



CONFESSIONS OF A RENEGADE HUMANITARIAN:

Molotov Cocktails, Lepers and a Land Rover

PART I

IT'S JUST AFTER FIVE FIFTEEN IN THE MORNING. THE SHIP'S BERTH IN MONROVIA'S FREEPORT IS PITCH BLACK AS I CLIMB INTO DEFENDER #993 TO BEGIN A LONG JOURNEY ACROSS THE COUNTRY OF LIBERIA, WEST AFRICA.

Not in the mood for cafeteria coffee that too often tastes like motor oil, I skipped it, thinking wistfully of my New York Starbucks lattes.

I wipe the heavy condensation off the windshield with my shirt and grunt something inaudible in the direction of my companion, videographer Chris Bamber, as we pull away from the ship. Gate One is guarded by a heavily armed contingent of Bangladeshi UN peacekeepers wielding machine guns. They're even groggier than I, and it takes a few moments for the soldiers to recognize the white Land Rover with Mercy Ships markings on the side, and swing the port's huge iron doors open.

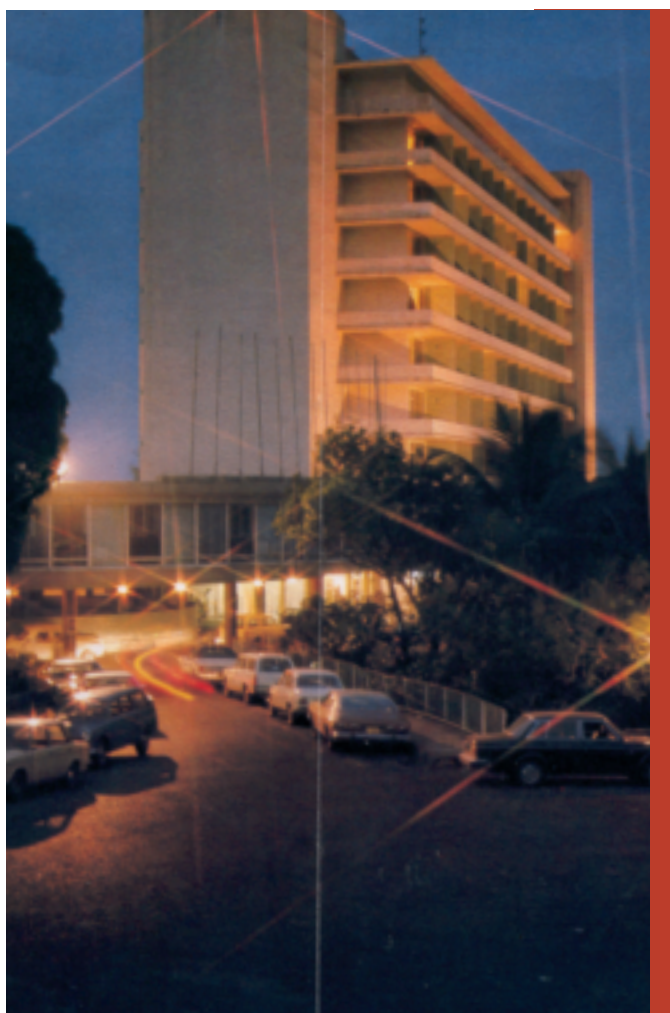
Haphazardly but securely tied to the Rover's roof are crutches and wheelchairs—lots of them. We would be a strange sight for sure in the West, but here in one of the world's poorest countries, the guards don't even blink as our vehicle passes. We're on our way to a leper colony.

Two weeks before this auspicious departure, I felt like the naughty schoolboy with the principal as I sat across from towering Dutch Captain Jurryan Schutte in a small, uncomfortable chair in his office on the Anastasis, the world's largest civilian hospital ship. We waited for Don, the ship's security officer, to arrive so we could start the meeting. Small talk failed but Don soon arrived, sternly glaring at a clipboard. The topic of solemn discussion was my proposed trip to a town about six hours' drive away, on the Guinea border. I wanted to go to Ganta to live in and photograph one of the world's few remaining leper colonies. They thought I was crazy.

