

Escape from Mogadishu

JAMES K. BISHOP

Editor's Note: James K. Bishop was sworn in as ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Somalia in July 1990. Three rebel armies were already contesting the government's control of the countryside. Six months later, a popular uprising in the capital was to drive President Mohammed Siad Barre, who had ruled the Horn of Africa nation for 21 years, out of office.

As violence increasingly threatened their lives and inhibited the embassy's normal business, dependents and non-essential employees were ordered out of Mogadishu in December, and private Americans were urged to leave. The uprising at the end of the year left those American diplomats who remained, and other Americans and foreigners who had taken refuge with them, gravely imperiled by lawlessness. Two U.S. Navy ships sailed from the Persian Gulf to the East African coast. From a distance of 450 miles, the ships sent a team of Marines and Seals by helicopter to secure the endangered embassy compound. Within 24 hours, 281 evacuees were rescued, as armed looters scaled the compound walls.

On Ambassador Bishop's return to Washington, the FSJ asked him to recount his last days in Somalia, describing both the decisions to evacuate and the manner in which the evacuations were accomplished.

Bishop is no stranger to conflict-torn posts. Before being posted to Somalia, he served as ambassador to Liberia and then as director of the task force that helped organize the evacuation of that post. Earlier in his career, and in more peaceful circumstances, he served as ambassador to Niger.

The illuminated tips of their rotors described five phosphorescent circles above the swirling sand, as the first wave of helicopters was loaded with evacuees. Bob Noble radioded that Major Sayed, the local police commander, had appeared at Gate 1. With a grenade in one hand and a radio in the other, he was threatening to signal prepositioned Somali troops to open fire on the choppers if they tried to take off. Thinking to myself that reality seemed patterned on a State Department crisis management exercise, I told Bob, the manager of our contract guard force, to bring the major to the front of the chancery, where I would talk to him.

It had been a full day since two CH-53 helicopters had dropped over the compound wall at dawn on January 5 and disgorged 60 very welcome Marines and Seals. Their presence presumably would deter the armed looters at whom we had been obliged to shoot the previous morning. As they were deployed, the Marines had pulled down ladders that looters had positioned against the compound wall in preparation for renewed assault.

Soon after their colleagues stationed themselves around the compound, a team of Marines and Seals had driven the quarter mile to the military mission compound. Colonel David Staley, chief of the Office of Military Cooperation (OMC), and other officers safehavened with him, as well as a badly abused Kenyan ambassador, his wife, and staff, were waiting in lightly armored vehicles. The two mini-convoys had emerged and sped back to Gate 1, as our lookouts signaled the absence of Somali military traffic on Afgoy Road outside the gate.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the volume of fire around the embassy compound had picked up more slowly than it had on the several mornings since December 30. That

was the day when the Somali government's attempt to disarm residents of eastern Mogadishu provoked a spontaneous popular uprising. Nor had we yet heard that day any sound of the artillery and armor fire the army had been employing indiscriminately against rebellious neighborhoods, after having first tried to subdue them with mortars and rockets.

Widening chaos

Violence had been endemic in Mogadishu for many months. During the summer, embassies and government buildings had been bombed by the regime's opponents, and senior police officials had been assassinated. Westerners, including one of our Marines, had been injured, and several others had been killed in criminal attacks. My family and I encountered this violence soon after our arrival, when a shot was fired at my wife by a gang of thieves during a robbery at a supposedly safe beach. The embassy had earlier withdrawn all American personnel to the part of Mogadishu where the chancery and other embassy buildings were located, on a 160-acre compound. Self-imposed travel restrictions and a curfew were intended to keep official Americans out of harm's way. But by December these measures were proving inadequate, as criminal activity grew. Vehicles were being taken and their drivers killed by soldiers, policemen, rebels, and common criminals throughout the city and at all hours of the day. Foreigners as well as Somalis were being targeted, and neither diplomatic personnel nor their vehicles enjoyed immunity. A robbery and gunfight outside the chancery compound in early December made it evident that distance from the centers of earlier violence no longer provided any real protection.

For several months there had been frank discussion of the security situation at the community meetings open to both official and private Americans. Everyone familiar with the embassy knew that our top priority now was to take measures that would improve our physical security and our ability to cope with emergencies. Few Americans, therefore, seemed surprised when, at a standing-room-only special community meeting December 5, I told them I had recommended voluntary departure of U.S. government dependents and non-essential employees to Washington. To underline to private Americans the seriousness of the situation, we read the text of the travel advisory proposed to Washington. I also volunteered that my wife and daughter would be among the early departees. Subsequent telephone calls to parents with children at post emphasized the desirability of the children's early departure.

