

# Kagnew Station—UMUC's Secret Paradise

Charles J. Krumbein  
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Ask any of the Overseas Marylanders lucky enough to have been scheduled to teach there prior to the base closing in 1974 and you may get an almost unanimous positive response. Kagnew Station located on the Horn of Africa in what was then part of Ethiopia (now in Eritrea) was an exotic paradise outpost almost like no other. The country's posters touted "13 Months of Sunshine" (using the lunar calendar) and they meant it. At an elevation of 7500 feet above sea level, the average daily temperature came in at a 'ho-hum' 75 degrees. The local population back in the days when the base was still thriving consisted of a heady mixture of Ethiopians, Eritreans, Arabs, and Italians, along with a smattering of merchants from India, Pakistan and even Greece. As Dr. Joe Arden once told me, "It's our only sub-Saharan outpost."

So how did I get so lucky to get sent there to teach? Well, truth be told, it was Uncle Sam and the good old U.S. Army that first sent me there as my duty station after my AIT (Advanced Individual Training) finished in June of 1967. On June 14, 1967, to be exact, which any student of history would know was right on the heels of the Six Day War between the Arabs and Israelis. That meant that as soon as I arrived at the Asmara Airport on a flight down from Athens, I was met by an E6 staff sergeant who personally drove me onto the base, had me change into my military fatigues, and who then shepherded me around to all of the base check-in points so that a procedure that normally was done in a leisurely couple of days got handled so quickly that after just four hours of arriving at the airport, I found myself at a desk and on duty for the next eight hours, jet lag be damned. I soon realized that I had found paradise and my original hitch of eighteen months, with the help of a couple of extensions, ended up lasting a total of thirty-nine months. For a young man from Wisconsin, that weather and climate suited me just fine, thank you.

It did not take me long to get acclimated to life in the sun before I went to check out what educational and cultural opportunities were to be had there. In doing so, I ended up at the quonset hut that served as the base Education Center with one Frances Sullinger in charge as the ESO. I began by taking a two-term course in Italian, knowing already in my own mind that I was going to use every means possible to stay there for as long as I could. I also had a sit-down with Fran during which I disclosed that I had a desire to teach at the college level. She immediately suggested that I look into volunteering to teach at the local University of Asmara located a few miles off base in the downtown area. I did that and in less than three months I was offered a chance to teach Shakespeare to local college students and some of their faculty nuns. Having only run a few seminars in grad school in my life, I just jumped in with both feet, got myself a little Fiat 600 for transportation, and what eventually became my forty-year teaching career was off to a flying start.

Even though it was only one night per week, that class ran for three full hours (good training for what was to come shortly with UMUC classes). Sure, I got no pay, but the side benefits were well worth every moment. I soon found that taking that course in Italian was already paying dividends.

Whatever I could not make clear in English to these foreign students I was able to muster through with rudimentary Italian. One would be surprised at how quickly a foreign language begins to take hold under those kinds of stressful moments. The students were mainly female, daughters of local merchants, and of course the nuns. They were appreciative of me because without my being there, Shakespeare would not have been available on their schedule. In fact, I was invited back for a second term and ended up with pretty much all of the same students to teach a course of my own choosing, this time Modern Drama. That presented a bit of a challenge because whereas Shakespeare plays were at least somewhat available in the University of Asmara library, for that subsequent course one of my old college texts that I had dragged along to Kagnev Station became THE text. I had to leave it in the library and have students read the play chosen for the next week one at a time, and then take the volume out of the library to use in the classroom. (As it turns out, that was also good preparation for some of the adventurous times when I was teaching for Maryland and had to begin the classes without textbooks having arrived for the students. I do not imagine that I was the only one who ever labored under that experience while being a vagabond Marylander.) By the way, as far as I know, that modern drama text is still on the shelf at the University of Asmara, that is, if it has not fallen completely to pieces by now.

