

A Reporter and His Favorite Boots Travel the World

VOA Correspondent Steve Herman tells the story of the now-radioactive boots he has worn for almost 25 years



VOA correspondent Steve Herman's boots before being repaired after nearly 25 years of wear. (Steve Herman/VOA)

Hello, and welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

I'm Christopher Cruise in Washington.

Today on the program, VOA Reporter Steve Herman is here to tell us the story of the boots he has worn for almost 25 years as he has reported from around the world.

These are special boots.

“I have worn them for up to 36 hours and they still felt good. They are the best-fitting boots I have ever owned.”

But the boots are in bad condition. Will Steve and his boots have to say goodbye?

Longtime VOA Southeast Asia Correspondent Steve Herman visits today on As It Is.

The Story of a Reporter and His Near 25-Year-Old Boots

People who have to stand for a long time -- like soldiers, police officers and reporters -- need strong footwear that also feels good. VOA's Steve Herman has been travelling the world with the same pair of boots for almost 25 years. But he has worn them so much that they may now be un-wearable. Can they be saved?

Here is Steve Herman to tell us the story of a man and his boots...

Steve.

Thanks, Chris.

The story begins in Japan and moves to the city of Portland in the northwest American state of Oregon. The city is home of one of the last American shoe factories.

The boots that star in this story are known as “Danner Lights.” I bought them at a store in Tokyo -- I think it was in 1991. The boots are leather and can be worn in the water. They keep your feet from getting wet. I have worn them for up to 36 hours and they still felt good. They are the best-fitting boots I have ever owned. I love my boots.

They kept my feet dry as I crossed streams in Sichuan, China. I have worn them in the hot sands of the Middle East. They have been on my feet as I walked through wet, poisonous earth in Bhopal, India. I have worn them as I moved along the icy streets of Seoul, South Korea. They have helped keep me from falling as I looked out the open doors of military helicopters over wars.

I have not been hurt in any of my dangerous reporting work while wearing my boots. So I consider them lucky.

Recently, I had to decide if I should continue to wear my boots. I had them on my feet during the meltdown at Japan's Fukushima nuclear power center in March 2011. I was close to the center when the tsunami hit and damaged the factory. Then, I went to the center to report on the crisis for VOA.

I wanted to have the old boots repaired, but I wondered if it was safe to do so. So I asked for help from the National Atomic Testing Museum. They told me to talk with Ralf Sudowe, an associate professor of health physics at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. He told me that hikers and soldiers often have radioactivity on their shoes.

He used a machine called a Geiger counter to measure the radiation level of my boots. The testing took place almost three years after I wore them at Fukushima. The counter "clicks" up to 150 times a minute -- the faster the clicking, the more radiation there is.

"The frequency of the clicks is increasing as I move it over the toe cap of the boots. So there's definitely something on the tip of these boots -- on the toe cap -- that is more radioactive than the

normal background. If I go to the back of the boot, you don't hear anything anymore."

More tests, in a special container, made me feel better about the radiation level of my favorite boots. Professor Sudowe found that the small amount of radioactivity wouldn't cause health problems.

So I sent them to the place where they were made: the Danner factory in Portland, Oregon. Several hundred pairs of boots are sent to the factory every month to be repaired.

Marci Uselman is the head of the repair department. She told me people love their boots, even if they are not in good condition.

She said many owners of the boots are emotionally close to them.

"For a police officer, it could be the first pair of boots he had when he began his service. In the army, they've obviously fought and been standing next to their fellow soldiers and it means a lot to them."

I discovered that my boots were among the oldest ever sent to the factory to be repaired. And, they were among those in the worst condition.

Oleg Shyshkin was the Danner employee who worked on my boots. He began repairing boots as a teenager in Ukraine, where he was born. His father -- and grandfather before him -- also repaired boots. They -- and Mr. Shyshkin -- are called "cobblers."

He first tore my boots apart. This was difficult for me to watch. Many years of dirt fell onto his work area. The cobbler then replaced almost every part of the boots -- even the laces!

The extremely dry leather of my boots had caused problems. I watched a hole appear when Mr. Shyshkin removed the old stitching.

Mr. Shyshkin used tools like pliers and a hammer. The work he does -- and the kinds of tools he uses -- are the same a cobbler would do and use hundreds of years ago.

But, Mr. Shyshkin also used more-recent technology -- an Italian shoe machine.

Mr. Shyshkin worked on my boots all day and called the repair a success. He compared it to medical treatment.

"Surgery is done. The operation is good. Still alive."

"How long do you think before they'll need another surgery?"

"How long are you wearing these shoes?"

"Already about 23 years."

"I think it's same."

Workers still manufacture Danner boots as mine were in the early 1990s. They are hand-made. In other words, workers do not use machines, except for sewing. Everything is done at the factory -- from inspecting the leather to putting on the soles, or bottoms, of the boots. That is the final step.

Most American shoe companies manufacture their products in Asia, where wages are lower. But some, like Danner, still make some or all of their footwear in America.

Danner meets congressional requirements that their shoes and boots are American-made, using only American products. But the company's staff is international. Only about 12 workers in the factory were born in the United States. There are 87 Vietnamese workers, 14 from Burma, 14 from China and nine Somalis.

Danner -- which was formed in 1932 -- is not an American-owned company. The company was bought in 2012 by a Japanese group of stores called ABC-Mart. It was at one of that company's stores in Tokyo that I bought my boots in the early 1990s.

For now, the company mostly sells its shoes and boots to American soldiers, police officers, hunters, hikers...and reporters like me. But the company says it has plans to sell its products to people throughout the world.

With my boots on, I'm Steve Herman.



Steve Herman wearing his newly-repaired boots for the first time, at the Danner factory, Portland, Oregon, Jan. 20, 2014. (Steve Herman/VOA)

Thanks, Steve.

That's our program for today.

I'm Christopher Cruise reporting from VOA Learning English headquarters in Washington. I'll be here next week at this same time with another edition of As It Is on The Voice of America.

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