Well before those leaving voluntarily had flown off, we recognized several of the benchmarks we had set to identify the time when ordered departure for U.S. government employees should begin. The tide of violence was swelling. Another of our drivers, the second in three weeks, was shot, and his vehicle stolen. The daily light-arms fire around the embassy took an ominous turn when a fire on the road

outside Gate 1 sent bullets flying through the air, and into our vice consul's home, just as our employees left for the day. Roundtable talks to include the government and representatives of the three rebel groups fighting government forces in the countryside aborted when the government arrested two of the prospective representatives. Then the United Nations moved to an ordered departure of their own employees and dependents. With our own people instructed to go by December 19, our official community had shrunk from 147 to 37 by that date, and we believed that half of the 90 remaining private Americans also had left.

Between the 19th and the 30th we had been busy



Ambassador Bishop (front, center) on board the U.S.S. Guam after evacuation. With him were (left to right): Chris Swenson, administrative counselor; Karen Aguilar, PAD; John Fox, political-economic officer; Bishop; Robert Noble, manager of the embassy's contract guard force; and Walt Fleming, facilities manager.

packing up the belongings of those who had departed, rehearsing our emergency procedures, and trying to encourage both cabinet members and opposition leaders to curb the violent activities of their followers. But the situation only became more acute, as an eruption of intertribal fighting in the capital added to the lawlessness. Sensational press reports claiming that one of the rebel armies was poised to attack Mogadishu rang alarm bells in Washington. In meetings with the prime minister and the president, I could identify no government game plan for stemming the growing chaos.

Our plans to further reduce our numbers were overtaken by the December 30 uprising. Its nature and extent were not clear for several days, but the firing which broke out throughout much of the city made it evident that we were dealing with violence on a new order of magnitude. The greater danger was personalized the next morning, when our defense attache, Colonel Ken Culwell, arrived at the residence with several bullet holes in his car. One shell had found a gap in the vehicle's armor and cut across the driver's seat an inch behind Culwell's backbone. A bullet hole in the roof of another defense attache office vehicle parked beside the chancery reminded us of the damage the stray rounds flying into the compound could do to less resistant surfaces. That evening an impatient soldier at an impromptu roadblock sprayed a carry-all driven by Lieutenant Colonel Neil Youngman, the deputy OMC chief. He rode it back to the

OMC compound on the rims, thankful that only the front tires had received fatal punctures.

Circling the wagons

Over December 30 to 31, we moved almost everyone into our residence, the marine house, or the K-7 compound across Afgoy Road. As both the government and the political leadership of the tribe which was fighting the government's troops in the city seemed receptive to Italian efforts to promote a ceasefire, we thought this a likely outcome. If not, government forces, already making unrestricted use of their greater firepower, presumably would extinguish the upris-



On board a helicopter on the U.S.S. Guam. On left: Jim Maher, budget and fiscal officer; Paulette Ripley, the DCM's secretary; and Marine Thomas J. Sheffield, helicopter crew chief. On right: Margaret O'Rourke, A.I.D., and Bill Matthews, communicator.

ing. By staying within the high walls of our compounds, we hoped to keep out of the fray.

However, the insurgents would not negotiate or be cowed. They held their own in the eastern neighborhoods and attacked government strongholds at the presidential compound and the airport. In other parts of the capital, including our own, soldiers became the targets of armed youth. The military responded by indiscriminate use of mortars and heavy machine guns as well as rocket-propelled grenades. What proved to be my last early morning jog around the chancery compound was aborted New Year's Day, when small arms fire around the embassy forced me to take cover three times in 20 minutes. Nervous soldiers made Afgoy Road a shooting gallery that same morning, cutting off from the embassy those safehavened outside its walls. As would become the case until the K-7 compound was invaded four days later, we began opening our gate to send armored vehicles to pick up people or to receive evacuees, only when lookouts posted on the roof of the K-7 apartment building radioed that no armed personnel were on the road. Communicator Matt Kula, Administrative Counselor Chris Swenson, and Buildings Maintenance Officer Bill Mueller's sunburned faces became their lookout badges of office.

