

## **Introduction**

The main reason for this brief trip to West Africa was to accompany my sister who has just written a film called '*Rhodesia*' about events in that country which took place in 1977. One of her fictional characters is a terrorist called Abaiyonga and I suggested that it might be an interesting idea for my acquaintance in Liberia, a former warlord known as General Butt Naked (fig 1), to act that part in her film.

Unfortunately my sister due to illness did not come to Liberia and her place was taken by a friend, Jeanne, who had previously visited the Mercy Ship in Monrovia. We met up with the former General, now the evangelist Joshua Blahyi, on several occasions.

## **Day One – The journey**

The outbound flights via Brussels to Monrovia were uneventful, except that I managed to leave my IPAD and a notebook PC, the latter a gift for a pastor, at security in Brussels Airport. In the queue to board the plane I met Dr Rachel an emergency room physician from the USA who was about to spend two weeks working at JFK Hospital under the auspices of the HEARTT Programme.

[www.hearttfoundation.org](http://www.hearttfoundation.org)

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We then visited a jewellery shop in Benson Street and I commissioned two silver lapel pins: a map of Africa and a Mercy Ships logo, while Jeanne photographed a child in the street (fig 5).



We had lunch at a street side restaurant chosen by Odecious not far from JFK Hospital where we experienced a local 'delicacy' called fofou and soup which contained 'interesting' chunks of meat and fish. After lunch we passed a vehicle illustrating that football is a religion for many (fig 6)!



The next event of the day was to give a lecture at the AM Dogliotti Medical School to about 30 fourth year students on 'Anaesthesia in Africa'. The problem in Liberia is that there are no medically trained anaesthetists to act as role models so the perception among medical students is that anaesthesia is only provided by nurses. I made an effort to try and dispel this attitude and several of the students (fig 7) thanked



me afterwards and expressed an interest in considering anaesthesia as a career in the future. I said that I would try to find the finance for anybody wanting to train in another English speaking African country such as Kenya, Ghana or Nigeria. I also suggested that it might be possible for anyone interested to spend time on the Mercy Ship seeing whether anaesthesia might be for them.

That evening we had dinner at the Mambo Point Hotel with a delightfully eccentric friend, Chantal, who works for a major NGO. She has lived in Liberia for six years and made some interesting comments such as the ex-pat men in Liberia fall into only three groups – mercenaries, missionaries or madmen! Back at the Royal we talked to a professor of economics from Germany who had accompanied us from the airport, and also to a UK based film producer called Simon who was involved in a project using graphic mime and theatre to try and persuade people how important it was to wash their hands after defecation.

### Day Three

That morning we visited the *Harvesters International School*. On the way we drove past several interesting road signs (figs 8, 9) and through an area of town known as 'red light' because it used to have a set of traffic lights. We were met by the smartly dressed headmaster Gabriel Kumeh (fig 10) who proudly

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showed me the notebook PC I had given him in November 2010 which was still working. We visited both his schools, one for 200 children (figs 11, 12) and the other 100 (fig 13).



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I am not sure how effective the actual teaching was, but what the schools were doing was keeping the children off the streets and giving them some discipline. The fees at the school were only \$1 per month and even so only 50% of the pupils ever paid. The children at both schools sang some songs for us and we gave a few words of thanks and encouragement. Gabriel explained how they needed money to purchase new books and also to add a proper roof and floor to one of the classrooms. He also discussed the possibility of help to purchase the site. For the last few years they have paid no rent but the lady owner who lives in America, has now handed over the management to her two sons who are not quite so philanthropic. Jeanne suggested that some of the pupils might like to draw a selection of Christmas cards from which she would then select one as her personal card for 2012. Just before we left three days later Gabriel arrived at our hotel on his motor bike with a bag full of drawings. In the afternoon I returned to JFK Hospital to meet James Serleaf Johnson, the President's son, an ER physician in the USA. My embryo idea is to organise some senior registrars from the Wessex Region to go to Liberia for two month stints, the first month with their predecessor and the second month with their successor, to assist with the provision of anaesthesia and training of nurse anaesthetists at JFK. Dr James would be happy to allow me to use the HEARTT programme as a framework

