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Cover Page Footnote

Canadian War Museum, Interview with Major (Retired) Doug Henderson, 31D 21 Henderson (hereafter 31D 21 Henderson). Interview excerpts have been condensed and edited for clarity in consultation with the interviewee.

Op LOBE and the Evacuation of Canadian Personnel from Libya, 2014

An Interview with Major (Retired) Doug Henderson

ANDREW BURTC H

Abstract: In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring uprising in Libya and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's intervention that overturned Muammar Gaddafi's government amid fears of reprisals against civilians, Canada and other countries re-established a diplomatic presence. The region was still unstable with many competing militias in a tentative truce following Gaddafi's downfall. Canada's embassy required a military presence to secure the compound and the safety of Canadian VIPs. In July 2014, the men and women of Operation LOBE were forced to evacuate from Libya amid a diplomatic exodus during a resurgence of civil war. This piece, based largely on a Canadian War Museum oral history interview with Op LOBE's Roto 6 Task Force Commander Major Doug Henderson, revisits the mission's purpose, its deployment, the challenges faced in country and the successful evacuation of Canadian personnel to Tunisia in the summer of 2014.¹

MILITARY ORAL HISTORY is a field that offers unique opportunities to discover aspects of operations and personal experiences of deployments both well-known and obscure, particularly in the absence of declassified and available public records concerning recent events. Political scientist and oral historian Jerold Waltman, recalling his first forays into oral history, reflected that his research before

¹ Canadian War Museum, Interview with Major (Retired) Doug Henderson, 31D 21 Henderson (hereafter 31D 21 Henderson). Interview excerpts have been condensed and edited for clarity in consultation with the interviewee.

that point was “antiseptic.”² Oral history can be messy. Interviewees and interviewers wrestle with emotional periods in the interviewee’s past, jumbled chronologies, tangled interpersonal relationships and the desire to convey one’s own version of the truth. Oral testimony is compelling, personal and occasionally contradictory. Yet, as a means for the historian to fill gaps in the record of Canadian military operations, especially those that have not received substantial journalistic attention, the oral history interview is an essential tool.³

The Canadian War Museum (CWM) has pursued oral history with veterans of military operations spanning the Second World War through to the present day, dating back to the late 1990s. In the aftermath of the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the approaching millennium, the Museum applied for and received funds from the Chawkers Foundation to develop an oral history program. Administered from 2000-2007 by Colonel Angus Brown with The Friends of the Canadian War Museum and assisted by volunteer and Canadian War Museum staff interviewers, the oral history program targeted approximately fifty veterans and serving military personnel every year, usually with a focus on a specific branch of service or type of military activity, with a provision for some “walk-in” business or interviews of opportunity. As a result of the partnership between the CWM and the Friends of the Canadian War Museum and staff efforts to sustain the oral history program since 2007, the Museum developed a holding of more than 500 oral history interviews, constituting an important resource for oral historians and military historians alike.

Since 2007, the Museum’s objectives in collecting oral history have been to collect and preserve oral history interviews with veterans of Canadian military operations and individuals affected by operations on the home front. A secondary purpose has been to employ oral history methodology to build on and contextualize existing archival and material culture collections where an interviewee may have particular experience with a specific vehicle, weapons system or item in the collection. And finally, with a nod to the Museum’s role as a

² As quoted in Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan, eds. *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 262.

³ As Cave and Sloan point out, oral history and journalism are closely matched, particularly in the period during/after a crisis. Cave and Sloan, *Listening on the Edge*, 4-5.

public history institution, oral history is used to sustain a collection of material for CWM use for purpose of display, education and outreach, in the galleries, through research and publications or online. In the fall of 2021, the Museum launched a new project, “In Their Own Voices,” with the aim of dramatically expanding the scope of its oral history archival efforts to take in as many new personal perspectives on oral history development as possible by 2024.⁴ The focus of the project is to draw on veterans’ postwar or post-service experience.

Interviews at the CWM are styled to follow an individual veteran’s experience, usually going into some detail about a particular deployment or aspect of their war service. While the Museum’s interviewers have tended to eschew the longer-form “life story” model of oral history interview, each interview is preceded with information gathering about the individual’s service, their family history and any available documentation relevant to their experience on the deployment. Where desired, the Museum has conducted multiple interviews with some veterans to cover different deployments or aspects of their experience over time. These interviews are more demanding of the interviewee’s time and are resource-intensive from a collections perspective, requiring additional transcription and cataloguing. Given the long service records of many of our interviewees, however, the multiple interview model is often preferable to a longer single session, which can be exhausting for the interviewee, especially if the interview touches on difficult subjects or experiences.

