

GROUND ZERO

This was the sharp end – ground zero – the place where we packed away our war faces and Kevlar, put on a forced smile and dealt with the bullshit as best we could.

Militarily, when somebody refers to 'the sharp end' they are most definitely talking about the most hazardous tasks and locations within the forward areas of any theatre of operations.

Although 'forward areas' are becoming harder to define in modern warfare, there is always, so to speak, a line in the sand where only a select few cross on a daily basis. It's the place where you put on your war face, access that heightened state of awareness and block out all the bullshit. It's the place where the only thing that truly matters is your mates to your left and right.

As full on as all of that sounds there was, to me, an anomaly in Somalia – something different, something that would ultimately change my personal perception of what the sharp end is.

Jokingly, in the early '90s, long before Somalia was a blip on the ADF's radar, we unofficially added a new last line to the infantryman's creed "...in a caring environmentally friendly manner".

It was a joke of course, spawned from countless low-level exercises where we were continually drilled in dealing with civilians and how to use a simple smile before resorting to CS grenades.

As receptive as we were to any change in the yearly training program we were sceptical that these new skills would ever be used operationally.

But fate had other ideas.

I'm proud to have been one of those soldiers who crossed that line in the sand.

But, I honestly feel Somalia's sharp end was not where we were returning fire and kicking in doors.

To me, it was where we were forced to compromise our safety more than anywhere else.

It was where we slept within spitting distance of the wire and ate, literally, within grenade-throwing distance from the nearest shanty shack.

It was where I could hear the children singing and smell the mothers cooking the family meals.

More importantly, it was where we got off our high horses and were forced to empathise with the local population, even if we didn't want to.

To me, that was the sharp end – ground zero – the place where we packed away our war faces and Kevlar, put on a forced smile and dealt with the bullshit as best as we could.



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Although the water point was monumentally important to the people who lived around it, I must say it looked monumentally crappie as we pulled up.

We had seen and visited many water points during our patrols and travels but this was the first time we would be static at one for several days.

Mac got his hand-over brief from the departing section commander in record time and, ominously, there was no small-talk or banter as the departing section scrambled for the trucks and took off in a cloud of dust before we were even in the gate.

The water point itself was only about 20m by 20m square and shoddily surrounded by cyclone fencing and the dodgiest cat-1 razor wire I'd ever seen.

In the centre was a 10m-tall water tower and, in its shadow, stood the concrete-block pumphouse that, at a pinch, housed the pump, generator and call sign 3-2 Bravo's eight men during our stay.

Shortly after we arrived, I climbed the tower to survey our surrounds. As section gunner, I would play a major part in any defence of the site and quickly tried to take it all in.

Displaced-persons' shanties starting 5m from our fence and spreading out to the south and east; open ground to the north and west ending at about 250m with substantial single- and a couple of double-story buildings.

I orientated the departing section's range card to the ground, sketched in a couple of my own details and had a last look around trying to picture the whole scene at night.

Our arrival had been timed to coincide with the local's afternoon siesta but, from the top of the tower, I could already see a stream of container-carrying women heading our way to collect water for their families' evening meals.

I headed back down the ladder.

Before long, the constant day-time vigil of 20 or so children had swollen to several-hundred colourfully dressed women carrying all manner of water containers.

Mac had been given no strict orders about dress at the location so, in true she'll-be-right style, we ditched the Kevlar vests and webbing and resorted to throwing a couple of weapon magazines in trouser pockets and just carrying rifles.

I happily plonked the Minimi in the pumphouse doorway where I could get to it quickly, while I carried my Browning 9mm around in the compound.

Just like the food-distribution tasks, it appeared that collecting water was beneath the average Somali male and, pleasantly, there were very few males of recruiting age around the water point.

To the women who squatted in line under the relentless African sun, the daily chore seemed to be just as much a

colourful noisy social event away from the men as anything else.

Unlike the chaos of food distribution, the women here formed lines and, patiently enough, waited their turn.

Surprisingly, while taking turns at the entry point, we found the local women to have a great sense of humour and were capable of being quite cheeky.

The other cultural surprise was that the women were intrigued by my camera and weren't remotely shy when I took pictures.

During the first afternoon at the water point, I hovered around the entrance long after I was relieved by Abs, happy to kill time taking photos and goofing around.

