

Annex E

My 115 ATU RCAF Yemen Adventure



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It was a hot sunny morning at the United Nations Emergency Force aerodrome in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. I had served nearly ten months of my one year tour of duty with the Royal Canadian Air Force's 115 Air Transport Unit operating in the Gaza Strip. Our job in the troubled region was flying surveillance patrols along the Armistice Demarcation Line between Egypt and Israel. We were also tasked with providing air support for Brazil, Colombia, Denmark, India, Norway, Sweden, Yugoslavia and the Canadian army. These were the nations still participating in the first multinational peace mission carried out under the United Nations flag.

It was mid June 1963, I was just packing it in for the day when Warrant Officer Ducharme called me into the little cubical he called his office. He seemed ill at ease and offered me a chair. He informed me I was the airframe tech selected to on the new United Nations peacekeeping mission to Yemen. I'd heard a few sketchy accounts of the on going conflict in Yemen broadcast over the Royal Air Force's radio station in Cyprus. The bloodshed had been raging there ever since the army overthrew the old imam in 1962. The republican force supported by the United Arab Republic, of which Egypt was a member, was engaged in a civil war against the royalists supported by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

I didn't know a hell of a lot about the place, but wasn't overly concerned. The WO said I would find out everything I needed to know about the mission at a briefing slated for seven o'clock that evening. As I was taking it all in, he stressed, that it was extremely important that the first thing I did when I got back to camp was to go to the armament shack and pick up a 9-mm pistol.

Age had yet to soften my desire for change and travel. I was 26 years old and still in search of adventure. I was free of grown-up responsibilities and leading the free life of the rover.

Like most young males, I believed growing old was somewhat overrated. Young men have always cheered the old men that have sent them off to die. War, even with its many terrors, can't curb our youthful enthusiasm for adventure. It's a universal law. No one is exempt. Down through the ages, their romantic imagination has had visions of thundering guns victoriously routing the enemy in the field. When in fact, fatigue, hunger and terror are the realities of combat.

The UN Airport was located 5 km from our quarters on the outskirts of the old Mediterranean Pharaonic city of El Arish. I had missed my ride and bummed a lift with the WO back to the old British Army camp that housed

115 Air Transport Units' 90 or so RCAF personnel. Camp Marina, as it was called, was also home to a small contingent of soldiers from the Yugoslavian camp just down the road. It was their job to guard the place from pilferers. They were not always successful. The Yugo soldiers were not allowed to fraternize with us. Their commander didn't want his Marxist indoctrinated troops corrupted by our capitalistic ways. One Saturday afternoon four of Marshal Tito's Communist-led regime's young socialists sneaked into the Airman's Mess to have a few beers. One of the airmen went back to the barracks and brought back an old Eaton's catalogue to show them. They were wide-eyed in disbelief, could it be that everything they had been told about the West was just a pile of Communist propaganda.

My first order of business after I got back to barracks was to follow the Warrant Officers' instructions and pick up my gun. I was also issued two clips holding nine bullets each to accompany my snazzy new firearm. I was told if I fired any of the bullets, I'd have a lot of paper work to fill out when I got back. The next order of business was to head over to our little base commissary to purchase a few necessities. A bottle of rye and a couple of cartons of cigarettes topped the list.

After supper I had a couple of beers at the mess and wandered over to the briefing. Wally Johnson, the back catcher on our fast-ball team was the electrician going along. The aero-engine tech and bridge buddy (I can't recall his name) was the other tech coming with us. An old Flight Sergeant I knew as a bit of a jackass from 412 squadron back at RCAF Station Uplands in Ottawa rounded out the ground crew.

Our Little White Airplane



The pilot was about my age and new to 115 ATU. He told us we would be leaving at eight in the morning in one of our Otters. We were to be part of the advance party for the new UNYOM (United Nations Yemen Observation Mission.)

Both sides in the conflict had agreed to cease military action. Our assignment was to fly surveillance patrols to insure that the terms of disengagement were being met. We would be in Yemen until the Canadian contingent arrived to take our place. The young pilot had no idea how long that might take. A larger twin engine Caribou aircraft would leave a half hour before us. It would drop off a 45 gal. drum of gasoline for us at Sharm El-Sheikh. After topping up with fuel we would continue on to Jeddah Saudi Arabia and complete our trip to Yemen the next day. It sounded like just

another routine milk run. I remember someone asking about the aircraft's load capacity in this summer heat. I wasn't too concerned. Even though the Otter wasn't the most advanced aircraft around, it did have an excellent record operating under diverse flying conditions. The flight to Jeddah from Sharm El-Sheikh, at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, was well within the Otter's operational range.



