

# Twenty Years since the Integration of the Uruguayan Air Force into the United Nations's (UN) Air Operations Service: Path to Africa

COL ANDRÉS LEAL, URUGUAYAN AIR FORCE



**T**wenty years after the Uruguayan Air Force (*Fuerza Aérea Uruguaya*—FAU) entered the United Nations's (UN) air operations service, the author, a member of the first contingent deployed in Africa, recounts his experience firsthand and relays how the lessons learned changed FAU's rotary-wing aircraft employment doctrine, a change that set the stage for future deployments to other countries in conflict, such as Haiti and Congo.<sup>1</sup> While many generations have passed since this event and the path was not free of sacrifice, the effort, lessons learned, experiences lived, and the many people that undertook it made it more passable for those who came after in search of professional development. With the

perspective of time, we can truly appreciate the greatness and legacy brought to us by what initially may have seemed like a crazy adventure.



Arturo Pérez Reverte, prolific novelist and war correspondent for over 20 years throughout many conflicts, recounted in an interview the relationship that existed between the character of his latest novel and war. The story, about the circumstantial entry of a mining engineer into the revolutionary war in Mexico at the beginning of the 20th century and the ambiguity of feelings that he experiences as the conflict changes him, is analyzed by the author, who states that there are two types of people when it comes to the relationship between man and war: those who need that permanent adrenaline to live and those who, like him, used it as a school of life. Without intending to contradict him, I believe there are also people who intertwine these two visions: the middle point in that very particular relationship between man and armed conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

I began to experience life in a conflict zone in 2003, the year of the first deployment of our air force's aerial assets and personnel to support the UN in the dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea, in the horn of Africa. It has already been 20 years since that deployment, which should be considered a before and after in the life of our helicopter squadron and our air force. Personally, I found myself in my early 30s, with some experience in the aeronautical profession, with little knowledge of the region and the UN system, but with a great need to get out of my comfort

zone and get to know the world a little more. Coming from a country that fortunately has not had the need to resolve its disputes in any other way than through diplomatic means, the possibilities of operating in hostile areas or conflict zones, in declared or undeclared wars, seemed distant. Since, as military personnel, we prefer peace and work to defend it, the possibility of professional development and the real application of training seems to only take place away from our daily lives.



The perspective of time means that today we can look back, analyze and contemplate that experience from a different perspective, and fully value its importance as the first deployment of our air force operating under the UN flag in a conflict zone: an area of operation full of challenges, dangers, and risks, and where we could undertake our vocation operating in a complicated operational environment. We were in the middle of a real conflict, where training and manuals were fully applied, operating alongside countries that were very geographically and culturally distant, which all constituted a great institutional and personal challenge.

Our destination, two countries: on the one hand, Eritrea, about which we knew nothing until then, and on the other, Ethiopia, about which we had the memories

of the news images of children beset by chronic hunger and inexhaustible thirst. A conflict between brother countries which were almost identical, ancient, deserted, distant, and related by poverty. Everything seemed mixed here, two countries fighting for territories and for an outlet to the sea, where very old cultural relationships mixed with cutting-edge technologies, confounded by sandstorms and dry riverbeds, almost sacred lands, and men and women proud of their history, their religion, and their way of life.



Arriving in Asmara, capital of Eritrea, carrying a Bell 212 helicopter in a Hercules C-130, was quite an adventure. The discomfort of the journey, the stops just to refuel and long stretches that seemed eternal, prepared us for what was to come. Getting off the aircraft and being invaded by the African breeze, hot and full of smells, spices, sweat, extreme poverty, pain, was our first unforgettable impression. We were greeted with the view of a lavish Christian cathedral, which contrasted with a nearby monument to rubber sandal-style footwear, a proud symbol of Eritrea's recovery after its independence, and they proudly told us, "We fight against a power." Meanwhile, on the Ethiopian side, the majestic obelisks of Axum, over

1,700 years old and witnesses of its great imperial history, were being overflown by a drone packed with sensors.

We quickly started construction of our base in Asmara, a city that boasted its Italian architecture which at times reminded us of our distant capital of Montevideo, had a generally friendly and affectionate population which were very proud of their culture, their history and their value, albeit sometimes fearful and distrustful based on significant generational differences. However, when we first arrived, we lived in a temporary camp with a diverse population of military observers from many African countries and followers of the Islamic religion. This allowed us to learn more about unfamiliar cultures and forced us to learn ways and customs that were different from our Uruguayan way of life. In a world where globalization was just beginning to be talked about and the Internet was barely dawning, the contrast and cultural differences introduced us to a new paradigm. We began to see things differently, work differently, think differently, which caused us to change and adapt from deep seated concepts rooted in our training. We realized this was Africa, the Africa of books and encyclopedias, of animals, the jungle, the savannah, safaris, magical sunsets in artistic postcards, a world that was just opening to us. From the very beginning, as soon as when we got off the aircraft we had traveled in for almost three days, we experienced a reality different from what we had learned and expected.