Among the thousands of Somalis who began streaming past our gate on their way out of the embattled city were members of the families of our employees. Many of the latter, as well as numerous contract guards, were staying on

the compound overnight, because their homes were beyond government lines. The new year brought the first requests from private Americans for refuge within the compound. U.S.A.I.D. Director Mike Rugh took on the task of housing and maintaining order for a compound population that ultimately exceeded 500. U.S.A.I.D. Contractor Peggy O'Rourke, our Irish Jewish mother, who had preparing meals for 50 Foreign Service Nationals and guards at the now-vacated A.I.D. compound, took over the embassy snack bar kitchen. There she was ultimately to prepare hot meals for some 350 evacuees, FSNs, and guards. At the OMC compound, Colonel Stanley was preparing more than 100 meals a day, many of them for the local guards and armed policemen who were chasing away the soldiers looting elsewhere in the neighborhood. My executive assistant, Lynda Walker, nurse practitioner Karen McGuire Rugh, and PAO Karen Aguilar took over direction of the embassy and USIS kitchens and began providing gourmet cooking for the embassy staff.

By January 2, the government was employing heavy artillery against the dissidents, whose strength nevertheless appeared to be increasing. Low altitude overflights by government MIGs suggested the regime might bomb the rebels, as it had two years earlier in similar circumstances in the northern city of Hargeisa, destroying much of that town. Looting was becoming commonplace, and the nervous behavior of the soldiers calling at a supply depot set up across Afgoy Road inspired little confidence in their discipline. Already, uniformed men had broken into several A.I.D. compounds to steal vehicles and were beginning to loot homes vacated by embassy personnel. Although we saw Somali Airline's airbus occasionally use the airport, the firing all around us precluded any movement in that direction. Accordingly, I cabled Washington on January 2 to say we would need U.S. military assistance in departing a city in which the lives of Americans were now seriously endangered.

In Washington, an urgent meeting took place early the morning our message was received, and a task force under Jeff Davidow's very capable and sympathetic leadership was established. Later in the day we were told that the president had ordered C-130s to fly immediately to Mombasa. They would be prepared to fly into Mogadishu as soon as flight clearances could be obtained and arrangements made for us to proceed safely to the airport. In addition, the U.S.S. Guam and the U.S.S. Trenton had been instructed to set course for Mogadishu from their position in the Gulf of Oman. By January 7 they would be able to evacuate us by helicopter from the compound itself, should this be necessary.

Although Mogadishu's phones were out, we were able to communicate with most western European embassies by radio. They reported that the Italians, whom we could not contact directly, were negotiating a ceasefire with the government and rebels. Indeed, several ceasefires were announced by the government radio. However, our efforts to obtain landing clearance for the C-130s at Mogadishu

were frustrated by our inability to communicate with anyone in the government. A runner we sent to the Foreign Ministry found its gates chained and the building vacant. We then passed word to the Italians to ask the government for the landing permission we needed.

The response we received from the Italians was that the president had agreed in principle that foreign governments could evacuate their nationals. Details, he told the Italians, were to be worked out with the Foreign Ministry. More significant than this non-reply was that the fact that noncombatants in both camps were ignoring the ceasefires accepted by their nominal leaders. Increasingly, it became evident that the rebels had no command and control structure. They were fighting as individuals and small groups. It was also becoming apparent that command and control within government forces was eroding fast, and guns were being distributed to members of the president's Marehan tribe. We also began receiving reports that soldiers had shot officers of other tribes when given orders to which they objected. On January 3, I therefore advised Washington that the C-130 option was impractical and evacuation would have to be in a non-permissive mode by helicopter, as soon as the Guam and the Trenton could launch their aircraft.

Golf course gun battle

With artillery thundering, plumes of smoke marking impacts to the southeast, small arms fire everywhere, and looting becoming more widespread, I received notes from several diplomatic colleagues asking for rescue and/or refuge. The response to each was that he and his staff were welcome but that we could not mount any rescue operations. Some took advantage of lulls in the firing to make their way to us. Eventually the heads of 10 diplomatic missions, most of those in Mogadishu, were among the evacuees. Several chiefs of mission, including the Kenyan and the Sudanese, had been beaten and robbed by uniformed looters. Walt Flemming, our tireless and courageous Foreign Buildings Office facilities manager, helped Mike Rugh accommodate them, ducking at one point an AK-47 burst which drew an arc in the wall just over his head.