for this possible scheme. Volunteer anaesthetists would thus benefit from free accommodation, breakfast and lunch provided at the hospital. I met three residents from the USA working in the emergency room at JFK (fig 14). One of them told me that not only



did she receive her normal salary from her hospital in the USA while she was there, but Johnson and Johnson had provided her with a \$3500 scholarship to cover the cost of airfares. The idea of volunteers coming out from Britain and continuing to get their normal pay sounded brilliant but I think in the current financial climate in the Health Service this suggestion might be a step too far for most Trusts and Deaneries.

Dr James thought it would be a good idea to set up a training programme in Liberia for doctors wanting to practice anaesthesia but I think this might be difficult and it would be better if the doctors were trained in other African countries where successful training programmes are already running. Dr James offered to come over to the UK to talk about the HEARTT Programme to interested people. While I was at JFK I also visited one of the 'emergency' wards where several of the patients were children who had accidentally ingested caustic soda used by their mothers for making soap; as a result they had developed severe oesophageal strictures. One of them, 11-year-old Emmanuel, had had a feeding gastrostomy inserted (fig 15).

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That evening we had dinner with Vietnam war veteran Bill Martin who for two years had been the Mercy Ship's co-ordinator of surgical services. He was currently working as special advisor and speech writer to surgeon Walter Gwinegale, the Minister of Health. Their relationship extended over many years to when they used to run Phebe Hospital. Over dinner at an excellent Chinese restaurant in the Palm Hotel Bill told us what a contrasting personality the Minister of Health could be. Two days after he had been addressing the UN in New York he would not let his current driver take him to a funeral because he was from the wrong tribe! Bill told us there were 151 doctors in Liberia for 3.5million people, more than 40 of who were ex-pats but there were very few trained specialists. He recounted a funny story from his time on the Africa Mercy: there had been a rumour in the press that the ship's surgeons were removing kidneys to sell for transplants, so to quash this utterly false belief local journalists were invited on board but to his horror when they visited the ward there was a basin in a corner with a sign above it saying for washing kidney dishes!

### Day Four

This began with a visit to the craft market at Mambo Point, where we bought a few carvings and necklaces after some hard bargaining. After a brief rest back at the hotel we set off to visit JREC (Jamaica Road Evangelical Church), which I had supported intermittently for a number

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of years. The projects included helping to finance a toilet block (fig 16) for the congregation, providing some computers and for the church floor to be tiled. To my great surprise they

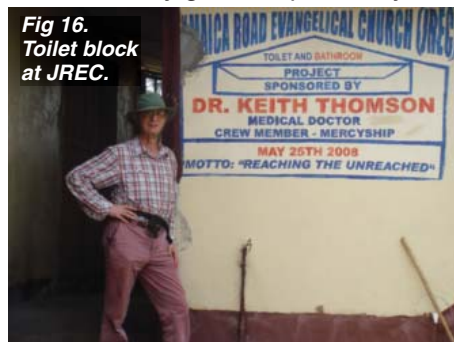


Fig 16. Toilet block at JREC.

had organised a 'gowning ceremony' for me during which I was presented with a framed certificate and a hand woven African cloak by two lady members of the congregation (figs 17, 18) while the choir sang and some prayers were said.



Fig 17. Gowning ceremony



Fig 18. Wearing gown and holding certificate



Fig 19. Kids at orphanage

After this significant honour, Jeanne and I went on to the Agnes and Alfred Orphanage (fig 19) which we had supported for some years by helping to build a computer centre and more recently a girls' dormitory which we were pleased to see was now in use (fig 20).



Fig 20. Completed girls' dormitory

Unfortunately none of the computers were working but I have arranged for some more to be sent from the Edinburgh based charity *Re-using IT*.



