

# **On Mamba Station**

**U.S. Marines in West  
Africa, 1990-2003**

***U.S. Marines in Humanitarian Operations***



COVER: *Marines from the 22d MEU (SOC) help young evacuees put on their life preservers before the flight to Freetown, Sierra Leone, during Operation Assured Response.*

Photo courtesy of *All Hands*

On Mamba Station  
U.S. Marines in West Africa, 1990 – 2003

*U.S. Marines in Humanitarian Operations*



by  
Major James G. Antal  
U.S. Marine Corps  
and  
Major R. John Vanden Berghe  
U.S. Marine Corps

History and Museums Division  
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# Foreword

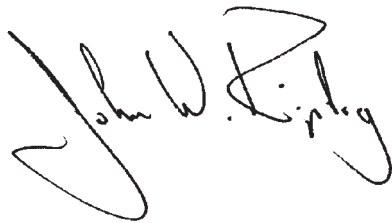
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This monograph tells the story of thousands of U.S. Marines who supported Operations Sharp Edge, Assured Response, Quick Response, Noble Obelisk, and Joint Task Force Liberia, the noncombatant evacuation operations in 1990, 1991, 1996, and 2003 from Liberia, in 1996 from the Central African Republic, and in 1997 from Sierra Leone.

The traditional concepts of employing Marines predicated their involvement in West Africa on protecting American lives and property that might be in danger. Before its actions in West Africa, the Marine Corps was frequently called on for noncombatant evacuation operations. Classic examples of which include recent evacuation operations in Cyprus in 1974, South Vietnam in 1975, Cambodia in 1975, and Lebanon in 1982 and 1984. Marine involvement in the Liberian evacuations during the country's 14 years of civil war went beyond the permanent presence of the Marine Security Guard detachment at the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia, requiring a total of six Marine Air-Ground Task Forces and one Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team platoon to deploy in Liberia. Supporting elements were present in Sierra Leone, Sengal, and Spain. As a testament to operational flexibility, the Marines in Liberia reached as far as the Central African Republic, when a Marine Air-Ground Task Forces successfully launched an additional noncombatant evacuation operation from the Liberia area of operations to support the evacuation of U.S. citizens from Bangui. The civil war in Liberia from 1989 to 2003 caused much bloodshed, death, suffering, and destruction. The Marine Corps efforts focused on protecting Americans lives and property and resulted in the evacuation of Americans and foreign nationals from the violence and chaos of civil war.

The authors of this volume, Majors James G. Antal and R. John Vanden Berghe, served as historical writers assigned the History and Museums Division. Major Antal previously served in a variety of infantry and intelligence billets and commanded the Marine Corps Security Force Company in Naples, Italy. He retired from active duty in 1998. Major Vanden Berghe, an infantry officer, served as the assistant operations officer and the operations officer of Battalion Landing Team 3d Battalion, 8th Marines, during that unit's participation in Operation Sharp Edge. He retired from active duty in 2002.

In pursuit of accuracy and objectivity, the History and Museums Division welcomes comments from interested individual.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John W. Ripley". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a long, horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John W. Ripley  
Colonel  
United States Marine Corps (Retired)  
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

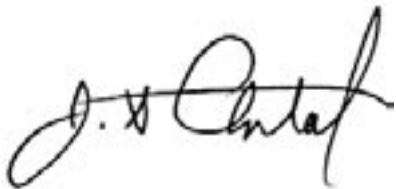


# Preface

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This monograph examines the decisions, deployments, and actions of United States Marine Corps forces in Liberia associated with Operations Sharp Edge, Assured Response, and Joint Task Force Liberia, and in the Central African Republic with Operation Quick Response and Noble Obelisk in Sierra Leone. The United States Marine Corps' support of the American Embassy in Monrovia, Liberia, during the country's civil war (1989 to 2003) involved six different Marine Air-Ground Task Forces. The study begins with interactions between the Marine's forward command element and the embassy staff from May through August 1990. Reviewed in detail are significant actions leading up to the embassy's 4 August 1990 decision to evacuate and draw down selected sites. Marines conducted security, support, and noncombatant evacuation operations from 5 August 1990 to 15 February 1991. The concurrent actions of West African peacekeeping forces and Liberian peace efforts are included to provide the context of Marine actions in Monrovia. A short discussion of the interim civil war years follows. With the reintroduction of American forces in April 1996 comes the arrival and deployment of the Marines as a joint task force. Accordingly, the study examines the deployment, command relationships, political-military relationships, the fighting, and Marine's actions at the embassy. Next is an account of the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force, the last Marine unit in Liberia. Included is a narrative of the unit's deployment, turnover, actions ashore, and their final phased withdrawal from the embassy on 3 August 1996. The account of the May 1996 evacuation (Quick Response) from the Central African Republic provides a related example of Marine responsiveness in noncombatant evacuation operations. This monograph illustrates the flexibility and utility of naval expeditionary forces, specifically, Marine expeditionary units, to conduct noncombatant evacuation operations in an uncertain world.

This monograph could not have been published without the professional efforts of the staff of the History and Museums Division. The authors would like to thank Mr. Charles D. Melson, Mr. Charles R. Smith, Dr. David B. Crist, and Mrs. Wanda J. Renfrow for their meticulous review and corrections to both style and content, and Mr. Charles R. Smith, for his contributions to the text. We also would like to thank Ms. Evelyn A. Englander, the research librarian, Mr. Frederick J. Graboske and his staff in the Archives Section, and the Reference Section, headed by Mr. Danny J. Crawford.



James G Antal



R. John Vanden Berghe

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## *Part I*

# Operation Sharp Edge 1990-1991





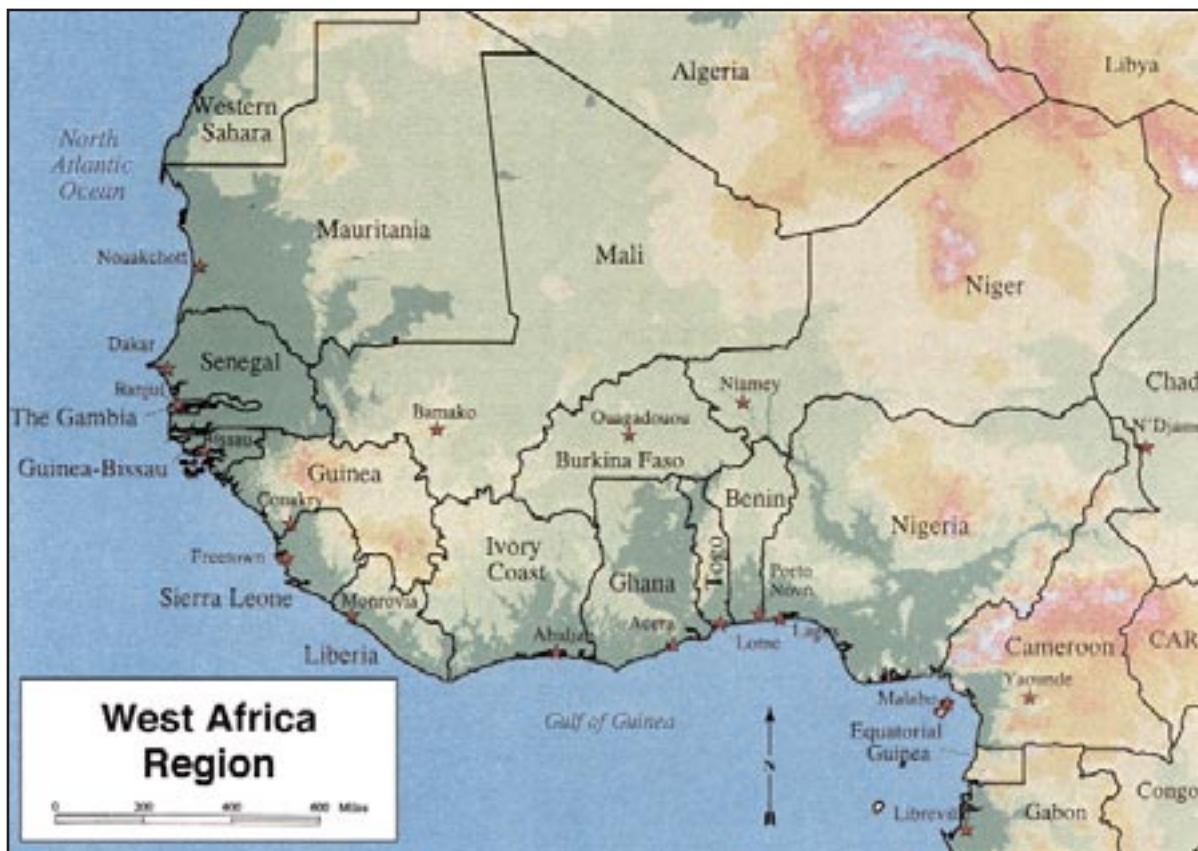
## Chapter 1

# Liberian Unrest Turns Violent

### *The Geography of Liberia*

Liberia is geographically situated between Sierra Leone, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast on the western bulge of Africa. In total landmass, the country is slightly larger than the state of Pennsylvania. Its narrow coastal strip, from 20 to 50 miles wide, is interlaced with swamps, tidal lagoons, and marshes. The coastal areas lead to rolling hills that range from 400 to 1,200 feet high and are covered with dense broadleaf and ever-green forests. Timber and rubber plantations abound in these areas of abundant natural resources. Along Liberia's northern border, the rugged Guinea highlands divide the Niger River

basin to the northeast from streams flowing across the country. The dominant mountain ranges of the Wologisi and Nimba, with elevations to 5,748 feet, are found along the country's eastern and northeastern borders. Both of these mountain ranges, as well as the lower Bong Hills, are rich with iron ore deposits and littered with gold mines. The country's six major rivers drain north-east to southwest into the Atlantic Ocean. Three of the country's seven significant diamond mines are located near the Lofa River. Major port cities include Buchanan, Harper, Monrovia, and Robertsport. The tropical climate has very distinct wet and dry seasons. During the wet season, which runs between April and November, the





average accumulation of rainfall is between 150 and 170 inches with almost daily torrential thunderstorms in the late afternoon. In the capital city of Monrovia, the mean temperature is 82 degrees Fahrenheit with an average humidity of 90 percent.

Liberia traces its origins back to the 1816 establishment of the American Colonization Society. Intended to sponsor the repatriation of former American slaves to West Africa, this organization established its first successful settlement on Cape Mesurado in 1821. That site grew into the city of





Photo courtesy of the authors

*In government since 1935, William Richard Tolbert, Jr., succeeded to the presidency of Liberia upon William S. Tubman's death in 1971. Instituting reforms to close the disparity between Americo-Liberians and indigenous tribesmen, Tolbert raised expectations while the economy failed, stimulating opposition and a military coup.*

Monrovia. By 1847, more than 45,000 freed men, as well as Africans rescued from slave ships, had settled there. Most of these settlers died of disease or in conflicts with local tribesmen. The settlers declared independence from the American Colonization Society's jurisdiction in 1847 and established a republic constitutionally modeled after the United States. European nations quickly

recognized the new country, but the United States failed to establish diplomatic ties until 1862.<sup>1</sup>

Liberia's seemingly democratic structure was, in fact, a façade. Territory claimed by African-American settlers and their descendents (Americo-Liberians) and those rescued from slave ships (Congos) extended eastward into the interior, which was populated by at least 16 indigenous tribal groups. The ruling Americo-Liberian elite had no interest in assimilating the African population and referred to them as the "Country People." Adopting the attitudes and lifestyle of antebellum southerners, Americo-Liberians regarded the native Afro-Liberians as uncivilized inferiors. Although Liberians considered their state Christian, only about 10 percent of the population belonged to one of the Christian denominations; 20 percent were Muslim, and the remaining 70 percent maintained traditional African beliefs. English is the official language, but there are more than 20 dialects derived from Niger-Congo linguistic groups. A pidgin "Liberian English" is the common tongue.

The True Whig Party, which represented the interests of a small group of interrelated families that dominated the country, monopolized political power for 133 years. This group comprised only 5 percent of the population. This ruling class resided mainly in the coastal urban centers, principally Monrovia, and exploited Liberia's natural resources of rubber, iron ore, and lumber using labor coerced from the rural population. Firestone Tire and Rubber Company established the world's largest rubber plantation at Harbel in 1936, heralding a period of increased American economic involvement in the country. An Open Door Policy, implemented after the election of President William S. Tubman in 1944, led to increasing foreign investment and modest prosperity. During World War II, the United States built Roberts Airport and the Freeport of Monrovia, further developing the country's infrastructure.

Unfortunately, more emphasis was placed on exporting raw materials than on expanding Liberia's industrial capacity. In addition, a National Unification Policy aimed at assimilating rural Afro-Liberians fell short of incorporating the native population into the political power structure. Tubman, in fact, had no tolerance for any form of political opposition. When former President Edwin James Barclay's Independent Whig Party challenged Tubman in the 1955 presidential elections, his supporters were harassed

and Barclay's party was eventually banned. Although Liberia prospered, only the True Whig oligarchy benefited and repression maintained the chasm between them and the majority of the population. This situation continued during the presidency of William K. Tolbert, who assumed office upon Tubman's death in 1971. But discontent led to organized opposition and the Movement for Justice in Africa was formed at the University of Liberia in 1973. Then in 1975, Liberian students in the United States organized the Progressive Alliance of Liberia. An unpopular increase in the cost of rice led to a demonstration on 14 April 1979, which escalated into rioting, looting, and the deaths of nearly 100 people in Monrovia.

### *Samuel Doe's Rise to Power*

A year later, Tolbert died when 17 noncommissioned officers, led by Master Sergeant Samuel Kenyon Doe, stormed the Executive Mansion. They murdered the president in bed and killed 26 members of his security guard. After advising tribal soldiers not to obey Americo-Liberian officers, the enlisted men assumed control of the government and proclaimed themselves the People's Redemption Council. The public initially welcomed the end of 133 years of Americo-Liberian rule with enthusiasm, but the televised execution of 13 Tolbert Administration officials by drunken soldiers foreshadowed the imposition of a military dictatorship. Doe promised a return to civilian rule by 1985; political activity was banned until 1984. Of 14 political parties that were organized, only four were allowed to participate in the presidential and legislative elections held on 15 October 1985. Many of Doe's opponents were detained or otherwise harassed, and when the election still seemed to turn against him, representatives of his own National Democratic Party of Liberia manipulated the vote count and proclaimed him the victor with 50 percent of the votes (80 percent of the legislative seats being claimed by his party). Meanwhile, Doe removed many of his fellow 1980 coup conspirators from the government, increasing the concentration of power to members of his own Krahn tribe. The Krahn, like the Americo-Liberians before them, became a despised minority ruling over a repressed majority. On 12 November 1985, former People's Redemption Council member General Thomas Quiwonkpa led an unsuccessful coup attempt. Quiwonkpa's failure led to his execution



Photo courtesy of the authors

*Leaders of the violent 1980 military coup that overthrew President Tolbert were: (left) Sgt Nicholas Podier, who became speaker of the interim National Assembly; Sgt Thomas "Strongman" Quiwonkpa, commander of the Armed Forces of Liberia; MSgt Samuel Kenyon Doe, head of state; and Sgt Thomas Weh Syen, deputy head of state. All died violently. Three were killed on orders of Samuel Doe, and Doe himself was killed in the midst of the 1990 civil war.*

and that of 16 of his supporters, followed by widespread persecution of their Gio and Mano tribesmen. Approximately 3,000 were killed, especially in Quiwonkpa's own Nimba County. Many fled the country to await an opportunity for revenge.<sup>2</sup>

During the early 1980s, Liberia was viewed as a bastion against Soviet expansionism and Libyan influence in Africa and American aid flowed into the country. The end of the Cold War and increasing alarm over Doe's abysmal human rights record led to a reduction of aid by the end of the decade. This decline, coinciding with decreases in the value of Liberia's exported raw materials and the corruption and incompetence of the regime, resulted in economic chaos and widespread unemployment.

Then came Charles Taylor. An Americo-Liberian educated in Massachusetts, Taylor was an expatriate opponent of the Tolbert regime. Present in Liberia during the 1980 coup, his degree in economics and glib personality earned him the leadership of the General Services Administration, which was responsible for centralized government purchasing. He was accused of embezzling about \$1 million U.S. dollars in



1983 and fled to the United States, where he lived as a fugitive until he was arrested by U.S. marshals. In September 1985, Taylor escaped from Massachusetts' Plymouth County Jail, where he was awaiting extradition. He made his way to Libya where Muammar Qadhafi allowed him to train an insurgent force. After additional training in Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast, Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) crossed the border into Nimba County on Christmas Eve, 1989.<sup>3</sup>

### *Civil War Begins*

Initially, few in the government took the threat seriously. By late December, however, Doe sent the 2d Battalion of his army to suppress the guerrillas. Targeting Gio and Mano tribesmen associated with Quiwonkpa's 1985 attempt, the Krahn-dominated Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) alienated the population with indiscriminate murder, rape, and pillage. As civilians began to fear government soldiers more than the NPFL, Taylor's force grew. Many soldiers likewise fled to the rebels, taking their weapons with them. The insurgents lured some AFL units into ambushes by passing false messages on captured radios, gaining more arms in the process. Children as young as 10 years old fought as well, some to avenge slain family members and others simply because they had no option.<sup>4</sup>

As popular support grew, the NPFL expanded its initial focus on killing government troops and officials to persecution of Doe's Krahn and their Mandingo associates. By 6 January 1990, more than 10,000 refugees had fled to the Ivory Coast, spreading word of atrocities committed by both government and rebel forces. Meanwhile, Doe tightened his own security by establishing numerous checkpoints throughout Monrovia and dispatching additional troops into the interior.<sup>5</sup>

The insurgents successfully eluded Doe's forces, moving across mountains and through forests to seize the town of Tapeta, which gave them control of the coastal road and split the country in half. On 7 March, the United States Congress passed House Resolution 354, condemning atrocities committed by both parties in the conflict.<sup>6</sup> On 24 March, an American missionary was killed in crossfire. In Monrovia, government troops began harassing Liberians employed by the American Embassy. Threats directed against embassy officials over the security guards' radio net culminated in the burning of an

embassy warehouse by two disgruntled employees on 29 March. As Taylor's forces advanced into Grand Gedeh County in early April, the number of Liberians seeking refuge in neighboring counties grew to more than 140,000.<sup>7</sup> On 23 April, an embassy travel advisory stated the security situation was deteriorating as random acts of violence against foreigners increased. Three days later, the voluntary evacuation of official dependents and nonessential personnel was authorized. Within a week, the official American community shrank from 621 to 143 as embassy families, Peace Corps volunteers, and employees of the Voice of America and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) left the country.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, Doe urged Krahn chiefs to: "get their cutlasses and single barrel guns and get into the bush and pursue the rebels," prompting further atrocities.<sup>9</sup> Loyalist troops arrested 150 Gio

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soldiers suspected of treason. Many of Monrovia's primarily Mandingo taxi drivers fled to Sierra Leone and Guinea while AFL troops manning a growing number of checkpoints throughout the city detained, harassed, and extracted bribes from motorists. In addition, the number of mutilated corpses multiplied. On 24 May, the U.S. State Department issued another travel advisory ordering all nonessential personnel to leave.

### *The Need for U.S. Involvement*

As the situation continued to deteriorate, the Joint Chiefs of Staff began looking at four possible actions that had been presented by the U.S. European Command. The maritime option included the employment of a Marine amphibious force. The other three involved Army airborne or U.S. Special Operations Command forces seizing

Roberts International Airport. The American Embassy in Monrovia wanted a military option available, but did not favor a direct military presence ashore. Personnel were still being evacuated by commercial charter flights, and although there was no government opposition to their departure, nor any apparent physical threat, numerous roadblocks had to be negotiated on the way to the airport. Evacuees traveled in convoys escorted by the embassy's regional security officer and locally hired guards. While it appeared a noncombatant evacuation operation conducted by U.S. forces was unnecessary, the maritime option provided the most viable contingency force. After review, President George H. Bush, with the advice of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin L. Powell, and the Secretary of Defense, Richard B. Cheney, approved the European Command's plan to station off the Liberian coast 2,500 Marines equipped for an amphibious landing.

On 25 May 1990, the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (MEU (SOC)), as part of its Landing Force Sixth Fleet deployment 2-90 (the second MEU deployed to the

issued the deployment order directing the Mediterranean Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) with the 22d MEU to proceed to the vicinity of Monrovia. Upon arrival off the Liberian coast, the Marines would prepare for evacuations and security operations at U.S. installations ashore to be conducted with or without permission from the Liberian government. Colonel Granville R. "Granny" Amos, commanding officer of 22d MEU, had been monitoring the situation for some time and immediately directed that equipment and personnel be embarked in compliance with a 12-hour standby plan.<sup>10</sup>

Government and rebel forces continued fighting at the key towns of Garbande and Buchanan.\* The rebel tactics were to first attack checkpoints and convoys outside a town, then encircle it. Once surrounded, government troops usually retreated into the town, haphazardly firing mortars, rockets, and machine guns. The terrorized civilian population suffered most. Doe's troops generally deserted or fled, allowing the rebels to win easy victories.<sup>11</sup> Taylor's rebels employed these very tactics on 26 May to seize the city of Kakata, about 30 miles northeast of Monrovia. Arbitrary arrests and detentions in Monrovia continued, as did the indiscriminate killing of Gios and Manos by Krahn soldiers. As fighting drew closer, more refugees flocked into the capital. Seeking protection from the violence, a large group gathered outside the compound of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). U.N. personnel granted entry to about 1,500.

On the evening of 29 May, government AFL troops broke into the compound firing automatic weapons, wounding two guards and killing a third. Between 30 and 40 men and boys, including Gio and Mano UNDP employees, were forcibly removed. At least eight were tortured, executed, and mutilated on a nearby beach. Michael Heyn, the U.N. representative in Liberia, described the attack as "incredible, and a violation of international law."<sup>12</sup> On 30 May, the U.N. evacuated its entire staff. Although Doe visited the compound the following day, promising the survivors he would find the culprits, he either could not, or had no intention of, controlling his army.

