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My PSYOP Experience Supporting UNOSOM II

SGM Joanne Gisseman

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37F02, NCOIC JPOTF Cell, 8th Bn, 4th PSYOP Gp

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Abstract

In June 1993, shortly after the United Nations forces transitioned control from UNITAF, I deployed to Mogadishu, Somalia to support UNOSOM II with PSYOP operations. This was the first time the U.N.'s mandate had ever allowed for peace enforcement; they were not prepared to respond to their self induced "mission creep". In this paper I recount some of my memorable experiences during my short but intense deployment to this lawless, famine stricken country. Some of the challenges I faced while working for the U.N. included working with an insufficient staff, numerous hours spent repairing our printer-duplicators, and the abduction and execution of five of our Somali employees. I also shared friendships with our Somali workers, experienced job satisfaction, and deepened my patriotism for my country.

My Experiences Supporting Operations of UNOSOM II

Background

At the time of this deployment, I was a promotable sergeant with four years plus Active Duty experience as a Psychological Operations Specialist (PSYOP). I was 25 years old, married to a Special Forces Staff Sergeant, with no children. My previous deployments included a four week Joint PSYOP exercise in Jordan, six months in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia during Desert Shield/Storm, and a three month humanitarian aid deployment supporting the HIV-positive Haitian refugee camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The United States responded to the world's cry to provide humanitarian assistance to stop a wide spread famine in the midst of an ongoing civil war in Somalia. In January 1991 after controlling Somalia for 21 years, the authoritarian regime of strongman Mohammad Siad Barre fell from power. A resurgence of clan violence ensued with 14 different clans vying for power throughout the country which was now devoid of any central government and stricken by drought. Clans raided storehouses and depots of other clans, and Somalia fell into sectarian and ethnic warfare. Relief organizations paid protection money to the warlords as they tried to distribute food supplies. However, many of the supplies never reached the starving and were used to increase the power and prestige of the warlords (Stewart, 2002).

On April 24th, 1992, the United Nations passed Resolution 751 and almost immediately an insufficient contingency of peacekeepers was deployed establishing the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). The United States began Operation Provide Relief in support of UNOSOM on 15 August 1992. In response to the continued starvation in the increasingly chaotic conditions, the United States initiated Operation Restore Hope under the direction of a US commanded Unified

Task Force (UNITAF) on 8 December 1992. There was no resistance to the 38,000 strong force from 23 different nations. The warlords cooperated with each other, UNITAF troops, and 49 different humanitarian relief operations. Relief supplies flowed into the port and began making their way into the interior of the country by late December (Stewart, 2002).

UNITAF established a Joint PSYOP Task Force composed of 125 Soldiers and civilians from the 4th PSYOP Group, one U.S. Navy Soldier, and a dozen Somali linguists.

The JPOTF's mission was to provide advice, to analyze PSYOP-relevant intelligence and produce all printed products (leaflets, handbills, posters), including a Somali-language newspaper, and to transmit radio broadcasts via AM, FM and shortwave programming (Borchini & Borstelmann, 1994). The JPOTF worked with coalition forces, senior U.S. and U.N. civilians, and nongovernmental and private volunteer organizations. Throughout the course of Restore Hope, the JPOTF designed, produced and disseminated large numbers of more than a dozen different handbills and posters; issued 116 editions of a Somali-language newspaper; transmitted radio broadcasts twice daily; produced and disseminated more than seven million leaflets; deployed tactical PSYOP teams with the coalition forces; and provided advice to the U.S. special envoy and his staff (Borchini & Borstelmann, 1994).

Overall, relief operations went well, with few incidences of violence from February to May 1993. Markets reopened, travel became more common, and Soldiers settled into routines (Stewart, 2002). PSYOP Soldiers were even allowed to shop in local Mogadishu markets.