The interview on which this article is based was very much a case of “walk-in” collecting. Major (Maj.) (Retired) Doug Henderson reached out to the Canadian War Museum to express an interest in documenting the work he and his team of military police and other serving members accomplished in Tripoli during the Libyan Civil War, protecting the Canadian embassy staff in Libya up to and including conducting an evacuation of essential personnel from the embassy in the summer of 2014. Henderson’s original reason for reaching out to the Canadian War Museum was to better document the history of this deployment and the circumstances surrounding the evacuation. He said he wanted to ensure that the accomplishments and the unique nature of the mission are attributed to the members

⁴ Canadian War Museum, “In Their Own Voices: Stories from Canadian Military Veterans and Their Families,” accessed 9 May 2022, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/blog/in-their-own-voices-stories-from-canadian-veterans-and-their-families/>.

of Op LOBE and can be celebrated by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the Military Police in particular. Henderson felt the incident had not received much attention at home and was at risk of being distorted in accounts by allies who may not have an accurate view of the Canadian contribution to embassy security.⁵ After some dialogue by email and consulting documentation Henderson provided about his deployment, including a tour diary, unclassified Powerpoint briefing presentations and video clips taken by his team showing significant incidents related to the evacuation, the author of this article arranged an oral history interview. The interview took place remotely via Zoom owing to COVID restrictions. Following the interview, the video file was transcribed automatically and then verified before the interview was transferred to the Canadian War Museum's collection.

Henderson's offer of an interview was welcome, as the Museum had few oral histories related to the Libya conflict. But it was also of interest because his account touched on an aspect of Canadian military history that is not well-documented in other sources either. While Canada's participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission over Libya has received attention from military historians, serving military members, political scientists and diplomatic historians, these studies have focused on the nature of Canada's foreign policy objectives in supporting NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 or on the lessons learned through the employment

⁵ Doug Henderson, correspondence with author, March 2021.

of Allied airpower.⁶ Much less attention has been paid to the continued diplomatic engagement in Libya or what was involved in protecting Canada's diplomatic presence in a post-conflict, mid-civil war Libya. Very little has been written in particular concerning the role of Canadian military police in this function. There is even less information available, historical or otherwise, about the Canadian military's role in conflict evacuations generally. Henderson's account provided a useful glimpse into this relatively unseen field of Canadian military operations.

In developing this article, the author consulted the transcript of the interview, supplementing details with additional documentation from the deployment provided by Henderson or available through other literature. The author also consulted extensively with Henderson to confirm details of his deployment, clarifying individuals' roles or removing some names to protect the privacy of still-serving members of the diplomatic staff or fellow military members on Op LOBE. The relationship between interviewee and interviewer should be one of mutual trust and respect. The post-interview consultation was important to ensure the interviewee was comfortable with this retelling of his account, even if the full transcript will be available in future to interested researchers through the Museum's website. Taking the interview off the Museum's digital shelf, working with

⁶ Some observers likened Canada's engagement with the NATO mission in Libya as part of a revolution in Canadian foreign policy towards the Middle East, a hardening of the "traditional" Pearsonian soft power and middle power peacekeeping. Jeremy Wildeman, "The Middle East in Canadian foreign policy and national identity formation." *International Journal* 76, 3 (2021): 359-383. For a more nuanced, contemporary take on the Conservative government's approach to foreign policy as a response to Axworthian, UN-friendly, human security-based principles, see Adam Chapnick, "A diplomatic counter-revolution: Conservative foreign policy, 2006-2011." *International Journal* 67, 1 (Winter 2011-2012): 137-154. Professional reflections by RCAF officers have formed the early historical analyses of Canada's participation in Op MOBILE. An example of this type of literature would include entries in the *RCAF Journal*, such as Lieutenant-Colonel Brian Murray, "Air Power's Contribution to Coercion," *RCAF Journal* 1, 2 (Spring 2012): reprinted: <https://www.canada.ca/en/air-force/corporate/reports-publications/royal-canadian-air-force-journal/2015-vol4-iss3-05-air-powers-contribution-to-coercion.html>. RCAF History and Heritage historians have likewise turned to commanders' perspectives to capture recent operational history and promote future research and writing on the subject. For example, see Richard Mayne and William March, eds. *Air Wing: RCAF Commanders' Perspectives During the 2011 Libyan Conflict*, (Department of National Defence, 2018) vi-vii. Available at: https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/mdn-dnd/D2-401-2018-eng.pdf.

the interviewee to develop and refine the story below, is an example of continuing the productive collaborative practice that went into the oral history interview to begin with. The narrative that follows below is meant to bring the interview to life for readers, rather than have it remain a “mere object of collection,” to paraphrase oral historian Michael Fritsch.⁷

During the Cold War and after, Canadian military personnel participated in a series of conflicts classified as “police actions,” “peace support operations,” “humanitarian interventions” or other terms that disguised armed conflict in terms other than “war.” Some of the conflicts that fell into this grey zone of war-but-not-war were episodes in the former Yugoslavia, such as the Canadian involvement in the 1993 Battle of Medak Pocket, where Canadian and French troops moving into a disputed area to mark new ceasefire lines instead ended up in a prolonged firefight with Croatian troops and were forced to observe ethnic cleansing operations, and the 78-day Kosovo air campaign against Serbia in 1999. While subject to intense media coverage at the time, public awareness and interest in these conflicts faded, particularly after a decade of public attention given to Canada’s involvement in the war in Afghanistan, which overshadowed many other military missions. One of these missions was Canada’s involvement in NATO’s 2011 campaign in Libya.

Unrest and popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, known as “The Arab Spring,” began after an official seized the scales that Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi used to sell his wares on 17 December 2010. Bouazizi sold his fruits without a license and was subject to police harassment unless he paid exorbitant bribes. After the seizure, and in desperation, Bouazizi publicly self-immolated in protest. Mohamed’s cousin Ali filmed the event and the protests that followed.⁸ Bouazizi died a little over two weeks after locals managed to put out the fire. Protests linked to

⁷ Michael Frisch, “The Memory of History,” in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 5-17. As quoted in Stephen High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement*, (Toronto: UBC Press, 2014), 3.