When on duty, we taught the women simple words in English and, in turn, they tried to teach us basic Somali.

One woman became interested in the name on my cams.

Even though the stint at the water point had started well enough, the fact we were literally living in a cage under the constant gaze of 20 or 30 children from 0500hr till 2300hr, plus several hundred women twice a day, did wear thin pretty quickly.

"Mista mista, gifty choclato; photo, photo; water, water; mista mista, choclato." It was loud, persistent and bloody annoying.

At first we didn't mind the attention. Then it got old and we tried to ignore them. When that didn't work, we tried to give them what they wanted, only to find double the number of children chanting "Mista mista" the next morning.

Mid morning on the second day, Abs was gobsacked to find a kid crawling through the wire behind the pumphouse.

Startled by Abs, the kid scrambled back through the wire, opening up a decent-sized gash on the back of his leg.

While Mac got on the radio to send HQ an incident report, Rock and Axle manhandled the two boys into the middle of the water point and plonked them on the ground, covering their heads with flak vests in an attempt to appease the growing crowd.

While waiting for the MPs to turn up, we had a quiet chuckle to ourselves watching the women and kids become braver, screaming and spitting through the wire at the now totally incapacitated thieves.

Each of us had our escapes during the quieter moments – reading books, playing cards, even cooking food and making brews was a distraction from the constant babble and prying eyes.

Luckily, I found an unexpected escape from the bullshit with my camera.

As annoying as the children were, I learnt to enjoy them as photographic subjects.

Naturally, I'd been taking pictures since

section, I'd collected a good selection of bits and pieces from numerous Yank and Aussie ration packs the night before and handed these through the wire to her.

The girl gave a nod, smiled and quickly headed off with her prize between the makeshift shanty huts.

Feeling good about myself that morning, the normal chants and demands from the other children didn't seem as loud and annoying as normal.

Unfortunately, others in the section weren't fairing as well and, after having a rock sail past inches from his head, Axle finally cracked the shits and ran out, scattering children in all directions.

The incident was trivial in the general scheme of things, but it fired up the rabble, and the children promptly returned to the wire louder and more irritating than ever.

Not long after, during the morning water

a yelled, "Get the fuck back or we'll close the water point!" as another plastic water container went flying through the air.

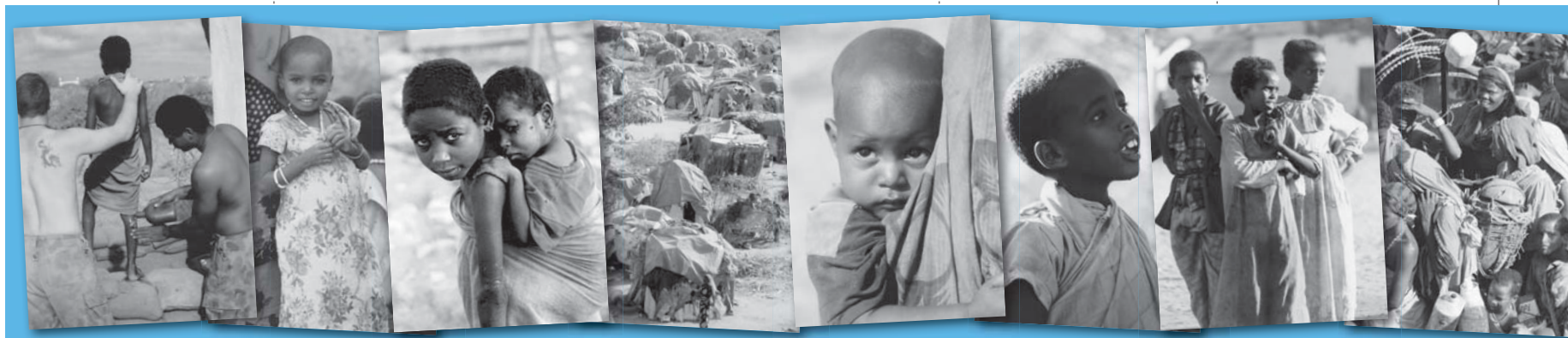
That last afternoon was long and drawn out and, by the time the Mog pulled up, none of us were in the mood for chit chat as Tom's section threw their stuff down and we loaded up. J Conway tried to strike up a conversation with me as Mac did his handover and, after getting only one-word replies, simply asked "How was it?"