January 4 was our worst day. Half of our 160-acre compound was a primitive 80-acre golf course. The internal wall separating the recreation area from the chancery, marine house, residence, JAO complex, etc., was perforated, like the wall on Afgoy Road, every 20 yards by 2-foot gaps blocked by thin bars. Normally we did not have to worry about anything more lethal than wild dogs coming through the gaps. But early January 4 we learned that looters armed with AK-47s were trashing the golf club and terrifying the FSN families safehavened there. From the golf course they would be able to fire through the gaps in the internal wall at anyone moving on the embassy half of the compound. Bob Noble, a former Special Air Services trooper always at the point of maximum danger, went to deal with the intruders, accompanied by Elaine York. On her first tour abroad as a security officer, Elaine had come from Abidjan to assist us and was to demonstrate remarkable stamina and

physical courage. She and Bob fired over the heads of the looters when more subtle means of chasing them off were unsuccessful. The looters returned fire, directed at Elaine and Bob, who defended themselves, hit at least one looter. Both sides then withdrew.

While Bob negotiated with a militia commander whom he had befriended for armed help fighting off the golf course looters, soldiers broke into the K-7 compound and seized Bill Mueller. They released Bill when he gave them the keys to one of the vehicles in the courtyard. Bill and Chris Swenson then retreated to a safehaven, while the soldiers helped themselves to our vehicles. Back at the chancery



We could not predict how long Bob's militiamen would stand guard at the golf course. And the army's violation of the K-7 compound clearly put us in greater jeopardy. We certainly could not count on remaining unmolested until the scheduled arrival of the marines three days later. I therefore asked Washington for two platoons of parachutists from Saudia Arabia to hold the compound until the vessels approaching us could launch their helicopters.

compound, commercial officer Mike Shanklin, a retired Marine officer, armed himself and took an armored van to evacuate everyone to the chancery from the glass-walled residence now in the line of fire of any looters on the golf course. We then buttoned up the chancery and the JAO headquarters, our other safehaven. In a series of flash messages, Washington was alerted to our situation.

Bob's militiamen came to our rescue, chasing the looters off the golf course in a brisk exchange of fire. Bill and Chris made it back to the embassy compound once the soldiers departed the K-7 area and Bob identified a gap in the military traffic on Afgoy Road. Bill and Chris were replaced later as lookouts by Matt Kula, who kept watch from a trap door on top of the water tower until it came under fire later in the day. In addition to small-arms impacts, a rocket-propelled grenade, probably aimed at the water tower, struck a warehouse near the JAO safehaven.