The town had not been a portrait of tranquility in recent weeks. Just days earlier, a few Liberians decided to toss Molotov cocktails at the UN Checkpoint before fleeing into the bush. A Red Cross worker was thrown out of his SUV during a riot, narrowly escaping injury. Don didn't want me



Leprosy patients at the Ganta Rehab center greet our Land Rover, carrying wheelchairs and crutches.



The Ducor Intercontinental Hotel sits at the highest point of Monrovia, Liberia's oceanfront capital. It catered to luxury business travelers and vacationers before the war. Today, it is home to more than 5,000 squatters who live without electricity or running water.

anywhere near there. But I simply had to go. And then it hit me. In the seven months I'd served as a volunteer on the hospital ship, I hadn't used a single day of vacation time. And I did need a vacation.

Vacations for me used to be extended jaunts to beaches in Brazil or Uruguay, to Milan and Paris for heavy partying during fashion weeks, to Prague or Florence to ogle architecture and drink fine wine. Now I wanted to take a vacation to a leper colony. Captain Schutte and Don saw my logic, that I could do as I pleased while on "vacation," and cleared me to go, provided I signed off articles indicating the organization was not responsible for my well-being or thrill seeking.

Thrill seeking was a skill I had perfected, often to the detriment of my well-being. I was born in Philadelphia and raised mostly in the rolling New Jersey countryside. When I was eighteen, my rock band hit a patch of success and I moved to New York City. Although the band broke up soon after the move, I never looked back, spending the next nine years working in the entertainment

business as a nightlife promoter and event producer. I basically threw parties for a living, which had its perks. I was actually endorsed by both a beer and a vodka company for a year, paid to drink them exclusively. But years in a decadent business took their toll on my body and my soul.

I've been brought up to love God and others and had strayed far from both tenets. I lived selfishly and thoughtlessly. My life seemed great to others, but I felt empty. After taking some time off last year, I trekked north in search of natural beauty, finally settling on Moosehead Lake in Maine. Away from all the noise, I sought to reconcile my spirit and decided to commit to a year of volunteer service to the poor, away from all the social climbing and nonsense I'd thought so important.

I joined a humanitarian organization called Mercy Ships. They had been operating mobile hospital and surgery ships serving the world's poorest nations for more than 25 years, producing incredible results. Top doctors and surgeons from all over the world left their practices and fancy lives to operate for free on thousands who

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have no other access to medical care. The organization is full of remarkable people. The Mercy Ships’ chief medical officer left Los Angeles to volunteer for two weeks. That was eighteen years ago. And the 350 volunteers on the ship actually pay for the pleasure of serving, between \$300 and \$500 a month for room and board, which helps keeps costs down and donor money flowing where it’s most needed. The surgeries performed are modern day answers to the miracles Jesus performed. The blind see when cataracts are removed. The lame walk through orthopedic surgeries, and the mute speak when surgeons close cleft lips and palates.

I landed the position of ship’s photojournalist and traveled to West Africa. I traded my midtown New York loft for a 150-square-foot cabin with bunk beds, roommates and cockroaches. I traded chic restaurants for a cafeteria feeding 400. And bad coffee. And as it turns out, I’d never been happier.

GETTING THERE

Driving across Liberia may be dangerous, but it’s certainly not boring. The badly paved road snakes through lush rainforest greenery from oceanfront Monrovia to the river that marks the border of Guinea about 200 miles north.

On the outskirts of the capital, Monrovia, just past a defunct traffic light, thousands of Liberians converge on a frenetic marketplace. Vehicles limp past money changers and ramshackle wooden kiosks selling eggs, suitcases. Wheelbarrows seem to grow on trees here and weave crazily in and out, fighting with pedestrians and vehicles to share a single lane. The unarmed members of the national police look like cheerleaders in dusty navy blue uniforms, frantically waving arms and blowing whistles as they try to assert authority over cars and trucks moving only inches at a time.

Our Rover skirts around Firestone’s million acres of rubber trees, the world’s largest rubber plantation. Firestone, to me, is the equivalent of rent control tenants in New York City. They signed a 99-year lease with the government in 1923 and agreed to pay a dollar an acre—a million bucks for a million acres.

