

Monrovia Memoires (April 23-May 7 2006)

Dr Keith D. Thomson
FRCA,
Consultant Anaesthetist,
North Hampshire Hospital,
Basingstoke, UK

Any
anaesthetists
wishing to
volunteer their
services should
contact either
Mercy Ships UK
on 01438 727800
or download an
application form
from the website
www.mercyships.org

Introduction

Liberia is a fascinating country which is attempting to recover from the devastation and debris left by more than 14 years of civil war which ended in autumn 2003 when 17,000 UN troops took control and President Charles Taylor departed to Nigeria. Three infamous presidents, Talbot, Doe and Taylor preceded the recently elected first lady president in Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Harvard educated Liberian and former finance minister under President Samuel Doe – who was tortured to death by rebel leader Prince Johnson in 1990. Apparently the one hour highlights of the eight hour video of his demise is still a best seller.

Fig. 1 Anastasis in Monrovia



The *Anastasis* (fig 1) was docked in the busy *Freeport* of Monrovia.

Fig. 2 dove of peace



A Liberian pigeon (aka 'dove of peace' – fig 2) often sat on a coil of discarded razor wire nearby while 300m away was a capsized cargo vessel (fig 3).

Fig. 3
capsized
cargo
vessel



Apparently there are up to seventy bodies inside the sunken hull, the sad end to desperate attempts by looters with no scuba equipment. The tips of masts indicated the final resting place of other sunken vessels. The 700m of road from the port gate to the ship was guarded by UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia) soldiers from Ghana in three separate sandbagged machine gun posts (fig 4).



Outbound flight

On the SN Brussels 767 I read an interesting biography of Sean Devereux [1], a British aid worker shot dead in Somalia in 1993 at the age of only 28. He had worked in Liberia from 1990-1992. The book contained several interesting and relevant quotes:

1. 'It is not the length of existence that counts but what is achieved during that existence however short.'
2. 'What about our responsibility for the arms that are sold to these warlords for Western gain?'
3. 'Prevent sales of weapons especially to developing countries without democracy.'
4. 'Young people witness their dreams being washed away in a sea of blood.'
5. 'How destructive Sean believed the 'handout' mentality was becoming in Africa.'

Also on the flight were others bound for the Mercy Ship. These included my wife, the rest of the anaesthetic team, (Ray, a CRNA from the USA, Marcus from Germany and Gehad from the UK but of Egyptian origin) and a lively trio of West Country scrub nurses Kay, Caroline and Pat – plus their pet talking donkey!

Rosa Branson, a well known UK artist was also on board. She wanted to experience life in Africa on and off the

The drive was pleasant with lush green vegetation and miles of rubber plantations (fig 9), a major factor in the fragile Liberian economy and the profits of *Firestone*.

On December 24th 1989, the day the civil war is said to have started, an army unit left the garrison at Ganta to try and quell a reported rebel incursion into the country. This unit was ambushed, massacred and the commander left on the road with all his limbs hacked off.

A group of nine of us travelled up in two vehicles both to support Brian Hancock doing VVF surgery at the local mission hospital and to deliver donated medical supplies. The two drivers of the flatbed had to stay in the police station at Gbarnga for about 3 hours after they were involved in a minor accident when wing mirrors clashed and the driver of the other vehicle sustained a cut lip, they were released after having to sign a document saying that they were 100% to blame and that they would pay all medical and repair costs.

We stayed in house owned by a Canadian charity called *Equip*. The accommodation consisted of mattresses on the floor covered in vital mosquito nets, cold water showers and electricity only between the hours of 6 and 10pm, when the generator worked. Nearby was a leper colony and TB hospital which was caringly looked after by 5 charming, dedicated nuns from the '*Sisters of Mercy*'. Most had been there for many years, Sister Gardia since 1963 and Rita since 1975. Basket weaving and wood carving generated some income for lepers like '*walkie talkie*' who used to be the local town crier. (fig 10)



Fig. 10 'walkie talkie' with carving

Ganta United Methodist Hospital

This was managed by Mary, an Afro-American woman married to a Liberian pastor. There were 130 staff on the payroll including three doctors, \$11000 was required per month for salaries. Albert, the hospital medical superintendent and general surgeon was on about \$1600 per month and Joseph, the anaesthetic nurse on \$200.



