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Excerpt from chapter 11, "Benghazi: The Libyan Adventures"

We had an exceptionally competent staff in Benghazi. George Naifeh, the public affairs officer, and his wife, Marion, both of whom spoke Arabic, were the best the Foreign Service had to offer. Sadly, they were being transferred elsewhere in the normal course of their duties. Everyone, the Libyans in particular, were very sorry to see them go, and there were numerous farewell parties for them. On the day of their departure, my wife and I rose very early to accompany them to the airport. After wishing them Godspeed and watching the plane ascend into the sky, we drove back to Benghazi in the official car. On the way, we dropped Elsa off at the new Residence in the suburbs.

The day was Monday, June 5, 1967, a day I shall never forget. I arrived at the office around 9:00 a.m. to encounter Libyan staff members in great excitement rushing out of the building, while a guard detachment of five CYDEF soldiers took positions at the door. I was told that war had broken out between Israel and the Arab countries, and unruly mobs were already in the streets. Running upstairs to my office, I met Tom Twetten, who calmly gave me a situation report. I gave instructions to the staff to call the Emergency and Evacuation (E & E) Committee together and to secure the building. While we had done some burning of classified material in the previous weeks, urgent measures now had to be taken to deal with the vast amount still in the file room.

In the final analysis, despite the fact that the ambassador was in Tripoli, Benghazi was a de facto embassy, with all that went with it. It was a repository for top-secret messages and documents from Washington and posts all over the world. Should this material or the code machines fall into unfriendly hands, the consequences for the United States could be disastrous. I immediately ordered the files to be burned, using the file room incinerator, as well as five emergency fifty-gallon drums on the roof.

The E & E Committee met promptly, and within fifteen minutes coordinated instructions were passed on to everyone. Key persons on the E & E Alert List were to be telephoned. The thirty-five members of the Military Advisory Group were to have played a key role in the defense of the Embassy, but a telephone call from Lieutenant Colonel Campbell informed me, minutes after he had left the E & E meeting, that he had run into mobs on returning to his

headquarters. He said it would be unwise to try to force a passage to the Embassy with his men at this time. However, a station wagon loaded with weapons for us had departed earlier. Indeed, while we were on the telephone, it arrived, accompanied by Army Captain Peter Sielinski and Corporal Emil Fabrocini, who had come along to help defend the Embassy. Footlockers with rifles, pistols, grenades, tear gas, and gas masks were quickly carried inside. The station wagon sped away, just as a mob of several hundred Arabs came running around the corner.

The doors were slammed shut. Weapons were passed out in the entrance hall with the admonition that no shot be fired without my permission. I strapped on a .45 caliber pistol. With Robert Prosser, who had replaced Anthony Santiano as administrative officer, I made the rounds of the building, checking its security. I was grateful that in an earlier life it had been an Italian bank. It had strong, barred windows, a heavy iron grill, an outer door, and a massive, vault-type steel inner door opened by combination lock.

In addition to myself, nine members of the American staff were in the building, as well as a Peace Corps volunteer, Richard Johnson, who was helping to telephone persons on the E & E Alert List. The latter were being told to relay instructions down the line to the American community to stay indoors, listen to the radio for BBC and British Armed Forces broadcasts, and await further instructions. My good friend, John Tomazos, the Greek consul, as well as two Libyan employees, were also in the building, having been trapped by the appearance of the mob. Tomazos had stopped by seeking advice on how he might protect the Greek community.

At first, the 500–600 demonstrators were content to wave a large bed sheet-like banner with a pro-Nasser inscription in Arabic, while they jeered the CYDEF guard. Suddenly, they became violent. The cobblestone streets around the Embassy and the cathedral square had been torn up prior to being repaired. Large piles of cobblestones and rocks were lying about. In minutes, the CYDEF soldiers went down under a barrage of rocks and then scurried off without firing a shot. Everywhere, there were sounds of windows breaking and the smashing of shutters. The building received a tremendous pounding. In no time offices were badly damaged, the floors covered in rocks. Office equipment was smashed. Antennae on the roof were knocked askew. From what we could see of the mob, they were not just the students we had seen demonstrating in the streets in past weeks. Many appeared to be foreign workers, likely Egyptians, who were among the two thousand of their countrymen engaged in building the pan-Arab Olympic stadium and other projects in and around Benghazi.

Radio Cairo was broadcasting erroneously that American planes were bombing Cairo, and one could sense the mob's hostility. Shortly after we came

under attack, we lost our electric power and had to switch over to an emergency gasoline generator to operate the communications equipment. The telephones also ceased to work. There had been no indication from government authorities of any proposed cut-offs. Possibly these facilities had fallen into the hands of the rioters. Still at this point, it appeared as if the Libyan government was doing what it could to protect us.