⁸ Thessa Lageman, “Remembering Mohamed Bouazizi: The Man who Sparked the Arab Spring” *Al Jazeera*, 17 December 2010, accessed 10 December 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/17/remembering-mohamed-bouazizi-his-death-triggered-the-arab>.

Bouazizi's self-immolation started hours after the incident, building as the man lingered in hospital. The news sparked a revolutionary movement against the dictatorship of Tunisian President Zine El Abadine Ben Ali. By mid-January 2011, Tunisia's president fled the country and within a year, the leaders of Egypt and Yemen would step down or be forced from power by popular demonstrations in public squares. In some countries, protests against corrupt and repressive regimes were met with deadly force, sparking civil wars, most notably in Libya and Syria.

In Libya, the fuse of popular unrest was lit in February 2011 by Muammar Gaddafi's arrest of a human rights lawyer. The protests swiftly overwhelmed the regime in cities such as Tripoli, the country's capital, and Benghazi. The Libyan government tried to violently crush the uprising, to the alarm and condemnation of international observers. Yet some Libyan military units defected to the revolutionaries rather than follow orders, and brought with them weapons and equipment. The Libyan Civil War had begun. The various armed factions within the revolution banded together to become the Transitional National Council (TNC) and had early success in eastern Libya. But by March 2011, the tide began to turn against the revolution as Libyan government forces reversed the TNC's gains.

On 17 March 2011, the United Nations Security Council imposed a no-fly zone over Libya and authorized member states to "take all necessary measures ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack ... while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory."⁹ Canada, which had worked to secure the United Nations resolution, quickly deployed CF-188 jets to the region to support its implementation, with unanimous support by Parliament. The seven CF-188 jets, 140 support personnel and two CC-150T tankers landed in Italy two days after Canada's announcement, with additional transport and surveillance aircraft arriving a week later. Canadian ships serving with NATO's Standing Maritime Group 1 moved to the Mediterranean Sea to support the sea embargo against the regime. Canada joined the NATO assault on Gaddafi's forces on 21 March 2011, the first of 944 strike sorties

⁹ UNSCR 1973, 17 March 2011, accessed 10 May 2011, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10200.doc.htm#Resolution>.

Canadian pilots would launch over the course of the war.¹⁰ Canada's part in the Libyan War ended the day after Libyan rebels captured and killed Gaddafi during the Battle of Sirte on 21 October 2011. That November, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Governor-General David Johnston paid tribute in Parliament to the Canadian Armed Forces' role in the NATO mission as RCAF aircraft flew over the Peace Tower.¹¹

On the ground in Libya, however, the situation was far from settled. Residential areas of Sirte, where Gaddafi was killed, were reduced to rubble during the fighting. One journalist compared the scale of devastation to Ypres in 1915.¹² The challenges confronting Libya were not new. Lisa Anderson, writing in the *Middle East Journal*, recalled the observations of Henry Villard, the U.S. ambassador to Libya after its independence in 1952, when local politics trumped the United Nations' carefully constructed transitional plans: "It is difficult to conceive of a kingdom starting off with such serious handicaps as faced Libya on its birth date. ... The Libyan population was ... hardly a good foundation on which to build an administrative hierarchy. ... half of Libya was a battlefield in the [Second World] war and many of its towns lay in rubble."¹³

Likewise, once the 2011 civil war ended, the Transitional National Council, made up of many disparate factions, was not united on the future direction of the country. During the war, Canada had shuttered its embassy and evacuated its staff. After the war, Canada's embassy reopened in Tripoli. Risks to international personnel persisted because of Libya's instability. In September 2012, militants stormed the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, killing the American ambassador, John Christopher Stevens, and three others. Stevens

¹⁰ Richard Mayne, "The Canadian Experience: Operation MOBILE," in Mayne and William March, *Air Wing: RCAF Commanders' Perspectives During the 2011 Libyan Conflict*, 5-7.

¹¹ Dave Chan, "Harper hails Libya mission as 'great military success,'" *The Globe and Mail*, 24 November 2011, accessed 10 May 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/harper-hails-libya-mission-as-great-military-success/article4106634/>.

¹² David Randall, "Gaddafi's Dream Capital for Africa Pulverized into a Ruin." *The Independent (UK)*, 23 October 2011. As cited in Maximilian Forte, *Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO's War on Libya and Africa*, (Montreal: Baraka Books, 2012), 31-32.

¹³ Henry Villard, *Libya: The New Arab Kingdom*. As cited in Lisa Anderson, "They Defeated Us All: International Interests, Local Politics, and Contested Sovereignty in Libya." *Middle East Journal* 71, 2 (Spring 2017), 238.

and an IT specialist died from a fire set at the compound, while two CIA agents were killed in a mortar strike in a nearby CIA compound. While the killings set off a political firestorm in Washington, most countries—America included—maintained their diplomatic presence in Libya.

As with other dangerous diplomatic postings in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Canadian military personnel provided close protection for embassy staff and visiting VIPs. The Canadian Armed Forces operation to support the embassy's activities in Tripoli was called Operation LOBE. The operation was sustained by a contingent of military police, some specializing in close protection of Canadian embassy staff, while others were more concerned with the general security of the embassy and their living quarters. Maj. Doug Henderson was selected to lead the sixth rotation (Roto 6) of Op LOBE in March 2014.