One of the other afore-mentioned side benefits of volunteering to teach at the University of Asmara was that, because Ethiopia had only two universities in the whole country, it meant that H.I.M. Haile Selassie I would attend the spring commencement and personally hand out diplomas to all of the graduating students. It made me quite proud to see almost all of my students get handed their diplomas by an actual emperor. Not only that, but His Imperial Majesty then went down the line of the teachers and shook each of our hands! I know in reading some of the Memoirs that Serge Shewchuk had the opportunity to meet H.I.M. when Serge came down to Kagnev. Whether he got to shake his hand as I did is left open to discussion. (As a side note, about a year later I was headed on a walk downtown off the base and was stopped by a large crowd lining the street that led from the airport to the local palace. I soon discovered why the crowd was gathered as a parade of fancy open-top autos went by and there, waving to the crowd were not only H.I.M. himself but also none other than the visiting Shah of Iran and his lovely wife. It is not often that one gets to lay eyes on two of the world's three emperors at the time, the other one being Hirohito in Japan.)

With those two volunteer terms under my belt, and at the suggestion of Fran Sullinger, I filled out the application to teach for the University of Maryland and was approved to begin in November of 1968. The class was, of course, English Comp. 105. But I was ready to take on the role of adjunct teacher with an actual paycheck to be earned at the end of the term. That was not always as smooth sailing as I would want it to be. As mentioned earlier, occasionally textbooks did not make their way down to remote Asmara in time to begin classes. Teaching on the fly like that prepares one for almost any future circumstance that could happen in a classroom. One other unforeseen problem arose when I found myself standing in front of a classroom populated with my co-workers on my classified military job. Not only was I sharing barracks life with some of them, but I also had to take a lot of ribbing about some of my less-than-polished classroom manners. Further, I wore my civilian clothes when I taught. Most of them wore their fatigues. As my clothes were just what was available at the local PX, they were not always the most stylish of duds. In one other memorable incident early on, I was walking into my army duty post one morning and coming out the door was one of my students, an E7 staff sergeant. He looked at me, staring at my lowly E5 patch on my uniform, and went right to

the Education Center and dropped the course. I guess he felt that clearly someone who he outranked by a couple of pay grades could not possibly ever teach him anything.

In any case, I continued teaching for Maryland for two more years until I finished my military service in September of 1970. Have I made it clear that I loved it there? So, I stayed on for one more term until the end of October. That choice also created a slight ruckus as, having been at Kagnew for over three years by now, I was well enough known that when I showed up at the local officers' club, more than a few of them took exception to my presence there. It led to written complaints being registered to the base commander. He proceeded to march over to the Education Center and confront Fran Sullinger, loudly demanding to know, "Who made Krumbein a GS12?" When she calmly replied, "The Department of the Army," he spun on his heels and went back to his office. I was then begrudgingly allowed to drink and dine there, with only a few surly mutterings coming my way.

To return to the matter of Kagnew Station being UMUC's secret paradise, let me point out some of its other advantages. Aside from the glorious weather, there came the opportunities to travel to some very "far-away places with strange-sounding names," to borrow Dr. Joe Arden's phrase. For instance, just staying in-country provided a place like Massawa on the coast of the Red Sea. How exotic, you ask? Well, first in going down the mountain either by car, bus, helicopter, or littorina (the little chug-chug train built by the Italians in the 1930's that took one past a landscape filled with eucalyptus trees leading to blooming cacti and up close with monkeys) from a temperate 75 degrees to a sweltering 120 degrees in the shade. I made ample use of all of those means of transport. Upon arrival, going into the air-conditioned American TTU (Transportation Terminal Unit) resort hotel was a relief, not to mention the well-stocked bar with bottles of Heineken and Tuborg ready to be swigged. I fondly recall scaring the life out of Kagnew newbie Dr. Julian Jones by inviting him to join me on a drive down to Massawa in my little red Austin-Healey Sprite two-seater convertible by driving a bit too fast for his taste in the mountainous switchbacks just below Asmara on the way down to the first village of Nefasit.