However, we were in a violent part of the world and when serving in such places, one prepares for these situations. In cooperation with the British military, a two-way radio had been placed in a cabinet behind my desk. Periodically, two British soldiers from the signals detachment would come by to assure that it was in operating condition. Nevertheless, at the fateful hour, it did not work, and we were unable to reach British Cyrenaica Area Command Headquarters.

The communications vault's incinerator was woefully inadequate. Our main effort to destroy files then rested with the five fifty-gallon steel drums on the roof. Several file loads were hurriedly carried up there and dumped in the drums. Destroying all the classified material in the file room was going to be a long, laborious, and dangerous process, since anyone on the roof moved under a shower of stones from below.

Before much could be done, however, I arrived on the roof to see attackers appear on top of a higher adjoining building. They began hurling rocks down on us. A ladder was lowered, which some of them used, while others simply dropped down the twelve feet to our level and rushed toward us. A hand-to-hand struggle ensued. I gave the order to clear the roof and we fought our way to the stairwell, slamming the steel door shut. Captain Sielinski was placed on guard at that entry point.

A short while later, Sielinski reported that our assailants had tried to force the steel door to the stairwell and, unable to do so, had departed. Before leaving, however, they had cut the halyards on the vertical pole from which the American flag flew and it was left draped down against the front of the building. He requested permission to retrieve the flag and run it back up the pole. I dismissed his request, saying it would be counterproductive and only incite the mob further.

Venturing out onto the roof again to retrieve the fifty-gallon drums, we were spotted. Fortunately the drums were still in place, but in recovering them we were bombarded with rocks from the adjacent building. The drums were hauled down the stairs and placed on an interior courtyard balcony which could only be entered from the communications vault on the second floor. Using burning kits and thermite grenades, the feverish effort to destroy safe-loads of highly classified material began again.

With the antennae damaged, we were having problems in maintaining contact with Embassy Athens, which was relaying messages for us to Washington, Tripoli, and other posts. A direct telephone line in the vault to the British military headquarters functioned for a brief time; but it too soon went dead again for most of the day. Suddenly out of the blue, one of the office phones rang. It was an American oilman calling from deep in the desert to find out what was happening. I explained our situation and asked him to forward messages to our Embassy in Tripoli. We arranged to have him call back periodically, since even with that phone we could not call out.

On a normal sunny day in June, temperatures in Benghazi can go well above 100 degrees, as desert winds blow warm air and sand into the city. The building, now buttoned up, without electricity, and filled with smoke from burning files on the inner balcony, became a furnace, and I knew it would only get worse. One could see that staff members feared not only for their lives, but for those of their wives and children on the outside. We had received word that "half the city was ablaze from the burning of Jewish shops and properties."

I then did something I was often queried about later. Captain Sielinski came to me once more with a request that we retrieve the flag and raise it to its full height. Any sensible Foreign Service officer might again have dismissed this as foolishness. However, I was troubled by his request and the effect it might have on others present. In combat as a paratrooper in World War II, I had seen how important it was for soldiers to feel that they were acting bravely. I knew what defiance and a bit of bravura could do for them when under mortal stress. A display of courage can be infectious and inspiring, just as an act of cowardice can be demoralizing.

I went into my office and closed the door. It was in ruins. The windows were obliterated. The floor lay buried deep in rocks, which continued to crash in violently, scattering glass and debris. Kneeling down in a far corner trying to protect myself, I sought guidance. I do not know how long I was there, possibly two, three, or more minutes. I then came out and told Captain Sielinski to raise the flag, which he did with considerable daring. The psychological impact I had hoped for was obvious, as everyone, with resolve etched into their faces, worked on with grim determination.

A reinforced CYDEF contingent of forty soldiers with automatic weapons arrived, accompanied by a large riot truck with a water cannon. Their presence enabled the Greek consul, PCV Johnson, and the two Libyan employees to exit the building. Six CYDEF soldiers with axe-handle clubs were admitted into the building; four were placed on the roof. That was none too soon, as just then another assault was launched against the roof. I arrived at the top of the stairwell with Tom Twetten and Bob Prosser to find the CYDEF soldiers retreating down

the stairs. Outside, Captain Sielinski, with an axe handle taken from the CYDEF, was desperately clubbing intruders to keep them away from the entrance. Joining him in a wild melee on the roof, we were buffeted by rocks as we fought to bring our people in and then secure the door. One attacker lodged himself in the door only to have it closed with bone-shattering effect on his leg.