Henderson joined the Canadian Forces in 1978 as a reservist with 763 Communications Squadron in Ottawa and then transferred to the Princess of Wales Own Regiment in Kingston in 1980. While attending Queens University, he joined the Regular Force and after graduation became a military police officer in 1986. His career included postings in Canada, Germany and the United States, as well as a number of deployments, including to Bosnia, Honduras and Southwest Asia. In 2012, he became the commanding officer of 3 Military Police Regiment in Nova Scotia and deployed from there to Libya on Op LOBE.

As Op LOBE was a military police-heavy mission, the commander of the Canadian Joint Operations Centre appointed Henderson as Op LOBE's Roto 6 task force commander.

Henderson notes that Op LOBE was “supposed to be the template for how we were going to deal with all the emergencies at Canadian embassies. When I arrived in 2014, we had 18 people of which seven were CP [Close Protection] operatives. There was the command team, which were two MP [military police] — myself and my sergeant-major. And then there was a medical team, [a trauma surgeon and a medic]. We also had an Operations Officer, a Cultural Advisor, Supply Sergeant, an Admin Corporal, a Signals Corporal, and an Int[elligence] cell of two.” Roto 6 was a composite

unit, with personnel selected from a variety of trades and borrowed from other units.¹⁴

The members of Roto 6 began their training to deploy to Libya in January 2014 with a trip to Norfolk, Virginia to enhance their driving skills. The training included such things as how to take corners, ram vehicles, drive quickly in columns as well as drill in what to do if a driver was injured or killed. In his tour diary, Henderson noted that the training was “the wildest ride I ever had.”¹⁵

And it gave us a lot of confidence going into Libya. Then we headed back to Canada and we ended up in Kingston where we were doing a lot of first aid. The non-CP people learned how to actually do CP work in a vehicle so that if we ever had to do the duties, we would know what to do.¹⁶

At Canadian Forces Base Kingston, the Roto 6 team completed their departure checks and their additional training. They received intelligence reports and tips from members of previous Op LOBE rotos, cultural training about what to expect in Libya and then yet more training in driver skills such as convoy driving. Additional emphasis was placed on first aid and medical extraction and wound care, as they would mostly be on their own in Tripoli. Training in marksmanship, command post tasks and other skills continued until mid-February, when the team broke up for pre-deployment leave. It was evident that the team had gelled during their training and was prepared to face the challenges Tripoli would offer.

Henderson and his team arrived at a tipping point in Libya’s fragile post-war order. Elections with high turnout in 2012 had allowed for a peaceful transition of power from the National Transitional Council to the General National Congress. However, rival power centres emerged in the country as political factions began to arm themselves. An estimated 1,700 armed groups were present in the country. While the larger groups advocated for greater autonomy, some were allied with nationalist or regional causes and others with Islamist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda.

¹⁴ 31D 21 Henderson.

¹⁵ Doug Henderson, *Op LOBE Diary 19 March 2021* (unpublished manuscript), 2. Provided to the author.

¹⁶ 31D 21 Henderson.

Regional military councils helped coordinate between groups and staved off fighting between many of them.¹⁷ Numerous smaller armed groups were closely linked to towns, neighbourhoods or families that could afford to sustain them, evidence of a response to the central government's inability to assert credible control across Libya.¹⁸ In Benghazi, Islamist-aligned militias continued attacks against diplomatic targets. Foreign targets were, however, a sideshow to the wider power struggles building over control of Libya's natural resources. The Libyan parliament dismissed the prime minister, Ali Zeidan, in March 2014 in part because of the ongoing oil crisis.¹⁹ Zeidan's ouster occurred as the Roto 6 team arrived. The split between factions in eastern and western Libya would only get worse as the mission progressed.

In Tripoli itself, the team arrived in a capital divided between a variety of armed groups, private security firms, militias and criminal smuggling and hostage rings.²⁰ And Tripoli's terrible traffic problem underlined the usefulness of Roto 6's pre-deployment training:

While we were there, the UN declared Libya as the worst country in the world to drive in due to fatalities in traffic accidents. And as I was looking in my notes, we arrived, we did the handover, [and] the next day we had our first traffic accident. And the next day after that, we had our second traffic accident. They were minor, mind you, but still it just went to the chaos on the roads in Libya, and that the driver course was invaluable in giving us the confidence to be able to drive over there.

The personnel of Op LOBE spent much of their time divided between the Canadian embassy compound in Tripoli and a development known as "Palm City," where they lived. The different international facilities were bordered by territory controlled by different militias loyal to opposing factions, a point that would become important later in the tour.

¹⁷ Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff, "Libya" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7, 1 (February 2015): 96-97.

¹⁸ Brian McQuinn, "Assessing (In)security after the Arab Spring: The Case of Libya," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 46, 4 (October 2013): 717.

¹⁹ "Libya ex-PM Zeidan 'leaves country despite travel ban.'" *BBC News*, 12 March 2014, accessed 31 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26541979>.

²⁰ McQuinn, "Assessing (in)security after the Arab Spring," 717.



Figure 1: Palm City map - Area 1 was the location of the Canadian Diplomatic lodgings and Area 5 the Op LOBE lodgings. [Doug Henderson]

So, Tripoli of course, it's spread out along the Mediterranean Sea. On the east end of Tripoli, there are what used to be individual towns. This place where Palm City is, is called Janzour. Janzour was pro-Gaddafi during the war. Matter of fact, Gaddafi's daughter lived in Palm City, a luxury housing complex built by the Maltese. So, she had an apartment in there and she had a bunch of really expensive cars, which we'd like to have seen, but they got stolen. So never got to see them. It happens! The embassy was in the Tripoli Towers, which is in downtown Tripoli, 12 kilometres in a direct line from the Towers to Palm City.²¹

Palm City had an international atmosphere. It was home to many of the official residences of foreign embassies. There were also offices for some international businesses as well as residential housing for their personnel.

The primary focus for the military personnel deployed to Op LOBE was to provide support to the Canadian diplomatic team in residence in Palm City and working in downtown Tripoli. But the threat to international personnel, including members of Op LOBE, was changing. Previously, the threat might have manifested while staff were en route between Palm City residences and the embassy compound in Tripoli. However, the atmosphere on the ground shifted

²¹ 31D 21 Henderson.

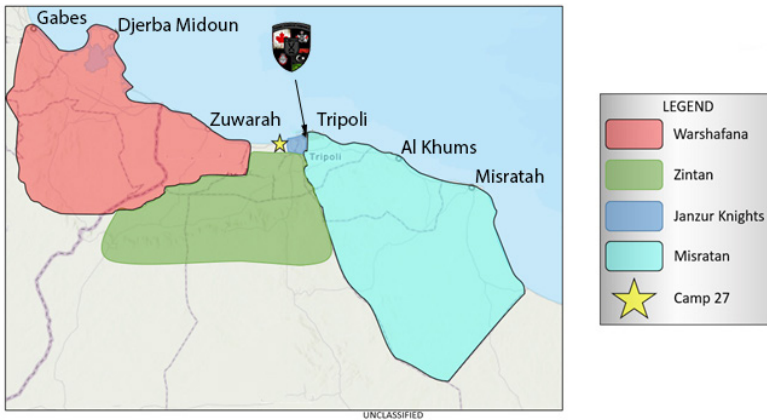


Figure 2: Militia Area of Operations, Tripoli and Environs, 2014. [Doug Henderson]

as disagreements among armed factions within and around Tripoli deepened and power-sharing agreements failed. Within the first few weeks of Roto 6's arrival, the situation had deteriorated to the point where the British embassy security team advised the Canadians that they should be using armoured vehicles rather than soft-skinned vehicles. These were obtained and used for the duration of the mission.

Palm City, and Tripoli as a whole, was divided between a number of rival factions. Closest to the compound were the Janzur Knights, who were loyalists during the civil war, and who maintained a local security force in the neighbourhood. The Misratans, based to the west of Tripoli, ran the Ministry of the Interior as well as a military airbase out of Mitiga. The Misratans cast an envious eye over the international airport in southern Tripoli, which was maintained and controlled by the Zintan militia, an anti-Islamist faction that operated mainly in western Libya.²² The Zintan brigades were able to use the airport to collect customs and taxes. This became a flashpoint later in the Roto 6 deployment. Outside Palm City, the Zintan militia maintained a brigade headquarters in an area called the Regatta, an illegal arms souk where members of Op LOBE could hear customers test-firing weapons into the Mediterranean Sea. Complicating the already complex local security situation was the threat posed by

²² "Guide to key Libyan militias," *BBC News*, 11 January 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-10744533>.

organized crime and infiltration by Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State, the terrorist group that conquered substantial territory in Iraq and Syria beginning in 2014. These new groups changed the atmosphere in the city.

When we came in, the threat of kidnapping was becoming obvious in that you had a lot of criminal elements trying to make money. ... Every day there were one or two kidnappings and they get their money and they let the people go. ... That started to change and then changed fairly rapidly when we arrived. Fighting had started between the central government and the Islamic fundamentalist groups out in the west where the oil fields were. Benghazi was a complete gong show for the whole time we were there. There's a university town, very western oriented, and within three weeks [after] we got there, the Islamic factions had built a wall between the male and female section of the university. There were regular beheadings of students and teachers. A prominent lawyer was murdered. She had actually represented a lot of the Islamic leadership in their criminal trials. And yet they still killed her. It was getting rougher and rougher and AQ showed up, Al-Qaeda. And shortly after that, ISIS [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria] started to show up. And then we started to see kidnappings, money paid, and the hostage killed and dropped off on the side of the road. We would see calls for westerners to be taken hostage, to be used in order to get terrorists out of jails. Up until ISIS arrived in Libya, there were no vehicle-borne IEDs [improvised explosive devices]. Now we were seeing vehicle-borne IEDs. So that changed things. [The militias'] heavy weapons would always be firing into the air. And you'd see these tracers going through the sky. It was all very exciting, lots of noise, very few casualties between the fighters, but where the rounds fell, people were being injured and killed. But now what we were seeing was that the weapons were actually coming down and they were firing at each other and killing each other. So this was a complete change in the atmosphere of the place.²³

