

Tweaking the Beard of the Prophet

A few Adventurers of an "Asset" with the RSMC

The time was late 1987 and my contract with the Royal Saudi Arabian Navy was rapidly drawing to a close. Almost three years in the Kingdom had begun to grate on the nerves, and I was ready to return to the U.S.A. Enough was enough, and I was looking forward to returning to my beloved Idaho Mountains. Unknown to me at the time, I was about to get in one more dig into the ribs of the minions of Abdul Aziz al Saud.

I had signed on almost three years before to help start, raise and train the Royal Saudi Marine Corps. It certainly sounded like fun, but I hadn't reckoned with the lack of skill, personal pride, and ability of those who populated the ranks of our fledgling service. We had essentially "dragooned" a number of (mostly) unmotivated individuals out of a "tea drinking" Navy into a service that would be trained and equipped to impose their will on the enemy (whoever that might turn out to be). While there were exceptions, most of our charges had absolutely no inclination to expose themselves to the inconveniences normally associated with metamorphosis into a semblance of what is normally thought of as being a Marine. We had our work cut out for us, believe me!



Culver with the Saudi Marines



**Commander Amar al Quatani
Commandant of the RSMC**

We worked almost totally independently from the normal Saudi Naval Command and were left pretty much on our own most of the time. We were motivated and experienced instructors, most former members of the Marine Corp's Force Reconnaissance Companies, EOD experts or ordnance and marksmanship trained. For companionship we had a contingent of Retired Navy Seals who were attempting to work the newly formed Saudi "Navy Special Unit" into some semblance of a Saudi Special Warfare/UDT unit. The Navy was having the same problems we had, but on steroids! The Seals and Marines often got together to discuss the idiocy of the entire task of producing highly

trained and motivated assault personnel out of a sow's ear (probably a poor choice of comparisons considering the circumstances and the aversion of the Muslim Religion to swine). Both the Marines and the Navy Seals were working for a Saudi Navy Commander, Ammar al Quatani. Now, Commander Ammar was basically a "hot-dog" who had spent quite some time in the United States, attending various Military Courses such as the USMC Command and Staff School, and the Air Force language school in San Antonio, Texas. While he wasn't exactly a chip off the old "Recon Block," he spoke excellent English and knew enough buzz-words to keep the pot stirred. He had, however, acquired a taste for photographic operations (better known as Photo-Ops). Being the daddy of the Royal Saudi

Marines and the Saudi Navy Special Ops, he intended to impress all and sundry of the marvels and professionalism of his new formed units – and that took “eye-candy” in the form of photographic records of their accomplishments. This was to work right into the Agency’s plans to spy on the Saudi Naval Services. It became the perfect cover for intelligence gathering.

Everything went well initially, as we were just as interested in taking pictures as he was in sticking them into his newly acquired photo album. Marines (as has been long suspected) are seldom without a camera to record their mighty deeds. Both Commander Ammar and we were happy. Needless to say, however, we always kept the negatives and a copy of the myriad of photographs. The fly in the ointment was that there was a well known “official” ban on taking photographs on Saudi military installations. Commander Ammar winked at the regulations and his press photographer(s) continued to function without any noticeable interference.



Saudi Marines snapping in with G3 Rifles prior to Rifle Qualification on the range

Things began to get a bit dicey as a particularly unspectacular young Navy “snail” was assigned to the Marines as a student. He wasn’t the brightest star in the sky, but he seemed to be intent on making sure the regulations against taking photos on the Navy Base were rigidly enforced. He first asked us not to take any photographs, and when we told him that the Commander had ordered us to take the pictures, he at first seemed confused, and then upset. My reasoning was that a Commander’s wishes must take precedence over the wishes of a “no-

class duck.” The young snail wasn’t about to take on the Commander, but within a couple of days a very smooth Saudi Navy Lieutenant named Esau began monitoring our training. He participated in our operations and watched us photographically recording the deeds of the young Marines in the course of their duties. After the film had been developed, the Lieutenant asked if he could see the pictures, and he seemed to be quite pleased with the results.

Commander Ammar had taken a couple of days leave, and Lieutenant Esau wanted to “borrow” the photos to show his contemporaries how well the Marines were progressing. Upon his return to the base after the weekend, we asked for the photos to turn in to Commander Ammar but were told that “we” were not allowed to have the photos, and he would retain custody of them for official purposes. As you have no doubt guessed, Lieutenant Esau was a member of Saudi Naval Intelligence sent over to keep an eye on the suspicious activities of the infidel instructors. From that time on, we continued to take pictures, but we carefully avoided any overt display in front of the Navy intelligence Lieutenant. It was still great fun to take pictures in front of the “student-snail” who remained frustrated during his entire tour with the Marines.