By noontime, the mob around the Embassy had worked themselves into a fever pitch. Waving an Egyptian flag, they routed the large contingent of soldiers, who obviously had orders not to use their weapons. The mob was then bent on destroying the riot truck, which was employing its powerful water cannon. Undeterred, they began to rock the vehicle furiously. Battered, windshield gone, the driver in a last hysterical effort to avoid being tipped over, drove off crazily through the crowd.

The mob then, with a vengeance, stepped up their attack on the Embassy. A long, steel sewer pipe was brought up and used as a battering ram. The entire building shook under the onslaught. We were now under severe attack. I ordered everyone into the second floor communications vault except Captain Sielinski and Corporal Fabrocini, who assisted me in a quick survey of the building. The click of a rifle bolt again prompted a shout from me that no shots were to be fired without my order.

We found that the mob had pried apart the iron bars on several ground-floor office windows and were entering. A twelve-inch-high, glass-brick transom above the front entrance door also was almost battered through. The roof stairwell door was giving way. Staff members stood at the vault opening, ready to secure. I was at the foot of the wide marble staircase when the breakthrough occurred. Fanatical, knife-wielding intruders rushed screaming down the hall. They were covered in blood, cut as they were pushed through broken windows by the mob.

Putting on gas masks and dropping tear gas grenades, we engaged them on the stairs with rifle butts in a hand-to-hand struggle. In seconds tear gas filled the area. We fought our way up to the second floor and moved into the vault. Securing the steel combination door, we locked in ten persons: Twetten; Prosser; communicators Donald Griffin, Maurice Birkhold, and Richard Calder; secretaries Doris Prosser and Ann DeLisle (both of whom had elected to remain); Captain Sielinski, Corporal Fabrocini, and myself. There was battering on the vault door for several minutes, but then the tear gas must have severely impeded those efforts. It soon also began to saturate the vault, where in the blistering, bake-oven heat, it made breathing extremely difficult. Eyes and skin burned.

Agonizingly, there were only five gas masks for ten people, and these had to be shared among the men, if the work of destroying files was to be completed. The two women were moved into a separate telecommunications room, where

an additional door provided a modicum of protection. They were seated in a corner and covered with wet blankets.

My greatest fear, which I kept to myself, was that the gasoline for the generator, which was located down in the patio, would be discovered, sloshed under the vault door and ignited. Minutes went by, and this did not happen. Nonetheless, my heart sank as outside smoke wafted in, and I knew the building had been set afire. While this was occurring, the frantic effort continued to empty safes and burn files on the small outside balcony overlooking the patio. Load after load would be placed in the fifty-gallon drums and ignited with thermite grenades, sending belching columns of flame and black smoke high into the air from the center of the building. In hindsight, this must have added to the impression that the Embassy was engulfed in flames.

It was imperative that fires in the building be controlled, if we were not to perish. As noises outside the vault diminished, the door was cautiously opened and, gas masks on, several of us went out. Locating additional fire extinguishers, we spread out through the building. The fires were largely on the first floor and confined mostly to woodwork, furniture, and drapes. The tear gas, when mixed with the smoke and heat, was so intense that it helped to keep the mob out of the building while at the same time making them think that we had succumbed. Instead, the fire extinguishers were brought into play, spraying down walls and putting out flames where possible.

Signs of the blind fury of the mob were everywhere, with blood on the floors, walls, and furniture. One tear gas canister had skin and blood clinging to it; evidently one attacker had grasped the discharging grenade. As the afternoon wore on, the staff continued burning files and sending messages. With his quiet courage, Tom Twetten was a great asset, methodically working with Griffin, Birkholder and Calder to see that messages were sent and files destroyed. We encountered difficulties encountered making the equipment function, and at times we went off line, but the ingenuity of the communicators overcame almost every problem. Bob Prosser seemed to be everywhere when help was needed.

There were several more intrusions, as small groups of attackers climbed into the building, only to be forced back by the heat and residue of tear gas. Corporal Fabrocini, acting as a sentinel, remained at the head of the stairs, gas mask on, for five hours. He would signal when it was clear to come out of the vault to check the building and extinguish fires. On four occasions we received word of planned British rescue attempts, only to have them postponed. This was unusually hard on Mrs. Prosser and Miss DeLisle, who bravely endured without gas masks.⁹

We had a few erratic telephone contacts with the British Headquarters. Colonel Martin at one point pleaded with me to hold on, saying that an effort to

reach us could cost lives. He was a fine, competent officer and I knew he was doing his best. He told me that armored vehicles had been stopped 200 yards from the Embassy. One armored car had been destroyed by pouring gasoline down the hatch, setting it afire with an officer and five soldiers inside. Colonel Martin added that Her Majesty's Embassy and the British Council had been set afire and that the U.S. Information Center had been sacked and burned, as had our former Embassy Residence. Blessedly, I had moved Elsa and the children to the new Residence out of town the previous week.

