

134 ATU (Air Transport Unit), Sana Yemen 1962-63

June 24, 2013

Flight Lieutenant (Ret'd) George E. Mayer
RCAF CD and Bar



134 ATU (Air Transport Unit), Sana, Yemen 1962-63

June 24,2013

Yemen introduction: I was a 22 year old staff pilot in Air Navigation School, Winnipeg, Man. one of dozens looking ahead to the next flying posting. One of the older pilots (25 years old) there was wearing a curious sand-coloured ribbon and I asked him to tell me about it. He explained that there were flying postings available with United Nations (UN) in various countries and he had spent a year on loan from the RCAF with 115 ATU in El Arish, Egypt flying de Havilland Otters and twin engine Caribou. The only way to be selected was to volunteer for service with UN and hope for the best.

It took less than two months from submitting my request to receiving my posting to Egypt and that was exciting. I graduated from the Caribou and Otter courses in Trenton not knowing that my Caribou instructor, Flight Lieutenant Ian Umbach would be my future Commanding Officer in Yemen in less than a year! I arrived at El Arish, proceeded to check out as captain which included the mandatory week off for a medical condition known as "Gyppo Gut" - a GI condition where you were coming out both ends simultaneously for what seemed an eternity!!

Rumours started circulating about another UN mission starting up in Sana, Yemen and how terrible the working conditions were there. Sana was a walled city and the gates were locked every day at sunset, the altitude above sea level was 7400 feet, pilots alternated between flying the Caribou out of Sana and spending up to ten (10) days in three different outposts flying the Otter. Food was terrible, flying was dangerous for many reasons, and the "Yemen Gut" was beyond description! (Yes, we all got it!!) The outposts made the TV program MASH locations look like the Chateau Laurier.

In general, the heat was unbearable, and the scorpions dangerous. However, having to eat American 5 in 1 field rations, live in a tent supplied by UN, and pay the RCAF \$95.00 a month room and board was outrageous!

My first trip to Sana substantiated what previous pilots related after their visit: There was no weather information for flight planning, no Control Tower, the one runway was a 14,000 feet long gravel surface, and dodging the Russian made Yak fighters flown by Egyptian pilots was almost suicidal! Maps contained large blank areas of our routes marked as "relief data incomplete"!

With the stage now set, let us look at the more humorous side of this posting to an isolated location - 134 ATU Sana, Yemen.

Sana, Yemen

The medical repatriation rate from Yemen was established at nearly 65%. Replacement personnel were required within months of starting operations. I believe the unit establishment was 26 personnel of which 12 were pilots including the CO. My six (6) month posting to Sana was as a replacement for one of those pilots.

The events surrounding my arrival were, much to my chagrin, a harbinger of things to come! The Fiat jeep sent to pick me up stalled at the airfield and I had to push it to start it!! As we approached one of the large gates to the city, I was prompted to look carefully at the ledge above the gate opening and not react adversely to what I saw. What I saw approaching the gate was three human heads each with a neat bullet hole in their forehead and still smiling!

We drove through the narrow streets with gay abandon blasting our horn at seemingly deaf camels, goats, donkeys, and locals all bent on restricting our travel. Arriving at my future home, I was greeted by a Yemeni guard high on the local drug "Quat" brandishing his traditional weapon, the curved dagger called a Jambia. Behind him was a beautifully painted sign that read:

Welcome to 134 ATU Sana, Yemen The Twilight zone

The building was an impressive three storey stone structure which I later found out housed the royal family concubine!! (We will not go there.) It took no less than three cold Amstel beer to stop my knees from shaking and wash down the road dust. Another beer and a round of introductions and I began to feel at home!

CAVEAT: The following tongue in cheek stories are about life in 134 ATU Sana HQ,s and three main outposts at Najran and Gizan in Saudi Arabia, and Uqd in Yemen. The liberal use of humour should not be thought of by the reader as the author's way of diminishing the hardship and danger of these isolated locations.

The Outposts

Najran, Saudi Arabia

This outpost was located on the SW edge of the Rub Al Kali desert which runs 1500 miles across to the Persian Gulf and is known as "The Empty Quarter". It is 4700 feet above sea level, temperatures reach 125F in the shade, and cool off at night to a pleasant 50F or cooler.

The Prince of the local area supplied two Saudi guards who were supplemented by UN guards from the Yugoslav Army. One guard showed an intense interest in our dart board game so we offered to

teach him the rules. The board was hanging from a nail driven into the main centre pole of our shelter tent. His first dozen darts hit everything within range except the dart board and he lost his cool! We handed him another set of darts which he threw down at our feet, took about 20 paces back from the foul line, took his 9mm German Mauser mountain rifle off his shoulder and fired it at the dart board. A terrible crashing sound ensued and when the smoke and dust cleared, the bulls eye was missing from the board, the tent pole lay in ruins and our living tent was partially collapsed!

We knew from the smile on his face that he really won that game.

The Beer Fridge

The focal point of Najran was the 450lb. kerosene fired double door fridge strategically located in the shady party area. On the left side was the Danish beer Tuborg and on the right side, my favourite Dutch Amstel beer. You were obliged to bow or salute whenever you passed it by! It was the junior man on the outpost that was charged with keeping it stocked and worth his hide if he didn't!! It was one of these fridges that nearly caused my demise and is the subject of another story to follow about the outpost at Uqd.