SOS under fire

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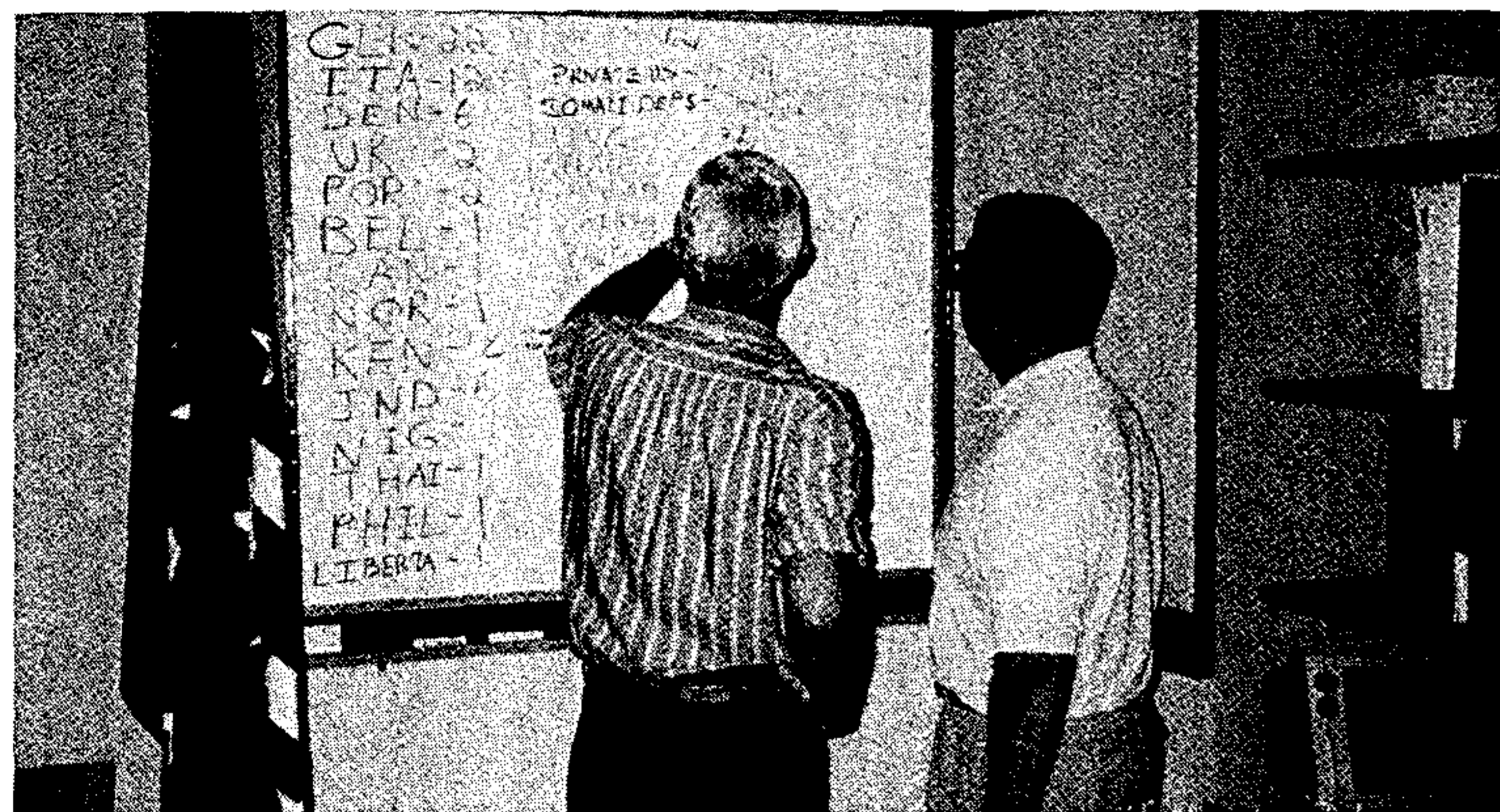
would be ready to evacuate us a day earlier than scheduled.

During the afternoon our "combat consuls," Brian Phipps, Mark Manning, and John Fox, dressed in flack jackets, ducked bullets at Gate 1 as they decided whom to admit to the compound for evacuation. These were painful decisions, made in a tense and emotional environment, and all three performed superbly. An American woman, shot two days earlier, turned up at the gate and was treated, together with a Sudanese diplomat's wife nine months pregnant, by Karen McGuire Rugh and our contract physician, who was among the evacuees. Beginning to realize we would be leaving, many of the FSNs and guards were asking nervous

those chiefs of diplomatic missions who had arrived, and Deputy Chief of Mission Joe Borich, who went out to the Guam to coordinate with the naval and Marine commanders aboard.

Repeated rescues

Later in the morning, once the recovery of the group at the OMC compound had reunited our ranks, we focused on what help we could provide to other diplomatic missions. The Soviets had made contact with us by radio the previous day, informing us they had been attacked and lost vehicles to looters the day before. Their ambassador did not want to try to reach our compound without an escort. Bob Noble persuaded a then cooperative Major Sayed to provide one for a fee, and an hour later we had 38 Soviet guests. A similar operation, at a significantly higher per capita fee, brought us 15 British nationals from their embassy, which was in a more dangerous area. Unfortunately, the South Koreans did not trust the *bona fides* of the escort we sent them. Special arrangements made with a senior Somali resulted in the recovery of the British ambassador and German chargé, who had spent five days under intense fire across from the president's headquarters—brave men both.



DCM Joseph Borich (left) and military attaché Ken Culwell review a list of evacuees from 15 countries.

questions about their safety and future. Meanwhile, we were trying to check out reports that a 50-caliber machine gun had been set up in the K-7 apartment building, from where it could dominate the helicopter landing zone in the chancery compound below. Crowded into the chancery and JAO building, we talked through the night with the task force. Culwell updated the Guam, and we caught some sleep.

It is doubtful any of the evacuees will forget the welcome chatter of helicopter blades, as two CH-53s came over the compound wall soon after dawn. Our rescuers had flown for three and a half hours, meeting their refueling aircraft twice in the dark, a mission that reduced safety margins to a razor-thin edge. Despite their ordeal, the 60 Marines and Seals were on top of the situation as they exited the choppers. From the start, coordination between military and civilian authorities could not have been smoother. Marine and Seal officers decided where to deploy their men, and responsibility for use of lethal fire remained mine. While a shot or two was fired as the Marines and Seals took up their positions, the 50-caliber machine gun report proved bogus, and a C-130 gunship flying overhead held its fire. Later in the day, incoming 50-caliber rounds and the impact of a rocket on the compound wall added to the stimulation provoked by the usual small-arms racket round the compound and the sounds of artillery fire across town.

