

CASS asked me if I wanted to go to Africa in uniform, but not in the Army.

This time the locale was neither Iraq nor Afghanistan, but rather a remote garrison town in North Central Kenya. The mission was to train the Kenyan Army so they could increase the level of border security with the adjoining failed state of Somalia. The start date was January of 2008, precisely in the midst of the ethnic violence which wracked Kenya post election and left thousands dead. With the death toll climbing, I will admit to a loss of enthusiasm as departure date approached.

The ten of us arrived in Nairobi in the dead of night, ghosting through immigration on Government ID's which means there was never a record of us having been in the country. As the sun rose the next morning, I found myself bouncing along a rutted track some 6000 feet above sea level. The twin spires of Mt. Kenya gleamed in the distance, sunlight sparkling off the glaciers.

As trainers, we were technically classified as non-combatants and were thus unarmed. In a bizarre twist of fate, the only location suitable for accommodations was a wildlife Conservancy, one of the most pristine African wildlife habitats on the planet. We disappeared into austere quarters in an isolated quadrant of the refuge, invisible to the daily parade of movie stars, singers, and upscale clientele who routinely stayed at the more luxurious camps. We were gone shortly after the sun came up and returned just before it set. The only hint of our existence was the rolling gunfire which sometimes echoed through the blue haze of the hills to the North where the Army base lay.

The Kenyan Army is unusual by African standards, being both professional and well integrated. There are some 43 different tribes in Kenya with a multiplicity of religions and languages. While this diversity has fostered ethnic violence in other parts of the country, the soldiers existed in harmony. Christian soldiers would quietly wait while their Muslim comrades conducted their daily prayers. The Army, much to its credit, refused to partake in civil peace-keeping operations during the ethnic violence and kept its troops in the barracks, thus keeping with the Constitution of the country.

With the passage of time, we fell into routine. Tea served prior to sunrise, followed by a hearty breakfast and then off to the training area. Commuter traffic of the 4 wheeled variety was invariably light, but commuters of the 4 hoofed variety was a different story. More often than not we were halted by wandering rhinos and elephants who had opted to use our road as a kind of pedestrian mall. Unlike Baghdad however, nothing was going to blow up suddenly on the side of the road. The zebras didn't explode which was viewed in a positive light by all who served in Iraq.

The Kenyans themselves are an Army in transition, which has posed innumerable problems. The young and educated speak English while the old and vested do not. The Officers are, for the most part, hopelessly inefficient and many are corrupt. We spent a month with one young Lieutenant who was far more interested in calling his girl friends than on training men. He went to the field armed with a walking stick, sunglasses and cell phone. When it came time to carry his load, he simply pointed to his batman, which is a kind of personal orderly left over from the dumber days of the British Empire. The best are the lower level enlisted who are both motivated and intelligent. But it will require another 2 decades for the current cream to finally rise to the top of the layer of fat which is currently so prevalent in the Kenyan military.

The training environment is equally unique. There are no perimeter boundaries nor border fences. In simple terms, that means you can find anything on the live fire range, from errant lions to wandering herdsmen accompanied by a hundred head of sheep. It was invariably humorous to see a company of heavily armed men, though lacking real bullets, drop everything and flee from the scene of a passing lion or pachyderm. Having said that, I tended not to linger myself and always made sure at least one fat private was between me and the marauding beast of choice.

Military ranges in the West are tightly controlled. Not so in Kenya. The warning for a pending live fire was simply the top NCO stepping out and firing 3 shots in the air at 30 second intervals. About

15 minutes later the live fire started. If you were caught downrange that was your tough luck and the best option when the bullets crackled overhead was to quickly search for a shallow depression in the ground from which to ride out the storm. The bush telegraph is a wondrous thing, for although I came across the riddled carcasses of a few goats or stray dogs, we never shot a human, which was nothing short of amazing in my book.

The wildest part of the contract, in terms of wildlife, was at the lodge where we stayed. On the second day there I was shaving in the large tents we had when, from above the mirror, a foot long snake fell from the netting above into the sink. Battleship grey in color, he promptly exited the sink and curled up in the corner of the shower. To be honest, I was too surprised to be scared. He didn't look too harmful, which is one of the reasons I avoid everything that slithers in Africa. For upon notifying one of the staff, hysterics descended upon the local workers. My cute little garden snake was indeed a baby cobra, who by then could produce enough venom to kill a full grown elephant. So my second morning was marked by the necessity of having to bludgeon a baby cobra to death with a fire extinguisher in my own shower. Welcome to Africa.

