



Carlos Makes a "Head Call"¹

A Saga of the Saudi Arabian Air Defense Force

This incident took place shortly after our arrival in Saudi last March². A bunch of us hopped on the company bus that runs down to the various Souks³ on certain nights of the week. If I recall the group, it was Bill Sweeney, Bill Honeycutt, Skip Hartnett, Chuck Julian, Jon Ashbrook, Jimmie Dorsey, myself, and of course, Carlos. This particular night, we hit the Main Souk, which is well endowed with all sorts of shops, purveying everything from gold to silver, clothing, watches, electronics, in short if it can be had in Saudi, you can usually find it in the Main Souk. Virtually anything that is sold in any of the Souks can be bargained for, usually for a good sized discount off the asking price. Having spent several years in Jeddah on a previous tour, Hartnett and I were renewing our acquaintance with several shopkeepers, most of who still remembered us even after an absence of six years or more (it may have been due to our obnoxious personalities or the handle bar moustache, but any rate, we were having a great old time).

Having placed us in the Souk on this particular night, it is also necessary for the reader to realize that one of the more maddening experiences while shopping, is to get well into a bargaining session just when "prayer call" goes. These guys pray five times a day, every day of the week, and my friends, when prayer call goes, **everything** stops, period!!

They start off the day with prayer at daybreak, pray again at noon (or thereabouts), on into the evening, etc. Prayer times vary due to phases of the moon, but first call for each prayer is published in the daily paper(s). When prayer call starts, everything closes down. Shutters/grates are pulled down over all the store fronts, and the religious police come along to make sure all the "faithful" head for the nearest Mosque.

Prior to entering the Mosque for prayer, the faithful are required to purify themselves by washing their hands, feet, faces, etc., to avoid angering the "Almighty"... Allah, in this case of course. In Saudi Arabia, there are more Mosques than you can shake a stick at. It is said that a Mosque must be built so that one is within walking distance of any believer. Having taken a good look around, I'm here to tell you that **!**believe that!

When you are building any new facility (the rifle range, for instance), one of the very first buildings to be erected is always the Mosque. Along with the Mosque, there must be a

“washing facility” to perform the appropriate cleansing/washing absolutions prior to entering the Mosque to pray. Most, if not all Mosques have their own washing facilities, but when you're talking about the Main Souk, with everybody (the faithful, that is) heading for “Mosque” at the same time (being “herded” by the religious police), it can get pretty crowded.

To alleviate such crowding, virtually any toilet facility in Saudi is set up for foot washing and other sanitary absolutions prior to prayer (cleansing/washing of hands, feet and whatever...). One of the other peculiarities of a Saudi “facility,” is the absence of any type of a “trough type urinal.” They either use individual urinals, inside of an enclosed stall (normally just a hole in the deck with a couple of dividers for privacy). There is a certain modesty in this society that prevents “flaunting one's whatever” and they (the Saudi Marines) used to think that we “Westerners” were terribly crude when we would utilize the nearest sand dune when we were operating with them in the desert. The Saudi's would get down on their knees and dig a small pit in the sand... They also wanted to do abandon ship drill, and drown proofing while wearing a full sweat suit... all this from an outfit that apparently learns at birth how to pick their nose with one hand while scratching one's “crotch” with the other in public, and seem to be able to switch hands without missing a stroke... hummm... The point I'm trying to make is that there are no “trough type” urinals in the heads over here. With the stage so set, we can get on with our Carlos story.

While the rest of us are dickering for some sort of trinkets, Carlos feels the necessity to answer a sudden call of nature. Upon asking directions to the nearest “facility”, he is pointed up a winding set of steps not too far from our shop. Shortly after Carlos disappears, first call sounds for evening prayer. The shops start to close, and all the new guys are standing around gawking at the unfamiliar sights and sounds emanating from the Souk.

Carlos is gone for about 15 minutes. He comes back down the stairs with a funny look on his face and makes a remark about what weird “head facilities” they have in this country. Upon further quizzing, he tells about this rather disagreeable guy wearing the traditional Saudi Head Dress⁴ and Thobe⁵ coming into the place while he (Carlos) is using the urinal... seems this character is making some rather rude if somewhat unintelligible remarks.

Carlos says about the time he was finishing up, this guy (obviously cursing in Arabic) washes out the “urinal” with some sort of hose and starts to wash his feet in this interesting recess in the deck... Without any further discussion, I figure it is **definitely** time to pull an “exit stage left” and head for another location. This **probably** rates right up there with eating with your left hand after returning from the “powder room⁶.” I can only imagine, actually I was too busy “beating feet” for safer stomping grounds! With a beginning like this there will no doubt be a number of Carlos Stories before we get back to the World.

ROC '93



End Notes:

¹ In Naval Terminology, the term "head" means the same thing as "rest room," "the facility," "the John," etc. Comes from the time when running water and/or flush commodes were something well into the future. To avoid leaving rather unsanitary piles of "ka-ka" or "do-do" laying about, the Sailor or Marine needing to answer a call of nature, went up towards the bow (called the "head" of the ship) and dangled the appropriate portion of his anatomy over some nets stretched for just such a purpose. Must have been a real thrill in a typhoon!

² This took place in the Spring of 1993.

³ The term "Souk" in Saudi Arabia is another term for "market," "shopping center," or in different locals in the Mid-East sometimes called "the bazaar." Here the various Souks usually are classified according to their specialty, i.e., "The Gold Souk," "The Rug Souk," or sometimes according to ethnic origins, i.e., the "Syrian Souk," etc. In this case, it was its location, the "Main Souk."

⁴ The "head dress" is what we infidels irreverently called "*the table cloth and fanbelt*". Actually it was a cloth head covering (much like a very large handkerchief, usually red and white checkered) topped with a thick two strand cord that originally acted as a "camel hobble" in days of old when not wearing it atop one's noggin.

⁵ The "Thobe" is the traditional Arabic Robe (usually white) worn as an outer garment.

⁶ Traditionally, the left hand is NEVER used to shovel food in ones mouth (assuming the individual is right handed). This comes from the days before the invention of toilet paper, and the left hand was used for such unspeakable acts as personal cleanliness. In the days before toilet paper, the individual was required to "wipe" with sand... Egad! Thus the right hand is always used for eating, never the left! The practice of cutting off an offenders hand in the Mid-East was ***not*** to keep him from stealing, but rather to banish the perpetrator from polite society. No one would allow an individual with only one hand to sit at the table with fellow Arabs due to what the "one handed one" must be required to do with his remaining hand. In essence it was a method of banishment.