We were approaching a milestone in the FAU and had a great responsibility: To follow what we learned in our flight squadron and to honor what our predecessors had instilled in us, even though the reality of what we faced was very different to the environment where we came from. We were going to open new paths and have our own experiences, and in the process, we were going to be the ones to lead the way, for others to follow.

Upon receiving authorization from our country's parliament to proceed, we faced the logistical challenge of planning and acquiring everything necessary for the construction of the camp and its long-term maintenance and operation, individual personnel equipment, medical supplies, aeronautical spare parts, selection and training of personnel, and everything that was necessary to operate under the conditions required by the UN. Given the imminence of the deployment, this required our air force to redouble its efforts in the face of other existing deadlines and requirements. The lack of familiarity with where we were deploying instilled in us a need to search for all available information, both from an operational point of view and health, climate, ways and customs, geography and religion. We eagerly absorbed useful advice from all those who offered us their experience in those or other lands at the service of the UN. At the same time, we had to continue with flight training, giving special importance to training with night vision goggles. Thus, our days were long,

many nights and early mornings were spent in the training field and in the mountains perfecting maneuvers, standardizing flight procedures and, above all, refining techniques for solving in-flight faults and emergencies.

Finally, the time for deployment came. In our Hercules C-130 and an L-100 of the Argentine Air Force contracted by the UN, the implementation of our plans was put to the test. A month later after our initial arrival we received our second helicopter. With our two Bell 212 helicopters fully operational, time passed between day and night training, and perhaps the most difficult process of all began: getting our peers to trust us. With no previous experience in UN missions, with little experience in the new operational environment, little by little our crews were doing the best they knew how to do: collaborating to safeguard human life. We were enduring the vicissitudes of the hostile environment: a difficult, changing meteorology with little capability to forecast, desert mountains, and sandstorms. We operated in a darkness full of challenges, with ground defensive positions constantly directing their weapons towards us, tracers coming from the many kilometers of trenches dug in the rock bordering the neutral zone, and minefields near the landing zones. The lack of knowledge regarding our night vision capability by friendly ground personnel from other countries complicated matters as well, as we had to insist on the correct use of lighting material to avoid the usual glare from the equipment they used when trying to locate our helicopters.

Being used to the four typical seasons of our country, it came to a surprise that instead there were only two clearly distinct seasons here: a dry season where we faced the aridity of the terrain and a fog that permanently limited our visibility, as well as the dust and sand from the helipads; and a rainy season where we faced expansive storms with heavy rain and wind, with clouds hiding the mountains and covering the valleys, almost never having a clear view of the terrain. Both seasons always conspired dangerously against our safety.

Slowly, a necessary bond of trust was generated between the UN operations authorities and our personnel. Experienced air operations personnel noticed our professional work and commitment and how we overcame difficulties with determination and courage—always prioritizing the safety and protection of human life, military observers, demining operations personnel, and all those who required our support. We eventually began to see the fruit of our training and something which I consider of most importance, the consideration of factors we never used to have to take with such care and detail: flying in mountainous areas, the review of operations manuals for flying in dusty or sandy areas with the risk of brownouts (intense and blinding clouds of dust raised by the helicopter's rotor during take-offs and landings), landing in high and precarious places, and the exhaustive use of charts to accurately determine borders that had slim margins for error.

Compared to flying at sea level in Uruguay versus operating at almost 8,000 feet above sea level in Asmara, we had to use all our knowledge and experience to get the most out of our aircraft, which were now flying with much reduced capabilities. In the end, we finally gained the necessary trust and confidence to be deployed in more than day and night training or mere medical evacuation missions.

The ability to operate with night vision goggles was the culmination of a process that had begun around 1997–98 with the acquisition of materiel and the training of our pilots, technicians, and instructors by the US Army at Fort Rucker, Alabama (now Fort Novosel). The exchange of experiences and joint deployments with other countries made our squadron and the FAU obtain a great advantage compared to other helicopter units in the region and around the world. Extensive training ensured the safe use of the devices during nighttime operations and was the direct result of the vision of officers who foresaw that the future lies in having the night as an ally and having the ability to operate 24 hours a day. Back home, it was a great challenge we conquered and proved capable of in the service of our citizens on an almost permanent basis. This capability led the UN, faced with the withdrawal of Italy's helicopters operating in the Horn of Africa, to choose us to provide relief for medical evacuations. In parallel to the flight training, the theoretical classes and discussions with officers of the armed forces and our national army who had gone as military observers to the region, introduced us to that different and, until then, very distant world.

