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Final part of our report into Mercy Ships' work in Liberia

## General with the blood of 20,000 people on his hands

**By Euan Duguid**

**RED LIGHT lies in the heart of Monrovia, at the foot of Somalia Drive, a 15-mile-long roughshod highway.**

The poverty-stricken community got its name because it once had working traffic signals.

Now it really is the end of the road for many, with rape, murder and violent muggings common.

It was here I came face-to-face with a former rebel commander, responsible for inducing hundreds of children into barbaric killing during Liberia's first civil war of 1989-96.



Today, Joshua Milton Blahyi is an evangelist in Red Light, helping rehabilitate children he led into battle with the help of a long-term Mercy Ships volunteer.

Blahyi told me, "There is not a single moment when I will not think of, or be confronted by, my past. So I hope many Liberians now and in the future will see that violence cannot help and that destruction has no place."

Blahyi was known as General Butt Naked, charging into battle dressed only in his boots at the head of a gang known as the Butt Naked Battalion.

But any humour in the name is snuffed out by the fact that Blahyi and his fighters plumbed the depths of depravity.

### **Confessed**

Earlier this year he confessed to Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that he and his soldiers killed 20,000 people.

He admitted to sacrifices, which reportedly included, "the killing of an innocent child and plucking out the heart which was divided into pieces for us to eat."

Child sacrifice had been part of his tradition as a tribal high priest.

The Commission was modelled on the post-apartheid South African commission and has been taking testimony from victims as well as former combatants to create a full accounting of the carnage, to allow Liberians to heal the wounds of war.

Although the body cannot charge killers, Blahyi insists he is ready and willing to face justice — if it comes — but wants to make the most of his time at liberty, rehabilitating those he's left deeply damaged.

The father of three, who says he found God during the heat of battle in 1996, is on a programme organised by a Mercy Ships volunteer, ordained minister and psychologist Dr Lyn Westman.

The aim is to train community leaders in counselling for former child soldiers and ex-combatants. The UN reckons by the end of the second war (1997-2003) more than 15,000 children were directly involved.



## Meeting

Dr Westman had arranged my meeting with Blahyi in a church hall inside a security compound in Red Light.

Blahyi is a powerfully-built 38-year-old who, my driver observed, had a definite air of menace. But he came across as articulate and genuinely remorseful.

I asked if it was true about the 20,000 deaths.

"Yes, yes," he replied in a deep Liberian brogue, a heavily accented form of American English. "It is not literally killing one, two, three . . . 20,000 people myself.

"It is inspiring, encouraging, initiating young people into the process, giving them the command.

"I strongly believe there is no way I'd feel free by hiding from those things I did. There are more than 500 guys who wouldn't have fought if I did not force them to fight.

"The damages that were caused, the chaos that was caused would not have happened . . . I believe I'm responsible."

During the civil war, soldiers played football with human skulls.

Blahyi continued, "I used to fight naked, that was inspiration from my tradition. The oracle I worshipped insisted I went into battle naked. It was a way to manifest the powers he gave me.

"We believed that material was a hindrance to spiritual defence from bullets."

## Drunk blood

Blahyi said most of his fighters were on drugs but those closest to him had drunk human blood, which had an intoxicating effect.

According to Dr Westman the trauma suffered by ex-child soldiers — many still with drug habits — is profound.

“These children were often forced to kill,” she said. “But all were victims before becoming perpetrators and had lost or become separated from their families.

“They’ve experienced fear followed by the anger of war — then capped by guilt because of their actions.”

That combination of emotions has created an explosive cocktail, with former fighters prone to extreme violence, often sparked by minor problems.

One charity worker, who helps ex-child soldiers, told me he and his staff had to deal with a violent outburst from the group after the project’s power generator broke down.

Dr Westman has been teaching a “whole person” model of counselling, geared to physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual aspects of the person as well as listening and caring.

Blahyi believes the programme is helping create hope for a city plagued by war.

He said, “It is hard, but with the training it is getting easier. Before I was only using prayers, now I am using other methods.”

Blahyi claims he has saved 50 former child soldiers from drugs and crime.

“They (Mercy Ships) have provided training that has changed my life. They have given me confidence, courage, a new start.