In view of the changing threat environment, Henderson reviewed the embassy's existing defensive and evacuation plans. He and his staff developed a defensive plan for Palm City. "I also had to figure out how we were going to get out of Palm City. Because the worst thing would be to get caught in Palm City ... because there was

²³ 31D 21 Henderson.

nowhere to go.” During the war, the Zintan militia had attacked the compound, taking the front gate and flanking the facility, leaving the Mediterranean Sea as the only exit. It quickly became apparent to Henderson that the facility’s defence would need to be coordinated by more than just the Canadians. He contacted a multi-national organization called the Gentlemen’s Club, composed of members of the various diplomatic corps in Tripoli in order to exchange information informally. Together, they held meetings to coordinate and plan for the security and defence of Palm City, setting up password and identification systems, doing regular radio checks, cross-training on each other’s weapons systems and planning evacuation procedures should the need arise. Henderson considers this coordination effort a success due to the confidence placed in the plan by the international community.

To plan for the worst outcomes and for everyday operations in Libya, Henderson depended heavily on intelligence gathering. One source was the embassy’s security officer, who would be notified of developments through diplomatic sources and The Gentleman’s Club. Henderson’s intelligence officer was reliably able to obtain information from the British training cadre based nearby, as well as from his own personal contacts with knowledge of events in and around Tripoli. And while human intelligence remained an important part of the operational picture, social media took on a key role in tracking the resources and intentions of the various militias threatening security in Tripoli. The local militias had Facebook pages on which they would post photos of their vehicles and equipment:

The Janzour Knights, the Zintan, the Misratans, and the Washafana all had their Facebook pages, and they would put pictures on it. So, we were able to get pictures of their equipment. They would say, Oh, we’re going to move here. And sure enough, there’d be a picture of a line of vehicles driving down the highway. Or [a post about how they] were going to defend Janzour against all comers, and they show a picture of a berm in the middle of the road. The Misratans went in to get the Zintan out of the airport. And that fighting was pretty harsh. So, what you would see on the Twitter feed, for example, would be the Janzour Knights saying the Zintan are bad people, and the Zintan would come back going, Oh, Janzour, you’re, you’re just as bad. Your mother wears combat boots, and that would go on for a couple of days. And then two days prior to operations, all Twitter communications would stop and

it'd be absolutely quiet. Two days later almost to the hour operations would start. So, we were actually able to forecast when Janzour and the Zintan were going to hit it off, which gave us a chance to do some planning and be prepared for the noise that we would hear, knowing that it was not directed at us. It was a really, really valuable resource to be able to see what the militias were saying to each other and who was in and who was out.

As the situation on the ground deteriorated further into the summer of 2014, Henderson was reporting back to Ottawa and learning the markers that would lead to an embassy evacuation. The decision to evacuate lay in the hands of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD) and Op LOBE and the diplomatic mission in Tripoli were not always in agreement about the security situation. The Roto 6 team was to have returned to Canada on 15 July, but with the deteriorating situation in Tripoli, it was impossible to get their replacement team of Roto 7 into Libya. Then on 13 July, the Misratans attacked the Tripoli International Airport, rendering it inoperable. Ninety per cent of the aircraft at the airport were destroyed by rockets and artillery on that day in July.²⁴ Fighting in Tripoli between militia factions had intensified through the spring and summer of 2014, with particularly heavy fighting in and around the airport as the Misratans and Zintan factions fought for control of this important terrain. Henderson advised the embassy's acting head of mission of the increasing threat.

I went to the acting head of mission, and I said that based on the equipment that is out there that could potentially attack us, I cannot guarantee your safety. I've got armoured vehicles, pistols and rifles, and the Libyan military has ZSU-23-4s [self-propelled anti-aircraft guns]. They've got T-62 tanks. They've got technicals [commercial vehicles mounted with heavy weapons], and there's thousands of them. So, hey, I'm telling you that we're getting to a point where I'm not going to be able to carry out my mission. And I got essentially told, we cannot close down an embassy. It's a big deal, and we're not there yet. So, stay in your corner. Then the Americans left.²⁵

²⁴ Sergeant Chad Whiteside, "The Story of Task Force Tripoli," unpublished report, correspondence provided to author, 5 January 2021.

²⁵ 31D 21 Henderson.

On 24 July, Henderson was advised by Combined Joint Operations Command (CJOC), the Ottawa-based headquarters that oversaw all Canada's international missions that the Canadian embassy in Tripoli would be closed and that the Roto 6 team should evacuate embassy personnel and the LOBE team by road through Libya to safety in Tunisia on 29 July.

In several of the firefights during the attack on the airport, ordnance that missed targets near the airport landed in the vicinity of the American embassy, increasing the risk to American military and diplomatic personnel. This was in addition to the kidnapping risk posed by organized crime and terrorist cells operating in and around Tripoli. On 26 July, American forces left Tripoli by air and road to Tunisia.²⁶ Press reports in Canada at the time noted that the Canadian embassy seemed slow to evacuate even after the American decision, a sentiment Henderson and his team would have agreed with.²⁷

In the wake of the decision to evacuate the Canadians, the Roto 6 preparations to leave took place against the backdrop of continuing degradation of the security situation near Palm City. The tasks that needed to be carried out to get everyone out were daunting.

