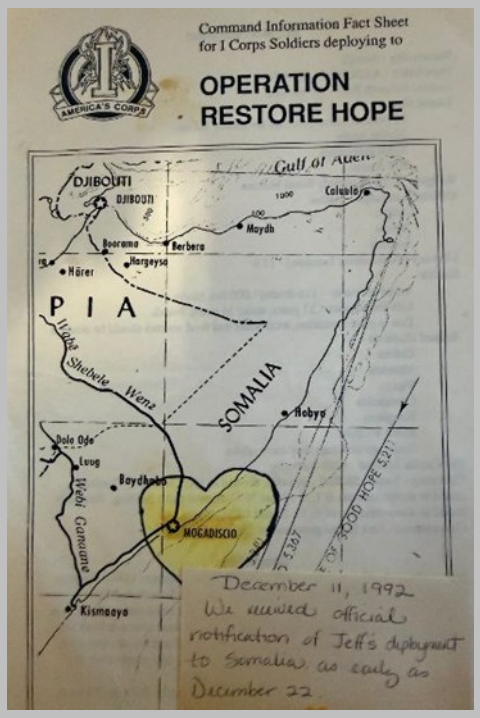
Somalia, Memory, and the Ache of Disappointment

A personal reckoning



Major Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

Why This Still Stirs in Me

I have been trying to understand why the current stories about Somalia and Somali fraud have gotten under my skin so deeply. Like most people, I do not like seeing tax dollars squandered. I do not like watching systems abused. I do not like seeing people take advantage of a country that tried, however imperfectly, to help them.

Let me be clear from the start. I am not saying all Somalis are bad. That would be false and unfair. I have known kind Somalis, generous ones, people who would give you the shirt off their back. But there is also something deeply broken in parts of that culture, and I encountered it firsthand long before today's headlines.

That is where this reaction comes from. Memory.

1992: Going In With Hope

In 1992, I deployed to Somalia while assigned to the 62nd Medical Group. Prior to that deployment, I had served in several military hospitals in the United States and in Germany as an adult and pediatric psychologist, working with active-duty service members and their dependents. I was not infantry. I was not combat arms. I was a clinician.

Still, like every officer assigned, I was issued a Beretta. I was an officer.

I had qualified with it, though I am still not sure how. In truth, I was probably more dangerous to myself with that weapon than to anyone else. I slept with it under my pillow, more out of anxiety than confidence.

When I deployed, I carried a kind of naïve hope. I told my wife, Leah, that this was a humanitarian mission. General Aidid was starving his own people, extorting them, weaponizing hunger. Tens of thousands were dying. In my mind, shaped by years of work with children, I imagined myself handing out candy bars and offering comfort in small, human ways.

An Early Warning

On the way in, our aircraft stopped briefly in Taif, Saudi Arabia, to refuel and to give us a short break and a hot meal. I remember standing in line as a Saudi national served the soldiers. When it was my turn, our eyes met. What I saw stopped me cold. There was contempt there. Hatred. Not irritation or indifference, but something sharp and unmistakable. I remember freezing for a moment, stunned by the intensity of it. I have never forgotten that look. I do not know what he was thinking or what had shaped that hatred, but I knew with certainty that he despised me. That moment sent a chill through me. It was my first quiet warning that the world we were stepping into was far more complicated and far darker than I had imagined.

Arrival in Mogadishu

We landed in Somalia at night. As the C-5 lifted off, we were told we could not yet move on to our destination. Gunfire echoed in the distance. When we finally reached what had once been a university campus in Mogadishu, a place that must once have been beautiful, it was hollowed out and ruined.

Before we even settled in, I ran into an old friend, Jim Masson, a Navy psychologist and later a dear colleague. The Marines had arrived before us and were already dug in, preparing to hand the site over to the Army. Seeing them underground surprised me. I asked Jim why they were dug in like that.

"Mortars, man," he said.