Prior to this incident, the commander of the Sixth Fleet, Vice Admiral James D. Williams, USN, authorized the dispatch of the 22d MEU's forward

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Mediterranean that year), was training at Camp de Canjuers near the port of Toulon in southern France. The MEU comprised a command element (the MEU staff); Battalion Landing Team 2d Battalion, 4th Marines (BLT 2/4); Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 261 (HMM-261); and MEU Service Support Group 22 (MSSG-22), the MEU's logistical support element. When the deployment order came in from General Powell, the MEU's McDonnell Douglas AV-8B Harrier detachment, based ashore at Hyeres Naval Air Station east of Toulon, abruptly shifted its focus from routine training to "mounting out" on board ship. The following day, Admiral Jonathan T. Howe, Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Europe,

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\* Buchanan is a port linked by road and rail to both Monrovia and the interior.



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*A port view of the amphibious assault ship USS Saipan (LHA 2). In the Mediterranean participating with the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit in NATO southern region exercise Dragon Hammer '90, the Saipan and other ships in the amphibious ready group would be ordered to waters off Liberia.*

command element to Liberia. Serving as a liaison between State Department personnel and the MEU, the employment of a forward command element is standard procedure for any evacuation operation.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the embassy in Monrovia had not requested the forward command element, which made coordination difficult. The team's five original members were reduced to two due to problems with travel arrangements. Encumbered by personal weapons, ammunition, pyrotechnics, satellite communications equipment, cryptology gear, rations, uniforms, and civilian clothes, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen J. Labadie, Jr., the 22d MEU's executive officer, and Major Glen R. Sachtleben, executive officer of BLT 2/4, flew from the USS *Saipan* (LHA 2) by helicopter on 29 May.

After landing at Rota Naval Station in Spain, the pair sought transportation for themselves and their equipment to Liberia. Commercial transportation presented several problems. Not only was it extremely expensive, but their equipment would be difficult to pass through customs. They also had no visas, and the circuitous route (connecting at Madrid, Paris, and Amsterdam) would take 46 hours to complete. A Navy Beech D-12 Super King airplane was available, but it could not carry both them and all their baggage. The officers considered crossing to Morocco, renting a car, and driving to Monrovia. Meanwhile, Colonel Amos decided to send the three remaining forward command element members: Captain David J. Mollahan, officer in charge of the MEU's air naval gunfire liaison company detachment;

Lieutenant Commander Robert Peterman, officer in charge of the Amphibious Squadron 4's (Phibron 4) naval special warfare group detachment; and Sergeant Scott R. Widdifield, from the MEU's radio battalion detachment. While the trio traveled to Rota, Major Sachtleben met Commander Phillip G. Hobbs, the commanding officer of Fleet Logistics Support Squadron 22 (VR-22), a Navy Lockheed C-130 Hercules squadron based at the naval station. That night, the two officers agreed that a VR-22 Hercules would fly the forward command element to Monrovia, provided each got the approval of their respective chains-of-command. While the forward command element spent 30 May getting vaccinations and Malaria pills, VR-22 helped them obtain personal clearances to travel to Liberia and submitted an aircraft clearance request. At 0500 on 31 May, their C-130 left Rota for Monrovia.

### *First Look at Monrovia*

Lieutenant Colonel Labadie, Major Sachtleben, and the remaining members of the forward com-

mand element arrived at 1205 local time. The aircraft spent only 15 minutes on the ground, just long enough to quickly offload its passengers and their equipment. Roberts International Airport, 35 miles from Monrovia, was closed to commercial traffic due to nearby rebel attacks. Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Newman, USA, assistant chief of the military mission at the embassy welcomed the forward command element. The five-man team then drove to the embassy's Greystone compound, where Lieutenant Colonel Labadie directed them to establish communications with the 22d MEU while he met with the embassy staff.<sup>14</sup>

The staff briefed the forward command element on the current situation. At the meeting of the Economic Community of West African States on 30 May in Banjul, Gambia, the participants called for an immediate ceasefire and established a standing mediation committee to help resolve the conflict. But the insurgents had already reached Harbel (site of the former Firestone rubber plantation, now Japanese owned), bringing them within 20 miles from the capital. This advance effectively closed all air traffic to Roberts



Photo courtesy of the authors

*Armed Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia soldiers drive past the American Embassy on United Nations Drive. The rebel soldiers belonged to one of two factions challenging government forces for control of the capital.*





DVIC DN-ST-90-11228

*The American Embassy in Monrovia became the focal point for American citizens and other foreign nationals to gather in preparation for evacuation during Liberia's political unrest and civil war.*

International Airport. In addition, Taylor's NPFL had split into two factions, which further complicated the situation. Former army captain and ethnic Gio, Prince Yormie Johnson, broke with Taylor in February to form a new faction called the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL). This group was challenging both the government forces and their former comrades for control of the capital. Control of more than two-thirds of the country was now split between the two rebel factions, each of which continued to advance in spurts, pausing to reorganize between attacks.

On 26 May, the 22d MEU completed loading its personnel and equipment on the ships of the ARG, which sailed from Toulon the following day. As the group passed Rota, HMM-261 helicopters picked up additional personnel, supplies, and maps of Liberia. The ships then headed south after taking on fuel and supplies. The *Saipan* and USS *Sumter* (LST 1181) proceeded together while the USS *Ponce* (LPD 15), delayed by repairs, followed later.

Recognizing the MEU might be given a contingency mission in Liberia prior to receipt of the deployment order, Colonel Amos directed the MEU staff to refine their plans. Using rapid planning techniques, they were a day ahead when the order was received on 26 May. The following day, the staff briefed General James P. McCarthy, USAF, Deputy Commander in Chief, European Command; Brigadier General Richard Potter, USA, Commander, Special Operations Command, Europe; Admiral Jonathan Howe, USN, Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Europe; and Vice Admiral James D. Williams, USN, Commander, Sixth Fleet, on board the *Saipan*. The briefing detailed various courses of action open to the MEU, should it be called upon to execute a noncombatant evacuation operation in Monrovia, now designated Operation Sharp Edge.

Reports on the deteriorating situation led to an all-out effort to get the Marines to Liberia quickly. Accompanying the ships of Phibron 4, which formed the ARG, was the destroyer USS *Peterson* (DD 969). The MEU transferred a reinforced pla-

toon of Marines and one helicopter to the destroyer so they could arrive prior to the rest of the task force. These 75 Marines would provide quick reinforcement if called upon, and included an evacuation control center to coordinate an evacuation. A detachment of Navy SEALs (Sea, Air, Land) from Naval Special Warfare Group 2 also boarded the *Peterson*. Traveling at 30 knots, the destroyer arrived off Liberia on 2 June.

The operation order for Sharp Edge directed the task force to be ready to conduct an evacuation within 24 hours of notification. It also assigned Admiral Williams, the commander of the Sixth Fleet, as the commander of the joint task force (JTF).<sup>15</sup> The JTF, now officially formed, comprised approximately 2,300 Marines from the 22d MEU and 1,900 sailors from the ARG. When the *Saipan* and *Sumter* arrived on 3 June, the Marines on the *Peterson* returned to the *Saipan*. With the arrival of the *Ponce* on 4 June, the JTF went into a modified location at sea, designated Mamba Station.\*

The embassy compound was located on a peninsula at the western edge of Monrovia with the ocean to the west and south and the Mesurado River to the north. To the east were the business district, central market, Tubman Stadium, and the AFL's Barclay Training Center. The Executive Mansion and Capitol were southeast of the training center. Tubman Boulevard, the city's

The other fork in Tubman Boulevard led eastward along the coast toward the U.S. telecommunications transmitter and Roberts International Airport. Two bridges crossed the Mesurado River north of Monrovia, connecting the capital with Bushrod Island where the Freeport was located. The road continued north across the St. Paul River, passing through Brewersville to the Voice of America receiving station and American telecommunication office receiver site.

The American community was spread out among the city of 400,000 people. An embassy warehouse was on Bushrod Island.<sup>16</sup> The USAID library was located in the central business district. The Graystone compound was located one block east of the Mamba Point embassy compound and housed diplomatic personnel. The embassy's Marine Security Guard detachment lived at Marine House on United Nations Drive. A U.S. Government Services Organization warehouse was within a block of the Barclay Training Center, while the American Cooperative School, USAID Headquarters, Peace Corps Office and training center, and housing for several embassy staff members and other American citizens were located in Sinkor and Congo Town. Americans working in outlying areas such as the Omega and Voice of America transmitter sites lived in either Monrovia or its suburbs.

Both the embassy staff and senior Navy and Marine commanders of the task force were clearly aware of U.S. policy toward the Doe regime. During the 1980s, approximately \$500 million in economic, military, and social aid flowed into Liberia, making it West Africa's largest per capita recipient of American assistance.<sup>17</sup> Because of the country's long-standing ties with the United States, and the Cold War access to Africa it gave the American government, the two nations had strong mutual interests.\*\* Yet the Doe regime's corruption, incompetence, and appalling human rights record could not be ignored.<sup>18</sup> As the rebel factions closed in on Monrovia, Marines and sailors waiting off the coast faced an increasingly complex and volatile situation.

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*During the 1980s, approximately \$500 million in economic, military, and social aid flowed into Liberia, making it West Africa's largest per capita recipient of American assistance.*

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main thoroughfare, passed eastward through the Sinkor District, Spriggs-Payne Airport, and Congo Town. Tubman Boulevard branched off at Paynesville. Traveling northeast, it was eight miles to the U.S. Omega navigation transmitter site and 22 miles to the Voice of America transmitter. Six miles further east the road forked again, leading either northeast to Kakata or southeast to Herbel.

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\* Mamba Station was named for Mamba Point, the location of the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia.

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\*\* United States aircraft could land and refuel in Liberia on 24 hours' notice. The Omega navigation station assisted international shipping by providing navigational fixes, while the American telecommunications relay site provided communications for diplomatic traffic between embassies in sub-Saharan Africa. The Voice of America relay station transmitted broadcasts throughout the region.



## Chapter 2

# Preparing for Operation Sharp Edge

### *From Predeployment Training to the Mediterranean*

In the course of training for its deployment, the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) practiced three noncombatant evacuation operations. For the 22d MEU's "graduation" special operations exercise, Battalion Landing Team 2/4 (BLT 2/4) conducted two different site noncombatant evacuation operations concurrently. One evacuation took place at a mock embassy and the other at an outlying site. Using rapid planning techniques, the MEU executed the multisite noncombatant evacuation operations exercise at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, within six hours of receiving the warning order. Company E performed the outlying site mission and Company H the mock embassy mission.<sup>19</sup> By coincidence, the exercise mirrored closely the subsequent actions of the unit in Liberia.

Before the deployment, the staff studied a number of contingency areas, including Liberia. The MEU's intelligence officer, Major Stephen L. Sayko, explained: "Prior to the deployment we started to take a look at the map, and Africa kind of stood out at us." If a contingency arose that needed a maritime option, "the Med MEU would be the only game in town." The intelligence section took the standard contingency planning materials for West Africa, which included Liberia.<sup>20</sup>

The 22d MEU's deployment began on 8 March 1990 when it sailed from Morehead City, North Carolina. As the next unit in the normal rotation to the Mediterranean, they steamed across the Atlantic and arrived at Naval Station, Rota, Spain, on 26 March. While at Rota, the staff received its first dispatch on Liberia, which reported an American citizen had died from a gunshot wound to the leg. After this initial message, the MEU staff began receiving other reports from the embassy

in Liberia, including information on the 29 March burning of the U.S. Embassy warehouse in Monrovia.

By 23 April, in Cannes, France, the MEU learned that the State Department had issued a travel advisory on Liberia. The advisory recommended that American citizens leave the country, and noted the start of a reduction of official personnel at the embassy. That same day, the Fleet Marine Officer at the U.S. Navy's European headquarters, Colonel Willis H. "Bill" Hansen, together with U.S. European Command representatives, briefed the MEU staff. Colonel Hansen had led a four-man European Command assessment team to Liberia earlier that month and had acquired an excellent understanding of the embassy's situation as well as possible evacuation sites.<sup>21</sup> The first-hand assessment gave the MEU commander and his staff helpful planning information and access to recent pictures taken in Liberia. Colonel Hansen reviewed all possible force options available to European Command if an evacuation was required, but the staff focused on the one maritime option that included the MEU. With this new and updated information, Major Sayko's intelligence section began to develop detailed support plans in earnest.<sup>22</sup> \* Meanwhile, the Marines continued their scheduled training and exercises in the Mediterranean.

In the first week of May, the MEU participated in Dragon Hammer, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization exercise in Sardinia. After the exercise, the MEU sailed to San Rapheal, France, and off-loaded equipment and personnel on 16 May for training at nearby Camp de Canjuers. When the Mediterranean-based Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) anchored in Toulon on 17 May, the MEU split for training and liberty. While one half trained for 10 days at Camp de Canjuers, the other

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\* The planning included obtaining the embassy's Emergency Action Plan from U.S. European Command.



DVIC DN-ST-90-11531

*Stationed off the coast of Liberia, Marines of the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit practice body-search techniques on the flight deck of the amphibious assault ship USS Saipan (LHA 2) in preparation for Operation Sharp Edge.*

half enjoyed liberty in Toulon. With messages from the American Embassy in Monrovia indicating a steadily worsening situation, Colonel Granville Amos wanted his Marines prepared to react quickly. He directed his staff and subordinate commanders at Camp de Canjuers to ready plans for a possible 12-hour return to the ships at any point in the training cycle. Realizing the seriousness of the deteriorating situation, Colonel Amos, a veteran of the evacuations of Phnom Penh and Saigon, as well as operations in Grenada and Beirut, wanted to be ready for any eventuality.<sup>23</sup>

Early on the morning of 25 May, Colonel Amos officially learned about the possible contingency mission in Liberia. The alert order issued by the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the 22d MEU and Amphibious Squadron 4 (Phibron 4) to get under way for Liberia.<sup>24</sup> The ships sailed two days later after a quick loading of equipment and personnel back on board. As they steamed out of the Mediterranean, the ships received fuel and fresh supplies. The Marines received person-

nel augmentation.\* On the way to Liberia, the MEU received European Command's Operation Order Sharp Edge while conducting mass casualty drills and evacuation operation reception rehearsals.<sup>25</sup> The orders directed the MEU to be prepared to protect and evacuate American citizens and other foreign nationals from Liberia.

### *Point Men in Monrovia*

In preparation for the evacuation, the MEU sent a five-man forward command element to the embassy in Monrovia to assess the situation. Arriving on 31 May, the team's reception indicated that many of the embassy officials considered their presence premature. Gathering at their quarters on the day of their arrival, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen J. Labadie's team met with Colonel David Staley, USA, the chief of military mission in

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\* Personnel augmenting the joint task force included intelligence specialists, such as a four-man joint intelligence liaison element.

Monrovia. Colonel Staley instructed the team on its conduct, to whom the team could talk, what the members could wear, and where it could go. Essentially, the forward command element could talk to anyone, but if it needed to talk to any Armed Forces of Liberia personnel, the team had to first clear coordination with Colonel Staley. Directed to wear only civilian clothes, the team could travel freely unless going to some unusual place. In those cases, the team needed advance clearance for the visit from the chief of military mission. Speaking frankly, Staley stated he really did not know why the Marines had come, and said the embassy had a good handle on the situation. He further informed the team the embassy expected a coup and anticipated it would take two or three days. That would likely be followed by a great deal of killing and other acts of retribution for the excesses of the Doe government. Once that was over, Staley said the U.S. would recognize the new government and the embassy would go back to business as usual.\* Colonel Staley did not anticipate any need for an evacuation because the embassy had already drawn down staff and dependents. He then expressed the hope that Lieutenant Colonel Labadie and his Marines would have a nice stay, however brief, and reaffirmed that he would support the team in any way he could.<sup>26</sup>

Given the nature of the alarmist message traffic coming out of the embassy, the forward command element reacted with surprise. Major Glen Sachtleben put it plainly:

Of course we were shocked. We expected to land and fight our way to the Embassy and then saw that it wasn't that way. The checkpoints we went through were very quick, no problems at all. The soldiers we saw walking around all had weapons, but they were all lackadaisical looking. There was no feeling that this country was falling apart in our first impression.<sup>27</sup>

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\* This line of thinking originated from past Liberian events. Samuel K. Doe's bloody but successful coup in Monrovia, 12 April 1980, ended quickly. The city also rapidly returned to business as usual after a failed coup attempt on 12 November 1985.

Their dismay at the low level of urgency deepened as the team met other embassy officials during the remainder of that first day. Most of the embassy staff, including the deputy in charge of mission, members of the defense attache office, and the chief of station appeared surprised to see them, unconvinced and unsure of why Marines were there. Only Larry Hartnett, the regional security officer, and Colonel Staley appreciated the Marines' presence and fully understood their mission. Major Sachtleben felt the attitude among the embassy staff was that of "this isn't going to happen guys."<sup>28</sup> The forward command element team members knew their tasks and wanted to get to work. The tasks included conducting liaison and assessing the overall situation, surveying helicopter landing zones and landing beaches, determining the number of evacuees, and estimating the level of hostilities likely to be encountered during an evacuation. Unfortunately, the prevailing opinion of the staff, that an evacuation was not necessary, led to a reluctance of certain key embassy personnel to support the Marines' effort. Personality conflicts among the embassy staff also lead to certain members of the staff obstructing the team's efforts simply because of its association with another staff member.<sup>29</sup> All of this made the work of the team more difficult.<sup>30</sup>

The forward command element met with the Marine security guard detachment, which was headed by Staff Sergeant Timothy Love. Team members noted that Guard Post One was located at the main entrance to the chancery. At the post, the Marine guard on duty monitored local communications and functioned as the net control station for one of the five radio nets at the embassy.<sup>31\*\*</sup> The posted Marine was the communication link for Lieutenant Colonel Labadie's team when they conducted reconnaissance forays. As the violence escalated, the Marine security guard detachment's quick relaying of messages

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\*\* For official Americans and government employees, these radio nets allowed the passing and receiving of messages to warn them of potential problems. In case of emergencies or dangers, most official and nonofficial U.S. citizens received notification or warnings by radio using a tiered contact system. Nonofficial (non-government employed U.S. citizens) Americans in Liberia maintained contact through a warden system with the missionary radio networks, or through commercial companies' communications with their Monrovia offices. Backup for nonofficial Americans was by telephone or short wave radio. "Liberia Emergency Planning Handbook," dtd 1990, Annex B (Sharp Edge HistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).



DVIC SN-DT-90-11420

*Officers of the 22d Marine Amphibious Unit gather in the Marine Expeditionary Unit commander's office on board the USS Saipan (LHA 2) for a briefing on the situation in and around Monrovia.*

and reassuring assistance when called helped embassy staff and forward command element personnel in potentially life threatening situations. In addition to the Marine security guard detachment, the embassy's local guard force stood post outside the gate and inside the embassy compound. The embassy employed a very loyal contract guard force composed of Liberians hired by Wackenhut Corporation. Darrell M. Lowe, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel, oversaw the 550 guards, who carried only nightsticks.<sup>32</sup> This force manned more than 200 posts throughout the capital to protect official American citizens and property.<sup>33</sup> Stationed at all U.S. properties, the guards proved to be a source of local information to the Marines, passing on reports as to who controlled certain areas and what types of activities took place during the fighting.<sup>34</sup> As a testimony of their loyalty, throughout the crisis many of the guards

remained on post and reported information even after the rebels had overrun the surrounding areas. Some guards were beaten and others were killed in the violence.

With the destroyer USS *Peterson* (DD 969) steaming toward Liberia, members of the forward command element were almost certain European Command would select the maritime evacuation option that included the Marines. Once the destroyer arrived, the MEU and ARG constituted the quickest response for the emergency and rendered the three other European Command force options irrelevant. Lieutenant Colonel Labadie believed the Marines on board Navy ships just offshore and over the horizon best suited the embassy's diplomatic intentions. Colonel Staley assured Lieutenant Colonel Labadie that the deputy chief of mission, Dennis C. Jett (in charge of the embassy in the absence of the ambassador), would not allow the U.S. Army to bring in troops and simply leave them at the airport, which could enflame an already delicate situation.<sup>35</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Labadie and Major Sachtleben found the State Department's approach extremely frustrating, often putting

\* In addition to the unarmed guards at the embassy, other unarmed guards manned posts at the Graystone compound, U.S. Information Service (USIS) building, USAID Library, USAID compound, Peace Corps compound, DoD military mission, American Cooperative School, official Americans' residences, and the navigation and communication site facilities.



them at odds with embassy officials. According to Major Sachtleben: “We think of things in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, and days, and then we roll in on top of the State Department who have a totally different philosophy. They think of things in terms of weeks, months, years, and decades. So here were these two different elements, the Department of Defense and the Department of State, kind of bucking up against each other. So it was extremely frustrating.”<sup>36\*</sup>

Despite the hindrances, members of the forward command element set out to collect information for a possible noncombatant evacuation operation. They began by surveying helicopter landing zones.<sup>\*\*</sup> Traveling in civilian clothes, Lieutenant Colonel Labadie, Captain Mollahan, and Sergeant Widdifield visited every designated landing zone (LZ) in the area. The site surveys included the American Telecommunications Office, the Voice of America, the Barclay Training Center (AFL compound), and the American Cooperative School. The team gathered updated information on size, slopes, obstacles, directions of flight access and egress, surface materials, and dominant terrain of each landing zone. That information was then relayed to the MEU through messages and phototeletype.<sup>37</sup>

The results of the survey excluded some landing zones from the list of evacuation sites. The presence of AFL soldiers at the Barclay Training Center and the extensive overhead wires supporting the antennas at Voice of America sites eliminated these landing zones from consideration. The survey also identified some new landing zones, such as the basketball court in the embassy compound. Named LZ Magic after the professional basketball player “Magic” Johnson, the basketball court became the primary helicopter landing zone for Operation Sharp Edge.<sup>38</sup>

Because the evacuation could employ either helicopters or landing craft, Lieutenant Colonel

Labadie felt it prudent to survey possible landing beaches. Lieutenant Commander Robert Peterman and Major Sachtleben were assigned to this task. The two officers, dressed in civilian clothing and carrying concealed weapons, hiked to seven area beaches. Aware of the delicacy of the situation—traveling the countryside without visas and looking at beach landing sites for what could be construed as an evacuation or an invasion, depending on your point of view—both men acted as circumspect as possible. They looked at every designated landing beach and Peterman conducted a swimming survey in the surf zone at most of them. The two officers discovered hidden rocks, undertows, and plunging surf at every beach. The team especially concentrated on the beach next to the compound, known as Red Beach, conducting surf observations twice each day for several weeks. When the AFL put the beach under surveillance, the surf observations for Red Beach stopped. The team recommended Navy SEALs

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*“We think of things in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, and days, and then we roll in on top of the State Department who have a totally different philosophy. They think of things in terms of weeks, months, years, and decades. So here were these two different elements, the Department of Defense and the Department of State, kind of bucking up against each other. So it was extremely frustrating.”*

— Major Glen Sachtleben

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\* Deputy Chief of Mission, Dennis C. Jett, expressed an embassy staff viewpoint of the forward command element after about a month ashore. Jett stated that “embassy relations with the military were beginning to fray” by July. Dennis C. Jett, “Evacuations During Civil War, Liberia 1990,” in *Embassies Under Siege: Personal Accounts by Diplomats on the Front Line*, Joseph G. Sullivan ed. (Washington: Brassey’s, 1995), p. 138.

