

# SOMALIA ONLY

## in

### Part II

Apart from the black spots brought on by my encroaching senility 15 years down the track, time has failed to diminish the intensity of most of the memories that are still stored in that filing cabinet in the back of my head marked 'ASSORTED RANDOM WEIRD STUFF', sub category, 'SOMALIA'. The random, weird and bizarre moments in time kept hitting me with such regularity in Somalia it ended up giving the entire deployment a surreal and stranger-than-fiction feel. Probably the most comforting and reassuring thing learnt from my reminiscing with the guys after all this time, is discovering we all seemed to be similarly afflicted. To prove that point, to reassure myself, and for your entertainment, I've collected a few gems from the boys that I had almost completely forgotten about. Enjoy.

**B**illy, like myself, was a bit of a collector and he was determined to get a French Legionnaire's beret after Steve and myself continually harassed him by sticking the two we had snagged, under his nose.

So, on a quiet day, Billy talked Meehan into going for a walk to the Legionnaire's area to try and do some trading.

After a bit of haggling, Billy did the deal for a beret and generally started shooting the shit with a few of them who spoke a bit of English.

Before long, the conversation got around to the tools of the trade, and Billy asked if he could have a play with one of their Famas G1 rifles.

One of the Legionnaires looked around to make sure no NCOs were close by, but then chickened out and said that, even with the rifle unloaded, it wasn't possible to let unauthorised personnel handle it.

A bit disappointed, Billy instead asked if the Legionnaire could show him their immediate-action drills.

Happy to show off, one of the Legionnaires picked up his rifle and a magazine off a nearby cot, raised the rifle to the high port position, inserted the magazine and started running through the cycle, explaining this and that.

The guy then cocked the weapon and, while still yacking away, pulled the trigger, sending a round into the ceiling.

With their ears ringing, Billy and Meehan watched in dismay as the other soldiers in the room dived for cover and the owner of the Famas, as if electrocuted, threw the rifle to the ground and ran out of the building and down the road towards the front gate.

With a heap of NCOs and officers arriving on the scene, as well as a lot of yelling and screaming in French, the boys decided to split, back to the safety of 3-2's tents.

Back at the tents Billy proudly showed off his new beret and had a ball telling the story of the Legionnaire who was probably still on the run.

It wasn't until talking to a French soldier the next day that we started comprehending why the soldier's reaction to the UD (unauthorised discharge) had been so odd. Apparently, in the Legion, the punishment for a UD is loss of pay, extra duties as well as having the shit kicked out of you by your platoon mates.

By the dull glow of a quarter moon, Billy scanned the street and was finally happy to stop the patrol for 20 minutes or so.

Using the Motorola radio, Billy stopped Steve, his lead scout, who instinctively moved to a darker spot beside the road.

3-2 Charlie had been stealthily patrolling along the labyrinth of darkened backstreets for almost two hours and it was time to take a break.

These extended stops on the night patrols in town were not only a chance to have a sip of water and rest your legs, but also proved to be a great way of simply melting into the shadows and seeing who walked by.

Lives, 3-2 Charlie's 21C, found a slight depression beside the road with Blakey, the section gunner, facing up the road, while Billy got sorted.

Only a few feet away to their left was a crude camel-thorn fence that surrounded a large area with several huts set at its rear.

Although the light was not that good, Lives could easily make out Billy moving about, doing a quick recon before finally coming over and crouching beside them both.

After a chat, Lives moved the gun just inside the camel-thorn compound entrance, followed by the rifle group and then the scouts.

After being placed on the ground by Billy, Lives moved around the guys to check on their wellbeing and double-check to make sure nobody had gotten lost in the darkness – don't laugh, it happened more than once.

Several minutes after settling in next to Blakey, Lives tensed as he heard coughing and hacking noises close by, just outside.

With the coughing noises growing louder, followed by a spit, both raised their weapons as a shadowy figure appeared, silhouetted in the entrance only 3m in front of them.

Bizarrely, the male – let's, for simplicity, call him Ernie – looked left and then right, made up his mind about something, and walked directly towards the pair as he started hoisting up his traditional sarongy tingo.

Ernie was now so close to Blakey that Blakey had to raise his Minimi so the muzzle didn't hit Ernie in the groin.

Milliseconds before Lives was about to pounce on the would-be attacker, the totally oblivious and night-blind Ernie turned his back on them and squatted.

