

Loran C Station Matratin Libya

Back in 1968 transfers were controlled at the District Level. Headquarters would just direct a District to send a person to a location like Matratin, Libya. I was happy as a SK3AK station at AIRSTA Corpus Christi, TX. When the YN1 came and said the District is asking for volunteers to a Loran Station – said nope and thought that was it. Wrong – month later orders came down that I was going to LORSTA Matratin, Libya. Pissed was my first reaction because I had been promoted to SK2. Then came the physical, the Naval Doctor said I needed 20 shots to go to that location. (Vietnam wasn't that bad!) Plus side was that Libya was ruled by a King that was pro-American; an Air Force Base in Tripoli and America and British Oil Companies in the desert.

Getting there was an adventure, first Governor's Island New York (3 days), then to AIRSTA Naples Italy/ACTEUR (7 days) then a direct flight on a Coast Guard C123 to the Sahara in Libya. I guess I didn't really realized what I was getting into until I got to Naples. The guys at the air station and flight crew kept apologizing to me for my fate. I had gotten the hell hole of all duties. Flying over the vast emptiness of the Sahara Desert seeing these few buildings that was going to be home for a year is when reality of my fate sunk in. We landed on an old WWII German air field that the CG had re-surfaced the runway when the station was built. What hit me first was that it was 90 degrees and the guys were wearing foul weather jackets; I thought oh boy here it comes – psyche the new guy out.

Every two weeks the Coast Guard would fly the C123 to Matratin with supplies, fresh milk, vegetables, movies and mail. Thus, I learned real quickly that it was unload the airplane as fast as you can into the stake truck so the plane could take right back off to Tripoli. Counting me there was four of us plus the CO to unload the plane. The airfield was about 20 minutes down the only paved road across Libya, supposedly two lanes depending on the sand shift. We had to drive through the Mable Arch, a tall statue commemorating where the borders of two tribes were established. At the time there were two tribes ruling Libya, to define their territory one runner was sent from Tripoli and another from Bengasi, where the

two met was the boundary (465 miles from Tripoli – 250 miles from Bengasi). There are WWII pictures of Rommel riding through the Arch.

Turning off the road and driving over a hill I finally looked down at Matratin. There was a railroad crossing (tracks to nowhere) and a Bus Stop – got you thinking. The living quarters housed a seamen/third class section, second/first class section, Chiefs quarters, laundry and toilet/showers, and the galley/mess deck/rec area. The work building contained the engineering section (generators, evaporator machines, and garage and mechanic shop. The other half of the building contains the ET work shop, the supply cage, Timer Room, and the ship's office. There were two other buildings; the transmitter building next to the tower and the CO/XO quarters. Outside the work building were fuel and water tanks. There was a pipe line laid from the Mediterranean Sea to the station to make fresh water from evaporating the salt water. The base was encompassed by barb wire fencing, outside the fencing hadn't been de-mined since the war. Every once in a while we would hear about an Oil worker getting blown up traveling through the desert. I did take hikes outside the camp and found that the German bunkers from WWII were still visible and somewhat intact. I did find two German Tank shell chasings and brought back with me. Side note: Made lamps out of them and they were on our dresser for years.

The first class Corpsman and I were the only ones that left the station. There was ESSO Oil storage and pumping station several miles down the road where one of us would fly out on their DC3 plane to Tripoli. Landing at the city airport I would have to take a bus into Tripoli and then catch a ride to Wheelus AFB. There I would buy beer, soda, canned goods, frozen food and exchange items. Load and net all these items on a cargo pallet. We had two freezer containers that when the C123 first flew to Matratin with Milk and dairy; they would fly to Tripoli for the night. I would have to unload the container onto a truck and in the morning drive to get the frozen meats; then drive back to the plane and load the container and the cargo pallets onto the C123. Then jump on the plane and fly back to Matratin where this was all unloaded and taken to the base to unload again. At one time we would take a crew member (for R&R after 6 months) with us to help with the loading and unloading but when the Commander of ACTEUR found out about it,

the CO was ordered to stand down on that practice. So the only outlet for the rest of the crew was the trip to the airfield to unload the plane.

For the first six months (when I wasn't traveling to Tripoli), I stood ET Timer watches. Later the engineering gang was getting shorthanded so the Chief asked for me to stand engineering watches. I got so good at running the evaporators that the Chief would only have them run on my watch. Running two EVAP's for four hours would yield enough water for 5-6 days. Fortunately for my year we never had a generator problem.

The station had several vehicles, a Travel-all w/radio, 2 Ton Stake Truck and two weapons carriers. Work day was 8-4 Monday through Friday, 4 hour watch shifts, breakfast ended at 0745 except for off watch persons. Lunch 1130 and dinner at 1600. Movies every night at 2000 and the bar/exchange opened at 1800-2200. Another guy and I operated the bar/exchange.

Over time the station had built a beach house, out of wood crates, on the Mediterranean. Was a good hike in the sand up and over the hill the tower was on and back down to the beach. This was on Saturdays and Sundays and we would have to carry our beer and soda. The sand also provided some interesting creatures, vipers and cobra snakes, scorpions and camel spiders. Whenever you walked outside you walked with your head down looking for these guys. During the late spring, summer and early fall the sand storms would come up around 1 pm and last for about 2 hours. Visibility was zero and if you went out, life line was necessary. Temperatures in the summer ranged from 90 – 140 degrees and winter the temps were between 80- 100; this is why guys were wearing foul weather jackets at 90. When you have a 30-40 degree drop it's cold. There was a King's Police garrison close to the oil camp for protection. We had two of their men as guards to the entrance of the station and a tribesman as a house boy. The House Boy was actually head of the Nomad tribe and lived in a large tent while the guards and others lived in wooden crates they stole from the station. Twice a month we would deliver water to them if we could find them (they moved their camp regularly).

After 9-10 months I was pretty much accepting the whole isolated desert life when Colonel Gadhafi overthrew the King and took over the country. This was on 1 September 1969 and unfortunately I happen to be in Tripoli. It took several weeks for our Embassy to get our supply flights back on track. However, this caused the Libyan Army to storm onto our base. I will say our CO had guts to stand out in the middle of road and challenged them. Eventually with parties on both sides agreeing for the time being we were left alone. However, in December some of us were invited to a party put on by the Oil camp that included women. Short story, we took the Travel-all with the big whip antenna and radio because more of us could fit; arrested by the Libyan Army (for being spies) and put in jail. Took the American Embassy to get us out. Not a feather in the CO's hat!!. My tour of duty was up and as soon as my relief finally arrived in January, I left the station by the Oil Company bush plane and made my way through Tripoli to Wheelus where I caught a MAC flight to Madrid and then a KC135 to Westover Ma.

I guess the station was finally closed down in April of 70.