What can one do in the glaring sunshine of Massawa besides bake to a crisp? Well, for one thing, one can swim or snorkel in the crystal-clear waters of the Red Sea (thereby helping me to complete the Grand Trifecta of swimming in the Med, the Red and the Dead.) On view are a plethora of exotic sea creatures ranging from hundreds of different and colorful fish to sea turtles and even sea urchins (be careful not to step down on those black devils.) For the hardy, there was also water skiing available. There were also luscious opportunities to do some deep-sea fishing. Several of us would take the mail chopper flight down to Massawa and charter either a nice fishing boat or, in a pinch with fewer participants, rent an Arab dhow and head out to the Dahlak Archipelago. For whatever reason, fish does not seem to be a major diet staple in Eritrea. One hears of all the problems with starvation there and yet it sits right on a body of water filled with thousands of very edible fish just waiting to be harvested. In my time, I have made catches or witnessed a crew of eight pulling in upwards of fifty huge fish in one day at sea. Hemingway would practically kill for such an opportunity. Nothing beats a freshly caught 25-pound jack tuna. Even barracuda prepared the right way can be quite tasty. Add to that grouper, red snapper and the occasional shark and a day out on the Red Sea can make the hardest of local fishermen back home jealous.

So besides swimming, snorkeling or fishing, Massawa is home to ready-made opportunities to sample cuisine with not only an Italian flavor, but also lots of Arab dishes and of course the spicy food and drink of Eritrea/Ethiopia itself. For my tastes, among the best dishes I enjoyed were alicha (a curry-flavored mix of hardy vegetables), chirrol (a spiced-up paste made from mashed fava beans or chick peas) and of course zigni which consists of a meat (usually chicken or beef) with hardboiled eggs swimming in a liquid red-hot berbere sauce. Having it done down in Massawa by the locals can often result in a scalding of the lining of one's mouth and tongue if one is not careful. All of these foods are eaten by hand (using the right hand only, as everyone knows where that left hand has been and what it has been doing), using broken off chunks of injera, the large, sour and fermented spongy pancake-like staple made from teff flour and flavored with local spices. Mentioning that injera reminds me of an amusing story. As a vacationing Marylander down the mountain for the weekend, I once had the rare good fortune to be invited by members of the Ethiopian navy to dine at their base, which was located on a spit of land sticking out into the Red Sea. Among the other guests was a party of British seamen who happened to be in port at the time. We were seated at an elegant white table with candles and a centerpiece, and on the table before each guest was a folded-up into quarters large piece of injera. We all sat quietly while the naval band played some stirring music. At a signal, a huge ceramic plate with the zigni was placed in the middle. The British sailors all looked at one another, not knowing what to do next. Suddenly, one of them picked up the soft injera and began tucking it into his open shirt top, to be followed by the rest of his naive naval compatriots. At that point, the Ethiopian sailors were literally pointing fingers and then rolling around on the floor laughing, thinking that it was the funniest thing they had ever seen. I was able to join in the laughter, having not committed that particular faux pas due to my having lived in country for over four years by then.

One more infamous dining experience occurred in Massawa when a bunch of us on a late Saturday got off the fishing boat at the landing adjacent to the resort hotel and mutually decided that we were not going to chow down that night on the TTU's American staples of hamburgers, hot dogs and fries with Coca-Colas to wash them down. About a mile walk from the American hotel, a jaunt made not too bad once the sun was setting, there existed the elegant Red Sea Hotel with its very fancy ristorante. A group of about a dozen of us made the walk and entered the hotel where a maitre' d then escorted us into the dining room with a view overlooking the Red Sea and the setting sun through a giant window. The menus were nicely printed, albeit in both Italian and the local Tigrinya dialect. Some smartly dressed waiters stood by as we each settled on a choice of entree. Most of us made the obvious selections of steaks or various fish like red snapper or grouper. A few ventured off to try calamari or even octopus. Only one person was left to order. He fancied himself a quasi-expert in languages and we all sat in silence until he made his decision. Finally, he pointed to one menu item and said, "I know what that word means. It's frog legs. I've always wanted to try those." The waiters took our orders and scooted off to the kitchen. About ten minutes later, when we all congratulated ourselves on having made this evening walk, and after a glass of wine each, the pasta course was rolled out on carts on dishes placed beneath stainless-steel covers. To say the least, the pasta was cooked to perfection and the sauce was divine. A bit more wine helped to wash it down. Next came a salad covered in oil and wine vinegar, which we all enjoyed heartily. Just over forty minutes had passed since we had sat down to eat, but we were already toasting one another after a long day at sea, when the entrees began to be carted in. We tucked in our red napkins (real ones this time) and awaited the steamy dishes to be uncovered before each of us. All of us, that is, except for the guy who had ordered

