

134 ATU IN YEMEN

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In June/63, I was informed that I was to be the CO of 134 ATU to be based in Yemen, and to be prepared to leave in a few days. First, I went to New York with G/C Lupton for a briefing by Dr. Ralph Bunche, Deputy Secretary General of the UN. The briefing was vague and raised more questions than it answered but we figured that answers would eventually come.

With an advance party consisting of Ken Gaydamack, (Supply), and the Adj and a WO, we flew commercial air to Aden. I regret that I have forgotten the names of the adj. and the WO, as they, along with Ken were the backbone of the operation, (especially the WO), and I do them a disservice by not remembering their names. After waiting in Aden for a couple of days, we were picked up by a Caribou and flew to Sana in Yemen.

Yemen consists of a mountainous central spine with deserts on both sides. The west side is on the shore of the Red Sea, with temperatures near +50°C and the one to the east leads into the empty quarter of Saudi Arabia and is a bit above sea level and not as hot but plagued by dust storms. Sana is at 7500 ft which provides a comfortable temperature, but takes some acclimatizing because of the altitude.

Our first tasks were to prepare for the arrival of the main party, conduct recce flights and define exactly what we were to do, none of which was ever fully accomplished.

The only billet available was the "Guest House", a type of hotel with not enough room and no amenities. The water was not fit to drink, or even wash in for that matter, up to a dozen per room, only one toilet /shower and no hot water. There was room for only two offices which I gave to the supply officer and the adj, as they had a need to store records, prepare paper work, etc.

I met with Gen VonHorne, the UN commander, who explained that the war was between the Egyptian/Yemeni forces supporting the republicans against the royalists who supported the deposed king. Saudi Arabia supported the royalists and were their main arms supplier. Each side deployed between 50 – 70,000 men with the Egyptians supported by tanks, artillery, air and naval forces. The republicans controlled the cities and towns and the royalists controlled the country side. We would be flying over hostile territory and could expect to be fired on. In fact, the Caribou had already been hit.

Arms were brought to the royalists by sea through Jizan on the Saudi side of the Saudi/Yemen border on the shore of the Red Sea, and over land through Najran, on the Saudi side of the Saudi/Yemen border on the east side of the central mountains. From these points, the arms were shipped through passes into the central mountains and delivered to the royalists.

The plan was to use Sana as HQ with posts at Hoddeida and Jizan on the Red Sea, at Sada located in a bowl in the mountains north of Sana, and at Najran. Originally it was planned to use helicopters and Otters at Jizan and Najran for patrols, and the Caribous would provide logistic support throughout the area. Yugo soldiers would patrol the passes in jeeps in coordination with the aircraft.

A crated S-55 helicopter was flown into Aden to be assembled by RCN techs and test flown by Craig Miller, an experienced RCAF helicopter pilot. All concerned predicted that the S-55 would be unable to perform in such high temperatures and they were proved right. Thus the helicopter and personnel were sent home and 3 crated Otters were flown into Aden from the Congo to be assembled by RCAF techs. They would then be deployed to Jizan and Najran.

When the main party arrived, it was apparent to all that we were living in the middle ages. This was made evident by the appearance each morning of a freshly severed head over the main gate to the city. Living conditions were appalling, with overcrowding, no potable water, no off duty facilities. Rations were 10-in-1 hard rations of limited variety and taste, and soft drinks and beer did not slake thirst. ATCHQ, which provided excellent support, was asked for a cook and a water purification plant. The cook arrived quickly which greatly improved the meals, but the water plant took a few months.

It was also decided to send people home with the idea of having those left being too busy rather than have too many standing around with time on their hands and no recreation for their off hours. We kept only enough pilots to man both Caribous (including me) and a couple of spare Otter pilots so that they could rotate into Sana for a rest from their high risk living and flying conditions. In my case I acted as Air Staff Officer (ASO) in addition to being CO and a line pilot which was a tiring schedule that lasted for months. Eventually, S/L Bob Race arrived as ASO and was a welcome and effective addition to the staff.

When the Otters were ready, it was considered too risky to try and fly them over the mountains in the heat and prevailing weather conditions (heavy thunderstorms built up early in the morning) so they would follow the coast to Jizan and then two of them would go through the passes to Najran. Because we were flying over hostile territory, I directed that at all times; the Otters were to fly in pairs in radio contact with each other. If one a/c went down, the other was to land and pick up the crew, abandoning the downed a/c. (Subsequently, I ordered the Otters to fly above 3000 ft as they were taking too many hits from ground fire.)

A Caribou carrying fuel parts and techs was assigned as escort and the Otters successfully deployed. UN New York was advised that we were ready to begin regular patrols.

Shortly after our arrival, it became evident to me that the mission was futile. It was ignored by all belligerents, received no support from New York, and suffered from confused direction to the point that the commander was contemplating resigning in frustration. Which he soon did.

Thus I decided that while we would do the job, my personal goal was that no Canadian lives would be lost in this very dangerous and ill-conceived operation.

And so we settled into a routine. The weekly North Star brought in the mail and supplies and rotated people to El Arish. We instituted regular flights to Asmara, (now in Ethiopia), where the cook could buy fresh rations, and the men got a taste of civilization. The US army had a small post based there and we could get cheeseburgers at the PX. We had other flights to Aden Jeddah and El Arish, all of which provided a break from the conditions in Yemen. Because the UN did not provide medical support, I quietly arranged with the RAF in Aden to treat any Canadians needing medical aid. This proved helpful for the many ailments, mishaps, sickness and occasional scorpion bites that we airevac-ed to the RAF hospital. Thank goodness for the RAF.

Towards Nov, it became time to rotate people home and I tried to send them back in the order they arrived, followed finally by me. Being associated with failure is never satisfying, but it was through no fault of the men who served. They conducted themselves with ingenuity, resourcefulness and professionalism at all times, and did the job that was asked of them. Not long after we left, the mission was greatly reduced with only a token presence left, and even that soon ended.