Chapter 6

The End of U. S. Army Tenure

The Exchequer was looking askance,
While the Army stood by in a trance;
With the Navy aghast,
Kagnew's reins were then passed
From Chuck Light to Al Noggle to Chance.

Charles Krumbein
John Rasmuson
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By 1970, Kagnew Station had come of age as one of the most unique military organizations in the world. It's rarefied qualities have surfaced in the prolix ARCOM narratives generously meted out over the years, in justifications for special funding, and at the annual Asmara Reunion where devotees set apart one night for collective reflection on their common bond — Kagnew Station. Perhaps it is this very uniqueness that has contributed to a complete absence of mugwumpery in the Kagnew Station rank and file. One either liked it profusely or hated it.

On the positive side, a tour at Kagnew Station offered houseboys and housegirls, a chance to save a few dollars in the low cost of living, and the opportunity to capitalize on the Command's endorsement of higher education and take some University of Maryland or University of Oklahoma courses. For some, the cultural setting was a matchless experience in itself. For others, it may have been Red Sea lunkers, the challenge of the Prince Makonnen Golf Course, Italian food or Ethiopian gold jewelry that kept the personnel office flooded with extension requests. Or perhaps it was the «13 months of sunshine» that made an assignment to Ethiopia a memorable one. But probably above all, and especially for the first-termer anxiously awaiting ETS, Kagnew's relaxed military routine made it an optimum assignment.

The slackening of military decorum is especially curious in light of Kagnew's inception in the aftermath of World War II. Add to those militaristic beginnings the effects of the Korean Conflict, the Cold War, the difficulties in Southeast Asia and the fact that Kagnew has been ringed by an insurgency for nearly ten years. To be sure, the forties, fifties and early sixties witnessed abundant military activity. For a time, four
Kagnew's Combined Services Band disappeared along with P.T. and survival training.

armored cars and an infantry company guarded Kagnew Station. There were orchestrated monthly parades and ceremonies replete with a polished honor guard and a Combined Services Band. In addition to basic training for the Special Guards, S-3 began regular training classes, weapons qualifications, P.T., and night training maneuvers. There was even survival training conducted near Axum. But by 1970, almost all of it had disappeared. When the innovations of the MVA swept through the Army, there was little effect, for Kagnew authorities had unknowingly anticipated virtually every change. Apart from the construction of two-man rooms in the barracks, the availability of beer in Mom’s Place (the Consolidated Mess) was the only noticeable modification. In all probability, the influx of older and more well educated ASA enlistees contributed to the obviation of such things as work formations and inspections. Another factor may have been the isolation or the small-town atmosphere which fostered a sense of collective camaraderie. At any rate, a significant percentage of Kagnew citizens relished the relaxed routine Kagnew Station offered.

While visiting Kagnew Station in 1971, General William Westmoreland observed «I do not believe we have a more remote station of our Armed Forces than Kagnew Station.» Kagnew-haters found commissarization implicit in that assessment for the inconveniences which attended Kagnew's extreme physical and cultural isolation were the crux of their dissatisfaction. Kagnew-haters groused about mail backlogs, travel restrictions and the troublesome supply line which denied them a good many amenities. Kagnew-haters were habitually afflicted with Asmaritis, galled by street boys and frustrated by the promises of R&R flights which never materialized. In a word, their complaint was boredom, for there was nothing for them to do. One particular faction lamented the loss of the regimen of «the good old brown shoe Army.» And so it went at Kagnew.

A product of the seventies, which surfaced at Kagnew Station, was the disaffection for things military which characterized the host of «volunteers» precipitated by the Vietnamese War. Kagnew Station got radical chic which was manifest in underground newspapers, rock concerts, coffee houses, Fireign Theater and of course, utter disdain for crew cuts. Of all the symbols of the celebrated Haight-Ashbury/Woodstock generation, hair was the salient one. Long hair became the badge of the initiate. Hair inspired a rock musical and peeked from under Namath’s helmet. Kagnew’s hair was cultivated discreetly and was often disguised under viscous pomades and extra-large caps. But Kagnew initiates faced a day of reckoning in the monthly pay lines where sharp-eyed first sergeants brooked no deviation from any regulation. Kagnew’s barbers looked forward to pay day.

In keeping with the spirit which prevailed during the long water shortage, the Kagnew command worked assiduously to make life pleasurable. There were new tennis courts, an indoor handball court, a new bookstore and single E-5’s moved off post. A number of other blandishments included improved hotdog buns, an upgrade and expansion of the PX and the availability of peanut butter in the commissary.
The Great Peanut Butter Famine of 1971 was the upshot of low-level bungling, and Epicurean Kagnewites were confronted by a good many empty commissary shelves until the Command intervened. When the peanut butter, dish soap and dog food finally arrived, the commissary did a land office business as Kagnewites resorted to elaborate ploys to circumvent customer quotas. Ever since that time, scare-buying tactics have been an integral part of retail life at Kagnew Station. The quota system was subsequently employed to good advantage hoodwinking greedy customers into buying large quantities of white elephant.