Fig 21. A classroom in new school

We also saw a new school block (fig 21) which seemed to be being well used as not only did the 50 children from the orphanage go there but also another 150 children from various surrounding villages. Jerome the headmaster of the orphanage told us about two proposed projects: 1) to plant some rubber trees and 2) find people who might be willing to sponsor some of the village children for \$40 per head per trimester

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(there are three to the year), to help increase the teachers' salaries from the current \$40/month. We were also joined at the orphanage by friends from the Sean Devereux Foundation, set up by his family in memory of Sean, a British aid worker who had spent 5 years Liberia before being tragically shot dead in Somalia in 1993.

That evening we had dinner at the Royal Hotel with our 'new friend' Simon and a South African trained general surgeon, Lawrence Sherman, who was the vice dean of the A.M. Dogliotti medical school and the only practising Board qualified surgeon in the country. He gave me a slightly different perspective on the HEARTT Programme at JFK. He claimed that the Liberian residents had been kicked out of their accommodation at the hospital and had to find more expensive alternative facilities outside. The previous night Bill Martin had told us about a Liberian doctor from Phebe Hospital who went to South Africa a few years ago to train as an obstetrician but only lasted a year there because he was not academically up to standard, but Lawrence said he was in RSA at the same time and the doctor was perfectly knowledgeable but had an epileptic fit in the operating room which led to his training being curtailed.

### Day Five

Monday began at 6.30am when I went for a 30 min run with Bill and Simon to JFK hospital and back. After breakfast Odecious took us to collect my hand-made lapel badges on the way to his house to meet his wife and daughter. En route we visited a lady who had had a false left leg fitted by the Mercy Ships team some years before. This seemed to be in good order and she was walking well.

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We met Odecious's family (fig 22) including daughter Mimi to whom I agreed to send some money for her to restart a college sociology course. After leaving Odecious' house we went on an interesting 'cross country' route in the redoubtable OJ2 to Joshua's house.



We took him, his wife Josie (fig 23) and their four children to a nearby restaurant. Some of us travelled in OJ2 but Joshua came on a motorbike with two of his children plus the driver, none of them wearing helmets (fig 24).



Soon after we arrived at the restaurant a big black 4x4 arrived with hub-caps which continued to spin after the engine had stopped. Out strode a large man, Joshua jumped up and yelled 'Bacu' and there was an emotional greeting between the two childhood friends (fig 25). Bacu, otherwise known as T. Edwin Swen,



was the second most senior policeman in the whole of Liberia. Although out of uniform he had both handcuffs and a pistol on his belt. Apparently during the war he had fought for Charles Taylor, whereas Joshua had been a supporter of Samuel Doe but they had never fought against each other



After lunch of curried chicken which everyone enjoyed (figs 26, 27) we returned briefly to the Blahyi's home (fig 28) before returning to the hotel for a couple of hours rest.



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We then went out to dinner with American friends Kirsten and Keith to an excellent Lebanese restaurant called SAJJ which, for a total of \$35 for 4 people, was good value. Keith used to be a dentist on board the Mercy Ship but had been in Liberia for some years working and setting up training courses for local dental technicians. He is also an expert surfer – Liberia has a reputation among the International surfing community for some very special waves. They will soon be returning to the USA with their two daughters and their adopted Liberian boys.

### Final day

I returned to JFK hospital to meet Ghanaian anaesthetic nurse Elikem who was in charge of the anaesthesia training programme, to discuss my ideas regarding sending out some senior registrars from Wessex. She seemed to be pleased with this suggestion as did Anthony Hne, one of the older anaesthetic nurses I knew from the three previous conferences I had organised. I also met Dr David, a USA based general surgeon, who was there with a couple of his residents. My final meeting at the hospital was with Dr Billy Johnson, the medical director, who also approved of my suggestion and said he was very happy to write a letter to the Wessex Deanery in support of the initiative if that was helpful. We then checked out of the hotel and went to Keith and Kirsten's home on ELWA beach where I joined Joshua's 'Christian beach party.' This was organised by Joshua and friends (fig 29) and attended by a mixed group consisting of 35 girls and boys who had been transported by bus from a ghetto area of Monrovia where most of them were living on the streets (figs 30, 31). The boys were mostly petty criminals and the majority of the girls made a living from prostitution.