“They have helped me work with people, they have helped me accept some of the things that I can’t change.

“They have also helped me recognise the things I can change and taught me how to make a difference.”



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## Ship’s surgeons gave Esther a new life

**“I SAW a pregnant woman plead for her life, but the rebels shot her anyway.”**

This was Mark, a 22-year-old Liberian security guard who worked in my hotel compound.

"From the dead body they cut out the unborn child and took it away."

Cannibalism had been a feature of Liberia's civil war, so Mark gave me a long, sad stare, as if to say, 'You know what happened next.'

Mark had been hiding in a ruined building in Monrovia. The psychological impact of what he saw down below on the street that night was clear.

A nervous stutter which sometimes stalled his words had developed soon after the atrocity.

"The war is over now," he said. "We want a better life in Liberia, that is why I work nightshift here and go to college during the day. I want to become a doctor."

This was my slap-in-the face moment in Liberia, just before my driver picked me up early one morning to take me to *Africa Mercy*, when the horrors of war suddenly became reality.

## Sobering

Equally sobering was my subsequent tour of the ward on the hospital ship.

One little boy was in for skin grafts because his mosquito net had caught fire while he was sleeping.

Another patient, in his 50s, was in for reconstructive facial surgery. He'd told staff a witch doctor cut off his nose when he was a child because of a small abnormality. He'd faced a life of ridicule.

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It was

last year, when two Mercy Ships staff spotted her at a local market, that her transformation began.

Surgeons rebuilt her face and Marthlyn recently returned to the Africa Mercy for additional work to her nose.

## Play

Her mother, Comfort, said nobody pointed and laughed at her any more and she could play with her friends, something she'd never done.



Marthlyn Smith hadn't a normal life either, and never have, but for the the Africa Mercy surgeons. Marthlyn, from Bong County, had been considered an outcast the age of one because of a potentially fatal disease widespread throughout Africa, that destroys the of the mouth and cheeks. Before she was 11 the disease had eaten her face her nose and mouth had



Esther Dwey is also living testament to the new lives Mercy Ships bring.

During fighting in the mid-1990s, Esther had run from rebels, hiding in the bush on the outskirts of Monrovia.

With a five-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter, the situation was terrifying enough — but Esther was expecting a third child and went into labour while on the run.

She said, “At the time of delivery I began to experience difficulty. The baby was too high and could not come down. It was in the heat of war and there was no access to hospital. The child died in my womb.”

Esther’s husband, who was later murdered by rebels, took her to a man who had training in first aid. He removed the dead baby with scissors. The operation was traumatic enough — but it left Esther with a punctured bladder.

## Ravaged

For 10 years, Esther endured incontinence and was shunned as a result, making the struggle to bring up children in a ravaged land near impossible.

But thanks to a bladder repair procedure in 2005, Esther was given a new life.

She’s found a new husband and had another child, whom she calls, “Robert, my Mercy Ships baby.”

Esther recently became a Mercy Ships counsellor, offering support to Liberian women having similar problems corrected by *Africa Mercy*.

But just getting on board can be a miraculous feat for many. One surgeon told me many patients can’t read and have to be given appointments based on the phases of the moon.

During the Mercy Ships screening day held earlier this year in Samuel K. Doe stadium, 74-year-old Alfred Ztelue heard about the charity on the radio.

His left leg had been haphazardly amputated after a rocket exploded under him in 1991 and was in need of orthopaedic care. He’d negotiated his way through Monrovia’s chaotic and lawless road network — on a hand-pedalled bike.

## Humbling

The heart of Liberia lies in its people. People like Mark, my hotel security guard, whose desire to move on and become a doctor, rather than be consumed by bitterness, is truly humbling.

But often desire alone is not enough — especially for those who need urgent medical care.

It’s the vital work of Mercy Ships that really can make the world of difference.

■ **Read more about Dr Keith and Mercy Ships at**



[www.africansmiles.co.uk](http://www.africansmiles.co.uk)

## **How you can help**

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

**Susie Hope,  
Fundraising Manager (Scotland),  
Mercy Ships UK Scottish Office,  
PO Box 8777,  
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**Call 01899 830475 or log on to their website at [www.mercyships.org.uk](http://www.mercyships.org.uk)**

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