Charlie, the Resident Camel

Returning to the landing area after a 0700-0830hrs Otter desert patrol, Charlie usually made an immediate landing impossible because he would be grazing either on or in the middle of the landing area. Usually, it only took one low pass at cruise power to move him out of the way but not this particular day! Three low passes each lower and closer and more power than the previous one failed to move the beast! I began the final pass with full power, wheels at the camels head height, lining up to put his head down the centre line of the aeroplane an inch below the propeller tip arc. Looking back after that scary low pass, Charlie was heading out across the Rub Al Kali desert probably setting a world speed record for crossing the 1500 miles all the way to the Persian Gulf!

Najran - Fun in the Sun

On isolated postings, pranks are the rule of the day and you must never lose your sense of humour! The best in Yemen was as follows:

The UN Radio Officer (A) and our Army Logistics Officer (B) were continually trying to outdo each other. The outposts were equipped with a Swedish fogger, a devious device designed to spew out a foul white cloud of fly repellent. (B) waited till (A) was asleep in the tent then fired up the fogger and filled the tent with fog. (B) then yelled "FIRE" as loud as humanly possible and waited for the action. (A) woke up, presumed the tent was on fire and ran naked through the tent wall to safety he thought. War was declared.

(A) then began his revenge. He studied every move (B) made for a week.

*It is necessary to set the scene for (A)'s revenge. Each person in the camp was allowed **one and only one** five (5) gallon Gerry can of water for the daily shower and it was left out in the sun all day to warm up.*

The routine (B) followed was to empty the water into the shower tank and then proceed into his tent to undress and get towel and soap etc. This gave (A) more than sufficient time to empty eight (8) boxes of strawberry jello into the shower tank and hide. Turning the shower on, (b) released a torrent of warm, sticky, sweet, red liquid which attracted every fly for 50 miles around! A truce was declared, a volunteer donated his water ration, and we all left the best of friends.

Gizan/Jizan Outpost - Saudi Arabia

Located on the shore of the Red Sea, always 99F and 99.9% humidity capped off by the unbelievable stench of rotting sea weed and dead animals (stray dogs) Accommodation was small building made of cinder blocks with the potable water stored immediately adjacent to the black water tank. Dangerous flying conditions were caused by heavy thunder storms that frequently topped 65,000 feet according to the weather radar up the coast in Jiddah.

To seek just a few moments of relief from the heat, the flight engineer and I took an Otter off and climbed to 16,000 feet where the temperature hovered around 32F and we froze our butts off for twenty glorious minutes. The descent back to base was a continuous string of expletive deletives as we descended back into the hell hole.

To determine the maximum payload for the Otter under these extreme conditions required an unorthodox solution. We simply filled the aeroplane up, closed the door, and attempted to take-off. If we were not airborne by the time we reached 90Kts. or normal cruise speed, we aborted the take off, returned to base and threw out some cargo and tried again! In case you are wondering, our runway was the hard sand shoreline which gave us at least a 25 mile run!!!

Uqd Outpost, Yemen

Located on the step plane 50miles inland from the Red Sea shore nestled up against a range of mountains 13,000 feet high! Runway was a dirt gravel road widened enough to just fit the Otter under carriage with boulders on both the approach and overshoot ends. All flying from outposts was done in pairs in case one aeroplane has to force land, the other can assist. I took off first this day with the previously mentioned 450lb. fridge loaded in the back of my Otter. The first off always overflew the runway to confirm that the other aeroplane took off.

My low pass over the runway showed my partner still on the ground and not running! I whipped the old Otter around the circuit, turned onto final approach and found myself entering a stall- forgot about the monster fridge in the back! I initiated stall recovery just like I was trained to do and managed to touch one

wheel on the side of the runway in between boulders, then bounced onto the other wheel on the other side in between boulders and came to a juddering halt scant feet from my partners aeroplane and him!! My partner that day was a giant of a man Flight Lieutenant Ron Day, all 6 feet 4" of him - a great pilot. The dust settled, my face ashen grey, and both of us aware we were 12,000 miles from home, he said in a very stern voice "George, another landing like that and you are fired"! He then gave me a fatherly pat on the back, smiled, broke out in laughter and said-"lets go back to Sana and get drunk".

Sana, 1964

I refused my posting back home from Yemen and asked for a three month extension to be spent in El Arish, Egypt and my request was granted. After all, I had to be out of Canada for one full year in order to return under Settlers Effects and not pay any duty or taxes on the goods purchased in the Middle East.

El Arish April 1964

End of tour, posted to 102 KU Trenton. Return home at last.

June 1964, I received a special request from my Trenton CO to fly a Caribou 5303 from Trenton back over to El Arish to deliver the aeroplane and another pilot Flight Lieutenant Doug Scott who was posted there. My return trip from El Arish to Marville, France was a ferry flight to return C47 Dakota 511 home. It had been ferried to El Arish to replace five (5) Caribou requiring all flap hinges to be renewed because of corrosion. This marvellous Dakota supplemented by a few Otters flew every trip it was scheduled for and never missed a beat. I travelled the final leg home from Marville to Trenton in the mighty Yukon and settled in for a long and happy life in Transport Command.

I would like to dedicate this story to all the Military personnel who ever served on an isolated posting. I hope that they will record their stories for others to read and not let these priceless adventures pass untold.

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT (RET'D) GEORGE E. MAYER
RCAF CD AND BAR

Per Ardua ad Astra

IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE