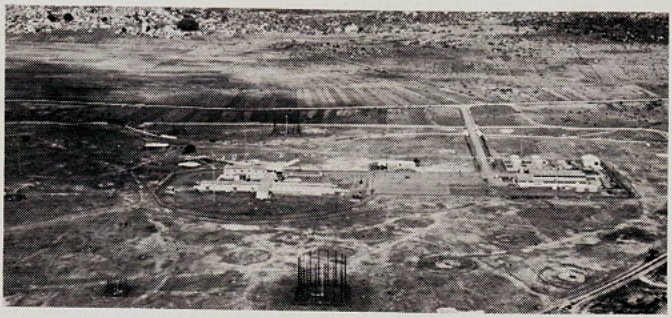
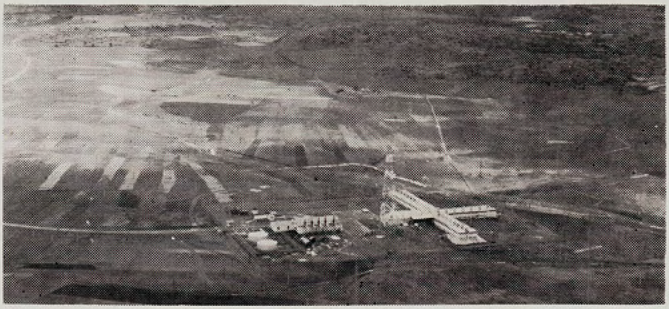
Kagnew Station 1973



Tract H Navy Transmitter Site (Gura)



Tract D STRATCOM Transmitter Site

Chapter 5

The Sixties

Why should I go to the States?
You've brought America here.

An Oasis Club waiter
October, 1967

The flurry of activity which attended the construction and piecemeal occupation of Tract E spilled over into the early sixties. As activities and services moved from Tract A to Tract E, the old buildings were abandoned and later demolished to make room for badly-needed family quarters. The Army Security Agency held forth from a new headquarters building, Pershing Hall, and continued logistical support and personnel services for units representing all three uniformed services.

The dependent population snowballed and for the new arrivals, there was some good news and some bad news. The good news was that the growing number of facilities provided an outlet for every appetite. The bad news was that the impressive array didn't include family quarters. At almost any given time from the late fifties until the late sixties, upwards of 40 families were lodged in downtown hotels awaiting off-post quarters. Until 1963, government quarters were virtually non-existent. The 15 sets on Tract A were the only ones available, in fact, while construction progressed on quarters near the back gate of Tract E. The completion of those 50 quarters did very little to shorten the long waiting list. In 1962, a redesignation of 24 enlisted quarters provided housing for officers on Tract E, which brought the total up to 51 available officer quarters and 77 enlisted.

Concern for the meteoric rise in the dependent population prompted the Army Security Agency to order 60 sets of prefabricated family quarters. Characteristically, they took 18 months to arrive while the housing situation grew more acute. In August, 1964, a moratorium on command sponsorship for personnel below the grade of E-5 went into effect in an effort to stem the tide of incoming families. The prefabricated buildings finally arrived early in 1965. A $161,000 contract for the construction of foundations was let in March and construction began in the outfield of the Radio Marina softball field.

New arrivals to Kagnew Station in the early sixties were greeted by three new clubs, (Kagnew Station Officers Open Mess, Top Five and Oasis), a newly-remodeled ten-lane bowling alley, a $22,000 miniature golf

course, a spanking new Teen Club and a renovated outpatient clinic. But the recreational complex, Kagnew Farms, which opened in 1961, represented the Command's most ambitious recreational undertaking.

«Kagnew Farms» was the name of the area where the Radio Marina transmitter site had been located until it was abandoned after the construction of the new transmitter site at Tract D. Until the facilities were supplanted by Stonehouse in 1964, Kagnew Farms commanded a lot of weekend attention. The area was first opened October 22 when Kagnewites got a firsthand look at a new skeet range, a small-bore rifle and pistol range and the Afro-American Racing Club's banked-dirt oval track. Over the years, hundreds of spectators filled the track's bleachers for jalopy races, motorcycle scrambles and gherry cart races. The *Gazelle* reported on the second day of racing:

> «The race track at Kagnew Farms is the scene of races on alternate Sundays of the year. The last race day was November 5 when two races each in motorcycles and go-carts provided the chills and spills in addition to the four jalopy races. A marked improvement over 'opening day' was noticed in the pit area and now, a retaining screen has been erected around the track for spectator and driver protection.»

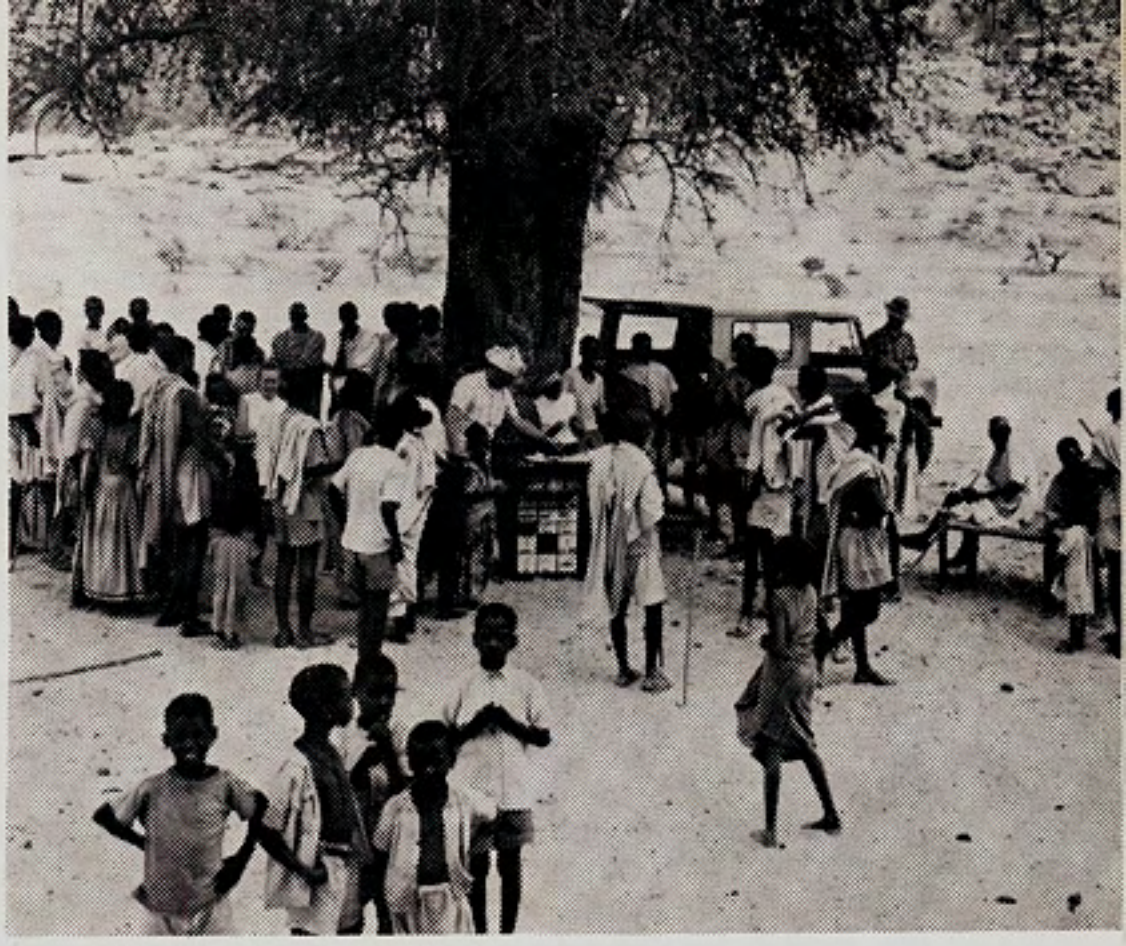
By the end of 1963, the transfer to Tract E was more or less a *fait accompli*. The Navy had taken over the Radio Marina building as their headquarters and administrative offices. They shared Tract A with the veterinarian, PDO, a STRATCOM warehouse, the Special Guard headquarters, the Auto Hobby Shop and 15 aging family quarters.

In June, 1961, Kagnew's naval unit became a full-fledged communications station, and Navy receiver operations moved out of Tract C and into Tract F.

Unlike Tract A, activity at Tract E waxed. Internal shuffles and reorganizations kept pace with the physical improvements in post facilities. The creation of the Public Information Office in 1963 was the upshot of Kagnew's mindfulness of its guest status in Eritrea. PIO sponsorship of community relations projects was intended to win friends for Kagnew Station, while a collateral responsibility for dissemination of information regarding Kagnew Station was meant to dispel misconceptions. It was under the auspices of the Public Information Office that Kagnew's most famous citizen got his start.

While driving from Keren to Asmara, SP5 Hugh Downey offered a ride to an elderly priest. The priest insisted that Downey visit his village to inspect its tumbledown school, and that's how it all began. Downey subsequently managed to raise enough money to construct the John F. Kennedy Memorial School in that village. After his discharge from the Army, he traveled to Missouri, started the Lalmbda Association to finance his plans, and then returned to Keren to get to work. By the time Hugh left again nine years later, he had added six more schools, a 150 bed orphanage and a hospital. The accolades engendered by his work in Keren have reached international proportions and include commendations from Lyndon Johnson and H.I.M. Haile Selassie I.

The old school (left) was so run down, SP5 Downey felt obliged to build a new one.



PIO-sponsored medical safaris earned a lot of friends for the American Community of Kagnew Station.

Although the American community of Kagnew Station got a lot of mileage out of it, PIO enterprise was not entirely limited to Downey's Keren project. There were medical safaris in which volunteers under the supervision of Army doctors drove to outlying villages dispensing medical care to those in need. A Volunteer Teachers Association also had its beginnings in the PIO. At its peak, over 50 volunteer teachers augmented the staffs of 11 local schools and colleges. Nine members of this association received honorary academic gowns from H.I.M. when the University of Asmara opened in January, 1967. The possibilities available to philanthropic Americans in Eritrea have been (and are still) virtually limitless, and civic action programs over the years have ranged from construction of storage dams to donation of textbooks. During the sixties, practically every unit and organization devoted plenty of time and money to its own project.

The *Kagnew Gazelle* also fell into the PIO bailiwick (became bimonthly in June, 1963) and news coverage was supplemented by a daily publication, *Kagnews*. *Kagnews* listed items for sale, announcements, club entertainment schedules and a weekly summary of significant world news. For a good percentage of the time of its existence, *Kagnews* was edited by a dependent.