\*\* The forward command element brought with them a copy of Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) Intelligence Support Handbook (NISH) that contained imagery and data on key landing zones, landing beaches, routes, and locations in Liberia for a NEO.

conduct a comprehensive beach survey before using Red Beach as a landing site.<sup>39</sup>

The chief of station, Jim McWilliams, opposed the idea of conducting further beach surveys. In their first meeting, McWilliams assured Lieutenant Colonel Labadie that special operations personnel from European Command already had assessed the beaches and approved them for evacuation. Lieutenant Colonel Labadie knew the beaches required a more detailed hydrographic survey, but McWilliams and the military attache did not agree. With Jett’s initial support, Lieutenant Colonel Labadie submitted the proposal up the



DVIC DN-ST-90-11412

*LtCol Emerson N. Gardner, Jr., commanding officer of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 261, delivers a pre-operation brief to his officers and pilots in the squadron ready room on board the USS Saipan (LHA 2).*

chain-of-command.\* Higher headquarters disapproved the request and the Marines made due with the results of the forward command element's limited surveys.<sup>40</sup>

Work such as reinforcement of the embassy still required the team's attention. The forward command element planned for the reinforcement of the embassy, which included specific posts to defend and harden. The regional security officer closely cooperated with the team on its plan. To identify specific embassy evacuation responsibilities, the team worked with the consular section. The rush for visas as people tried to leave the country kept the consular office extremely busy. Despite the surge of people, the consular officer, Mrs. Penny McMurtry, coordinated with the for-

ward command element. Incrementally, the Marines gained the required information and completed the basic reinforcement plan by the time the ARG arrived.<sup>41</sup>

The team also worked with the embassy staff in planning a more detailed evacuation than what was in the embassy's emergency evacuation plan. This, too, proved difficult because almost all the embassy staff thought an evacuation was unnecessary. The staff believed its draw down arrangements to be sufficient. No one at the embassy actively obstructed the Marines' efforts, but many on the staff simply did not feel an evacuation plan constituted an urgent priority or merited their immediate attention. Despite this indifference, the team completed a detailed evacuation plan.<sup>42</sup>

### *Circling at Mamba Station*

Once off the coast of Liberia, the ARG waited in the overpowering heat and humidity at a position officially designated Mamba Station. For the

\* Deputy Chief of Mission Dennis C. Jett later stated, "since the surveys would have been conducted within site of the Executive Mansion and the army's main base, an armed confrontation was entirely possible." The forward command element eliminated this particular beach early in the planning for the same reason.





DVIC DN-ST-90-11421

*Marines of the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit gather in the hanger bay of the USS Saipan (LHA 2) for a briefing on the situation in Monrovia. Also outlined were the rules of engagement governing their mission once ashore.*

next two months, while the ships steamed slowly in a circular ocean track, the embarked Marines kept busy. Virtually every day they rehearsed various evacuation plans with all units and considered all location options. One particularly sensitive plan concerned the extraction of President Doe if he decided to leave Liberia. The MEU practiced the contingency based on two different options. The first involved a helicopter evacuation from the embassy, while the second was a direct flight from Spriggs-Payne Airport by fixed-wing aircraft. In both options, once evacuated, Doe would fly in one of the MEU's Lockheed KC-130 Hercules aircraft to a country that would provide him sanctuary.<sup>43</sup> A maritime special purpose force (MSPF), composed of the MEU's Marine force reconnaissance detachment and the ARG's SEAL

detachment, repeatedly primed for these options, conducting day and night full dress rehearsals. Acting as the covering force for the MSPF, Company H also practiced its role in the preparations. The plan remained on stand-by and in early July the group's alert times shortened temporarily to a one-hour alert to execute.\* During June, most of the cabinet officials fled their posts, with the exception of one or two ministers, while President Doe doggedly maintained he could reverse the growing victories of the rebels in Liberia.

In anticipation of the evacuation, the designated commander of the joint task force ordered the

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\* Although the vacillating President Doe eventually refused a U.S. offer for safe passage, the Marines remained ready.



DVIC DN-ST-90-11540

*Marines prepare to fire automatic M249 light machine guns, known as Squad Automatic Weapons or SAWs, during weapons training held on the stern of the USS Saipan (LHA 2). Fielded in the 1980s, the SAW filled the void created by the retirement of the Browning Automatic Rifle.*

establishment of a forward logistics site at Lungi airfield in Freetown, Sierra Leone.\* The MEU based its KC-130 aircraft detachment from Marine Aerial Refueling Squadron 252 (VMGR-252) at Lungi. Two aircraft arrived on 5 June with the mission of providing aerial refueling and supporting the logistical air bridge between Rota or Dakar and Freetown. Marine and Navy helicopters also

\* Among the Commander of Fleet Air Operations Mediterranean's (ComFAirMed) responsibilities was positioning and operating the forward logistics site, supported by a CH-53E helicopter detachment from the Navy helicopter squadron, HC-4. The site periodically received additional logistic help from Navy Lockheed C-130 Hercules and Douglas C-9 Skytrain aircraft. (JO2 William Davis, "HC-4 Continues Operation Sharp Edge Support," *Signature* (Naval Air Station, Sigonella), 26Oct90, p. 1; HMM-261 ComdC 1 Jul-31Dec90, p. 3; HC-4 ComdHist 1990, encl., p. 3).

began conducting short-range logistics flights from the ARG ships to the airfield. Later, the Freetown forward logistics site would serve as a transit point for evacuees arriving by helicopter or ship.<sup>44</sup>

At the beginning of June 1990, the Monrovia embassy staff maintained its daily routine, including shopping in town. The staff appeared to reflect the city's "wait and see" outlook. Since all the fighting between armed factions had taken place in the countryside, Monrovia appeared deceptively calm. Gradually, however, the fighting outside Monrovia started to disrupt the calm facade. Rebels overran the city's satellite earth station and international telephone service ceased.<sup>45</sup> The voluntary draw down turned mandatory after the Department of State granted the embassy's request for an authorized departure status. (Authorized departure status implied there was imminent danger to State Department employees or their dependents.) Sunday charter flights continued to depart with American citizens from their temporary homes in Monrovia, most leaving with just suitcases. Organized convoys of Americans departed from the embassy to the airport in town, Spriggs-Payne, with the regional security officer and his local guards providing security. Approximately 1,450 Americans remained in Liberia, down from 10,480 five months earlier.<sup>46</sup>

By 7 June, Taylor's NPFL forces controlled Herbel and the international airport areas. The advancing fighters established roadblocks and camps to the east of Monrovia. Denied access to the international airport, many foreigners trying to leave crowded onto the remaining commercial flights at Spriggs-Payne Airport. On 10 June, the U.S. Embassy extricated 360 more Americans using chartered Air Guinea Boeing 737 aircraft.<sup>47</sup>

Colonel Amos decided to send three members of the MEU's radio battalion detachment to Monrovia by boat to augment the forward command element. Embassy officials turned down a helicopter insertion feeling it would frighten Liberians or draw attention to the embassy and send the wrong message about American intentions.<sup>48</sup> A helicopter-announced arrival might have confused many Liberians involved in the conflict, as word had gotten out to local newspapers that a Marine task force waited offshore. Liberians, especially those who came from the interior where most of the NPFL troops originated, may never have seen or heard a helicopter before. For them, such a sight might incite fear, curiosity, or both. Many Liberians wanted the

Marines to come ashore primarily as a peace-keeping force to stop the fighting and relieve the suffering. Some factions wanted the Marines to support President Doe, and others wanted the Marines to remove President Doe and allow the NPFL to take over the government.<sup>49</sup>

On 12 June, Colonel Staley, Thomas J. White, the embassy's economics officer, and the four members of the forward command element went out to the *Saipan*. They made the trip to the ship, located below the horizon off the coast of Monrovia, in a 21-foot sailboat belonging to the station chief. The group conferred with Colonel Amos and his staff on board the *Saipan* for about two hours. They conveyed Jett's thoughts on why the embassy did not feel a sense of urgency as expressed in earlier and recent messages. Colonel Staley, White, and members of the forward command element explained that rather than conduct an immediate evacuation, as the MEU had anticipated, the Marines needed to wait. The quintessential force, the MEU could hold at Mamba Station until the situation ashore reached a crisis point.<sup>50</sup> Following the briefings, the forward command element, White, and Colonel Staley, accompanied by three previously selected members of the radio battalion detachment, headed back to Monrovia.

Once at the embassy, the radio battalion detachment, headed by Sergeant Kenneth M. Sharp, set up their intercept equipment. With an abundance of unsecured chatter on Motorola-type handheld radios, the detachment listened to the radio nets of the various fighting factions in and around Monrovia.<sup>51</sup> The Liberian's lack of operational security made the collection effort easy. Most government and rebel forces spoke Liberian English, although they spoke in dialects when they wanted a secure conversation. The rebels incorrectly believed the Americans could not translate these dialects. During the entire MEU operation in Liberia, the detachment provided the *Saipan* useful daily reports for analysis.<sup>52</sup>

### *Frantic Negotiations Fizzle*

As the rebels gained ground and moved into the Monrovia area, Doe's AFL forces responded to the increased pressure by engaging in random shootings, beheadings, mutilations, and other atrocities. In the Clay-Ashland District of central Monrovia, an AFL squad executed 14 Americo-Liberians. On 14 June, a group of more than 1,000

Liberians conducted a peace march in Monrovia and stopped in front of the embassy. The Marine security guard detachment and extra State Department security personnel deployed throughout the chancery and compound in defensive and observation posts. Fortunately, the demonstration led by church officials did not turn violent. The embassy, meanwhile, on 16 and 17 June, flew out 210 more American citizens by chartered aircraft.<sup>53</sup>

With the situation in Monrovia worsening rapidly, respected Liberians frantically made an attempt at peace negotiations. The Liberian Council of Churches, encouraged by outside organizations such as the Organization of African Unity and the Economic Community of West African States, organized and chaired the meeting. Negotiations sponsored by the Interfaith Mediation Committee of the Liberian Council of Churches met in Sierra Leone but failed to reach an agreement. Apparently, Taylor's delegation



DVIC DN-ST-90-11402

*Marines are led to one of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 261's Boeing CH-46E Sea Knight helicopters on board the USS Saipan (LHA 2) during a rehearsal for Operation Sharp Edge.*



believed their forces were about to achieve a military victory and saw no need for further discussion and arrogantly walked out of the talks.

The fighting by 23 June had advanced to the outskirts of Monrovia. Johnson's INPFL rebels attacked Taylor's NPFL rebels from positions just 13 miles northeast of the capital city in Bensonville and Careysburg. A large crowd demonstrated for peace on 26 June, calling for a ceasefire and demanding the Liberian president leave the county. About 500 Liberians broke off from the main body demonstrating downtown, marched to the gates of the American Embassy, and chanted for the U.S. to intervene while diplomatic security personnel and the embassy's Marine security guards took up defensive positions. But the demonstration remained nonviolent.<sup>54</sup> The next day in central Monrovia, AFL soldiers fired on another peace demonstration killing and wounding many in the crowd near the U.S. General Services Organization compound. During the shooting and ensuing panic surrounding the march, stray rounds penetrated the chancery and ricocheted off some of the taller buildings in the compound. One round hit the bulletproof glass in front of Corporal James Landherr's standing post one.<sup>55</sup>

The following afternoon, the NPFL, many in bizarre costumes such as carnival masks, wigs, football helmets, women's dresses, shower caps, and even toilet seats, attacked Liberian army positions at Roberts International Airport.\* On 28 June 1990, the new American Ambassador, Peter De Vos, arrived in Monrovia. By this time the Sunday charter flights had reduced the official embassy staff to approximately 40 essential personnel.<sup>56</sup> As if to welcome him, the INPFL seized the hydroelectric plant at the Mount Coffee Dam the next day and cut off electricity to the city.

Early July found Taylor's rebels firmly in control of most of the Liberian countryside, including the cities of Buchanan and Gbarnga. The offensive temporarily halted to replenish supplies. A few days later, Prince Johnson's INPFL rebels clashed again with Taylor's NPFL fighters outside Monrovia. Formerly allies, now opposing forces, both meant to destroy the other and Doe.<sup>57</sup>

Fighting on 8 July moved to the city's suburbs with heavy fighting occurring at the Spriggs-Payne

Airport and the Sinkor area just west of the U.S. military mission quarters. The city's population feared the rebels and the daily random searches, arson, looting, shooting, executions, and rapes committed by government soldiers. Rebel advances resulted in rice and gasoline shortages and cut off water in the city. Embassy water and fuel tank trucks ran a daily gauntlet of hostile checkpoints and the effort became progressively more difficult as the month continued.<sup>58</sup> For safety, the Ambassador moved all official U.S. personnel inside the compound or to the Sam and E building across the street from the embassy.

The resumption on 5 July of peace talks, now mediated by the Economic Community of West African States, offered only a glimmer of hope for the citizens of Liberia. During talks in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the NPFL demanded that Doe step down before the fighting could stop. The talks broke off the latter part of July due to the lack of agreement and progress among the warring parties.

Fighting continued among all three factions throughout the month of July with the army attacking the NPFL near Paynesville and Camp Schiefflin. Prince Johnson's and Charles Taylor's fighters fought near Bensonville on 9 July. Another violent clash between the INPFL and NPFL near Careysburg and Paynesville took place as Johnson's INPFL moved south from the Bong Mine area toward Monrovia. As a result, the U.S. Omega station went off the air and the station operators subsequently abandoned the site. With Omega off the air, ships and aircraft could no longer receive navigation fixes from that station.\*\* Thousands of uprooted and homeless Liberians swamped the Omega and Voice of America sites seeking protection. Jett, in a letter to his wife, stated: "There are displaced people anywhere they feel safe: 500 came over the wall of the American Community School: 6000 at the Voice of America: 2000 at Omega."<sup>59</sup>

In Monrovia on 12 July, Taylor's fighters invaded the Nigerian Embassy. To prevent the massacre of their citizens, Ghana and Nigeria sent ships to aid in the evacuation. Guinean soldiers crossed the Guinea border into Nimba county to evacuate and protect that country's citizens. The American Embassy continued to schedule chartered flights

\* Many fighters wore these items as symbols of good luck or good "juju." Skulls of victims often decorated checkpoints or vehicles to show the fighter's ruthlessness and to frighten potential enemies.

\*\* Although the Liberian Omega station was off the air, the Amphibious Ready Group's ships and aircraft received accurate Omega fixes from other stations located around the world.

for Americans wanting to leave. Throughout the country, foreigners and Liberians fled from the fighting.

On 14 July, the embassy requested approximately 20 additional Marines from the Marine Security Guard Battalion.<sup>60</sup> The June convoy escorts, peace marches and groups of refugees at the embassy had taxed the two-dozen diplomatic security personnel brought in to assist the regional security officer.<sup>61</sup> By mid-July, the increased violence prompted Larry Hartnett, the regional security officer, to direct his diplomatic security personnel to man posts along the perimeter and conduct night patrols inside the compound. On the roofs of buildings near Gate One and Gate Two, diplomatic security personnel set up defensive positions and placed American flags over the protective cinder blocks.<sup>62</sup> Many Liberians and some Americans mistook the armed diplomatic security personnel for Marines.<sup>63</sup> The request for additional Marine security guard personnel highlighted the embassy's need for extra security. The forward command element had advised De Vos to bring in a rifle company from off-shore and objected to the request, but the Ambassador believed Marine security guard augmentation under Hartnett offered the best solution.\*\*

### *Marines Poised for Insertion*

Marines offshore were placed on two-hour alert to reinforce the embassy on 20 July after President Doe accused Colonel Staley, the chief of the military mission, of directing rebel attacks against the government. President Doe's accusation sparked a new wave of anti-American sentiment within the disillusioned, disintegrating army. Declaring him *persona non grata*, Doe ordered Colonel Staley to leave the country.<sup>64</sup> Colonel

\* Primarily there to provide personal protection service, the diplomatic security special security team focused its attention on security for ambassadors and key embassy officials. The team performed other security missions such as escorting Americans leaving the country under authorized departure status as well as escorting the water and fuel trucks attempting to make daily runs in town.

\*\* On 24 July, 20 Marines left Quantico, arriving on board JTF shipping on 28 July. By the time they arrived, the 22d MEU could not bring them in by helicopter because of fighting around the embassy. The augmentation remained on board ship the entire time the MEU operated ashore. When analyzing what size force was needed to replace the 22d MEU, European Command staff considered a Marine Security Guard augmentation option.



DVIC DN-ST-90-11544

*A plane director signals to the pilot of a McDonnell Douglas AV-8B Harrier II aircraft taxiing on the flight deck of the USS Saipan (LHA 2) during Operation Sharp Edge rehearsals. The six-plane Harrier detachment was part of the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit's composite helicopter squadron.*

Staley departed the next day and flew to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he provided up-to-date information to an awaiting MEU debriefing team.

Late in the morning on 20 July, Prince Johnson's forces crossed the St. Paul River bridges to Bushrod Island, increasing the pressure on Monrovia. Traveling in a protected convoy, Ambassador De Vos visited President Doe the following day. Approximately 25 AFL soldiers stopped De Vos' vehicle at gunpoint and threatened the Ambassador. After a heated argument that almost escalated into gunfire between De Vos' security and the AFL, the troops allowed the vehicle to proceed to the Executive Mansion.<sup>65</sup> Two days later, while the MEU rehearsed the Doe extraction and the reinforcement of the embassy, President Doe, holed up in his mansion, accused the United States of again siding with the rebel factions and saying a U.S. submarine had shelled the Executive Mansion. The Ambassador denied

the preposterous submarine attack accusation but Doe had again fueled his soldiers' anti-American sentiment.

Prince Johnson's INPFL took control of Bushrod Island and brought the war into downtown Monrovia. Crossing over the Mesurado River bridges from the north on 23 July, INPFL rebels entered Crown Hill, the central business district and the capital by-pass areas. Fierce firefights took place between INPFL and government soldiers as droves of civilians fled Monrovia by ship, vehicle, and foot. With more than 32,000 displaced and homeless Liberians concentrated in

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*Roving bands of government soldiers entered an International Red Cross-protected compound and the John F. Kennedy Hospital. They captured, beat, and killed those of Gio and Mano tribal backgrounds who did not escape.*

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the city, large groups wandered about looking for shelter in local churches, schools, international nongovernmental organization compounds, and abandoned U.S. Embassy properties.<sup>66</sup> In a humanitarian gesture, the embassy opened Graystone compound to the frightened and homeless Liberians, who quickly filled the area.

Highlighting the deteriorating situation, on 24 July gunfire one block from the embassy caused approximately 30 to 50 people to rush the gates and scale the outside wall.<sup>67</sup> Some of the panicked crowd gained access to the courtyard in front of the administrative annex. Alerted Marine security guards moved to defensive positions in the interior of the chancery.\* The crowd desperately "crawled through every conceivable crack and opening in that embassy wall and were inside within seconds because the embassy simply was not ready to defend itself," Major Sachtleben recalled.<sup>68</sup> A diplomatic security guard fired five shots into the air to disperse the crowd and to control the situation inside the compound.<sup>69</sup> The incident ended without bloodshed with diplomatic and contract security guards finally rounding up the intruders.

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\* The Marine security guard detachment responded to 16 separate internal defense alerts and five emergency recalls for demonstrations between 25 May and 2 October 1990.

While rebel forces infiltrated further into the city, government soldiers looted the central business district supermarkets and the U.S. Information Service building. Roving bands of government soldiers entered an International Red Cross-protected compound and the John F. Kennedy Hospital. They captured, beat, and killed those of Gio and Mano tribal backgrounds who did not escape.\*\* President Doe further inflamed the situation with more absurd assertions, accusing the United States of sending black Marines to assist the rebel forces. These false assertions fueled yet another wave of anti-American sentiment in the AFL, who thought the U.S. favored the rebels. With no celebrating, the AFL spent Liberian Independence Day, 26 July, conducting house-to-house searches for rebels and rebel sympathizers, and black "Marines." A Ghanaian ship from Freetown, Sierra Leone, arrived to evacuate 1,500 of its citizens. Thousands more refugees now crowded into various abandoned American properties in an effort to escape the AFL.

Fighting between the AFL and the INPFL intensified on 27 July as the INPFL moved deeper into downtown Monrovia from its base on Bushrod Island. The fighting included exchanges of rocket barrages as well as small arms fire. On the other side of town, AFL soldiers efficiently looted the Peace Corps compound, bringing in trucks to take the property away.<sup>70</sup> Government soldiers at the Barclay Training Center conducted beachfront executions of opponents, dumping many bodies into the ocean.\*\*\* The *Agence France Presse* reported rebel forces within sight of the presidential palace on 29 July.<sup>71</sup> Just five blocks from the U.S. Agency for International Development headquarters in Monrovia, government soldiers burst into St. Peter's Lutheran Church on 29 July and reportedly killed 200 and wounded 70 or 80 other civilians who sought shelter.<sup>72</sup>\*\*\*\* In one of the worst atrocities of the war, AFL soldiers fired into a crowd until they ran out of ammunition; the troops then killed the survivors with machetes.<sup>73</sup>

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\*\* Government soldiers rounded up some 250 medical students and executed them at the end of Spriggs-Payne Airport runway. Visiting U.S. Coast Guardsmen and British and Nigerian reporters viewed their skeletal remains in February 1991.

\*\*\* Many Marine helicopter crews routinely reported seeing bodies floating offshore in August.

