

## Out of Africa

### **An emigrant from Kenya tells Helen Harvey about deeds of derring- do in foreign climes.**

Taranaki Daily News    Last updated 16:44 23/01/2010

Richard Foale, 43, flies people around in his helicopter. His passengers are tourists and the terrain they fly over is the mountains and pastures of Taranaki.

A few years ago, Mr Foale's passengers were members of the United Nations and NGOs and the land they flew over was the mountains and deserts of Somalia.

Think Blackhawk Down.

He was already in Somalia when the Americans arrived. Born in Kenya, Mr Foale had returned home after six years in the British Army Air Corps and was looking for a job. A bloke he knew said: How does Somalia sound? He didn't have much time to ponder the question because he was on a plane the next day.

In Somalia, Mr Foale worked for an American company that ran the airports at Mogadishu and Djibouti, the small country (and capital of the same name) north of Somalia. The former French colony's capital is the hottest city in the world, Mr Foale says. "When I was flying the Cessna Caravan [a plane] from Djibouti, we had to get airborne early in the morning before the temperature reached 50 degrees Centigrade. Once that happened, you weren't allowed to operate the aircraft."

The company didn't have the lease for helicopters, so he flew planes.

Mr Foale flew UN and NGO staff around Somalia, sometimes landing on roads when airstrips were held by the wrong side.

"In a lot of the places we landed, we had to pay a landing fee to a bunch of rebels sitting in a ute with an antiaircraft gun sitting on the back."

Blackhawk Down gave a very American version of the story, he says. The Hollywood version.

"The Americans . . . arrived in landing boats on the beaches at Mogadishu and were met by CNN and all the camera crews lighting up the beaches to get shots of everybody landing. It was ridiculous."

There weren't rebels or any other armed people there waiting. The Americans walked in - it wasn't like D-Day.

There were many nationalities in Somalia working for the UN: a Kiwi contingent, Pakistani, Malaysian, Irish, not just Americans. Though the movie does mention the Pakistanis, he says.

"It was just that the Americans had this inability to patrol outside their [three] bases. They went everywhere in their armoured vehicles and so had no interaction with the people whatsoever."

Initially the Somalis were very keen to have Americans around, he says. It was good for business. There was huge trade "through the fence" - black market - and everyone was very friendly. But then it all went badly wrong. The Blackhawk aircraft were shot out of the sky.

The Americans retaliated with a Hercules, which had a "bloody great gun" on the back, flying at 8000ft and shooting into the night.

"And we used to sit there in our campsite in Mogadishu and watch this thing going around and blasting . . . It was blowing great big holes into a shanty town. It was complete random firing. They didn't know who they were firing at, basically. It was just retaliation."

The minute the retaliation started, the Somalis' attitude towards the Americans changed, he says, "in fact, any white person. That was the turning point . . . The atmosphere really changed."

It was fascinating, he says, sitting at Mogadishu airport watching all the tracer rounds being shot in the city, which was only 3 or 4 kilometres away.

"And we were sitting on rocks drinking wine and beer, like in a movie. I always relate it to a movie called Air America."

The Americans turned up with masses of machinery, their own shops, everything.

"We could buy everything there. We made an awful lot of money as a group by setting up a bar at the terminal and we had Somalis running it for us. We were buying stock from the American PX at one price, vastly inflating it and selling it over here at the terminal. We were making way too much money, which meant we were able to employ a Somali chef at our campsite and we were eating lobster every evening and throwing a party every evening for whoever wanted to turn up."

It was a wild time, he says.

"I was sleeping above two AK47 rifles that we all had. And everyone knew we had them. We all equipped ourselves like that. It was madness. All the tents had sandbags around them."

He would go for a jog every evening, from one end of the airport to the other. One night he and a friend suddenly had tracer rounds landing all around them. They lay flat in the sand until it was dark and then ran back to safety.

"I'll never know if they were aiming at us or just stray rounds."

