

ASMARA, ERITREA, ETHIOPIA, EAST AFRICA  
The years 1954-1957

On 20 July 1954 we moved out of the house at 1310 N. Greenbrier St. (about 1 year to the day from the day that we had moved in).

After a few days leave at Horseheads, New York, we reported to the Port of New York and stayed about 2 nights at a hotel, after which we boarded the US Army Transport USS Geiger and sailed for the Mediterranean. After about 2 days at sea I was on deck one morning and noticed 2 army officers I had not seen before. One was a chaplain, a Major Fredine and the other a captain of the medical corp, a Dr. Bellas. These two gentlemen were to serve with me for the next 3 years and play an important role in whatever success I may have had at my new overseas post.

Our ship stopped at the port of Leghorn, Italy for one night and then went on to Rome for a night before crossing the Mediterranean to Tripoli and Port Lauty where there was large air base. That evening while in transit quarters at Tripoli, I learned first hand of some of the problems I would face at my new post and which had not been mentioned to me in my briefing at Arlington Hall, Virginia. Arlington Hall was the world wide headquarters of what was then known as the Army Security Agency, an intelligence gathering organization. Calling at my quarters in Tripoli that evening was a Major Reed. A tall heavy set bald headed Texan, Major Reed informed me that his purpose of being in Tripoli was to accompany a dependent wife from Asmara who had been convicted by a general court marshal in Asmara of shooting her husband through the heart. She was to serve her sentence in West Virginia. This was not the most pleasant news a new post commander could receive for his new assignment.

The next day we boarded a C54 with a stop at Cairo and then on to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The heat and humidity was very oppressive and the only quarters available were Quonset huts. We went to bed and were awakened at about 2:00 AM the following morning in order to prepare to board a C47 (a 2 motor piston air craft) for Asmara. We took off and actually flew west 600 miles eventually crossing the Red Sea, when we were notified by the pilot to prepare for landing. I learned then that Asmara, Eritrea, Ethiopia was located atop a 10,000 foot mountain overlooking the Red Sea when the plane did not start to loose altitude for a landing. (For those who wish to obtain a vivid description of this ancient land they should read a book written about 1938 titled Under the Red Sea Sun by a Commander Ellsburg of the United States Navy).

This post was known as Radio Marina when used by the Italians prior to World War II. When General Erwin Rommel with his Afrikaner Corp was about to take Cairo (which he never did) the Allies thought they would have to fight him from the underside by going north through Africa. A military post was therefore established in Asmara even though it was 1000 miles south of Cairo and over some of hottest dessert in the world. The port of Massawa on the Red Sea would serve as an excellent deep water seaport. This would entail sending goods by ship around the Cape of Good Hope and north through the Indian Ocean and Straits of Aden.

The post itself was located on the outskirts of the city of Asmara and consisted of several barracks, a motor pool, a headquarters building and about 4 sets of so called officer's quarters. (I later noted that the upper part of my quarters was constructed from lumber recovered from shipping boxes). After our arrival we were taken to our quarters and the following days and months were eventful.

About the second day in our new quarters a young native house boy appeared and made application for work. He said that he had been house boy for Col. Hopkins, the former post commander, but that he had become sick, but was all right now. On further inquiry I found that he had syphilis, but stated that he had been given shots in the arm and now, he had a clean bill of health. Needless to say his request for employment I did not act on favorably. My wife Elizabeth had been an army nurse and was quite careful in these matters.

Another unusual incident took place on our first Saturday night at the officers club. My wife and I were enjoying the party and dancing to the tune of the Italian orchestra, but it seemed like the first dance would never end, they keep on playing so I keep on dancing. I finally stopped to inquire of my executive officer when the first dance would end and he replied "when the commandant stops dancing"

The day after arrival the same Major Reed I had meet in Tripoli formed an honor guard for me. However in reviewing the honor guard and passing the front rank I probably was quite inconsiderate in that I stopped to inspect a soldier's rifle. I found the action was not well oiled and the barrel was dirty. Thus with a recent general court marshal and an honor guard with dirty weapons I immediately decided I had a job on my hands to do. I further learned that soldiers were getting in trouble in the city of Asmara on a more frequent basis than should be. I learned that several hundred men in operations were assigned to one company with only one officer in charge (no wonder then that the soldiers got in trouble). After about 60 days and further survey of the situation I learned that the company grade officers assigned to operations had no responsibility for their men when the men were off duty. Thus many principals of good command control and discipline were being violated and it was not the soldiers fault. I therefore consulted my staff on this matter and was told I would have to get permission from Arlington Hall to reorganize the place. However, I recalled from my days at Camp Crowder, Missouri that a post commander could organize new companies for training purposes without permission from higher authority.