The seeming Saudi aversion to having “uncensored” photographs leave “The Kingdom” manifested itself in more ways. We began to check out the regulations, as rumors abounded on infidels subjected to having their bare feet beaten with split bamboo for transgressions against the wishes of the Saudi Government.

It seems that there were also prohibitions against taking pictures, not only of (or on) Military Bases, and Oil Refineries, but also any pictures that might embarrass the Kingdom in the eyes of the world. For instance, one expatriate worker was an amateur photographer taking pictures of Jeddah on a weekend outing. As long as he stuck to the buildings and monuments all went well, but it seems that he was carried away by the moment and took a picture of one of the many back alleys. He was taken into custody and his camera and film confiscated. The authorities found that one of the pictures showed a trash can in an alley, and were sure that he intended to publish the photo in some sort of magazine that might make the “progressive” Kingdom look bad (or backward) in front of the rest of the civilized world – horrors, a trash can? How unfeeling of the blighter to take such a picture!

The first time I ran afoul of the law in my photo-ops was quite innocent, and well prior to my contacts with the more clandestine members of the communications folks located in the Consulate. We were driving back to our quarters from the Navy Station at the end of a long day. Our northbound route home took a four lane highway bordering the Red Sea for much of its length. We looked over and saw an entire herd of camels occupying the southbound lane and all the camels seemed to be trotting in perfect harmony. This was too good to miss, so I stuck my Nikon out the window and captured the moment on film. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there appeared a Toyota Land Rover (the Jeep-like configuration) with a bubble-gum machine on the top of the vehicle. A very officious individual in uniform climbed out of the vehicle and ordered us to immediately surrender our cameras and follow him to the office. He pulled into the office of an Oil Refinery bordering the highway.

When we asked him for an explanation for such treatment, he (in very broken English) told us that we had most flagrantly violated Saudi law by taking pictures of the oil refinery. I was scratching my head as we were taking pictures out of the side of the car away from the refinery. He triumphantly pointed to two oil tanks across the road from the main refinery. He then demanded that we surrender our *lgamas* to him (an *lgama* is the Saudi equivalent of a “green-card” issued to expats working in the Kingdom). Since being without your “green-card” was prima-facie evidence of being in the Kingdom illegally, you guarded it with your life – being apprehended without “your papers” was worth a trip to the Saudi slam! Upon his second demand, I got a bit belligerent and told him that I would only surrender it to the police. The irate security guard was sure that his authority has been impugned, and he started shaking his fist. I repeated my intention to only surrender it to a legitimate police officer, not some Saudi “door-rattler”... He told me that they cannot allow pictures to be taken of any oil refinery, because of the possibility of sabotage or terrorism. He again demanded my *lgama*; I, of course, refused!

I suddenly had a bright thought: maybe I could screw with this guy’s brain-housing group!

“You know,” I said, “that the United States built these refineries and already have a copy of the plans! What could a couple of pictures hurt?”

“On no,” sez the snail, “it would be illegal for the United States to have a copy of the plans for this refinery!”

This guy obviously ain’t playing with a full deck! I decide to go on full mental attack!

“You know about satellites that can take pictures from far out in space, don’t you?” I asked.

The door-rattler is now totally bemused and confused.

“Satellites?” he says. “What (are) satellites?”

“Rotating little balls up in the sky with cameras attached that can take pictures of anything in the Kingdom! They can take pictures with such great detail that they could take pictures of the King going to the bathroom,” I said pouring it on a bit thick!

The little security guard blanched totally white, and his eyes got as big as saucers.

“You take pictures of King going to BATHROOM?” he says in obvious rage and disbelief!

Uh oh, I may have gone too far in my attempt to screw with the little idiot! The security snail went running for the front office, but we still had possession of our Igamas!

A very well-spoken Saudi dressed in a western suit came in and settled the snail down and shook his finger at me with a thinly disguised smile – who says these guys don’t have a sense of humor? He then explained that he is bound by Saudi regulations not to allow anyone to take pictures around the refinery. I took pains to explain that we were new to the country and had never seen an entire herd of camels on a freeway. His eyes lit up, and he said he now understood. He took our film and had it developed while we were served tea and given complimentary copies of the refinery’s propaganda hard-backed calendar.



RSMC Instructor Pat Teague holding Rubber Boat training for use in amphibious raids Persian Gulf in background

Our film was returned properly developed and sure enough, one of my pictures of the camel-freeway shot DID have an oil storage tank in the background. He took a paper cutter and removed the offending tank and returned our film to us with a free developing job! He jokingly said that anytime we need a quick develop job, all we have to do is take all the frames we want except the last one, and then come by and take a picture of the refinery and turn the film over to him! He will develop our film free and simply keep the one of the

refinery. He roared, laughing, and slapped his thigh. Handshakes all around and we were sent on our way and no jail time! Whew... I probably shouldn’t have mentioned the King and the bathroom, I suppose. Mercifully, the head man was a western educated gentleman who realized that evil intent isn’t always inherent in western actions...

