

## LORSTA (WADI) MATRATIN, LIBYA

I'm Charles A. Kelley, CWO-4 ENG, Retired. I served as engineering officer of Matratin during 1967-1968. To say the least, that was some kind of an experience in my 28 year career in Charlie Golf. Here we go.

I boarded the C-123 log flight from Naples to the station in Libya and not long after takeoff I was told that we were going to make a stop in Malta because of an oil pressure light going off in the cabin. When we landed on Malta a guy with a pushcart came out to the plane with it loaded with all kinds of booze. We took the booze, he got paid, and away we went. Next stop, Tripoli, Libya, Air Force Base. The flight stops there to pick up two crew members from Matratin that fly to Tripoli every two weeks to food shop for the station. They are flown there by the Mobil Oil field break flight. Our guys shop at the commissary and fill a freezepak with perishables and other dry goods. From there the flight heads out to the station about 465 miles, half way across the country. When we get there we land right beside the "MARBLE ARCH", a monument built there by Mussolini during WWII that straddles over the Libyan highway. The arch divides Libya into the two states, ie, tribes, Tripolitania to the west and Seranaca to the east. Tripoli being the capital of the west and Bengazi the east. We are met by the stations 5-ton stake truck and after offloading the station supplies the plane departs and will return again in two weeks.

About half an hour later I arrive at the station and before I can even get inside to stow my gear or meet the CO, a little arab comes up to me pushing a bicycle and says; "Chief you shifty". I told him his smart a\*\* had better watch his mouth if he was going to get along with me for the next year. He left in discust, kicking sand as he walked away. An arab named Millet Salahmed Bahmud, a station arab empolyee whom I later found out took care of the OINC and Chief's quarters as the houseboy came up to me and said all the little guy wanted was for me to take a look at his bike and fix it later and that "shifty" in arabic meant to "look see". Oh, well, my first encounter with arabs. Mufta, as the little guy was called for the next year, every time I would be doing anything on or off the station he would throw down a rug, pile up rocks and pray. Millet told me he was trying to hex everything I did. After getting settled in I had a meeting with the boss, LTJG david Clements and the chief ET. Evidently when the CAT generator engines would see a load change the governors would surge the rpm and cause the LORAN signal to go beserk. I had brought a new set of injectors with me from Naples. The section engineer had told me they were having some problems and that I should go ahead and see if the injector change would have some help, so I changed them on one of the CATS and trimmed the governor to a nats a\*\* and put that one on the line. End of problem. I soon hooked up with Mobil Oil and visiting them I found out they were using the same plant as ours. We made a deal that if they would let me have 24 injector kits, I would rebuild theirs so they didn't have to keep exchanging with the plant in Peoria. Within a couple of weeks we were in business with the generators on the station, I'm happy, the ET's are happy. For that whole year we never lost any air time. I also found out that with both distilling units on the line we could barely keep up with making enough fresh water to support our usage. I ordered another MECO unit from Section and it was approved. While waiting for the new unit to arrive we had Johnson/Towers, a contractor that did a lot of work for the oil companies to build us an addition to the distilling unit area to house the new one. We got the new unit, set it up and put it on the line. That gave

me time to make repairs to the other two units. No more water problems. One thing about Cap't Ayers, when I would request something, he never turned me down.

Next was morale. We had guys in fights, cursing at each other and so on. So one of the first things I did was to repair the soft ice cream machine and put it on 24 hour self serve. Man, was that a help. Everywhere you looked someone would have a cone in his hand, including me. The temp. outside was usually between the high 90's to low 130's and this didn't help matters any. I drove down to Mobil one day and they were playing a softball game and having a BBQ. I asked Gene Brown, a pilot of theirs that I knew if maybe we could get involved. He told me they had a league that included, Occidental Oil, Exxon and a whole slew of oil well crews that play at the wells through out the desert. Needless to say, we joined the league. We played one game at home and the next away. When we would be scheduled to play an oil well, Gene would take 9 of our guys in the twin engine Caravel and fly them to play. When we played at home we supplied the BBQ but knowing our limited resources they would provide some of the food. Now morale was really getting somewhere. Tom Omri, now the station CO, after relieving Clements, would tell us if ever anything happens to nearly half my crew while playing ball half way across this damn desert my career is over. But he played too when home games were on.

