

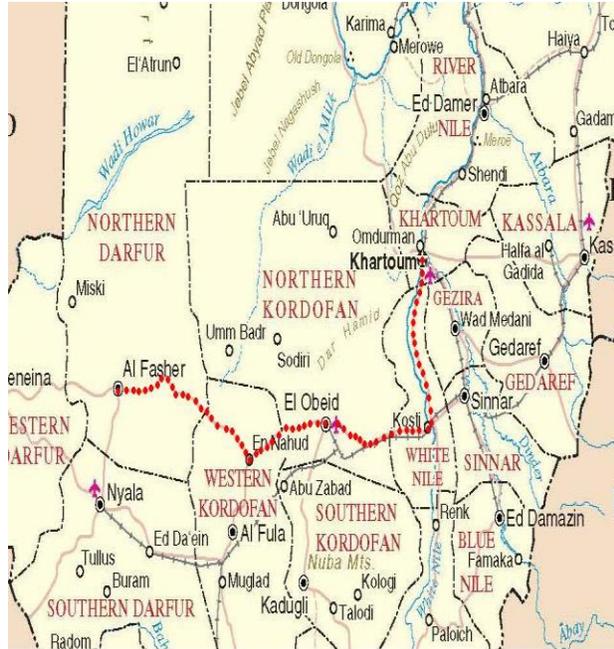
## A SAILOR IN SUDAN

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*The opinions expressed therein are those of the author only and not the Government of Canada*

How did I get there? How does a RCN Log Commander end up standing in an interrogation room in real danger of losing much more than his dignity? Well, the short answer is, I jumped at the chance.



I was asked to take a long-range convoy from Girouard's railhead in Khartoum all the way west across the Sudanese desert to strife-ridden Darfur, close to the Chad border. This was an opportunity to follow a route older than the written word through some of the world's most unforgiving territory plagued by hostile factions and escorted by an equally hostile escort. What's more, I was paid to do it.

As Senior Staff Officer Log Ops with the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), one of my primary roles is the planning and monitoring of intra and inter-theatre convoys. The mission's mandate in Darfur of facilitating the implementation of the peace process is frankly, overshadowed by the sheer scope of the job at hand. Although currently the largest UN

mission in the world, the area of operations is the size of France and with 27,000 peacekeepers, of which only 18,000 are military at the end of a 1400-mile supply chain, the logistics can be baffling.

Further complicating the issue are the million plus internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sudan and the thousands of refugees in neighbouring countries who are not in their homes, not farming, not herding and consequently retarding any hope of economic recovery. The UN's goal is to get these people home so that they can get on with their lives and Sudan can recover enough to feed itself. However, this great and supposed repatriation will only happen if their homes and the routes they must travel to those homes are secure. UNAMID means to bring stability to Darfur by simply establishing a presence in a place so cursed with conflict ranging in scope from outright rebellion against the Government of Sudan (GoS) to inter-tribal and resource-based flare-ups. This is done by dividing UN forces and resources amongst 3 sectors and nearly 40 team sites, something akin to a forward operating base. The network of patrol routes, information gathering and monitoring provided by these establishments is critical to achieving the mission.

Team sites are usually established at critical junctures of roads, migratory routes, water sources or at sites of traditional conflict or IDP camps. Supplying these team sites is my job and, being relatively new to the mission and certainly to the UN way of doing things, I try to get out

on some of the convoys I organize to see firsthand the challenges they face. The route between El Fasher (where I am based), Nyala, and El Geneina to the team sites are standing and oft-used routes. Within a month, I had a good grip on the issues we faced and why. Long range convoys from our sole seaport of Port Sudan into theatre are usually executed by contracted trucking and not so easily accompanied. So when the opportunity arose to move UN vehicles from Khartoum all the way to 'sector west', like I said, I jumped at the chance.

