

To Djibouti and Beyond

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I was an English faculty instructor with UMUC from late 1968 until I returned to the USA to pursue my Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in May of 1975. Part of that time transpired while I was a member of the US Army and part while I stayed on as a civilian, thereby going in rank in late 1970 from an SP5 to a GS12. One of the attendant privileges of that position that I have sorely missed is the opportunity for exotic foreign travel, which I am certain that many of my fellow Marylanders enjoyed as well. That point is borne out in my reading of several of the memoirs which are available to all of us now. In my own first memoir entitled “Kagnew Station: UMUC’s Secret Paradise,” I made a sort of promise that I would tell about some of those opportunities particular to travel from Kagnew Station during our breaks between terms. Among such options of which I took advantage were included travel in and around Ethiopia itself, as well as jaunts to Khartoum in Sudan, a long week spent by crossing the Red Sea into Yemen, as well as a ten-day trip up to Israel.

But by far the most “exotic” of these ventures was the one that took place in 1971 when I and three other friends flew in a single-engine Cessna down to the outpost of the French Foreign Legion in what was then The French Territory of the Afars and the Issas, currently renamed Djibouti. Hollywood has at times often used the Legion as a setting for films running the gamut from the serious to the romanticized to the silly and comic. On the serious side, one could cite films like Adventure in Sahara and Outpost in Morocco. Examples of the romanticized films would be the many remakes of Beau Geste. As for comedies, there is a long list that would include Abbott and Costello in the Foreign Legion, as well as Laurel and Hardy’s Beau Hunks, or their Flying Deuces. Even the Brits got into the comedy act in the Carry On film Follow That Camel. In fact, the French used their own legion as a backdrop in a film entitled Beau Travail that is set in Djibouti itself.

As for my own foray there, the purpose of the mission was to bring back to Kagnew Station what turned out to be the last legal cheetah cub ever to be exported out of that exotic country on the Horn of Africa. (Before I incur the wrath of any animal-rights activists, let me say that I was more of a mere observer on this trip, one who happened to have the available free time and could fill the last seat of the small four-passenger airplane, plus share the expenses involved in the trip.) One of the other members of the small group who made this journey was Tom Horton, who later returned to civilian life and became a long-time reporter on ecological subjects for The Baltimore Sun newspaper, especially exploring that subject in depth on the Chesapeake Bay and environs. He also wrote extensively for Rolling Stone magazine and National Geographic, among many others. I thank him here for helping me to recall a number of specific details for this memoir.

In any case, armed with passports containing strict visas limiting the trip to just two days, the four of us set off on a bright Saturday morning heading southeast to Djibouti. Along the way, we flew low and had an excellent view of the Danakil Depression, one of the hottest and most forbidding landscapes on the planet. As a student of literature, while flying over this stark region I recalled reading some of the letters of French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud who told of his time in the area and of the fierce tribes who harvested the salt from the Danakil, and who in tribal battles also harvested the male genitalia of their slain opponents. My memory of reading his long prose poem “A Season in Hell” seemed quite appropriate at that time. We all prayed that our small aircraft would not suffer any engine failure during those tense flyover moments as even

attempting a landing there would surely have brought a quick and fatal end to this crazy adventure. Finally, our over two-hour flight brought us to a safe landing strip in Djibouti with a sigh of relief.

The first thing I noticed as I disembarked was the shimmering wave of heat that swept across the land. I had been many times to Massawa on the Red Sea, which was hot enough, but here even at ten o'clock in the morning, my shoes stuck to the tarmac and the blistering sun seemed like it was trying to fry me on the spot. The next thing I noticed once we got to our hotel was that the prices for everything were very excessive. Even a six-ounce bottle of Coca-Cola cost about four dollars in equivalent currency. It soon became evident that Djibouti manufactured no products and had to import everything. At those prices, I was glad that I had had breakfast before leaving the airport in Asmara. We soon settled into our rooms with both overhead fans and free gecko entertainment as a few scampered up and down the walls. However, that brief respite from the searing heat could not last forever. We had to brave venturing out in a fresh change of clothes consisting of white shirts and shorts, wide-brimmed hats and cheap sunglasses to ward off the glare. I must add that it is one thing to see French Foreign Legion troops in two dimensions flickering up on a big screen in Beau Geste; it is quite startlingly another to have a platoon of them march past in the flesh, kicking up dust and wearing those funny hats with the white flaps in the back to protect their necks from the sun.

