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Sgt. Christopher Saputo guards the American Embassy in Rome



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## Cover Story



Protecting people: Sgt. Patric Tooley, here walking past a statue of Venus in the U.S. Embassy in Rome, was a military policeman and now reassures people as a Marine Security Guard.

# America's SECURITY GUARDS

*Exotic locales, a room of your own, no officers in sight. How do you get a job like this?*



Keeping the guard up: Cpl. Emilio Villarreal, left, and Sgt. Christopher Saputo confer during a shift change. Saputo says this is not the cushy duty some think it is.



# Cover Story

By Chris Lawson  
Times staff writer

ROME, Italy

It's perhaps the most unique of Marine duty, far from the fleet and high on the skyline: Marine Security Guards, the front line of America's diplomatic defense.

For the 1,030 Marines who serve as embassy security guards, life as an MSG at the more than 126 embassies and consulates around the globe is both demanding and thrilling.

There's international intrigue and the lure of foreign service — protecting America's overseas stations and ensuring that classified state secrets don't fall into enemy hands. There's also the chance for special duty pay, accelerated promotion opportunities and the thrill of serving abroad for almost three years anywhere from Africa to Europe.

It's as independent as independent duty gets, offering hundreds of lance corporals to sergeants unmatched professional and personal opportunities. Staff NCOs, who serve as detachment commanders, get the chance to have their own commands.

But it's not for every Marine. Some call it nothing but glorified gate guard duty.

Regardless, for the last 195 years, leathernecks have been protecting American lives and property overseas. Direct protective support of diplomatic missions started in 1835.

But it wasn't until the Foreign Service Act of 1946 that Congress wrote it into law: Enlisted Marines would meet the Department of State's security guard requirements at Foreign Service Posts throughout the world.

Ever since, young Marines like Sgts. Christopher Saputo and Patric Tooley, now serving at the American Embassy in Rome, Italy, have packed up their dress blues and crisscrossed the globe, leaving behind life in the trenches for duty as a Marine Security Guard.

## Clearly defined roles

At any embassy, the role of the Marine security detachment is clear and simple: protect American lives, government property and classified material.

The Marines are the first line of defense at America's foreign homefronts, a heavy responsibility not taken lightly. Their job is to give up their lives to protect a building — and the people inside it — should it ever be threatened.

Unlike years past, Marines do not stand guard outside the gates of America's embassies dressed in their dazzling dress blue uniforms. Nor do they provide external perimeter security. That's now done by foreign national protection services. Instead, MSGs are responsible for the internal security of the embassy.

The Marines stand posts at various embassy entrances, regulating who gets in and when. They conduct "roving patrols" in the hallways, offices and corridors of the embassy, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

They look for security violations, things like unlocked safes or classified documents someone may have left lying out on a desk. They report violations to the Regional Security Officer, a State Department official in charge of overall security operations.

Oftentimes, a Marine must confront an employee who violated a security procedure. That person can be fired for such care-

lessness. While it's difficult, the Marines have learned not to take such matters personally.

"A Marine on duty has no friends," said a stoic LCpl. Erik Lollar, a former infantryman.

"We don't make the rules, we just enforce them," echoes Sgt. Erik Chaney, who used to work as an electrical equipment repair specialist.

Col. Mark Goodman runs the Marine Security Guard program based at Quantico, Va., home of the MSG School. Goodman said it takes maturity, responsibility and integrity to make a good security guard. And they make sure they provide the right product to the State Department.

"A Marine's integrity must be beyond reproach," Goodman said. "We hold MSGs to higher standards than anyone else. But along with that comes higher 'bennies,' accelerated promotions, special consideration, and the like."

Some of those benefits include:

- Special duty pay of \$110 a month.
- A one-time allowance of \$1,123 for civilian clothes.
- Dress Blue Uniform issue including one blouse and six pair of trousers.
- 100 bonus points added to composite scores for promotion to corporal and sergeant.
- Possible meritorious promotion to staff sergeant and gunnery sergeant.
- Special consideration before promotion boards, which are briefed on the unique requirements for what is considered one of three special duty assignments (the others are recruiting and drill instructor duty).
- Up to a 23-month extension on active duty for Marines in a closed MOS, who

may be otherwise unable to reenlist.