RCAF 115 Air Transport Unit serving in Yemen. 1963-1964

As we were leaving, the pilot asked if any of us had ever fired a 9-mm pistol. Nobody had. "No problem" the youthful small-arms instructor replied, "you simply slip in the clip, pull back the breach, point the thing and pull the trigger." This was to be the extent of our weapons training. I since have it on good authority, there is more to it; that is, if you actually expect to hit anything.

The next morning we loaded our tool boxes and baggage into the little Otter and set out for what would be enough adventure to last me a life time.

Our flight path would take us close to Saint Catherine's Monastery. It is located on the sight where many believe Moses received the Ten Commandments. One of the most interesting things about the monastery is the Chapel of Triphone (also known as the skull house). After a monk dies and an appropriate amount of time passes, his bones are dug up to make room for the next monk in need of the accommodations. His skull is then removed and reunited with those of his fellow monks. The religious beliefs of these Greek Orthodox monks appears strange to many of us in the West; just as many of our everyday absurdities we take for granted must seem strange to them.

We landed at Sharm, topped-up with fuel and were soon on our way. I had no idea at the time how ill-prepared I was for the challenges that lay ahead. Shortly before we were due to land at Jeddah I got tired of looking out the window at the boring scenery that never ever changed. I glanced into the cockpit and noticed the low-fuel warning light was blinking. I leaned in and mentioned it to the aero-engine tech that was filling in as co-pilot. 'Yeah' he said, ignoring my concern, it's been on for quite a while. It's probably just a malfunction in the light's electrical circuit. Despite this optimistic evaluation, I felt a whole lot better a few minutes later when the airport came into view. The pilot tried to contact the control tower on the radio. He didn't get a response so he did the only thing he could. He landed. The pilot taxied the Otter up the tarmac and parked near the main terminal. We didn't have much fuel to spare. The engine began to sputter as it ran out of gas.

We had no trouble clearing customs. The security guard took one look at our blue berets and United Nations insignia and whipped us through. He didn't even bother inspecting our luggage. After all, we were here to end the war. The Norwegian major assigned to meet us was nowhere in sight. We were standing around trying to come up with a plan, when an American pilot who flew for Saudi Arabian Airlines came over and started up a conversation. We told him our plight. He did his best to be helpful. He told us we could probably get rooms at the hotel where he and the rest of American pilots stayed. He hailed a cab and told the driver to go straight to the hotel. None of us had thought to bring any Saudi Arabian money with us, so our new friend paid the fare.

The taxi driver took us to a seedy hotel that wouldn't pass for second rate. One look and we knew no American pilots stayed there. He must have thought, being infidels, we wouldn't know any better. We told the taxi driver

to get the hell out of there and take us to the right hotel. It turned out to be only a couple of blocks away from the airport. We went in and the manager informed us they didn't have any spare rooms. He was very friendly and phoned around town to see what he could find. After three or four tries he told us the good news. We could get accommodations at the Jeddah Palace. The bad news was it was a first class hotel and cost \$20 American per person per night. That was a lot of money back in 1963, but we had no choice, we said we would take it. The manager informed us it wasn't too far to walk. He gave directions and off we went without sense enough to know we stood out like a sore thumb. No one had bothered to let us know about the strict conservative dress code the law of Islam requires of both males and females. Here we were, five airmen wearing short pants, walking down the road in a city that is the gateway to Mecca. Halfway there we were stopped by a member of the religious police called the Mutawa. He was accompanied by a regular policeman carrying a sub machine-gun.

He pointed to the cameras we had slung around our necks and warned us that picture taking in public is not allowed in their Kingdom. I was not aware at the time that tourism was not permitted in Saudi Arabia. A great part of the Kingdom's mystery stems from the fact it is so difficult to visit. It was hard to imagine a country where they find it more acceptable to carry a machine-gun around in public than a camera.

As we neared the hotel, we saw a young woman wearing the traditional Ababy walking toward us. This is the soft black cape that also covers the head and is indigenous to Saudi Arabia. She was also wearing the mandatory long dress that provides anonymity to the female form. As we passed, human nature got the better of her. Curiosity clouded her judgment and she glanced sideways to sneak a peek at this strange sight. The man walking beside her dressed in a thobe, the long shirt dress garment Arab men usually wear, turned and gave her lightning-swift swat on the head. This would be considered gentle treatment in a country that in this day and age still practices female genital mutilation. At times it is difficult to understand the complexities of the female gender. Why women in the Middle East still patiently endure this barbaric practice is incomprehensible.