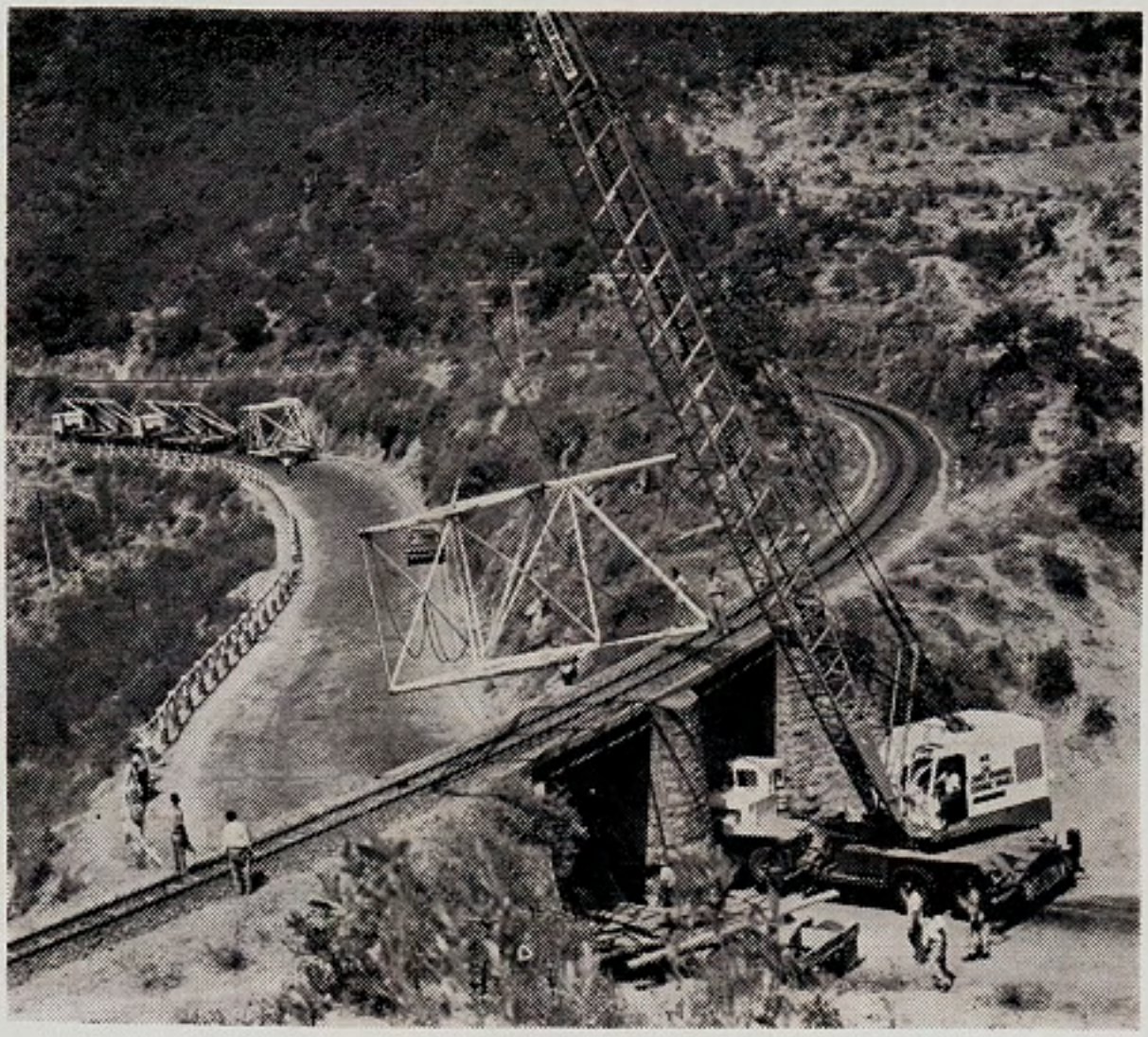
KANU-TV was operated by the PIO and was second only to Special Services in terms of off-duty attention. Quite naturally, KANU kept pace with stateside developments and offered an ambitious schedule of locally-produced amateur nights, quiz programs, kids shows and East Africa's own version of *American Bandstand*.

June 5, 1964 marked the end of the final vestige of British influence and Eritrea was ordered to «drive right». With the move to the right side of the road came another innovation — speed limits. Kagnew's Provost Marshal suggested that for a few weeks «only those persons that need to drive do so.»

A Department of Defense news release in January, 1964 unveiled plans for a new deep-space research site—Stonehouse. For Kagnew's race track aficionados, the announcement was a grim one indeed:

> «Experimentation in the peaceful uses of space will receive added impetus in Africa with the installation, at Kagnew Station, of additional equipment for space communications research and for future study of radio receiving and transmitting techniques. The new equipment,