When we got the order to go, we only had six armoured vehicles. We needed to figure out what we could take and what we had to leave behind. We were told we had to bring certain things home. We were burning the classified documents. We had a team loading up the computers and the electronics and the stuff that needed to come with us. And then we had a team that was just de-linking ammunition. 40,000 rounds were de-linked and we had to make it unusable. So we put it in salt water, and then we put it in our bathrooms because we couldn't bury it. We didn't want 40,000 rounds to fall into anybody's hands, because that's enough to start a small war. All the rations we

²⁶ Associated Press, "U.S. evacuates embassy in Libya amid clashes." *CBC News*, 26 July 2014. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/u-s-evacuates-embassy-in-libya-amid-clashes-1.2718976>

²⁷ Kathryn Blaze Carlson, "Canada shifts embassy operations to a hidden location." *The Globe and Mail*, 28 July 2014. When asked about the discrepancy between American and Canadian evacuation plans, John Babcock, commenting for the Department of External Affairs, remarked "the government doesn't comment publicly on security measures abroad."

didn't want, the weight equipment, vehicle parts, and the Kraft Dinner that I got from my family that I left behind.²⁸

As the evacuation plans unfolded, additional preparations were made for extra security for the road move. A British private security firm, the Rose Group, was hired to set up potential safe houses along the route of evacuation to the Tunisian border. Another locally contracted British expat, was to move ahead of the Canadian column of vehicles along the route to check to see that it was clear and talk to people at checkpoints and clear the path. Members of the Close Protection Team in Op LOBE had previously checked the route alongside British forces earlier in July.²⁹ This preparation was important because miscommunication near Camp 27, a militia camp along the escape route, had led to Misratan forces firing on a British Special Air Service vehicle two days before the Canadian's planned evacuation. The contractor's role was to inform the various players along the route that the Canadians were moving and that they posed no threat. As well, it was arranged that additional security would be provided by the Misratans based at Camp 27. This included two escort vehicles and a tail vehicle. There would also be an additional escort by the Washafana militia as the Canadians travelled through their territory. The eighteen members of Roto 6 and four embassy staff members rolled out of Tripoli in the early hours of 29 July 2014. They left just in time.

I communicated to Ottawa and Africa Command on my sat phone what the changing picture [of the convoy] was going to look like. I then gave the sat phone to the Ops O and the int officer who were in another vehicle together so they could radio Ottawa as we passed their checkpoints that they had set up on the route. And so, at 0645, 29 July 2014, we got mounted up, got in our vehicles and we hit the road. At 0730, the Misratans opened up with artillery on Janzour. So, if we had been late, we'd still be there. Because the Janzour Knights set up [their defensive] berms, the whole area was shut down and there [would have been] no leaving if we wanted to.

²⁸ 31D 21 Henderson.

²⁹ Sergeant Chad Whiteside, "The Story of Task Force Tripoli."

The evacuation proceeded largely as planned, with the Canadian vehicles in convoy proceeding through the desert along a corridor to the Tunisian border. One incident disrupted the convoy.

The road was a straight, narrow two-lane road. We were able to get up to good speeds, 120, 140 kilometers per hour, but there was some traffic. A blue Mercedes came up beside us and passed us and suddenly realized that there was a black BMW coming in the opposite direction. The guys in the [blue Mercedes] saw the black BMW, slammed on their brakes and pulled in front of us. The vehicle we were in was so heavy, it wasn't stopping. The driver stood on the brake, but we went right into the back of this Mercedes and we crushed the trunk, [its] front tires blew out. We all pulled over to the side of the road. Three [Libyans] popped out of their car and they're all on their cell phones right now, talking to who we don't know. One of the Libyans had come over and tried to get us to come out of our vehicle. [Roto 6's Cultural Advisor, a captain] got out of his vehicle to talk to them, but he couldn't calm these guys down. The close protection guys got out and were doing an overwatch of the situation.³⁰ We used the sat phone and called Africa Command, called Canada and said, this is what's happened. We're dealing with it.

At one point in the conversation with the Libyans in the vehicle, several of the occupants threatened the column's interpreter that they would call on armed friends to extract payments from the Canadians. This prompted the Canadians to return to their vehicles. American aircraft, meanwhile, circled overhead to observe the Canadian evacuation in case trouble arose en route.³¹

[Our cultural advisor] had given up trying to talk to the Libyans. As he tried to get back into his car, the Libyan grabbed him and tried to pull him out of the car. Another Canadian actually had to forcefully pull [the cultural advisor] in the vehicle. Our [fixer] was able to negotiate.

³⁰ Sergeant Whiteside, in his report on the Close Protection Team's role in the evacuation, also summarized the incident. "The [Task Force Tripoli] Interpreter unsuccessfully attempted to discuss possible options with the driver of the Libyan vehicle. The conversation soon became an altercation when the Libyan driver pushed the interpreter leading several members of the TFT to exit their vehicles with weapons drawn." Correspondence provided to author.

³¹ Whiteside, "The Story of Task Force Tripoli."

As we're talking, an elder showed up, who was the cousin of the guy we hit, and the elder was able to negotiate with [us] for 1,500 U.S. dollars. Our guy also gave him his spare tire and his jack, and a couple of other personal items just to promise that he would come back and they would continue to talk about the accident. So we mounted up and then we travelled down the highway.