We knew from experience it was not wise to interfere in their local customs. It had been drummed into our heads from the very first day we arrived in Egypt; we were "ambassadors" of Canada. We were not allowed to retaliate against anyone, regardless of the provocation. The local populous knew of this strict restriction and took advantage of it many times.

It was about four o'clock by the time we reached the hotel. We were hot, tired, thirsty and hungry. We checked in and went up to our rooms. I was surprised to find them small and austere by Canadian standards. The furnishings although sparse, were practical; they consisted of two single beds and an old wooden chair. The room lacked a window and a common bathroom was located in the hallway. This was certainly not the luxurious penthouse suite one would expect to get for twenty bucks.

After a shower and a short rest, we put on our long pants and headed for the dining room. The waiter took our order and asked us what we would like to drink. When we asked him what brands of beer they stocked, he looked surprised. He informed us, Islamic law did not allow alcoholic beverages in Saudi Arabia. The only beer they served was non-alcoholic. This indeed was an unusual country. We compromised and had tea.

The Major showed up as we were finishing our supper. He immediately began to brief the pilot on the next leg of our journey. We were to fly to the coastal city of Hodeida, (Al-Hudaydah) refuel and carry onto the old walled capital city of Sana'a. The Major told us that the military situation along our flight path had recently deteriorated. There had been a lot of hostile aircraft activity in the region lately and the anti-aircraft gunners were extremely nervous. He said, "There's a good chance you'll be shot down before you reached Hodeida." Then he added, "I'll try to get a message out to the anti-aircraft batteries and ask them not to shoot down your little white airplane." He wished us luck and departed. After he left, there was no immediate reaction. No one said a word. Could we be that expendable. It's funny how denial works on the mind. It was like the Major hadn't been talking about us. We had no choice but to soldier on. Nobody was interested in our point of view. When you join the military, your life no longer belongs to you. We were leaving for Yemen in the morning whether we liked it or not. That's all there was to it.

After breakfast we went to the front desk to pay the dreaded bill. The manager informed us, that because we had come so far to end the war, (he thought we had come all the way from Canada) the grateful Saudi Arabian government was picking up the tab. They even had a car waiting to take us to the airport. As it turned out, the Major had booked us into the hotel.

The airport was fogged in when we arrived. All we could do was refuel the Otter and sit around and wait for the fog to clear. To our surprise a United States Air Force Sgt. came driving up in a jeep. He said the fog wouldn't lift until ten and invited us for coffee. We were chatting away when I mentioned we were surprised to learn that Saudi Arabia was alcohol free.

The Sgt. told us the American detachment is not allowed any alcohol the whole year they spend in Jeddah. Occasionally, a diplomat will smuggle in a bottle of booze in his sealed attaché case, but it never manages to filter very far down the chain of command. He then went on to tell us of the risks you faced if you were caught with alcohol in your possession, up to 100 lashes or possibly a year in jail, sometimes both. This came as a real jolt. I had gone through customs and been stopped by the police carrying a bottle of whisky. It raised the reality that in this part of the world, having little knowledge of the customs of a region could lead to dire consequences. Luckily, sometimes you are fortunate and get protected by your ignorance. Ignorance can be bliss, but it can also get you into a lot of trouble. It was becoming clear; the briefing on the mission could have been a little more informative.

The fog lifted at ten just as the sergeant predicted. Back at the flight line we climbed into the Otter and took off for Hodeida. About an hour into the flight I glanced into the cockpit and noticed the pilot flying with his fingers crossed. I looked out the window and saw one of the anti-aircraft guns tracking our little white airplane. They didn't shoot! Things were looking pretty good, but our good fortune as about to change.

As we neared the Saudi-Yemen border the pilot leaned back into the cabin and told us to fasten our seat belts. I looked out the window. To my surprise there was no airport in sight. The pilot leaned back into the cabin and brought us up to date. We had lost our oil pressure and were making an emergency landing! He reminded us the Otter had a fixed undercarriage. This meant the aircraft would flip end over end if the sand turned out to be too soft to support the main wheels. I remember thinking at the time; you've got to be kidding! Running out of gas is one thing; being informed you might get shot down was disconcerting. Being told your time is up if the tenure of the sand happens to be too soft; that was something else. I had always been led to believe that when you come face to face with your destiny and prepare to depart this mortal world; you find inner peace and a marvellous insight flashes through your mind. None did. It didn't really dawn on me that in a few brief minutes this is how it all could end. Of course, it didn't really matter; it was not like we had a lot of options. We were going to land whether we liked it or not. The pilot said he would try to keep the airplane in a nose up attitude as long as possible. Hopefully, he could touch down on the tail wheel.