One night he was up at the Kiwi camp for a party. Several were standing out the back of the tent, as blokes do, having a pee, when a mortar landed 20ft from them. It didn't go off.

Most of the mortars didn't go off, he says.

Every time the Lear jets would arrive at the airport, the Somalis would know important people were arriving and start lobbing mortars over the perimeter. The whole airfield would immediately get closed down, the sirens would sound and the Americans, dressed in flak jackets, stayed hidden in their foxholes, Mr Foale says.

"We had all these very expensive aircraft that needed fuel, so a couple of us guys from Kenya used to wander out in T-shirts, shorts and jandals and refuel the aircraft while the soldiers were hiding underground. They must have thought we were complete idiots."

The chance of being hit by a mortar was remote. They weren't that accurate and most of them didn't go off. Every day the Americans would scan the airport and find mortars that had come in overnight and the bomb squad would be called in to defuse them.

It was madness, he says again - but character building.

His company lost some of its contracts in Somalia, so Mr Foale went back to Kenya and worked for a trucking company and indulged his interest in motor sport. He drove in the Safari Rally, which was then part of the World Rally Championship. He then flew helicopters for a tourism company. The boss got some work in Somalia, but Mr Foale wasn't interested. He argued that it wasn't a good idea to fly helicopters in Somalia because of the possibility they could be hijacked.

"There were lots of aircraft flying into Somalia, but on to safe airstrips - you knew who you were paying. The trouble with helicopters is their ability to land anywhere. And the minute you land anywhere, somebody can turn up round the next bush and point an anti-aircraft gun in your direction and demand money."

But eventually he was convinced it would be OK and he went back to Somalia, this time flying choppers.

He flew a Dauphin, a large helicopter that had come from South Africa, where it used to fly Nelson Mandela around.

"We were flying a very wealthy Arab who was supposedly doing something with wildlife in Somaliland, which is in the north, but in fact all he was doing was financing his own private hunting safari."

For some reason, the Arab wasn't allowed to stay overnight in the bush at the camp with the rest of his countrymen, so every night he would be flown back to the city.

The pilots had a procedure whereby they would contact the camp by radio each morning before they landed. One morning there was no answer, so Mr Foale, his South African co-pilot and the Arab did a low-level pass to have a look. The two pilots didn't like what they saw. Convinced something was wrong, they turned back. Their passenger wasn't happy.

They later found out the camp had been overrun by Somalians and the Arab's cousin had been shot. That evening, the Arabs left Somalia in an airbus, never to return, leaving the contractors sitting around wondering what to do next. All their equipment was still out at the camp and the South African pilots were all for going out and getting it, Mr Foale says.

"But myself and the most senior pilot said no, it's not sensible.

"That night, we went to the airport and loaded two 40 gallon drums in the back of a big VIP helicopter and filled it up with jet fuel."

There was also a smaller helicopter that had quite a few Jerry cans in it.

At 4am, the contractors took off for Kenya. It was a long flight and they didn't have the capability of flying all the way down Somalia, so they took a shortcut across Ethiopia.

"That was a dangerous thing, because we didn't have clearances or anything, but to be honest, we weren't that worried. I don't think they were going to find us."

They had to land quite often to transfer fuel to the smaller chopper.

"I'll never forget the radio call that we made to air traffic control in Kenya."

The Kenyans were concerned about their lack of flight plan and told them to fly to the military base.

"But we gave them telephone numbers for our boss in Nairobi and he was able to clarify things . . . that's the last time I set foot in Somalia."

Not long after he got back, a company came out to Kenya to film the World Rally Championship and the boss offered him work in the UK at the race circuit in Silverstone. There had to be a medical helicopter there as part of the contract with the drivers.

Mr Foale was there when Michael Schumacher crashed and he flew him to hospital.

Schumacher's manager, Jean Todt, now president of FIA, tried to climb into the helicopter. Mr Foale had to be quite forceful, he says. There was only room for the patient, the doctor and the pilot.