now ready for installation, will consist of two rotatable parabolic antennas, one 85 feet in diameter and the other 150 in diameter. These modern antennae are designed to further the study of long-range communications and to facilitate the study of the effects of the ionosphere on communications. The selection of Asmara for this important new space research activity resulted from extensive surveys to find an area combining relatively quiet electronic environment, and suitable topographic features and climate characteristics, near the equatorial belt. Kagnew Station is a particularly appropriate site to receive the new antennas in light of the station's past contributory research into natural electronic phenomena. The new equipment will expand Kagnew's communications research capability and will permit scientific measurement of unusual transmission characteristics in outer space communications research. United States interest in this research activity is based on the desire to improve long-range communications world-wide. The new installation will make an important contribution to man's expanding knowledge of the mysteries of outer space. Materials for the new antennas will begin to arrive at the seaport of Massawa in early May. From there, they will be truck-hauled to Asmara. The installation is expected to be completed in 1965 and during phases of its construction should employ many Ethiopian workers. Arrangements will be made for groups of visitors to tour the new facility during its construction in accordance with past practice at other parts of Kagnew Station.»

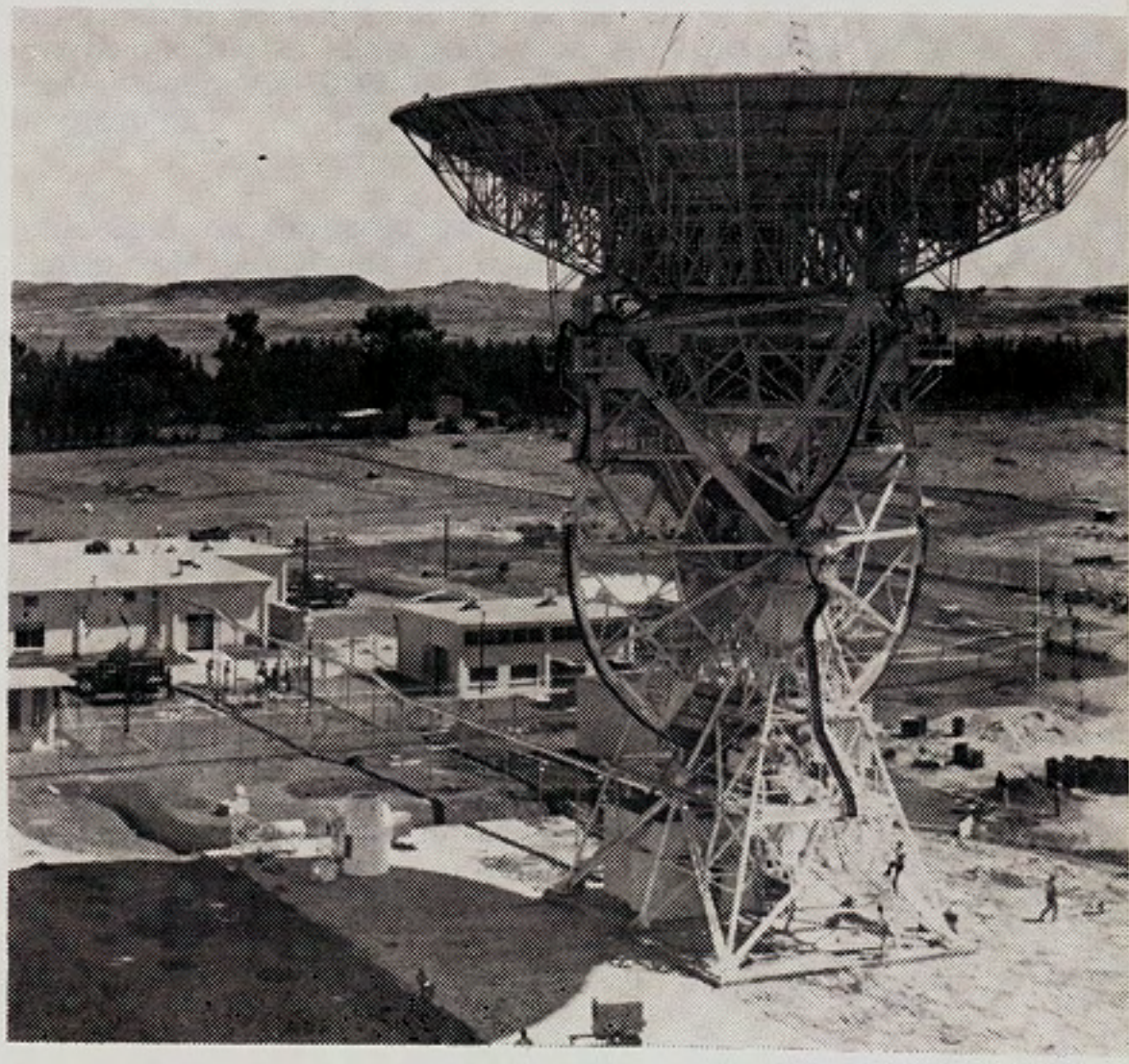


Once the huge pieces of parabolic antenna had been successfully off-loaded in Massawa, an equally laborious process of trucking them to Asmara presented itself.

As predicted, the 6,000 tons of Stonehouse arrived in Massawa in May and June of 1964, and $600,000 added an operations building and a power plant at Kagnew Farms.

G. G. shots were injected into the Kagnew routine in 1965 along with the first Catholic Chaplain, the conversion of part of the of the Guest House into a Dental Cinic and the first little league baseball game. In January of that year, the Post Training Building, the scene of too many Character Guidance classses, was converted into the PX Annex. In May, the «Club in the Clouds» (Service Club) received a major facelifting. Refurbishments included an indoor waterfall and a wall-sized mural of Mount Fuji. Three years later, another major renovation supplanted Mt. Fuji with an African safari lodge.