The duty at the operations company was on a 3 shift basis. I therefore directed my staff to come up with a plan to recognize the post so that one shift would include all men and officers on that shift and the officers to be responsible for the men 24 hours a day. Thus the post was reorganized to consist of 3 separate operations companies, and a headquarters company which was to include a military police detachment. A separate medical detachment was under the command of Captain Bellas whom I had first met aboard ship on the high seas. The reorganization was accomplished with no increase in administrative personnel and I learned a few years later that this type of organization became a

model for the various permanent field stations of the ASA throughout the world.

The results in improved moral and discipline were dramatic. Another area of concern was the lack of appropriate uniform by the men. The soldiers were not exhibiting adherence to good order and military discipline. I therefore directed that we hold a monthly parade followed by reception and dance at the officers club. The problem was to get any music for the parade. My staff thought I was a little touched in the head, when I directed that the orchestra which played for the Saturday night dance at the officers club be used on the parade ground to render the Star Spangled Banner. I was urged to call off the first parade, but instead I directed "Major Bircher we are going to have a parade and I want to hear the Star Spangled Banner if you have to whistle it." Like the excellent soldier he was he replied "Yes Sir," and saluted. The parade went on with the orchestra.

To my surprise a few weeks later a small Ethiopian band showed up to play the music for the parade, this apparently came from the Ethiopian regiment which was stationed on the other side of town. Just how or in what manner my staff arranged for this or how they were paid I felt it best not to inquire. There are things that a post commander should know about but sometimes it is just as well if he does not know about a few minor matters.

Improvement in moral and discipline became more evident every day. After a few months we obtained authority for a Kagnev Station Patch, for soldiers to wear on their uniforms. I no longer had reports of several men in trouble in the city of Asmara on a daily basis.

I appointed Major John Merritt who was my S3 as a Summary Court Officer. What few men did get into trouble were promptly given company punishment without delay. Justice swift and sure was my motto.

The result of the foregoing action was that in my 3 years in command of Kagnev Station there was just one special court martial and this pertained to a Navy individual who returned from a hunting trip and then decided to lead a group of sailors in a tour of the residential section of Asmara shouting and calling attention to their success. This was not good for public relations as the Italian population in Asmara was not permitted hunting privileges.

The Navy unit commander was a Lt. William Evans, who with his wife and family was a definite asset to our post personal. As an aside, he had a son, William Evans, Jr. who several years later went on to graduate from the US Naval Academy and passed the inspection of Admiral Rickover and became an outstanding submarine officer. In the summer of 1992, was Capt. William Evans, Jr. assigned as Executive Officer to the Commander Pacific Fleet, headquartered at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. William Evans, Sr. died in an accident several years ago, but we still correspond with his wife Edna.

The foregoing is a very brief report of my first few months in Asmara with one exception.

Prior to my departure from Washington, the commanding general of ASA had informed me that money had been appropriate and plans drawn to expand Kagnev Station to include many quarters on the post, larger antenna fields, a new chapel, post exchange, a new K-12 school, and a water and sewer system. However permission

had not been obtained from the Ethiopian government in Addis Abba for this expansion. The Ethiopian Government would have to take the land from the local land owners and this presented quite a problem. Even more of a problem than I knew about at that time. I was told the State Department and the Corp of Engineers had both tried to arrange with the Ethiopian Government for it to take necessary action with the Eritrean Government, to acquire the land for the expansion, neither had been successful. I was by the commanding general of the Army security Agency in writing that I was authorized to negotiate with the Ethiopian Government in person to expedite this expansion. Thus as noted above in the fall of 1954 having reorganized the post for better order and discipline I turned my attention to possible negotiations with the Ethiopian Government. The State Department Counsel who had a compound next door to mine in Asmara was a Mr. Edward Clarke. He had tried without success to gain permission for the expansion but I learned from him a possible reason why. It seems the Emperor Haile Selassie's son in law known at the Bit Woded had been appointed and was the Emperor's representative in Asmara to deal with the Eritrean Government. It was believed that the Bit Woded was desirous of some extra personal compensation for our permission to expand Kagnev Station. The Ethiopian Government method of stalling the expansion was to from time to time state that the proposed agreement between the two governments be changed in some small manner, such as water rights, payment for land and crops, etc. I could not understand why the Ethiopian Government would refuse our request when after all it was the Allies who had liberated Ethiopia from the Italians (at that time less than 20 years before), including England which had evacuated and given residence in London to the Emperor Haile Selassie during the Italian occupation. In more recent years the Allies had provided the Ethiopian Government with a military advisory group and much equipment, including weapons, tanks and aircraft.