While three of us waited under umbrellas at an outdoor cafe, sipping our overpriced Cokes, the pilot made arrangements for transportation to take us out to the farm where the baby cheetah awaited. I should explain that this animal was not being picked up for any one of the four of us. About six weeks earlier, a friend of the pilot named Byron Brumbaugh was working as a civilian for the facilities/power plant at Kagnew Station. He got a notice to go on emergency leave because his father was hospitalized with serious health concerns back in Salt Lake City. But a problem arose with accessing quick air transportation directly from Ethiopia back to the States, so someone suggested that he try going down to Djibouti and hope to have better luck from there. Unfortunately, that choice did not pan out either and Byron ended up stuck in a hotel in that remote country for two more days. While sitting in the lobby, worrying about his father, he was approached by an Arab trader who singled him out as an obvious American and who offered to sell him a cheetah. He dismissed the offer as crazy and also did so the next day when the same man came back for a second try. On the third day, Byron finally left Africa and made it back to Utah to be with his father. He stayed for twelve days and while there his curiosity took him to the city library to check out some books on cheetahs.

His father regained enough of his health to be released out of the ICU. On his return journey, Byron's flight was again routed through Djibouti where once more he was stuck there for two days. He checked into the same hotel and was again approached by the same Arab trader offering to sell him a cheetah for \$400 in U.S. currency. By this point the idea of owning such an exotic animal had taken root and he accepted the offer. However, he only had \$200 in cash left after paying off his hotel bill and other incurred expenses. The man gladly accepted the down-payment with the understanding that Byron would return soon with the remaining balance needed to take ownership. When he returned to Kagnew Station and asked for leave to go back to Djibouti, his employer emphatically refused and told him that with all of his travel delays and such he had used up much more leave time than he even had available. Left in that quandary, there was nothing to do but to seek out the help of a willing friend to make the trip with the remaining \$200 in hand and to bring the animal back to him. So the pilot friend rounded up three more of us and after securing all of the required visas, off we went on the quest to exotic Djibouti.

Once the group got to the farm in the late Saturday afternoon, we were immediately advised of a new and unexpected problem. It transpired that because of the incessant lobbying of

a well-known French animal-rights activist, none other than the famous actress Brigitte Bardot, a new law had just gone into effect that very day, barring the export of wild cats from The French Territory of the Afars and the Issas. It took a bit of wrangling and some anxious moments, but the man wanted his \$200 and he also wanted the cheetah cub gone now that the law had gone into effect. We were able to reach a quasi-legal compromise by having the doctor who gave the animal all of his required shots to backdate the paperwork one day in the hopes that it might just do the trick and allow the animal to leave the country. We were provided with a couple of bottles of formula with which to nourish the animal and left the farm holding our collective breaths with a four-month old cheetah cub in a large cardboard box with some holes punched in it. Saturday night at the hotel with the lively geckos as non-paying roommates was a fitful one, to say the least. A hearty, albeit expensive meal, did help to settle our concerns a little bit. After all, we now had the cheetah in hand. What else could go wrong?

Of course, that is a rhetorical question. Early Sunday morning, we checked out of the hotel and headed for the airport where our pilot had his airplane refueled for our departure. However, that meant going through customs and having our passports stamped for exiting. But the cheetah did not have a passport, only the doctor's dicey paperwork which soon caught the attention of the wary customs official. Let me just say that monetary bribes sometimes become the only means to accomplish getting out of sticky situations. On the small Cessna, there was a space just behind the two rear seats where the box containing the cheetah cub fit snugly. With our other small bags between our feet now that the space was no longer available for them, our small plane finally left the Djibouti airport with its Sunday afternoon blazing sunshine and we headed out northwest, back once more over the scary Danakil Depression and now pointed towards the Asmara airport.