So, there I was, an over-ranked Convoy Commander of 25 vehicles comprising 15 SUVs and 10 massive garbage compacting trucks; the latter of which were spectacularly ill-suited for desert driving. My staff consisted of 10 professional Sudanese truck drivers for the big rigs and 17 civilian police officers from 14 different countries...most of whom were also spectacularly ill-suited for desert driving. Because we were starting from outside UNAMID's area of operations, our force protection was GoS Central Reserve Police who would turn over to armed UN troops at the Darfur border. If the personnel and consistency of the convoy wasn't enough to give pause, this GoS police escort certainly was. Picture, if you will, five four-wheeled drive pickup trucks of dubious age and condition each mounted with an old Soviet 12.7 mm anti-aircraft gun and carrying at the very least eight AK-toting, flip flop-wearing paramilitaries in all manner of dress. In fact, the only degree of uniformity found in our escort seemed to be their worrying immaturity both in age and weapons discipline. Seemingly harmless outcrops of rock and vegetation would elicit the most brutal and direct fire.

I won't get into a history lesson of this storied corner of the world but I was quivering with anticipation of traversing a region that was little-changed from the time of the Mahdi and Kitchener's expedition up the Nile to Khartoum. There was a Canadian connection there too with Voyageurs used to pilot his river boats and Percy Girouard performing miracles of engineering in laying hundreds of miles of rail across the desert. My contribution was negligible in comparison but the challenges of moving men and material across a land better-suited to no movement at all remained unchanged.

So, with visions of 'Beau Geste' and 'Sahara' (the Bogart film, not that ridiculous Cussler adaptation) I flew from El Fasher to Khartoum to make final preparations. The morning of departure dawned like most other mornings in Khartoum, hot and dusty. I found the vehicles fuelled and with fresh batteries but that was the extent of their preparations. One was missing a back windscreen, two had doors that wouldn't close and all were disgustingly dirty. I don't mean dirty on the outside as all vehicles in Sudan are coated in a fine talc-like dust. I mean dirty inside with mounds of refuse, garbage and local critters. When UNMIS peeled out of Khartoum a few months before, they left their surplus vehicles in an unused motor pool. Unlocked doors coupled with a large homeless population amongst the locals ensured that nothing went unused, especially the option of a roof over one's head.

After mucking out what we could and killing what we couldn't, we loaded our personal gear and six days of rations into the vehicles and waited for the GoS escort to show up. I had made sure that most SUVs had a second driver as we were pushing through with no delays. The Sudanese police had made it quite clear that we were to expect 16 to 18 hours of driving a day and our goal was to get to the Darfur border and under UN escort sometime on the afternoon of the third day. Mine turned out to be a rather chatty South African beat cop but that didn't last too long.

Our departure time of 0600 was delayed repeatedly as the morning cooked away with still no escort. Calls were made and then re-made until finally, in a cloud of dust and war whoops, they showed up. Quick introductions were made uncomprehendingly but certain that I could

identify at least the officer amongst them, we did a comms check, mounted up and moved. The first hour was spent fighting our way out of Khartoum's notorious traffic. It is said that Chinese Gordon had the roads laid out in Khartoum to resemble the geometry of a Union Flag when seen from the air. This romantic explanation is a far cry from the tactical advantage of being able to control eight roads with one cannon placed at the centre. Whatever the logic in the 1880's whether whimsy or a darker purpose, the eight streets converging together made for some interesting traffic conundrums in 2011!

### **GoS Central Reserve Police**



By the afternoon of the first day, we had crossed the White Nile and made El Obeid by late evening. Situated centrally, El Obeid was a UN logistics hub up until the fragmentation of Sudan into north and south and the subsequent move of the UN mission in Khartoum to Juba in the Republic of South Sudan. El Obeid is also where the pavement runs out and the real fun begins.

Unfortunately, the fun would have to wait for a full 36 hours. Our GoS police escort was requested by necessity as we needed protection and armed UN soldiers are not permitted to operate outside Darfur. Officially, the escort is provided as a courtesy by the government. However, if I take anything away from my UNAMID experience, Bashir's government does little for the UN and never out of courtesy. In addition to providing them with rations and bottled water each evening, the pickup of which they were never late for, the request for bribes was incessant. Districts in this country are run like feudal states by the local police and army commanders and everybody, naturally, wants a cut. Our escort was from Khartoum and try as they might to whisk us through a region without having to share the spoils, often times they reluctantly had to give up a share to their police and military brethren. The plan to get into El Obeid late and leave early before the local authorities caught on was foiled by a particularly diligent local soldier and we were stuck until tea was drunk, deals were made and pockets were lined.