As my logistics officer I had an excellent officer in a Lt. Col. Edgar Hoffman, who had a working relationship with the administrators of the Ethiopian Government. To satisfy their desires, I therefore felt that in the early spring of 1955 the only thing left for me to do was to go to Addis Abba in the company of Mr. Clarke and to see if we could not negotiate an agreement. The United States Ambassador had been flown to Germany for an emergency operation and therefore was not available. I decided that with Mr. Clarke I would face the Ethiopian Government with a direct request for permission to expand Kagnev Station. I was informed that prior to this general meeting I should make a courtesy call on the Emperor Haile Selassie. This I did, but not without some humiliation on my own part. In order to meet protocol requirements when I entered the throne room where the Emperor would be seated at the far end, I was to bow slightly, then about at 1/2 way across the room to bow further and on approaching His Majesty The Emperor Haile Selassie I was to bow to the waist, which I did. This was not easy for a proud young Colonel of the US Army. While the Emperor had an interrupter present he could understand English quite well and after a very pleasant conversation where he petted his dog from time to time I felt it was time to depart which I did in reverse order in the same manner in which I entered the throne room. The meeting the following morning about 10:00 AM with the Ethiopian government

officials including the Secretary of State of the Ethiopian Government and so forth was to be attended by Mr. Clarke and myself representing the United States Government. I felt that this was my opportunity, for an up or down answer for the expansion of Kagnev Station. As we left the United States Embassy, Mr. Clarke spotted a small four leaf clover which I placed in a buttonhole. We had previously used the embassy Cadillac, but I suggested we use the Ford, may be this would change our luck. I said to Mr. Clark "Ed, why don't we just get up and remind them of all this equipment, and all this assistance and what we have done for Ethiopians in the hope that this would influence them to sign the agreement." Mr. Clarke replied, "Oh, that would not be diplomatic." I said, "Do you mind if I do." He replied, "not at all." We therefore entered the large meeting room where there were at least 30 Ethiopian Government officials present. After preliminaries I arose to present the United States position. I enumerated all the friendly acts the United States government had rendered to the Government of Ethiopia. The foreign minister rose to state that there was still some questions about the details of the agreement and he thought we should return to Asmara to iron these out. I immediately thought that this was just another stall and I was going to have an up or down decision at that time. So I arose drew my shoulders back and in slow loud clear English stated. That if, "the Ethiopian Government could not see their way clear to sign this agreement, the only thing left for me to do was to inform my government of their position," which was to again delay the signing of the agreement. The Ethiopian Foreign minister arose and in a loud clear English stated that I represented the most powerful government in the world, the one who had the atomic bomb. He further stated, "we will sign." Following the signing that evening we were invited to a reception and cocktail party at which there appeared to be no hard feelings, and they were very happy to have reached an agreement with us. I was therefore sure from the past, that they had been bluffing in order to satisfy the Bit Woded in Asmara.

I cannot let this writing pass without relating an incident which took place the night before at a reception at the US Embassy. I knew that a Lt. Col. Breeding and a Major Reed, who had meet me in Tripoli, were on a hunting trip in southern Ethiopia. To make a long story short, they were told so they said by the Ethiopian authorities they could hunt for big game and if they were successful they could then purchase an expensive hunting license, after the fact so to speak. However these two inspired officers could find nothing to shoot at, but a poor giraffe and were promptly arrested for shooting big game without a license. In other words they had fallen into the Ethiopian authorities trap. This of course was not encouraging news for me when I needed all the good will I could get. Lt. Col. Breeding further requested a personal loan from me to buy an air ticket back to Asmara as he had depleted his cash reserves to pay the fine imposed. I therefore took him over to a corner of the room and gave him \$100.00 and told him to get out of town as soon as possible. I did not want to see him again in Addis Abba.