After being in that desert for a while I got this idea about how to really give morale a kick in the butt. LET ME PUT TO REST HERE AND NOW ANY FALSE CLAIMS ABOUT WHO BUILT THE STATION DUNE BUGGY KNOWN AS THE "SUXMOBILE"

I knew some of the station vehicles were showing their age so I surveyed the chevy carryall and the 1-ton dodge stake truck. Cap't. Ayers at ACTEUR approved it and the next log flight we unloaded two new International 4x4 pickup trucks to replace them. With the help of DC-1 David Echols, (RIP) I set out to build what became the most famous "DUNE BUGGY" on the planet. I went to my pilot buddy down the road at Mobil and made a deal with him. He would get me all the parts to rebuild the slant six engine from the 1-ton dodge and I would provide them with all the Gazelle they could BBQ. It wasn't long until he brought me a complete overhaul kit. While we were waiting for it to arrive Dave and I cut up the surveyed dodge and the carryall and married the front end of the carryall to the rear end of the dodge. We used the complete dodge drive train by shortening the drive shaft. At first it was a one seater but we later made it into a two seater with the rear seat higher than the front so Gazelle shooters could shoot from the back seat. With the dodge engine rebuilt and tested we finally got it to fit into the front end of the carryall chevy. When completed, Dave and I gave the thing a test ride down the highway and reached 118 MPH. "NUF SAID". We had a name calling contest where everybody put a name in a hat and the one we drew out would be the name. One of the seamen on the station's crew was drawn and the "SUXMOBILE" was born. Our station had the old M-1 rifles. Our first excursion about 50 miles south of the station in the Sahara with 4 guys on board, 2 up front and two shooters up back brought back 5 gazelle. I dropped off two at the Mobil Oil terminal cook shack and brought the other three home.

After that the CO and I would have a signup sheet for 4 crew members to take it out on weekends for scavenge hunts. We decided to limit our gazelle stock in the freezer to six because of limited space. We kept Mobil well supplied. We found that the Sahara was strewn

full of left over WWII meorabilia that just about gave everybody a souvenir to take home. It did get a little out of hand though when one crew brought back an unexploded bomb. After that, no ordnances were to be touched in that desert. We also began to get gazelle for Millet and the guard families. Now, everybody had Gazelle and God knows those arabs needed anything they could get to eat since their mainstay was pasta noodles almost three times a day. Now morale was sky high and the CO and I made everyone on the station swear they would never tell anyone about the buggy being there. The reason being that taking weapons away from the station to hunt gazelle might not sit too well with the Section. But as time went on someone squealed about it and the section got the word. Wasn't long until Cap't. Ayers came for an inspection. Any time anyone from section would be on station we would hide the buggy under a tarp in our junk yard. So, after the inspection the Cap't. came up to me and said, "where is it, Chief, the jigs up". I took him to it and found out that all he wanted to do was drive the thing. He told me while we were out that he had never seen morale so high on one of his stations and that he was getting requests from some crew members to extend for 3-6 months on the station. He also told me that he thought that I may have surveyed two station vehicles that may have had some life left in them, but that he thought it was well worth it. During that visit we had 6 gazelle hanging in the freezer. He never mentioned that it was against regulations to take weapons from the property although he knew we did to get the gazelle. I told him that Major Ali was aware of the guns off station and that he had said; "by the grace of Alah, keep feeding my people gazelle, they need the vitamin E". Cap't. Ayers did, however, thoroughly enjoy the gazelle we had on the BBQ pit.

Major Ali was the Libyan police chief from down the road. He supplied us with the 9 guards for the station. He always tried to catch us off the station because he wanted the dune buggy for himself. He would always show up on weekends and pull that huge knife off his hip and slice off a huge hunk of gazelle to eat. He would tell me; "Chief, Chuckie, when I finally catch you off the station with firearms, I'll let you keep them, but I keep the buggy". I'm sure our guards would notify him when the buggy would leave the station since they were part of his police division. He would send two Land Rovers out to catch us but we always looked out for the dust cloud from his vehicles and when they got to within 1/2 to 1 mile away we would circle around them and they could never catch the buggy. They never had a chance of catching that thing and sometimes they would come back out of the desert towing one of theirs.