Our last message was sent at 5:55 p.m. in preparation for a 6:30 p.m. evacuation, arranged with the British forces. By then the destruction of all the classified material had been completed. Cryptograph machines had been selectively rendered inoperable, so that they could be repaired, should there ever be a chance we might return. Any item we did not want to fall into unfriendly hands was burned. In another sporadic telephone call, Colonel Martin told me that rescue efforts again had to be delayed. It seemed that we had finally reached the breaking point. The waiting now was particularly hard on the women. The intense heat of the burning building, hours in tear gas without gas masks, and the smoke in that acrid vault had us to the point where we were roasted, blackened, and barely able to see. Our throats were raw, our lungs seared and painful.

I was so proud of my colleagues. They had done the impossible. At this low point, in an effort to keep spirits up, I took a photograph of President and Mrs. Johnson from the wall. Breaking it out of the frame, in a grandiose gesture I wrote a brief letter to the president on the back, saying no matter what happens to us, we had done our job and done it well. I had everyone sign it, while thanking them for a magnificent performance. The photograph was then date-time stamped in good communication records fashion.¹⁰

At 8:00 p.m., a British force under the command of Major Jonathan Hall-Tipping finally arrived. That time was selected to take advantage of a Libyan government curfew imposed at 7:30 p.m. By prearranged plan, the staff exited hurriedly through a battered ground floor window to a waiting British lorry. Clambering out between the pried-open iron bars and broken glass, I saw a convoy of vehicles through the black smoke. The major was in the lead jeep with several British soldiers, one sitting on the back holding aloft a large Union Jack fluttering in the ash-filled breeze. It had been an unreal day, one taken from some movie scenario. I found myself listening for bagpipes. We were a miserable sight, cut, battered, bruised, and burned, but for the time being we were all safe.

Sitting in the back of the lorry as we rode through litter-strewn streets, it seemed as if much of the city was ablaze. Buildings were on fire and shops burned out, their goods looted or scattered in the streets. As we reached the

outskirts of town and darkness settled in, I looked back to see the entire sky illuminated by fires. A large lumberyard owned by a Jewish merchant was blazing furiously, sending sparks high into the night. Benghazi had been turned into an inferno, and I realized how lucky we were to have escaped. My thoughts were also with Elsa and the children. I planned somehow to get to them and keep them with me.

Arriving at D'Aosta Barracks, I was met by Colonel Martin, who was apologetic about having to delay attempts at our rescue. That fine gentleman had the lives of everyone to be concerned about and had handled the situation with great skill. I was deeply grateful to him. The British had seen to it that Elsa and our three children had been picked up and taken to D'Aosta Barracks, where they were ensconced with the families of British, American, and other nationals in a large warehouse/garage. They were bedded down on concrete floors, but blessedly all were safe.

Had my family still been in the Residence downtown, they might very well have been killed. The massive, ten-foot-high wooden door of that building had been battered in. Finding the house empty, the mob became even more enraged, viewing it as testimony that the Americans were forewarned of the Israeli surprise attack. After demolishing the interior, they set the place afire.

My job was only half done. I felt strongly my responsibility for the many Americans still in the city and elsewhere in Cyrenaica. At 2:00 a.m. that night, I called for a volunteer to accompany me into Benghazi to bring out U.S. citizens who, because of their location, were deemed most in danger. Foreigners had been instructed on British emergency radio broadcasts to remain out of sight in their homes. Captain William Walsh of the MAG offered to join me and drive a station wagon. In addition, a Libyan Army sergeant stationed at D'Aosta Barracks rode with us. Driving through the burning city, we were repeatedly stopped at roadblocks manned by nervous, trigger-happy Libyan soldiers. We passed smoldering buildings and shops as we navigated through the debris-laden streets. As we neared our Embassy, we saw the blackened, burned-out hulk of an armored car and the destroyed private vehicles of our staff.

Pulling up in front of an apartment building illuminated only by fires from Jewish shops a short distance away, I went into the building, leaving Captain Walsh at the wheel and the Libyan sergeant on guard. The city was without electric power. Flashlight in hand, I climbed the darkened stairs, knocking on doors. My efforts were finally rewarded, when on the fourth floor a door was cautiously opened by an American woman. Addressing me by surname in the candlelight, she said, "Thank God, I knew you'd come. We are all packed. The suitcases are in the next room." In that moment, I was deeply

moved. Her words were as fine a commentary as I have ever heard on the faith
our citizens place in their Foreign Service.