I knew from past experience that aircraft fitted with fixed undercarriages have their disadvantages. One time we had to take the Otter to Beirut to

have it weighed at BOACs (British Airways) maintenance facilities. We were not allowed to fly over Israel and had to stay twenty-five miles outside their no-fly zone. The pilot didn't like flying the Otter that far from land and kept sneaking in closer to the shore line. The Israelis were monitoring us on radar and finally told the pilot, the next time you do it, we'll scramble a couple of fighter aircraft and shoot you down. The pilot wisely chose the lesser of the two evils.

The landing was, to say the least, a little on the rough side. Thanks to the Flight Lieutenant's skill the Otter managed to end up in one piece. To our relief the wheels only sank a few inches into the sand. Our pilot tried, but wasn't able to raise anyone on the radio to let them know we had run into mechanical problems. Travelling can be fun and exciting and help to increase one's knowledge of the world; it can have its drawbacks too.

After the engine was shut down, I opened the door and an amazing number of moths swarmed in and around the aircraft. There had to be, without exaggeration, thousands of them. I have no idea where they came from, or what they were doing there. One of the crew ventured out and checked the oil tank.

It was bone dry. Thankfully someone had thought to bring along a spare case of oil. We got it out of the baggage compartment and topped up the tank. The pilot figured our best bet was to try and restart the engine and carry on to Hodeida. It sounded like a good idea to me. I was eager to leave and spend as little time as possible in this hostile to man environment. I sure wasn't looking forward to spending a night in the desert with the moths. The engine started and the pilot revved it up to its maximum RPM. The Otter strained and groaned as it struggled out of the swirling sand. After what felt like forever, the little white airplane was finally airborne.

Our little expedition was on its way once again. We lumbered along the coast line until we spotted the Hodeida military aerodrome. Everything seemed normal, but that was about to change. Suddenly, and without warning, the engine seized and the propeller came to a grinding halt! Once again fate intervened and determined our course of action. Luckily, there was a short civilian gravel runway not far from the main air strip used by the Egyptian MIGs. We didn't have enough height to complete our turn and had to abandon the preferred method of approach. The pilot took what he thought was the best course of action. He took a short cut and landed crosswise on the gravel runway. This was my second forced landing in one day. I was beginning to have second thoughts. Maybe flying around in a

single engine aircraft in this Godforsaken part of the world wasn't the best way to make a living.

The welcoming committee must have been puzzled by the sight of an airplane landing in this unorthodox manner. I looked out the window and saw about ten suspicious looking characters making their way toward us. We knew we were in the middle of a tribal war and not sure of our best course of action. None of us had been in this situation before and were not familiar with the proper protocol. We didn't even know who we were allowed to shoot. Should we strap on our side arms and blast our way out, or perhaps it might be better to surrender and come out with our hands up. The pilot suggested we leave our guns in the plane. Wally poked his head out the door and looked around. Everyone was glad to see us. The Peacemakers had arrived. The war would soon be over.

The UN secretariat had requested that RCAF personnel take side arms and ammunition with them when assigned to the Yemen area. Normally, only occupants of aircraft carried side arms. This limitation had a twofold purpose; it emphasized the peaceful nature of the mission, and it lessened the temptation to attack UN personnel for the purpose of securing much-sought-after weapons. Carrying guns can be dangerous.

Bazaar in Hodeida



A few minutes later an Egyptian Air Force officer drove up in the Soviets excuse for a jeep. He invited us to have supper and spend the night at their officer's club. I don't know what we ate. We were really thirsty, but afraid to drink the water. They offered us tea. It had been rough day, so I figured what the hell; a little tea isn't going to kill me.

After supper when it cooled down to around 40 degrees centigrade we went for a walk to get some of kinks out. We were ambling along a road next to the Red Sea when we came across some new buildings the Soviets had built after the 1961 fire. We ventured into one and found a small commissary where the Russians sold supplies to their staff. I was poking around and spotted what appeared to be some kind of soft drink in Canada Dry bottles. I asked the lady behind the counter how much they cost. She replied, one American dollar. Bargaining is a fact of life in the Middle East. As is the custom, I started the bidding at a point considerably lower than the dollar she was asking for the pop. The firm faced Bolshevik informed me, one American dollar is the selling price. Even with the Canadian dollar worth more than its American counterpart, this was outrageous. Back in El Arish I could buy world class Toburg or Amstel beer for a dime. This was a big saving over twenty-five cent Air Force messes in Canada typically charged for a beer. An airman I knew back in El-Arish had a particular fondness for beer and was very proficient at consuming the product. He figured the more he drank, the more he saved. He was trying to save as much money as he could before he returned to Canada.

