

A CIA Rescue Operation Retold

By

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This is the story of an operation that has never been fully told. It pertains to the successful exfiltration of four Mossad operatives from Sudan to a friendly neighboring country, Kenya, in 1985. The details come to life as remembered by two former CIA officers who reveal the actions they took to save the Israeli operatives. At the time Milt Bearden was the CIA station chief in Khartoum and Jack Kassinger was in Nairobi as a regional support officer. An existing CIA directive had authorized field elements to assist friendly governments whose assets might be in trouble. This meant, in not so many words, give a hand when and if needed.

Milt recently provided his input to the operation and Jack's input as taken from the memoir he published in 2010.

In the spring of 1985, a military coup in Sudan led to the overthrow of President Jaafar Numeiri, a pro-U.S. strongman. Numeiri was in Washington at the time of the coup, but many of his top lieutenants were not so lucky. They were quickly arrested, severing intelligence ties to the West. Soon thereafter, agents working for Libyan dictator Moammar Kadafi began arriving to support the new Islamic government. In a message to headquarters Milt provided a terse report: "Everybody I know in Sudan is in jail and we've got a bunch of hoodlums with Kalashnikovs flying in from Libya."

With the demise of the Russian KGB in 1985, no other spy service was so shrouded in mystery and intrigue as Israel's Mossad. In the post-Cold War world where U.S. intelligence agencies were giant bureaucracies facing constant congressional oversight, Mossad stood out as a tough, daring spy service fighting with a clear-cut goal: ensuring the survival of the Jewish state. Despite ambiguities that might have existed in their bureaucratic relationship, the ties between many CIA and Mossad officers in the field remained close. On a personal level, Milt [like Bill Mosebey, the CIA chief in Kenya,] felt a sense of "brotherhood" with Mossad. At one point in the early establishment of their relationship, Milt had met with the senior Mossad operative secretly in a Khartoum hotel room to liaise and share intelligence. In Nairobi, Mosebey was doing the same kind of work, meeting with friendly services and sharing information. Thus, a year later when the issue became life or death for Mossad, the CIA sprang into action.

The new Sudanese authorities in Khartoum had received a tip disclosing the working location of the Mossad operatives. The Israeli spies had been betrayed by an informant and their cover blown. With the airport closed and no way out of the country the Mossad operatives were clearly in harm's way as Israel had no diplomatic ties with Sudan and no embassy to provide a haven. Desperate, the agents were on the run, winding through the crowded streets of Khartoum, one step ahead of Sudan's secret police and their Libyan allies. Finally, they were able to get a message to Bearden; they were coming to him for help.

For the next 30 days, it was a cat and mouse game with the CIA moving the operatives from one house or safe house to another to prevent their capture and likely execution. It began when two Mossad agents knocked on the front door of Milt's home. They were soon joined by a third Mossad agent. A few days later, a fourth agent arrived.

As station chief, Milt had a large home in a walled compound on the city's edge. He and wife Marie had plenty of room for guests; it was too risky to try and keep the Mossad operatives there—they would have to be kept someplace else and were constantly moved around. Still, the Mossad operatives couldn't use their gear to contact Israel for fear the transmitting signal would give their location away. For them, it was a tense situation but they felt safe in the hands of the Americans. That all would change a few days later.

Sudanese authorities had become suspicious of the Americans and began to closely surveil and tail Milt and other station personnel. Something had to be done. Milt knew that he couldn't keep the Israelis hidden forever. They needed to be out, out of the country and someone else's problem. He sent a message to headquarters: "We need to devise a means to get these people out of here. Time is of the essence." That message was subsequently forwarded, with details, to Nairobi.

It was the middle of the night when I got a call from Bill Mosebey. "Can you come over, Jack?"

“When, Bill?”

“Right now.”

“Shit,” I whispered. “OK be there as soon as I can.” It was a routine that I had gone through with him on more than one operational occasion.

Bill had timed my arrival at his house accurately. He had the front gate open as I pulled up to his driveway entrance. He motioned for me to park next to a Land Rover that was sitting off to the side of his lawn. I got out of my vehicle and walked over in his direction.

“Look,” he said, “I need your input as to whether we can help on an operation that is very important to the chap sitting in my living room.”

The smell of scotch was strong on Bill’s breath, which was an indication the meeting had been going on for some time.

“OK,” I said. “What next?”

“He’s from a friendly, but unnamed, intelligence service. You don’t need to know which service or the country. When we go in, I’ll start the conversation; no last names and don’t embarrass me by asking the guy a lot of questions he probably won’t want to answer.”

Jesus, I thought, I’m going to be declared to another intelligence service.

We went in, and Bill casually introduced us on a first name basis. No telling what they had discussed before my arrival. We shook hands; Bill began by asking me what I wanted to drink. After mixing me a gin and tonic and pouring himself and the other gentleman another scotch, Mosebey got down to business. As I listened and watched the two of them, I could not help but think how much the other gentleman looked like an old undertaker I had seen in some western movie. He was tall and had black hair and receding eye sockets, with dark shadows underneath his eyes. Later on, I mentioned this to Bill, and the moniker stuck with the guy for the next few weeks.

“Let me lay out the scenario,” Bill said. “Four of his colleagues are holed up in our embassy in Khartoum. Their op was blown and they barely escaped capture by the Sudanese intelligence service. If captured, it’s more than likely that they’ll be executed given the nature of their mission. They have been temporarily provided safe refuge, but we need to assess our ability to facilitate an exfiltration op to get them safely out of the country.”

“The current thoughts are to try and get them onto a cargo plane of some sort and bring them here,” interjected the undertaker.

Bill, twisting the end of his mustache, looked at me, and said, “With your knowledge of regional airport operations and your cover, do you think it possible to bring them out through customs, where they are at now, and in through customs and immigration here, without raising any suspicion, and, more importantly, not getting them caught or identified here in Kenya?”

“I’m pretty sure we can do that with the proper planning,” I said. “How much time do we have?”

“Not more than a week.”

His response was a bit of a shocker.

“A week is not much time,” I said, half expecting a terse response from someone who knew that timing is everything when planning and executing an operation, but he let it pass and just shot a hole through me with his stare.

We tossed around several potential scenarios and jettisoned most due to, you got it, time constraints.

“If we can get them on a plane safely, why are we concerned about identification issues or getting them through the airport here?” I asked.

The undertaker did very little talking and left most of the details to Mosebey.

“Politically speaking,” Bill said, “it is better to conceal the op from the Kenyans rather than risk informing them and having it blown due to some unfortunate leak. A blown op with their foreknowledge will make it much more difficult for the government to deal with Sudan and the media. Besides,” he said, “this is a case where it is better to act rather than to ask permission; it’s the best way to create a case of plausible deniability for the Kenyans.”

I left Bill's house thinking about the proposed extraction plan and wondering more about the operatives than the operation itself. The next day, I witnessed a flurry of cable traffic between the field and HQS. Our embassies in the region were occasionally provided support from the military utilizing a C-130 or C-141 aircraft to deliver supplies and diplomatic cargo. There would be nothing unusual about a flight being initiated to deliver cargo to Khartoum—so that became the plan—one that I may have suggested as a viable means to get them out.

Within a span of two days, a tech ops officer was en route to Khartoum. He carried with him the necessary equipment and devices that would be used in the exfil operation. Once the tech arrived at the embassy, a cover for action plan was devised to conceal the movement of the four operatives to the airport. There was no room for error in the operation. The drive to the airport was in excess of twenty kilometers, and the weather was extremely hot—more than was expected. A vehicle breakdown or delay en route would cause very serious problems for our precious cargo. The medical staff at HQS figured the men could sustain the heat for no more than an hour and a half while en route to the airport. Therefore, it was imperative that the truck not leave before the plane arrived and not be delayed en route. The crew of the aircraft was augmented with a medic, who would treat the men for possible dehydration once they were airborne.

CIA technicians in Khartoum devised a method to conceal the Mossad agents. At the appropriate time, a van was used to carry them to the airport. A station officer rode in the front seat; there were two more in the back with the cargo. The plan seemed to be going smoothly until another warning surfaced and gave cause for concern. The Sudanese had figured it out and surmised that somehow the Americans would try to get the Israelis out of the country on the C-141 now parked at the airport. About the same time, an officer at the airport reported that a Sudanese helicopter had begun to hover suspiciously nearby. Milt immediately securely radioed with orders for his men to speed up the process. The engines were started, the cargo quickly loaded, and the pilot taxied onto the runway despite nervous hailing calls from the tower.

In Kenya, I carried credentials that enabled me to support a broad range of USG programs in the region. One such duty was coordinating military air command (MAC) special air missions that hauled official cargo destined for a number of U.S. embassies, as well as some of the local governments in the region. In Kenya, for example, the mission's normal C-130 aircraft landed around 2300 hours, and I would meet the aircraft upon arrival and ensure the plane arrived and departed without incident. Larger C-141 aircraft normally arrived mid-afternoon and were principally used to bring in large quantities of cargo, part of the U.S. Government military assistance program (MAP) for Kenya. The crews for these missions would normally take their rest stop in Nairobi. I was responsible for arranging hotel accommodations, maintaining security for the aircraft during their twenty-four-hour layover, and coordinating the delivery of specified cargo to the appropriate consignees.

It was Ops-day. We received a flash message that everything had gone according to plan in Khartoum and the aircraft was wheels up and heading our way. We received a subsequent message while they were en route that the cargo was in pretty good shape and being treated by the medic on board. I left my office and headed for the airport, cautiously mulling over the details of how I would get the four Israelis off the aircraft and through the immigration checkpoint. I arrived about thirty minutes before the flight—my normal practice. I walked into the immigration/passport control office at the end of the terminal building and greeted the lone control officer. He was a new officer, one I had not met before. We exchanged greetings. I showed him my credentials and walked out onto the tarmac.