Now, we get to the border and the border has been closed and they've locked the diplomatic lane. And there was this young fellow in a Washafana flag t-shirt. He was like a man possessed. He was walking around, his arms flailing about, waving his weapon. Someone comes to us and says they want our passports. So we gave our passports to them. They took them away. They probably photocopied them. Then they came back, checked our faces with a passport, gave them back to us. Finally, I was told that our local guy went up to the [Washafana militiaman] and threatened him with reprisal. And they said, okay, now we're going to open the border. ... We then drove through two more check points up to the Tunisian border, where we were met by Captain (Navy) Stu Moors, the military attaché out of Egypt.³²

The Canadians' sigh of relief after reaching the border was well-earned. Crossing the embattled capital and contested terrain governed by rival militias to reach the border was a trip that spanned 800 kilometres and took fourteen hours. Members of the Close Protection Team hailed the evacuation as the longest land evacuation carried out by the Canadian Armed Forces in its history of supporting overseas diplomatic missions. That the evacuation went smoothly and without significant incident beyond the road accident was a signature accomplishment. No news, in other words, was good news.³³ Given the remarkably limited resources available to the Canadians in Tripoli, many things could have gone wrong. One of the armoured vehicles could have been damaged and rendered unserviceable, the local militias could have changed their minds about our [the Canadians'] safe passage, all the while the situation in the country continued to deteriorate.³⁴ For his part, Henderson

³² 31D 21 Henderson.

³³ Whiteside, "The Story of Task Force Tripoli."

³⁴ Whiteside, "The Story of Task Force Tripoli."

laments that the uniqueness of the evacuation operation has never been recognized.³⁵

Like many purpose-built task forces, the Op LOBE team dispersed soon after their responsibility had been officially discharged following the evacuation.

The diplomatic people stayed in Tunisia and we said goodbye to them the next morning. We got on a flight from Tunisia to Paris, where we stayed overnight. Nine o'clock the next morning, we got the flight to Dusseldorf and then the Canadian hub in Cologne. [We met] a social worker to do the reintegration briefings. And then we got our tickets and we went to the airport and we went our separate ways.³⁶

Henderson retired from the Canadian Armed Forces in 2017, after a thirty-eight year career. He counts Libya as perhaps the most stressful and at the same time most important deployment of his career, an affirmation of the value of the training he and other soldiers received to prepare to carry out an unusual mission in extraordinary circumstances. Among the materials Henderson shared before and after his interview with the Canadian War Museum was a video montage assembled by one of the members of the diplomatic team. The video, set to a pop beat, shows the beauty and fragility of Tripoli leading up to the evacuation. The azure of the Mediterranean and bright colours of sea-side amusement park rides and shop facade along the road give way to the grey rubble of a destroyed building and teenagers dancing against a backdrop of graffitied cement walls. And then, gunshots, black smoke clouding the horizon, fires burning at a vehicle checkpoint. The video ends with a cheeky hashtag—*#BestEvac2014*.³⁷

While sharing the video, Henderson remarked on the stark atmospheric shift captured by it, and on the evacuation in general:

The speed with which the atmosphere changed from the happy people living in the ruins of their old lives, the revolution being the promise of so much, just like the Arab spring. Within weeks ...the brotherhood

³⁵ Doug Henderson, correspondence with author, March 2021.

³⁶ 31D 21 Henderson.

³⁷ "Straight out of Tripoli," 10 March 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZV1SxVcZVEg>

of the revolution was uncertain, and the smiling children were not on the streets any more. And in four months the nights were lit up with tracer fire and we evacuated our citizens. They are still fighting over the remains of that piece of desert. It is a sad statement of humanity and Libya in particular. I just shake my head.³⁸

The narrative above captures a perspective of an event that passed largely without notice in Canada, through the eyes of the officer in charge of the deployment, based on his recollection of events and with the benefit of seven years' hindsight. Readers will acknowledge the limitations of the interview, that it cannot shed complete light on the events leading to the evacuation of the Canadian embassy, nor even the full spectrum of preparations and work done during the evacuation itself. We must also acknowledge the value of the interview as both a glimpse into a unique private experience at a historic moment that happily ended without Canadian casualties, but also as kindling to spark future research and possibly encourage others with similar experiences to come forward with their accounts. As oral historians can testify, interviewees can sometimes be reticent to speak about their experiences, either because "everyone" experienced the same thing they did or out of concern for being seen as needy for attention.³⁹ As the editors of a collection of oral testimonies of Afghanistan veterans observed, "Military service comes with a heavy price ... Yet, on the other hand, it also comes with many rewards ... immensely profound friendships forged through shared, often dangerous experiences; the opportunity to make a difference on both the national and international stage; a unique and challenging career."⁴⁰ The military emphasis on service over self can lead some would-be interviewees to remark that their own efforts were nothing special or rightly observing that their work was the product of a team effort. Yet testimonies such as Henderson's, when offered, provide historians an important view

³⁸ Doug Henderson, e-mail correspondence with author, 27 September 2021.

³⁹ As a matter of oral history practice, getting interviewees to discuss matters that are obvious to them but potentially noteworthy to future researchers/listeners is a challenge in and of itself. See High, *Oral History at the Crossroads*, 299-300.

⁴⁰ Craig Mantle et al., eds. *In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Bravery and Valour in Afghanistan, 2001-2007*, (Winnipeg: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2013), 3.

into the joys, humour, frustration and labour of military service at a time of crisis.



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