Mid-1966 saw the opening of the new Navy transmitter site, Tract H, and Tract G, the STRATCOM Satellite Terminal in Gura. At roughly the same time, the 2 million dollar power plant, the STRATCOM Barracks, the BEQ and 54 famiy quarters were completed. KANU-TV, which had become an affiliate of the American Forces Radio and Television Service, switched from channel eight to channel two, 41,000 pieces of quartermaster furniture arrived and hunting came to an end in Eritrea.



Workmen put the finishing touches on Stonehouse's 85 foot parabolic antenna. A major expansion, completed in 1971, more than doubled the size of the site.

The moratorium on hunting caused a drop in morale equalled only by the great Peanut Butter Famine of 1971. The ascendency of the Eritrean Liberation Front rang down the curtain on Kagnew's favorite pastime, one which had flourished since the mid-forties. It was so popular that Army vehicles were used for an average of 300 trips a year, and almost every Unit Fund owned a jeep or two for hunting. For a time, the Navy maintained a hunting camp in Agordat and a fulltime Kagnew game warden scrupulously enforced hunting regulations.

In addition to the completion of the Company B barracks and the conversion of the Woodcraft Shop to the Multicraft Shop, the FY 1966 Historical Report notes another example of the great lengths taken to accomodate every Kagnewite's individual needs:

«Shelves were installed in all cells of the Post Guardhouse. This improved the morale of all detained persons in that it provided an adequate place for the storing of articles that prisoners are allowed to keep during confinement.»

There were also some internal changes in Special Services in 1966 with the organization of the Entertainment Section. Its staff quickly got the Special Services Male Chorus underway and produced plays in the Roosevelt Theater on a quarterly basis.

Significant events in Asmara in 1967 were eclipsed by *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and the pilgrimage to Haight-Ashbury, but the rain (or lack of it) in 1968 grabbed the headlines. The rainfall that year was well below average and Kagnew residents began rationing in February, 1969 when water was cut back to five hours a day. Nine months later, having had only a negligible rainfall during the summer, the situation deteriorated and water usage hours were again reduced. Conservation pre-empted all other concerns. While Army engineers pounded drill bits into layers of bedrock, Kagnew's motor pool trucked nearly five million gallons of water up serpentine roads, and the Facilities Engineers divided their time between devising ingenious water-saving schemes and puzzling over thousands of gallons of water which were unaccounted for each day. By early 1970, Kagnewites had one hour of water in the morning and one hour at night. The *Kagnew Gazelle* offered some consolation:

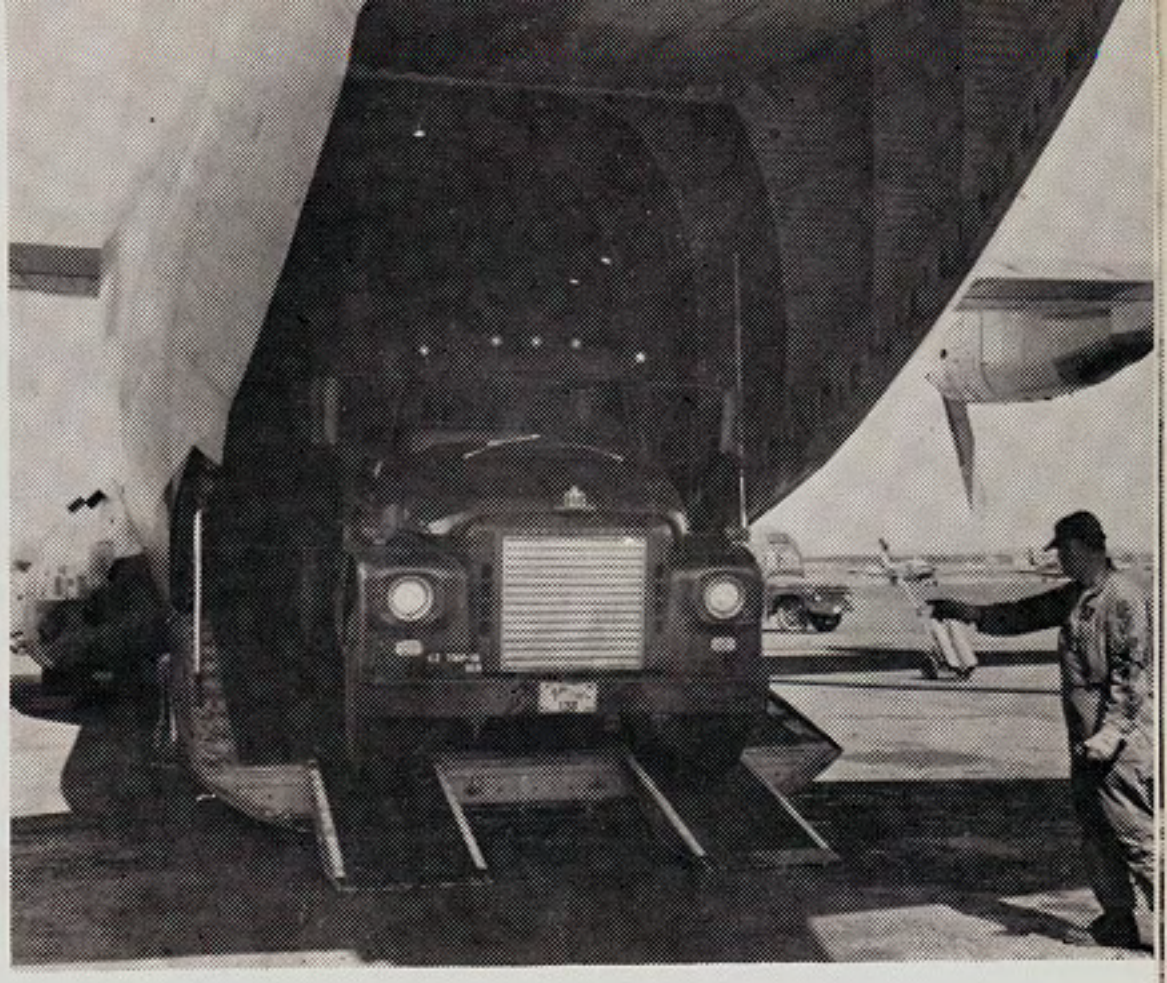
«It's a sad story all around. The Tract C well-digging project which was started May 6, has been plagued from the first by mechanical breakdowns, stuck bits and hard rock. And now — to top it all off — our diggers have gone to the very 100 meter limit allowed under our agreement with the Ethiopian Government and all we have to show for our efforts is one rather empty hole in the ground.

