

## **Give me a Clue – Hot or Cold?**

### **A surgeon's memories of SPEARHEAD**

Colonel (retd) David Vassallo FRCSEd, DHMSA, MA, L/RAMC

Nothing ever happens when one's on SPEARHEAD, they told me...

In spring 2000 I was nominally assigned for six months, as a military general surgeon, to a Field Surgical Team (FST) within the Spearhead Lead Element, the British Armed Forces' principal high readiness component. This essentially consisted of a battlegroup formed around a light infantry battalion (in this case the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the Parachute Regiment), with supporting forces from other arms, prepared to deploy at minimal notice to any trouble spot around the world.

I was reassured by the powers that be, that nothing ever happened on SPEARHEAD and that I could continue with normal duties. Therefore, while I prepared my kit just in case, I left it at home in the south of England while I embarked on a pre-arranged attachment to a civilian hospital in Salford, up north, some six hours rail journey from home.

Soon afterwards, late one Friday evening in early May, I received a phone call in Salford.

'Sir, you're still on Spearhead, aren't you?' said a familiar voice from the FST, in Colchester.

'Yes', said I.

'We've been placed on 24 hours' notice to move. We're getting ready. When can you get here?'

'I'm in Salford. My kit's at home. I could catch a train first thing tomorrow and be home by 1330hrs. Would that do for starters?'

'Yes, no problem, we'll call you at 1400hrs. Probably still be on another 24 hours' notice to move. Sorry, can't tell you any more over an open line.'

I racked my brain, I'd not heard of anything in the news, other than some minor trouble in Zimbabwe – surely we weren't going there? I rang home to ask my wife to collect me from the rail station and expect me for lunch, and to await a phone call.

On Saturday the trains ran on time, I arrived home by 1330hrs and settled down to a quick lunch. There was still nothing on the news. At 1400hrs the phone rang.

'Sir, you've arrived home? Good. A taxi's on the way to take you to South Cerney, it'll be with you in half an hour. We'll see you at the airfield as you'll get there before us.'

'Where are we going?'

'Sorry, can't tell you, open line. The anaesthetist is in the taxi, he'll update you.'

Imagine yourself in this situation, with half an hour to finish preparing for a journey literally into the unknown, which might be anywhere around the world, what would you do? Quickly now ...

My instincts kicked in, I needed to know what uniform to wear.

‘At least give me a clue as to where we’re going. Is it hot or cold?’

‘Hot.’

So that ruled out the need for bulky cold weather gear.

‘Is it desert or tropical?’

‘Tropical. We’ll issue you anti-malarials.’

So no need for desert combats; lightweight tropical gear would suffice. Maybe it was to be Zimbabwe after all.

Soon thereafter, one hurried goodbye to my wife later, the taxi arrived. The anaesthetist briefed me that we were picking up a Royal Navy orthopaedic surgeon en route (a FST normally consisted of two surgeons, two anaesthetists, and a few operating department practitioners, with kit, equipment and a portable MacVicar operating table)<sup>1</sup>, and that:

‘We’re off to Sierra Leone.’

And that was my introduction to Operation PALLISER.

Apparently, rebels of the Revolutionary United Front, who had brutally conquered most of Sierra Leone, were advancing rapidly on the capital, Freetown, and the UK Government had agreed to an urgent UN request to intervene to halt the RUF advance and prevent a humanitarian disaster. The Spearhead Lead Element was assembling at South Cerney (a RAF airfield, near Cirencester) to fly via Senegal into Lungi Airport, Freetown, to secure the airport and city.

At South Cerney we met up with the rest of the FST and medics from 16 Close Support Medical Regiment in Colchester. The surgeons were issued with revolvers for personal protection, but my RN colleague initially balked at this:

‘I don’t know how to use one of these. My personal weapon is normally a 4.5-inch gun on the bow of a destroyer.’

We soon reassured him, and we all flew off to Senegal on a VC-10 soon thereafter, together with the bulk of the Spearhead personnel (eventually some 600 strong), on the first leg of our adventure. At Senegal we disembarked for a refuelling stop, but just as we were about to board coaches to a holding area, we were told:

‘You see that C-130 Hercules over there, with its propellers whirling. That’s for you. The first 100 of you get on board fast, the rebels are advancing on Lungi Airport, you have to get there before them.’

---

<sup>1</sup> MacVicar FT. A Simple Operating Frame for Field Use. *J Roy Army Med Corps* 1967;113(3):134-136.  
<https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/jramc/113/3/134.full.pdf>

I argued successfully that under those circumstances they needed more than simply an inexperienced regimental medical officer and a couple of medics aboard, and that the FST must be on that Hercules. Nonetheless we had to split FST resources into a bare minimum of equipment and personnel in order to get maximum fighting capacity aboard. My RN colleague and I exchanged glances – there was no way I would stay behind. We agreed, I said ‘I’m going, you follow on in the next plane’.

Once on board the Hercules, sitting all crowded together on our kit, the major in charge gave the company a quick tailboard briefing before take-off. I’ll never forget his words, as I sat next to a soldier loaded with bandoliers of heavy machine gun ammunition:

‘We’re flying to Lungi Airport, landing after dark. The plane will stop fast and turn round for an immediate take off after we disembark.

We may have an opposed landing. Number 7 platoon - you disembark to the left. Number 9 platoon – you move to the right. HMG platoon – you give covering fire.

FST – Your Mission: Save Life.’

## Epilogue

Fortunately, no shots greeted us at Lungi as the Hercules landed in utter darkness, skidding to a halt as it reversed direction. We bomb burst away from the aircraft ramp, narrowly avoiding spraining our ankles as we blindly tumbled with our heavy kit into the ditches either side of the runway. In the lonely silence that descended as the Hercules roared off into the jet-black night sky, we wondered, ‘What next?’

Suddenly, an apparently disembodied posh sounding voice called out from the darkness ‘Welcome, the rebels are not here yet. Do stand up and follow me.’ And so we did, making our way to the airport control tower and hangar around which the infantry quickly set up a defensive cordon, while the FST improvised an operating theatre within a carpenter’s stall in the hangar.

The next morning, the rest of the battlegroup arrived, rapidly moving out to secure the approaches to the airfield and the capital, stabilising the situation for the UN and Sierra Leonean Government, and then carrying the fight to and eventually turning the tables on the rebels – but that you can read about elsewhere.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Richards D. Sierra Leone 2000: Pregnant with Lessons. Chapter 4, in: British Generals in Blair’s Wars (Eds: Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron, Hew Strachan) (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013)

<sup>3</sup> General David Richards. Operation PALLISER. Chapter 8, in: Taking Command – the Autobiography (London: Headline Publishing, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> General David Richards. The Battle of Lungi Lol turns the Tide. Chapter 9, in: Taking Command – the Autobiography (*ibid*)