Sgt. Jason Cisarano, an artilleryman by trade and a 6½-year Marine veteran, is typical of the kind of Marine who joins the MSG program. He spent his first three years cocking cannons at Camp Lejeune, N.C., before he signed up to be an embassy guard.

"You hear about the Marine Security Guard program, you hear that it's a special place to be, good for Marines, and good duty," he said. "It sounded like something I wanted to do."

Cisarano's first post in 1992 was in Warsaw, Poland. He's been in Rome since March 1994. Like most guards, he'll get one "good" post and one "bad" post. There are 126 posts throughout the world, and a Marine will serve one in the upper half of the list and one in the lower.

Cisarano said he's enjoyed learning about new cultures, and relishes the responsibilities of his position. He likes the independent nature of the duty.

He also like the sergeant's stripe he was able to pin on soon after graduating MSG School. His MOS was very slow to promote to E-5, he said, but like others who successfully complete the school, Cisarano earned 100 bonus points toward his cutting score on graduation day. He picked up E-5 shortly thereafter.

"Before I came out here, I had already been promoted to corporal, but in my MOS it was really hard to go from corporal to sergeant," he said. "Coming out here really helped me out in that respect. It sure speeded it up."

Tooley spent his first 15 months in the Corps as a military policeman on Okinawa, Japan, before he joined the MSG program in 1994. He too had just picked up E-4 when he reported to MSG School. Like Cisarano, he picked up sergeant within months of graduation.

"My friends in the MP field are still the same rank, E-3s and E-4s, the same they were a year and a half ago," he said. "While I was in MSG School, my MOS was closed for promotion to sergeant. It opened up just after I graduated, and I got it. I beat the score by more than 50 points."

In other words, without the 100 bonus, he couldn't have vaulted over the top.

Tooley became a military policeman because he likes to help and protect people, he said. He now enjoys doing the same thing on an international scale. Armed with a .357 State Department revolver at his side, Tooley said he's more than just a gate guard.

"Marines are a real reassuring presence, both to the embassy employees as well as the American citizens who come here for help," he said. "I like the idea that I can help some older couple who might have spent their entire life savings on a trip to Rome, only to have their luggage or purse stolen. I can help them. We can refer them to the proper authorities."

The Marines also provide a stable presence for embassy and State Department workers.

"We're letting them know they are coming to a secure place to work," he said. "That's my job. To protect this place and make it safe for everyone."