On 4 May 1993, the United Nations took command, and UNOSOM II began operating under recently passed Resolution 814 which considerably broadened the mandate to include peace enforcement for the first time in UN history. The transition suffered many set backs and only 30% of the UN staff was in place for the handover (Stewart, 2002). The U.S. contingency was reduced from approximately 28,000 to 4,500 troops (Allard, 1995). The PSYOP transition was no different. With U.N approval as of February 1993, the outgoing JPOTF began the process to hire and train local Somalis as journalists, translators, artists, broadcasters, radio producers, and printers. However, in March the incoming UNOSOM II staff requested that there be no change in the PSYOP staffing and that the U.S. Army personnel remain. Although the State Department approved the U.N. request, all non-essential equipment and personnel were redeployed (Friedman, 2006). The remaining U.S Army personnel included a lieutenant colonel, three sergeants and a specialist.

My Arrival

I joined the small PSYOP contingent on 5 June 1993 to replace one of the sergeants scheduled to depart in a few days. On the day I arrived, violence erupted in Mogadishu when supporters of General Muhammed Farah Aideed ambushed Pakistani Soldiers, killing 24 and wounding 44 others. The Pakistanis were responding to a request for help from a patrol of Italian Soldiers who were outside of their assigned corridor when they were attacked. The Pakistanis did not have sufficient ammunition and were over taken and killed by the angry crowd. While enroute to the airport to pick me up, the rear window of our vehicle was shattered. This was the first time I had ever traveled in a vehicle with a loaded weapon prepared to return fire, thus, began my short but intense deployment to Somalia.

As a promotable sergeant, I was the NCOIC of our small contingent. Our mission was to continue support of UNOSOM II by overseeing the production and dissemination

of 15,000 daily copies of a Somali-language newspaper, transmit radio broadcasts twice daily, and to develop and disseminate printed PSYOP products as required. Approximately 30 Somalis were on the U.N. payroll to assist in our mission. Approximately every three days we printed leaflets in support of security or relief operations; often a leaflet was used for multiple missions. Around 45 new leaflets and 4 posters were produced throughout UNOSOM II. The dissemination mission normally consisted of two PSYOP Soldiers flying on an Italian UH-60 helicopter. Large, heavy-duty garbage bags were filled with leaflets, tied with a large knot, and attached to a static line. While compensating for wind and positioned over the targeted location, a large hole was torn in the bottom of the bag, then the bag was thrown forcefully downward scattering the leaflets.

Landing in a Blackhawk Helicopter

Shortly after arriving, we were tasked with providing security on a night mission to escort journalists on a Blackhawk flight over Mogadishu. The Public Affairs Lieutenant Colonel selected me for the mission thinking that I hadn't had much excitement in my career and the press did not see many military females. He asked me if this was my first time on a Blackhawk. I replied "No, but it will be the first time I've ever landed in one." He thought that was great, so I still got to go on the mission. It was a great experience to ride with the press. We passed around a few flight helmets with night vision capabilities and followed a few suspicious acting Somalis. I'd act suspicious too if a military helicopter was tracking me.

Set Backs

Sadly, our newspaper delivery vehicle was targeted by an opposing clan, and 5 of our workers were captured and executed. The youngest was ~ 18 years old and the oldest, the Colonel, was in his seventies, had several wives, and his youngest child was five years old. Although 500,000 Somalis had already perished from violence and

famine, we were terribly saddened by their loss. They were wonderful people. The same day our workers were killed, we gathered all the remaining workers together and a Special Forces Major taught them escape and evasion methods. The following week, one of our translators relied on this training to save his life. This was the first time I was exposed to prejudice and extreme violence that was not based on color or religion; I was shocked.

The UNOSOM II press conferences were held on the elevated porch of our office, and we quickly began to dislike the press as they treated us and our workers poorly. On 12 July 1993, after the American quick reaction forces (QRF) attacked an important Aideed compound with helicopter gunships, an angry mob turned against the press covering the action. Four journalists and cameramen were killed and their bodies were displayed. The journalists were traumatized that their own kind were violently killed. I remember thinking that they had no sorrow or respect for peacekeepers killed – we were just numbers. However, the situation was much different when the casualties were from their own ranks, and they realized they had no special status in this conflict.

Our printing operations were frequently interrupted by equipment problems. We had two RISO™ printer-duplicators that produced 15,000 daily newspapers and other PSYOP products as required. RISOs are known for maintenance problems, so they were probably not the best selection, but the price was right. Our Somali printers were trained to print but not to maintain the equipment. Compounding the problem, when the U.N. took over operations in May, the U.N. repairman took the manual and all the parts to a centrally located warehouse and repair facility in Mogadishu. When the security situation deteriorated, no one could access the warehouse and the current repairman was not familiar with our equipment. Thus, when we requested a work order for repair and maintenance of our printing equipment, we were told there was no way to repair our printers.

