

Horseback riding in France in the early 1960s

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In early 1959, after spending 18 months in beautiful Scotland, my father was transferred to *Chateauroux Air Force Base in the Loire Valley in France. Of course my mother and father were ecstatic!! My parents were elated that the United States Air Force provided military base housing at this posting. The military base housing subdivision was called “Brassieux” and was 7 miles from the actual Air Base. It looked like a typical American subdivision but of course there were no telephones in the homes except for the commanding general’s home and the Air Police “Guard Shack” that policed the perimeter of the housing area. And there was no television! What a concept – we actually had to talk to each and would spend time playing a friendly game of Hearts after dinner.

There were a total of 15-30 US military bases throughout France, Germany and Spain all populated with US service men and their families. France was home to 11 bases. That necessitated an American School system from kindergarten thru 12th grade to accommodate all the children of the US service men and women stationed in Europe during the “Cold War” period post World War II. We had football, basketball, baseball and Track– just like the good old USA! My brother was on the baseball team and Track Team and sadly there were not a lot of sports activities for the “girls”, just the “Cheerleader” Squads for Junior and Senior High School. I was never interested in being a cheerleader and so I was delighted when my mother and father helped me find a local horse stable to continue my horseback riding lessons that had begun in Scotland.

We found a horse stable 10 miles from Brassieux – it was run by a gentleman by the name of Sebastian whose home was Spain and who fancied himself a representative of the Spanish Riding School style of instruction. *In Spain, to undergo training at the Spanish Riding School means a lifelong education, which is always subjected to the needs of the horses. It is tough, takes eight to ten years and requires iron discipline. The handed-down oral tradition of classic equestrian art still applies today and is passed on from generation to generation.* But in reality, the only similarity was that it was the oral tradition of instruction. He accepted me as a student but he was tough.

My parents could afford for me to take lessons every two weeks and the lessons occurred in an indoor ring with only me on my horse and Sebastian, the Spanish instructor who was quite vocal and strict. He was in the center of the ring with a “whip” that he would use to make his point as he would flay his riding boots with the whip to make a point when I made a mistake, which there were many. Yikes! I learned much under his oral tutelage but it was not a “ride in the park” by any means. He also demanded that I wear the proper riding attire – jodhpurs, riding jacket, riding boots and velvet riding helmet. It was beginning to be an expensive sport but my very talented mother made my jodhpurs and my proper riding jacket so I only had to buy the boots and the helmet with money that I saved out of my allowance.

VERY lucky for me, he “allowed” me to ride a beautiful black Arabian mare by the name of “Aisha” – she was magnificent. I was responsible for her grooming before and after our lesson in addition to putting on her saddle and bridle. That was another wonderful learning experience for me.

Horseback riding in France in the early 1960s (cont)

There were several other students who were taking private lessons from Sebastian and we were all feverishly practicing in order to “qualify” to participate in a very small competitive horse show that would take place in the fall of 1962. It was truly a glorious time for me, especially after I made some progress with my “form” as Aisha and I walked, trotted and cantered around the ring.

My family was so proud of me and we were looking forward to the small horse show. Unfortunately, my father was reassigned to Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas just before the horse show was to take place so I was unable to compete. I was so lucky to have yet another unforgettable experience as a “military brat” and I thank my parents for taking advantage of every available avenue that allowed me to grow, learn and appreciate the discipline it takes to learn how to ride and take care of a horse.

**Châteauroux-Déols Air Base (IATA: CHR, ICAO: LFLX) is a former United States Air Force Base in France. It is located in the Indre département of France, located about 3 miles (5 km) northeast of Châteauroux and about 1 mile (1.6 km) northeast of Déols on the east side of the Départemental 920 (D920) (Indre) road in Central France. During the Cold War, Châteauroux-Déols was a front-line base for the United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE). The USAF base at Châteauroux-Déols actually consisted of two separate facilities about five miles apart, Châteauroux-Déols Air Depot (CHAD) and La Martinerie Airdrome. The base was home to some 8,000 Americans between 1951 and 1967.*