

a Hawk in the Land of Vultures



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BY COL. CHARLES J. DUNLAP, JR. '72

The three loud cracks startled me—well, scared me, really. Of all the things I thought I might do after graduating from Saint Joseph's, dodging gunfire on the grounds of the U.S. Embassy in Somalia wasn't one of them. Actually, I never even expected to be in the military in the 1990s, let alone in Somalia.

How did it happen? With my draft-induced ROTC commission, I reluctantly entered the Air Force in 1976 after getting my law degree at, yes, Villanova. Most of my military career was thus devoted to legal and administrative duties. I was well-traveled, but generally far away from the line of fire. But suddenly—or so it seemed—16 years passed, and I found myself in Kenya serving as the legal officer for Joint Task Force PROVIDE RELIEF, an effort to airlift food to Somalia beginning in August, 1992.

The real work—the scary stuff—was not done by me; it was done by the air crews who flew their big C-130 transports into the isolated Somali airstrips delivering food. But I did go to Somalia, and these are my most vivid memories of the time I spent there—a Hawk in the land of vultures.

My first trip was to escort a Congressional "fact-finding" delegation. On this journey, one staffer—sheathed in a bullet-proof vest (which hadn't been issued to us yet)—questioned our lack of the same. Explaining that the vests wouldn't, in any event, stop the heavy-caliber Somali bullets, I quickly added—seeing gloom descend on his face—that the vest might help if we hit a mine.

Hearing that he stood up, ripped his vest off, plunked it on his seat, sat himself down and smiled—satisfied that a key part of his anatomy was now well-protected. About then his plan started looking pretty good to me.

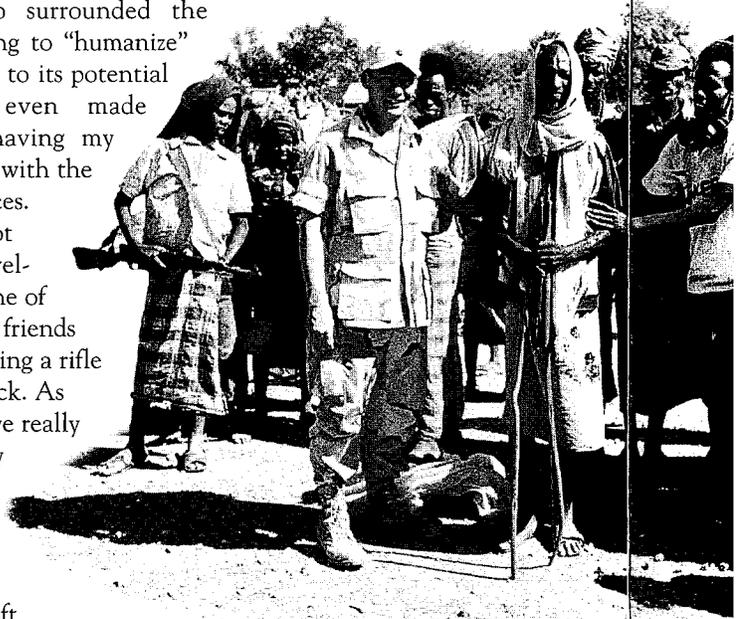
Needless to say, I got myself a flak vest for the next trip. They made wonderful seat covers.

On another visit, we had just arrived in a town where our commander was negotiating the repair of a dirt runway.

Suddenly, the C-130 that brought us unexpectedly took off, leaving the four of us surrounded by hundreds of Somalis. I guessed that the general, who had headed into town, was in trouble and had radioed the aircraft to take off as soon as it could.

Alarmed, I began to talk to the armed Somalis who surrounded the airstrip, hoping to "humanize" our tiny band to its potential captors. I even made a show of having my picture taken with the "security" forces. But when I got the photo developed, I saw one of my newfound friends casually pointing a rifle toward my back. As it turns out, we really weren't in any danger; the general had merely arranged for another aircraft to pick us up. As tactfully as the circumstances permitted, I thanked him for keeping us so well-informed.

After the massive RESTORE HOPE operation began in December, several of us were ordered to Mogadishu to brief the newly arrived U.S. combat forces. It was on this trip that I was to find myself dodging bullets on the grounds of the U.S. Embassy. As we approached the nearly roofless city in a pint-sized Army C-12 airplane, the destruction we saw was appalling.



