

# Miracles, Mercy and Mangoes

RUTH WILSON, WARD NURSE - MV ANASTASIS, LOME, TOGO, WEST AFRICA

*“Those who go down to the sea in ships, see the wonderful works of the Lord in the deep”. These are the words from Psalm 107 that echo in my heart and head when I think of the wonderful month spent on board the Mercy Ship Anastasis working as a ward nurse.*



The MV Anastasis, the world's largest non-governmental hospital ship, offers free medical care to the poor of West Africa. Corrective surgery is offered to those with facial tumours, cleft lip and palate defects, burn contractures, vesico-vaginal fistulae and club feet, to name but a few.

## The Journey

I chose to leave the comforts of my own nursing job at Gartnavel General in Glasgow for one month, and experience nursing on board the former cruise liner, docked in Lome, the port for the West African country of Togo. Togo is a thin 'slither' of land which is bordered by Ghana to the west, Benin to the east and Burkina Faso to the north. It is right on the equator so the temperatures soar, making my Factor 8 very inadequate!

I recall sitting on the plane on the way to Togo, watching as we flew over acres and acres of the Sahara Desert. A beautiful vision of colours; gold, bronze and greens, never to be forgotten. My thoughts were drawn to the poem 'Footprints in the Sand', when at particularly difficult or challenging times of our lives there are only one set of footprints as we are carried along by the Lord.

As the door of the plane opened at Lome airport, I was hit by the intense African humidity and heat, a damp musty smell crept up the nostrils. We arrived at the visa desk, only to wait over one hour for processing. I nicknamed the officials the "manyana men" as time did not seem to be an issue!

I was not alone as I had already met up with others who were also going out to serve on the ship. Vivienne - dentist for three weeks, Tracey - ward nurse for two months, James - housekeeper - two weeks, Bob - eye nurse for six weeks and Sonia - ward nurse for two months. People come from all over the globe to give of their time and skills, to help others who are much less fortunate than themselves.

Eventually we get through the formalities and see the welcome sign 'Mercy Ships' and I realise that my adventure is about to start in reality, and not just in my thoughts.

While packing our belongings into the Land Rover we are surrounded by local people begging for money and signalling that they are hungry and needing food. My vivid memory is of one mother with a tiny child tied onto her back staring at us with desperation in her tired eyes.

## Lome - the capital

We drive through down town Lome; there are hundreds of people lining the streets apparently staring at our white faces. It is humbling to be a cause of so much interest. The electricity supply is limited, so the alternative source of light for houses, bars and shops are with candles lit up inside jam jars. Children are roaming the streets, some watching a huge television as if it was the only one in the city. The women walk by with everything but the kitchen sink on their heads, while the men stand by and watch them! 'Zemidjans' (moped-taxis) pass us by with whole families on board. Pick up trucks drive by with five, six or more men reclined in the back. Seat belts or crash helmets are never used.



We arrive at the dock side and catch a first glimpse of the big white ship. She is an awesome sight, illuminating the darkness with bright light from several hundred portholes. I can feel a lump welling up in my throat, from the emotion of being part of this amazing ministry.

## Dr Gary Parker

The resident surgeon Dr Gary, who has worked



full time on board for over 15 years is a real godly man. He performs all sorts of surgeries, many of which are very challenging, often staying in theatre till late on in the evening; he never complains. I remember one particular day in the OR (operating room), when I was observing a nine month old girl called Ruth, who was anaesthetised for cleft lip repair. Gary prepared the drapes, marked out his incision lines with a sterile pen, and then gathered us together for a



word of prayer. He asked that she be kept free from infection, pain and all complications. At the end of the operation I thanked him for allowing me to watch. He turned round and thanked me in return for looking after the patients in the ward. That was a real moment for me. Surgeons thanking ward nurses is not an everyday occurrence in the N.H.S!

The focus on God being the 'healer' is so evident on board this ship. Prayer is the first resort - not the last. I recall a woman who had a hysterectomy. Her blood count was very low, in fact at least 50% less than the normal level. She was sitting up in bed, cardio-vascularly stable, drinking water and not requiring any oxygen. In my experience that woman, if in the UK would have been very sick, possibly on a ventilator, giving the medical team a lot of concern.

#### **Jonathan's story**

This little boy made a huge impact on me. At the age of three he was out playing with friends, and was unfortunately caught in a bush fire. He suffered burns to his head, ears, chin, neck, chest and his arms were literally 'melted' to the sides of his body. Now aged five he came to the ship with his uncle, and received life changing surgery. His burn contractures were released and grafts were taken from the normal areas of skin on his thighs. He had the most expressive big brown eyes I have ever seen and seemed to be able to find joy in the smallest things. For two weeks he had to lie flat in bed while his wounds healed, so we taped balloons suspended on strings to the ceiling, and he would exercise his legs by kicking them, giggling and squealing with delight. Many children and adults in West Africa have very little playful or educational stimulation, but on the ward parents and their kids would be encouraged to play, read and colour in pictures, a whole new experience for them.

I will never forget this experience; my own life has been blessed by both working with the crew of the Mercy Ship Anastasis, and also by the generous and loving nature of the West African people. Oh yes and I experienced my first taste of mangoes - what a treat!

In my opinion patients are nursed on this "big white ship of hope" with love, compassion, dignity and respect. Many go home with their lives transformed not only physically but also spiritually.

The European tour includes visits to Spain, Holland and Germany and was be in Sunderland UK in September 2003. The next outreach is from November 2003 to June 2004 in Freetown, Sierra Leone. More volunteers are needed, especially with the Africa Mercy, the latest addition to the Mercy Ships fleet, due to sail from her Tyneside berth by 2005.

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