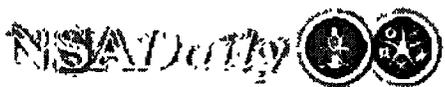


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Defending Our Nation. Securing The Future.

(U) History Today - 14 July 2014

Run Date: 07/14/2014

(U) MEMORIES OF STONEHOUSE

(U) During the Cold War NSA operated a collection facility at the Army's Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia. The Stonehouse facility had an 85-foot antenna and a 150-foot antenna. The antenna feeds were frequently changed for special events, and John O'Hara, an NSA senior scientist, would sometimes head TDY teams responsible for those changes. Here are some of his memories of Stonehouse/Asmara from his TDYs.

(U) Kagnew Station was originally created as an Italian communication facility during WWII and was named Radio Marina. After the Italians were defeated there in 1941, it was controlled by the British military administration until 1943, when they handed it over to the United States.

(U) The Stonehouse facility was located about a mile outside the city of Asmara. While commuting to and from the facility on the very narrow roads and streets, one would frequently have to stop or slow down due to drovers moving their flocks of sheep or cattle against the background of giant antennas. This led one member of our team to remark that they were living in both the first and twentieth centuries.

(U) The city of Asmara and the surrounding countryside were very pretty. One evening we piled into three vehicles and went to a place called "The Escarpment." Just as the sun was setting, we saw a caravan of people on foot crest a mountain top near us and we watched them pitch camp for the night. The men were bearing huge baskets hanging from bars on their shoulders, and the women were bearing packs on their backs; we were told they were people collecting cactus fruit. This was like a scene from the Bible.

(U) We would be provided with a rental car. When we would first take it out, the gas meter was always on zero. There would be only enough gas to make it to the nearest service station, which was owned by the same guy who owned the rental car place.

(U) The hotel rarely had hot water for bathing. The water was either cold or at best lukewarm. We were told that the water in the hotel where we stayed was unsafe to drink so we would lug gallon bottles of Gatorade from Kagnew Station back to the hotel to drink and brush our teeth.

(U) The hotel was near Emperor Haile Selassie's palace, where the Emperor kept lions. They would start roaring very early in the morning and we could hear them from our hotel. We referred to them as "Selassie's roosters."

(U) Changing antenna feeds on those monster antennas was no trivial task. You certainly could not be afraid of heights, because the feed for the 150-foot antenna was about 100 feet above the ground. Feed changes would sometimes be delayed because high winds precluded working at those heights.

(U) Eritrea was an independent state that had been ceded to Ethiopia as a protectorate by the League of Nations after World War One. In 1961 Ethiopia annexed it as a province. This led to establishment of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and its quest for independence.

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(U) The ELF was fighting for independence from Ethiopia (which they finally won in 1991), and they were conducting guerrilla warfare. As a result, the Ethiopian authorities halted any traffic in and out of the city from sundown to sunrise. The ELF was ambushing and kidnapping people and holding them for ransom; if no ransom was paid, the hostages were frequently killed. We were instructed never to go out on the streets alone. If one drove out of the gates of the city, there had to be at least two vehicles. Since we had to drive into the desert to bore sight the antennas, this applied to us.

(U) On one bore sight trip we were miles from Asmara in what appeared to be an uninhabited area. After we were there for about an hour, a group of about ten pre-teenage boys appeared and started pestering us for money and cigarettes. We could see no houses or tents for miles, so we wondered where on earth they came from.

(U) We frequently worked long hours. One night I returned to the hotel about 10 p.m. to find two heavily armed soldiers standing at the outside entrance; there were two more inside. This was a little surprising, but when I got off the elevator at my floor, two more armed soldiers were standing there. I was now very curious, so I went back down to the front desk and asked what was happening. The guy at the desk said some General was having a meeting and the guards were just there to provide protection from any possible ELF attacks. I was so tired that I had no trouble falling asleep but I was glad to see that the soldiers were gone the next morning.

(U) Emperor Haile Selassie would occasionally come by in a motorcade and there would be thousands of people on the street to watch him go by. On one such occasion I saw mounted police use their horses to forcibly move people out of the way in a very nasty manner.

(U) Thanks to the chief of security at Kagnew Station, I received a private tour of Haile Selassie's palace grounds, conducted by Selassie's chief of security. That was a unique experience. The palace grounds were very opulent and were like a zoo, with all kinds of exotic birds and lions. I was really impressed with Selassie's heavily gilded private chapel.

(U) The palace grounds were enclosed by thick walls, and I often wondered how many Ethiopians actually got to see or know what was behind them. The ELF eventually did get an independent Eritrea. I wonder what happened to the animals and what the status of the palace is today.

(U) Haile Selassie was emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, when he was overthrown. He was thought to be a descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and was widely known as the Lion of Judah; many of his followers considered him to be divine. It is not clear how he died, but his body was supposedly found in 1975 buried under a toilet on the palace grounds.

(U) For a photograph of Emperor Haile Selassie visiting Kagnew Station, see the [History Today of January 12, 2005](#).

(U) Discuss historical topics with interesting folks. Visit the Center for Cryptologic History's blog, [History Rocks](#) ("go history rocks").

(U) [Larger view of photo](#)

(U) Have a question or comment on "History Today"? Contact us at DL cch or cch@nsa.

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