Late on the third day, we pulled into a town called En Nahud to fuel at a Petronas gas station whose well-lit and chromed existence was as out of place in the dirty, dusty and miserable collection of mud huts as I was. Remarkably, in the middle of all this, a tiny provincial village of a few thousand people, was a gleaming white marble hospital. Not big, only a couple of stories and judging by the tinted windows, about six rooms per floor, but remarkable nevertheless. I immediately rethought my fast-forming opinion of an uncaring government after all the poverty we had passed to date until on closer inspection, I found out that the most remarkable thing about the hospital was its facade. In fact, the only thing about the hospital was its facade. Not a joke nor a cover-up but literally a facade. The marbled front exterior wall complete with tinted windows and gleaming sign and red crescent over the door was literally 8 inches thick and propped up by a motley collection of timber and old pieces of pipe from behind. My investigation was curtailed by an AK-toting soldier but I wondered what occasion, what inspection or what visit would necessitate the building of a facade without a structure. Not unlike the countryside visits of Catherine the Great, things were not always as they seemed.

I walked back to the collection of UN vehicles that had already fuelled and was waved over by the drivers. Like truck drivers the world over, they spent too much time awake and trying to concentrate not to relax when they have the chance. If they had to wait, they would do it either eating or sleeping and it was a mouth-watering concoction that was bubbling up from the wok-like pot perched precariously on the primus stove. With broken English I was invited to sit and, in the traditional Sudanese manner and armed only with a piece of bread for an implement, we shared a communal meal of goat and gravy.

### **On the Road to An Nahud**



When we finally pushed out of En Nahud later that night, it was starless, windy and the dust hung heavy in the air. I had lost my South African co-driver to accompany one of the Indonesian police who had little cause to ever learn how to drive a four-wheeled drive standard shift. Our next stop for the remainder of the night was to be a village named Wad Bandha. Just a few hundred miles

down the road, we figured we could get there in three to four hours but the fair, albeit dirt track we had been following so far, gave way to pure desert and the maddening speed set by the front escort vehicle and the inability of the 'heavies' to keep up, meant that the convoy was spread out over 5 miles of dusty desert night and in real danger of getting split up. Repeated radio calls to the lead GoS truck went unanswered and watching the fading yellowed lights of the vehicle behind me blinking in and out of sight, I ordered all to a more sedate pace so as to stay together. I was resolved to the probability we would get lost but at least we would be lost together. We slowed and I strained the eyes out of my head to follow the fast-disappearing tracks of the long-gone GoS truck.

We had made good time for an hour or so as I was pretty confident I was on the right track. Visibility was down to about 40-50 feet but I could still see the GoS tracks faintly in my headlights. Staring at the track, I was a nearly too late to yank the wheel hard over to get out of the way of a truck coming at me like the hounds of hell were on its heels. I ran a dozen feet off the trail and up and over a dune before regaining track and stared at the lead GoS vehicle in my rear-view mirror pull a u-turn and pass me. They had reached Wad Bandha and had come back to look for us. Only a few miles out, we picked up speed and followed them in. It was still too fast for my liking as I keep overdriving my headlights but, apart from a bright green flip-flop that



flew out of the murk to catch up on my windshield wiper, I didn't hit anything.

### **Wad Bandha traffic jam**

I marshalled the vehicles laager-style around a copse of acacia in the middle of Wad Bandha and strung my hammock between the back rack of my Nissan and a convenient tree. Most lads

decided to sleep inside the vehicle but with the engines off and the windows up, I found it too hot after the first night. My hammock had a built-in bug net so I was cooler and protected and not for the first time did I thank the occasional foresight of the supply system. I was draining the dregs of my evening coffee after having seen a joyous GoS policeman come and retrieve his flip-flop when the GoS Lieutenant came up for a chat. I called over our transport I/C, a Canadian ex-corporal from Maniwaki named Danny Moore to join in. I might be the convoy commander but Danny had been driving for the UN for 7 years and running convoys in Sudan for four. He knew the ins and outs of this and I wanted him close.