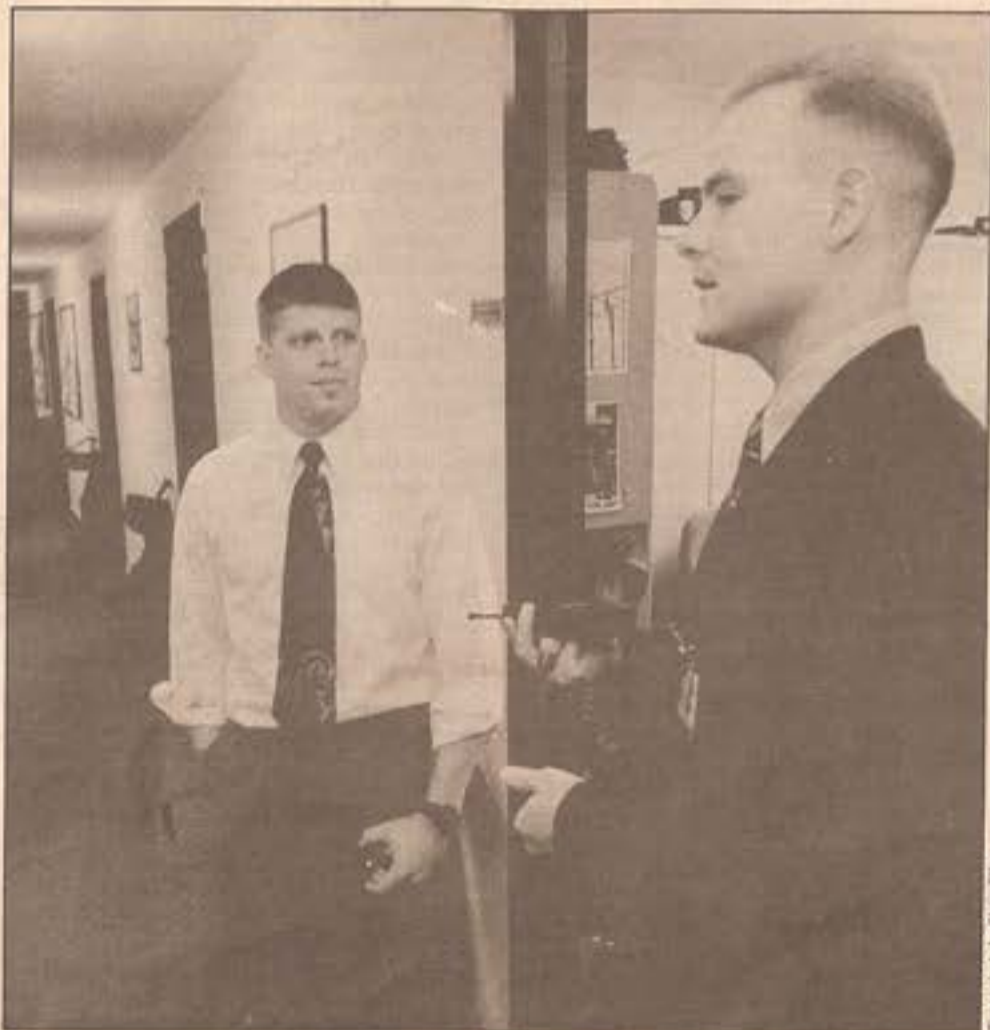
Inside Post One, the main entrance to the embassy, the Marines keep their combat shotguns, pistols and ammunition. They are trained to quell riots and internal disturbances — such as a disgruntled foreigner upset at not getting a visa — and

See MSG, next page

## Got what it takes?

Marines who want to become MSGs must meet a stringent list of requirements, both personal and professional. Among them:

- Sergeants and below must be single and agree to remain so until the end of their tour. They must also have at least 32 months left on their contract upon reporting to the MSG School.
  - Corporals and lance corporals must have a 4.2 average on their proficiency and conduct marks.
  - Staff NCOs must have at least 39 months on contract upon reporting to MSG School.
  - Staff NCOs may not have more than four family members including their spouse.
  - A staff NCO's spouse and dependent children must be U.S. citizens. They may be naturalized citizens or hold dual citizenship.
  - Staff NCOs with families may not make unaccompanied tours.
- In addition, all Marines must:
- Be U.S. citizens.
  - Meet Marine Corps personal appearance standards.
  - Have passed their most recent physical fitness test.
  - Have no general court-martial convictions; no summary, or special court-martials in the past five years.
  - No more than one non-judicial punishment within the year before applying.
  - No history of financial instability.
  - No information in their background that would jeopardize top secret clearance, such as psychiatric care for mental disorders, undisclosed drug involvement or immediate family members who are not naturalized.
  - No family, personal or medical problems that would preclude an overseas assignment.
  - Have a minimum GT score of 90.



At the ready: Sgt. Russell Donaldson, left, and Sgt. Patric Tooley talk in the hallway of the Marine house in Rome. At the doors in the hallway, Marines store their combat gear in case it's needed.

Times photo by Steve Elfers



## Cover Story

## Marine house: Living in the lap of 'luxury'

By Chris Lawson  
Times staff writer

ROME, Italy — Life at the Marine house is different than most leathernecks are used to. It's more like a fraternity house than a barracks, but make no mistake, there are no toga parties here.