The seventies also enjoyed both/and, a quarterly literary magazine, FM stereo, two UH-1H helicopters, and the first ladies of the Women's Army Corps to serve in Africa. There were some records set too. Kagnew's 1972 «Month of Madness» netted $12,000 for the Army Security Agency Benefit Association and True Grit set a box office record of $1035.75 at the Roosevelt Theater.

Kagnew's two helicopters were the second attempt at a miniscule air force. A pilot, a crew chief and a single engine airplane were the first try in the mid-sixties.

Photo: Mike Hoffman

The Eritrean Liberation Front and their avowed goal of restoring Eritrea's sovereignty had a significant influence on Kagnew Station in the seventies. Although incidents increased in the lowlands, Asmara remained a relatively untroubled oasis. With the possibility of large-scale confrontations in the offing, however, the Keren Rest Center was boarded up in January, 1971. Kagnew prepared for the worst which came in mid-1972 when Gazelle reporters filed this report:

«The Ethiopian who approached the gate of the communications site wanted something, exactly what no one knew for sure (for sure, no one seemed to know much that day). He had either walked a hundred kilometers or he wanted a hundred dollars — or maybe he was a hundred years old. At any rate, to someone it sounded like a hundred shifta and out went the clarion call to the Ethiopian commandos, who presently manifested themselves in profusion in the vicinity of Tract D.
Meanwhile, back at the main ranch, lines of communication crackled with accurate assessments of the situation:

'They blew up the big dam out by Tract D!'

'The Ethiopian commandos guarding the dam have retreated to Tract D!'

'Those commandos are tough. It must have taken a couple hundred heavily armed shifta to make them do that!'

'Yeah, or maybe a couple thousand lightly armed ones!'

'AFRTS? Would you put an ad on the radio — Tract D is under attack!'

'Geez, I wonder if we'll have an alert?'

'Cooler and higher heads stuck to the saner of the wild rumors. One hundred rebels, while no biggie, were still to be reckoned with. Clearly it was a job for... The First Attack Squad! The stalwarts of the 'fighting first,' irreverently dubbed 'Cummings' Commandos, assembled in a trice at the sound of the first call to action: 'Drag the first 35 men you see off the street and get 'em out there!' Fearlessly they donned bandolier and field gear. Gloriously they sprang into the enemy force.

'There were heroes everywhere that day. As the back-up, Second Attack Squad, Rasmussen’s Ragtags, readied for the fray. One tight-lipped youngster put through a terse phone call back to his duty station 'My God, they're giving us real bullets. Tell my wife I'm going out there. It must be the real thing!'

'And none was more icily determined than the leader of the pack, CPT John R. hisself.'

'Calmly he awaited news of the Armageddon’s progress. Knowing it might be their last cup ever, he dispassionately gave his fighting men the order to deploy to the Consolidated Mess and to drink coffee therein.

'In the air too, Kagnew carried the day. The command crackled inside the earphones of a nearby pilot: 'Small FF out at Tract D. Disembark your present passengers and provide air surveillance.'

'OK. Uh, what’s an FF?'

'It's a firefight. Disembark us,’ cried the present passengers.

'With the advent of aerial reportage the extent of the situation became evident:

'A hoax?'

'A &$%**+ &$ hoax!'

'Geez, I guess we won't have an alert.'

'There is one consolation. If the shifta every try a real attack, they will quite likely die of laughter before they can fire a shot.'
STRATCOM’s satellite terminal moved into the fold at Tract B after six years in Gura.

The shooting death of a military police courier on the Massawa road in January, 1971 prompted Kagnew authorities to close the road to American travellers. Although details of the shooting were never learned, the closure remained in effect until travel restrictions were modified to allow FOV convoy travel nine months later. The Keren Rest Center was never re-opened and the road remained off-limits until October, 1972. In the wake of the newly-imposed travel restrictions, Kagnew’s morale took a downward spiral.

“Personnel turbulence,” the Volunteer Army euphemism that covered the uncertainties of whether or not one was in the Army or out, descended on Kagnew Station in December, 1971 and if nothing else, set the stage for a scenario of frustration and uncertainty which prevailed during the early months of 1972.

On March 9, 1972, Post Commander LTC Clarence O. Light, Jr. made the official announcement. Owing to Department of Defense fiscal and budgetary considerations, the Army Security Agency was leaving Kagnew Station. The announcement caught no one unawares. In fact, after the countless rumors spawned by a moratorium on incoming replacements and spending, it was bland indeed. Quite naturally, the immediate concerns were personal in nature and eclipsed whatever sentiment there may have been for the fate of Kagnew Station.

Tract C operations ceased on March 24 and the long-suffering cadre of 05H’s moved fixtures and furnishings with a vengeance. The 05H’s had been vociferous Kagnew-haters, or perhaps more specifically, Tract C

05H’s worked tirelessly to dismantle Tract C.
haters. Their detestation centered on their plight of frozen tricks (non-rotating shifts) and infrequent breaks.