This was the only brush with the Ethiopian authorities any of my personal had, except for the last few months of my tour, when a soldier on a hunting trip, in the dusk of an evening mistook a native for an animal and shot and killed him. To

extract the United States government from this matter took some doing which I will not go into here. However I was helped considerably by my Judge Advocate Major Andrew Geisler who is even today retired and still teaching International law in a school in Winchester Va.

Another scene which took place while I was in Addis Abba had to do with the Emperor's granddaughter. The American Attache to the Ethiopian Government was a Lt Col John Townsend, who was a classmate of mine from The Command and General Staff College. He obtained an invitation for us to attend the wedding reception of the Emperor's granddaughter.

The setting for this reception was out in the countryside in the middle of a large field where two 8 by 10 foot hardwood dance floors had been transported and a large tent erected over the entire area. The Diplomatic Corp were seated in a favorable position to observe all events. The Emperor and his family were seated at the end of one dance floor where a native orchestra played native tunes and the honored couple had their first dance. The dance floors were surrounded by huge oriental carpets laid on the bare grass and ground. At the end of the other dance floor a modern orchestra played for those who wished to dance western style dances. There were many servants, one group of whom carried a potent Ethiopian drink called tege and offered to all who were willing to try it. Another group was tall large Ethiopian men who carried a huge platter of raw meat, with a sharp butcher knife. Anyone who so indicated could stop this individual and cut off a piece of raw steak. After Col Townsend and I observed these events for about 2 hours we decided to make an unobtrusive exit. We noted that not to far away the edge of the tent was not staked to the ground, so we exited under the edge of the tent thereby not having to parade before the entire group and make it appear that we did not appreciate the party.

During my tour in Asmara both Col Townsend and his wife, Vera were very cooperative and hospital.

Thus by the summer of 1955 I felt that my post was going well, the Corp of Engineers appeared, let a contract with a state side corporation to build the new post at an area known as Cintia.

By 1955 I found that my small post isolated as it was being placed on the Department of the Army and Department of Defense visitors list. I learned that trips to exotic places by diplomats and high ranking Department of Defense personal was desirable. On one occasion I recall a whole plane load of DOD personnel came into Asmara on a C54 and after the usual briefing, they scattered out in groups to view the new construction, see the sights of downtown Asmara and that evening we held the usual dinner for them. There were several groups that seemed to enjoy themselves so well, that I was afraid they were going to stay an extra day, rather than leaving the following afternoon. My staff and I therefore pointed out that being at 10,000 feet that the air became much lighter in the afternoon and it was much more prudent for a large aircraft which was heavily loaded to depart then, than in the morning when the air was heavy. After consultation they accepted my advice and we were relieved of playing host for an extra day. I was more fortunate than most post commanders in that by the spring of 1957 I was able to move my office to the new post and we also occupied the new chapel.

The tour in Asmara was suppose to be for 30 months, but that meant that the group that went there with me in the summer of 1954 would be leaving around New Years of 1957 or mid year of the school year. Many of my officers had families with children in school, and I suggested that we all request a 6 month extension in order to complete the school year. This extension was granted for all who requested it.

There are so many separate incidents and interesting situations which took place that I cannot list them all.

For example due to the Suez Canal being closed by controversy between the British and the Egyptians my supplies were shipped from New York to Germany and then from Germany by cargo ship down around the Cape of Good Hope and up through the Red Sea to the port of Massawa. I learned upon being assigned to the Pentagon after my Asmara tour that the reason the supplies were not shipped directly from New York to Massawa was due to some kind of controversy between the Army and Air Force. There were a couple of times when we had to mix local flour with that received from the states so we could make bread. In solving this difficult quartermaster supply problem Captain Bernard Reynolds was most helpful.

I believe it was the fall of 1956 when as a member of the Dhahran Liaison Group I received orders to accompany the group on a trip down the east coast of Africa to Cape Town and return through Central Africa. Our first stop was in, Mogadishu, Somaliland which the Italians had once controlled and at this writing United Nations forces are back there today. (1993)

On the way to next stop we circled Mount Kilimanjaro and noted the large herds of wild animals on the African plain. When we stopped that night at Mombasa, Kenya along with Mr. Clarke and the local ambassador I was invited to a reception at the British Embassy. I quickly learned that prior to the playing of the British National Anthem one did not smoke, or visit much. There was present a large Nubian band dressed in red uniforms and when they struck up God Save the Queen which has the same tune as My Country 'tis of Thee, it reminded me of the saying that the sun never sets on the British Empire. It was also interesting to see in the same city large buildings of German architecture which were constructed before World War I when the Germans had colonies throughout the world.