These Marxist no doubt shared Comrade Nikita Khrushchev's bureaucrat belief, that the Soviet Block's economic system would indeed bury the West. Living behind the Iron Curtain didn't prevent these Marxists from adapting to the realities of capitalism and being pretty sophisticated businessmen. They had no qualms when it came to looking out for themselves and getting the best deal they could. They fully understood the fundamental law of supply and demand. When it comes to the question of money, there is not as much difference in human nature as propaganda would lead one to believe.

What was I to do? They had me over a barrel. I was really thirsty and bought three bottles. I thought it was kind of ironic.

Here I was, a Canadian in Yemen, buying some kind of drink in Canada Dry bottles from Russians and paying for them in American dollars. This

was my first encounter with the new global market. I inhaled the first bottle and saved the other two for later.

Back at the Egyptian base we bunked down on the old dilapidated army cots they had generously set up for us. Our first day in Yemen was coming to an end. It was too hot to sleep, but thankfully, we had a place to rest. This weary traveler had all the adventure he needed for one day.

The next morning a sergeant and six soldiers accompanied us back to the Otter. The Egyptians had agreed to store all the loose gear we had on the aircraft. One of the soldiers dropped a piece of equipment on the ground as he was loading it onto the truck. When he bent over to pick it up, the sergeant standing near by booted him in the ass. I didn't find this the least bit out of the ordinary. I had often seen them use this well-tested and time-honoured tactic to inspire and motivate their troops back in Egypt.

Just as they were finishing loading the truck, I looked up and saw a Caribou with UN marking on it circling over head. I didn't know that after the Caribou crew dropped off the drum of fuel for us at Sharm El-Sheikh they were carrying on to Yemen. This brought up some more discrepancies in the briefing, or more likely, I had not been paying attention. Maybe drinking beer before the briefing wasn't such a good idea after all. It did however; raise some questions, why wasn't our equipment flown down to Yemen in the much larger Caribou? I didn't mention this observation to anyone. I knew from past experience that the higher-ups don't consult with Leading Air Craftsman (LACs). For some reason, the military brass doesn't seem to like it very much when lower-ranking servicemen make suggestions.

When the Caribou landed I was surprised to see Commanding Officer piloting the aircraft. He said that when we didn't show up in Sana'a they got worried and thought we had probably crashed in the mountains. They had taken off at first light hoping to find us. The young Flight Lieutenant brought the C.O. up to date and filled him in on our dead stick landing. The seasoned Wing Commander seemed unimpressed and was quick to offer advice. He pointed to a paved road not far away and told the fresh-faced young aviator it would have been the better choice. This just goes to show, whenever men do things, other men will come along to show them how it could have been done better.

After the truck was loaded, we hopped in the Caribou and took off for Sana'a. We found a five-gallon jerry can filled with water on board the aircraft. We didn't know where it came from, but that didn't stop us. We started to gulp it down like a camel at the end of a ten-day trek across the

desert. When we landed at the military airstrip outside Sana'a we were pleased to find the temperature quite pleasant. Compared to the heat and humidity of Hoheida, I felt sure Hell itself would have felt comfortable.

A burly Irish civilian with a pistol strapped to his side and a Yemenite soldier assigned to guard our aircraft were the only ones around when we landed. I was fascinated by the soldier's imposing array of artillery and the armament he wore for his personal protection. Besides his rifle and a bandoleer full of ammunition, his other accessory was a large curved dagger called a djambia carried by most men in Yemen. We were told you could tell how many heads they had cut off by the number of holes drilled in the daggers handle. I'm pretty sure they made that up just to impress us. This armed to the teeth soldier guarded the aircraft night and day. Whenever we showed up, he was on duty.

Our chauffeur introduced himself and drove us to the walled capital. Near the main entrance into the city two young men sat on the ground chained to a tree. The Irishman stopped in front of an old building. It had recently been bombed and was anything but luxurious.

We were told our new abode had previously been the palace that was home to the old iman's harem. The rooms were rather small and drab-looking. There was nothing in the rooms except two cots.

Acceptable Accommodations

The walk-in wardrobe was a peg on the wall. A wire with a naked light bulb attached hung from the ceiling. The bathroom was equipped with two strategically located foot pads to help alien your bum over a hole in the floor. The UN considered these living conditions primitive, but acceptable.