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Fig 29.  
Joshua with helpers



Fig 30. Joshua with street kids on Elma beach



Fig 31.  
Myself with street kids

According to Joshua they charged only about 1USD per client. It was an interesting venture. The boys and girls were all given a decent meal, a T-Shirt and were treated like human beings. There were a couple of freelance journalists invited by Joshua who were doing both video and still pictures for a local newspaper but they wanted \$140 to submit their pictures to the editor! One of Joshua's future plans is to purchase land to build a hostel for the girls to try and remove them from their life on the streets.

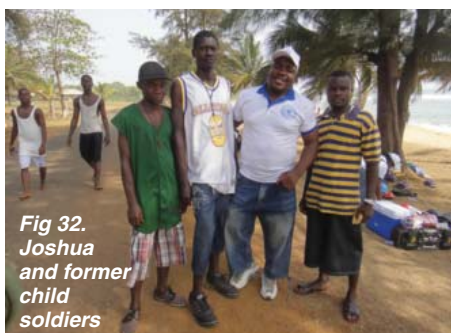


Fig 32.  
Joshua and former child soldiers

This will be similar to one he built for a group of boys (fig 32) and that featured in the film *The Redemption of General Butt Naked* shown on More 4 television in August 2011.

After an enjoyable swim in the rough but warm sea we were driven by taxi driver Marshall to the airport in a car which was in much better condition than OJ2. After going through security I was stopped and asked to accompany a uniformed man to a warehouse to check one of my hold bags which apparently had 'organic material' in it. I was slightly anxious about going there on my own but fortunately nothing untoward happened. They wanted me to open the bag which contained about 30 copies of Joshua's book I was taking back to the UK to sell, I gave one of the customs men a copy. Back in the departure area I bought a wooden box with 'Liberia' inscribed on it and then used up my remaining local money consisting of a very dirty 5 USD note and equally filthy Liberian dollar notes, totalling \$200 (the equivalent of 3 USD), in exchange for a wooden carving of an elephant.

We landed at Brussels airport at 04.15am after an uneventful but uncomfortable flight but my mood dramatically improved when I successfully managed to recover both my IPAD and notebook computer with the help of Aliza my travel agent (AlizaT@cjltravel.com) who had contacted 'lost and found' at the airport a few days earlier and arranged for an identification number to be issued for me to reclaim the items.

### Prologue

This was a successful trip to Liberia, definitely made easier by having a full time driver (at 40 USD/day) and staying at a 'decent' hotel. I had achieved everything on my agenda

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including discussing with Joshua the possibility of his taking part in my sister's film. After seeing first hand the good work that he was doing with the street children I am convinced that the 'Redemption' of the former General Butt Naked is continuing. I had fruitful meetings with all relevant people at JFK Hospital concerning my idea of getting some senior Wessex anaesthetic trainees out to Liberia. It was also good to see that the Orphanage, School and Church I had been supporting for the past five years were all thriving.

### PS

Email received 9th June 2012

Hi Dr. Thomson,

I am a Year IV student of the A.M. Dogliotti College of Medicine here in Liberia and I was present when you had a talk on the campus a few months ago. Since then, I have been seriously considering the option of pursuing a career in anaesthesiology upon completion of my studies. It is my hope that through continual correspondence with you, I may be exposed to opportunities for such study programs elsewhere since there is no such training program here in Liberia. Look forward to hearing from you.

May God bless you for your good work.

Kind Regards,

Jethro W.S. Zawolo