August 1975, my Bandmaster offered me two free tickets to see The Army Field Band of Washington, D.C. perform at Trinity University. At first I declined, but at the last minute decided to go. As luck would have it, one of my senior sergeants was at the concert and pulled me back stage at the intermission to talk to the commander of the Band, Major Sam Fricano who needed a replacement for his chief arranger (Dave Volpe) who was retiring. I flew to their headquarters in Ft. Meade, Maryland (just outside

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of Washington, D.C.) for the audition, and was accepted.

In March 1976, I sold my house, packed up the family and drove to Ft. Meade. I immediately began writing new music for the Field Band for their spring tour and continued to write for the concert band. I also took private composition lessons at Towson State University from the great jazz composer and arranger, Hank Levy. Although I had my first two pieces published by Kendor Music that year, I knew I wanted to do more than write music for the rest of my military career. I not only wanted to write it, I wanted to conduct it, and someday, hopefully become the Director of the Studio Band. To do that, I would have to become an Army Bandmaster, a Warrant Officer. I asked Major Fricano for his permission to request admission into the Bandmaster course. He smiled knowingly, and said, "I was wondering when you were going to get around to it."

On the first day of December, I was accepted for Bandmaster training at the School of Music. In four weeks, I cleared quarters, raced my family back to San Antonio to stay with Claudette's parents, and flew to Norfolk, Virginia. The course of instruction was six long grueling months. We began with eighteen candidates, and only ten of us graduated.

My first assignment was at Ft. Polk, Louisiana where I spent three enjoyable years as Bandmaster of the Fifth Infantry Division Band. I was twenty-five and the youngest Bandmaster in the Army. I was full

of an overabundance of energy and determined to succeed at everything. Looking back now, I believe I must have been exasperating to my sergeants, especially the older ones. We all survived and they taught me how to be an officer. In 1978, the band flew to West Germany for *Reforger '78*. We performed for six weeks throughout the military exercise area near Frankfurt, enjoying the German hospitality—especially the beer and schnitzel.

One of the highlights of my time at Fort Polk, was conducting the 5th Infantry Division Band at the 1980 Arkansas Bandmasters Association conference and performing with Harvey Phillips. What I remember most about Ft. Polk was that Claudette and I were blessed with two more children, Adam and Colleen.

In 1980 I received orders to Frankfurt, West Germany as Bandmaster of the Third Armored Division. I flew to Germany first, and six weeks later Claudette and the kids followed. In January 1981, the American hostages held in captivity by the Iranian government were released. Our band performed for their departure from Rhein-Main Air Force Base to the states. I remember conducting the band during "God Bless America" and suddenly found myself being hugged by one of the released hostages who was crying and thanking me for being there. I may have cried a little bit, too. Each year the band provided music at the World War II memorial service at Margraten, Netherlands and at the annual Nijmegen Marches, also in the Netherlands.



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In 1983 the Bookers were once again moved by the Army to Brooklyn, New York where I became the Commander and Bandmaster of the 26th Army Band: "The Army Band of New York City." During this time the band provided music for all visiting heads of state, for Mayor Koch's city ceremonies, concerts in the park and at the World Trade Center. In 1986, the band performed for many of the activities in support of the Centennial of the Statue of Liberty.

In May 1986, I was asked to be the Director of the Army's "Jazz Ambassadors." I took about one second to think it over and said, "When do I start?" In August 1986, I reported to the Field Band for the second time in my life and by October, I was on a 40-day coast-to-coast concert tour of the United States with the Jazz Ambassadors.

During my seven years as their director, I took the Jazz Ambassadors on many tours throughout all sections of our great country and in many parts of the world. In February and March of 1989, the Department of the Army sent the Jazz Ambassadors on a 30-day tour of India performing in New Delhi, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Bangalore, and Poona. We even paid a visit to the great Taj Mahal. In summer, the band did a 26-day tour of six countries in western Europe which included performances at the Nice Jazz Festival in France, the North Sea Jazz Festival at The Hague in the Netherlands, and the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. We performed with Louie Bellson and Don Menza at the 1987 National Association of Jazz Educators in Atlanta.

The band marched in the Presidential Inauguration Parades in 1989 and again in 1993. We performed in Tokyo, Japan in 1993 in a centennial celebration of the birth of Glenn Miller. We performed at the Midwest International Band and Orchestra Conference in Chicago twice, but my favorite of all performances was at the 1991 Texas Bandmasters Association Conference in San Antonio.

I left the military in 1993, and spent one year as Director of Bands at Fork Union Academy in Virginia. Our family returned home to San Antonio the following year, and I became assistant editor of Southern Music Company. I finished my Masters degree in Instrumental Conducting from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 1996, and was appointed the acting Director of Bands at Trinity University 1996-97. I received my Texas Teaching Certificate from Southwest Texas State University in 1997, and taught public school music until appointed in 1999 to my current position as Director of Bands at the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith.

Over the years I have come to realize how important my 21 years in the Army Band program were. There was always a sense of accomplishment; time and freedom to learn my trade, and I strongly believe I served my country to the best of my abilities. I highly recommend any of the military band programs. The opportunities for learning and leadership are there for anyone who has the desire to be the best they can be. Sound familiar?