The Flight Sergeant inspected the premises and came to the conclusion we would be better off living in a tent. I don't know where he thought we would get one, or if we did, where we would put it. To his credit he never gave up trying.

The USAF diverted one of their Hercules C130 transport aircraft to bring in all our basic daily needs. The aircraft was operated by an air national guard squadron from one of the southern states. The crew was on a training trip to Europe and not happy with their new assignment. The provisions included G.I. battle rations dated 1945 and an enormous amount of Coca-Cola. The rations were not that bad. We could smoke the

cigarettes and eat the chocolate bars. We even got used to the black stuff floating around in the corn beef hash. The Coke was especially welcome. An Austrian doctor sent a water sample away to be analysed. When the report came back, he warned us not to drink the stuff. He advised us not to even use the water to wash our face, as it couldn't be purified by boiling at this 7200-foot altitude.

One of the crew members experimented shaving with Coke. He soon gave it up as impractical.

Personal hygiene was always a challenge. Except for the Flight Lieutenant the rest of us had been in the Middle East for at least six months. Enough time for us to build up our immunity to dysentery and "Gypo Gut." Later on a medical doctor was sent over from Trenton to assess the situation. He described the living conditions in Yemen, at best, atrocious

Every time we drove out to the airport we would pass the two unfortunate men chained to the tree. They spent the entire day sitting on the ground, silent and uncomplaining. The memory of the look of acceptance and hopelessness in their eyes has yet to escape my memory and never will, as long as I live. I had no idea what horrendous crime they must have committed to deserve the indifference their fellow countrymen showed towards them.

Predestination is one of the core beliefs held by the Islam and many other monotheistic religions. Their main doctrine is that mankind can be persuaded to be virtuous only by the promise of heavenly rewards in exchange for accepting injustices and the sureness of death.

One example of how this influences their everyday day life took place back in El Arish. Four of us were waiting around the Barber Shop for a hair cut and the barber was a little late. Mastafa, (the boss of all the Egyptian workers) came over and waited with us for the barber to arrive. When the barber showed up, Mastafa started to yell and scream at him in Arabic. When he finished dressing him down, he slapped the barber across the face a couple of times. As the barber turned to leave, Mastafa kicked him in the ass. The barber went into the shop and started cutting hair as if nothing had happened. He didn't show any anger whatsoever. It had been preordained and therefore, it was in Allah's hands. There was nothing he could do but accept the outcome. I'm quite sure I would have shown a little displeasure.

The next morning on our way to the airport I noticed that the two young men we were used to seeing chained to the tree were missing. Later that day, a local government dignitary handed us an official looking document. It stated that the two prisoners had been captured trying to infiltrate the air base. There had been a trial that morning and the jury had found them guilty. The proclamation stated they had confessed to the crime and agreed with the verdict. It went on to say the prisoners had asked to be executed and the court had agreed to grant their request.

The sentence was to be carried out in the public square the next day. While not forbidden, we were encouraged not to attend.

They need not have bothered with the request. I had no intention of observing the gruesome sight. I have to admit, it would have been a once in a lifetime experience. There have been no public executions in Canada since the politicians abandoned the spectacle back in 1869, possible because, popular as the novelty might be in some countries, the event only drew five thousand spectators.

I began to settle in. The surroundings became familiar and less disturbing as time went by. Some time into our second week in Yemen our Engineering Officer who had only recently arrived in Egypt came down to pay us a visit. He was billeted at the other side of town. The Flight Lieutenant drove over to see us about nine o'clock at night. He was as pale as a ghost when he came in the door. He had been forced to stop four times on the way across town. He told us, one sentry would hold a loaded rifle two inches from his head, while the other guard demanded identification. The young officer spent the night with us and headed back in the morning. I heard he was very ill when he got back to El Arish and had to be repatriated back to Canada. I ran into him in Summerside PEI two years later. He told me that the doctors never did determine the true nature of the ailment he picked up in Yemen. They had not been able to cure his disease and nature was taking her own sweet time.

Later in the week we were stopped by two Egyptian guards as we drove into the Aerodrome. They were laughing and pointed to a decapitated human head mounted on a plank. A cigarette dangling in the severed head's mouth seemed to add to their amusement.

Many Westerners no doubt, would find their behaviour coarse and unsavoury. There are several differences between the East and the West. Our civilization is fuelled primarily by man's strongest instinct, envy and greed. The Middle East on the other hand is driven by its dark history of

racial hatred. Generations of training and hardened by the severity of living in this environment have reinforced the belief; it is perfectly all right to lop a person's head off for any minor offence. These are the virtues required of men who engage in competitive homicide. They are what they have to be.