After Firestone, it’s through about ten UN military checkpoints sporting sandbags and ambitious razor wire art. AK-47s swing carelessly at soldiers’ sides, and they stare blankly at our white Land Rover and rooftop crutch installation.

We pass through displaced persons camps, where tens of thousands squat in mud huts built on top of each other, haphazardly roofed with unraveling multicolored tarps barely fending off fierce sun and penetrating rains. The camps sing of intense poverty. The smoke from cooking fires is listless and lost, enveloped in Liberia’s oppressive humidity.



ABOVE: A Mercy Ships Defender parked outside the Anastasis hospital ship in Monrovia’s port.

RIGHT: A broken gas pump serves as a reminder of better days. Gas is now poured from glass jars.



“The day was too short. I was determined to return and discover more.”

As the road turns from bad to awful, we nimbly dodge potholes leading to China. I'm amazed our tires can take the punishment, but at least we're in the right country to repair a flat.

LIBERIA

Liberia is a mess. It's considered by many to be the world's poorest country, so poor it's left off the United Nations Development Chart of 177 nations because there's simply not enough information to rank it. The facts are shocking. There is no public electricity anywhere in the country. There is no running water, no sewage treatment, and no mail service. Fourteen years of civil war destroyed all that. Yet there was a time when Liberia was a tourist

destination. There was a time when you could buy a Bentley in Liberia.

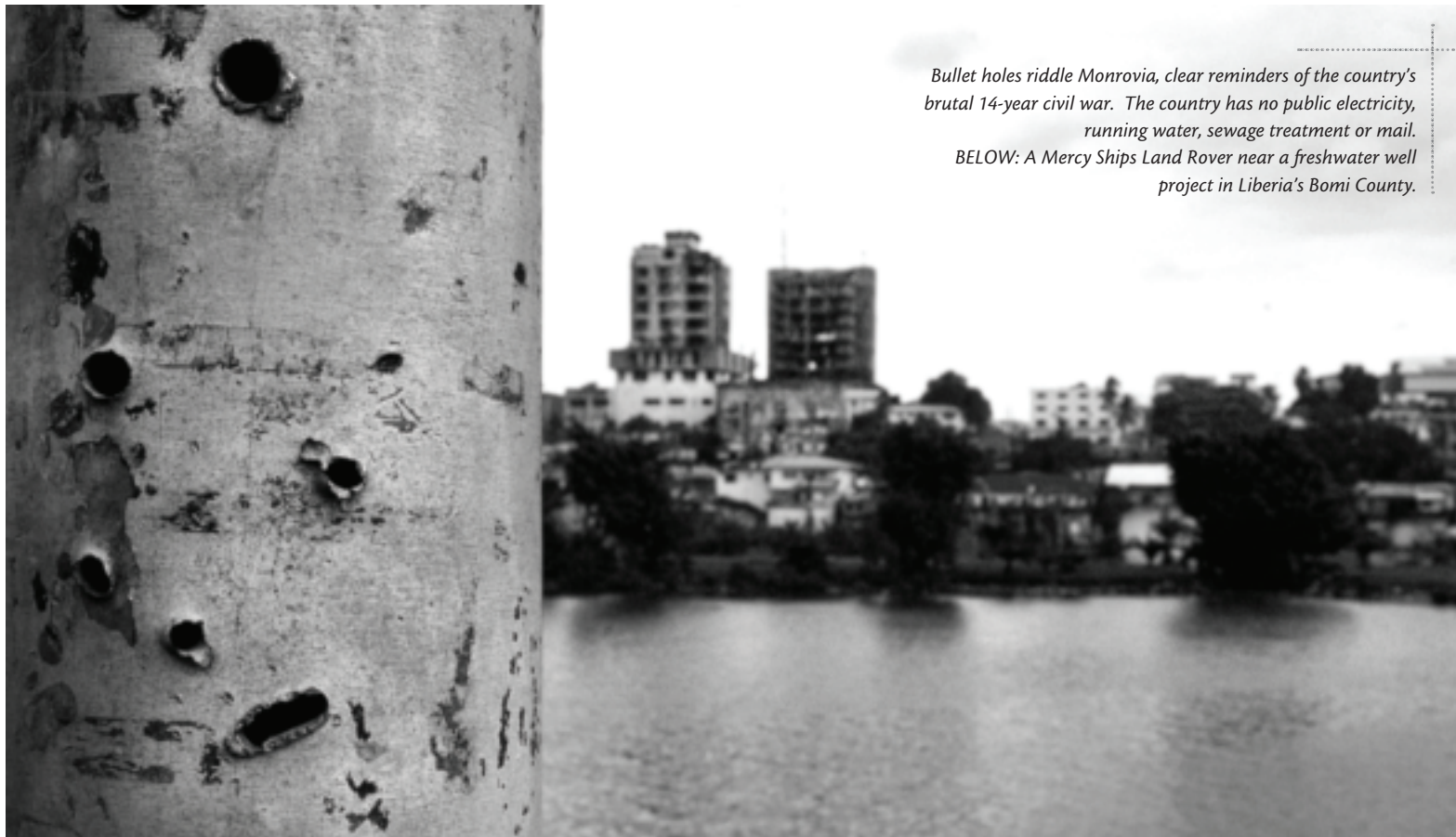
But that was then. Today, Monrovia's four-star luxury hotel that once accommodated thousands of tourists each year is now home to thousands of squatters. And while the Liberian dollar used to equal the US dollar, now it's worth less than two cents.

