

## Making Papa Proud

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When I began my seven-year career as an English instructor on the UMUC circuit, I was living at Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia, already fully employed by Uncle Sam as a member of the U.S. Army. I arrived in mid-June of 1967, right on the heels of the Six-Day War and so was immediately thrown into working a job that I had been trained for at Fort Devens, about thirty-five miles outside of Boston. Getting drafted and then enlisting for four years was in line with carrying on a family tradition of serving in the military: my father Walter had spent three years in the U.S. Navy, bouncing around the Pacific Ocean on a destroyer named the *USS Kane* during WWII; my younger brother Jim had already begun what was to become a twenty-year career in the U.S. Air Force, including one tour at Phu Cat AFB in Vietnam which just happened to coincide with my first major duty assignment out of the ASA (Army Security Agency) school in Massachusetts, meaning that I could not be sent to Vietnam because of the Sullivan Act, and so I got shipped off to the Horn of Africa; later, my youngest brother Bob decided that he would add to our family's military history by enlisting for eight years in the U.S. Marine Corps, thereby ticking off one more branch of the military. So in a very real way, we three sons were all making our Papa proud.

But lest any reader mistake the intent behind my title, I have a whole other "Papa" to which I am also referring. It did not take long after settling into the life of a soldier at this exotic base before I became restless and sought out whatever means was available to continue my education that had been interrupted by my draft notice. I eventually signed up for and successfully completed eighteen credit hours with UMUC, including six in Italian language, six more in Russian language, three in sociology and the final three in an introduction to theater course. My many hours spent at the Ed Center lead to my acquaintance with its ESO Fran Sullinger. Once she became familiar with my situation, she recommended that I volunteer to teach at the local University of Asmara, which I began to do within less than ninety days of my arrival in Africa. My teaching there for three terms lead to my applying to UMUC at Ms. Sullinger's urging, and the rest is history.

Even being as busy as all of that sounds, my restless nature sought out further stimulation, which I found by taking numerous trips to Kagnew's major R&R center down the mountain to the steamy port of Massawa. My first trip there happened before I had an automobile, so I took the local putt-putt train called the littorina, whose system had actually been built and then maintained in part by my wife Toni's father Giovita Vitali, at the behest of Benito Mussolini. (If anyone wishes to see what that ride was like, here is a link to one of several videos about it on YouTube: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f2QO3YQFj8>). Many more trips followed, both by auto and occasionally by local bus. It was there that I found adventure with a capital "A". I have recounted some of that adventure in previous memoirs. But the form that this particular bit of excitement takes has to do with my curiosity while sitting on the veranda of the TTU (Transportation Terminal Unit) and sipping a cold Tuborg or three while staring out at the boats shuttling into and out of the harbor.

For it was not long before I inquired into how one could go about chartering one of those vessels and seeing more of the Red Sea than just swimming in it at the local beaches. (After all, teachers do occasionally require a break from their classrooms, in spite of what their students may believe.) That ultimately took many months of planning and coordinating, finding a group of eight others who could all willingly arrange for time off from their military duties on the same weekend in order to share both the expenses involved and the thrill of deep-sea fishing. Finding a nice vessel was

the easiest part, since the TTU staff all seemed to have relatives who were soon vying for our business. I settled on one of them who owned a nice craft, powered by two huge Mercury engines that were manufactured in my hometown of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. So I knew that the owner had good taste. When the Saturday morning arrived for our departure, most of us took the luxury route and flew down to Massawa in the Kagnew mail chopper piloted, I soon discovered, by the brother of a woman who was in my graduating class in high school, and therefore also a Fond du Lac native, an army captain, and a Vietnam vet. "It's a small world, after all." One other member of our group was driving down in his jeep and towing a small wagon designed to hold and transport our anticipated catch.

It was not long before we had our gear stowed and were all on our way out to sea. We soon passed Green Island, and then hit the deeper waters. Once everyone got into position, four of us cast off first, two along the side and two off the end of the boat. I was one of the lucky four who got to go first. And when I say "lucky," I truly mean it. Within five minutes, I got the first strike, meaning the other three had to reel in quickly so that our lines would not get tangled. It took a good twenty minutes to land that first fish, a large jack tuna weighing in at well over twenty pounds. One of our crew used the gaff hook to help haul the fish aboard. Into the hold the catch went and we four cast out again. Within a few minutes, there was another strike on my line which then necessitated my three fellow fishermen to reel in. Another ten-minute fight brought another good-sized jack tuna into the hold. So once more the four of us cast out and once again I had a strike on my line. This time the three others were actually cursing me as they reeled in and waited until I landed my third twenty-pound plus jack tuna. Quite apparently we had hit a school of these fish and whatever bait I was using was getting their hungry interest. After at least forty-five minutes of reeling in huge fish, my arms were like rubber and so I gladly surrendered my pole. When no more fish struck, I was once more the subject of everyone's envy and ire.