As suddenly as he appeared, Ernie's intentions became just as suddenly clear as a cloud of toxic fumes hit the boys, followed by a loud, comical, splat-splat-splat noise.

Not content with his first attempt to clear his bowels, Ernie grunted and groaned while Lives and Blakey quietly pulled their feet away from the impact point just as another volley fired off, splat-splat-splat-splat.

Thinking it was only a matter of time before their presence was discovered, Lives thought through his options while trying his hardest not to throw up.

Having an inspiration, Blakey reached back and fumbled around until finding a decent enough sized branch from the ground beside the camel thorn wall.

Poor unsuspecting Ernie, so happy with his lot in life, started humming his favourite tune, only interrupting it to brace himself and grunt to fire off another barrage.

After hours spent hunting by moonlight, Lives' eyes were well adjusted to the dark and he could easily see the grin appear on Blakey's face as he ceremonially offered the camel thorn branch. Lives smiled back and carefully took hold of the branch, bristling with 3cm-long spikes.

Now armed, Lives raised the thorny branch and brought it down with all his strength on Ernie's exposed arse.

Splat-splat... 'AAAGGGGHHHH'.

Like a piece of laser-guided ordnance, the camel-thorn attack had been so accurate and savagely executed that the branch stuck firm in Ernie's bum and was ripped out of Lives' hand as Ernie jumped and ran, screaming, out of the compound and down the road.

Not knowing the source of his torment and pain, Lives swears Ernie's continuous screams of terror could easily be heard fading off into the distance for 10 minutes or so. Poor Ernie.

Another factor that added to the stranger-than-fiction feel back then was the continual stream of furphies – stories and bullshit being fed to us from all directions.

You'd think that the men and women of a deployed battalion group would be way too busy to spend time gossiping, swapping stories or worrying about what everybody else was up to, but I must say that the 1RAR grapevine in Somalia was healthy, despite bearing very little real fruit.

The furphies and bullshit pretty much covered the whole spectrum from the absurd to the troubling near truths.

For example, did you know that Elvis Presley and Jimmy Hendrix, at least up until February 1993, were actually alive and well, running a fish and chip shop in a town called Burakabar, just off the main road between Mogadishu and Baidoa? Well, that's what I was told.

Or at the other end of the spectrum was the one about the 50 trucks and buses heading towards Baidoa from somewhere down south, loaded up with armed bandits

"Na, why?"

"Bosnia has gone nuclear. Europe's burning guys. We're all fucked."

"Bullshit!"

"Na, fair dinkum mate. Dunno any details. Buggedger if I know what's gonna happen to us here. Hopefully we'll get pulled out."

Yes, I know, I know – but you have to remember that back then we had no mobile phones, no internet, personal radios that actually picked anything up were rare and there was a lag time of about three weeks to a month on our mail from home.

We were completely cut off from the outside world and at the mercy of the system to feed us information.

In our defence, the Pioneers in the 6X6 Rover that day had put on an academy-award-winning performance.

As is your lot in life as a platoon signaller, Heady, or Head as we called him, practically had the radio handset super-glued to his head 24/7.

On the day in question, Head was chilling out on his cot under the semi shade of a hutchie inside the UNISOM compound in town. He had his shirt and boots off and was digging at the gunk under his toe nails when a sudden blast from the handset caused him to jump.

"3-2 this is Zero Alpha."

Head waited a couple of seconds and then casually replied, "3-2, go".

"3-2, do you have the Tango India in your location. Over?"

Firmly in siesta mode, Head dislodged a nasty greenish glob of junk from under one of his big toe nails and, without skipping a beat, replied in a suitably uninterested tone. "Roger, Zero Alph."



Axle at a water point at sunset

These coveted items were always in high demand and, I'm guessing, when a call-sign got their hands on one, it was hard to pry it back off them.

After a laugh and a bit of banter, Head swallowed his pride and jumped on the radio to inform Zero Alpha of the mistake.

Thinking we were trying to pull a swiftie, an unknown pioneer at the other end of the line suddenly became very snaky and curtly informed us that the TI was in our location and they would be over in 20 minutes to pick it up.

Suitably gob-smacked, Sarge jumped on the radio to add a bit of weight to the developing situation and, for his effort, copped a stern rebuttal.