We continued to take pictures, but we became much more circumspect in flaunting our photographic efforts. Midway in our tour, the entire Saudi Marine Corps was transferred to the Persian Gulf side of the Arabian Peninsula. Our new home was Jubail, with our base located at Ras al Gar, where the U.S. Marine forces were staged during the (1st) Gulf War. By this time, our contracts with the Saudi-American company had expired, and those of us who had decided to stay, signed on directly with the Saudi Navy. Quarters and chow immediately went seriously downhill, and we were billeted in salvaged trailers. The Saudi Navy hired some Pakistanis to handle the culinary efforts to feed the expats on the Navy Contract. There are two things that I will avoid if at all possible in the way of chow, and that’s anything with fins or feathers! I almost starved in the final months in country! Geesch...

Back to the final weeks of our contract. Photo-ops continued, and we hadn't been bothered by any of the ever diligent Saudi Intelligence service minions. But that was to change in the next couple of days, and I finally got my chance to tweak the beard of the prophet one final time!

We had just received the compliment of 81mm Mortars that we had been expecting. They had been over two years in coming, and we looked forward to giving them a workout. One interesting note - these were brand new! I don't think in my entire Marine Corps career I had ever seen one of these things in the grease! They were gorgeous (if you can ever call a pig-iron piss-tube gorgeous!). Having spent a tour in the Artillery in my younger days, I got the nod to be the lead instructor in the mortar instruction. Once I had gotten our fledgling Camelnecks familiar with the guns, I started mortar crew drill, having the crews racing to see which team could get their gun(s) set up first. Anyone who has ever served in mortars can picture the drill. It was obviously time to take some pictures for Commander Ammar's scrap book. Unfortunately, as it was to turn out, Commander Ammar was on a two week leave.



Boat Team One falls in ready to launch



**"Boat Team One, In the Water!"
Former Force Recon Marine Pat Teague
supervises Saudi Marine Raid Training**

I had no sooner taken the pictures, than I saw a third-class duck drive past the training area, just as I was putting the camera away. He was leaning out the vehicle window looking on in disbelief. I took the camera straight back to the office and removed the film and hid it in my running socks stuffed into my tennies in my bottom drawer. I wasn't about to let the Saudi duck take my film. I then returned to the instruction area to await the arrival of the gendarmes. Sure enough, he wanted my camera. Now by this time I had acquired a

Nikon F3 and wasn't terribly anxious to let some camel-mechanic screw around with a fairly complicated piece of gear. Reluctantly, I got the camera out. He asked for the film. I had run the mechanism ahead for a number of frames so that even with the camera empty it appeared that I had been taking pictures. I ceremoniously rewound the mechanism and opened the camera back. Much to my horror (and the duck's) I found that I had been taking pictures with an empty camera! Oh No! What could I have been thinking? I explained that I hadn't used the camera for months and had assumed that it was loaded with film. I shrugged my shoulders and displayed the empty camera. Now the duck wasn't Albert Einstein, but he knew I was winding his watch on this one. He reluctantly took the camera and disappeared.

That evening, I took the film home in my rolled up socks and put it in my underwear drawer in the trailer. Several days passed and nothing was said, but I still didn't have my camera back. It was obviously time to reclaim my property. I was within a week of exiting stage left from the Kingdom, and I wasn't about to donate my camera to the camel jockeys. I drove up to the security office and was met by an older tall, thin, mustang Navy Lieutenant who immediately demanded the film. Right, I thought to myself, about the time the sand dunes turn to grassy hills! The lieutenant turned from surly to insulting.

"You are lying," he says, "give me the film!"

"Lieutenant," I sez, "in MY Navy, if a junior officer were to tell me I was lying, I'd unscrew his head and defecate in his neck" (using slightly stronger language, of course)! "Of course, since this isn't my country, I won't do that, but you must understand I have just been insulted!"

"You must think we are stupid," he says, "give me the film!"

"I didn't think you were stupid until several minutes ago, but I'm beginning to change my mind!"

The lieutenant was becoming apoplexic...

"Lieutenant, even though I DIDN'T take any pictures, if I had any film in the camera, Commander Ammar has requested that we take pictures of the training for his scrap book!"

"Commander Ammar doesn't have the authority to do that – **"I"** am the intelligence officer and he must do what **"I"** say!"

"Do you mean that Navy Lieutenants are senior to Commanders? No wonder you guys need help!"