Fig. 11 the ward cat!

There were two operating theatres and several wards, in one of which I photographed the hospital cat! (fig 11)

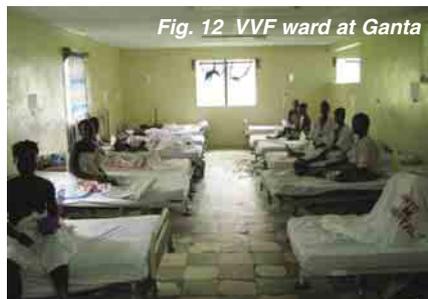


Fig. 12 VVF ward at Ganta

The wards (fig 12) and operating theatre by African standards were very clean although rather bizarrely the instruments were sterilised in a pressure cooker, outside on a barbecue (fig 13)!



Fig. 13 autoclave - barbecue model!

Much of the facility had been rebuilt after the destruction by LURD rebels in 2003. There was a charming little chapel with an unusual 8 ft high cross made out of red glass over the altar (fig 14). The faithful were summoned at 8am every morning by the chaplain banging

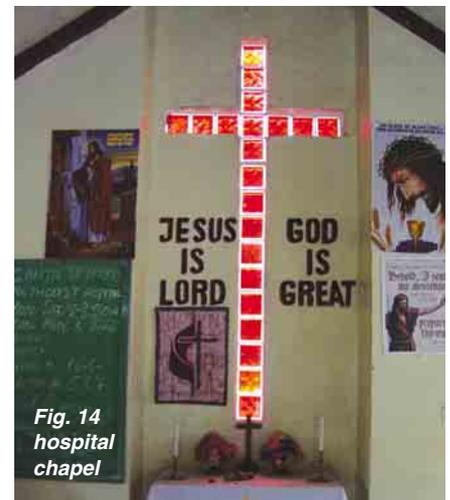


Fig. 14 hospital chapel

a spanner on an empty O₂ cylinder suspended from the branch of a tree. (fig 15)

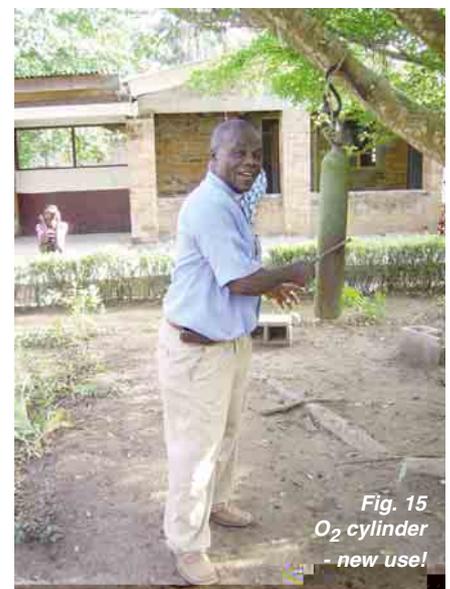


Fig. 15 O₂ cylinder - new use!

Theatre experience

During the two days I was there Dr Brian performed six VVF repairs. Joseph the local anaesthetic nurse had about 25 years experience and was particularly adept at performing spinals. There was no anaesthetic machine and his only GA technique was boluses of IV ketamine and an infusion of suxamethonium.

The patient was intubated and manually ventilated using a *Laerdal* resuscitation bag (fig 16) connected to an O₂ concentrator with a maximum output of 5L/min. The only other drugs he had were atropine, adrenaline, diazepam, lignocaine and bupivacaine. Magnesium sulphate was available for treating eclampsia but blood was only given



Fig. 16
local
ventilator

if the patient had a compatible and willing relative. Monitoring consisted of pulse oximetry and automatic BP.

As in other African hospitals I have visited, the dignity of the patient was not something that anyone cared about, all were placed in what I refer to as 'the horizontal crucifixion position'— stark naked with both arms out on boards. For the VVF cases I did insist they kept their gown on and their arms folded across the chest.



Dr Albert, the local surgeon used a nail brush to clean the perineum (fig 17) – a good way of testing that the spinal block was effective?

Interestingly Mercy Ships had to pay \$75 per patient (reduced by hard negotiation from \$150) as well as bringing all the equipment anaesthetic (drugs, spinal needles, IV cannulae and fluids) and surgical.

Brian was intending to perform 25 operations during the 10 working days. One afternoon he kindly agreed to be transported urgently by helicopter back to the *Anastasis*

to perform a laparotomy on one of his patients who had become septic seven days post-op after part of her bladder had necrosed.

During our visit to Ganta I had the privilege of meeting missionaries David and Audrey Waines who ran *Equip Liberia*. They had been evacuated 12 times during their 20 years in the country. They had some fascinating and horrific tales to tell such as David's personal meeting with Charles Taylor to tell him about a vision he had concerning his 'bad' behaviour. The wall paper in his office was the same as in the dream and during the visit he wondered several times whether he would come out of the office alive. Audrey gave an incredible account of a drive up to Ganta in a taxi with a drug crazed driver. The passengers also included a pregnant friend, the vehicle owner and a policeman!

A call in 2002 from their 14-year-old daughter would have created a terrible dilemma for any parent. She was at boarding school in the Cote D'Ivoire and had phoned to say that she was under her bed as there was a battle raging all around the school between Government and rebel forces. All the children were eventually rescued unharmed by French troops.

Equip among their many activities were involved trying to reduce the maternal mortality in the area which they estimated to be about 6000/100,000 pregnancies as compared to 10/100,000 in the UK. All pregnant women were given one dose of three tablets of Fansidar as prophylaxis against malaria in both the 2nd and 3rd trimesters. They also provided TBA (traditional birth attendant) training but the practicalities were often hindered by animist ideas such as a plank of wood being pressed on the abdomen of a woman in obstructed labour and the belief (definitely not evidence based!) that semen can poison a baby via the breast milk so a woman who says she has 'weaned' her baby in fact means that she is having sex again.

The return drive to Monrovia was uneventful. We stopped for fuel at an amazing filling station where diesel was repeatedly poured out of a big metal Jerry can into a one gallon glass demijohn and then siphoned into the Land Rover (fig 18).

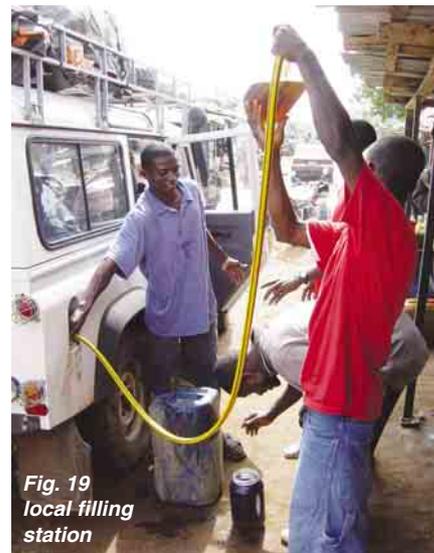


Fig. 19
local filling
station

Each of the eight gallons seemed to be a different colour but the engine did not seem to mind! The cost was \$33.

An old friend

I met Sierra Leonean, Catherine James, whom I last saw in Conakry, Guinea in 1998 when she was my little African girl, Regina Conteh's, teacher. I had paid for Regina's mother to have a Caesarean section in a Freetown hospital 5 years before to save her life.

After a remarkable series of events the Conteh family migrated to Australia from Ghana in May 2005. Catherine and her 10-year-old daughter Louise had moved to Monrovia 10 months ago. They had decided not to return to Sierra Leone because she had been told that things were worse there than in Liberia, I think that is debatable. As a teacher she has had little difficulty obtaining employment in a private school at a monthly salary of about \$27. Her daughter is a pupil at the same school and has been nicknamed 'Freetown girl' by her classmates because of her fluent English in contrast to the local dialect.