Meanwhile, Mr Foale's sister Debbie had met a Kiwi and moved to New Zealand. Mr Foale and his partner and now wife, Jolanda, came out for the wedding and loved it.

A year later, they moved here.

"I was tired of the British weather and wanted to get back to the colonial way of life."

Kenya was a British colony that gained independence in 1963 and Mr Foale calls himself a colonial.

He went to a Nairobi primary school, which had 120 pupils, 118 of them colonials. The colonial children went to high school in the UK, taking over a 747 at the beginning of each term.

Mr Foale's father ran a civil engineering and building company and did extensive work through East Africa.

"My father was a pilot and because we did so much work in East Africa - the distance is very large out there - he had Cessna aircraft. So, from a very young age I was always sitting next to him, often holding the controls."

When he first left school, Mr Foale went back to Kenya and helped in the family business. At that time, the firm was building a house up round Mt Kenya for the actress Stephanie Powers, famous for her role in the television series Hart to Hart.

Mr Foale was the intermediary between the actress, who had moved in before the house was finished, and the

workforce.

"It's difficult to continue building a house when somebody won't get out of bed until about midday and then is obviously somewhat upset by the noise we were producing. Well, yes, we are still trying to finish your house."

It probably put him off the building industry.

"I decided I wanted to get into aviation and one of the ways to get into aviation and get a good training with not a lot of outlay was to join the military."

So Mr Foale went back to Britain. He joined the army, because it had more helicopters than the air force.

"I started officer training at Sandhurst, but being a colonial, they said, We're not going to send you to Sandhurst straight away because you need a bit of educating."

They sent him to a course at Beaconsfield, which was hard work but good fun.

"They used to take us to the theatre in London to try to broaden our outlook. And we did a lot of military history, as well, which was incredibly boring."

And then there were the 5.30am starts to go jogging. The course lasted six months, then it was on to Sandhurst. After finishing his training, he wasn't able to go straight on to the flying course; instead, he was attached to the Royal Anglian Regiment as a platoon commander. The regiment was based in Germany, but Mr Foale spent most of his time in Canada.

Back in England, he did his flying training starting on planes - Chipmonks - before moving on to Gazelle helicopters.

He was then sent to Germany and Canada. And he also did a stint in Northern Ireland during The Troubles.

"We were in helicopters, so felt somewhat removed. We did a lot of border security. I saw a bomb go off in downtown Belfast - we were right on top of it. We were given a warning about 10 minutes beforehand and we got airborne and the bomb went off underneath us."

Mr Foale had a good friend who was based at the border in south Armagh.

"It was very difficult for him and he was very nervous because his face would have been recognised by anybody in any bar. I could go flying, land at the airport at the end of the day . . . change into my civilian clothes and head off into Belfast . . . It was probably a whole lot easier for me to interact with the local community because I could pretend to be someone totally different. I didn't have to be anything to do with the army . . . A lot of people loved the army, but you never knew who you were talking to. I used to talk about Kenya and pretend I was a visitor. That became a bit difficult when I kept visiting the same bars too often."

Canada was a lot more peaceful. His last year in the army was spent in Medicine Hat, east of Calgary.

"We had five helicopters based there in the mountains. That was interesting flying. In winter, temperatures would get down to minus 20 - not that we did a helluva lot in the winter, but we did keep flying a little bit. We mainly went skiing."

After six years with the British Army Air Corps, Mr Foale moved on. His first stop was to get his commercial licences, then he went home to Kenya just before his sojourn in Somalia.

These days his life is much quieter. He is a family man with wife Jolanda and baby daughter Safi. They own Heliview Taranaki and take people on scenic flights. Before that, he worked for the rescue helicopter.

"I love Taranaki. It's fantastic. People don't realise how lucky they are to go surfing then skiing in the afternoon. And what better way of seeing it than the way I do? Eight o'clock last night, the mountain came out. There was the sunset. When seeing it from the air, you really appreciate it."