By now the lieutenant is no longer coherent. He ordered me to report to the senior intelligence officer on the Jubail Naval Base, and gave my camera to the third class duck who had originally confiscated it. The Lieutenant instructed him to stay with me while I went to see the head Intelligence Officer. Uh Oh, this did NOT bode well!... Time to start thinking ahead. A quick stop at the main gate resulted in a clearance to the security office. I began to imagine that this might be one of those times my "contact" in the American Consulate warned me about. I could see that one minor agency "Asset" was about to be hung out to dry if I couldn't figure a way out of this one!

I was met by a pleasant enough older Navy Lieutenant who introduced himself as the Chief of Security. He had obviously heard the entire story from the red-faced lieutenant at Ras al Gar and was ready for me. Instead of playing the bad-a\$\$, this guy was using the good-cop routine. He gave me what passed for a fatherly lecture, explaining that while it is good to admit making a mistake (giving reference to my story of having forgotten to put film in the camera), he thinks it is highly unlikely that such an intelligent individual as myself would make such an error! He told me that it will probably be necessary for me to have my quarters searched. He also explained that the security personnel would of course, look in all of my underwear, socks and other personal effects and if it was there, they would no doubt find it. A cold knot formed in my stomach, but I decided to gut it out. We "Assets" are known for our cool and calm demeanor (yeah, right!) – However, I would NOT let the raggies win this one! I wanted that film, as a matter of honor if nothing else! I told him that I would be happy to have

him conduct a search, all the time maintaining a cool outward demeanor. He told me that he must go to lunch but would finish the conversation after chow. Hummm...

I asked the thinly disguised Gestapo agent if it was alright to go over to the finance office and get my final pay during the lunch break, thinking to make a break for it, get to the trailer, and dispose of the film with my buddies in the SEAL contingent. The lieutenant agreed as long as the third class duck accompanied my wanderings. With little or no fanfare, I grabbed the company car and headed for finance.



Infamous Picture of our Mortar Training with the Marine Corps, Naval Instructors and Saudi Officers – one picture from the roll of film that got me in *BIG* trouble with Saudi Naval Intelligence!

gonna' cost me big time for bailing my fanny out of the soup. I smiled back and agreed – this was no time to negotiate!

Having just established my “innocence,” I went back by Finance and picked up my shadow, who reluctantly left his buddies to their tea. I explained that the Navy wasn't ready to pay me yet, and I couldn't find “Mr. John”... The Saudi's answer to Albert Einstein said that he understood, and we returned to the Gestapo headquarters.

The intelligence icon of the Saudi Navy continued with his cautions and informed me that he was a graduate of our intelligence schools in the States. Great I think, now I know what's running through his mind. He told me that since we are both officers, and he realized that everyone has something he wants to hide, that he would allow me to make a phone call to anyone I like and he will not listen (yeah, right!), and that way I can be sure that they won't find anything in my trailer that I wouldn't want found! Heh, heh, heh... That one was old when Mohammad was wearing his diaper on his fanny instead of his head!

I told him that his offer of the phone call was appreciated, but that I had nothing to hide. I pointed out that they would find my K-Bar Knife with a day-night flare

I told my Navy shadow that I must find “Mr. John” (the Saudis usually use the first name rather than the last), and that he was welcome to come with me if he wanted. By now the “shadow duck” was settled in with his cronies, drinking tea, and he allowed as how he'd stay there, but I should tell him before I leave. I breathed a sigh of relief and headed for my quarters solo – whew! Upon pulling up in front of the trailer, I wasted no time cleaning all the contraband out of my drawers - and took it over to my SEAL buddy. He grinned and told me it's



Saudi Marine Instructor's Patch

taped to it for water safety, and he says that would be quite alright. I also informed him that I had one of the pencil flare guns to be used as a safety device in the event of a training accident, plus assorted web gear to carry my canteen and jungle kit. Again, he readily agreed that all this would be considered to be legitimate gear. With that, he lapsed into more small talk and finally made his decision. He told me that, upon reflection, he's sure I'd been telling the truth all along and that no inspection would be necessary! Idiot! They may have given him a diploma from Intel School, but he sure didn't learn much about human nature! We "Assets" however, were ever clever, clandestine and enigmatic! Heh, heh, heh...

He returned my camera and we exchanged addresses so he could visit me in the States. We departed with appropriate handshakes and smiles... I laughingly informed my "controllers" at the Consulate of the possible visit in North Idaho by the Saudi Naval Intelligence Service, and they laughed. I wouldn't sweat it was the reply, they don't even trust their OWN intel types to leave the Kingdom unescorted!

I was still smiling to myself when I climbed aboard the "Freedom Bird" with my film tucked safely away in my gear. I kept one copy for my personal files of course and dutifully gave the other to the Agency contact when he and I shared cookies and coffee on a mountain top in Idaho. The Prophet's Beard had been tweaked one final time!

ROC