\*\*\*\* United Nations officials in October 1990 confirmed the number killed. Returning U.N. officials investigated the massacre and directed the interment of approximately 600 bodies in the church.



In desperation, a large group fleeing from the killings broke through the perimeter fence of the U.S. Agency for International Development compound looking for safety. The embassy could not confirm the exact numbers killed because of the heavy fighting taking place in the city.

The U.S. controlled Graystone compound now housed more than 5,000 refugees. Because of the geography of the city, the compound received a great deal of overhead small arms fire. The street fighting intensified with all three factions exchanging automatic weapons fire and rocket-propelled grenade barrages. Corpses littered the streets. INPFL fighters maneuvered by foot and vehicles down United Nations Drive directly in front of the embassy late in the morning on 30 July.<sup>74</sup> A short time later, the sound of heavy machine guns and small arms fire echoed in the compound and numerous stray rounds passed overhead. Elements of the Liberian army engaged INPFL forces just below the Marine House down the street from the embassy and killed approximately a dozen men. This type of sporadic but vicious fighting continued intermittently throughout the city during the latter part of July.<sup>75</sup>

By 2 August, the city was indeed a battleground, with violent clashes frequently occurring between the two rebel groups near the American Embassy. On the afternoon of 3 August, De Vos directed all mission personnel temporarily to the chancery's ground floor after several artillery rounds landed near the embassy.<sup>76</sup> Corporal Phillip L. McClaine, a member of the Marine security guard detachment, recalled the rounds impacting just south of the compound near the British Embassy.<sup>77</sup> The intensity of the fighting halted all flights out of the city's Spriggs-Payne Airport and many of the AFL units broke apart as the rebels advanced.

The INPLF leader, Prince Johnson, held an interview with the press on 4 August at his field headquarters on Bushrod Island, boasting of his intention to force a U.S. intervention by taking American or British citizens hostage. Located in INPFL controlled territory, the Americans at the American Telecommunications Office receiver site would make excellent potential hostages. Johnson emphatically stated he wanted to "create an international incident so that foreign troops can intervene."<sup>78</sup> Reinforcing his ruthlessness, a burst from his AK-47 assault rifle resulted in the summary execution of a Liberian International Red Cross worker handcuffed to a French relief worker. Described as an "alcoholic psychopath," Prince

Johnson appeared that day to live up to the description.<sup>79</sup>

Embassy officials had no choice but to react to Johnson's publicized threats against American citizens. At 1400 on 4 August, Ambassador De Vos called Lieutenant Colonel Labadie and Major Sachtleben into his office to discuss an evacuation of the embassy. The ambassador proposed three courses of action: one diplomatic and two military. After discussions with the country team and appropriate officials, the State Department decided not to negotiate directly with Johnson. Instead, they looked to two military options—evacuating and closing down the embassy or drawing down the staff while simultaneously reinforcing security.<sup>80</sup>

### *The Call to Evacuate*

Lieutenant Colonel Labadie notified Colonel Amos at 1820 that Ambassador De Vos had recommended through State Department channels that Marines would assist in an evacuation of American citizens from Monrovia.<sup>81</sup> Colonel Amos then alerted BLT 2/4 of the imminent possibility of an evacuation. All subordinate units of the MEU began preparations, in particular the company commanders of Companies H and E. At approximately 2035, the Ambassador used a forward command element radio to personally call Colonel Amos to notify him of the necessity of an evacuation.<sup>82\*</sup> De Vos specifically informed the MEU commander and the JTF commander that the State Department had approved a draw down and reinforcement of the embassy beginning the morning of 5 August. De Vos and Colonel Amos decided that landing hour would be at 0900.<sup>83</sup>

After the Ambassador's call, the MEU commander ordered his staff to prepare for a total evacuation option plus a draw down and reinforcement option.\*\* Approval came for the second option that involved the evacuation and closing of

\* According to LtCol Emerson N. Gardner, Jr., the Ambassador called directly to the ship using the forward command element satellite communications only two times. The first occurred the day before, when he talked with the MEU's executive officer, LtCol Labadie. LtCol Emerson N. Gardner intvw, 24Oct90 (OralHistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.). 22d MEU Landing Force Operations Center (LFOC) Watch Log, 5Jun-21Aug90, 3Aug90 (Sharp Edge HistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

\*\* With President George H. Bush's approval, the national command authority directed the geographic combatant commander, U.S. Commander in Chief, Europe, to implement his execute order.



DVIC DN-ST-90-10898

*Alerted by Col Granville R. Amos, 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit's commander, of the imminent possibility of an evacuation, Marines of Battalion Landing Team 2/4 gather on the hanger deck of the USS Saipan (LHA 2) to draw ammunition and load their magazines.*

the American Telecommunications Office receiver and transmitter sites, the draw down of the embassy staff, the insertion of a reinforced rifle company into the embassy, and the provisioning of logistic support to the embassy. At 2100, the MEU and ARG staffs convened a crisis action team meeting to review and refine the existing plans. The meeting on board the *Saipan* went into the early morning hours.

As the crisis action team met, the commanding officer of BLT 2/4, Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Pugh, tasked his company commanders to prepare for the two branch plans of the approved reinforcement and draw down option. Later that night, the Marines adjusted their orders when the embassy decided not to use the American Cooperative School as an evacuation site. Embassy officials eliminated the site because they were unsure if any significant numbers would show up due to the short notice. Catching up with MEU actions at 0043 the next morning, European Command issued the execute order. The landing force operations center finally received the message at 0223.<sup>84</sup> The Navy and Marine staffs

adjourned at 0300 on 5 August and agreed to meet again at 0500 for a final confirmation brief.

The final plan called for securing each evacuation site with a reinforced platoon and the establishment of a hasty defense. Led by its company commander, Captain Gary R. Oles, the force for the receiver site consisted mainly of the 3d Platoon, Company E. Company E's 2d Platoon would secure the transmitter site. Each rifle platoon received reinforcements, including a machine gun squad, two shoulder-launched multipurpose assault weapon teams, and a firepower control team from the MEU's air naval gunfire liaison company detachment.\* Each 45-man platoon included a small command element. In addition to the transport helicopters supporting the company at both sites, the plan called for an escort consisting of two Bell AH-1T Cobra attack helicopters. The attack helicopters would remain over the

\* The 83mm man-portable, shoulder-launched multipurpose assault weapon is used to destroy bunkers or other fortifications. With the dual mode rocket model, it also can destroy armored vehicles.

ocean in a ready and on-call status. Oles anticipated 18 evacuees at the receiver site and three evacuees at the transmitter site.<sup>85</sup>

The MEU's composite squadron, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Emerson N. Gardner, Jr., would take Company E Marines to the receiver site. The plan required three Boeing CH-46E Sea Knight helicopters filled with Marines and two empty CH-46Es to provide transportation for the evacuees. The Marines would disembark first and about two minutes later two empty helicopters would land and embark the evacuees, if ready. A third helicopter of Marines would land if required. Until called for, all helicopters not used in the initial landing were to remain a few miles away over the water. Surrounded by an encampment of approximately 5,000 to 6,000 displaced Liberians, the Marines and Americans at the site believed it was important to evacuate quickly. No one knew how the refugees, or the INPFL in the area, would respond to the helicopters or the presence of Marines. Fortunately, the excellent communica-

tions with the potential evacuees at the receiver site allowed the Marines to pass on their requirements to expedite the evacuation.

A similar plan for the transmitter site involved three transport helicopters; two loaded with Marines and one empty for evacuees. Two Cobra attack helicopters would escort the transport helicopters and remain over the water within sight of the Marines in the landing zone. In the first wave, two helicopters, a Boeing CH-46E Sea Knight and Sikorsky CH-53E Sea Stallion loaded with Marines, would land, unload passengers, and then take off immediately. Establishing hasty security, the Marines would concurrently conduct a quick screening of the evacuees. If the evacuees were ready, the Marines would quickly call in the third empty helicopter, a CH-46, to pick up the evacuees. Again the plan called for all helicopters not used in the initial landings to remain over the water until called. Although the company executive officer, First Lieutenant Richard E. "Ted" Anders, did not have direct communications with



DVIC DN-ST-90-11339

*Standing by on the USS Saipan (LHA 2), Marines make final adjustments prior to boarding Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 261 helicopters for the short flight to Monrovia where they would augment security and assist in the evacuation of American and foreign nationals.*





DVIC DN-ST-90-10896

*Marines board a CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter on the flight deck of the USS Saipan (LHA 2). Two AH-1W Bell Cobra attack helicopters and fully armed AV-8B Harrier jets were on stand-by should the Marines encounter resistance.*

the site, the Marines had more time to accomplish the task since there were no nearby refugees and only three evacuees at the site.

As the outlying evacuations occurred, two CH-53 helicopters would fly to the embassy to deliver Company H Marines, who would provide security and assist in the draw down. Two Bell UH-1N Huey helicopters would provide escort. Lieutenant Colonel Pugh intended to establish all positions within the compound since the MEU did not have authority to move outside the embassy.<sup>86</sup> Colonel Amos wanted the insertions to take place simultaneously so the fighting factions would not have time to react.

Because of limited launch space on board the *Saipan*, the CH-53s were to lift off first and orbit above the ship as other helicopter waves formed. The Sea Stallion helicopters held more fuel and could remain airborne longer than the CH-46s. With the CH-53s off, the flight deck crews planned to launch the CH-46 helicopters, along with the four escort gunships. Upon clearing the *Saipan* of all helicopter assault waves, the launch

plan called for the spotting of fully-armed AV-8B Harrier jets on the flight deck that could be airborne at a moment's notice. The *Saipan's* helicopter direction center staff and squadron staff plan reflected detailed planning and critical timing since it entailed the launching of 22 helicopters from two ships.<sup>87</sup>

At 0500 on 5 August 1990, MEU officers attended a confirmation brief held in the wardroom. By 0600, the companies had staged in the hangar bay of the *Saipan*, ready to draw ammunition and load onto the helicopters. Once the confirmation brief ended, the bands on the ammunition crates were cut and the company gunnery sergeants supervised the issue of ammunition to their Marines. At 0730, the helicopter launch cycle began and the Marines loaded on to the CH-53s in 15 minutes. The heavy lift helicopters carried Company H Marines slated for the embassy and some of the Company E Marines for the transmitter site evacuation. Loaded and ready at 0800, the CH-53 helicopters launched from the deck of the *Saipan*.<sup>88</sup>



## Chapter 3

# Evacuation Operations

### *A Rainy D-Day*

Although the weathermen on board the USS *Saipan* had predicted clear skies for 5 August, Mother Nature had other ideas and greeted the pilots of HMM-261 with a rainy, cloudy day. Lieutenant Colonel Emerson N. Gardner, Jr., squadron commander of the “Raging Bulls” of HMM-261, planned to have the helicopters rendezvous in the appropriate groupings for the scheduled landings as soon as all the aircraft lifted off the ship, but the low ceiling and rain prevented the squadron helicopters from flying

through the clouds in specific groups. Instead, Gardner directed the helicopters to take radar vectors through the storm system and meet up in landing groups on the other side. As Gardner recalled: “We did that, and it worked out real well.”<sup>89</sup>

During the flight through the clouds, the helicopter direction center vectored the helicopters to prevent mid-air collisions and then helped sort out the helicopters once they arrived on the other side of the rain clouds. Once in the clear, the helicopters grouped together according to landing sites. The direction center’s effort to keep the two



Photo courtesy of BGen Granville R. Amos

*At Landing Zone Magic, Marines of Company H quickly exit a Sikorsky CH-53E Sea Stallion and fan out to cover Gate One and Gate Two and establish several blocking positions just outside the American Embassy compound.*

CH-53s together caused some initial confusion, but that was quickly sorted out and the helicopters and Marines they carried sped on their way toward the Liberian coast. The passage through the storm caused a six-minute delay, which did not prove to be critical.<sup>90</sup>

Led by Lieutenant Colonel Gardner, the helicopter group of five CH-46s and two AH-1Ts arrived by 0906 at the American Telecommunications Office receiver site north of Monrovia.<sup>91</sup> Three of the CH-46s carried Company E Marines to provide site security for the evacuation while the two empty CH-46s carried 18 sets of life vests and protective helmets for the evac-

uees. The Marines got their first glimpse of the site, a huge cleared area covering about two square miles, as the helicopters carefully navigated the approach around support cables and other antenna field hazards. The extensive receiver site encompassed three different landing zones. Within the site, a small perimeter fence enclosed a cluster of cement communications and support buildings. Outside the fence line surrounding the site were thousands of refugees living in a large makeshift shantytown of plastic sheeting and palm frond lean-tos.<sup>92</sup> The designated landing zone, named Dove, was located inside the communications site fence line and stood out like an

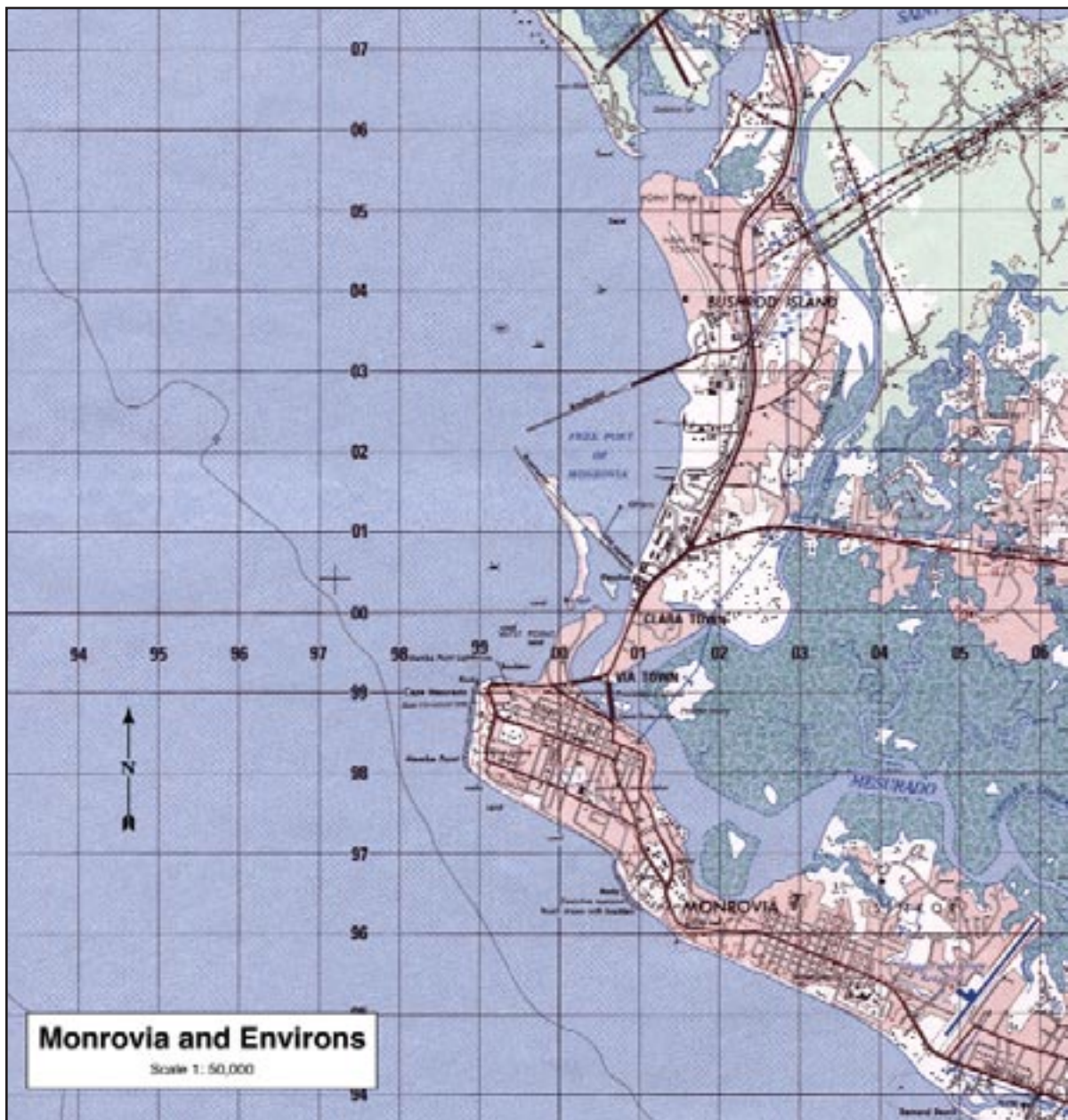




Photo courtesy of BGen Granville R. Amos

*A Marine rifle squad positioned atop the American Embassy's Gate Two overlooking United Nations Drive, the main thoroughfare running the full length of the Embassy compound.*

island among the sea of refugees. The landing zone provided enough room for two helicopters to land in front of the two-story main building.

Two helicopters landed and Marines quickly unloaded and secured the interior perimeter fence. The helicopters took off again as soon as the last Marine was out. Hundreds of refugees pressed up to the perimeter fence line to see what all the activity was about. Some Liberians attempted to climb the fence and were warned: "Stay back! We are U.S. Marines!"<sup>93</sup> While the two empty CH-46s landed, the fifth loaded helicopter remained airborne with the Cobras to keep watch on the situation on the ground. Jack Quin, part of the embassy's communications support unit at the receiver site, already had divided his personnel into two nine-man groups, or "sticks," for loading onto helicopters. The Marine company commander, Captain Gary R. Oles, and Quin quickly verified the identities of every civilian on the evacuation list while the evacuation control team, headed by Staff Sergeant Effard T. Henson, searched and screened the evacuees for weapons using

hand held metal detectors. The evacuees, their equipment, and four escorting Marines lifted off in two helicopters at 0913. With their task completed, the Marines pulled back and boarded the helicopters at 0919.<sup>94</sup> As the last helicopter left the zone, Captain Oles observed two men with shotguns running toward the gate of the compound. Fortunately, no shots were fired and the Marines departed without incident.<sup>95</sup> The rapid evacuation of the American Telecommunications Office receiver site completed one task of the MEU's mission.

Seven minutes after the receiver site evacuation, the evacuation of the American Telecommunications Office transmitter site southeast of Monrovia began. As the helicopter-borne force approached Landing Zone Condor, Company E Marines observed about 20 armed men within 400 meters of the landing zone along the main road to the south. A few of the men began moving toward the transmitter site along an entrance road. Once on the ground, the Marines fanned out and established a hasty perimeter.



Second Lieutenant Michael S. Bodkins' platoon spotted seven NPFL rebels moving along the entrance road leading into the site. The site's unarmed local security guard and two Marines waved and yelled at the approaching rebels, ordering them to stop and turn around. The rebels complied and made no further attempt to interfere with the evacuation operation. (The Marines later learned a radio intercept had overheard the rebels being told to "blast" any U.S. helicopters.) While a Cobra gunship orbited nearby, the evacuation control team identified the three evacuees by their passports, scanned them with metal detector wands, and embarked them on the waiting CH-53. About 11 minutes after landing, the 2d Platoon collapsed the landing zone security and extracted at 0936.

The evacuees from the receiver site arrived at 0935 on the *Saipan*. Minutes later, the ship received radio confirmation of the evacuation of the transmitter site. By 0950, all evacuees and Marines from both sites were on board. With their mission complete, the Marines of Company E stood down and turned in their ammunition.<sup>96</sup>

### *Into the Embassy*

While evacuations were underway at the telecommunications sites, the MEU began its main effort at the American Embassy in Monrovia with Marines from Company H, BLT 2/4, setting down at Landing Zone Magic at 0910 to reinforce the security and draw down the embassy staff.<sup>97</sup> The first wave involved two CH-53 with each succeeding wave consisting of two CH-46 aircraft. When the first wave landed, Lieutenant Commander Robert Peterman of the forward command element notified the 3d Platoon commander, First Lieutenant Gary S. Johnston, about a potential threat outside Gate Three. Johnston ordered one squad to immediately cover Gates One and Two, while he and another squad followed Peterman through Gate Three to establish a blocking position near the corner of United Nations Drive and Sekou Toure Avenue. The sounds of sporadic gunfire echoed in the compound as they moved out. Captain Daniel S. Rogers, commanding officer of Company H, met Major Glen Sachtleben in the landing zone. Rogers received a quick update on the possible threat outside Gate Three. He immediately responded by ordering First Sergeant Luther T. Rymer to inform incoming platoons of the situation upon their arrival in the landing zone.<sup>98</sup>

While establishing security, Marines climbing a ladder to a defensive position on the building at Gate One spotted a cluster of INPLF fighters coming down the road about 50 meters to the north. Someone quickly parked a nearby armored Suburban sideways and the fire team took up positions behind it. A newly arrived squad from 3d Platoon swiftly moved outside Gate One and turned north toward the threat on United Nations Drive. Captain Rogers, his radio operator, and Major Sachtleben followed the squad. The rebels paused when Major Sachtleben warned them by bullhorn to turn around. The Marine squad began to leapfrog toward the fighters with fire teams moving from one covered position to the next. A French journalist that had been walking with the INPFL group joined the Marines as they tactically moved up the street. The rebels, observing the advancing Marines, backed away slowly up United Nations Drive and moved into a house at the junction of Benson Street, a main thoroughfare. Major Sachtleben then gave another bullhorn warning, telling the INPFL troops to leave the building; a few obeyed. To eliminate the threat the fighters posed to the Marines, the squad leader, Sergeant Todd Alverson, ordered his men to clear the building. Fire teams lead by Corporal Dennis Tuzinoski and Corporal Sean Collins methodically cleared each room, forcing the remaining fighters to escape out the rear of the building. With the house clear, the squad moved east down Benson Street and set up positions covering the road. The squad's position looked straight down Benson Street, the left flank anchored at the Masonic Temple grounds and the right anchored by a deep ditch next to the wall of the Graystone compound.<sup>99</sup>

By this time, 2d Platoon had arrived and relieved the 3d Platoon squad at the corner of Sekou Toure Avenue and United Nations Drive and Gate Three.<sup>100\*</sup> The 3d Platoon squad then moved up United Nations Drive to establish a third blocking position just north of the United Nations Drive and Benson Street intersection. This northern-most blocking position had its right flank anchored on the rock quarry and the left flank extended up the slope of Mamba Point Lighthouse Hill, giving the squad a clear view to

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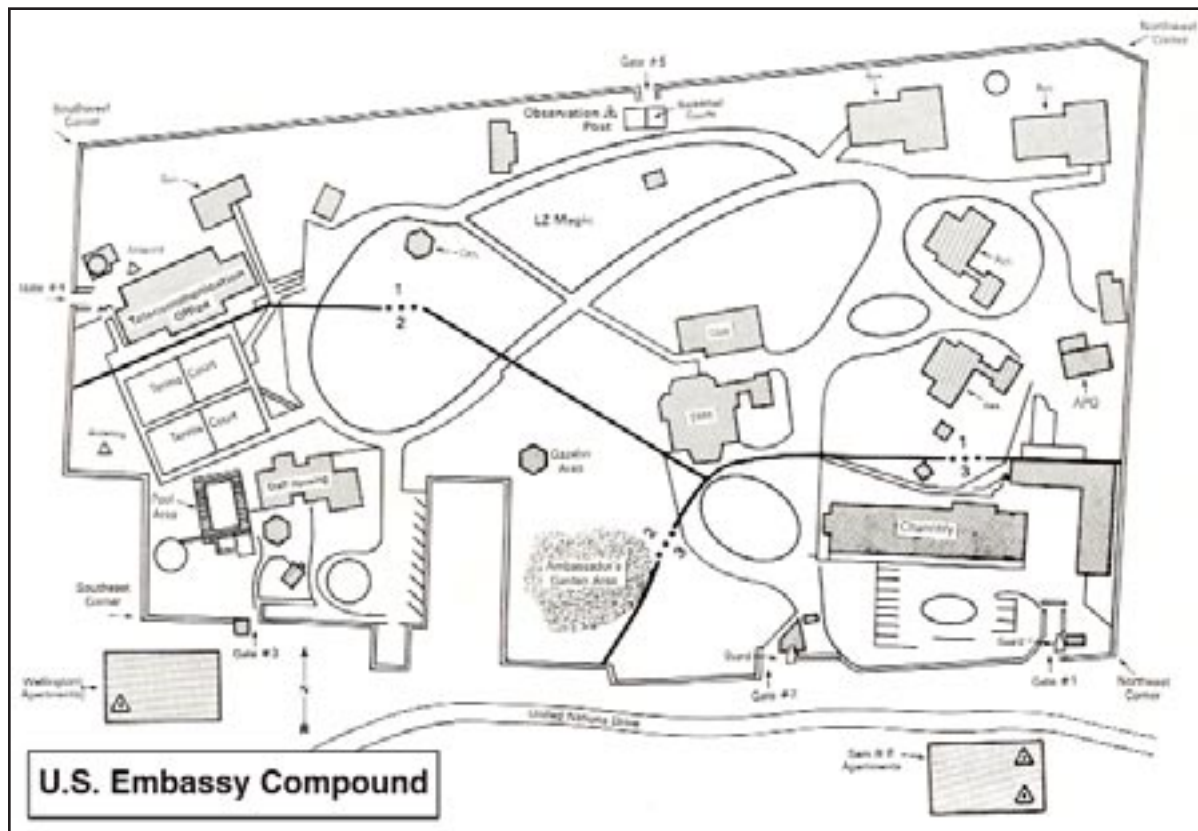
\* Sekou Toure Avenue was named after the despotic ruler of Guinea who led the fight for independence from France in 1956 and ruled the country from independence to 1984. He claimed to be a descendent of the legendary Malinke chief, Samori Toure, a Guinean guerrilla leader who fought the French in the 19th century.



monitor the movement of vehicles approaching from the north.

