

BLURRED VISION:  
LIFE INSIDE THE SAND CASTLE

MY THIRTEEN YEARS IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

L. Martin Moss

To my wife Sandy

For forty-seven years of putting up with me...

# Introduction

“What did you do in the war, Daddy?” That was more or less the pretext of writing this memoir. At least it started out that way.

Wrong “war” you say? You’re right. Most people who remember that saying are thinking about World War II, and even though I was crawling around in diapers at that time, I guess it applies to my story because the First Gulf War was my war. Okay, I wasn’t in the active military, but I was there in Saudi Arabia working for a civilian military contractor and living on the U.S. Air Force’s housing compound, and I did “participate.”

I had thought many times of writing down my adventures in Saudi Arabia for my own amusement later on in my life, but once I started putting things down on paper, more and more interesting tidbits about living and working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia came into my thoughts. I remembered things that I hadn’t thought of in years.

As of the new year 2009, it’s been thirteen years since I left Saudi Arabia in the fall of 1996, and when I started having what I call limited memory or short term memory loss, I knew that I had better get it down on paper and as soon as possible.

Also, the fact that my mother who passed away in 2001 had dementia when she died of metastasized cancer got me interested in Alzheimer’s research. For the past thirteen years I have volunteered with the “Memory on Aging” program at Washington University here in St. Louis, Missouri. I participate in verbal, photographic, computer and memory exercises as well as other tests on a yearly basis. In addition, I take part in MRI, PET Scans, spinal taps, and other assorted medical tests.

One of the recommendations to improve memory retention is to keep your mind occupied at all waking moments. Relaxation is not a recommended activity for your brain. Experts suggest reading books and magazines, doing crossword puzzles, or Sudoku, or just thinking ... anything to keep your mind engaged, keep those electrical charges in your brain flashing.

So I started reading books, and as I've always been a war buff I started with war memoirs like the six-volume history of *The Second World War* by Winston Churchill, along with murder mysteries and espionage novels by Vince Flynn, Tom Clancy, Daniel Silva, Robert Ludlum and Frederick Forsyth--anything that kept my interest and that I didn't want to put down.

When I can't sleep at night, I get up and read for a couple of hours, or watch a movie. I take a book or my Nook® reader with me to the movie theater and read while I wait for the movie to start. Bowling—in between each frame. Restaurants—same thing, while waiting for my meal, and sometimes during the meal. My wife, Sandy, understands. Sometimes she'll even bring along a book of her own—usually a Danielle Steel novel. I only do this when we're by ourselves, with our children, or when I'm alone.

I have never enjoyed reading so much, and it assisted me in writing my own memoir.

This memoir contains my recollections of what I was told, what I personally experienced, what I learned and what I witnessed. Some of these recollections may not be 100 percent accurate, but what I've written is what I remember. My opinions of certain people are just that—my opinion. I get along well with 99.9 percent of the people in this world, but over in Saudi Arabia that figure dropped to about 98 percent. You'll see what I mean as you read the book.

There are a lot of people to thank, especially my editor Mary Menke of WordAbilities LLC. Mary and I have read, amended, asked questions, gotten answers, re-read and gone over the same process for over a year. Mary's put everything in its proper place, turning my thoughts and words into a coherent story. Yale Wolff and Steve Berman encouraged me and helped to steer me in the right direction by giving me verbal support and encouragement. Al Priidik, Cookie and Chuck Lucas, Barb and Dan Abeling, Nancy and John Petrusek, Sandy and Harvey Kiser, all former Saudi expatriates who were in the Kingdom while I was there, corrected my scattered thoughts and helped me remember certain aspects of our time in Saudi Arabia.

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# Chapter ONE

## *What the hell ...?*

**November 1983.**

A bomb scare. Culture shock. Sleep deprivation.

Thus began my 13-year-odyssey while working and living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The path to Saudi Arabia had been a long and convoluted one.

After graduating from University City Senior High School in St. Louis County, Missouri in the winter of 1958—I had enough credits and wanted out of high school—and then spending one semester at Harris Teachers College, I talked my mother and stepfather into signing the paperwork for me to join the United States Naval Reserves. While my parents were talking with one recruiter about wanting me to remain in the reserves for a while, I was talking with another recruiter and telling him that I wanted immediate active duty. After just a few weeks, I received my orders and was sent to boot camp at the Naval Station, San Diego, California, which I much preferred to freezing my butt off at the Great Lakes Naval Station in Chicago, Illinois instead. When I graduated 13 weeks later, I was temporarily assigned to the Naval Air Station at Miramar, California, where the movie *Top Gun* would be filmed years later, as my permanent assigned squadron was on a Far East deployment and would be returning to the United States in a few weeks.

The trip to Saudi Arabia was my second overseas adventure, the first having been my two Far East deployments with Attack Squadron 146 (VA-146), the “Blue Diamonds,” and the Seventh Fleet of the U.S. Navy in Hawaii, Japan, the Philippines and Hong Kong from 1959 to 1962. I served as a Personnelman, an enlisted administrative rating, during my three years of active duty.

During my active service, I had begun corresponding with my future wife, Sandy. Her mother and my mother would play weekly Canasta card games at my parent's home, and once when Sandy's mother saw my boot camp graduation photo in my dress blues (I was handsome, had lots of dark hair, and wasn't wearing my glasses) she asked if her daughter could write to me. Sandy swears it was the other way around...that my mother asked her to write to me. An exchange of letters, not to mention romance, ensued and when it came time for me to reenlist in March 1962, both families made it quite clear that I shouldn't. Taking their advice is one of many early mistakes I made, as I truly enjoyed the service, the people I served with, and living the single life in southern California.

Upon my return to civilian life, my stepfather recommended that I take court reporting or machine stenograph classes. Both my older stepsister and my younger half-sister took shorthand, my half-sister ending up working as a court reporter for the Maricopa County Superior Court in Phoenix, Arizona. I think my stepfather saw court reporting as a natural progression from my experience as an administrator while in the service.

I worked at several jobs after I left active naval service in 1962, but remained in the Naval Reserves for an additional seven years. While taking day classes for a court stenographer position, building my machine shorthand speed to 120 words per minute, I was hired as an administrative assistant with the Illinois Terminal Railroad. After a year, a similar position opened up with the Union Pacific Railroad, and another year later with the Southern Pacific Railroad, all with offices in downtown St. Louis. I wasn't thrilled with any of these jobs and began looking for something—anything—else. I tried restaurant management, working as a night manager for several fast food restaurants, then as a manager at Burger Chef—now Hardee's—and eventually landed a job as night manager at a Howard Johnson's Restaurant. A hernia operation closed out my career at Ho-Jo's, and once again I was looking for something else.

My father-in-law and brother-in-law offered me a job with their wrecking and salvage business and for the next thirteen years, I battled the elements, sweating in summers and freezing in winters, working outside on large and small dismantling jobs. Money was tight and my father-in-law made sure my salary and benefits remained low to keep the money flowing back into the company. I took on a second job as night manager at another fast-food restaurant and worked both jobs for more than a year.

When a higher-paying salvage job opened up at a competitor's firm, I took it. That job lasted fewer than six months, and I went back to my father-in-law, dejected and depressed. Seeing the writing on the wall, I returned to night school to resume building up my machine shorthand speed. After a long period during which I increased the speed at which I took dictation to 160 to 180 words per minute and typed out depositions and other legal documentation at over 100 wpm, I realized that I would never be a court reporter. I just couldn't get past the 180 wpm range. I knew I had to find another position where I could use the skills I had acquired.

In 1982, I was forty-one years old, with a wife, three growing children and a mortgage and two car payments. I was in debt up to my proverbial eye balls and I still didn't know what I wanted to be if and when I grew up.

One evening, after again failing the 200 wpm test, I saw an advertisement on the school bulletin board for an administrative position at McDonnell Aircraft Company of McDonnell Douglas Corporation, headquartered in St. Louis. I applied for the position, did the prerequisite interviews and took the shorthand and typing tests. At my follow-up interview, I was informed that I had failed the shorthand test, which didn't surprise me in the least. I explained to the counselor that the test, which was on a vinyl record, was at 40 to 60 wpm and I couldn't take dictation that slow on my stenograph machine. I asked if I could retake the test at triple the speed. She had never had a request to take the test at more than 60 wpm. She agreed and re-administered the test by turning the speed on the record player—I am really dating myself here—from 33-1/3 rpm to 78 rpm. I passed with flying colors, one error for five minutes' worth of dictation and 95 percent accuracy in typing the dictation on the computer. Needless to say, they hired me on the spot.

My life was about to change for the better.

Initially I was assigned to the Human Resources secretarial pool at McDonnell's headquarters building, and then as a temp for senior management officers of McDonnell Aircraft Company. Soon I was working for many of the other divisions of McDonnell Douglas Corporation as well. I would spend days, weeks, even months working for the Directors, Vice-Presidents and even the Presidents

at dozens of the corporate offices, filling in for their secretaries and administrative assistants when they were ill, on vacation or taking maternity leave.

My work day began at 7:00 a.m. when I would receive a telephone call instructing me to report to work for a President, Vice President, or Director at one of several dozen offices and warehouses scattered over the St. Louis County area. After doing that for a more than a year, I put in for a permanent position and was hired as an administrative assistant to the Manager of International Marketing at McDonnell Aircraft Company. At the time, International Marketing was part of McDonnell Douglas Automation division, selling computer programs to overseas markets.

Nine months later, I was approached by the former Manager of Computer Services for McDonnell Douglas Services (MDS) in Saudi Arabia. He had just returned to the States after his two-year contract in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia had ended and was now working for the Vice President of International Marketing. He told me that because Saudi law prohibited women from working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia except as nurses or teachers, all contracted administrative services were performed by men at McDonnell Douglas Services' four main operating bases and its headquarters in Riyadh. He asked me if I would be interested. I didn't actually commit one way or the other.

I had no idea he had submitted my name to the Peace Sun Program until they called me later that week requesting an interview. My boss at International Marketing said it was probably a step up and recommended that I see what they offered. Afterward, I heard nothing until about six months later when I was called over to interview for the administrative assistant position reporting to the Vice President of MDS In-Country, Paul Homsher.

I accepted Mr. Homsher's job proposal and was transferred to McDonnell Douglas Services office in August of 1983. After more interviews and three days of orientations, plus providing my birth certificate, training certificates, applying for a passport and getting the required entry visa, I was on my way to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, the Vice President's administrative assistant position had been filled prior to the time I arrived in Kingdom and I was now assigned as administrative assistant to retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Tom Denhardt, Manager of Government Relations at McDonnell Douglas Services' headquarters in Riyadh.

The first leg of the trip went without a hitch. I had flown out of St. Louis on November 11, 1983 on board a British Caledonian Lockheed L-1011 tri-jet into London's Gatwick airport. I had the next day and evening free before my 7:30 p.m. flight to Riyadh. The weather in London was beautiful, sunny and clear with temperatures in the 60s. For the entire day, I walked the marvelous city, touring the museums, enjoying the sights and sounds, conversing with the locals and enjoying the food at some outstanding restaurants. With a few hours to go before my flight, I took in a movie—*Let's Make Love*, starring Marilyn Monroe—in Piccadilly Square. I then returned to my hotel, picked up my luggage and headed for the London Underground Tube to take me to Heathrow Airport.

*What the hell have I gotten myself into?* soon became the question haunting me every step of the way.

The Peace Sun Program through the Royal Saudi Air Force was for all intents and purposes McDonnell Douglas Services' sponsor in Saudi Arabia. As such, inbound and outbound flights were required to be on their national carrier, Saudia Airlines. I looked around the boarding area of the Saudia Airlines terminal, noting the different nationalities and cultures of my fellow travelers, and listened to the various languages spoken. There were several other Westerners, Americans I assumed, but I didn't recognize any as McDonnell Douglas Services employees.

Most flights into Saudi Arabia leave England and the other major European cities in the late evening so as to arrive in the Kingdom in the early morning hours before the heat becomes unbearable. In 1983, the airport terminals in Saudi Arabia didn't have covered jet ways; passengers boarded and deplaned via a moveable staircase brought out onto the tarmac. Since the daylight temperatures in Riyadh often exceeded 120° Fahrenheit during daylight, arriving in the late evening hours when it was pitch dark was fine with me.

At a few minutes past 7:00 p.m., I stood in line with the other 200 or so passengers to begin boarding. My assigned seat was in the middle section at the back of the plane, between two Middle Eastern men, both dressed in Western-style clothing. We didn't acknowledge one another. As the plane pulled away from the gate, the "Prayer to Allah" beseeching a safe journey was intoned over the speakers. I fastened my seatbelt and listened to the supplication directed to Allah

and Muhammad, the Prophet, followed by safety demonstrations in Arabic and English. I remember thinking, *what an appropriate way to begin the flight, with a prayer for a safe journey.*

The plane taxied slowly to the runway for takeoff. At the main runway, the pilot revved up the engines and just as quickly cut them off. For a few seconds, there was total silence. Then chaos ensued as the passengers noticed flashing red, white and blue lights of the fire engines, police cars and other military and emergency vehicles which were suddenly surrounding our plane.

As an announcement was being made in Arabic, most of the Arab passengers unbuckled their seat belts and rose up en masse. Frantically yanking carry-on and personal items from the overhead compartments, heedless of other passengers who happened to be in the way, they ran towards the front of the plane, shouting at the flight attendants and crew. Saudia flight crews at the time usually included a British captain and a British or Saudi co-pilot and navigator as well as British and Arab stewards and stewardesses, all of whom were trying to get the Arab passengers to return to their seats.

As for myself and the other Western passengers on the plane, we had no idea what was happening. Eventually, above the commotion at the front of the plane, a second announcement in English told us there was a “mechanical problem” with the aircraft. All passengers were to deplane immediately, leaving all personal items behind—a message obviously lost in the Arabic translation. We would be returning to the main terminal.

The front hatch opened and several police and military officials, all armed with machine guns, boarded. Shouting matches erupted among the Arabs, the military, the police and the flight crew regarding carry-on bags. Several of the Saudis managed to keep their bags with them as they deplaned. I took only my wallet and passport and headed for the buses taking us to the terminal. I was placed on the second of five buses. The convoy, led by our police and military escort, headed back, but to a different terminal from the one where we had boarded. We were deposited at a loading dock, where the police separated the men from the women and children amid loud complaints of mistreatment from several Arab passengers.

The men were escorted into a large room where we waited and wondered what was going on. After some time, we were told, first in English by a British Bobbie, then in Arabic through a translator, that someone had reported that there was a bomb on our plane. The authorities were now searching the plane. If nothing was found, we would be allowed to continue our flight.

Several times during our wait, I observed small groups of Arabs and other non-Westerners being led to another room. I later learned that several were patted down and a few strip-searched. I was grateful I hadn't been among the chosen.

*What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

A little less than two hours later, we were allowed to re-board the aircraft. Everyone had to claim their luggage, which had been removed from the plane and lined up in neat rows on the tarmac. I picked out my two pieces, deposited them on the luggage carts and re-boarded. As I once again buckled up in preparation for departure, I noticed that one of my two Middle-Eastern seat mates was gone. I never did find out what happened to him.

During the flight from London to Riyadh, the Arab passenger next to me tried several times to start a conversation, but his English was terrible and I couldn't understand more than a few words. A little while before we landed, he spilled his coffee, drenching his western-style suit and splattering my pants. He offered no apology, simply got up and retrieved his carry-on from the overhead compartment and went to clean up. He returned wearing the traditional Saudi thobe (white silk gown/covering) and ghutra (head scarf). All attempts at conversation abruptly ended.

Our flight departed two-and-a-half hours later than scheduled, and we arrived in Riyadh just after 2:30 a.m. I find it impossible to sleep on airplanes, so I was dead-tired. I dragged myself off the plane at Riyadh Air Base, the small airport used for both commercial and military air traffic entering Riyadh. I had been advised that someone would meet me to take me to our housing compound. My head was spinning from the anxiety of the preceding hours and the lack of sleep:

*Did my greeter wait the extra two hours, or had he gone home? Did he speak English? Should I call the compound?*

*What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

It took more than two hours to get through passport control, immigration and customs. You can imagine how thrilled the Saudi immigration and customs personnel were to see us in the wee hours of the morning. If looks could kill, we would all have been fresh road kill. I collected my luggage and entered the customs area. Although I knew what to expect from my orientation, I was still shocked at the outdated airport. It took me back to my first airplane trip in the 1950s on a Trans World Airlines Super G Constellation four-prop aircraft. It was like a small hanger in a one horse town. None of the modern amenities we westerners are all used to.

There were three lines: one for families, one for male Saudis and one for everybody else. Guess which line was the longest and the one I was stuck in? The “everybody else” line moved at a snail’s pace. I was relieved when the family line was empty, and some of us were allowed to move over. When I finally reached the 15-foot stainless steel counter, I hoisted up my two suitcases and my carry-on, unlocked the suitcases and opened them for inspection. The Saudi processor, a private in the Saudi National Guard, asked to see my passport. After returning it to me, he rifled through my clothes and personal items, removing everything from my suitcases and then haphazardly throwing it all back in.

Once I was cleared, the processor ordered me in Arabic and then with hand signals to “Hurry up and move along.” I closed the suitcases and carry-on and looked around for my “meet and greet” helper. My eyes landed on the green and white MDS sign being held by a dark-skinned man, who I later learned was of Sri Lankan nationality. I signaled to him and he waved back. I grabbed a shopping cart, just like the ones at Piggly Wiggly, Kroger or the A&P. As might be expected, one wheel was screwed up.

I put the two big pieces of luggage in the top and the carry-on and my coat on the bottom shelf. At the exit, another Saudi inspector stopped me and in broken English informed me that one of my bags had not been checked. I had no

idea what he meant—hadn't I just gone through the whole process with Inspector No. One?

Inspector No. Two showed me that Inspector No. One had neglected to place a sticker on one of my bags. Inspector No. Two's job was to check off the sticker. No sticker, no check, no release. I would have to go through the line again—starting at the back. I pulled the neglected bag from the shopping cart and motioned for my greeter to take the rest of my luggage and wait for me.

Twenty minutes later, I was back in front of the idiot who had first checked my luggage. He again asked for my passport and searched my bag as though he hadn't seen it before. I was truly shocked that my pleasing personality and handsome face hadn't made a lasting impression on him! As I look back now, perhaps in the wee early morning hours I wasn't in the best of humor and my true good-natured personality didn't show through. Finally, with the required sticker in place, and then checked off by Inspector No. Two I was able to leave the airport.

My greeter was waiting for me at the exit with the rest of my luggage. We wheeled the rolling-challenged shopping cart to the parking lot, where I took in my first sights, sounds—and smells—of Riyadh. It smelled like an outhouse. Next to Riyadh Air Base a new, elevated concrete highway was being built, and sewer lines were being installed beneath it. In the interim, sewage, human waste, and garbage floated down the trench in the middle of the road.

Climbing into a 1970's-era Chevrolet station wagon and heading for the compound, I again muttered to myself the now-familiar phrase, *What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

When we arrived at what turned out to be my temporary housing for the next six weeks, a two story concrete, non-descript villa, my greeter rang the outside gate doorbell, awakening our Sri Lankan houseboy and probably disturbing the sleep of all the other inhabitants. Our houseboy scrambled out of his sleeping quarters under the inside stairway to open the outside gate for me. Although he probably weighed no more than 80 pounds, he managed to lift one of my suitcases and carry it inside. I followed as he led me down the entry hall into my room.

Room No. 8, a single, measured about twelve feet by ten feet and contained twin beds, a wardrobe closet, and a small table with an alarm clock and a telephone. The shared bathroom was at the end of the hall, right next door. I looked at the clock. I couldn't believe it. It was shortly after 5:00 a.m. I undressed and fell into one of the beds.

At about 5:20, I was awakened by the dulcet tones of the Mullah calling the faithful to the first prayer call of the day through the four loud speakers blaring from the mosque half a block away. (There is usually a mosque within a three-block walk from anywhere in Riyadh). Even with the windows closed, it sounded like he was right next to me. As if that weren't bad enough, the recorded announcement was repeated at the other mosques surrounding our building—it was like hi-fi and stereo. Fortunately, the first call to prayer lasted only a moment, and I drifted back to sleep.

At six o'clock, I was rudely awakened by the incessant ringing of the telephone on the night stand to the side of my bed. After about the fifth ring, I picked up.

"Is Jerry Cole there?" the voice at the other end asked.

"Who? What?"

"Jerry Cole, the Base Director for Taif."

"Look, fella, I just arrived in this fucking country a little over an hour ago and I'm dead tired. I don't know any Jerry Cole!" I slammed down the phone.

The phone rang again. As I picked up, the voice said, "I'm really sorry to bother you, but Jerry's in Room Six. Please wake him up. It's very important."

“Okay, okay,” I mumbled as I climbed out of bed, put on my pants and walked across the hall to Mr. Cole’s room.

I banged on the door.

“Yeah! What do you want?” he yelled.

“Telephone call for you, Mr. Cole.”

In a matter of seconds, Jerry Cole was in my room. He grabbed the phone from my hand, shooed me out of my room, closed the door and proceeded to conduct McDonnell Douglas Services business from my room. Slumping down in a corner of the hallway between my bedroom and the bathroom, I again fell asleep.

Mr. Cole woke me a few minutes later, apologized for forcing me out of my room, shook my hand and welcomed me to Saudi Arabia. I returned to my room and collapsed into my bed.

At 6:30, the houseboy shook me awake and said my ride to the office would be there to pick me up in one hour. I got up, took a shower, changed clothes, ate breakfast (thank God for Rice Krispies®) and went to work. Needless to say, who I met, what I said, and what I did that first day at work did not register for several days.

Thus completed my entry into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

*What the hell had I gotten myself into?*

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