I got with Dave one day and told him I had another morale builder idea. So we took a piece of 4x4 and cut it 6' long and 2 1x6 planks and made a railroad crossing sign and planted it along side the highway across from the station. You should have seen the sidesplitting laughs from the crew when a vehicle would slam on it's brakes and stop to look for the RR tracks that weren't there.

I could go on and on about morale builders but I'll end this with Major Ali's words to me as he would say, "I'm gonna catch you some day, Chief,Chuckie", as he would pat me on the back and give me a big smile.

We did have one really serious time at the station worth mentioning. A couple of weeks before the Arab, Israeli conflict, known as the now infamous 6 day june war the log flight collected all

the station weapons except for a 410 shotgun. We were told that any incident against the station would be treated as an assault against 22 unarmed American Coast Guardsmen. We watched as thousands of Arabs would pass the station going east to Egypt to join in the pending action against Israel. One group of a few thousand of them stopped and camped right across the highway from the station. Major Ali showed up and told the CO to pull down our flag or he would not be able to control them since he didn't have the people to do it. He said they know who supplies Israel with the bullets, so they were not going to sit there and look at that flag. Our CO pulled it down but I was totally against doing it. Although, maybe it turned out to be the best thing to do at the time. After the war was over most of them that passed us on the way were coming back, what was left of them, and they were begging us for water. We gave it to them but not until they watched us raise our flag again. That did, however put a stop to the Gazelle hunting. After that I would take the 410 down by the Mediterranean and shoot partridge for the cook to prepare. There would be a bird under almost every bush I walked up to. The shells for the 410 were picked up at the Air Force Base in Tripoli by our food shoppers. Where there is a will there is a way.

FOOTNOTE: One of the reasons I'm doing this article is to set the record straight. There is an article on the net that shows some chief and CO as building the buggy. I don't have a clue what they claim, but Dave Echols and I built the "SUXMOBILE" from the 2 surveyed vehicles described in this article. Any crew member serving with us can verify this because at one time or another they all pitched in to give Dave and I a hand with building it.

OF SPECIAL MENTION ARE A FEW REAL GOODIES:

#1 The CO would nearly crap his pants every other week during the softball league season. The Mobil Oil plane would sometimes fly our 9 guys hundreds of miles into the desert to play an oil well team and return them later in the evening. Hey, he could have said no, but it would have made him the most unpopular CO on the planet. Not once in the almost 13 months I was there did we ever have an off station incident.

#2 Our Ambassador to Libya worked out of Tripoli, but on occasion he would travel to Benghazi by vehicle and would stop at the station for overnight. When he would leave the next morning he would ask the CO if he could take 2 or 3 of the station crew for a short vacation. He said there was always a party in his honor and the guys would have a good time. I found out later why the guys had such a good time. The Lebanese, Italian and German women would come to these parties wearing "NO" underwear and made it clear when sitting down. They loved the "Coasties" because they knew we were stuck in that d\*\*n desert for a whole year without our women. Oh yeah, some heck of a party!!!

#3 Me and one of the seamen were invited to an Arab wedding for one of the guards daughters. The Arab wives got together and made our clothes for the event. All Arab garb. We went to it riding camels Millet provided. It was an amazing event. Only problem was that after the wedding all the men folk sit down to have a glass of tea. They make the tea by boiling the roots of the "Shae" bush that grows wild throughout the desert. The bush provides food for many desert animals. Only thing we didn't know was that you only drink a small shot glass full

and even have to sip it for some time at that. They load the glass with sugar so you can swallow the stuff. What happens a few minutes after you toast with it and you're not used to it, you are in a different strange place, a different world so to speak. It took about 4 hours before I realized I was, "Chief Kelley". DON'T DRINK THE SHAE TEA".

#4 One day Millet told me his camel was sick and he had to walk to work from his tent in the desert. Millet, by the way had 3 wives and a heard of kids and lived in a monster tent. I drove him to his tent and told him to bring the camel to the station so Doc. could take a look at him. When he got back, Doc., our Corpsman told him there was nothing he could do. Out behind the station barracks is a leaching pool where the laundry and galley drain into. I told Millet to let the camel take a long drink from it. Next day, Millet came in riding the camel. Millet said on the way home after the camel had that drink he would yell and then blow a string of feces about 6' long. He said he did it many times. "camel alright now, Chief, thank you".

