

Part two of our special report into charity's amazing



No, we're not going to sell your liver

Africa Mercy's

At the time I was watching him perform a delicate procedure in one of the ship's operating rooms.

The American maxillofacial surgeon has served on Mercy Ships for 22 years. Today he's rebuilding the face of 30-year-old Philip Blama, who had a huge benign tumour removed from his lower jaw bone.

I watched Dr Parker skilfully graft segments of bone from the inside of Philip's hip, which he then carefully shaped around a curved titanium implant on Philip's lower face.

This was to rebuild his lower jaw, which had also to be partially removed. It's an



intricate procedure but not uncommon.

Philip's case was similar to that of 23-year-old Alimou Camara, who'd been on *Africa Mercy* not long before.

Alimou's tumour had begun when he was 16 as a small lump, but without treatment it had grown to the same size as his head. It hung from his lower jaw, slowly cutting off his airway and making it almost impossible to eat.

Alimou's life became a misery. His sister-in-law even ordered her children not to drink from the same cup for fear of contamination.

Now, thanks to Mercy Ships' surgeons, Alimou's face has been transformed and he's looking forward to returning to education and rebuilding his life.

But Dr Stephen Moise, a cardio-thoracic anaesthetist from Clydebank's Golden Jubilee Hospital, told me that Liberia's efforts to move forward can sometimes end in horror.

Dr Moise, who was born in Zimbabwe in 1964 and moved to Scotland in 1994, explained, "Some local groups have been trying to encourage small businesses.



"Soap-making is one way of making money. The problem is part of the process involves caustic soda and children are eating it."

That can mean a slow, agonising death. The soda causes a chemical burn in the gullet, which then scars and tightens meaning victims can't take food or water.

Those lucky enough to get treatment at Monrovia's JFK Hospital have had a tube inserted in their abdominal wall so they can be fed liquids.

That isn't a long-term solution, so during his three-week stint on board — part of his annual leave — Dr Moise is performing operations on a number of children.

They aim to gradually increase the width of the gullet in a series of delicate procedures, allowing patients to consume food and liquid naturally.

He said, "I've also been assisting at an operation to remove congenital cataracts on a six-month-old girl, whose pupils were dilated and white.



"As well as giving her sight, it will also make a massive difference to the course of her life."

I discovered what he meant on a visit to a Mercy Ships' eye clinic in Gaye Town, an impoverished community of 50,000. A nurse there told me that children with white colouring in their eyes are often considered demonic and their families shunned.

Johan Petier Johannesen (JP) from the Faroe Islands — a regular visitor to Scotland — is the ship's patient counsellor and regularly has to reassure some their beliefs are unfounded.

He said, "One patient with a facial tumour had been warned not to come to the ship because we would remove his liver and sell it.

"But the tumour was so painful he came for treatment and was relieved when I told him he'd keep his liver!"

Most patients have either been referred by an outreach clinic or pre-booked at a Mercy Ships screening day earlier this year, held in Monrovia's Samuel K. Doe stadium.

But some simply turn up and that can cause heartache for staff. One nurse told me they sometimes turn up with cancer, which can't be treated on board.

JP explained, "It can be very difficult. Patients come with high expectations and sometimes you just can't help them, but you have to be realistic and tell them straight.

"We do have happy moments, especially with someone who has faced physical or psychological pain because of a condition. It's nice to see them excited about going home after treatment and recovery."

It's the ultimate job satisfaction. The surgery and treatment offered by *Africa Mercy* isn't just life-saving, it's life-giving.

The 152-metre *Africa Mercy* was acquired in 1999 by Stagecoach founder Ann Gloag for £4 million. The *Dronning Ingrid* was converted from a Danish Rail Ferry to the world's largest non-governmental hospital ship.

As well as berths for a crew of 450, *Africa Mercy* has six state-of-the-art operating theatres, recovery, intensive-care and low-dependency wards, with 78 patient beds in total.

Around 7000 procedures are carried out a year, including cataract removal and lens implant, cleft lip and palate reconstruction, orthopaedics and tumour removal.

Africa Mercy

From the bridge he has a grandstand view of Monrovia's port, littered with evidence of maritime misadventure.

Nestled on the dockside opposite is *Blue Atlantic*, which was seized by the French navy in January carrying 92 barrels of cocaine.



Nearby, on a crumbling dock, is the half-submerged wreck of the huge container ship *MV Torm Alexandra*, which capsized because of improper loading just before it was due to sail for Dakar in 2001.

But Capt. Tim, who worked his way up the Mercy Ships ranks over 23 years, runs a contrastingly clinical operation.

He likens the *Africa Mercy* to a floating town. More than 400 crew of over 30 nationalities enjoy a range of facilities including a small gym, Starbucks coffee shop and TV lounges.

Some have joined alone but there are also couples and young families, all paying monthly room and board.

So a top priority with Tim — an American of Dumfries ancestry — is security. That's handled by a small unit of ex-Gurkhas.

Every morning one of the pint-sized guards would carefully scan my visitor's pass before I boarded.

Tim told me how one would-be intruder tried to sidestep this check, but the Nepalese guard who instantly had him in a wrestling hold.

Tim smiled, "The Gurkhas are very nice and would

dinnertime chat I learned he was no stranger to pressure.

He'd served as senior advisor to the Liberian health minister for three years and dealt regularly with Mercy Ships.

A Vietnam veteran then health insurance professional, Bill arrived in Liberia in 1999 at the height of the civil war to serve as a hospital administrator in Phoebe Hospital in Bong County.

"In 1992 rebel forces came in and killed 192 patients and staff," said Bill. "When I was there we evacuated twice when rebels came close. It was terrifying."

Bill was also part of a team who headed into rebel-controlled regions to assess healthcare.

"We had a 'safe passage' letter from the secretary general of the LURD rebels, a chap called General Peanut Butter.

"Unfortunately there were only boy soldiers at the checkpoints. None of them could read so we had to persuade them what the letter said.

"The most tense time was getting into a region suffering a cholera outbreak. We had to supply test kits to a clinic but an eight-year-old boy, with a locked and loaded AK-47, was posted in front of the building with orders not to let anyone in.

"He'd been told he'd be shot if he disobeyed the orders but I needed to deliver the testing kits. This is the reality of war."

After an hour pleading his case, stressing people could die if the kits weren't delivered, he was allowed in. He doesn't know what happened to the child soldier.

From cleaners to surgeons there's a real sense of team spirit on *Africa Mercy*, forged by an understanding of the hardships outside the ship.

Former art teachers, John and Pat Duncan from Kirkcudbright, were nearing the end of a three-month stint as auxiliary staff. Pat, working in the laundry, had spent her weekends visiting women in Monrovia's notorious Central Prison.

She said, "Conditions are awful. Each day they get one plate of dried wheat, that's all. So I've started an 'egg ministry'.

"With clearance from the governor, I boil 30 eggs and take them in at the weekends. It's as if you'd given them a golden egg!"



■ **rehabilitate Liberia's traumatised ex**

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Mercy Ships rely on donations to fund their work. If you'd like to donate, write to:

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