We landed on the broken pavement, watching anxiously as our plane's wings sheared off overgrown bushes and saplings. Parking near a half-destroyed hangar filled with rusting MIG 17s and 19s—the remnants of the Somali Air Force—we climbed out into the kind of broiling sun that reminded me of my days as a Wildwood Crest lifeguard.

The sullen, glaring Somali men who greeted us that day in Mogadishu kept their distance. But the children, like curious kids everywhere, cautiously approached and smiled shyly.

Eventually we linked up with some Pakistani troops and made our way via a careening helicopter ride to the ruined U.S. Embassy, where the Marines had set up their headquarters. I accepted the command sergeant major's offer to show me his pride and joy: the new flagpole. But as we entered the yard, three loud gunshots sounded. That can't be what I think it is! raced through my mind.

A young Marine yelled, "Don't go out there! We're getting more sniper fire!" Sniper fire? Yikes! Struggling to maintain a semblance of composure, I thought, Isn't this the part where we're all supposed to dive for cover? The sergeant major looked at my drained expression with the kind of bored and practiced condescension that only a tobacco-chewing Marine Corps officer can muster.

"Sir, they're at least 400 meters away. They'll never hit us from there," he said. Oh sure, I thought. Famous last words! But he was right. Never doubt a Marine Corps sergeant major.

Upon finally reaching the jury-rigged staff, I saw a huge American flag. The Stars & Stripes, so clean and radiant above all the squalor, were quite a sight.

"Some people tell me the flag's too big, but I think it sort of lets everyone know we're here," the sergeant major said. Hesitating, he asked, "What do you think, sir?"

Pausing for just a moment, I said, "I think you're right, sergeant major, I think you got it exactly right." Satisfied, he smiled and returned to the endless task of looking after his troops.

The following day, I saw armed U.S. helicopters destroy several "technicals"—pickup trucks converted by Somali gunmen to carry heavy weapons. Knowing what I know now, I think that this was the beginning of Somalia's descent back into chaos that so many tried hard to prevent.

I made a few more trips to Somalia, the last to a devastated town inland from Mogadishu. We visited the local "hospital"—really just a collection of somewhat cleaner low-roofed shanties.

Just as we entered the courtyard, an American doctor burst out of one of the rooms. Masked and bedecked in full surgical regalia, he held his blood-splattered hands aloft as he asked hurriedly, "Are any of you guys doctors?" Obviously disappointed with our response—I didn't have the heart to tell him I was a lawyer, let alone a Philadelphia lawyer!—he muttered an expletive and raced back inside. I never did learn what had happened, but, given the misery in that place, it could have been any one of hundreds of medical crises.

Leaving the hospital grounds somewhat dazed, I was startled when a mud puddle I stepped over moved. Looking down, I realized the "puddle" was a half-naked elderly woman so horribly emaciated that she was nearly level with the ground. Her strength gone, the glaze in her eyes made it clear that the infirmary she struggled to reach could no longer help. Everyone over there said (and it's sadly true): Somalia may not be hell, but you sure can see it from there.

Forty-four Americans paid the ultimate price while trying to help. Scores more are crippled and disfigured for life. I suspect there will be no "Wall" in Washington, D.C. for these soldiers and airmen, and their sacrifice in Somalia will soon be all but forgotten. But I can't forget. At least they tried to give the Somalis hope. The only true failure is the failure to try.

Before leaving Somalia for the last time, I visited a children's feeding center. This particular center specialized in the most desperate hunger cases, and was manned by young Irish nurses who seemed like saints to me. These magnificent women labored tirelessly to save the sickest of the sick. Not only did the listless children bear the terrifying effects of long-term starvation, they also suffered from a variety of fatal communicable diseases.

Did I say these ladies were saints? Well, they were, but down-to-earth ones at that, and thoroughly Irish—they slyly told me how much they were looking forward to getting a beer during their next trip to Kenya. Not having any beer, we gave them some candy packets left over from our Meals-Ready-to-Eat field rations, and the nurses literally screamed with delight. I confess, these were the only cries of delight associated with MREs that I heard during the whole deployment!

So, if you're ever in East Africa, and you hear some ladies speaking about Somalia with an Irish brogue, you may want to buy them a beer. Consider that an order.

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The contributions of Saint Joseph's graduates to the Armed Forces by no means ended with World War II. Col. Dunlap is among hundreds of SJU grads currently in the service and is now assigned to U.S. Strategic Command in Omaha, NE. The views and opinions he expresses are his own and not necessarily those of the Department of Defense.