"We won't have Marine houses seen as brothels," said Col. Mark Goodman, the head of the Marine Security Program at Quantico, Va.

The Marines in Italy live in a comfortable, sprawling house that most Marines agree beats an open squadbay any day of the week.

"Living here is a tremendous incentive for any Marine," said MSgt. Keith Thrasher, commander of the Rome Marine Security Guard Detachment. "There's privacy, camaraderie and a terrific social atmosphere."

The Marine house has its own restaurant-sized kitchen, a bar area with sound and light system, and a common television lounge with a large-screen TV. On some weekends, the Marines hold a happy hour for embassy staff and

friends. The money they raise pays for the Marine Corps birthday parties and recreational gear.

The best part of living in the house: Each Marine gets a large, private room that's usually unmatched at other posts throughout the Corps.

There are rules of course: No members of the opposite sex are allowed in the Marines' rooms. Guests can't even enter the hallway that houses the rooms and sits just off the common lounge. It's easy to see why: Outside each room the Marines have pre-staged their flak jackets, helmets, gas masks, gas canisters, shotgun shells, and PR-24 security batons, ready for any emergency.

"It's pretty nice here; it sure beats a barracks," said Sgt. Jason Cisarano. But there are drawbacks, he said, noting his midnight curfew.

"It's tough to ask permission to stay out overnight somewhere," he said. "I'm a 25-year-old sergeant with a curfew, it can get hard sometimes."

## MSG posts

Marine Security Guards serve at a variety of embassies and consulates around the world. The posts, ranked in order of worst to best, based on liberty, restrictions and general quality of life:

1) Khartoum, Sudan	31) St. Petersburg, Russia	58) Caracas, Venezuela	83) Panama City, Panama	104) Tokyo, Japan
2) Monrovia, Liberia	32) Belgrade, Yugoslavia	59) Lima, Peru	84) San Salvador, El Salvador	105) Singapore
3) Conakry, Guinea	33) Moscow, Russia	60) Tunis, Tunisia	85) Bangkok, Thailand	106) San Jose, Costa Rica
4) NDjamena, Chad	34) Sofia, Bulgaria	61) Gaborone, Botswana	86) Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	107) Brussels, Belgium
5) Sana'a, Yemen	35) Shanghai, China	62) Nairobi, Kenya	87) Seoul, S. Korea	108) Bern, Switzerland
6) Algiers, Algeria	36) Bujumbura, Burundi	63) Rabat, Morocco	88) Bridgetown, Barbados	109) Lisbon, Portugal
7) Port-au-Prince, Haiti	37) Dakar, Senegal	64) Dhahran, Saudi Arabia	89) Athens, Greece	110) The Hague, Netherlands
8) Bamako, Mali	38) Djibouti, Djibouti	65) Jeddah, Saudi Arabia	90) Pretoria, S. Africa	111) Frankfurt, Germany
9) Niamey, Niger	39) Cairo, Egypt	66) Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	91) Cape Town, S. Africa	112) Berlin, Germany
10) Lome, Togo	40) Damascus, Syria	67) Nicosia, Cyprus	92) Port-of-Spain, Trinidad	113) Bonn, Germany
11) Yaounde, Cameroon	41) Islamabad, Pakistan	68) Tel Aviv, Israel	93) Mexico City, Mexico	114) Helsinki, Finland
12) Lagos, Nigeria	42) Abidjan, Ivory Coast	69) Manila, Philippines	94) Nassau, Bahamas	115) Vienna, Austria
13) Accra, Ghana	43) Lusaka, Zambia	70) Harare, Zimbabwe	95) Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	116) Luxembourg
14) Freetown, S. Africa	44) Antananarivo, Madagascar	71) Valletta, Malta	96) Quito, Ecuador	117) Oslo, Norway
15) Brazzaville, Congo	45) Kampala, Uganda	72) Tegucigalpa, Honduras	97) Montevideo, Uruguay	118) Geneva, Switzerland
16) Dhaka, Bangladesh	46) Dar es Salaam, Tanzania	73) Jakarta, Indonesia	98) Sao Paulo, Brazil	119) Ottawa, Canada
17) Kinshasa, Zaire	47) Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	74) Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates	99) Buenos Aires, Argentina	120) Paris, France
18) Yangon, Myanmar	48) Kuwait City, Kuwait	75) Bogota, Colombia	100) Santiago, Chile	121) London, England
19) Kathmandu, Nepal	49) Ankara, Turkey	76) Kingston, Jamaica	101) Madrid, Spain	122) Canberra, Australia
20) Maputo, Mozambique	50) Istanbul, Turkey	77) Asuncion, Paraguay	102) Rome, Italy	123) Dublin, Ireland
21) Karachi, Pakistan	51) Zagreb, Croatia	78) Brasilia, Brazil	103) Hong Kong	124) Copenhagen, Denmark
22) Havana, Cuba	52) Muscat, Oman	79) Manama, Bahrain		125) Stockholm, Sweden
23) Georgetown, Guyana	53) Warsaw, Poland	80) Budapest, Hungary		
24) Kiev, Ukraine	54) Prague, The Czech Republic	81) Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic		
25) Bucharest, Romania	55) La Paz, Bolivia	82) Guatemala City, Guatemala		
26) New Delhi, India	56) Amman, Jordan			
27) Colombo, Sri Lanka	57) Jerusalem, Israel			
28) Managua, Nicaragua				
29) Beijing, China				
30) Paramaribo, Suriname				

(New post not yet rated: Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan in the former Soviet Union)

— Chris Lawson

## MSGs under scrutiny every time they go to work

MSG, from preceding page

search for bombs and other devices.

Several times a week, the detachment conducts emergency reaction drills where the entire group is called out from wherever they are — they must carry beepers, cellular phones or radios everywhere they go — and rush back to the embassy to don combat gear and react to a fictional threat. They never let their guard down, not even while on liberty.

"You could go your entire tour and have nothing happen, and on the very last day something could. You've got to always be prepared," said MSgt. Keith Thrasher, commander of the Rome MSG Detachment.

## Not a 'cushy tour'

The recent bombing in Oklahoma City had all the Rome Marines remembering their primary mission and responsibilities.

"Many people consider this post a cushy tour," said Sgt. Christopher Saputo. "That's what the DEA guys in Oklahoma City thought about their post. Those guys considered it a cush tour where nothing would happen. Well it did. I won't let that happen here. When somebody, just one Marine, lets their guard down, it's going to happen."

The Soviet Union has collapsed but Marine leaders insist there are still espionage and terrorism threats in the world. Marines must always be on the lookout, despite the reduced worldwide threat. Every Marine on MSG duty remembers the infamous Moscow Station fiasco in 1987, when Marine Sgt. Clayton Lonetree and others allowed Soviet spies to compromise the embassy. It was a serious black eye for the Corps, one that has been hard to overcome. Even now, eight years later, Lonetree remains behind bars at Fort Leavenworth prison, still trying to appeal his guilty verdict.

"Nobody wants to be the next Lonetree," Cisarano said.

## Avoiding trouble in town

While all the Marines are aware of their security responsibilities, they have other ones as well. As uniformed diplomats, they must also avoid troubles in town.

"This duty can make you or break you. You screw up and you're gone," said Sgt. Russell Donaldson, a former mortarman. "You can't just go out and get drunk and act stupid. You represent the United States of America. You must learn to act like a diplomat."

The Marines are strict. Infractions or breeches of security are not tolerated. Second chances are few and far between.

"We can't afford to find some Marine curled up in the hallway sleeping on post," said MSgt. Michael Thompson, the chief instructor at the MSG School. "Our mission is too important."

And, adds Donaldson, you never know when a bomb threat or riot might endanger the embassy. He and his fellow Marines must be ready to react accordingly.

Marines call life at the embassies "high viz," or high visibility, that is. They know they are under a microscope every time they report to work.

"You're in a mighty big fishbowl," Tooley said.

On patrol in the embassy late one Saturday night, Tooley told a visitor he's still in awe of that fishbowl. With its million-dollar art work, gold-flaked ceilings and the opulent ambassador's office, the embassy is a constant reminder that Tooley is a long way from Wisconsin, his home state.

"It still takes my breath away every time I walk these halls," he said, the heels of his shoes clicking on the marble floors that lead to an ornate staircase in the center of

the embassy. "They don't have buildings like this in Wisconsin."

## Hardship posts

It's a different story in places like Khartoum, Sudan, and Rangoon, Burma, however. Those are some of the "worst" posts in the program. There, Marines have limited liberty, few amenities, and an austere working environment. The so-called "hardship" posts are usually smaller — five to a detachment is average — and are much more close-knit. It has to be in order to survive, Marines say.

But Marines like Chris Saputo, who served his first tour in war-torn Zagreb, Croatia, have positive memories of their hardship post. He got to know members of the embassy community very well, even becoming the godfather to one Croatian family's newborn son.

"When I was in Croatia, you were forced to go on two-man liberty, you were often restricted to the embassy compound, you had early curfews. Sometimes you could not go out of the Marine house after dark," he recalled. "But it was OK. The Marines were very tight, and we got to know some very wonderful people, both in and out of the embassy. I was glad to do a poor post. The Croatians are beautiful people. It used to tear my heart out a lot of times, because you want to help them out, things were so bad sometimes. But you can't."

While the posts differ in the degree of difficulty, the job is usually pretty much the same. It's important work, to be sure, but it can also get monotonous. That's why some deride it as glorified gate guard duty. A lot of times, Marines stand at a single post eight hours at a stretch doing nothing more than allowing people into and out of the embassy. It can be tedious and make a hard-charging Marine wonder why he ever left

the infantry. Then, they look forward to more of the same the next day.

There are disadvantages off duty as well. There are the language barriers; the lonely desolation of a hardship post; the fact that you can't always run to a military base to catch a cheap movie or go to the bowling alley; you can't have guests in your room; your family is usually thousands of miles away; and you may not always get along with the small band of brothers and sisters you are forced to serve and live with for 15 months at a time.

Sgt. Tooley relieves any boredom and frustration he gets from the job by teaching wrestling at local American schools in Rome. He's also lead singer for a 1960/1970s-era band that plays for various State Department functions.

"It's like anything else, you get out of it what you put into it," he said. "You can't just sit in the Marine house and be a barracks rat. There are a 1,000 sights to see in Italy. I've been to the top of the country down to Sicily. And there's still more I want to do."

Sgt. Saputo agreed.

"I mean really. How bad can it be?" he asked as he looked out of the embassy gates at an Italian sunset. "I live in Rome, Italy. Never in my life could I dream of having had this opportunity. I've lived in the capital city of Croatia. I've been to Venice, Pisa, Naples, Florence."

"I mean, yeah, the job gets bad sometimes. But then I just pack up and go to Venice!"

Saputo said it's important that Marines get out and enjoy the local flavor of the country to which they're assigned.

"Marines stick together and that's fine, but go find Italian friends, meet the locals," he said. "Who knows if you'll ever have this chance again?"



Cover Story

# A place where staff NCOs take command

By Chris Lawson  
Times staff writer

ROME, Italy — Security guard duty is not just for sergeants and below. At every post is a detachment commander and his assistant. Both are staff NCOs. Any Marine in the grade of staff sergeant to master gunnery sergeant can apply. First sergeants and sergeants major do not serve on the duty.

For senior enlisted Marines like MSgt. Keith Thrasher, commander of the Rome MSG detachment, there can be no better duty.

"In essence, you run the show," Thrasher said as he strolled the ornate embassy compound, eyes peeled for any sign of trouble. Dressed in civilian clothes, Thrasher could easily pass as a State Department diplomat. "Back in the fleet, you've always got a captain or a lieutenant who's in charge. Out here, it's my call. I'm the guy in charge."

