

## Fort Devens

January 1962, I was assigned to a school at Fort Devens MA, to learn Morse code. We packed the car and headed north, into a severe snowstorm. Luckily we were able to stay the night with Aunt Jeannette just outside Philadelphia, and wait out the storm. As we drove into Connecticut, we saw signs warning us of "Frost Heaves." Strange.... We had no idea what that was about until we began to fall into them, large holes in the highway, brought on by the wet cold weather. Made for a jarring ride.

It was dead winter when we arrived at Fort Devens, one of the worst winters in memory, which seemed to be the usual case during our many assignments. We stayed in the army guest quarters for one night, in a room that was more like a closet. The walls were so thin we were treated to an hours long fight between the couple in the next room, word for word. That, plus Randy, not yet a year old, suffering a severe bout of diarrhea, convinced us to move to a motel, at our own expense, till we found a house in Leominster, MA to rent. We had the downstairs, and the owners, a retired couple, lived upstairs. I had to report to work at my Army Unit daily at 5:30, so was up at 4:30 each morning. Sharon, then about three, would get up and sit with me in the kitchen while I drank a cup of instant coffee for breakfast.

At completion of training in July (I believe I graduated fourth in my class), I received orders to report to the Army Security Agency (ASA) Operations Company, Kagnew Station, Asmara, Eritrea (which at that time was an unhappy protectorate of Ethiopia).

## The Plane Trip from Hell

We departed Atlanta on Delta Airlines that September, bound for New York's Idlewild Airport, where we changed to TWA to continue our journey. We had lunch on the Delta flight. We knew it would be a long flight from New York, so we ate dinner at the airport before departing. Little did we know! Shortly after taking off, we were fed dinner.

After a short stop in Lisbon, we were given a continental breakfast. Then, departing Madrid we were served a regular breakfast. Upon leaving Rome we were served lunch, and after Athens, we were again given a full meal! I pretended to be asleep so that I could avoid a confrontation with another stewardess handing out trays of

food. On the long portions of the flight, Sharon and Randy, the only children on the plane, amused themselves, and our fellow passengers, by collecting the many empty small whiskey bottles. During the short stopover in Lisbon, we deplaned to stretch our legs. Jane and Sharon made a pit stop, and were puzzled about how to flush the toilet. They finally spied the water tank high on the wall with a pull chain attached. Welcome to the Old World!

As we landed in Cairo, we saw army tanks and Egyptian police and soldiers everywhere with automatic weapons. This was cause for consternation, but things were quiet as we deplaned into the terminal. It turned out that a Saudi military pilot had defected to Egypt with a load of munitions, and they were guarding the plane and the airport from retaliation.

I had just awakened from a nap, and didn't understand the question "Continuing or terminating?" asked as we deplaned. We were changing to Ethiopian Airlines, so we were continuing as far as I knew. Since we were "continuing", we were herded into an isolated room with hard seats, guarded by a policeman with a machinegun, while we watched the rest of the passengers proceeding to customs, and on by bus to a hotel downtown. After several hours, I was able to get someone from TWA who spoke English to come to our rescue. So, about 11:00 pm, after much bureaucratize, we were released, and, courtesy of TWA, put in a taxi and sent into downtown Cairo to the Cairo Hilton. The taxi driver gave us a nice tour of the town along the way. We were astonished to learn that, when detecting an approaching vehicle, the drivers would turn off their headlights. As they passed the other vehicle, they would flash their high beams a couple times, and then turn their headlights back on after passing.

Upon arriving at the hotel, we wanted a shower, but discovered the tub had a layer of sand in it, and the towels used, apparently having not been cleaned after the last tenants. So, no shower. We were hungry, but too tired to go to the dining room, so we called room service and ordered four hamburgers and cokes. Room service brought us two hamburger steaks and two cokes. After eating, we were distrustful of being awakened on time for our early morning scheduled departure, so Jane and I sat there slapping each other to stay awake throughout the rest of the night.

Our room overlooked a busy square in downtown Cairo. If we had only known, the view out the other side of the hotel was of some of the pyramids.