A few minutes later I saw the aircraft rolling down the runway, early and ahead of schedule. The pilot taxied the aircraft in and parked at the north end of the terminal at the last ramp some 100 yards from the immigration control office. I strolled across the tarmac and boarded the aircraft. I greeted the crew and the medic made a short introduction. I briefed everyone on the normal procedures for exiting the airport through customs and immigration. I noticed concern on the face of one Israeli operative as I moved about the aircraft. As I got closer, I noticed he was loosening a money belt that had been strapped beneath his shirt and around his waist.

"How many of those are you guys wearing?" I asked.

"Four in all," one man said.

"How much money?" I asked.

"Lots," said the one who appeared to be the senior guy.

"Well, I don't think I want to take you through immigration and passport control with you guys wearing those. Give me the belts; I'll put them in my briefcase. (I normally carried a deep-cavity Samsonite briefcase. This time it contained four

light-weight flight suits.) Just so you know, I'll lock the briefcase in the trunk of my car. I'll give you the briefcase once we've cleared customs and are out of the airport. While I'm gone, put on these flight suits and everyone get ready to leave."

The undertaker had placed one of his agents in the parking lot, where he could monitor the door leading from the immigration control office to the airport parking lot where a bus was parked. We made eye contact as I approached my vehicle. I unlocked the tailgate, threw in the briefcase, and grabbed a sack that contained a carton of Marlboro cigarettes. I headed back to the tarmac via the immigration/passport control office. As I entered, I noticed a more familiar face sitting behind the duty desk, and I smiled. He smiled back. He had a huge grin, an ebony-black face and big, white teeth. I recognized him from previous exchanges during many of my trips to process flights in and out of the airport.

"Jambo ndugu habari ako," I said.

"Jambo mimi rafiki," he replied. We shook hands briefly, and I left the carton of cigarettes resting on the corner of his desk. I headed out the door toward the aircraft. Lady luck is with us today, I thought to myself, as I walked on across the tarmac toward the plane.

I gathered the crew's official passports and the four official alias passports that had been given to the Israelis in Khartoum. The customs and immigration agent paid little attention to the crew as I handed him nine passports. He quickly stamped them with entry visas and we walked out with the crew loading up on the awaiting bus that would take them to the Hilton hotel downtown. There was no time to get the briefcase and pass it on to the agents before they departed. When I got back to my vehicle, I opened the briefcase and conducted a quick count of the money. It was well over a million dollars, all in hundred-dollar bills. I waited a few moments, giving some serious thought about what to do with the money. My radio squawked twice, and then twice more. I knew I should be sending a response. I did so, informing the station that all had gone well.

Many things entered my mind as I mulled over what to do with the money. I finally came to my senses. I closed the briefcase and laid it beside me on the front seat. As I drove out of the parking lot, I made a quick stop and passed the briefcase to the undertaker's man who had waited for me to clear the area. It took almost an hour for me to get back to the hotel to ensure the crew had checked in without incident. It had been a long day and I headed home knowing that we had just pulled off an amazing rescue operation and no one outside these two services would ever know about it. The next day I walked into Bill's office for a quick debrief.

As I was wrapping things up, he said, "Where's the money?"

"I gave it to the undertaker's guy who was providing surveillance at the airport," I said.

"Are you sure?" he asked me.

"Sure, I'm sure."

"Well, that had better be the case, because he's already called once asking about the money."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "He's probably got it by now. I'm heading back home. I told the crew I would take them out for dinner tonight. You know Mzee (Swahili, meaning old, wise one), it could be that the chap the undertaker had watching us was having some of the same thoughts I had earlier!"

With a chuckle, I turned and left his office. "See you later."

I picked up the now five-man crew using a van, and with my wife, Cherie, took them to the Carnivore Restaurant on the outskirts of Nairobi. We were all seated at a large table. Halfway through our meal, the waiter brought four bottles of champagne, sat them on the table, and motioned to the far side of the restaurant. Four men waived and raised their glasses in our direction. We smiled, waved back, and raised our glasses. It was amazing how well and how fast the Israelis could get around in the region. They probably had new identities and passports and would soon be on their way back to Tel Aviv or off to some other op. I never saw any of them again.

Bearden and Mosebey gambled that we could get the operatives secretly moved to the airport in Khartoum and flown into Kenya safely, without detection. It worked, but it could just as well have gone bad for the Israelis. When Milt got word that he might be the target of an assassination attempt, he left Sudan for an onward assignment. He and his wife visited Israel at some point later and were given a royal welcome, complete with a tour of Jerusalem. Milt also received a special honorific: "Righteous Gentile."