In the embassy compound, 1st Platoon set up as the company's reserve, manning observation

The small size of the makeshift landing zone meant helicopters could only come in one at a time. By 1100, 237 Marines equipped with fast attack vehicles occupied defensive positions.



posts on the west side of the embassy at Gates Four and Five. The platoon established a temporary blocking position outside the northwest corner of the compound to cover a secondary landing zone near the quarry north of the embassy. Weapons Platoon set up 60mm mortar positions in an open area just south of the embassy's Landing Zone Magic. Roving patrols initiated by 1st Platoon covered the interior of the compound and 2d Platoon occupied defensive positions at Gate Three. The Marines established observation posts in the compound and across the street in the Wellington apartment building and the Sam and E building. The observation posts outside the embassy gave them better visibility and provided an early warning position if any armed personnel approached the embassy.\*

\* According to the monthly status report from the regional security officer, Department of State diplomatic security personnel began manning the observation posts in the apartment buildings outside the embassy on 6 August. (AmEmbassy Monrovia msg to SecState WashDC, 171109ZSep90)

Each of the six fast attack vehicles (modified and reinforced jeeps) had a .50-caliber machine gun or 40mm Mark 19 grenade launcher mounted to them. The Marines positioned one vehicle at each of the northern blocking positions and two more vehicles at the southern blocking position. Constituting the reserve, the remaining two vehicles were directly behind Gate Two. The Marines then strung concertina wire across the road at all three blocking positions. Heavy machine guns, medium machine guns, antitank weapons, and a rifle squad at each roadblock protected the critical approaches to the embassy.<sup>101</sup>

Marines from Company H established three blocking positions outside the embassy, while inside the compound they began the hasty evacuation of waiting noncombatants. The infantrymen, working with the embassy staff, evacuated 38 employees by helicopter at 1045.<sup>102</sup>

Company H Marines moved to man gate security positions and observation posts, and a reaction force was positioned in the compound. The unit manned additional observation posts across



Photo courtesy of BGen Granville R. Amos

*Two modified and reinforced jeeps, each mounting a .50-caliber machine gun, were used by the Marines to buttress the blocking positions protecting vital approaches to the American Embassy.*

the street in the Sam and E apartments near Gate One and at the Wellington apartments near Gate Three. Upon learning that his Marines manned blocking positions outside the embassy, the BLT commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Pugh, provided reinforcements ashore with the 81mm Mortar Platoon from Weapons Company and the Light Armor Infantry Platoon, constituting an additional reserve.\*

The MEU received word later that afternoon it did not have authority to put blocking positions outside the embassy. European Command directed the Marines located at the roadblocks to pull back into the embassy and remain on American-controlled property.<sup>103</sup> Concerned about exposure and another Beirut-type bombing, Vice Admiral James D. Williams and Colonel Granville Amos came ashore to assess the situation. They walked the ground and supported the employment of blocking positions.

\* Capt Daniel S. Rogers and LtCol Robert L. Pugh decided later that additional reinforcements were not needed and withdrew these Marines the next day.

By 1730, the MEU had ordered Company H back into the compound.<sup>104</sup> Abandoning the blocking positions, the Marines assumed security positions within the embassy grounds that afforded less observation, narrower fields of fire, and less reaction time. A couple of nearby buildings dominating the embassy and the Graystone compound caused serious concern for the company commander. Small arms or rocket-propelled grenade fire could easily be directed at the embassy from the buildings near the compound.<sup>105</sup>

But evacuations continued in earnest, and by 1535 the control center evacuated 14 more employees.<sup>106</sup> By the end of the day, the 22d MEU had accomplished two goals: the evacuation of 74 noncombatants and the establishment of defensive positions at the embassy.\*\* President George H. Bush's press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, explained the Marines' actions at a morning press conference: "The purpose of this operation is to

\*\* The MEU flew 51 of the evacuees to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

safeguard lives, to draw down the number of Americans at the embassy staff and to provide security for those who remain....The Marines' presence does not indicate or constitute any intention on the part of the U.S. Government to intervene militarily in the Liberian conflict. We call on all parties in that conflict to ensure the safety of American citizens."<sup>107</sup>

in camouflage uniforms and helmets and armed with assault rifles and a few machine guns and started slowly advancing north up United Nations Drive toward the embassy. The Marines warned the AFL troops not to continue and advised them to turn around. Readyng their weapons and CS riot control agents (tear gas), the Americans repeated they allowed no armed foot traffic in



Photo courtesy of BGen Granville R. Amos

*Col Granville R. Amos (foreground), the Marine expeditionary unit commander, and LtCol Thomas W. Parker, his operations officer, walked the ground visiting each security position inside and outside of the American Embassy compound. Col Amos came away supporting the initial tactical decision establishing blocking positions outside the embassy.*

In the days that followed, the MEU continued to provide security and evacuate Americans and foreign nationals and worked on defensive positions within the compound. They also strung telephone lines to ensure redundancy in communications. The company used Motorola or MX-300 hand-held radios, tactical radios, and field telephones to link each position with the company, BLT, and MEU headquarters.

On 7 August, quick action by Company H prevented a potential firefight in front of the embassy. An AFL patrol of 30 to 60 men appeared

front of the embassy. The Liberian soldiers paused and passed the warning to their commander, a Major Tilley, who could be distinguished by a "Rambo-like" headband. Clearly, if his men continued up the road they risked a confrontation with the Marines.<sup>108</sup> Using a bullhorn, the Marines told the fighters they would employ tear gas if the soldiers continued. To his credit, Major Tilley ordered his soldiers to turn around. Less than a minute later on the same United Nations Drive, a small INPFL patrol appeared north of the embassy and started moving south. Immediately after the





Photo courtesy of BGen Granville R. Amos

*Marines and American Embassy personnel ready a group of noncombatants for evacuation. From the assembly point near the embassy they would be taken to the landing zone and loaded onto a helicopter for the flight to Freeport, Sierra Leone.*

Liberian soldiers had disappeared, the Marines warned the INPFL patrol to turn around. As with the first group, the INPFL patrol left.

Concerned about this incident, the Ambassador conferred with the MEU staff. He made it clear he did not want the Marines to threaten or use tear gas. The published rules of engagement did allow for the escalation of force, except under certain circumstances.\* Although the embassy had a copy of European Command's rules of engagement, the Ambassador's initial interpretation was more restrictive. The Marines felt bullhorn warnings were effective only when accompanied with directly threatening action. First Lieutenant James D. Chaney, 2d Platoon commander, was frustrated that riot control agents, while authorized by European Command, were "no longer a viable

option."<sup>109</sup> To the Marines on post it seemed the MEU's nonlethal option consisted only of verbal warnings. The initial word passed to Company H was clarified in a subsequent meeting between the Ambassador and ground commanders, which resolved the misunderstanding.<sup>110</sup> Daily meetings between Captain Rogers, the BLT executive officer, the Ambassador, and security officer were held to review the posture and make necessary adjustments.

To prevent similar incidents from happening, the Marines posted signs outside the embassy and distributed written standardized verbal warnings. The MEU's nonlethal inventory consisted of a set of proportional, escalating force; first verbal warnings, then CS gas, and finally warning shots. Ambassador De Vos agreed to allow the use of CS gas or smoke grenades if the new verbal warnings did not work. While fighters from both factions continued to travel by foot on United Nations Drive, the embassy also directed the Marines to allow vehicles to use the road if they showed no hostile intent and did not stop. If the vehicle did stop, the Marines told the vehicle occupants to move on. The Ambassador accepted the risk of a firefight directly outside the embassy by allowing the factions to use the road next to the embassy.

\* BLT 2/4 handed out copies of the rules of engagement to its Marines. The handout stated: "In the event that the host nation is unable or unwilling to provide the necessary protection to U.S. forces, the military on-scene commander will employ the following to overcome the threat: 1. Warning to demonstrators. 2. Show of force, including the use of riot control formations. 3. Use of riot control agents. 4. Warning shots fired over the heads of hostile elements. 5. Other reasonable use of force necessary under the circumstances and proportional to the threat." (BLT 2/4 ROE, Aug90 [Sharp Edge HistColl, MCHC])



That evening, Marines watched the trajectories of 122mm rockets launched from the Capitol Hill area and heard the impacts in the Crown Hill, Vaitown, and West Point sectors. The AFL attempted to stop the advance of Johnson's fighters in the

fire.\* The committee also established an Economic Community of West African States Ceasefire Monitoring Group to deploy to Liberia.\*\* Observers from the Organization of African Unity approved the establishment of a multinational



Photo: DVIC DN-ST-91-00814

*Two Marines man a security post on the roof of the American Embassy. The Marine on the right is armed with an M16 rifle, while the other Marine is leaning on an M136 AT4 light anti-armor weapon covered with a poncho.*

center of the city. Prince Johnson seized a number of foreign hostages, including an American, 24 hours after the initial Marine helicopter landings. He released 28 foreign hostages by 8 August, unharmed, due to pressure from the U.S. and other embassies and after receiving information about a soon to be deployed peacekeeping force.<sup>111</sup>

### *West African Peacekeepers Arrive*

One day after the Marines came ashore, the Economic Community of West African States met to establish the peacekeeping force. At the summit in Banjul, Gambia, the Economic Community of West African States standing mediation committee held its first ever session and called on all parties in Liberia to observe an immediate cease-

\* The standing mediation committee's purpose in case of a dispute or conflict by member states included initiating mediation procedures. Conflicts occurring within states when action was sustained or supported from the outside allowed for the provision of a collective defense to be invoked according to Articles 17 and 18 of the Economic Community of West African States security protocol. The Liberian situation prompted the establishment of the committee.

\*\* The decision to send the peacekeeping force was made by the members of the standing mediation committee, not the full membership of the Economic Community of West African States. Objections by the Bukinaban head of state noted the committee had no "competence to interfere in member states internal conflicts, but only in conflict breaking out between member states," (Weller, *Regional Peacekeeping*, doc. no. 59, p. 89.) Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, and Togo made up the committee's members. Nigeria led the effort to send the peacekeeping force. The decision played on the existing rivalries between African English speaking and French speaking countries in the region.

West African force, knowing it signified the first real attempt of a regional organization to assume a peacekeeping role. The two-day summit's final communiqué embodied a strong humanitarian rationale.<sup>112</sup> It called for a ceasefire, surrendering of all arms and ammunition, the secession of arms imports, release of all prisoners and cooperation with the monitoring group.<sup>113</sup> President Bush's announcement on the same day that the United States would send troops to Saudi Arabia to halt Iraqi aggression in Kuwait overshadowed the historic 7 August decision. The West African coalition consisted of 2,500 troops from Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. The commander stated military force would not be used to contain the situation in Monrovia.<sup>114</sup>

Meanwhile, in Monrovia, the Marines observed 122mm rockets impacting indiscriminately in the Mamba Point and Bushrod Island areas nightly. Foreign embassies urgently requested American assistance to evacuate their citizens and officials

due to the escalating level of chaos. On 8 and 9 August, the Marines evacuated the British and French ambassadors and other foreign diplomatic personnel. By the end of the day on 11 August, 199 persons had been evacuated and flown first to the *Saipan* and then on to Lungi Airport at Freetown.

A large part of the MEU's mission included providing parts and supplies needed for the embassy. To that end, KC-130 detachment flights delivered critical parts and supplies to Freetown. Helicopter sorties from the MEU then picked up the supplies and shuttled them from Freetown to the ship and then to Monrovia. The economic counselor officer, Thomas J. White, acknowledged the importance of the supply runs, commenting, "we were getting real low and might have run out of everything."<sup>115</sup> All outside commercial flights had ceased, which left the embassy entirely dependent on the MEU. According to the commanding officer of MEU Service Support Group 22 (MSSG-



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*Marines unload boxes of medical supplies and foodstuffs. With the cancellation of all outside commercial aircraft flights, the American Embassy was entirely dependent on 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit for resupply.*





Photo courtesy of the authors

*Marines of Marine Expeditionary Unit Service Support Group 22 supervise the pumping of diesel fuel from 500-gallon bladders into a truck for distribution. More than 35,000 gallons of fuel was delivered by helicopter to the American Embassy compound during Operation Sharp Edge.*

22), Lieutenant Colonel James W. Head: "Colonel Amos wanted to get the embassy to a level of self-sufficiency. Food, fuel, and water were the three big areas they needed support."<sup>116</sup> For more than a week, Marine working parties labored in the heat and humidity to unload 30 pallets of food and medical supplies.<sup>117</sup> The MEU Marines amassed more than 30 days of supplies at the embassy.

Lieutenant Colonel Head's Marines spent much of their time providing fuel for the embassy. When the embassy's underground fuel tanks dropped to a dangerously low level, the Marines kept the generators running by flying CH-53s in a round robin pick up and fuel delivery service using the 500-gallon bladders of helicopter expeditionary refueling systems. Marines of the MSSG delivered and pumped more than 35,000 gallons of fuel while in Liberia.

The MEU also flew in a reverse osmosis water purification unit to draw water from the nearby ocean. It could produce 600 gallons of potable

water per minute from a raw water source. However, the cliffs below the embassy and the rough surf prevented MSSG-22 engineers from getting the unit to function despite repeated attempts. The MEU solved the problem by flying a 400-gallon water trailer (commonly called a water buffalo or water bull) in daily to support the embassy. The MEU also consolidated all five-gallon water cans onto pallets and flew them in when needed.

The three factions continued to clash throughout the city while Marines provided security and support for the embassy.\* Marines heard the disjointed sounds of automatic weapons in Mamba Point, the whomp of mortars, and rocket explosions from the battle raging near the Executive

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\* No major ground firefights took place at night. Many Liberian fighters believed in "juju," and that harmful events could happen to them if they fought at night. Juju is magic attributed to or associated with jujus, which are fetishes, charms, or amulets of West African peoples.



Photo courtesy of BGen Granville R. Amos

*LtCol Thomas W. Parker (left center), 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit operations officer, meets with one of rebel leader Charles Taylor's officers at the port of Buchanan, south of Monrovia, to facilitate the evacuation of foreign diplomatic staff.*

Mansion and Spriggs-Payne Airport. Marine observation posts also sighted black smoke from burning buildings and explosions. Charles Taylor's NPFL fighters sacked many of the embassies, including those of Guinea and Nigeria. The Marines also received reports the NPFL fired on and scattered the occupants of the German and Swedish Embassies. The NPFL took charge of a large number of these European diplomatic personnel, essentially holding them hostage. On 11 August, Taylor announced he would grant safe passage out of Monrovia to the European diplomats. He then took them over land to Buchanan, stopping along the way at the refugee filled, non-functioning Omega site.

### *Evacuation from Buchanan*

Responding to Taylor's movement of foreign diplomatic staff to Buchanan, European Command issued an execute order to the JTF to conduct an evacuation from Buchanan.<sup>118</sup> On 12 August, the *Saipan* and USS *Peterson* traveled

down the coast of Liberia to Buchanan. On board, the MEU staff developed a plan for the evacuation that called for both a boat and a helicopter option. The plan, as approved in the confirmation brief, called for Lieutenant Commander Peterman and a Navy SEAL security force to come ashore by landing craft. Once in the port of Buchanan, Peterman's mission included establishing contact with the NPFL and finding a landing zone for the evacuation. Aerial photography revealed a number of potential landing zones, but intelligence reports deemed these unacceptable due to possible mining.<sup>119</sup> Once a landing zone had been identified, a helicopter would fly in with the commander of noncombatant evacuation operations, Lieutenant Warren T. Parker, and a team of Marines. The evacuation would begin upon agreement with the NPFL.

At 0630 on 13 August, with the blazing sun already dominating the eastern morning sky, Commodore Stanley D. Gastar, the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) commander, made radio contact with the NPFL in Buchanan. In calm seas,



Lieutenant Commander Peterman and the accompanying SEALs departed from the *Saipan* on board a LCM-8 landing craft (known to Marines as a Mike boat) and moved toward Buchanan's general cargo quay. Docking at 0825, Peterman met with members of the NPFL.<sup>120</sup> After confirming a suitable landing zone, Peterman called in the helicopter carrying Lieutenant Colonel Thomas W. Parker, the 22d MEU's operations officer. The embassy's consular officer and two other State Department representatives accompanied the Marines to assist in the sensitive negotiations. The helicopter also carried Parker's team, which consisted of a security detachment, a radio operator, the battalion air officer, the air, naval gunfire liaison company detachment assistant officer in charge, two photographers, and the MEU's flight surgeon. The flight surgeon accompanied the team because one of the evacuees, the Spanish Ambassador to Liberia, had a heart condition.<sup>121</sup>

The Marines did not arrive with a display of overwhelming force because they did not want the highly sensitive NPFL fighters to get the impression they posed a threat or wanted to

invade. Even so, the NPFL appeared offended by the weapons the Marines carried, which implied the NPFL could not be trusted to protect the citizens that were to be evacuated. The NPFL leaders made it clear they thought Marines posed a danger to NPFL soldiers. Illustrative of the level of suspicion, some of the fighters closely followed Lieutenant Colonel Parker everywhere he went. Parker ignored the intrusive followers.

Lieutenant Colonel Parker and NPFL representatives discussed the precise manner of evacuation in a beach house compound in Buchanan, one of several such compounds owned by the American Mining Company the NPFL had occupied. To reduce tension, Parker gave the NPFL delegation, led by a "General Major," some cigarettes as he talked. According to Lieutenant Colonel Parker: "After some negotiation about who, what, when, and where, we reached a general agreement about how we would conduct the evacuation. They had [the] people. I couldn't see where they were, but they had them staged off. I asked them to bring them to me 15 at a time to the LZ and I would only fly one helicopter into



Photo courtesy of BGen Granville R. Amos

*Evacuees from the German Embassy carry their belongings to a waiting helicopter on the beach at Buchanan. After being given protective helmets and life jackets, a group of 15 boarded the CH-46E helicopters for the 10-minute flight to the USS Saipan (LHA 2).*

the LZ at a time so as not to present a confusing picture to these people."<sup>122</sup>

Having reached an agreement, Parker suggested to Colonel Amos that the number of Marines on the ground in Buchanan be reduced despite the presence of several hundred NPFL troops, all armed with Communist bloc weapons. With Amos' approval, Parker sent the security detachment back. With the detachment's departure, the only personnel left were Lieutenant Colonel Parker, Lieutenant Commander Peterman, the battalion air officer, the air, naval gunfire liaison officer, the radio operator, the photographers, and the flight surgeon. Once both sides were satisfied with the situation, NPFL escorts began moving the foreign diplomats and their families toward the evacuation landing zone.

The NPFL brought 96 evacuees, in groups of 15 and surrounded by 30 to 40 armed troops, to the landing zone. Once in the landing zone, the Ma-

rines swept the evacuees with a metal detector wand and searched their baggage for contraband. A few dignitaries, including the Spanish Ambassador, the Swiss Charge' de'Affairs, and the Papal Nuncio received no inspection. After being given protective helmets and life jackets, each group of evacuees boarded a CH-46E helicopter and lifted off for the *Saipan*, a 10-minute flight. The helicopter flights ferried out one at a time, taking all but three of the evacuees, who left by LCM-8 and arrived on board the *Saipan* at about 1400 that afternoon, thus concluding the evacuation.