## Introduction to Eritrea

We thankfully left Cairo the next morning headed south on a noisy Ethiopian Airlines DC6. Another long flight, but finally we arrived at our destination, Asmara. We were met at the airport by our army sponsors, a married couple who were to shepherd us around, and assist us in finding a rental house and get settled in. They gave a guided tour into town, which happened to include our introduction to the ways and culture of a third-world country, as we passed a man defecating on the shoulder of the road, which we learned was a common practice. He also was banging two rocks together, something about covering up the sound of “evil spirits.”

Our sponsors took us to a hotel close to downtown Asmara, which was to be our home for the next two months while we located a house to rent. That was practically the last time we saw our sponsors.

The hotel was comfortable, and had a kitchen so we could prepare simple meals rather than having to go to the club on the base, although we did take many meals there. The army ran a bus from the base into the town and back throughout the morning, and early and late afternoon. There also was a taxi, driven by an older Italian whose station was at the hotel. Needless to say, we got well acquainted with that man, which paid huge dividends later (I’ll get to that). Because of her complexion and dark hair, he mistook Jane for a fellow Italian, and rattled on. She held up her part of the conversation by smiling and saying “Um hum” a lot. Finally the taxi driver realized his mistake and we all had a good laugh.

## Lost Kids

After living in the hotel a few weeks, we took the taxi one mid afternoon to the base to eat at the club before I went to work on the evening shift. Sharon, not quite four years old, finished eating before the rest of us, and asked if she could go wait for us on the front steps. We felt comfortable with that, and said she could. We stopped in the slot machine room and quickly lost a couple of nickels, then headed for the door. When we got there, no Sharon! We looked all over the club for her, inside and out, but she was nowhere to be found! Here we were, strangers in the middle of Africa, and somehow managed to lose a child. I ran to the MP office and alerted them, and soon they, and everyone they could muster, joined us in our

search. After a frantic hour or so, we decided that Jane and Randy should go wait with Annette Wilder, wife of my supervisor Jim, at their house, a short distance from the base. I called our hotel and asked them to send the taxi to meet us at the base gate and drive them to my boss's house. After the taxi took Jane and Randy away, I continued my frantic running around the base, looking in every crack and behind every bush. A half hour or so later, the MP's tracked me down and told me that Sharon had been found safe. What a relief! But, when we discovered where she was and how she got there, we were horrified! For whatever reason, Sharon, not yet four years old, decided not to wait for us to finish eating, and set out for the hotel, something over a mile away. She walked out the base gate, right past an American MP and two Eritrean police men, and up the street. She said that soon an Eritrean man asked her where she was going, and walked with her to the hotel. There she saw a boy, who was also staying at the hotel, playing outside, so she joined him. When the taxi driver returned to the hotel after driving a highly distraught Jane to the Wilder's house, he heard about a lost child. He saw Sharon and made the connection, and soon we were joyfully reunited.

I worked rotating shifts at the army base, six days, six eves, and six mids, with two days off between each shift. Those of us working this crazy schedule never had a chance to get used to any one shift, and the midnight shift was a particular challenge. Sometimes, after completing the sixth midnight shift, we would go to the NCO club where we got free coffee and toast, and would play pinochle. After having not much sleep for almost a week, it wouldn't be long and we would be giggling like a gaggle of teenage girls. But, we had fun. My work place was a secure building with only one window, in the commander's office, and was surrounded by two tall chain link fences topped with razor wire. An MP who checked our badges as we filed in and out guarded the gate. Once inside we didn't see the light of day (or dark of night) again until our shift was done.

Occasionally, during our off time, we would head out to a distant town where the army maintained a hotel for "R & R". We would take our families and spend a couple of days playing cards, having a few drinks, and generally relaxing. Because we were in an undeveloped, sometimes-dangerous part of the world, there really weren't many choices of places to go. On one visit there, we were sitting on the hotel porch playing cards, and Randy and Sharon were playing nearby with other

kids there. We heard a child wailing, and thought it probably was the son of a woman who was notorious about mistreating her children. The wailing continued. Then I noticed that Randy was not with the group of kids. I set out to investigate, and found him in a bathroom with the door locked. He was only three or so, and once he had panicked, I couldn't get through to him. There was no way to unlock the door from the outside. But, upon investigation, I discovered that there was a trellis with vines up the back wall two and a half stories to the bathroom window. So, up I went, like Tarzan in the movies. Luckily the window was open, and, though small, there was just enough room for me to squeeze through and open the door.