Life went on. One morning the Flight Tech was feeling a little under the weather. The Flight Sergeant was quick to volunteer me to take his place. "Poole will do it," was his favourite phrase. So off I went. I wasn't sure if there was anything in particular I was supposed to do to help fly the airplane. The pilots didn't ask for assistance, so I thought it best to let get along as best they could. I soon got bored watching them fly and I wandered back to the cargo area. I spent the next couple of hours looking out the window at the landscape. The terrain is quite different. The mountains are terraced and decorated with small villages. I was staring to doze when I heard a loud "thunk" not far from where I was sitting. I went up to the cockpit and informed the pilots. They were busy talking and seemed uninterested.



The Central Plateau

The next morning as I was doing my pre-flight inspection, I noticed a small hole in the rear of the fuselage. A closer look revealed the source of yesterday's thunk. It was a bullet hole. I pointed it out to the Wing Commander who showed considerably more interest in the thunk than he did the day before. It was the general consensus the shot was fired by one of the glassy eyed youth you saw everywhere carrying a rifle and chewing the intoxicating green leaf khat.

A few minutes later the mission commander drove up in his jeep. He was accompanied by the two things that never strayed far from his side. That would be, a beautiful blond Swedish secretary and a bottle of his favourite malt beverage. The W/C took him around to the back of the Caribou and showed him the bullet hole. The General had got out of the wrong side of the bed and wasn't in a very good mood. He seldom was.

He asked if the aircraft was all right to fly. The Wing Commander assured him it was. He told the General, The bullet had gone in one side of the aircraft and out the other, "without hitting anything important." I didn't get the impression he was talking about me. The General frowned and replied. "Then get in the God damned thing and fly it, what the hell do you think your being paid for?"

With this, he and his two travelling companions boarded the aircraft. This was a rude awakening. Up to now, it had never occurred to me that getting shot at was possibility, and it took all the romance out of the mission. I had always assumed that being an aircraft mechanic meant I had been hired to fix airplanes.

In August the General packed his bags and went home. He is quoted as saying "The Yemen mission was the most dangerous, worst equipped and least politically realistic of all the missions I have ever had."

While this was going on, the decision-makers decided we would return to Hodeida and install a new engine in the Otter.



An Australian Major and a New Zealand Captain were sent along as our liaison officers. The Egyptian Base Commander was there to meet us when we landed. He told us we would be staying at the Italian Embassy. The accommodations sounded quite elegant. I should have known better. When we got there the embassy turned out to be an old deserted tumbledown building barely fit to live in. It came with a large open water tank on the roof. The Colonel said he would send a water truck around later in the day and have it filled. As he was leaving, he invited the two officers to supper. The Major told the Colonel he didn't have time; he was too busy getting his men squared away. He later confessed the real reason he had not accepted the invitation was because the Colonel hadn't invited all of us. The Colonel must have felt slighted: the water truck never came.

We started the engine change the next day. We got up an hour before dawn and started work at sunrise in an effort to beat the energy draining heat. We were only able to work until ten in the morning. After that the breath-stealing temperature and the high humidity made working outside unbearable.

We were hot, stinky, dirty, oily and tired when we quit work for the day. We didn't have any water, so we grabbed our soap and tried to have a bath in the Red Sea. I didn't work out too well; the damned soap wouldn't work in the salt water. When we got back to shore, the policeman assigned to

guard the building informed us of the size and number of sharks that inhabit the local waters. That put an end to bathing in the Red Sea.

Meanwhile, the Major had been busy. There was an old well close by, so he hired a local boy to fill the water tank one bucket at a time. The young lad managed to get a couple of inches of muddy water a day into the tank. It was an improvement. Now we could have a shower after work. It is amazing how refreshing a few drops of muddy water can be.

The major also hired a young Ethiopian girl to do the laundry. The girl had a very pleasant disposition. She was entirely content and comfortable spending the entire day outside washing our clothes in an old washtub. How she managed to get our work clothes that were basically nothing more than oily rags scrupulously clean, is still a mystery to me.

I'm not sure how many days it took to change the engine. When the engine seized metal particles contaminated the entire oil system. We had to remove the oil lines and flush out the components. The only cleaning agent we had available was the gasoline we drained out of the airplane's fuel tank. The work was slow and arduous. There was also the tendency to get giddy after breathing gas fumes for a couple of hours in this heat. The Captain and the Major were a big help. When they weren't too busy, they pitched in and helped prepare the meals by picking the black stuff out of the corn beef hash.

