

SWL Sgt. Johnny Cash - *1932-2003* (Rosanne Cash has an album “Black Cadillac” One of the tracks is titled “Radio Operator.” I was aware of her dad being an intercept intelligence code operator in Germany. Could she be paying tribute to her famous father? I’d like to think so.

Johnny Cash is not an easy subject to write about because of precious little known about JR’s younger life. We will not be dealing with the Megastar’s wealth, fame or holdings, but attempt to bring out his love for Morse code and circuit training.



John R. Cash, 1951
Official USAF Photo Courtesy: Harmon Courtney

Born J R Cash, in 1932 to Ray (farmer) and Carrie Rivers (Reba) Cash, location Kingsland, Cleveland County Arkansas, one of six children. Our young JR worked alongside his parents and siblings in the fields. The influence of those hard early days inspired him to write songs as “Pickin Time, Five Feet High and Rising and Look at Them Beans.”

Johnny would listen to the radio at night, picking out the Memphis stations with their mix of country and blues songs - as well as gospel and Irish folk music sung by his mother.

Our subject graduated from high school, Dryess northeast Arkansas – That was in 1950 and plans for work in Detroit did not materialize and joined the U.S.

Air Force 7 July 1950. The Air Force would not accept initials as his name, thus he adopted John R. Cash as his legal name upon enlisting. (Lackland Base awaited at San Antonio)

Johnny earned the rank of Sergeant in the Air Force Security Service, spending 3 years stationed in Landsberg, Germany. His rating, radio operator intercepting Russian Morse code transmissions. While on duty, he was the first American to learn of Stalin’s death.

He is very proud of the fact he could copy Morse code at 35 words per minute. Cash said “That rhythm of the Morse code had a lot to do with the rhythm I felt in my music, every once in a while, I hear Morse code on my shortwave radio and I scribble it down. I can still copy it pretty fast and I wonder why that stuck with me for so long.” He continued “I realized that its got a rhythm that just begs to have a drum added to it, or a guitar. After I got out of the Air Force, I could still hear it and when I started writing songs again, I had that rhythm in my head. Those three years in Germany, where I thought I’d thrown away my personal life–well, I like to feel that’s where it came from.”

Another quote from the internet “Johnny and I talked about his military career around 1995. Mr Cash was a Morse Code Intercept Operator for USAF Security Service. He told me that the recruiter in testing individuals, Johnny you have a “musical ear” meaning he could learn Morse code easily. Musicians are the best Morse code operators. (Don’t forget the YL’s ability too)

Johnny Cash returned to the states in 1954, discharged from the Air Force and the remainder a tribute to music and his remarkable accomplishments. Scripted partially from Gene Mayler K8EE - Wikipedia.com radioparadise.com W8SU 2008