Along the way, we exchanged various ideas about what to tell the next customs officials in Ethiopia about our new "passenger". Would the doctor's clearly falsified document get us through? Among the ideas batted around were for the pilot to claim that we were running out of fuel and so had to land there as the only real airport within seventy miles. Another disregarded option was that the plane was having real engine problems, but that could have been seen through as a bald-faced lie by any mechanic who would check. So the consensus was just to take the bold and direct approach and fly in as if nothing at all was amiss. Nothing to see here. Just four scruffy Americans returning after two days away, but carrying one obvious extra box. However, past experience flying into Asmara by all of us had lead to having wary customs officials confiscating even a suspicious piece of foreign fruit. How would they handle this obviously very unusual bit of foreign import in a big box? With an even less-experienced Sunday crew on hand to welcome us, this unique situation was one fraught with anxiety on our part. Spending time in an Ethiopian jail was most retrograde to our desires. Standing six-foot five, Tom Horton took the initiative as cheetah bearer, following the rest of us through the customs checkpoint.

What happened next differs according to whom one asks. Tom claims that there was definitely more money exchanging hands as another bribe paved our way past any possible jail terms and the likely confiscation of the exotic animal. My being at the front of the small procession may have made me completely and naively unaware of such a transaction. All that I remember seeing was the customs person glancing quickly over the paperwork that he was handed, which he may not even have been able to read and fully understand, and then asking curtly, "What's in the box?" (Mind you, this was fully twenty-four years and half a world away from the Brad Pitt film *Seven*.) When Tom answered directly, "a cheetah," I saw the customs official jump back a couple of steps in obvious disbelief. So Tom opened the box and the nervous truth was now revealed. These four shady American characters were obviously up to doing something not covered anywhere in the customs rule book, or even in any of that official's previous job training. What I swear I recall him doing next was picking up the open box and running around the

terminal while showing off the cute animal inside to just about everyone else in the building. We could probably have had all of our pockets stuffed with illegal drugs or other forbidden contraband, such was his delight at holding that box and succeeding to impress everyone there with his cute little temporary prize. Twenty minutes later, we were back in our vehicle that we had left at the airport and on our way to Byron's place with his new pet. The fresh air at over 7600 feet atop our mountain home never smelled sweeter. "Aye, aye captain! Mission accomplished!"

With more than a bit of TLC, Byron raised that cheetah cub for over one more year of his tour of duty at Kagnew Station. It was christened "Naqta," which is Arabic for "Spot". (Of course.) Tom Horton even wrote up the tale of our Djibouti adventure for the Kagnew base newspaper The Gazelle. On occasion, I heard stories of the animal's breaking free from time to time, chasing after a passing herd of goats or even running down a frightened man on a motorcycle. On my one visit to Byron's home, with its all-marble floors, I saw Naqta, now at almost a year old, careening full speed into the living room and trying to gain its footing as if it were running on ice. Suffice it to say that Byron Brumbaugh had obviously now become the Kagnew Commissary's number-one customer for raw-meat products.

Once his tour ended, Byron returned to his home in Salt Lake City with a fully grown Naqta, which must have created problems with customs officials at both ends. I do know that he made it back home, and according to one rumor walked the cheetah around campus on a muzzle and a leash when he returned to his university studies. One can well imagine that such an action would have drawn the attention of the whole campus population, especially females. But it also drew the ire of both his understandably nervous neighbors and the university authorities. Ultimately, he was faced with a stern ultimatum: either surrender the animal to the Salt Lake City Zoo, where at least he had visiting rights, or it would be confiscated and likely euthanized. Byron chose the former option. My friend Tom Horton has since told me that he went to Salt Lake City on one occasion to visit Naqta. Obviously, the animal no longer survives, given the passage of over fifty years of time. How and when it left for the Great Beyond I have not been able to discover. All I can report for certain is that the "exotic" trip from Asmara to Djibouti and back still lives on vividly in my memory at age eighty-one.