It was less than 2 weeks later that I was gently padding up the hill, just after 0600, in search of morning coffee. 0600 is the nebulous witching hour between darkness and light. Two minutes earlier it is still pitch black. 8 minutes more is broad daylight, such are sunsets and sunrises directly on the equator. Those who have spent time in Africa watch where they put their feet and hands. I stopped on the gravel path for before me was a vague pattern too disciplined to be irregular earth. 30 seconds later another contractor, wiping the sleep from his eyes, tried to blunder past. I halted him and we both watched for another 30 seconds. Reaching down we tossed forward a few pebbles and were confronted with a most evil hissing. The pattern turned out to be a 4 foot puff adder, widely regarded as one of the most dangerous serpents in Africa. It took 15 minutes for the 2 of us to finally stone it to death. When it

was skinned for a future belt, a 3 foot feral cat was found to be inside. No wonder the snake had a difficult time in escaping, it was carrying its own body weight in its stomach!

One of the hidden joys of being in the contractor business is the off time in locales you would never visit on your own. Even in the early days in Baghdad, I found I was able to interact with the local populace. I have always found other cultures fascinating and unlike so many who opt to while away their down time in front of the television with a case of beer, I try to get out. It keeps one fresh and hones an appreciation for what one has.

I was in the midst of a world class wildlife sanctuary and was determined not to let the opportunity pass. So I went down to the Ranger station and basically hired my own personal guide.

Every spare moment, every day off, every afternoon possible, we took to the rolling grasslands and hills of central Kenya. Almost always on foot, departing in the morning in the last moments before sunrise. It was not unusual for us to wander more than 20 miles in the course of the day, through ravines choked with vegetation through rolling savannah with nary a tree in sight. We departed with a thermos of coffee, a handful of hard boiled eggs, slabs of pre cooked bacon, and thick, home baked bread of the highlands. Robi, my Pokot guide, carried his rifle and I lugged a walking stick and camera. Some of my photos appear on this page.

They were, beyond all doubt, the best days of my life. Robi had been a game ranger and a counter poaching tracker for some 25 years. He spoke no English. I spoke no Swahili.

We became like the animals that surrounded us.....skirting herds of elephants, routinely passing groups of cheetahs at ranges of 25 meters. Robi was fearless or mad or both. We were charged on more than one occasion by elephants. Another time I found myself running for my life only to hear him laughing beside me. Once, returning home from a long day, he glanced over his shoulder, tapped mine,

and simply said, "run." We had trespassed upon the personal property of a black Rhino and lived again to tell the tale. Contrary to every book I ever read, he was just plain obstinate and the local wildlife usually caved in. We found a pair of old Cape Buffalo blocking our path. I had already started on the detour when he motioned for me to stop. Picking up rocks, he simply moved forward and pelted them till they acquiesced and provided us safe passage.

We met lions on foot, in the wild. And cheetahs, along with a leopard in a tree. Came within grenade range of 4500 pound White Rhino. Once a hyena broke from cover between the two of us and another time we stumbled into a herd of 17 African wild dogs at a range of 3 meters. But the hairiest was coming upon a pair of hippos who were camped out on our lunch spot, beside the lake. I was all for taking second place. But Robi made a show of it and the hippos slowly yielded ground and retreated into the water. We had just started to boil the tea when they in turn made a concerted counterattack, charging us as water poured off their giant bodies. I make no attempt to lie. I was plain scared and getting ready for yet another run for life. We two sprinted perhaps some 50 meters before Robi turned and reached for more rocks. We stood our ground, which was insane, but he had the gun so I wanted to be close. Hurling clods of earth we closed the range and with bellows, snorts, and fake charges they again slowly yielded ground till they had returned to the pond. Every time they began to wade forward, heads barely above water, they were met by a hail of rocks. And so it went for 30 minutes, while we ate our sandwiches and drank our tea. We were perhaps 20 meters apart and I don't think my eyes left them once. But that was a contractor Sunday afternoon in Kenya and the memory shall enrich my life till the end of days. I learned SO much. About me, about another culture, about the ways of the animals which man so poorly understands. I fell in love with the place and dream of Africa now.

So the whole gig was a great contract for me. I was working with soldiers, which was great. I was earning a reasonable wage, which was also acceptable. But unlike my fellow contractors, who could

have cared less about the wildlife, I was able to take advantage of the situation in a way most people never can. That's what makes the contractor experience so valuable for me.

I can't wait to go back again next year, although there is a slot open in Indonesia which looks pretty appealing too. Just thinking about all that scuba diving from junks on my spare time, sailing through the Lombok strait on the way to Bali. Hmmmm.

Like everybody else who has come through here.....no regrets.