Catherine teaches a class of fifty-two 5-6 year olds and her one complaint is that discipline is far worse than among Sierra Leonean children, probably related to the prolonged civil war.

State of the Nation

Liberia is a war ravaged country of 3.5 million people, half of whom are under 14 years of age. The majority of the population cannot remember life without the armed conflict during which a quarter of a million were killed.

There are 17,000 UN troops of different nationalities including Swedes, Ghanaians, Nepalese, Nigerian and Bangladeshi, at a cost of \$67M per month, maintaining a fragile peace.

Poignant posters (figs 19, 20, 21) are displayed around town encouraging a change in lifestyle regarding issues such as violence to women, HIV and relinquishing firearms.

Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



The annual health budget, according to the advisor to the Minister of Health whom I met at a Rotary Club

of Monrovia lunch, is approximately \$32M of which only about 8% is provided by the Liberian Government and the rest by NGOs and organisations like USAID. This is about \$10/year/per person, compared to the WHO (World Health Organisation) recommended minimum of \$34.

The recently appointed Government need to address the issues of security, education, health, employment and not least the endemic corruption. There is a definite risk that now disarmed former teenage soldiers may change their mind if the wind of change and opportunity does not blow quickly enough. In the remarkable TV documentary 'An Uncivil War' about the LURD invasion of Monrovia in 2003 the point is made that 'War gives young men with no future a sense of dignity.'

The return journey

On the plane was the President of Liberia, Mrs Johnson Sirleaf, who was on her way to the USA to appear on the Oprah Witney Show. Her presence on board gave me some worry as the security checks at the airport had been almost non-existent as the baggage X-ray machine had broken down.

Also on board was BBC presenter, David Loyn, and his film crew who had been investigating alleged sexual abuse of children by UNMIL soldiers and aid workers. Their report the next evening (8th May 2006) on the 6pm and 10pm BBC1 news programmes was well presented and pointed a finger at employees of the *World Food Program* (sex for food?) and Ghanaian troops who had allegedly impregnated several teenage girls in a village near their camp.

Finally there was a attractive blonde Canadian lecturer in peace/war studies at Boston University who had been working as a consultant with *Mercy Corps*. In the past she said she had been involved with potential conflict resolution in the Balkans and various African countries.

She told me that the warlords in Darfur (Sudan) make a business out of charging NGOs to be allowed to bring in aid. Her most difficult assignment had been in the Congo where apparently rape of women was the 'norm' – she had to be guarded by her male colleagues at all times including in her bedroom.

Epilogue

Africa is a challenging but wonderful place which has a magnetic attraction for some of us. As Bob Geldof says about Africa in his excellent book [2]: 'The first thing you notice is light. Light is everywhere. Brightness is everywhere. This is not the Dark Continent. Not the Dark Continent at all. This is the Luminous Continent drenched in sun, pounded by its heat and shimmering in its blinding glare.'

I feel that small efforts to help, like those of the Mercy ship, even though they could be deemed to be 'a drop in the ocean' are worthwhile. Like the analogy of the little girl on the beach surrounded by washed up, dying starfish. When told how pointless it is to throw some back into the sea, she replies 'but it will make a big difference to this one and this one and that one'.

A new Mercy Ship, which was commissioned on April 6th in Newcastle, will arrive in Monrovia in April 2007. This ship will continue the excellent work begun in 2005 by the volunteers on board the *Anastasis* which is sadly going to be decommissioned, after 28 years of service to the World's poor. This is because of SOLAS (safety of life at sea) regulations concerning combustible materials on the superstructure of ships and the prohibitive cost involved in replacing all such material in a ship already over 55 years old. The last tour of duty for the *Anastasis* will commence in the Port of Tema in Ghana at the beginning of June.

References

1. 'While my heart beats'. By Dermott Devereux. Pen Press Publishers Ltd.
2. *Geldof in Africa*, Century 2005.