We went on south to Cape Town arriving on a dark rainy night and learned by radio that the runway lights were not working. Arrangements were made to line up automobiles along the runway with their lights on so we would know where the landing strip was. Circling Cape Town prior to landing was interesting due to the existence of what is known as Table Top Mountain. Upon departure from Cape Town we flew out over the southern tip of Africa and circled the area where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Indian Ocean. The turmoil in the water and the high waves generated as a result of the meeting of the two oceans was plainly visible.

My most vivid memory of returning through Central Africa was at one stop where our aircraft was refueled from 50 gallon drums with the gasoline poured though an old cloth used as a filter.

We then flew north to Entebbe located on the north shore of Lake Victoria. Of note there was a large historical marker stating that the first white man in this area was a Catholic

priest. Further his entry into this had only taken place about 50 years before.

Other memories of the three years in Asmara include the following:

The post saw fit to hire a gardener to keep the grass cut and flowers planted, and due to the Italian influence they always took good care "of the Commandant quarters" hence there was a nice flower bed by our quarters. Some one, some where, gave an order to the post gardener to uproot all the flowers the very morning that my wife was going to use those flowers in an arrangement for the officer wives meeting. This created a real rumpus and he was not entirely welcomed at our quarters after that. It is interesting to note that the post gardener was a large heavy set Italian reported to have been a chauffeur for Al Capone. He had been deported to Italy and on to Asmara.

Another incident that really impressed me was when an Eritrean Government official died. I was invited along with the US Counsel, Mr. Ritchie to attend funeral services for this official. Services were held at the Coptic Cathedral, the Jewish synagogue, and on to a Presbyterian service. Finally burial itself took place at a local cemetery. All nationalities were gathered around the grave where services were conducted, in a language which I could not understand. Finally in English the Lord's Prayer was said, by all.

Once a year the British who had a small cemetery there conducted a service for the British soldiers buried there, much as we do on our Memorial Day. It is note worthy that in the British Army soldiers were buried throughout the world where they fell, rather than being returned to the home land which we in America usually do. The British ambassador made mention of the fact that there were small cemeteries of this type scattered all up and down the African coast, in fact all over the world, where at one time or another, Britain had brought law and order to the area.

An observation I would like to make is that in the first part of my memories way back when I was first assigned to the 62nd Signal Battalion at Fort McPherson, Georgia, I was at the time and I thought very unfairly given the extra duties of post trial judge advocate (prosecuting attorney). As I look back on those days I could not have had any better preparation for assuming command of an isolated post 12,000 miles from my Commanding general than having to study diligently the manual of courts martial and thereby knowing exactly what authority I had.

Because I had grown up in a village of 3,000 people I was well acquainted with the necessity of providing our own recreation and welfare to make life livable. I therefore strongly encouraged such activities as bowling leagues, scouts, Sunday school, and baseball games. At Christmas time Santa Claus even visited my post arriving in a gherry cart rather than a sleigh with reindeer. A gherry is a two wheeled one horse cart with the capacity to carry the driver and one passenger. (A vehicle much the same as that used in our trotting races).

The tour of duty came to end in July of 1957. My family and I returned to the states, but the days and nights in Asmara would never be forgotten.

The trip home was not without incident. We departed Asmara on a C54 4 motor airplane bound for Cairo, Egypt. We were supposed to make one stop in route on the western shore of the Red

Sea, however a huge dust storm prevented this and so we were diverted to Jidda. It so happened that this was during the period of Ramadan (the holy month for Moslems) and the local airport personnel considered our emergency landing an intrusion on the spirit of Ramadan. Our pilot was further accused of flying over forbidden territory. All of our passports were collected while the local authorities made a detained and lengthy investigation. There was no place for the passengers to wait in comfort due to the high temperature. I therefore stood under the wing of our aircraft, after a while I noticed drops of engine oil on my brand new clean white shirt, which my good wife had ordered from Sears and saved especially for this trip. Finally after about 3 hours the diplomatic problems were resolved and we were on our way to Cairo.