And where there's extreme poverty, there's leprosy.

I'd visited the leper colony in Ganta once before and found the place haunting, enchanting. Simply called "Rehab" by locals and patients, about 700 live there. The place is run by only three nurses and four Catholic nuns. As I walked through the colony with my camera, shaking outstretched hands and stumps, delivering instant visuals via my digital camera display, the patients were delighted with



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*Bullet holes riddle Monrovia, clear reminders of the country's brutal 14-year civil war. The country has no public electricity, running water, sewage treatment or mail.
BELOW: A Mercy Ships Land Rover near a freshwater well project in Liberia's Bomi County.*

the attention and touch. The day was too short. I was determined to return and discover more. I wanted to get to know these people.

Back on the ship in Monrovia, after the first brief encounter, I realized I knew next to nothing about leprosy and hit the web. I remembered Bible stories of beggars yelling, "Unclean! Unclean!" as a warning so as not to transmit their terrible disease to passing Samaritans. I had heard my share of tasteless jokes that don't need repeating. But what was leprosy and was it really contagious?

After some research, I felt rather stupid and naïve—because everyone should know that leprosy isn't contagious if it's being treated, and it is, in fact, curable. That's the wonderful thing about the information age. An hour of smart Googling and you can know more about an obscure topic than just about everyone else you know. You can learn that leprosy isn't the flesh-eating disease fueling the search engine's staggering 22,200 pages of leper jokes. In reality, leprosy attacks nerve endings, and it is due to a lack of pain that lepers injure their extremities, causing damage and deformity. You can learn that the "L" word is hated and that most prefer "Hansen's Disease" after the Norwegian Armauer Hansen who first discovered the leprosy germ under a microscope in 1873.

But even after my careful research, I still couldn't get definitive evidence as to how leprosy was transmitted. Doctors think 95 percent of humans have a natural immunity to it, and it only preys on those with weak immune systems. But still, in the back of my mind, the element of danger was there. After all, Belgian priest Father Damien of leprosy's most famous island, Molokai, contracted the disease and died of it.



VISITING REHAB

As we pulled through the gate and down the long dirt path shaded by enormous pine and cotton trees, I noticed the lepers by the side of the road selling handcarvings and baskets for a few dollars each. There was no porter to take my bags, but I felt a sense of peace and excitement. It would be an honor to live among them for a week.

We unloaded the crutches and wheelchairs, and the Land Rover drove away.

To learn more or get involved, visit www.mercyships.org
or www.onamercyship.com.

The story continues in the March/April issue of LRL.