We fished happily for the rest of that day, going out past Dahlak Kebir and several more of the Dahlak Islands' chain, taking in more tuna, some barracuda, and a smattering of mackerel. We even landed a couple of small sharks by using freshly killed chickens that we had brought on board. One member had the ill luck to hook a dolphin, which he fought unsuccessfully for at least half an hour before just cutting the line. So great was our success that a few of us even became bored with the sport. As the sun set, we were all treated to one of the most glorious displays that nature could ever provide. In addition, being anchored out at sea afforded us a spectacular view of the "billions and billions" of stars that Carl Sagan claimed were up there. I found myself leaning over the deck, swirling the gaff hook in the water and just marveling at the luminescent trail left in its wake. It was indeed quite hypnotic.

When I discovered that the boat came equipped with a ham radio, it gave me the idea of attempting to contact my cousin Roger Wolverton back in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I knew his call sign, "K9DIB," but unfortunately he never picked up. That would have blown his mind had he done so, with me telling him where I was calling from. A couple of the friends decided to try bottom fishing and so baited huge treble hooks and lowered them overboard. When one of them got a strike, he began to reel in, only to feel his line get hit again. He began cursing the damned barracuda that had likely hit his fish, when he felt another strike on his line. A few more curses filled the air until he finally got his line up to where he could swing it into the boat. To our amazement, no barracuda had taken his catch. There on the treble hook, caught in the glow of a flashlight, were two huge grouper and one red snapper!

By that point, we were all pretty much exhausted and well satisfied with our fishing expedition on the Red Sea. The air temperature was cooling off, so we curled up in light sleeping bags scattered around the deck and drifted off to the Land of Nod. The next thing we knew, the bright sun was rising and became our natural alarm clock. The boat owner pulled up anchor and we set off back to Massawa,

a bit sun burnt, but also pleasantly satiated. We even had an escort at one point in the form of a pod of playful dolphins that slid alongside the boat as it chugged in past a scattering of Dahlak Islands. Once back in port, we laid our catch of the day on the dock and counted forty-nine total fish, including one that weighed in at almost fifty pounds! Fortunately for us, the crew at the TTU accepted our payment and cleaned the catch and cut it into fillets. After a few more Heinekens apiece, our summoned chopper pilot returned. The fish were loaded into the wagon filled with ice behind the jeep and made their way back up the mountain. On our flight back, the pilot gave us a scenic view of the landscape, including the hairy switchbacks above the village of Nefasit and then a nice view of Asmara before touching down at the Kagnew helipad.

With no prior training or skill among the lot of us, we had managed to haul in an average of five huge and tasty fish apiece. That fact later made me wonder why, when so many people were starving to death in Ethiopia, that in their desperation they did not at least consider having someone who had a boat take a few fellow sufferers out to sea and harvest some of the rich crop that was swimming for free just a few miles off shore. Anything would be better than wasting away, hungry and praying for relief. All I can figure is that fish is not really considered a part of Ethiopia's diet staples. That assumption, if true, is most tragic indeed.

So, to return to my original title, with our great fish catch on the fabled Red Sea, did we finally make "Papa" proud? You bet your sweet bippy, we did. In fact, while I continued my Kagnew teaching duties for UMUC, I later wrote a poem which in its third line reveals just that:

#### The Definitive Shakespearean Sonnet on the Subject of Fishing

There is great joy in the baiting of hooks  
And the sucking in of the salt-sweet air,  
As Hemingway tells in some of his books,  
And also Mark Twain, to name but a pair.

With fly rod in hand I haunt the world's streams  
And meet up with the most unlikely sort,  
The guy who's just made the catch of his dreams  
And claims that he does it just for the sport.

Then there's the gent who just wants to relax,  
Who dangles his line in lakes lazily.  
And the fishing philosophers who wax  
Eloquently why somewhat hazily.

But I shut each one up, as is always my wish,  
When I tell them my reason—I like to KILL fish!