«As for hauling, that does not appear to be the total solution. Kagnew tankers began trucking in water September 4 from the Navy Gura site as our situation worsened. That route was discontinued on September 25 when Kagnew found a closer source 17 miles southeast of Asmara on a farm belonging to Judge Latilla of Asmara.

«From the judge's well, we have been able to purchase an average of 40,000 gallons of water each day. All units on post provide driver details for the 1,500 gallon tankers and each driver makes from three to four round trips each day on his shift. (Post Engineer) Major Ken Scott admits the driving, done primarily by the same men each day, is a grueling task, not without its dangers. Sloshing water has a difficult momentum to control.

«Good news! The Command's request for money to drill more wells has been approved by Washington! The Mediterranean Division Engineers are now examining bids for the drilling contracts! Drilling is supposed to start by mid-December! Up to four wells are to be drilled! Three 5,000-gallon tankers should arrive before the week is out! A water-witcher has been called in to find a drilling site!

«Would you believe that last Friday this man of magic shook his stick around outside that Tract E back gate, a home-owner dug down 20 feet and was nearly drowned in water? And shortly after this (not one to argue with positive results), Major Scott took him out to Tract C and had him find us a new well site?



The Military Airlift Command has bailed out Kagnew more than once. The delivery of 5,000 gallon trailer trucks allowed Kagnew drivers to deliver more water in fewer trips.

«'Drill here,' Water-Witcher said. 'You will have water within 75 feet' Guess where the first of those four wells will be drilled.

«A Med Div geologist agrees with the location, believing we might bore into a fault in the basaltic rock and get lucky. But even so, if we should find water within the month, it will be of no immediate relief. Lines have to be sunk and pumping stations built.

«'I predict we won't see any water on Tract E from those new wells for six months,' Major Scott said, optimistically. 'If we get any by July, we're going to be lucky.'»

As time progressed, it became evident that Kagnew's only salvation was to be the summer rainy season and Kagnewites girded up for the dry wait.

When the rains did come in late June, a sad paradox developed. The torrential rainfall was so frequent that the well that was providing the bulk of the water was contaminated by waste materials washed off the surface. The long-awaited rains had only ruined what little water Kagnew did have. A series of prompt negotiations netted two purification units which were flown in by MAC and hastily put into service. On July 22, 1970, the rationing came to an end and fulltime water usage returned.

By the end of the sixties, all major construction had been completed. A total capital investment of 69.5 million dollars had provided 185 buildings and 25 miles of road, and Kagnew sprawled over 3400 acres of land. Surprisingly enough, once costruction was completed, space became a

The Company A barracks, completed in 1966, was patterned after Air Force buildings at Wheelus Air Force Base in Libya. After the ASA phaseout in 1972, the building housed the Medical Detachment and the Military Police.

premium commodity. Walls and windows came and went during the process of countless reconfigurations.

On Tract A, 120 sets of family quarters had taken over. The Navy had moved to new headquarters at Tract F leaving the Radio Marina building to become a Rod and Gun Club, a Radio and Television Repair Shop, a Beauty Shop and a Chief Petty Officers Lounge.

In way of a post script to 1969, weapons firing on the Kagnew range adjacent to Tract C was abruptly discontinued when a ricocheting bullet wounded a hapless Ethiopian at the Asmara Airport. On August 8, 1969, the inaugural flight of the Kagnew Station Flying Club lifted off in one of the two Cessna aircraft purchased from Wheelus Air Force Base. And sports competition reached a new zenith with Kagnew's first Super Bowl in which the enlisted team edged the vaunted officers squad in tackle football 12-6.

After 20 years of moving and building, Kagnew Station had blossomed into a full-fledged American community snugly ensconced in the Eritrean highlands. For most of the 4,200 Kagnewites, life was euphoric and the future open-ended. Or so everyone thought.

Kagnew's hospital was made over from an Italian garage. The addition of the outpatient clinic was the first of a series of modifications in the hospital. By 1969, all major construction on Tract E had been completed.