More Randy adventures. We hired a local lady part time to help around the house and look after the kids. She walked Sharon a few blocks to a small Navy base, where Sharon caught the bus to kindergarten on Kagnev Station. On her first day working for us, the maid took Randy along. There was a playground just inside the Navy Base gate, and Randy got all excited to go play on the swings. The maid couldn't go on the base, so she just assumed that it was OK and let Randy go, and she returned to the house. Well, around noon I got a call at work that Randy was missing. After rushing home I learned that Randy hadn't been immediately missed, that Jane just assumed that he stayed in our yard to play, which is where he spent most of his waking hours, when the maid came into the house. (Our house was surrounded by a high wall.) It wasn't till almost lunch that Jane realized that he wasn't home. Because the maid spoke little English, it took a while to learn what had happened.

Again we had MP's and other base personnel out beating the bushes. About mid-afternoon I found him, not too far from the playground, playing in the backyard of some Navy family housing. I knocked on the door to see what the lady knew. She said that Randy was playing in the yard with her son, and when she brought her son in for lunch, she told Randy to go home, but that he just stayed in her back yard playing. There were only six houses there, so you would think she would know all the children there, but she didn't bother finding out. Wow! Two children lost in Africa.

But wait! On one trip to the seaport town of Masawa, about 120 kilometers away, where we went to the beach, we met some friends, Bob and Susan Kellogg. Though it was late, we decided to stay at the beach and visit with them. We wanted

to swim, but had no suits. However, since it was almost dark, we all just shucked our clothes and waded in. We adults waded out to where we could kneel or just float, and told the kids to stay up at the edge of the water. It was a beautiful night, full moon, and pleasant weather. We had been in the water for a while talking and enjoying the relaxing warm water, when I realized that I could see only Sharon. I stood up and, looking toward the bright full moon, could not see Randy. So then I got down to the water level and looked, and saw just his head. He had decided to walk out and join us. A bit further and he would have been in over his head in more ways than one. I rushed in and picked him up from the water. That ended our pleasant interlude. I had nightmares for years about that episode!

Randy had a couple of other experiences of growing pains. He was 18 months old when we arrived there, and just about three years old when we departed. He awoke from his nap one afternoon and Jane took him to the bathroom. She took his pants down and was holding him in front of the toilet, but having just awakened, he was erect and unable to do anything. After a bit and no action, he looked up and said "Mama, tee-tee broken." His other bathroom episode, a lot more painful, when he was a little older, and able to go by himself. However, he didn't get the lid up all the way, and so, as he stretched on his tip toes, and barely reaching over the lip of the toilet, Bang!, down came the lid on him. He really thought it was broken that time.

### Orange Blossom Special

On a lighter note, we were at a Christmas party at Jim and Annette Wilder's. The evening was progressing, and everyone was getting mellow. Mitch, a co-worker was tending bar, and Jane asked him for an Orange Blossom drink. Mitch was just starting to slice the orange when he looked across the room and spied a young lady, a Peace Corps worker, sitting on the floor leaning against the wall, with her dress up, her legs open, and no panties. Pow! Mitch sliced right through his finger. A couple of the guys rushed Mitch to the infirmary on base. The on-call doctor was attending the Christmas party at the Officer's Club, and, unlike Mitch, was feeling no pain. He looked at Mitch's finger, cut to the bone, said "Line of duty!" wrapped a Band-Aid around Mitch's finger and sent him back to the party.

## Touring Wild Africa



Ralph Nation, a fellow Georgian, and I rented a jeep from Army Special Services, loaded some food, sleeping bags, gas cans and a couple of spare tires, and set out to tour Ethiopia. At that time, the country had not been mapped, and was wild and rugged. It has what some say is the hottest desert in Africa, and some of the highest mountains. The Rift Valley bisects the country, and the headwaters of the Nile River are there. All we had to guide us

was a tiny tourist book that had a hand drawn map of the country that was maybe 3 by 4 inches. It definitely was not to scale.