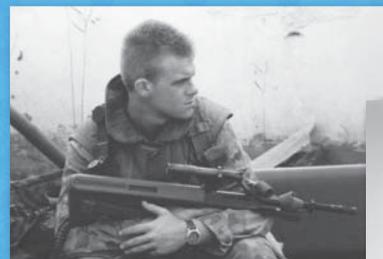
"NEGATIVE 3-2, we will be in your location in 20 mikes to take charge of the Tango India. OUT!"

"Cheeky bastard."

Frenchmen in their berets



The author in siesta mode at the CARE Australia compound



Head, with his ever-present radio handset

Mack and Head with the real TI scope



When pioneers come to collect a TI – priceless!



Somali mother and child

and suicide bombers, with the sole purpose of killing every Australian that dared step foot on African soil.

Although in hindsight it was a bit far-fetched, that one actually held enough weight to be mentioned several times in daily briefs.

But by far my favourite furphy came from the pioneers, while we were off on a road trip in the middle of nowhere.

When it was practical, while we were out and about, we would try and stop to talk to passing call-signs to glean information about the road ahead.

The quick interactions were handy, but also gave us a chance to catch up with mates in the battalion and have a general sticky beak into everybody else's business.

On one particular day, out to the north west, towards the Ethiopian border, the pioneers stopped for a chin wag and dropped a clanger on us.

"You guys been listening to the BBC World Service today?"

We heard from someone later on that they had a contest running to see who could disseminate the best furphy and see how far people would run with it.

As the pioneers headed off in a cloud of dust, obviously having a great laugh at our expense, we started completely freaking out, thinking the world as we knew it was about to end.

In our isolation we craved information and, when the Pioneers put on their song and dance, we lapped it up and paid the price with six hours or so of mental anguish.

I believe even the boss' scepticism was tested when, later that day, he bit the bullet and asked higher if the rumours were true. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall to see the look on Major Mick Moon's face when he was asked that one!

As fate would have it, though, Head, our platoon signaller, inadvertently set the wheels in motion a few weeks later for us to seek half-arsed but satisfying revenge.

Head was a likeable surfy type and, although dedicated and switched on, he seemed to comfort everybody around him by being about as laid back as you can get in the military without getting in the shit for it.

He had been stabbed just before we left Australia to fill the platoon signaller position because Sucker Fish was transferred to BHQ.

I guess some poor bastard had to do it and, strangely enough, Head didn't seem to mind the gig.

"3-2, 6-3 (pioneers) will be in your location to pick up the Tango India ASAP. Copy?"

"Roger that, Zero Alpha."

Looking over his shoulder, Head avoided looking in the direction of Sarge's cot and instead spied Lives reading a book on the other side of the compound.

Head abandoned his toe grooming and slipped his boots back on, but couldn't be bothered doing up the laces.

Concluding that putting his shirt back on was way too much trouble, Head placed the handset on the top of the radio, turned the volume up to max, grabbed his gat and strolled over to Lives.

"Umm – what's a Tango India?" he asked.

"A thermal imager, why?" Lives replied.

"Oh, ok – cool," Head replied while squeezing a pimple on his arm.

"Do we have one here?" he casually asked, having a second shot at the pimple.

"No, mate. Why?" Sensing something interesting was about to happen, Lives put down his book and sat up on his cot.

"Who was that on the radio mate?" Lives noticed a 'busted' look spread across Head's face. "What have you done?"

Head sheepishly confessed his goof and together they headed over to Sarge.

I'm not sure how many thermal imagers the battalion had in Somalia but I know they were rare and it was always a big deal to get one of the bulky cantankerous things assigned to a location or task.

It's debatable who actually came up with the idea but, over the next 20 minutes, Head, Steve and Lives found a roll of 100-mile-an-hour tape, some MRE boxes and a couple of Pepsi cans and constructed the dodgiest mock up of a TI ever seen.

True to their word, 20 minutes later the Pioneers rocked up and bluntly asked Sarge if the thermal imager was packed up and ready to go.

Trying his hardest not to laugh, Sarge said nothing and simply pointed to the group of guys proudly standing around the crude contraption.

It was a pity I was down the road in another compound at the time. I would have loved to have been standing there in person to see the look on the pioneers' faces and witness the subsequent slamming of the compound gate.

But, the photos are priceless. Karma is a wonderful thing. Only in Somalia.