The varied personnel problems that attended the phaseout became the focus of command attention. Mandatory early releases, pregnant wives, financial hardships and cumbersome pets complicated the already harried procedure of relocating personnel en masse. Space available MAC travel for non-command sponsored dependents and the Post Commander’s mandate to «bring the hassles to me» solved most of the problems. In short order, ASA was on the way out of East Africa.

Once personal concerns had been satisfied, there was considerable speculation on the plans for Stonehouse and the future of Kagnew Station. As early as February, 1972, unreliable sources in Kagnew’s indefatigable rumor mill had prophesied the closure of the entire station, but after a good deal of inter-agency juggling in Washington, it seemed that Kagnew would remain intact, sans the Army Security Agency. This final question became more pressing as ASA ranks diminished.

By the end of April, almost all of the equipment from Tract C was crated and shipped. The building became a furniture warehouse and the «Pit» (the Tract C Snack Bar) became the square dancing mecca of Ethiopia. For a short time, displaced ASA personnel were farmed out to other sections whose manpower had been decimated by the spate of mandatory early release programs, but by June, Kagnew’s population had been reduced by one-third. Sparse attendance at the Oasis Club and the Roosevelt Theater’s «Bird» movies, and the end of the record rush at the PX provided the most tangible evidence of the dwindling population. So, as Tract C filled up with furniture and civilian contractors infiltrated Stonehouse, a torpor began to manifest itself. But still no word on a new host unit for Kagnew Station.

Finally, in late May, it was learned that STRATCOM, the obvious choice for the honors, had declined, and the U.S. Navy had inherited Kagnew Station willy-nilly. The takeover date was slipped to the beginning of FY 1974 and the Army was directed to continue housekeeping until that time.

At the Chief of Naval Operations behest, a site survey team arrived in Asmara in June to prepare a complete takeover plan. In addition to Navy communicators from Washington, the team was comprised of individuals representing world-wide interests in Kagnew operations. After a busy fortnight, they hammered out a tentative plan which was, in turn, hammered on by a succession of bureaucrats in Washington. The plan called for Navy replacements to begin arriving in April, 1973 and for the assumption of every responsibility at Kagnew Station except Air Force functions, the Army Transportation Terminal Unit in Massawa and the operation of Stonehouse.

ARFTS Program Director Mike Edwards explains operational problems to a member of the Site Survey Team.
On October 1, the final vestige of the Army Security Agency was relegated to the archives as the United States Army Security Agency Field Station was unceremoniously re-designated the U.S. Army Garrison, Kagnew Station was unceremoniously re-designated the U.S. Army Garrison, Kagnew, and ASA remained in the wings as the benefactor of Kagnew's tenant units.

For the Army Garrison, FY 1973 promised to be a year of lethargy in which funds would be husbanded and turnover preparations would be executed. The Navy's plan called for the first replacements to arrive in April, 1973, and it was the Army's goal to lay the groundwork early for an orderly turnover. The preparations got promptly underway in anticipation of a follow-up team which was to identify items of Army property the Navy intended to keep. When the team failed to arrive, curiosity prevailed and there was a good deal of speculation in Asmara as to the Navy's actual intentions.

Although the extent of the vacillation is probably obscured in sheaves of Washington memos, Navy lassitude was diametrically different from the careful planning of the Army Garrison in Asmara. The Department of the Navy, it seemed, was having a number of second thoughts about the role it was to assume at Kagnew Station, and as FY 1974 loomed larger and larger, it became increasingly apparent that the terms of the original takeover plan were not going to take effect. The subject of contracts and other equally weighty problems of immediate concern to the Army seemed to be of secondary importance to Washington planners. Like General Halftrack, Kagnew authorities began searching the mail for some assurance that Kagnew Station had not been lost in a bureaucratic shuffle.

By March, however, the Navy began to react. Using empty coffers for leverage, the Navy engineered an adjustment of the original takeover date so fiscal and command responsibility would begin July 1, 1973, but a U.S. Army element would remain to assist with the transfer. It may well be that the Army will leave Kagnew Station with the same strength with which it arrived—a seven man detachment.

By November, 1973, Army green will be only a memory at Kagnew Station. Perhaps even the cannon which has graced the foot of the flagpole will give way to a brace of anchors.

Photo: Mike Hoffman
There is a certain touch of irony as the Army takes its leave. Not long after Lend-Lease provided the Army with a foothold in Eritrea, Massawa, «bloody hell-hole» that it was, was relegated to the Navy. In July, some 31 years later, a landlocked Navy base will rely on the U.S. Army to preside over port operations on the Red Sea.

For the departing members of the Army Garrison, the summer of 1973 will be a busy one with the time divided between assisting Navy counterparts and attending to the many last-minute details which Kagnewites have faced for a good many years. There has always been one last print to be framed, the final spree at the olive wood factory and the weekend trip to Massawa for some instant African swarthiness. Along with the departures, there will be an assortment of emotional reactions and probably even an occasional tinge of nostalgia. But in the final accounting, the residency of the United States Army in Ethiopia’s northern highlands will become merely another waymark in a 5,000 year history. Its only lasting significance will be to those who will reflect on the good times and the bad times Kagnew Station has generously provided.