Scared, tired, and glad to see the Marines, many of the evacuees expressed their relief the ordeal had ended. The diplomats and Americans experienced a harrowing and exhausting time in the hands of the ruthless and highly volatile fighters. They never knew from one moment to the next what the NPFL troops might decide to do. As



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*A squad of Marines from Company H, Battalion Landing Team 2/4, boards a CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter on the grounds of the American Embassy, beginning of the process of the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit's relief.*



Photo courtesy of BGen Granville R. Amos

*Wearing a protective helmet and life jacket, a young boy clutches a box of his possessions on the flight to safety. During its stay in Liberia, the 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit evacuated more than 3,200 American citizens, foreign nationals, and Liberian citizens.*

Lieutenant Colonel Parker put it: "They [the NPFL] would not hesitate to shoot somebody. They would not have hesitated, under the right circumstances, to shoot those diplomats and take a chance on blaming it on somebody else."<sup>123</sup>

While the Buchanan evacuation was taking place, the Marines at the embassy in Monrovia evacuated 12 people. That same day, the MEU reduced the size of the security force in the embassy compound to a reinforced rifle platoon. When the INPFL learned of the cooperation between the NPFL and the Marines in the Buchanan evacuation, they issued a variety of threats against the United States, although none were carried out.<sup>124</sup>

### *Rotation of Marine Forces*

On 14 August, Company E, which had conducted the evacuations of the two American

Telecommunications Office sites nine days earlier, relieved Company H from security duties at the embassy. Despite the heavy fighting around Monrovia, the size of the security force ashore remained at about 90 to reduce the chance of Marine casualties from frequent stray rounds. Company E assumed security duties by manning three main posts: Gate One, Gate Two, and the roof of the American Telecommunications Office building. The Marines then began a routine of patrolling the compound, manning observation posts and defensive positions, and maintaining a small reaction force. The MEU actually established guard orders for all posts.<sup>125</sup> While the embassy was still well protected, Company E could call for reinforcements and firepower from the ships if the need arose.

On 15 August, another 12 individuals were evacuated, including the Italian Ambassador to Liberia, and Marines monitored a peaceful



demonstration of 500 Liberians outside the embassy under INPFL guard.<sup>126</sup> The next day, Marines processed 359 people, mainly Indian nationals, the largest group evacuated to that point.<sup>127</sup> One woman gave birth to a baby after reaching the safety of the *Saipan*.

While the Marines involved themselves with local security and evacuations, fighting continued in the city. A mortar round hit the Korean Embassy while Taylor's NPFL again attempted to seize the nearby Spriggs-Payne Airport. Fighting closed the German and Italian Embassies and stranded the Ghanaian Ambassador in his embassy. In the midst of the fighting, the government's AFL forces shot an American Baptist missionary in the legs and captured him. He later died and the AFL allowed embassy personnel to recover his body from the Executive Mansion in Monrovia, where the besieged President Doe remained holed up, guarded by AFL troops.<sup>128</sup>

The MEU received assistance on 17 August from an unexpected source when the amphibious readiness group welcomed the USS *Barnstable County* (LST 1197) to Mamba Station. On board were Marines of a two-platoon detachment from Company D, 2d Combat Engineer Battalion, 2d Marine Division, who received orders to divert from their course home to assist the MEU in Liberia. Serving as part of the West Africa Training Cruise 90 and commanded by First Lieutenant Joseph F. Augustine, III, they officially joined the Liberian evacuation effort.<sup>129</sup>

On 17 August, an additional 88 people left from Landing Zone Magic. The evacuees told Marines that AFL members were actively seeking out Americans. The evacuees also related horrific stories of AFL soldiers rampaging in the Sinkor and Congo Town areas.<sup>130</sup> On 18 August, the evacuation control center and consular personnel processed 754 people, making that day's evacuation the busiest day the MEU had experienced.<sup>131\*</sup> The MEU intelligence section used interrogator translators who spoke Arabic and French to assist evacuation control center Marines in communicating with the Lebanese nationals, who made up the majority of the evacuees. Sadly, the body of the Baptist missionary shot two days earlier by AFL troops went out that day with the evacuees. As the rush to evacuate continued, the MEU flew

109 more third-country nationals to JTF shipping.<sup>132</sup>

Normally, after some additional processing and a two-hour flight from shipping, the evacuees arrived at Freetown. Later, the larger groups of refugees were transported to Freetown by ship. By mid-August, the Queen Elizabeth quay in the port of Freetown and Lungi Airport bustled with activity. Commercial jets, Marine and Navy helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, and Nigerian Lockheed C-130s delivering West African peacekeepers shared the airport runway. The West African monitoring group picked Freetown as the staging area for its soldiers heading to Liberia. The troops waited in assembly areas, cooked, listened to radios, and lounged at the port as additional forces arrived by plane and ship. Five ships from the West African countries anchored at the Queen Elizabeth quay after passing the ARG on their way to Freetown. These included Nigeria's NNS *Ambe* and Ghana's MV *Tano River* troop transports, jammed full with trucks, supplies, and ammunition destined for Monrovia.<sup>133</sup>

### *Turnover and Departure*

As the West African ships sailed toward Freetown, Mediterranean-based ARG 3-90 sailed toward the West African coast to relieve ARG 2-90. On 20 August, the 22d MEU welcomed its relief to Mamba Station by evacuating eight civilians to the 26th MEU's ships. The 22d MEU conducted a detailed briefing for the 26th MEU on board the *Saipan*. The next day, the 26th MEU officially relieved the 22d MEU in a blue-water turnover off the shore of Liberia. The 21 August turnover at the embassy went smoothly with Company E, BLT 2/4 relieved of its duties by Captain James K. Shannon's Company K, BLT 3/8. The 22d MEU and ARG 2-90 left Liberian waters after evacuating 1,648 civilians: 132 American citizens and 1,516 foreign nationals.<sup>134</sup>

As Colonel Amos left the embassy, he bid goodbye to Ambassador De Vos. Lieutenant Colonel Pugh, the BLT 2/4 commander, said: "The performance of the troops, especially the small unit leaders, was truly magnificent. It was a good plan and the extraction and reinforcement were executed flawlessly."<sup>135</sup> One evacuee, before she carried her baby on board a waiting helicopter, summed it up: "Thank God for the United States and the Marines. They're always there to help when people are helpless."<sup>136</sup>

\* The 18 August flight manifest, 22d MEU Manifest, August 18 Flights, Drawdown Evacuation 1990 (Sharp Edge HistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.), however, listed 802 evacuees.

## Chapter 4

# Operation Sharp Edge

### *Deployment of the 26th MEU*

As Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) 3-90, the third group deployed in 1990, and the 26th MEU sailed toward the West African coast to relieve ARG 2-90 and the 22d MEU, ships loaded with West African peacekeepers also sailed toward Freetown, Sierra Leone. The Marines of the arriving MEU and the soldiers of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group would soon encounter one another in Monrovia, Liberia.

Departing on 7 August, Marines of 26th MEU left Morehead City, North Carolina, to relieve the 22d MEU. A large crowd of journalists and television cameramen met the Marines that morning as they arrived at the port to embark on board their ships. The recent invasion of Kuwait created national interest in any deployment with journalists asking where the Marines and sailors of 26th MEU were going. Many of the Marines did not know themselves if their unit's mission would change or remain focused on Liberia. Adding to the Marines' uncertainty, President George H. Bush had announced that morning he intended to send troops to Saudi Arabia. While America's attention was focused on Saudi Arabia, Colonel William C. Fite III, commanding officer of the 26th MEU, concentrated on his unit's mission to Liberia, which included providing security to the embassy and conducting noncombatant evacuations and limited humanitarian relief operations in benign or hostile conditions.

Dispatching the 26th MEU to Liberia posed operational concerns. Sending it to the West African coast left the Mediterranean without an amphibious ready group. General John R. Galvin, USA, Command in Chief, Europe, Lieutenant General Carl E. Mundy, Jr., Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic, and Admiral Powell F. Carter, Jr., Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet, questioned the ability of the ready group and

MEU to respond quickly to other crises while involved in Liberia. The start of American involvement in the Gulf War raised the possibility of unrest spreading to the southern Mediterranean coast. If the ARG and MEU remained floating off Liberia, the U.S. European Command would not have an equivalent force available for contingencies in the Mediterranean. The Sixth Fleet's amphibious force could not redeploy rapidly to the Mediterranean. According to the European Command Joint Historian: "On 14 August 1990, an interagency meeting hosted by the Department of State on the Liberia crisis concluded that the withdrawal of the Marines from Liberia should take place. The participants in the Washington, D.C. meeting could not agree as to when."<sup>\*</sup>

Three things appeared to point to the mission ending soon: the build-up of Operation Desert Shield forces; the economic embargo of Iraq; and the threat of terrorism in the Mediterranean. At the operational level, the continued presence of the Marines in Liberia seemed unlikely given President Doe's refusal to leave, the fact that most of the Americans had been evacuated, and the impending deployment of West Africa peacekeepers. The commander of the Sixth Fleet, Admiral James D. Williams, thought the remaining operations in Liberia would be short-lived. As Colonel Fite recalled: "They just decided that the bulk of the work had been done, and the threat would be so reduced they could afford to get some presence back in the Mediterranean or possibly move forces on to the Persian Gulf and still handle the problem down in Liberia."<sup>137</sup> Consequently, the Atlantic Fleet and European Command considered splitting the ready group and embarked expeditionary unit to deal with both the Mediterranean and Liberia.

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<sup>\*</sup> EuCom JHO, *The Politics of NEO: Sharp Edge*, undated. (Chapter Two, EUCOM JHO NEO manuscript, Sharp Edge files, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).



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*Marines of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit wait on board the USS Whidbey Island (LSD 41) to be transferred to other ships off the coast of Liberia, during cross-decking operations to reconfigure the amphibious ready group for the upcoming mission ashore.*

Colonel Fite expressed reservations in a plan that would break up a well-trained team and employ subcomponents that did not normally conduct independent operations. Considering the serious developments in Southwest Asia, he did not know if the 26th MEU would join the assembling forces in Saudi Arabia. Fite viewed conditions in Liberia as dangerously volatile and was unsure whether the Marines left at the embassy in Monrovia could deal with a worst-case scenario, a deliberate attack. Each of the three warring factions in the Liberian civil war had proved to be erratic and unreliable when it came to keeping agreements. With each faction's strength estimated at approximately 1,000 combatants, no matter how incompetent the factions appeared, Fite considered any sustained attack by the fighters to be very dangerous.<sup>138</sup>

Colonel Fite wanted the remaining Marines not only to be able to defend themselves and the embassy, but to do so while carrying out a non-combatant evacuation against a hostile force. The

embassy guards needed quick reaction forces with firepower. As Colonel Fite commented: "I was reasonably sure that with the whole MEU there, that we could come in there whether they [Liberian factional fighters] liked it or not, either into the compound or on the little beach beside the embassy and conduct an evacuation."<sup>139</sup>

In the end, European Command's security concerns for the Mediterranean littoral and the desires of Admiral Williams, the Sixth Fleet commander, outweighed the reservations expressed by Colonel Fite. European Command decided to split ARG 3-90, which was composed of Amphibious Squadron 2 (Phibron 2) and the 26th MEU. Only about 400 Marines and sailors of the expeditionary unit, Contingency Marine Air-Ground Task Force (CMAGTF) 3-90, would remain off the coast of Liberia, "to maintain presence on station, continue with the evacuation, and maintain support and security for the embassy."<sup>140</sup> While CMAGTF 3-90 remained, the rest of the MEU would steam to the Mediterranean to satisfy the security and



scheduled exercise requirements of the Sixth Fleet and the European Command.

The decision to split the 26th MEU resulted in Colonel Fite consulting his staff on how best to divide the force based on its mission, capabilities, available shipping, logistics, and personnel. The staff also considered Colonel Fite's guidance important to accomplishing the reconfiguration with the least amount of movement of Marines and equipment between ships at sea. Dividing a Marine expeditionary unit normally not organized to operate in two parts meant risking not having the proper depth in equipment or personnel. The Marine and Navy staffs both worked energetically on the plan to ensure both portions could perform all required missions. Guidance from Admiral Williams included the assumption "that whoever stayed back wouldn't have to stay there very long."<sup>141</sup>

The right ship mix for both missions also required careful consideration. Early in the mission planning, Colonel Fite conferred with the ready group's commander, Commodore Stanley D. Gastar, USN, about designating a ship for the contingency task force.\* The USS *Whidbey Island* (LSD 41) provided the best platform considering the overall needs for aviation, logistics, and personnel support. Forming CMAGTF 3-90 required the designation of command, air, ground, and combat service support elements, the common building blocks to all Marine air-ground task forces. On board the USS *Inchon* (LPH 12), the 26th MEU commander named Major George S. Hartley, the executive officer of Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 3/8, to lead CMAGTF 3-90.

The aviation personnel and assets came from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 162 (HMM-162). The commanding officer of HMM-162 "Golden Eagles," Lieutenant Colonel Darrell A. Browning, assigned Major Daniel P. "Doc" Johnson to lead the aviation detachment. The aviation aircrews consisted of six officers and 22 enlisted men. The detachment also included landing zone control, helicopter maintenance, and helicopter support teams. Three of the squadron's CH-46E helicopters completed the air combat element.

After consultations with his staff and the BLT commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. Essink, Colonel Fite determined that a reinforced rifle

company provided enough combat power and depth to allow for the rotation of the Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Essink picked Company K's commanding officer, Captain James K. Shannon, as the ground combat element commander. Although Shannon's Marines formed the bulk of the ground combat element, he received augmentation from the BLT's Headquarters and Service Company, Battery G, Weapons Company, as well as the Amphibious Assault Vehicle and Combat Engineer Platoons on board the USS *Barnstable County* (LST 1197).

A difficult decision involved the mix of combat service support personnel and supplies. Lieutenant Colonel Jonathon W. Stull, the commanding officer of MEU Service Support Group 26 (MSSG-26), was concerned he did not have the necessary depth of manpower and adequate supplies to support both CMAGTF 3-90 and the remainder of the MEU. Stull selected the engineer support platoon to form the bulk of the combat service support detachment (CSSD) since its mission included utility support for the embassy. The engineer support platoon commander, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Edwin E. Deering, was selected as the officer-in-charge, and the detachment reinforced with aviation support, water supply, and bulk fuel personnel.

Embassy support was a large part of the 27-man CSSD's mission in Liberia. Since the embassy's logistical support needs were difficult to anticipate, the Marines did not hold a large supply block afloat. For the Marines ashore, anticipated supplies included food, barbed wire, and sand bags. The MSSG staff picked two large pieces of support equipment to go ashore, a reverse osmosis water purification unit and a generator pump capable of pumping 600 gallons per minute. This left the MEU with one water purification unit to support later Mediterranean exercises. As Lieutenant Colonel Stull explained: "Dividing that up between Mamba Station and the Med made things precarious to sustain support in both locations. It came out okay, but those two areas were probably the trickiest—supply and equipment density."<sup>142</sup>

The 26th MEU reached Mamba Station on 19 August following 12 days in transit. The incoming unit received turnover briefings from 22d MEU on board the USS *Saipan* (LHA 2) the next day. On the morning of 21 August, helicopters flew the 2d Platoon of Captain James Shannon's Company K, BLT 3/8 ashore, where they assumed embassy duties from Captain Gary Oles' Company E, BLT

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\* Captain Stanley D. Gastar, while in command of the Amphibious Ready Group, held the title of commodore.



DVIC DN-ST-91-05947

*During the shift of personnel and equipment among the ships of the amphibious ready group, Marines from the USS Inchon (LPH 12) disembark from a CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 162 on the flight deck of the USS Whidbey Island (LSD 41), their temporary home.*

2/4. The relief went smoothly and took a little more than two hours for Company E to turn over all defensive positions and ammunition. Around noon, the last of the 22d MEU left Company K with 90 Marines in defensive positions to guard the embassy and departed Monrovia from Landing Zone Magic.<sup>143</sup> The 22d MEU completed the blue-water turnover at approximately 1400 on 21 August and left Mamba Station, officially relieved.<sup>144</sup>

### *26th MEU and the Formation of the CMAGTF in Liberia*

Colonel Fite went ashore after the turnover and met with his forward command element and Ambassador Peter De Vos. Upon arrival, he received a briefing from his team, who had already been ashore for 12 days. The eight-man

team, headed by the executive officer of the 26th MEU, Lieutenant Colonel Richard H. Kunkel, Jr., had flown to Liberia the day before the MEU sailed from Morehead City and had observed evacuations, transmitted updated information, and familiarized themselves with the personalities at the embassy during their interim stay.

As the turnovers took place, work to reconfigure the amphibious ready group began. Personnel were transferred to and from the designated flagship of the task force, the *Whidbey Island*. The new load plan to accommodate the contingency task force required the concerted effort of all hands. At one point, the combined Marine and Navy effort resulted in the entire deck of the LSD being covered with vehicles, ConEx boxes, 105mm howitzers, and other MEU equipment.\* The reconfiguration, undertaken at sea, required

\* A ConEx box is a large metal shipping container.

numerous helicopter lifts and night runs with air-cushioned landing craft and well-deck operations to transfer all the equipment, supplies, and personnel. Helicopters with loads slung beneath repeatedly transferred equipment between the *Whidbey Island* and other ready group ships. The *Inchon*, USS *Nashville* (LPD 13), USS *Newport County* (LST 1179), and USS *Fairfax County* (LST 1193) also experienced changes to billeting and load-plan configurations. The MEU's 155mm howitzers below the main deck and deep within the *Whidbey Island* remained on board, impossible to move. During the reconfiguration, the MEU could not pull all other equipment and supplies from in front of the guns to allow for their transfer off the ship. The artillery pieces remained on board even though "there was absolutely no prospect of them being used there [Liberia]." <sup>145</sup> Most of the BLT's vehicles also remained below decks on the *Whidbey Island* for the same reason. <sup>146</sup> The Marines and sailors completed the task after three days of labor-intensive cross-decking, moving equipment, countless tons of supplies, and hundreds of men.

As the reconfiguration started, the MEU's executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Kunkel, and members of the forward command element continued to monitor the situation at the embassy. The chancery conference room, filled with radios that allowed communications with each post, the flag ship and U.S. European Command headquarters, served as the command post. The location gave the command element quick access to key embassy personnel. Later that week, Captain Shannon moved in to the conference room as the primary on-scene commander for the ground combat element of CMAGTF 3-90.

Other elements of the forming task force joined Company K ashore. The CSSD arrived at the embassy and found people awaiting evacuation. As Chief Warrant Officer Deering stated: "We landed on the 23d of August and immediately took care of the processing and loading of the awaiting evacuees." <sup>147</sup> In the first lift, an American and 30 foreign evacuees flew on a CH-53 helicopter to Freetown, Sierra Leone. <sup>148</sup>

The final transfer separating CMAGTF 3-90 from the 26th MEU ended when three CH-46 helicopters landed on the *Whidbey Island*. <sup>149</sup> With the completion of cross-decking on 24 August and the movement of the Marines, sailors, and equipment ashore, the task force assumed its mission. Most the task force remained on board the *Whidbey Island* and *Barnstable County* in support

or reserve.\* <sup>150</sup> Late in the afternoon, the 26th MEU sailed for Rota, Spain, leaving the task force behind in Liberian waters. <sup>151</sup>

The movement of helicopters to the *Whidbey Island* was significant since the ship normally did not house a permanent aviation detachment. Because of this and the lack of a hangar, the Marines stored some aviation supplies on the flight deck in front of landing spot one.\*\* The crew helped the aviation Marines settle into work spaces not designed for an aviation detachment. As far as anyone on board knew, the arrival of the helicopters constituted the first instance of an aviation detachment embarking on a landing ship dock for extended operations. <sup>152</sup> The ship also presented the newly arrived aviation Marines with some practical challenges. First, the ship did not have an air boss or someone accustomed to running an air control tower. Fortunately, a few of the sailors on board did have flight deck experience, so they operated the tower for a few weeks until the amphibious squadron sent an experienced air traffic controller. Second, with the helicopters positioned on the exposed flight deck, the first few rainy weeks complicated routine maintenance—plastic sheeting and ponchos helped somewhat.

### *Peacekeepers, Fighters, and Contingency MAGTF*

While the MEU completed forming the contingency task force, transport ships loaded with troops and equipment of the five-nation Economic Community of West African States Military Observation Group (ECOMOG) entered the port of Monrovia.\*\*\* During the afternoon of 24 August, Nigeria's NNS *Ambe* (LST 1123) and Ghana's MV *Tano River* maneuvered to the mouth

\* U.S. European Command limited the number of Marines ashore, gradually reducing that number as the deployment continued into the fall and early winter of 1990.

\*\* The air detachment normally launched one aircraft at a time. In case it needed to launch two helicopters, spot two was shifted further aft. The lower flight decks of the *Whidbey Island* and *Barnstable County* received increased salt spray as aircraft approached or departed. Frequent inspections by the detachment and increased maintenance hours identified potential corrosion problems.

\*\*\* An emergency meeting of the Economic Community of West African States Standing Mediation Committee composed of Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Togo, and Gambia took place from 5 July to 20 July in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The committee discussed the concept of deploying a ceasefire monitoring force to Liberia, but reached no agreement.





Photo courtesy of the authors

*A Nigerian armored vehicle patrols the streets of Monrovia. While one rebel faction assured unfettered passage to members of the five-nation West African peacekeeping force, other factions attempted to prevent their deployment throughout the capital.*

of the jetty area of Freeport.<sup>153</sup> They temporarily withdrew after receiving some sporadic mortar fire and reentered the port later that evening. After docking, a small mix of troops debarked. Awaiting the peacekeepers on the dock, Prince Johnson, head of the INFPL, attempted to contact the embassy over a Motorola radio, possibly one stolen from the embassy's local guards. Johnson asked for U.S. help in welcoming the African peacekeepers and securing the port.<sup>154</sup> The Marine security guard on duty, monitoring all the radio networks at Post One in the chancellery, did not respond to the request.