As soon as the Marines and Seals had their gear out of the helicopters, we had boarded 60 evacuees. These included all of the private Americans who had reached the compound,

troubled leaving their household help, especially after Mike Shanklin's manservant turned up brutally beaten by looters. We did not even have sufficient cash to pay the FSNs and household staff their wages due. During a break in the firing around us, I met with FSNs under a tree and explained that we would leave what cash we had and the commissary keys with the FSN committee to distribute money and food among them. They also were promised that everything possible would be done from Nairobi to send funds to them. The FSNs agreed that fate gave us few options, and only a handful made futile requests to be evacuated.

Mike Rugh and his helpers had done a characteristically thorough job preparing the evacuees for their midnight departure. As the first of the Guam's CH-46 helicopters landed right on schedule, the passengers went aboard with few hiccups—and only one successful stowaway.

Last-minute escape

Back in front of the chancery, I listened through an interpreter to an excited but disarmed Major Sayed, while Bob, and several Seals beyond the circle of light, kept Sayed and his radio in their sights. After 15 minutes of discussion, the major agreed that the first wave of helicopters could take off without interference. For the next three quarters of an hour, I kept Sayed engaged in sometimes insane conversation while walking him toward the landing zone, as other choppers landed, loaded, and took off. Finally, after gaining possession of the major's radio, Bob and I joined the Marines and Seals in their helicopters and sailed over the compound

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walls, as our adrenaline rush ebbed. It was only after our arrival on the Guam that we were told that the C-130 gunship covering our departure had picked up the illuminated radars of the SAM-2 battery at the airport, and that through their night-vision glasses, the helicopter crews had seen intruders coming over the compound walls while we were lifting off. The next day we discovered that rockets had been used to blast open embassy doors within two hours of our exodus.

Before leaving Mogadishu, we learned that General Schwarzkopf had ordered the Guam and the Trenton to return immediately to the Gulf of Oman, canceling plans to have evacuees debark at Mombasa. As we set off on a five-day voyage to Muscat, we were just happy to be aboard and grateful to the Marines and sailors who had put their lives at risk to save ours. The crews of both vessels were justifiably proud of their achievement, certainly the most exciting event of their five months at sea. Officers vacated their quarters to make room for the embassy's senior staff and the chiefs of diplomatic missions. Other embassy members, including several who had been lodged in officer's quarters when last serving on a U.S. ship, found themselves stacked four high in the enlisted men's compartments.

Two hundred marines and sailors volunteered within an hour when the chaplain of the Guam asked those interested to sign up as evacuee guides and escorts. For many of them, evacuee children were surrogates for little ones back home. Several extra-large marines helped bottle feed four-week-

old Mary Lynda Rugh, the Somali infant Mike and Karen were bringing home to adopt much sooner than planned. Several days out at sea, Capt. Saffell of the Guam announced the birth of the 282nd evacuee, the Sudanese diplomat's new daughter, with all the satisfaction of a senior family member. A few ambassadors soon were proudly wearing Guam sweatshirts, or attired in naval uniforms purchased at the ship's store.

Naturally, there was considerable discussion about the prospective conflict in the Gulf. The flyers showed some of us the night-vision equipment in which they placed great faith. At church services, some members of the ship's complement and evacuees prayed together. Lynda Walker's powerful rendition of Black spirituals brought radiance to the faces of the young Marines and sailors who joined her in song, and delight to a Soviet ambassador pleased to be invited to join the fellowship. Embassy athletes were welcome when the flight deck was opened to those desiring exercise. Jogging into a 35-knot wind proved less challenging than trying to avoid becoming aerodynamic when running before the same gale. Those invited to the chief's mess learned who ate best aboard ship.

My embassy colleagues and I debarked at Muscat with the thanks of many of those we had helped leave Somalia. Most of us had the telephone numbers of our sailing companions' wives and parents. Many of us prayed silently that those shipmates remaining aboard would be spared the horrors of war, as with their help, we had escaped injury in the chaos of Mogadishu. ■

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