I remember almost laughing it off. Mortars? Come on. We were here on a humanitarian mission. We were supposed to be handing out food, stabilizing things, helping people survive.

I was soon to discover Jim Masson was right.

When the Illusion Broke


Somalia duty a nightmare

▪ **Disturbing to soldiers:** Troops are submitted to a constant mixture of gratitude and dislike, discomfort and danger and most of all, uncertainty about how long it will last.

"Last night I tried to call you again, but no luck. We couldn't get through. I'll try again tonight but I'm sure it will be the same. I really do miss you a lot. Sure wish I could wake up from this nightmare."
— Sgt. 1st Class Dennis Nelson, in a letter to his wife, Helen.

By Lorrine Thompson
The Olympian

Judy Bush and Helen Nelson have been military wives a long time. They know it can mean long separations. But each "deployment" of their husbands is different, and Nelson struggled to describe why the mission in Somalia has been hard on both the soldiers and the spouses.

PRETENDED THREAT: A Somalia man with a knife cocks his arm as if to

That first night, the sound of incoming fire made itself unmistakably clear. Mortars. Small arms. Heavy weapons in the distance. The university compound vibrated with noise and tension. The illusion I had carried with me collapsed quickly. This was not a benign relief effort. This was a war zone.

Suddenly, I understood why the Marines were underground.

And suddenly, I understood how unprepared I really was.

That night, I did what any non-combat trained major might do under fire. I dove under a table.

A colleague and friend, Al Johnson, a seasoned soldier with prior combat experience, saw immediately how exposed and unprepared I was. Without hesitation, he crawled out under fire to our hooch, retrieved my Kevlar vest, and brought it back to me. He handed it to me and said simply, "Here, Hansen. Put this on."

I will never forget that moment.

He put himself at risk so that I would be safer. There was no drama in it, no speech, no heroics. Just quiet competence and care.

Learning How Survival Really Works

From that point on, I stayed close to him. He knew the terrain, the rhythms of danger, and the realities of that place. More than that, he embodied something I would come to understand deeply over time. In chaos, survival often depends less on strength or bravado and more on the quiet courage of people who look out for one another.

Trying to maintain some sense of normalcy, I kept running for exercise around the perimeter of the old university compound. Day after day after day, I was pelted with rocks. Not once. Not occasionally. Constantly. At first, I ignored it. Then I tolerated it. Then I got irritated. Then I got angry. And eventually, very angry.

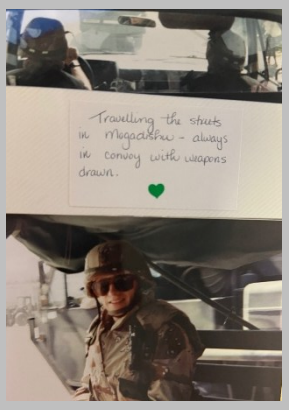
So one day I decided this would be different. This was not impulsive. It was premeditated. Major Hansen was going to conduct a tactical response using the only weapons available to him. Rocks.

I waited. I knew the pattern by then. Same stretch of perimeter. Same timing. Sure enough, the rocks came flying. And that was it. I picked up rocks and fired back. To my own surprise, the supposedly weapons incompetent psychologist held his own. Let's just say the exchange ended decisively.

After that, the rock throwing stopped.

They never bothered me again. I suspect they decided I was not worth the trouble. Possibly unstable. Definitely unpredictable. In any case, the message landed.

Convoys, Fire, and the Cost of Order



Then there were the convoys.

At times we rode in the backs of Humvees through town. One tactic used against us was dragging barbed wire across faces to knock off glasses or injure eyes. Think about that. We were there on a humanitarian mission, and people were actively trying to blind us.

