

Deployment to Somalia

By CWQ4 John P. Rego, March 1996

This story may or may not be fiction, because the only assistance I sought and received during its writing was that obtained from exotic malted beverages.

During the first 2 weeks of November 1992, MATCS-38 Det D's personnel and equipment trickled back in to El Toro following a WTI evolution in Yuma, AZ. It was about this time that the media began its blitz covering conditions in Somalia and President Bush began publicized consideration of taking action. Planning began immediately and initially two full IFR dets, and possibly a third, would be deployed. This eventually scaled back to one DET.



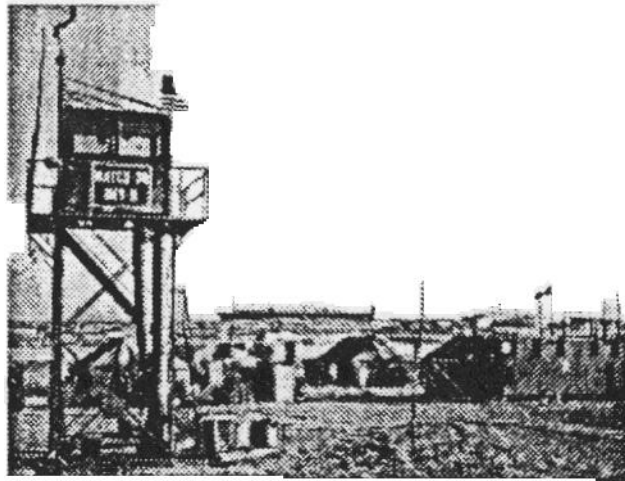
Early in December the execute order was given and the landing force, which was loitering off the coast quickly secured the air, seaports, and the US Embassy in Mogadishu, the Capital City. At the same time, three ATC officers joined the Joint Command Staffs as liaisons - one in Saudi Arabia and the other two, one of whom was Bill Miller (MATCA Member), in Mogadishu. A day or two later, MATCS-38 Det. D departed El Toro with all personnel and equipment aboard three C5 transports.

During our final approach into Mogadishu, our C5 was jinking about as though we were in severe turbulence. About halfway through the approach, an aircraft crew member came back and suggested that we lock and load (we had been issued ammunition at El Toro prior to departure). He also mentioned that the evasive flying was due to the small arms fire that was apparently directed at our aircraft.

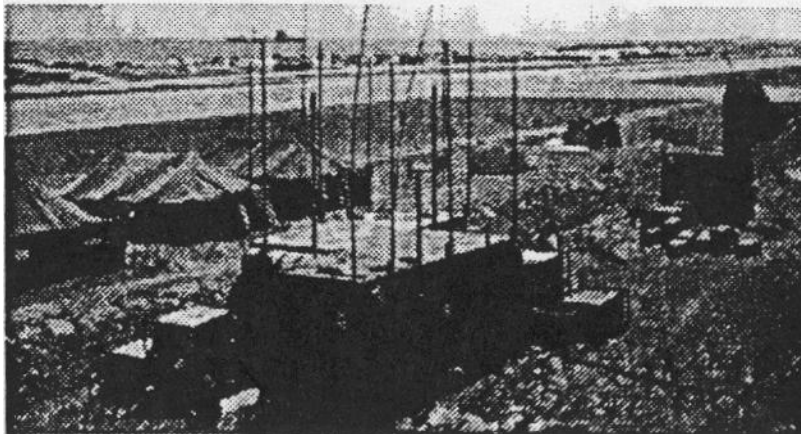
After our uneventful touchdown, the taxiing to the ramp seemed to take forever and of course there were no windows to see what we are getting into. During the taxiing we came up with a hasty plan to secure a perimeter around the aircraft and assembled the detachment on the forward cargo ramp. As the cargo door lifted and visions of John Wayne danced in our heads we were greeted only by a nasty stench and the frenzied activity of cargo handlers - naturally our plan went straight down the tubes. It was around 0300 local time and as dark as Death Valley on a moonless night and our detachment was moved into an abandoned construction site (apparently a passenger terminal) adjacent to the ramp.

While we waited for daylight to begin site surveys, our Det. Commander, Capt Brad Weisz, went in search or the Air Force Combat Control Team who had relieved the Marine Controllers that were attached to the landing force. Through the remainder of the night, and for about the next 72 hours, small arms fire was heard sporadically, along with the whizzing and sight of tracers well over our heads. As dawn crept over the Indian Ocean we realized that we were being watched; no more than several hundred feet from us was a crowd of Somalis that numbered in the high hundreds - perhaps a thousand - apparently just watching the activity.

Over the next couple of hours we walked about the airfield searching for an effective and relatively safe site on which to set up our equipment and camp. Once the site was found we began emplacing the equipment. It was actually three days before all personnel and equipment arrived and was in place, as our three aircraft did not depart El Toro together. I don't recall the exact timeline from here on out, but over the next several days the air field was TERPED, the TSQ-120 (tower), TRN-44 (TACAN), TPS- 73 (ASR), and TSQ-131 (CCS) were installed, flight checked and placed in service.