It turns out that the local army commander had heard of our presence and wasn't too happy about it. He hadn't received any requests and alleged we were there without official permission. There without paying for his hospitality, more like. The GoS Lieutenant was out of his depth against a full Colonel but he entreated us to wait and wait we did. Danny said that usually these things worked themselves out and after cooling our heels for a bit, face would be saved and we would be allowed to move on. Turns out there was a lot of face to save.

### **Brewing a cup**



For 5 days and nights we waited. It was maddening. The Darfur border and a UN escort comprising a company of Egyptian infantry was a scant 50 kilometres away but it may as well have been 500. To proceed alone and without escort was to court disaster and despite working the phones back to UNHQ and to whatever contacts we had in Khartoum, we were stuck. It was easy to convince a state official in Khartoum to let us move onward but that order was appreciably diluted by the time it hit the local army commander's desk.

We were down to a day's rations by the second day in Wad Bandha. We had gotten the customary visit by a member of the National Intelligence & Security Service (NISS) that morning with a thinly veiled warning that we were not to wander. This Sudanese version of a secret police is pervasive in all facets of Sudan's society and is Khartoum's watchdog constantly on the lookout for all manner of transgression. I ordered the rations preserved for the time being and not having much of a choice, I sent a couple of the Sudanese drivers into the village market for food. My hopes of a low profile was dashed when a pick-up came screaming into our little cantonment with the two drivers all smiles in the back along with a decidedly unhappy-looking goat. The driver of the pick-up was also the butcher and to a chorus of oohs and aahs from the ever-present and ever-growing pack of youngsters, he dispatched the goat and proceeded to dress the kill after hanging the carcass in a tree.

### **Dinner - Phase One**



Over the course of those five days, some very real truths became evident. The first and the source of the biggest relief was the friendliness of the locals. Despite the assertions that the ‘don’t wander’ rule from NISS was for our own safety, all we ever got from the local population was smiles. All I ever lost to them was arm hair to the children. Fascinated, they would gather round and soon little fingers would pull and tug on the blonde hair on my arms. I guess blue-eyed Newfs weren’t a common sight. Our drivers visited the market daily and in addition to goat, we had watermelon, rice, and local vegetables that staved off hunger. We still kept as low a profile as we could as Wad Bandha’s NISS seemed particularly stringent.

The second truth that emerged was that no matter the language, the culture, the race or the religion, euchre, once taught, is a huge hit. I didn’t

worry too much about any of the lads getting into trouble. It’s not like there was an Irish pub on every corner. What I did worry about was boredom. There were the card games of course and after the first day with not much hope of a move any time soon, I made them all do maintenance on the vehicles daily. Nothing seriously complicated but fluid level checks and stuff like that. Next, I organized ‘cultural exchange’ classes where everybody had to conduct a class explaining one element of their culture to the rest of us. This was a particular hit as we had classes on Indonesian cooking, Egyptian history, South African animals, the Royal Canadian Navy (mea culpa) and Sudanese phrases. All went well save for when one of the Sudanese drivers thought that the Phillipino police officer was explaining how to kill somebody by elaborately cutting into their skull. The man was actually visually paling until he figured out that what was being explained was the proper way to cut up a pineapple.

Finally, I discovered (and not for the first time) that when you get yourself into a sticky situation, help usually comes from the strangest of corners. Bored, and equipped with a shipment of ‘Izzy Dolls’ that I found in some lost mail in Khartoum, I took a Yemeni police officer as a translator and we walked a short distance up the road to where we knew there was a school. Looking back now, it was stupid and irresponsible but seemed like a good idea at the time. At the gate, my Yemeni colleague called for the headmaster and explained that we were in the UN, passing through, and his Canadian commander would like to make a gift of these dolls to his students. The man smiled until looking over my shoulder, I suddenly saw his face darken and he slammed the gate in our faces. We turned around and were faced with three armed NISS agents who motioned us to precede them. A hundred yards further along, we were conducted into a compound and separated.

Now, I pride myself on being able to talk my way out of most situations. It’s the gift bequeathed on me by my Newfoundland heritage. Take the finest that English prison hulks have to offer, add a dash of Irish, a sizable quantity of adversity and cook for 400 years and you have a race that rely on their tongues as much as their fists. Well, they had the guns and I was armed only with a blue beret so talking my way out seemed the only option. The problem was, I don’t speak Arabic and they didn’t speak English...much anyway.