Later that night the military observation group commander, Ghanaian Lieutenant General Arnold Quainoo, met with Prince Johnson. The West African soldiers ashore bivouacked haphazardly in abandoned warehouses in the port area.\* General Quainoo viewed his force's mission as

peacekeepers to assist the warring factions in observing a ceasefire.<sup>155</sup>

Regardless of the peacekeepers actions, the mission of the Marines encompassed: providing security for the compound; evacuating designated Americans and foreign nationals; providing limited logistic support to the embassy; and supporting limited humanitarian relief operations.<sup>156</sup> Major Hartley, the Marine task force commander responsible for accomplishing the mission, reported to Captain Francis. P. Grause, USN, the commander of Joint Task Force (JTF) Sharp Edge.\*\* Colonel Martin R. Berndt from the U.S. European Command assisted the JTF commander for a few weeks in the embassy as the military liaison to the West African peacekeeping force.

Joining their forces ashore, the remaining West African troops moved off their ships and ventured into greater Monrovia. This 25 August attempt to begin the mission of enforcing a ceasefire involved some collaboration with Prince

\* The rapidly formed force lacked supply support. Many newly arrived soldiers did not have personal weapons, uniforms, and boots. Prince Johnson, leader of the INFPL, later provided uniforms and boots as gifts to the Nigerian troops, according to Major General C.Y. Iweze, "Nigeria in Liberia: The Military Operations of ECOMOG," in *Nigeria in International Peacekeeping*, p. 231.

\*\* Since the turnover on 21 August, Commander Thomas L. Breiting, the commanding officer of the *Whidbey Island*, temporarily commanded the JTF until the arrival of Captain Francis P. Grause, who previously commanded Naval Beach Group Two.

Johnson's INPFL, which controlled Bushrod Island. The negotiations allowed the 2,500 peacekeepers to move freely through INPFL areas. Leaving the port area, a Nigerian battalion moved north and secured the St. Paul River bridges while a Ghana and Sierra Leone battalion deployed just short of the north end of the Mesurado River bridges.

The peacekeepers already knew Charles Taylor's NPFL would likely try to prevent their deployment. Taylor opposed the idea of a cease-fire and his delegation at the Banjul, Gambia, talks of 6 and 7 August 1990 flatly stated that until President Doe resigned, no agreement on a cease-fire could be reached. As the peacekeeping troops deployed throughout the day, Marines on post heard sporadic machine gun fire and the explosions of mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. Despite the fighting, Marine CH-46 helicopters flew their first mission into Landing Zone Magic as members of CMAGTF 3-90 delivered fuel for the embassy generators.<sup>157</sup>

As the fighting flared on and off, one NPFL gunner's rocket-propelled grenade hit a Nigerian armored car. The attack near the St. Paul bridges wounded two Nigerians.<sup>158</sup> The peacekeepers asked the embassy if the Americans could evacuate the two seriously wounded Nigerian soldiers. A Marine helicopter crew went on stand-by that evening, awaiting the result of the embassy's consultation with Washington. The State Department denied the peacekeeper's evacuation request the following day.<sup>159</sup>

On the morning of 26 August, Marine helicopters evacuated an American citizen who arrived at the embassy with a group of refugees. Previously, a detachment of Navy Sikorsky CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters picked up evacuees and flew them directly to Freetown. That evening, the path of the evacuation switched from direct flights to Freetown to a more judicious route. The JTF established the procedure of flying evacuees to the *Barnstable County* and placing a Marine helicopter on board. The ship would then sail to



DVIC DN-SC-91-06093

*A Marine shows a group of evacuees how to properly don helmets before boarding a helicopter on the grounds of the American Embassy. From the embassy they would be flown to one of the ships off shore.*



DVIC DN-ST-91-05963

*Four civilians disembark from a Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 162 Sea Knight helicopter at Lungi Airport, just north of Freetown, Sierra Leone. The civilians were processed on board a U.S. Navy ship off the coast of Liberia before being flown to Sierra Leone.*

Freetown, Sierra Leone. After arriving in Freetown, the CH-46 would fly the evacuees to Lungi Airfield for further processing and transfer. The Marines and sailors at the Lungi forward logistics site loaded the returning helicopter with critical parts, supplies, and mail for the ship. Once all the evacuees had departed the ship, the *Barnstable County* with its helicopter steamed back to Mamba Station. The combination of LST and helicopter evacuations effectively managed the flow of evacuees for the contingency task force. The Marines repeatedly used this method for about three weeks until the Navy helicopters supporting the operation, which had previously been grounded, could fly again.<sup>160\*</sup>

\* Earlier in Sharp Edge operations, evacuees departed the embassy for Freetown, Sierra Leone, on Sikorsky CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters belonging to the Navy's Helicopter Support Squadron 4 (HC-4). The two-aircraft HC-4 detachment routinely flew from Sierra Leone to Liberia laden with supplies, mail, and other cargo. Once helicopters landed at the embassy in Liberia, they off-loaded supplies and returned to Sierra Leone loaded with evacuees. The Navy C-130 or C-9 aircraft flew numerous flights to Freetown bringing supplies originating in the Mediterranean or continental United States. In late August, both HC-4 helicopters were temporarily grounded for parts and maintenance. With the number of refugees wanting to leave increasing, the CMAGTF took over this critical role using the *Barnstable County* and one CH-46.

On 26 August, evacuation control center Marines administratively processed 90 persons. To process the evacuees, embassy staff passed the word by radio and telephone about scheduled helicopter lifts and the available passenger seats. On the appointed day, potential evacuees came to the embassy (with their passports) and filled out an application. Consular personnel screened the applicants, giving priority to citizens of the United States, followed by foreign diplomats, foreign nationals associated with a foreign embassy, and other third-country nationals.

While the evacuees' administrative documents were being processed, the evacuation control center Marines concentrated on security and preparing evacuees for the flight.\*\* Working on a consular computer, Marines recorded the evacuees' names and nationalities for the flight manifests. On the day of the flight, Marines searched the evacuees for contraband, which involved searching each person and their baggage for any drugs or weapons. Despite the anarchy and violence in the city, the Marines found only one weapon, a pistol. However, "suspicious-looking

\*\* The State Department charged third-country nationals a fee for the evacuation, reportedly \$300 for evacuation to Freetown.



powders in bags” were found on several different evacuees.<sup>161</sup> Like the pistol, the Marines delivered the confiscated bags to the regional security officer for disposal. The luggage was staged after the search and each person was issued a flight helmet. Once a helicopter landed, Marines led the evacuees, assisting the young and the old, on to the aircraft. The helicopter launched after all evacuees had buckled their seat belts.

Along with processing evacuees, the combat service support detachment attempted to solve the problems experienced earlier in supplying the embassy with fresh water. With the end of the rainy season coming, the CSSD again attempted to draw water from the ocean using the water purification unit left by the 22d MEU. At the top of a cliff directly above the ocean, the engineers wrestled with the water purification unit and pump and concluded the existing pump lacked the necessary power. The engineers were able to draw seawater to the water purification unit at the top of the cliff after having a helicopter place a more powerful pump on shore, but the problem of drawing the water from the ocean still remained.

The purification unit used a suction pipe running from the shore out into the ocean, but severe surf action repeatedly broke the pipe. Consequently, the detachment was only able to pump water from the ocean at high tide when there was less surf action. The pump achieved strong suction at high tide on 26 August, which allowed the unit to produce about 6,000 gallons of potable water. Chief Warrant Officer Deering said: “We processed the water and it turned out to be real excellent water.”<sup>162</sup> The Marines gave samples of the water to the embassy staff, whose concerns about quality were eased by the surprisingly agreeable taste of the water. Unfortunately, the exceptionally heavy surf action at Mamba Point ripped the plumbing out of the pump within the week and washed it away. No longer able to rely on purified ocean water, the Marines looked for other sources to supply the compound. Collecting rainwater was the obvious choice, since in August it rained quite frequently. To that end, engineers set up a couple of 3,000-gallon bladders on low spots in the embassy compound and placed pipes to channel the water into the bladders. It rained



DVIC DN-SC-91-06073

*Marines scan United Nations Drive, the main street bordering the American Embassy compound, from a sandbagged guard post on the roof of an embassy building.*

hard enough to collect 6,000 gallons of water in two hours. The accumulation, processed by the purification unit, delivered clean drinking water for the Marines.\*

Marines continually worked to maintain defensive positions, which rapidly deteriorated in the rainy weather. While CSSD Marines worked on water and power, Captain Shannon's infantry improved its defenses. Marines rotated in a new rifle platoon about every seven days. The platoons, reinforced with machine gunners and 60mm mortar men, set up three rotating guard shifts of eight hours each. Once familiar with the posts, the platoon sergeants and squad leaders of Company K rotated men among the posts to reduce boredom.

To augment these infantrymen, snipers from the Surveillance and Target Acquisition platoon of BLT 3/8 came ashore. After assessing the limited fields of fire from inside the compound, the snipers concluded the Wellington and Sam and E apartments outside the compound afforded better observation of the city. Unfortunately, Marine snipers from the previous command had already been withdrawn from those positions under European Command orders to remain inside the compound. But diplomatic security personnel, although not as well trained in tactical surveillance techniques as the snipers, did not have the same restrictions and were directed to man observation posts in both apartments. The diplomatic security outposts afforded an excellent view of strategic parts of the city and indirectly gave the Marines early warning when fighting broke out.

Evacuees slowly trickled in and Marines evacuated two American citizens and three foreign nationals on 27 August. The next day, Sergeant Brian J. Bonfiglio, a member of the Weapons Company detachment, stopped a group of armed Liberians from summarily executing a fellow citizen. The incident began when a group of fighters started yelling, kicking, and brutally beating their victim. Quickly grabbing a loudspeaker and using a commanding voice, Sergeant Bonfiglio persuaded the group of fighters to stop and let the individual live. Since the action was not directed

at them or other Americans, the Marines could not use force.

The rules of engagement, the same used by the 22d MEU, allowed for an escalation of force if a fighter or a group of fighters initiated hostile action against Americans or the embassy.<sup>163</sup> Undisciplined Liberian fighters frequently pointed weapons at everyone, not realizing their actions constituted a hostile act. Individual Marines handled the leeway given to them by the rules of engagement with restraint. As Captain Shannon stated:

There were many times where the INPFL or some AFL guys would ride in front of the U.S. embassy on [United Nations] Drive, and not aim in but point their weapons in a very sarcastic manner at the Marine positions. The Marines had the presence of mind to discern who was kidding and who may not be kidding. Though the [rules of engagement] allowed them to fire at any of those vehicles who showed hostile intent such as pointing a loaded weapon, which had a magazine in the weapon, at the positions.<sup>164</sup>

Flights evacuating third-country nationals continued, and on 29 August, the *Barnstable County* left Liberian waters for Sierra Leone carrying evacuees and one of the air combat element's three helicopters. As fighting escalated the following day, 76 evacuees transferred to the *Barnstable County* and made the trip to Freetown. At the embassy in a recreation cabana hut located close to Landing Zone Magic, a stray 7.62mm round hit Lance Corporal Davis J. Cassady. The round came through the open-sided hut's roof and bounced off the floor. Fortunately, it was deflected by Cassady's flack jacket.

The forces fighting for control of Liberia rang in September with heavy fighting near the AFL's Barclay Training Center and Spriggs-Payne Airport. Stray rounds from small arms fire passed over and through the compound. As Captain Shannon explained: "Where we were positioned in the embassy compound, [which was at the end of a] beaten zone along the gun-target line, which means you are in receipt of many small arms. Regardless of whether they're firing at you or not, you're going to receive a lot of small arms, as well

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\* The embassy cistern system also collected rainwater. By using a complex system of gutters on the roofs of several embassy buildings, the water flowed by pipes into two underground reservoirs in the embassy compound. Between the two reservoirs, the embassy water storage capacity equaled about 200,000 gallons; a three-week supply at the rate the embassy used water.



Photo courtesy of the authors

*The American Embassy's recreation hut housed the Marine command post until a stray round from outside the compound hit one Marine, who was not injured in the incident.*

as automatic fire.”<sup>165</sup> During a daytime roving patrol, Marines found a small hole in the fence directly behind the recreation center and two more American citizens and 21 foreign nationals were evacuated.<sup>166</sup>

The fighting among opposing sides in the civil war continued on 2 September, with 20 artillery, mortar, and high-angle rocket-propelled grenade rounds impacting close to the embassy. The random shelling increased the number of noncombatants seeking evacuation. U.S. forces evacuated six more American citizens and 57 foreign nationals during a lull in the fighting.<sup>167</sup> That night, the *Barnstable County* again left for Freetown carrying evacuees to safety and bringing back supplies and mail.<sup>168</sup>

Monrovia appeared calmer for a few days as the West African peacekeepers renewed efforts to deploy throughout the city. On 3 September, Marines spotted the first observation group foot patrol, who waved as they passed the embassy.<sup>169</sup> The brief calm allowed Marine helicopters to

assist in replenishing the *Whidbey Island's* supplies from the USNS *Henry J. Kaiser* (T-AO-187).<sup>170</sup> On 5 September, a Marine observation post watched a NPFL fighter shoot at a passing civilian vehicle in front of the Wellington apartments. The routine rotation of rifle platoons and combat service support Marines took place on 6 September and the helicopters evacuated six more American citizens and 73 foreign nationals. Filled with refugees, the *Barnstable County* made yet another trip to Freetown that night.<sup>171</sup>

On 9 September, the Armed Forces of Liberia shelled the Freeport area from the Capitol Hill area. The exposed peacekeeper's ships temporarily withdrew from the port. The following morning, a convoy of INPFL fighters passed the embassy and headed south on United Nations Drive. At Barclay Training Center, meanwhile, 50 to 75 Liberian army troops formed up to escort President Doe to the peacekeeping force's headquarters. Both forces met and exchanged small arms fire just a few blocks east of the embassy.





DVIC DN-ST-91-06094

*A Marine buckles the chinstrap on a child's helmet before a group of evacuees board a helicopter for the flight to the initial processing center offshore.*

One of the INPFL fighters passing by a Marine post accidentally discharged his weapon, but immediately apologized to the Marines on post.<sup>172</sup>

President Doe ventured out of the Executive Mansion later that morning for the first time since June to visit the peacekeepers' headquarters. After Doe arrived at the headquarters at Freeport, INPFL fighters in a number of trucks pulled up and started arguing with the guards. Gunfire erupted and the fighters of Prince Johnson's INPFL forced their way into the building and began shooting at Doe's bodyguards. In the fray, the soldiers ran for cover while Prince Johnson's men searched from room to room for Doe and his men (members of the Krahn tribal group). Johnson's fighters killed more than 60 men from Doe's escort, wounded and captured Doe and took him to their base at Cadwell.<sup>173</sup> Word of the capture spread quickly throughout Monrovia and resulted in evacuees flocking to the gates of the embassy. Marines heard sporadic exchanges of small arms fire throughout the day, and by nightfall, Marines had evacuated nine more American citizens and 87 foreign nationals.<sup>174</sup>

Returning to Cadwell, Prince Johnson tortured and killed President Doe while his men recorded the grisly event on video. Amidst Doe's screams, Prince Johnson questioned him and narrated the video while drinking a beer. Foreign observers thought President Doe's death would signal the end of the fighting.

That same evening, the peacekeeping force asked for American assistance to evacuate some of their casualties, prompting the aviation Marines to prepare their aircraft for the expected mission. As Major Daniel P. "Doc" Johnson stated: "We were scrambling around at that time trying to get helicopters ready, trying to get them spotted, trying to get crews together to go in, at night, to the embassy and extract these casualties of the ECO-MOG forces." While the Marines got ready, the request for a decision went up the chain-of-command. It took about four hours before the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved. "We all knew that if it was going to be done," Johnson continued, "it was going to be done at night. Well, about 10:00 [PM] they came down and said, 'We're cleared to do it, but do it tomorrow morning.'" The Marines

spotted their aircraft and retired for the night, anticipating a launch before first light the next day. The medical evacuation plan called for the most seriously injured to be treated on the *Whidbey Island* while those who could travel safely were to go to the *Barnstable County* for further passage to Sierra Leone. According to Johnson: "The next morning [10 September] we got up and started briefing and getting aircraft ready. We were all strapped in, ready to go, and [the embassy] called back and said the ECOMOG forces decided to take care of their own wounded and send them back by one of their own ships."<sup>175</sup> During the remainder of the day, the Marines on post watched numerous convoys of armed peacekeepers and INPFL troops drive past the embassy. As night fell, the *Barnstable County* sailed to Sierra Leone with 96 evacuees.<sup>176</sup>

On 11 September, the sounds of sporadic fire from artillery, mortars and close heavy machine guns echoed throughout the embassy grounds. A firefight between INPFL and AFL flared up about 200 meters from the embassy gates with a barrage

of stray small arms rounds impacting inside the compound. U.S. Ambassador DeVos, in the interim, met with Charles Taylor to discuss ways to end the conflict.<sup>177</sup>

Attempts to control the Barclay Training Center shifted the fight to the east, but the embassy compound took an increasing volume of fire during the next two days. Small arms fire hit both Post Two (Gate Two), and Observation Post One, located on the top floor of the Sam and E apartment building across the street from Gate One. Artillery rounds landed in the water behind the British Embassy. Several Marines had close calls with one round passing through a trouser leg and other rounds impacting the sand bags around defensive positions. Reacting to the increased fighting, Major George S. "Steve" Hartley augmented security inside the compound and brought 60mm mortars ashore. Conducting the weekly rotation, 75 Marines returned to the ship and 92 Marines came ashore. During the rotation, the evacuation control center evacuated 12 more American citizens and eight foreign nationals.



DVIC DN-ST-91-05978

*A woman carries her daughter across the flight deck of the USS Barnstable County (LST 1197) after disembarking from a CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter.*



DVIC DN-ST-91-05981

*A civilian lifts his arms to be searched by a Marine while being processed on board the USS Barnstable County (LST 1197). Marines also conducted a quick search of luggage brought on board and provided the evacuees with refreshments.*

While Marines reinforced, Ambassador DeVos again met with NPFL leader Charles Taylor in the embassy.<sup>178</sup>

The fighting shifted closer on 14 September and bullets hit Post One and Gate One. Other embassy posts received a peppering of small arms fire, but with no effect. Battered bodies washed up on the beach below the embassy.<sup>179</sup>

Later in the morning, INPFL leader Prince Johnson conducted his first embassy visit. As a show of force, Major Hartley mobilized all available Marines and placed them in visible locations where the Marines could be seen cleaning weapons and manning posts. More than 60 of Prince Johnson's armed fighters waited outside the embassy on United Nations Drive while he met with the Ambassador. After Johnson's departure, intermittent firefights in the city increased. The infantrymen on post spent the night listening to the largest volume of rounds passing overhead thus far in the operation.<sup>180</sup>

On 15 September, fighting came very close to the embassy. Incoming indirect fire became extremely heavy, especially at Post Two. A gun battle occurred near Gate Two, which continued sporadically throughout the night as INPFL units maneuvered to within a block of the embassy. With fighting so close, even the most junior Marines realized they would be in Liberia for an extended period.<sup>181</sup>

Firing started early on the morning of 16 September at about 0430 with a small arms exchange just south of the embassy. Prince Johnson arrived later that morning and met again with the Ambassador for continued discussions. He brought a crowd of about 90 INPFL fighters, who waited outside the embassy on United Nations Drive. Meanwhile, the volume of fire landing in the compound and passing overhead held steady. Rounds hit the telecommunications office located in the southwest corner of the compound. In spite of all the stray rounds, Marines



evacuated six more American citizens and 46 foreign nationals. Later, Marines observed sustained heavy machine gun fire aimed at the Barclay Training Center from Mamba Point's Lighthouse Hill.<sup>182</sup>

Late in the morning of 17 September, Prince Johnson, accompanied by his bodyguard of 50

reinforce with the infamous and unpredictable Major Tilley now leading the AFL fighters.\*

Major Hartley quickly sent a rifle platoon by helicopter to the embassy and the reaction force deployed inside the compound within 34 minutes. The same helicopters also evacuated three awaiting American citizens and 46 foreign nation-



DVIC DN-ST-91-00663

*Two air crewman from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 162 carry an elderly woman from their CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter after arriving at Lungi Airport in Freetown, Sierra Leone.*

INPFL fighters, returned to the embassy and met with the Ambassador in what had become almost a daily routine. All appeared calm until just before noon.

The Marine task force's intelligence chief ashore received a report that indicated a strong AFL force was moving toward the embassy, possibly to engage Prince Johnson's bodyguard. Responding to the report of 150 AFL soldiers and one armored vehicle (a Romanian armored personnel carrier) moving toward the embassy, Captain Shannon called for a "Sparrow Hawk" reaction force consisting of a reinforced rifle platoon.<sup>183</sup> Calling to the *Whidbey Island*, he explained to Major Hartley that it made sense to

als during a pouring rain. In addition, Captain Shannon mobilized the combat service support Marines ashore, who stopped their work and quickly manned their assigned positions. Supporting the Marines, Captain Francis P. Grause moved his ships to within sight of the city. Fortunately, the AFL soldiers encountered other fighters as they advanced up United Nations Drive

\* Major Tilley of the Armed Forces of Liberia reportedly directed the massacre of more than 600 Liberians in late July 1990 at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia, a designated Red Cross shelter. Captain James K. Shannon intvw, 15Apr91, p. 10. (Oral HistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).



Photo courtesy of the authors

*West African peacekeepers not only guarded vital facilities throughout Monrovia, they transported the head of the differing factions to the American Embassy compound for discussions with State Department personnel concerning a ceasefire.*

and never appeared. The platoon of reinforcements stood down later that day.<sup>184</sup>

Prince Johnson received an escort from the West African peacekeeping force during his second meeting at the embassy that day. Marines watched the escort, who waited outside the compound like Johnson's men earlier. The meetings resulted in an appointment for Johnson to meet with Herman Cohen, the Under Secretary of State for West African Affairs.<sup>185</sup>

Under Secretary Cohen arrived by Marine helicopter the next day to conduct an assessment of the situation and meet with the factional leaders. The embassy saw the Marine force as an enabler, allowing the State Department to exercise a continuing influence in the negotiations between the factions and the interim government. The Under Secretary's visit underscored the American commitment to finding a solution to the crisis. That same day, the Marines conducted a normal rotation as sporadic small arms fire periodically flew over and through the embassy compound.