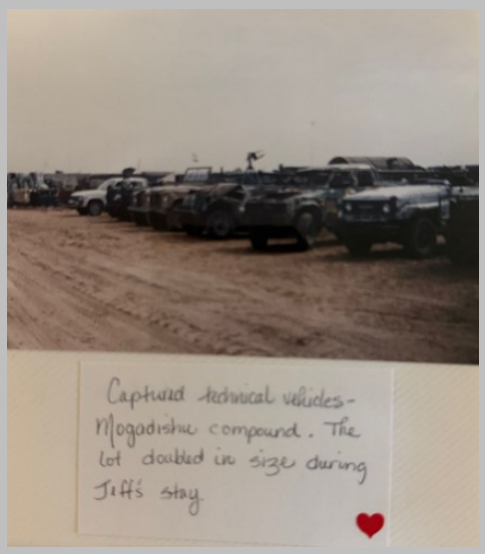
Rules of engagement were strict. We could not fire unless very

specific conditions were met. Instead, we carried long steel tent pegs, roughly a foot long, as last ditch defensive tools. Beretta in one hand, tent peg in the other. That was the reality.

I remember thinking we are trying to help you. Why are you trying to hurt us?

The Used Car Lot

Later, I watched Apache helicopters engage targets while going after General Aidid. They did not get him that day. What they did hit, however, was what we half grimly referred to as the "used car lot." It was an area filled with old technical vehicles, Jeeps and trucks mounted with recoilless weapons, .50 caliber machine guns, and other heavy arms that had been used to terrorize the city and attack coalition forces, including American soldiers.



After that firefight, our so-called used car lot had grown noticeably larger, filled with vehicles and weapons that had been confiscated. In a dark and almost absurd way, it felt like a small measure of success. More inventory, you might say. A strange thought in a place where survival often depended on gallows humor. Any used car salesman would have been impressed.

What Stayed With Me

Not long after I rotated out, Black Hawk Down happened. Whatever idealism I still carried collapsed under the weight of that tragedy.

For years, those memories went quiet.

Then recently, watching stories of fraud, entitlement, and open contempt toward the systems meant to help, watching people boast about exploiting social services, something stirred again. It felt disturbingly familiar.

I know there is goodness. I know there are honorable, hardworking Somali families. I have met them. I believe God loves them deeply.

But I also see a recurring pattern, then and now, where goodness is overshadowed by something darker. Entitlement. Exploitation. Tribalism. Contempt for the very structures trying to help. The posture feels eerily similar across decades.

Back then, a round passed within a few feet of me. Today, the rounds look different. Financial fraud. Manipulation. Ideological hostility toward the country that offered refuge.

This is not hatred. It is grief.

It is bewilderment.