They stripped me to my unmentionables and went through my pockets. Wallet, ID, Passport, some money, lip balm, and some other stuff but certainly nothing to warrant the none-too-gentle shoves and repeated questions yelled at me in Arabic. I was pushed to a corner and standing in my boots and not much else, I felt very vulnerable. One kept yelling in my face while a couple of others were field-stripping my wallet. Finally I got some English.

“You America!”

“No...no Canada. Ana Canadi!”

“You America...you USA!”

“No. CAN-A-DA. You know, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver...” Where the hell would the Sudanese community be in Canada? There had to be one. We had everyone else and maybe, just maybe, one of these guys had heard of it.

Another lad came into the room while I tried very hard to keep composed. He seemed to command some respect and he looked at me hard through his Ray-Ban knock offs. I suddenly had to use the heads very badly but before I could frame the request, he asked in heavily accented English, “What you like, Starbucks or Tim Hortons?” I was momentarily stunned but without thinking said, “Tim Hortons.”

“My brother!” he exclaimed and slapped me on the shoulder. A few staccato words and I had my clothes back. In fact, I had everything back except whatever Sudanese Pounds I had on me but I didn’t complain. A few minutes later we were released and on our way with a renewed warning to not wander about. My Yemeni colleague was as shaken as I was but sequestered in the next room, he had picked up on much of what was said. It turns out that this NISS Major had failed out of Carenton a few years ago but not before hoisting aboard a little piece of Canadiana. I consider myself very fortunate to have been raised in the East Coast Navy. Had I been a ‘sandy bottom sailor’ with more refined coffee taste, I would still be there.

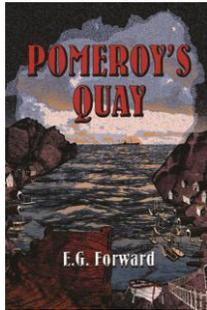
Out of rations, nearly out of safe water, and with pressure from Mission HQ, we convinced the GoS to give it up and take us back to Khartoum. Breakneck speed and a wee bit of frustration saw us make the journey in a couple of days. Once the euphoria of that first shower had worn off and waiting for the flight back to El Fasher, I had time to reflect on the experience.

### **NISS Compound - Wad Bandha**

I didn’t get the convoy through and I didn’t see much of historical Sudan. We didn’t stop at any ruins nor did I see much evidence of the country’s colonial history. What I did see was a proud and friendly people who accorded us every courtesy that was within their means and I did face some of the challenges that our convoys face each and every day. The crippling bureaucracy of the dictatorship that is the Government of Sudan is forced on the UN and the Sudanese people alike. This one thing is the greatest obstacle to development in this country that needs it so much.

A week after I got back to El Fasher, we learned of the bombing death of Dr. Khalil Ibrahim of the Justice and Equality Movement, one of the rebel groups, in the vicinity of Wad Bandha. His presence must have been suspected and this explains the erratic behaviour of the NISS. Perhaps he was even one of the multitudes of locals who paid us a visit, hiding in plain sight. I don’t know but in the wake of the unconfirmed stories of civilian collateral damage in

the bombing, I only hope that everyone I encountered escaped unscathed. The trouble is, I will never know but will always wonder. I am afraid for me that will be the legacy of Sudan.



*Cdr Forward has recently published a book about a young Newfoundland lad, Richard Pomeroy, who having just lost his father to a fishing accident, becomes the head of the family and must join the workforce. At a time when Britain is on the verge of war with Germany, Richard, facing the dangers of the sea and the violence of the enemy, must conquer prejudice and the torturous lifestyle of an inshore fisherman--all in the face of war. In a totally unexpected dramatic conclusion, Richard saves the day and reinstates his family's standing in the village. Pomeroy's Quay (978-1-926962-42-9) is published by General Store Publishing House, Renfrew, Ontario, and retails for \$20 and is available at*

*www.gsph.com, www.chapters.indigo.ca, by request at independent bookstores, and www.amazon.com.*