The difficulties of a complex logistics system led us to experience the wear of the material earlier than expected, which further complicated deployed maintenance planning, especially since we were flying our aircraft very differently and under different conditions, than how we flew in our country. The distances and difficulties of access to the area made it even more difficult to keep our machines operational (only one international airline operated cargo at that time with few and very limited frequencies). However, great supply planning and work by our maintenance technicians enabled us to have at least one aircraft operational for almost the entire period, and both available most of the time. This allowed us to operate safely, especially at night, since we were the only means of rescue with the capability of operating with night vision goggles.

All the inconveniences, distance from families, and communication problems made adaptation even more difficult—albeit with many moments of joy and glee. It wasn't all about facing and solving problems—the satisfaction of safely accomplishing missions, contributing to improving the quality of life of those who were deployed in hostile territory, protecting the civilian population, providing permanent 24-hour support to the members of the peacekeeping mission, being recognized for accomplishing the mission beyond the initial requirements, having a

harmonious co-existence among all personnel, and having great interactions with locals which allowed us to get to know about their lives and their daily difficulties—which far exceeded our own—made this mission one of the most enriching experiences to which I could ever aspire.

In these types of places, one learns to be a little more tolerant, know one's limits, to relent, if necessary, and to get to know others and especially ourselves. To get to know a harsh part of the world and lives marked by the misfortune of war taught us things that we would never see and appreciate otherwise.

Professionally, we learned a lot as well—how to get the maximum possible performance from our aircraft within their limits, the importance of adequate planning, and trusting the crews. We learned about flying in mountains, landing in dusty, confined areas, and how to safely exploit night capabilities. Of special importance was knowing that the trust we generated with other deployed personnel allowed them to carry out their mission with the peace of mind that, in the event of any need, at any time, they could count on our crews and aircraft. Above all, we knew how to create the necessary space so that our support crews could face their own difficulties and challenges, with a little more knowledge from our experiences—the difficult ones, which were many, but also the gratifying and enriching ones, which were abundant.

Fortunately, after an incredible year, we were able to return to our homes with the satisfaction of having fulfilled a good part of the expectations that had been placed on us, being the spearhead for the FAU integration into the UN system with our own aerial assets and becoming part of the international community that aims to bring a little peace to troubled areas of our planet.

This article attempts to be a modest tribute to the men and women of the FAU, who have been instrumental in the deployment of aerial assets into distant lands, who have known how to fly those skies that, even though they are the same color, are different. It is also about highlighting the nobility of the aircraft deployed, their great versatility, and as we pilots sometimes say, their “soul.” Responding at the appropriate times to our needs, they performed to their potential in the best possible way. Thanks to their performance, that first deployment contributed to a good part of the almost 4,000 hours flown and 62 MEDEVACS carried out successfully throughout the mission, half of which occurred at night. The positive acknowledgement of our actions by UN authorities enabled our subsequent selection for deployment to the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which continues to this day. □



## Notes

1. Diego Gonnet I & Diego Hernández, “Uruguayan participation in UN peace operations: An underestimated international insertion tool” (Participación uruguaya en operaciones de paz de la ONU: una herramienta de inserción internacional subestimada), *SciELO*, Vol. 4, 2008, [http://so.cialsciences.scielo.org/pdf/s\\_cclaeh/v4nse/scs\\_a03.pdf](http://so.cialsciences.scielo.org/pdf/s_cclaeh/v4nse/scs_a03.pdf).

2. Javier Márquez Sánchez, “Arturo Pérez-Reverte: ‘In war there is no gastronomy, there is survival. I’ve seen people fight over a piece of bread, but fight with blows, or over a drink of running water,’” *Tapas*, 2 November 2023, <https://www.tapasmagazine.es/en/tapas-interview-arturo-perez-reverte1/>.

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Col Leal is serving in the General Staff of the FAU. Graduated from the School of Military Aeronautics in 1996, he is also an Air General Staff Officer and he completed the Advanced Defense Course at the Air Command and Staff College. With 3,700 flight hours, of which 3,000 have been in helicopters, and around 2,000 hours flown in African skies, he is a pilot-in-command of various fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft. He has been deployed eight times in UN peacekeeping missions in Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, accumulating almost 70 months in the mission area as a crew member of the Bell 212 aircraft. In his last deployment in 2021, he commanded the Helicopter Unit (URUAVU) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.