Unlike other jobs for staff NCOs around the Corps, detachment commanders are literally their own bosses. They report via computer and telephone to their company commanders at the regional geographic offices, but there are no Marine officers looking over their shoulders at the embassy. Only four times a year do senior Marine officers visit the embassy to check up on Thrasher and his Marines.

### 'Just like a major'

"The staff NCO is in total command out there, except that he has no non-judicial punishment authority," said MSgt. Michael Thompson, the chief instructor at the MSG School in Quantico and a former detachment commander. "Everything else is just like being a captain or a major or some other officer."

The detachment commanders compile their own training plans and physical fitness plans, as well as oversee all security operations and ensure the Marines are up to par.

"I don't know of any staff NCO who would not like to write his own training or physical training plans," Thompson said. "Most want to have more responsibility."

"Usually, a good staff NCO busts his butt in the fleet and ends up getting just a pat on the back and a good fitness report from the lieutenant, but it's the lieutenant who gets the real praise. Out here, it's all on you."

Because the job is considered a command billet, the detachment commander has direct access to the company commander at the geographic company headquarters, usually a lieutenant colonel.

But while good things reflect well on the detachment commander, poor performance reflects that way too.

"You take the good with the

bad," Thompson said. "But a hard-charging achiever will do very well out there."

Besides the authority, there are other incentives for the staff NCO as well. Just like the watch-

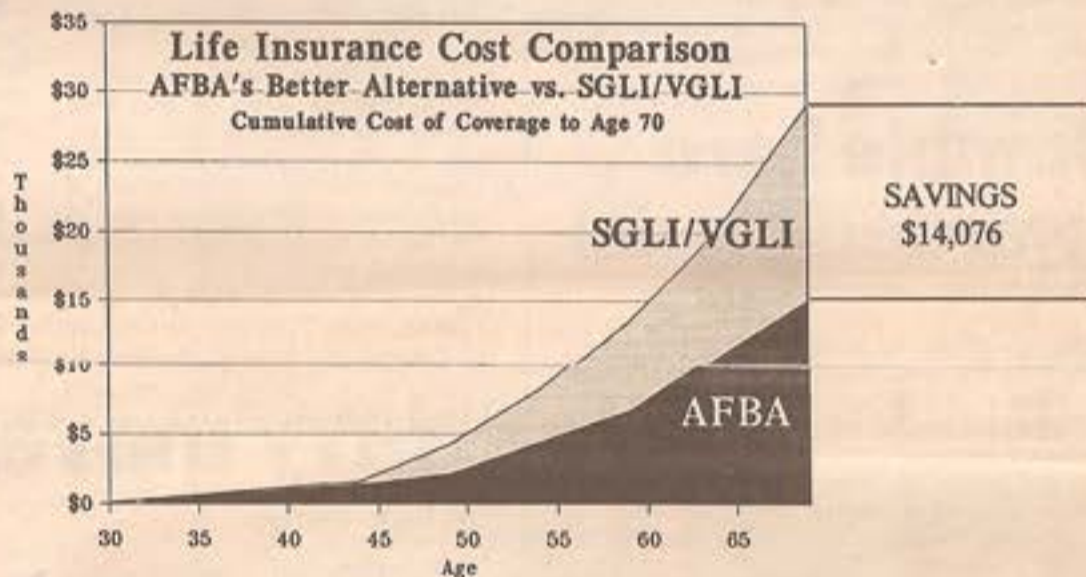
standers, they'll get special consideration at the next promotion board. Boards are mandated to consider them ahead of their peers because of their unique experiences. Both Thrasher and

Thompson picked up meritorious promotions to gunnery sergeant while on MSG duty.

"I feel important. I'm responsible — along with the Regional Security Officer — for the internal

security of our nation's embassy. That's a big responsibility," Thrasher said. "Plus I'm talking to new and interesting people, diplomats, foreign nationals. I'm rubbing elbows with ambassadors and other dignitaries. You won't get an opportunity to do things like that out in the fleet."

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