frog legs for his main course. We sat quietly for a few minutes more and then he said, “You guys go ahead and eat. Don’t let your dinners get cold.” We took him at his word and savored each delicious bite. Even those who had ordered calamari chewed away happily content. About twenty more minutes passed and still no frog legs. The waiters then came out with rich and hot black coffees that we all sipped, merrily awaiting the last dish to arrive. Soon the dessert cart arrived, and we all made selections of everything ranging from gelato to a kind of rich Black Forest cake to petit fours. Still no frog legs in sight. We were still spooning our various desserts when, with a great huzzah, a cart was rolled in with its stainless-steel cover and it came up to our last fellow guest. The covered plate was set before him and with a flourish the waiter uncovered—a whole deep-fried frog, lying on its back, head and all with black beady eyes staring up at its prospective diner! There is nothing like hardy laughter to settle a fulfilling meal. Only one person did not see it as being at all funny. The walk back to the TTU was one in which more laughter filled the night skies over warm and exotic Massawa.

There cannot exist a true Overseas Marylander born without a deep love of travel in his or her heart. Of necessity, travel is part of the devil’s bargain when signing on. Even just in Europe proper, when classes finish on a Thursday night, what is a weary English or history or sociology prof to do but hop on a train and head out from Germany or from wherever one happens to be stationed. I myself have often caught the late Thursday overnight train out of K-town to Paris, only to find a couple of fellow Marylanders already there on board joining me to see the City of Light. Most everyone stationed in Germany is also familiar with the “splits”-Monday and Wednesday evenings teaching and living at one base and then Tuesday and Thursday nights hitting the autobahn for a destination seventy or eighty miles away. In the winter, that could be pure hell on wheels in a tiny VW Beetle, hugging the far-right shoulder with a Porsche or Mercedes-Benz roaring by on the left and splattering the windshield with huge globs of snow or ice.

However, one more of the advantages of Kagnew Station was always teaching all four class nights in one place. That left those travel weekends open for places like Massawa on the Red Sea or Keren, the other major American resort spa within driving distance to the west on the road towards Sudan. Or one could drive south to exotic and historic Axum, said to be the current residing place of the Ark of the Covenant, Indiana Jones be damned. On breaks between terms, when ten days or more were available, I used my time to fly off to more “far-away places with strange-sounding names,” such as Djibouti, Khartoum, across the Red Sea to Yemen, up to Israel, or even just downrange five hundred miles to Addis Ababa. I promise to relate something of each of those trips in future entries.

So yes, Europe was nice and had its own many attractions, but for my money there was no place quite like UMUC’s secret paradise at Kagnew Station. (As an aside, my having been sent so often down to exotic Kagnew Station also afforded me the rare opportunity to have taught on three separate continents—Europe, Asia and Africa--within one academic year, a feat that I managed to pull off twice!) Further, on a personal note, Kagnew Station was also where I met my wife Antonietta of almost 52 years now and it is where both of my sons, Donato and Christopher, were born. So yes, perhaps I should be truly sorry for all of the Maryland English teachers who may have missed their chances to experience it, but thanks to English Director Dr. Robert Speckhard, who kept sending me back down there, I cannot say that I am repentant in the least for having hogged most of the glory years there in what was the best damn duty station on the planet, both while in the U.S. Army and after. Just

ask Dr. Joe Arden, or question Dr. Julian Jones or Dr. Serge Shewchuk, or even Fran Sullinger. Paradise did once exist, and it had a name—Kagnew Station.