#5 Our 9 Arab guards worked 3 men a day. 1 day on and 2 days off in rotation. Each had an 8 hour shift so they had to walk from their tent village in the desert to get to work. The CO and I decided to build them a small block house so the 2 off watch could stay at the station until their shift ended. That way when they got relieved the next day they could all go home together and the relief crew would take over the guards quarters. We even got an old window AC unit from Mobil and I got it working and air conditioned the place. Problem was that the guy on the gate would slip into the building and enjoy the comforts. Then we found out that they were bringing their wives and kids with them and we started to miss food. I even caught them with friends from down the road in there that wasn't even supposed to be on the station property. We threatened to take them before Major Ali for discipline but they got him to tell us to leave them alone. So, one night the CO had the 3 guards in his quarters chewing them out for not manning the gate at night. Amazingly, while they were there their little building caught fire. I told the CO I was able to get out their personal belongings before the fire spread. The Chief ET was assigned to investigate the fire and he and the 1st class electrician determined it was an electrical fire. A few days later the chief ET came into my office with a small 1 gallon gas can and asked me if I was missing one of these. He said he found it in the weeds behind the burned out building. End of that story, except we now had guards on duty at the gate again.

#6 Here's a few footnotes:

1. The Marble Arch built by Mussolini during WWII straddled the Libyan coastal highway. When Gaddafi overthrew the King he paved a roadway around both sides of the Arch and forbid any traffic to pass under the Arch except himself. Every other vehicle had to go around. He had military guards stationed there as Customs Agents, but for whatever reason I never figured out other than it was the border between the two states; (tribes). One point of interest about the Arch that most people have not been aware of is that a nude figure, supposedly of Mussolina is laying stretched out horizontally on the ledge near the top.

2. Our airstrip was built by Rommel and the Coast Guard resurfaced it when the station was built. It used to drive the guards at the Arch nuts because the C-123 would touch down on the Ceranaca side of the Arch and stop on the Tripolatania side.

3. A couple of times a year Gaddafi would ship sheep to all the Arabs living near the highway and then when he would drive by they had to face the east and slit the sheeps throat as an honor to him. At least they got to eat the sheep. King Idris, had two castles built at "Marsa El Brega" One for Gaddafi and one for his other son. Gaddafi was so terrified of things supernatural, that when he heard someone mention in gest that his castle was haunted, he never moved into it. He made sure it was never occupied until after his death.

4. Down the road heading east from the station was an abandoned German airstrip and also part of Rommels pier where he offloaded his tanks and other vehicles during WWII.

5. On some occasions I would take a ride down the desert with Gene, the mobil pilot in the Canadian built Dehavlan as he would check the pipeline going all the way down to the well at Zelten. Coming back one day he told me he wanted to show me something that very few people have ever seen. He beared northeast, south of Bengazi and told me to watch for anything I thought unusual. I finally saw what he meant. A small piece of a plane had it's tail sticking up out of the sand. I asked him why it was there and he said; "chief, thats the LADY BE GOOD". Thats the bomber that missed its landing in Bengazi and was lost during the war. Gene told me that sometimes he could see most of the bomber and other times none of it, depending on how the sand shifted with the wind. Jimmy Stewart did the movie about it. The Mobil pipeline got checked by plane about every two weeks because some caravans passing through would drill a hole in it and steal oil for their lamps and whatever else they used it for. They would try to plug it with a piece of Sahee bush root. Gene would see the oil spill in the sand and note the location and a crew would have to go out and repair it.

6. Poor Smedley, our mutt mascot. He hated Arabs and would tolerate them only when he got used to them. He hung out in my office most of the time. He knew our guards and service Arabs. SOOOO, when I got back to the station from the Arab wedding in all my Arab clothing he didn't know it was me. He attacked me with a vengeance, bit my legs and the crew had to pull him off me. Took Doc. about a month before he got me healed up.

7. One of the fun things I found out about LORAN C stations was that they liked to trade all over the world. We were at a loss for something to trade and finally got hold of a station in Australia. They wanted hat bands and we wanted Bush Hats. So, we would go on viper snake hunts with snares we made up, get the snakes, tan the skins in the sun and sew them together for hat bands. Wasn't long until they had hat bands and we had Bush Hats.

So that's how it was during my year at WADI MATRATIN LIBYA

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