We finally got the new engine installed. I have to admit we all shared a sense of accomplishment. It was a team effort. There was no use grumbling. We had the will and determination to put up with whatever it took to get the job done. Even though anger increases with the temperature, we never had a quarrel or disagreement. It was in everyone's interest to focus on the common goal of getting the engine changed and getting the hell out of there.

The day after we finished the engine change the Caribou arrived to take us back to Sana'a. One of the pilots took the Otter for a test flight and certified it serviceable, what a relief. There wasn't enough room on the aircraft for all of us and our equipment so the Major asked for volunteers to drive the jeep back to Sana'a. The Flight Sergeant and Cliff Collons, the Flight Tech from the Caribou said they would drive it back. Because there were still a lot of brigands in the area the major gave them a rifle to go along with their pistols. He advised them to keep their head down and not to stop for any reason.

On the flight back to San'a an American diplomat told us the 100 km mountain road the two airmen had taken had been built by the French. He said the Imam drove on it once and didn't like it. He refused to pay and told the French government to take it back. This was the same advisor who told us it would take Yemen 500 years to develop into an underdeveloped country.

This assessment seemed a little harsh. The history of the land of the fabled Queen of Sheba as Yemen was known in The Old Testament stretches back over 3000 years. This ancient trading center was a major exporter of frankincense and myrrh and was a region of great wealth. Nowadays, their strict interpretation of Shariah, the Islamic law, continues to keep them living in the seventh century when Islam first came to Yemen. Despite the fact that this ancient culture has access to the same weapons for inflicting death as we do; the people of this impoverished country are kind and friendly. It's true, they are still dogged by the belief they can cure man of his sins by declaring war and killing him.

Sana'a One of the World's Oldest Cities



It is equally true. There is a tendency by Western Nations to believe they can correct man's transgressions using the same methods.

The Canadian contingent had started to arrive by the time we got back to Sana'a. The next morning we walked over to where they were billeted to see if we knew any of the "Pinkies." Because of their 'pink tint' skin complexion, that's what newcomers were called until they acquired their Middle East tan. When we reached

The Canadian headquarters we could hardly believe our eyes. They had set up offices with tape on the floor to indicate where walls would be; in the off-chance they ever got walls. They had even taken the cigarettes and chocolate bars out of the combat rations and set up a canteen to sell them. It would clearly be wise to stay clear of these people. These new Pinkies were going to have to suck it up and deal with the realities of the circumstances they found themselves in. This was a fly by the seat of your pants operation. They would need all the innovation and airmanship they could muster, just to keep the airplanes flying.

As I was leaving, I bumped into one of the Pinkies I knew back in Ottawa. I asked him how things were going. He said everybody was shocked by, and having trouble adapting to the drastic change in living conditions. They were already experiencing a very high sickness rate. Unlike the infantry, airmen for the most part, have always been accustomed to going about the business of war, well lodged, well-fed, well-clothed and clean shaven. This mission would tax their mettle to the limit. The environment and the hygiene conditions found in this inhospitable climate would not be their only problem. It would be harder, and take them longer to cope with the mental challenges.

When I was getting up to leave, my former colleague looked at me and asked; "how do you stand it?" Stand what, I replied. He responded with dismay, "you're covered with flies!"

I looked down and a dozen or so flies were buzzing around and landing on me unmolested. I hadn't noticed. These are the qualities one needs to acquire in order to live in this part of the world. Now I can't live in the in the same house with one.

Back in Egypt the other ranks enjoyed a sense of camaraderie with the commissioned and senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) that didn't exist back in Canada. We shared the same hardships and living conditions. We had to learn to adapt and fit in. It was much like living in a commune,

but without any girls to distract us. It is amazing how young men's behaviour improves when they are not engaged in the pursuit of the fair sex and their feminine charms. We all had to find the best way we could to escape the drudgery and everyday boredom we encountered during our one year tour in the Middle East. Many used alcohol.

The thing that helped to keep me going was my dream of buying a brand new 1963 Thunderbird. My one year in Egypt would allow me to pay cash for one.

1963 Thunderbird



When I got back to Canada I took one for a test drive and didn't like it. It didn't matter. The car had served its purpose; it had given me a goal and a reason for being there.

Finally the day arrived when we were told we could take the first flight back to El Arish. I was eager to leave this country where all the conveniences that make life comfortable are missing. Life in Yemen is generally harsh, nasty, brutish and unforgiving Nature's one compromise is to make it mercifully short.