"Mentally exhausting, mate" I said, as the constant "mista mista" kicked up a notch as the new arrivals walked in to their cage.

Almost a month later, we returned for another stint, and found the same familiar faces pressed against the wire.

This time, we were armed with the wisdom of experience, feeling it would be a walk in the park the second time around.

Unknown to the guys, I was also armed



"Shinner" I said slowly, over emphasising each syllable.

For a second there was silence, but then, an eruption of laughter.

Confused women further back in the line yelled forward to find out what was so funny and, after a quick, incomprehensible reply, the laughter spread back until 50 or so women were pointing and laughing at me.

"What the fuck just happened?" I asked Gus and Abs, quickly becoming red-faced and uncomfortable.

Sensing my embarrassment, the instigator tried to keep a straight face as she locked her thumbs together and imitated the flight of a butterfly "Sheenar – you Sheenar" before bursting into a new fit of laughter.

Of course, Gus thought this was awesome and had great joy informing the rest of the section, who were lounging in the shade of the water tower or attempting to sleep in the pumphouse, that my new name was Butterfly.

Feeling guilty, Abs spent an hour coaxing the boy back so he could administer first aid, and then pampered him for a while before pushing him out the gate with a chocolate bar in hand and a bandage on his leg.

Of course, this started another trend and, from then on, we were presented with every kind of cut, graze and pussy scab to inspect and patch up.

Late on our second day, a group of panicked women ran up to the fence and, with a mixture of sign language, Somali and broken English informed us there were thieves going through their huts.

Rock, Axle and Gerry grabbed their gear and raced out of the compound as Polly and I climbed the tower to try and cover them.

Although we were 10m up, we quickly lost sight of the guys as they headed into the maze of huts and lean-tos. But, before we had time to think the worst, the boys re-emerged, dragging two teenage males.

As they came back inside the wire, an agitated crowd started to form outside.

day one in country but, for the first time, I started actually seeing what I was capturing rather than simply snapping away.

While carrying on with Gus at the wire on our first morning, I noticed a shy young girl at the edge of our regular mob of tormenters. The girl was about nine or 10 years old, had a shaved head, as was common, and was wrapped in a dirty blanket.

For no reason that I can remember, I raised my camera, focused and took a single picture instead of my normal series of shots.

Over the next couple of days, I noticed she was always there behind the wire but never interacting with the other children or tormenting us for chocolate, food or money. In fact, I don't remember her saying anything at all.

On our third morning, I made a conscious effort to get up earlier than normal to beat the rabble to the wire and was rewarded by finding the girl standing there alone.

Unknown to the other boys in the

collection, the women seemed a bit fidgety and a scuffle started when one woman tried to push her way into the line.

Abs confronted her and tried to convince her to move back down the line, but copped a string of abuse as she stubbornly crossed her arms and refused to move.

At the end of his rope, Abs picked up the woman's water containers and flung them into a nasty patch of camel thorn bushes.

It was an omen for things to come, as the day disintegrated into a series of squabbles. During the chaos, I noticed the young girl was back and again standing off to one side away from the other children.

When she saw me looking, she waved me over, stuck her hand through the mesh and handed me a crudely made copper bracelet. Before I could thank her, she smiled and ran off through the crowd.

Knowing the guys too well, I avoided the certain heckling and dropped the bracelet in my pocket for future inspection.

I was snapped out of the moment by

with a stash of goodies for the young girl who had intrigued me four weeks earlier.

After several hours of duty and mucking about, curiosity got the better of me and I finally approached our rabble of tormentors to ask where the little girl was.

After some half-arsed charades, the kids worked out what I was asking and, with little explanation, I understood their reply.

I'm not sure if the guys noticed that I was quiet that afternoon and I'm honestly not sure if they would have understood or cared that I felt great sadness for an unnamed girl who died while we were elsewhere.

"Hey Sheena, gifty gifty, choclato."

I did my best to block it out, knowing that before the three days were up, I was going to have a monumental dummy spit.

• That single, simply composed photo (page 63) of a shy girl looking at me through wire will remain the benchmark for all other photos I will ever take, and that crude, worthless copper bracelet remains unmoving off my wife's wrist.