I am very proud of my strong work ethic; I don't give up easily. I am also mechanically inclined, as my father taught me how to repair my first used car. On my own initiative I contacted our Print Company at Ft. Bragg, NC requesting someone to talk me through the repair. Since RISOs were not commonly held equipment, I was referred to the dealer that sold the RISOs. Over the next months, I spent many hours in the middle of the night talking to a very patient and encouraging technician. My first repairs were fairly easy consisting of cleaning sensors and performing routine maintenance, which I promptly taught our Somali printers. I was very displeased that our printers were not taught to perform general maintenance.

It became a frequent occurrence that I was awakened at 0200 when our printing operations were interrupted by repair issues. Both, I and the technician in the States were pleased when I adjusted a sensor with out the proper positioning tool – he didn't think it could be done. Every few days, I would beg the U.N. maintenance section to retrieve our manual and parts as soon as security conditions safely allowed. As time passed our repair problems worsened. One RISO went down and could not be repaired without parts. When the second RISO failed, I worked for two days and nights comparing the two RISOs with different ailments and scavenging parts from one to repair the other. If our printing equipment was down, we couldn't produce a newspaper, or support any operations with leaflets. We failed to meet our print mission.

Before I left in mid August 1993, I tried to pass on my knowledge to the U.N. employee who had taken over management of the PSYOP operation. I knew that my efforts were fruitless from my previous experiences with him, as five months earlier he had been a member of my unit, but I still had to make a decent effort. After I redeployed, the last printer failed and our section failed its print mission for weeks. We eventually became a U.N. priority and were assigned a technician who retrieved the parts and completed repairs.

Patriotism

On a personal level, my deployment to Somalia increased my level of patriotism. I knew from my previous deployments that I was grateful for my birth right of being born in the right place, the United States of America. Americans are very fortunate for the freedom, amenities, and opportunities that we enjoy. I never used to get emotional when I stood for our National Anthem – I do now. I commented how much I appreciated being an American to a young specialist that I met in an airport on my way home. He did not understand the meaning behind my comment. I asked if he had ever traveled out of the country ? He replied, no that he hadn't ever left the country but was soon to deploy with his unit. I told him he would understand when he returned home from a third world country.

Farewell

I departed earlier than scheduled, as my reenlistment contract had an option to attend one college semester within a year from my reenlistment date. My unit tried to defer my attendance to a later date, but was told if I couldn't attend by my suspense date, I would lose the opportunity. The day before I departed for the U.S., our Somali illustrator devoted a cartoon strip in my honor. The young Somali man named Celmi and his camel, Mandeeq, thanked me for all my hard work for the Somali people and said farewell to a friend of the Somali people to me. Mandeeq had tears in her eyes as I climbed the stairs to the airplane. I was very touched at our workers good-byes and torn about leaving.

Lessoned Learned

Working in a coalition for the United Nations presented many hindrances to our mission. Although the U.N. had the authority, it did not competently possess command and control of the various forces or even its own staff. This was evident by forces patrolling outside of their assigned sectors, my less than desirable contact with U.N.

employees, and our unanswered requests for assistance, work orders, and supplies. I was not impressed by the U.N. staff that I worked with. The U.N. employee that took over supervision of our operations had recently served in the UNITAF JPOTF as member of the 8th PSYOP Bn. He had a “who cares” attitude and was there only to draw a pay check and to make his entry into U.N. employment in order to use his linguistic talents.

The U.N. was not prepared to take over operations in Somali from UNITAF nor was our understaffed, five-Soldier skeletal PSYOP contingent. Since UNOSOM II controlled our mission, the 4th PSYOP Group didn't have any funds to support our needs.

This was the first time that the U.N.'s mandate has ever allowed for peace enforcement, they were not prepared to respond to their self induced mission creep. The United States public was not prepared to see dead American Soldiers paraded through the streets to support a mission prompted by pictures of starving children. How could the world's superpower fail to deal with impoverished war lords.

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