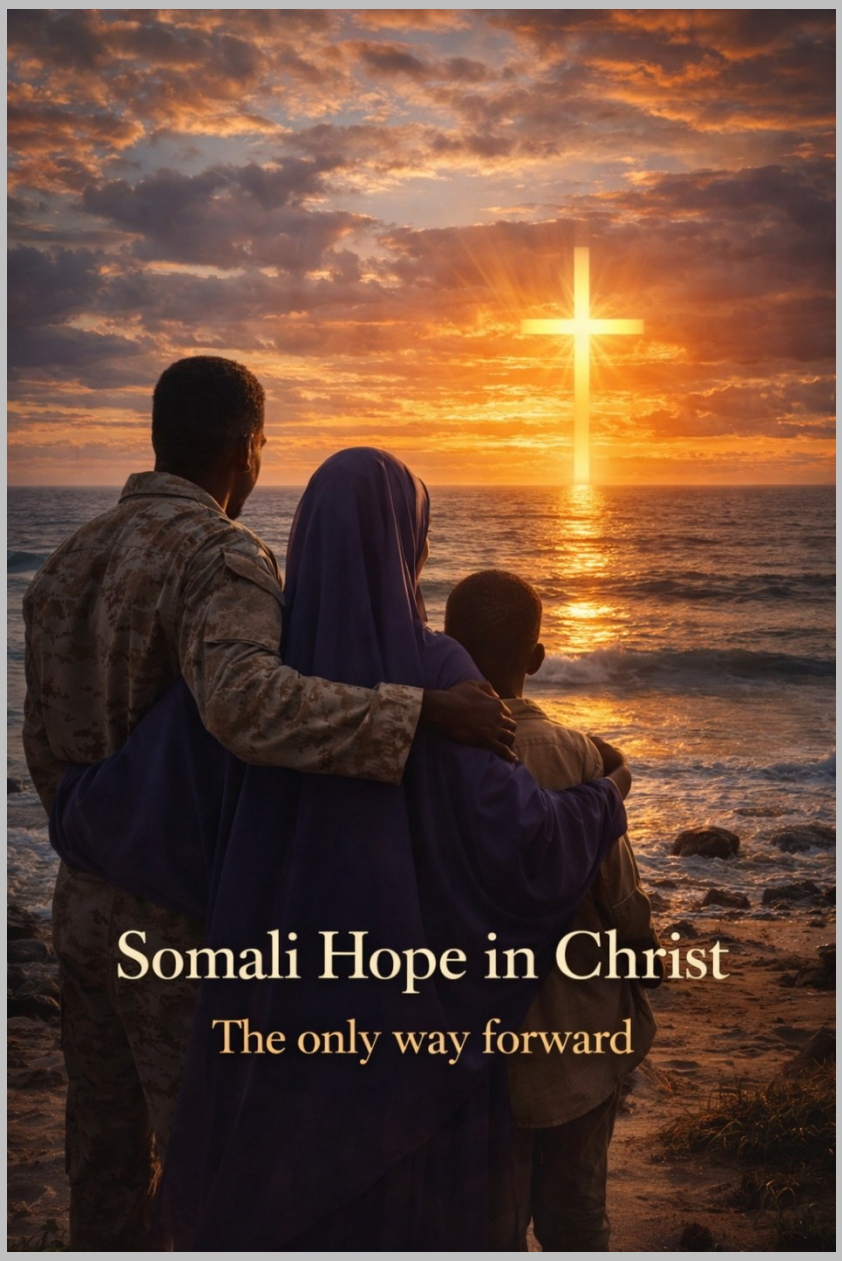
We tried to help. We sent aid, food, doctors, psychologists, and soldiers. We lost lives. We bore costs. We believed compassion would be met with responsibility.

Too often, it was not.

A Closing Prayer and Plea

I do not want this story to end with gunfire, with rocks flying, with contempt in someone's eyes, or with mortars falling in the night. I want it to end with something better. With the possibility that hearts can change.

We can and should try to understand what people truly need, rather than endlessly giving what ultimately harms them. Compassion without truth helps no one. Mercy without moral direction collapses into chaos. Love without boundaries ceases to be love at all.



There must be limits. There must be accountability. There must be a willingness to say, with firmness and care, this is not the way. When you are given truth, you do not spit on it. When you are given help, you do not exploit it. When people come to serve and protect, you do not fire mortars or drag wire to maim them. Grace is not an invitation to destruction.

And yet, even with all of that said, my heart still leans toward hope.

I pray for my Somali brothers and sisters. I pray that the love shown by those who came to help, by the soldiers and Marines who risked and, in many cases, gave their lives, will not be forgotten. I pray

that the blood that was shed, the sacrifices that were made, will not have been in vain. I pray that hearts hardened by grievance and resentment might soften.

This will not ultimately be healed by weapons or money or policy alone. It will be healed only by something deeper. A change of heart. A turning toward truth. A willingness to repent of violence and contempt and choose a better way.

That better way, for me, has a name. It is the way of Christ.

It is the way that calls us to repentance and responsibility, but also to mercy and renewal. It is the way that teaches us not to curse blessing, not to answer grace with violence, and not to despise what was given in good faith. It is the way that leads toward dignity, restraint, and peace.

That is my prayer.
That hearts would change.
That truth would take root.
That redemption would have the final word.

And that someday, what began in blood and sorrow might yet end in healing.