We spent the first night on the grounds of a Swedish Mission, in the middle of absolutely nowhere. We visited with the missionaries and some fellow campers in the early evening, and enjoyed petting a couple of German Shepherd dogs that lived there. We were on a high mountain plateau, and it got very cold after sundown, and, since our sleeping bags were made from thin army blankets, we bedded down with our clothes on. The sleeping bags zipped all the way up so that we had just a breathing hole.

Late that night, I heard Ralph scream, so I unzipped my bag as quickly as possible and looked out to see Ralph standing up, still zipped up in his bag! Then I saw the two dogs. It seems they were roaming and found us, and one of them stuck his nose in Ralph's breathing hole and gave him a lick. I guess I would have screamed also!

It took a while to quit laughing and get settled down again, especially since it was so cold.

Looking at our little map, we judged that we would overnight in the next town down the road, so were surprised to drive thru the town at noon. We pulled into the next town about midnight, and were lucky enough to find a hotel there, and still open. But, the police, seeing strangers in town, came in and asked for our ID's. We had no passports, and the army had taken our military ID cards when we reported into our base in Asmara. What we didn't know was that we were supposed to have been issued a special ID card identifying us to the Ethiopians. But, that never happened, so there we were, totally illegal as far as the local constabulary was concerned. Luckily a young man who spoke English, and who

used to live in Asmara happened by, and upon seeing our Kagnew Station license plate on our jeep, told the police who we were. They were satisfied, and left. Whew! We could have been locked so far away we'd have never seen the light of day again!

We finally passed through Addis Ababa, and headed south where the land was a little plusher. Ralph almost wrecked the jeep when a young lady carrying a jug of water on her head, and topless, walked by. We were again in the boondocks, just wandering around when we came upon a village where all of the men from middle teens on up carried either a spear or a machete. However, they were excited to have strangers in their midst, and not because we were on the dinner menu. They ran alongside our jeep, shouting and laughing.



We looked in our guidebook for the word for hippo, and asked where we could find some. They pointed and started running along the road. We followed, but when we came to the lake there was nothing to be seen. We later found a lake with many flamingos, but that was the extent of the wildlife. Except for a Hyena that ran across the road in front of us one night, a few monkeys, and a tribe of Baboons, we didn't see any other wildlife. (In fact, for the rest of my time in Ethiopia, the only wildlife I saw were a hornet as big as my thumb that flew in our open car window (we bailed out of our car in a hurry!), and some antelope, a few baboons and a couple of mambas (large, highly poisonous snakes)).

Anyway, we headed back to Addis where we booked a four-star room, mainly because it had its own shower. It was quite grand, comfortable beds, and was reasonably priced.

The United Nations African Economic Council was located in Addis, and as we walked past there, we saw a man in a dark fitted suit, bowler, and carrying a rolled umbrella. We were speculating that probably he was from Scandinavia, as he fit the picture, and there were a lot of Scandinavians there, when he turned and came back to us and asked in his finest Georgia accent where we were from. He had overheard us talking, recognized the accent, and upon learning that I called Marietta home, and Ralph hailed from Chickamauga, he revealed that he was from Decatur. He then took us on a tour of the city, and that night took us to dinner at a select restaurant where the food was great but HOT! Even two beers couldn't put out the fire, and I had a stomach problem for several days after. But, we had an



enjoyable and entertaining visit.

The next day we set out for home, driving the only other road in the country from the one we took on our trip to Addis. We were about a long day's drive from Asmara, just starting down a long mountain road to a village in the valley below when the jeep engine died. We coasted down the road and almost made it to the town when our jeep lost momentum and we came to a stop. But, as usual, a crowd of young men gathered round, and laughing and having a good time, they pushed us into the town. We were standing there looking at our dead jeep, wondering what to do, when two miracles happened. There was a tractor-trailer truck in town picking up a load of sacks of wheat, and the driver offered to tie our jeep on top of his load of wheat and carry our jeep to Asmara for the equivalent of about \$40. We began to believe in miracles. Then, two Land Rovers came to town with some Swedish men, maybe surveyors, and upon learning our dilemma, offered us a ride since they were traveling through Asmara. They even let us drive their Land Rovers, complete with right hand drive, which included having to shift gears with the left hand. At least the foot pedals worked like American cars, so we weren't totally confused.