By 18 September, the West African states decided to support the reinforcement of its contingent,

which eventually doubled the size of the force. The new field commander of the force, Nigerian Army Major General Joshua Dogonyaro, announced the force's mandate had changed from peacekeeping to peace enforcement. The recent artillery attacks on the force's positions may have influenced his decision. A call for reinforcements resulted in new Nigerian and Ghanaian battalions joining up in Freetown and embarking on ships to Monrovia.<sup>186</sup>

On 21 September, Charles Taylor announced his acceptance of an unconditional ceasefire to begin the next day. While Marines listened to the sounds of gunfire, the number of dead buried on the grounds of the nearby refugee-crowded Greystone compound reached 45.<sup>187</sup> More than 300 civilians fleeing the Liberian army gathered in front of the embassy about mid-day. The large crowd pleaded for assistance and refuge. But the crowd quickly became agitated and started to create a disturbance. As Marines readied for a confrontation in the face of the unpredictable situation, the embassy's local guard force commander, Dan Showalter, a retired Marine lieutenant

colonel, quietly walked outside the compound gate and into the hostile crowd. Speaking firmly, he first calmed and then persuaded the Liberians to disperse after explaining how to apply for evacuation.<sup>188</sup> At first light the next morning, a crowd of about 100 Liberians gathered at the embassy gate with their documents in hopes of being evacuated.<sup>189</sup>

Arriving to review the Marines' situation on 23 September, Rear Admiral Layton W. "Snuffy" Smith, USN, J-3 of the European Command, went ashore to meet with Ambassador DeVos. Major Hartley noted during the discussions that Admiral Smith strongly encouraged the Ambassador to conserve resources because of Contingency MAGTF 3-90's limited logistical capabilities.<sup>190</sup> Almost as a reminder of the efforts to support the embassy in the face of logistical limitations, the *Barnstable County* departed Liberian waters with evacuees for another trip to Freetown.<sup>191</sup>

While Charles Taylor had announced he would accept a ceasefire two days earlier, it took until 23 September for the NPFL leader to actually agree to adhere to that ceasefire.<sup>192</sup> But the American-brokered halt in the fighting lasted only until the night of 25 September. That night, several rounds passed through the embassy compound and the Marines on post spotted numerous muzzle flashes in town. Clashes again took place in the Mamba Point area over the next few days. On 27 September, Marines at Post One observed shots fired from a house across the street, and early the next day, artillery and mortars impacted east and northeast of the embassy. The Marines saw sporadic firing arc through the helicopters' approach path later that afternoon. Inside the compound, the intense overhead fire sounded very close.<sup>193</sup> The new escalation of intense fighting near the compound temporarily halted all evacuations.

The official announcement to end the ceasefire came on 29 September. Despite the danger posed by indirect small arms fire, evacuations resumed. Major Johnson flew a CH-46 that brought Commodore James M. Drager, USN, the temporary commander of the joint task force, and Major Hartley ashore. Rounds started popping in the grassy areas around the landing zone as the helicopter touched down and Major Hartley ran back to the helicopter after clearing the aircraft rotor blades and pointed out to the commodore the rounds impacting into the water. Commodore Drager and Major Hartley could hear the small arms fire even over the sound of the helicopter engines.

Believing the fire came from inside the compound, Major Hartley ordered Captain Shannon to find its source.<sup>194</sup> Captain Shannon alerted and deployed his reserve element, and after a thorough search, the Marines discovered the source of the rounds impacting around the landing zone did not originate from anyone in the compound. The landing zone, the recreation hut (sometimes referred to as Oceanside hut), and the communications building appeared to be at the end of the beaten zone for a nearby firefight.<sup>195</sup>

Later rounds struck the sandbags surrounding Post One and Post Two. Marines on post initially thought someone deliberately fired at them, but without being able to pinpoint the source, the Marines held their fire. The firing died down after about three hours, but not before a 12.7mm round shattered the office window of the deputy chief of mission.<sup>196</sup> The small arms fire continued intermittently the next day but moved away from the embassy.<sup>197</sup>

The sounds of occasional artillery and gunfire signaled the start of October. The West African force commander, Major General Dogonyaro, initiated a series of actions against NPFL forces to gain control of the city. Although the Marines heard rocket, artillery, and mortar fire, the amount of small arms fire around the embassy dropped off dramatically. During the first week of the month, Marines observed long convoys of INPFL vehicles and West African troops passing by the embassy. Nigerian peacekeepers established roadblocks nearby, one north of the embassy at the intersection of United Nations Drive and Benson Street and the other south of the embassy at the intersection of United Nations Drive and Sekou Toure Avenue.<sup>198</sup> Not surprisingly, they located the roadblocks near locations where the 22d MEU had set up roadblocks on 5 August. Cooperating with the West Africans, the INPFL commenced attacks against the NPFL. Even the AFL, holed up in the Barclay Training Center and Executive Mansion, launched probes against Charles Taylor's NPFL forces.

Fighting around the embassy continued to decrease as October progressed. The Nigerian forces gained loose control over central Monrovia while Charles Taylor's undisciplined NPFL fighters withdrew to the eastern suburbs of the city. The peacekeepers' trucks, loaded with soldiers, and Panhard AML-60 reconnaissance vehicles frequently drove by the compound's posts. After West African aircraft bombed the city of Buchanan, the NPFL retaliated by shelling the



Freeport area. Marines watched Ghanaian Aermacchi MB-339 jets flying ground attack missions. Later in the month they observed Nigerian Dassault/Dornier Alpha Jets fly overhead almost daily.<sup>199\*</sup>

These developments allowed task force Marines to settle into a quieter routine while assisting in the periodic evacuation of noncombatants. Working smoothly with Edward J. Fisher, the consular officer, Marines also helped process the administrative paperwork of those wishing to leave the country. The Marines received additional training on screening, identification, and passports to assist in determining who would be evacuated. The embassy staff efficiently "would get the word out to the people in the street to come in and fill out an application and bring their necessary paperwork, which eliminated a lot of the administrative burden."<sup>200</sup>

Among the challenges faced by the Marines was the cancellation of scheduled flights. On several occasions, weather and maintenance problems interfered with the times helicopters were scheduled to arrive. The CSSD Marines would get the evacuees processed and down to the landing zone and the helicopter would never arrive. According to Chief Warrant Officer Deering, when unexpected cancellations of evacuation flights occurred, "You'd have to tell the people, 'So sorry. Come back in three days,' which wasn't a big deal for us, but if you were one of the people trying to get out of Liberia, and you just sold your soul to whomever to get on board this helicopter and get out of the country it was a very depressing sight."<sup>201</sup> The Marines knew cancellations frustrated the evacuees, especially after they had been through the entire preparation process. Deering noted that, "we would have to send the people back out. At certain points it was dangerous out in the streets and these people had, obviously, come some distance to get in the embassy and were anxious to get out [of Liberia]."<sup>202</sup>

Parts and supplies for the helicopters came from a long, thinly stretched supply line.\*\* A dif-

ficult maintenance problem for the air combat element occurred at the end of October when the Marine helicopters needed a mandatory rotor head modification. The sleeve on the hubs of the rotor heads of CH-46 helicopters had a tendency to crack and all the helicopters in the Department of the Navy were limited to lifting 22,000 pounds of gross weight instead of the usual 24,300 pounds until they were equipped with the modification. After receiving a Naval Aviation System Command message requiring all CH-46 helicopters to be modified, Major Johnson's helicopters got top priority.

Unfortunately, the ship was not equipped with a crane capable of lifting the rotor heads, so the modification maintenance crew could not perform the work on board. The forward logistic site on Lungi Airfield secured a crane and the space needed to make the modifications. The helicopters were flown to Freetown one at a time for the modification. However, the modification team at Freetown encountered other problems, including a lack of the necessary spare parts. Only two helicopters remained available while work continued on the third. The project took longer than expected and it was two weeks before all three helicopters were modified and back to Liberian waters.<sup>203</sup>

The West African soldiers continued to make headway and attacked the NPFL using the INPFL as allies.<sup>204</sup> By 30 October, some signs of a return to normalcy in Monrovia appeared when the power briefly came on.<sup>205</sup> The number of Marines ashore providing security gradually declined with the fighting. Based on input from Captain Grause and Major Hartley that the worst appeared to be over, European Command reduced the number of Marines allowed at the embassy. The next question was how long the Marines would have to stay.

Logistics support grew as the direct threat to the American Embassy shrank. A large part of the Marine task force's logistic support in Operation Sharp Edge involved diesel fuel, which powered the embassy's generators. With the power grid in Monrovia shut down, the five generators ran almost around the clock and used 800 to 1,200 gallons of diesel fuel each day. To support this level of consumption, the aviation detachment brought the fuel ashore in 500-gallon bladders, which weighed about 3,000 pounds each when filled.<sup>206</sup>

Supporting the embassy's fuel needs required a tremendous amount of work. Before they repaired the rotor heads at the end of October,

\* The Nigerians deployed four Dassault-Breguet/Dornier Alpha Jets to replace the Ghanaian jets after 20 October. The aircraft is a tandem seat jet designed for reconnaissance, training, and light ground attacks.

\*\* Parts came from worldwide naval aviation supply activities. Normally routed to Rota, Spain, these critical supplies would be flown by Navy aircraft to Freetown, Sierra Leone. To complete the 3,500-mile journey, the helicopters of HC-4 ferried the parts to the Marine aviation maintenance detachment off the coast of Liberia.



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*A Marine CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter lowers a fuel bladder onto Landing Zone Magic in the continuing effort of the amphibious ready group to supply the embassy.*

the CH-46 helicopters were limited to 22,000 pounds gross weight. Because of the fuel's weight and the distance the aircraft had to travel, a helicopter carrying a fuel bladder could not carry a full load of fuel for itself. As such, a helicopter would take on as much internal fuel as it could manage, fly the fuel bladder to the embassy, and then return to the ship. After refueling, the helicopter could then carry another bladder. Since each flight and unloading process took between three and four hours, transferring the fuel made for a long flight day.<sup>207</sup>

The fuel supply effort kept the onshore support Marines busy. Helicopters brought in 2,000 gallons three times a week to satisfy the embassy's needs. As each 500-gallon bladder arrived in the landing zone, the bulk fuel handlers from the CSSD Marines took over. Using two pumps (one pumped at 125-gallons per minute and the other pumped at 50-gallons per minute), they would transfer the fuel from the bladder into a fuel truck, which held 2,000 gallons. Once the

truck was full, it would be driven to the generator sites where the fuel would be pumped into the generators' tanks.<sup>208</sup>

Performing both their evacuation and logistics responsibilities, service support Marines helped to bring in tons of foodstuffs and dry goods for the State Department's commissary and exchange. By November, the embassy supply flights routinely brought in luxury items such as 50 pallets of beer and liquor, 500 gallons of ice cream, and pet food.\* The Marines occasionally felt like hired hands. But Chief Warrant Officer Deering said his Marines "didn't feel bad about showing them what they could do." Some of the CSSD Marines went beyond the required effort, helping to pour a concrete slab from the landing zone to the road, as well as undertaking wiring and electrical troubleshooting for the embassy.<sup>209</sup>

\* The Marines also delivered pallets of carbonated beverages to the embassy. Initially, the embassy sold a can of soda to the Marines for 50 cents and then raised the price to \$1. As a result, the Marines stopped buying the embassy's stock.

### *Rotation and Reduction of CMAGTF Marines*

A relatively quiet Monrovia resulted in only 62 Marines ashore during November. On 3 November, the USS *Newport County* (LST 1179) arrived at Mamba Station bringing Company L, BLT 3/8 to relieve the Marines of Company K. The platoon commanders and squad leaders went in after receiving a situation orientation for the turnover. Within days of the *Newport's* arrival, the joint task force commander released the *Barnstable County*, which departed Liberian waters with Marine combat engineers onboard. On 14 November, Captain William F. Crenshaw's, Company L assumed security responsibilities ashore. Company K remained in reserve onboard the *Whidbey Island* to support Company L with a standby reaction force.

As the month progressed, the number of weekly evacuees dwindled. The combat service support Marines onboard continued to provide logistics assistance to the embassy and the Marines ashore. Helicopters from the forward logistic site

in Freetown delivered pallets of rice and baby food to the embassy as part of a humanitarian aid package. The stable situation allowed the West African force, along with some Liberian support, to fill the vacuum left by Doe's death as an interim government was appointed. The government's real power, however, extended only to the outskirts of the city. Ambassador DeVos attended the 22 November ceremony together with the peacekeeping force commander and his soldiers. Subsequent negotiations lead by the Economic Community of West African States resulted in all factions agreeing to another ceasefire on 28 November.<sup>210</sup>

On 30 November, the USS *Nashville* (LPD 13) arrived at Mamba Station to rotate the command element of the Contingency MAGTF. Major Hartley, his staff, and subordinate commanders briefed their replacements on the current situation in Liberia. While the briefings took place, the necessary transfers of equipment and personnel occurred. During the transition that day, fighting flared up briefly between the AFL, INPFL, and peacekeepers at the Barclay Training Center. The



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*Marines at the American Embassy unload a container of hot food. All outside commercial aircraft flights had been cancelled, making the embassy dependent on 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit for resupply.*



firefight resulted in stray rounds hitting the U.S.-leased Sam and E apartment building just outside the compound. At Post Two, one of the rounds hit a Marine, knocking him down and creating a three-inch crease in his Kevlar helmet. Unharmed, the round resulted in only a bruised forehead. The lance corporal and his scarred helmet became the object of much attention according to his platoon commander, First Lieutenant Walter E. Lavrinovich, Jr.<sup>211</sup>

Command of the Contingency MAGTF changed on 1 December with the executive officer of the 26th MEU, Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Kunkel, assuming command from Major Hartley. The transition was completed early on the morning of 2 December, when the *Whidbey Island* with the Marines of the original Contingency MAGTF 3-90 left Mamba Station.

As the *Nashville* arrived in Liberian waters, a European Command modification to the execute order directed a reduction in Marine presence ashore. Although the total number for the task force remained constant, only about 40 Marines remained onshore. Evacuation criteria changed with the new State Department policy that virtually eliminated most remaining applicants. Lieutenant Colonel Kunkel recalled the Marines evacuated less than 50 people during December.<sup>212\*</sup> The leadership at European Command, U.S. Naval Forces Europe, and the MEU believed the time to pull the Marines out had arrived.

A sense of peace returned in the streets of the city. Many of the markets reopened and people moved about conducting their daily activities. Deployed throughout the city and manning checkpoints, the West African peacekeepers' presence improved the security situation. The INPFL remained at their Cadwell base area and the AFL at the Barclay Training Center. The calm allowed some of the Marine task force staff to venture out and view the wholesale destruction firsthand. As Lieutenant Colonel Kunkel noted: "The first time we went out, it was clearly a city that had been at war. It looked like Berlin: you know, burned out buildings, collapsed buildings, streets blocked, burned out cars."<sup>213</sup> The look and mood of the city, however, changed within weeks as the new Marine task force commander noted:

The city was getting back to normal: lots of people out and about, open-air markets.... Vehicles moving: taxicab very, very busy.... Local police started coming out of the woodwork and back on duty. There was a concerted effort to clean the city up, clean the port up, clean the housing areas up. It was a mess, but it was slowly getting back to normal. There was an unofficial ceasefire and there was no fighting between any of the three factions.<sup>214</sup>

Other evidence of a return to normalcy included the reopening of Spriggs-Payne Airport on 8 December, when two of the peacekeeper's Alpha Jets landed. This allowed United Nations charter flights to begin using the airfield. Both the INPFL and NPFL opened rice distribution centers in areas under their control.

### *Completion of Sharp Edge*

Preparing to bring their mission to a close in early January 1991, the task force reduced the number of personnel and support equipment ashore. The 26th MEU by this time had evacuated 831 noncombatants.<sup>215</sup>

A notable achievement of the 26th MEU involved the logistic support provided to the embassy. Marines brought in countless tons of food, supplies, and more than 100,000 gallons of fuel to the compound. Despite the small size of the MEU, which made it incapable of being divided, it also successfully operated two geographically separated MAGTFs. Lastly, in the midst of the turmoil, the accomplishment of a major in-stream reconfiguration of equipment and transfer of forces spoke highly of amphibious ready group and Marine expeditionary unit teamwork, as well as the flexibility it gave to the commander of the European Command.

A total of 2,439 persons were evacuated during Operation Sharp Edge, involving citizens from 59 countries. Less than 10 percent of the evacuees were Americans.<sup>216</sup> Dennis Jett, the deputy chief of mission, summed up the contribution of the Marines by stating: "We could have not maintained our presence without your efforts. That ability to remain here allowed us to monitor and influence events, to speed relief operations, and

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\* The Marines also conducted a pet evacuation in which all the embassy's pets were evacuated by helicopter.

to evacuate those U.S. citizens and nationals of other countries who wanted to leave. In doing so, you were responsible for savings hundreds, and probably thousands of lives.”<sup>217</sup>

### *The Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team and the Departure of the Marines*

Considering the large buildup in the Persian Gulf and the apparent stability and security in Monrovia, European Command felt the time was right to end the mission. The Ambassador believed, however, that a security presence would still be required. Through additional consultations with the Department of State, an interagency group in Washington, D.C., recommended a Marine presence remain at the embassy. European Command requested U.S. Atlantic Command's support. Consequently, Admiral Carter tasked Marine Corps Security Force Battalion, Atlantic, with the embassy security mission.

Alerted and called off leave on 28 December, the 5th Platoon, Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team (FAST) Company, from Marine Corps Security Force Battalion, Atlantic, received the tasking. The 50-man platoon left Norfolk, Virginia, on 6 January 1991 and arrived at Lungi Airfield, Sierra Leone, a day later. They were the first FAST platoon to support an embassy.<sup>218</sup>

At the airfield, the platoon transferred their equipment, supplies, and ammunition from Navy C-130 aircraft to Navy CH-53E helicopters. One of the Navy helicopters belonging to HC-4 was undergoing repairs, leaving only one operational CH-53E to shuttle the FAST platoon and its equipment to Monrovia. The entire platoon arrived by the afternoon of 7 January, completing a long 2,000-mile journey in two days. Once on the ground, the FAST platoon commander, Captain Glen N. Cheatham, together with Company L's commanding officer, Captain Crenshaw, conducted a turnover and toured the defensive positions. After a quick briefing, Captain Cheatham's pla-



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*A Marine CH-46E helicopter approaches the flight deck of the USS Nashville (LPD 13). With the arrival of a platoon of the Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team Company, which assumed security responsibility from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, the Nashville departed, officially ending Operation Sharp Edge.*

toon officially assumed security responsibilities, manning posts, exchanging frequencies, and signing for ammunition and rations.<sup>219</sup>

Dressed in civilian clothing, Company L's liaison, the defense attache, and FAST Marine representatives went to Spriggs-Payne Airport to meet an arriving Navy C-130 loaded with the FAST platoon's follow-on equipment, ammunition, and supplies. Still along the edges of the airstrip were human remains; skeletons with rotting flesh still on them and piles of skulls.<sup>220</sup> West African peacekeepers now controlled the airfield, but the control tower had been peppered by small arms rounds during fighting and was not functioning. There also was a gaping rocket-propelled grenade hole in the tower. A Marine forward air controller talked the arriving aircraft in from the embassy and the Marines quickly unloaded and moved their cargo to the compound.

Late that day, Company L Marines flew out of the embassy and back to the *Nashville*. The turnover was complete with the delivery of additional ammunition stocks on the morning of 8 January. Operation Sharp Edge officially came to an end on 9 January when Contingency MAGTF 3-90 departed Mamba Station. The *Nashville*'s departure concluded the longest running non-combatant evacuation operation to date.

The arrival of the FAST platoon provided the embassy with a highly trained security force with close quarters battle capability and robust crew-served firepower. Manning three day posts and five night posts, they worked on improving selected positions. The Marines ate in the embassy's cafeteria and resided in vacant staff quarters. The FAST command structure also differed from that of the contingency task force. Reports went directly to the team's higher headquarters, the commander of the Sixth Fleet. Daily reports of the platoon covered the routine movement of the peacekeepers' military vehicles and personnel up and down United Nations Drive in front of Post One and Post Two. Armed factional fighters, mostly located outside Monrovia, never came near the Marine's positions. One large, very vocal demonstration occurred in late January directly outside the embassy. The Marines asked the Liberians why they were demonstrating and they responded they wanted "U.S. protection." The crowd of 200 to 300 persons eventually dispersed. Even with the apparent normalcy, 5th Platoon Marines on post heard random shots fired many times throughout their stay.

The embassy no longer depended on the Marines for fuel or water. The administrative officer renegotiated contracts for fuel and water out in town. Opening the airport allowed additional supplies to come by Navy C-130.\* The embassy staff frequently ventured out in the city and airport to carry on official business. Even the Marine security guards went out routinely to conduct physical training runs.

The cessation of fighting allowed West African peacekeepers to hold a parade for their rotating battalions on 9 February. The event was attended by the interim President of Liberia, the U.S. Ambassador, the defense attache, and the FAST platoon commander. At the parade, Captain Cheatham noted that Major General Dogonyaro, the peacekeeping force's commander, reminded his audience that his Nigerian troops now played a major part in the control of the city.<sup>221</sup>

Charles Taylor's NPFL fighters remained on the city's outskirts and Prince Johnson's INFPL at the Cadwell area. Some of the non-governmental relief agencies within the city re-established limited services. The formal signing by all factions of a ceasefire monitoring agreement took place in Lome, Togo, on 13 February 1991.<sup>222</sup>

Monrovia and its environs remained overall peaceful during January and February 1991. With the ongoing buildup of forces in Kuwait, both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and European Command wanted the Marines to depart. The Joint Chiefs of Staff directive ordering redeployment of the FAST Marines finally arrived in the second week of February from the Sixth Fleet. The Ambassador's reservations were overcome by developments in the Persian Gulf region, which dictated the mission's end.

In concert with the United Nations' 15 February deadline for the Iraqis to withdraw from Kuwait, the commander of the Sixth Fleet ordered the FAST platoon to depart Liberia the same day by Navy C-130. The morning arrival of the C-130 and C-9 aircraft at Spriggs-Payne Airport signaled the start of regular semi-monthly supply flights for the embassy. For the Marines, the platoon's 15 February departure ended a 194-day presence of Marine combat units ashore in Liberia. Marine combat units would return approximately five years later to the same long-running civil war.

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\* Navy Fleet Logistics Support Squadron 58 (VR-58) conducted the supply flights into Spriggs-Payne Airport.