

THE KL-7 AT KADENA AIR BASE

Air Force Security Service Comm Center in Okinawa - Japan

Steve Garrison

The USAF assigned maintenance of the KL-7 to Teletype Maintenance personnel rather than the crypto specialists, probably because the machine was primarily mechanical, with only a handful of vacuum tubes controlling the electronic portion. Aside from the training I received in tech school, my experience with the KL-7 came while serving in an Air Force Security Service communications center at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa.

Only two members of our Teletype Maintenance Group held the security clearance required to work in the Security Service Office (SSO). I was one of them, and the other was an NCO who outranked me. So, it was easy to guess who got dispatched to the SSO whenever there was a problem, especially at night or on weekends, or whenever routine preventive maintenance was due.

Most of the traffic passing through the SSO was processed by KW-26 crypto equipment. Occasionally, however, a message would emerge from the KW-26 still encrypted in five-letter groups. When that happened, the hard copy from the teletype machine, Kleinschmidt equipment throughout this communications center, would be torn off and taken to an office adjacent to the comm center, where it was handed to the officer on duty. The door would then be closed, and the officer and the NCO on duty would decode the five-letter groups using the KL-7, which was kept in a safe in that office.

I periodically performed routine preventive maintenance on the KL-7, including cleaning the contacts and replacing the ribbon when necessary. During my 18 months at Kadena, I never had to make a repair to the KL-7 in the SSO, even though I'm sure it was used every day. I do know it always seemed to be in use on the days I was in the SSO maintaining the teletype equipment.

An SR-71 was stationed at Kadena during my tour, and on the days it launched missions there always seemed to be a noticeable increase in traffic moving in and out of the SSO. I can only assume that much of that traffic was related to the SR-71, particularly the doubly encrypted traffic, which always seemed much heavier on mission days.

Our teletype shop wasn't far from the runway's end, where the hangar was that housed the SR-71. When those engines started - and you couldn't miss that sound - and you wanted to see it take off, you had better get outside quickly, because it wasn't on the ground for long. The SR-71 made almost daily flights over Vietnam, and possibly even China.

We had an Okinawan gentleman that worked in our shop and we became good friends. And on several occasions he invited my wife and I to have dinner with his family at his home. It was a traditional style Japanese home complete with a beautiful garden surrounding the home. And dinner was traditional Okinawan fare.

During my 18 months we experienced at least two massive Typhoons. One of them, if I remember correctly, dumped 24 inches of rain in just 24 hours. Good thing it was an island with lots of ocean front for that rain water to drain into. The winds were well over 100 mph.

I bought a small car from a GI that was returning stateside shortly after arriving for \$75.00. The only major expense for the car in my 18 months was for 4 new tires, retreads actually, that cost me \$25.00. When I returned stateside I sold the car to a new arrival for the same \$75.00 I paid for it!

© 2026 SSGT Steve Garrison, USAF 1966-1970, Ret. N4TTY

Version 1.2 Written for [Cipher Machines and Cryptology](#).

More information on the KL-7 is available at the [TSEC/KL-7 ADONIS & POLLUX webpage](#).