### Scary Times

A dark episode occurred one night when I got home from work around midnight. We had just settled into bed, and were talking about our planned move to a larger house, when a man walked up to our bedroom window and started trying to force it open. We had a high wall around our house, with pieces of glass cemented to the top of the wall, and a locked gate, so he had not made a mistake. I quickly rolled out of bed and grabbed my pistol and let go a round. As it turned out, he was nothing more than a common thief, and probably not a real threat, but this was Africa, and outlaws and political rebels, armed and dangerous, were about. He spent several months in the hospital recovering from a hollow point 22-caliber bullet in his chest. I have spent many sessions with myself being thankful that he was not dead. I later had to testify at his trial where he received a hefty jail sentence. My sentence was having frequent nightmares for months, then only occasionally, of hordes of Ethiopians coming thru our bedroom window. There was an attempt to get us moved into housing on Kagnev Station because of the danger of retaliation by family of the thief, but the bureaucrats maintained that we

had our place on the waiting list, and nothing was going to disrupt the order of things. Eventually our turn came up and we moved into base housing, but only for a few months, before returning stateside.

Once a week or so, an Eritrean would bring his “Gharry”, a horse drawn cart taxi, to the house and take Sharon and Randy for a ride around the town. We were cautioned to no longer allow that, as the local way was to bring revenge against children rather than adults – an easier target I suppose. What a sad thing, for that ended the rides for the kids.



Sharon and Randy did get to ride camels, though Randy was too young to appreciate it.

On more than one occasion there were gun battles in town between armed Eritrean separatists and the Ethiopian army and police. The families living in town had to lock themselves in their homes while we soldiers not already on duty were recalled to the base.

### Day-to-Day

Twice a year we had to pass a physical exercise test, which included running a certain distance, depending on our age, in our army uniforms, including our boots. The elevation there was about 8,000 feet, so running posed quite a challenge, especially since our work day consisted of sitting at desks, and a lot of our off duty time was spent at the club. We ran in groups, huffing and puffing as we went, and were humiliated by the Eritrean kids who would run along side us, group after group, laughing and carrying on, and having a great time.

Most of the army guys there were young men right out of school. There was a movie theatre on post, and the army built a TV station there, but not much else to keep a bunch of young guys entertained for long. Food was cheap at the commissary, when they had any (I think they specialized in empty shelves), and

booze was cheap, so, we had many cookouts and parties at our house. We worked with a great bunch of guys, and they were always well mannered and appreciative, and we did a lot of socializing. There were three clubs on base, Officer, NCO, and Enlisted. We spent a lot of time at the NCO Club, eating, dancing, playing pinochle, socializing, and of course, drinking. A way of life for those in the Army Security Agency, as most Agency assignments were to stations in the middle of nowhere. Once, our NCO club held a talent contest, and Jane entered, singing The Kingston Trio's "Scotch and Soda." Her talent was well received, and she won third place.

The wives had a lot of time on their hands, and thankfully Annette Wilder knew double deck pinochle. So, she taught the other wives, and they spent many days together playing cards and keeping each other company. That was a good thing in more ways than one since there seemed to be an inordinate amount of illicit he-she shenanigans going on there. Boredom, booze and opportunity.

But, we survived the being far away part and managed to have a pretty good time doing so. That really was a desirable place to be stationed compared to many other overseas posts the ASA had.

### End of Tour

The University of Maryland sent educators to military bases all around the world, and I took advantage of this while stationed at Kagnew Station. I completed two semesters of English, and two of History. This later paid big dividends, saving me having to take those busy courses as a full time student, because I applied for and was accepted to attend a college program sponsored by the army. I had no idea what data processing was, thinking it might be electronics, but I applied for that program.

In mid-June 1962, I received notice that I was accepted and would be attending Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa CA, to major in Business Data Processing. Orders were prepared that allowed me to ship my household belongings and car, as we awaited orders for us to depart. Finally, in late July, I received orders to head for California, to arrive there August 14.

Two days later, we had shipped the remainder of our belongings, and were on an Ethiopian Airlines plane headed back to "the land of the big PX."



American Kindergarten 1963