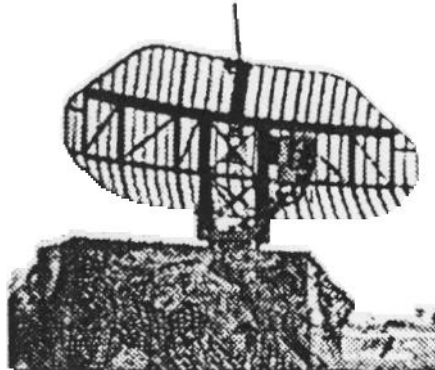


TSQ-120 tower, AN/TSQ-131 Communication & Control System, AN/TSM Maintenance Vans (tent camp in background). Ship in background is a maritime pre-positioning ship.



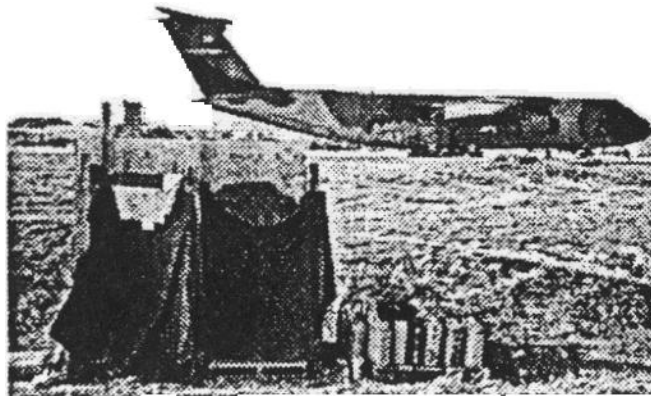
View of radar system taken from the control tower.

With all that done, we turned to the important tasks at hand of securing sources of health, comfort, and morale items, such as various spirit enhancers (naturally I have very little knowledge of these sources as it would have been foolish for anyone to reveal them). Although the antics and creativity of Marines during their time spent off-crew provides far more colorful reading and is in fact a credit to their adaptability, security reasons (the effort to protect the guilty, and of course there is the fifth amendment) prevent me from expounding on them in detail at this time. Besides, those stories will be much better after many more years or seasoning. So all you guilty Marines reading this - relax - your stories will be relegated to pubs and clubs for many years to come (yes Jim, this includes you).

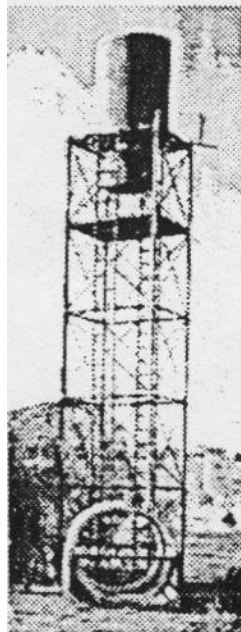
**AN/TPS-73*****Air Force 1 in the background***

One of the more memorable events involved an individual who convinced some Air Force types that he was a DOD representative and confiscated soft drinks and snacks from the stocks of arriving aircraft

Our number one scrounger obtained everything, ranging from African art work, to foreign military equipment and occasionally numerous amounts of fresh veggies and fruit (we won't discuss what he was offered by a local woman for a bottle of water).



Our shower facilities were right in the middle of the action (C-5 in the background).



AN/TRN-44 TACAN

One of my favorites is our young Marine who felt the need to cool off and took up residence in the Air Force Morgue body cooler and was found by an Air Force Colonel lying on a slab smoking a cigarette with a beer sitting displayed on his chest

Of course I can't leave out that practical jokes were abundant, crowned by the transformation of our water supply into 500 gallons of lemonade. A word of thanks is due to the armed forces of numerous nations who aided us in the pursuit of morale, among them New Zealand, France, Canada, Italy and Australia.

There was no liberty in Somalia, but our Det Commander had managed to get periodic seats for two or three day trips to Mombasa, Kenya. He would send three Marines at a time and got about half the det. there during our five month stay in Somalia. I was fortunate to be among that half and found the beer to be cold and cheap, the food OK and the ocean front resorts where we spent our time absolutely fantastic. Generally the resorts consisted of first class hotels with pools, beautiful beaches, restaurants, casinos, nightclubs, etc. The impression I got was that Europeans flock to Kenya just as Americans do to Florida, California, Mexico and the Caribbean.

During April of 1993, serious planning was underway for the withdrawal of remaining US Forces, which would complete the "thirty day" operation known as RESTORE HOPE. Responsibility for Somalia was to pass from US to UN Control upon our withdrawal.

What we considered a key part of this plan was the fact that the ATC Det could not withdraw until replaced by another ATC organization. The search for a replacement was more difficult than anticipated, but this would not hinder the retrograde of other US forces. There was some talk of assigning Det D to the UN force, but we were saved when the UN hired some Kenyan controllers to work out of a tower, eagerly constructed by our Det. with the assistance of Army Engineers and Canadian Armed Personnel. The thought of living on the airfield with a perimeter

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guarded by forces (who shall remain nameless) was not a pleasant one and we were quite happy indeed when our personnel started departing on the fifth of May and were completely out by the eighth.

Yes, I know this story mentions only a few names and provides no great detail as to any events or those individuals involved. This is due to the fact that the majority of those Marines are still on active duty and you all know how that works. However, the subject is open to discussion and any requests for info which are written on labels adorning cold bottles of beer during the month of September in Charleston will be favorably entertained.

This document provided to the Legacy Committee by Ron Irwin. Lowell A. Benson, Legacy Committee co-chair and webmaster, did some formatting for use on the web.