



THE ESCAPE

Margaret Davies

The civil war had erupted two weeks earlier in this normally peaceful, even optimistic, yet poor, West African country. We were surprised it had lasted so long already, but now troops from neighbouring countries were pouring in to support the President whose own army had rebelled. Because of this ‘help’, the war in Guinea-Bissau was to go on for a year, but we weren’t to know that at the time.

The United Nations had sent ships to evacuate all foreigners over a week before and most of the missionaries in the capital had left. Six of us had stayed to look after the property, feeling sure the fighting would not last long. But daily we saw the city emptying, as missiles were fired indiscriminately into the residential area around us. Most shops were closed with nothing left to sell. The few still open kept their metal grills closed all day and served the clients through the grill. A few brave women came in to sell their garden produce daily, but

there were few customers left in this ghost town that had always been a heaving mass of humanity.

It seemed the military had a regular siesta after lunch as the bombings ceased for a few hours.

After hours of diving under the table every time one heard the whizzing of a rocket, it was a relief to get out for a few hours to see who was left of the neighbours – mostly only old men, who couldn't face the trudge across the fields to goodness-knows-where, and were left to guard the homes of the extended family. Some had come to me for help with the wounded, but I had no experience with shrapnel wounds and felt very inadequate. All I could do with any confidence was give out antibiotics and painkillers.

So, on the advice of the national church pastors, it was decided we should leave in the Land Rover before dawn when the roadblocks would be put in situ. A message was sent to friends on an island. One man had his own canoe, and he would come and collect us off a beach twenty miles from where we were. We had to take as much food as we could. The Land Rover keys were later to be left in a pre-arranged hiding place where a pastor would find them and take the Land Rover away. Simple. We cooked food for the day and left it in a pressure cooker for easy transport. How we thanked God later for that providential guidance!

Though it was still dark with, of course, no electricity, we soon became aware that the road was crammed with a

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seething mass of humanity – like ants fleeing from danger – all desperate to escape the city. Almost everyone carried a child on her back or on his shoulders. Each woman had a huge plastic basin with as many of their possessions as possible on her head – clothes, pots and pans, bedding and long, rolled-up straw bed-mats, and of course, rice, the essential to life. As dawn broke, we were driving through villages that flanked the road and saw thousands of people lying on the verandahs and in the houses, starting to stir.

It was raining, so people huddled for shelter wherever they could. The eerie silence was such a contrast to the boisterous, good-natured banter we were used to. We stopped briefly at the village where some leprosy sufferers lived to give them some money. There were few dry eyes when we left. Who would help them now?

The sun was rising high as the first rockets came whizzing overhead, exploding at random.

Pandemonium broke out as people dived for cover. In the chaos, parents and children were separated. We heard some families were still searching for their children days later, searching with renewed hope whenever a new batch of people arrived on the beach, for that was where everyone was heading. Some people came loaded on trucks, but most on foot.

Once at the beach, canoes and boats were not frequent – each taking far more than their capacity. Again, parents and children would get separated, and often they wouldn't know

where the boat their relatives had embarked on was going. We white folk would never have been able to fight our way on to these fragile looking vessels, but of course, we knew that we were due to be picked up.

Unfortunately though, our friend had left in his boat for another island, so he didn't receive our message until he returned, a week later. That was when our pressure cooker of food proved such a blessing!

The beach was simply a narrow strip, especially when the tide was in, almost covering it completely. It was bordered by mangrove swamps. There was no shade in the heat of the day or shelter from the rain which usually came at night. The two oldest ladies of our group, both over seventy, opted to sleep in the car, while the rest of us slept on the beach – quite pleasant at times, but not very restful for a week. The few nights it rained we ran to the car, as did dozens of other people, all passing their babies and toddlers in through the windows. What a scramble it was afterwards to try and get them back to their own mothers!

Water was desperately short, and our one male took the container and queued for more every morning. Fortunately, the kind pastor from the city who had been entrusted with collecting the mission pick-up, brought tanks of water from our own well every day. All day, every day, trucks brought hundreds more people, but many, once they saw the conditions, returned the way they had come. Some of

us organised meetings for the children where they played games, sang and heard Bible stories. Some were deeply traumatised by things they had seen and by the constant noise of explosions and firing that was far from comforting.

Eventually, our canoe arrived, and we piled in. The captain was strict, however, so only thirty could come on board. Many hands helped us with our luggage and I soon discovered that someone had helped themselves to my hold-all with all my worldly goods. It's surprising what you can do without when you have to!

We found the island to be almost sinking under the weight of the people arriving every day.

The population had multiplied many times over already and still they came. Food supplies were dangerously low. A white boat-owner offered to take us to Dakar in Senegal for about £1000 – he was trying to recuperate the money he had lost from the last load who hadn't paid him. But we had to get to Dakar somehow – our leader had had no news of his pregnant wife and three children who were waiting anxiously there for him.

So, after another week, our journey continued. A speed boat took us and many others in relays out to a Portuguese military aircraft carrier which was on its way to an oil rig to refuel. We were warmly welcomed aboard and made as comfortable as possible on deck. It was about 2:00 a.m. when the refuelling started, and the seas were rough. I wondered how we would

cross over to another boat which would take us further. Just looking at the waves made me feel dizzy. But a solution was at hand in the form of a helicopter. Thank you, Lord!

Again, many 'Benvindus' (welcome) from the kind sailors, though this boat had already filled up in the city port, so even a place on the floor was difficult to find. It was lashing freezing rain. Our group were good sailors fortunately, but not all the other passengers were. There was a whole orphanage on board – all babies – so when we eventually did get into dock in Cape Verde there was a huge reception with TV cameras. We were all kept waiting while each baby in turn was carried down the steps by a sailor.

There we were all officially registered as 'Refugees' and given a number which was hung around our necks. All refugees were being housed in an unoccupied psychiatric hospital out in the wilds, with not a blade of grass in sight. It doesn't rain in Cape Verde. It looked like a moonscape with hills covered in ancient volcanic rocks. Thankfully, our stay there was only a few days – lack of water was again the main problem.

Soon, the refugee organization arranged a flight for us to Dakar – the Africans who had no definite family or friends to receive them were less fortunate. We'd heard nothing from the British Consulate, whom I assume had left when the first shot had been fired a month before. As it happened, this worked in our favour as we neither had the air fares nor

an official Embassy. We therefore flew for free, while the one German was told he'd have to pay back his Embassy when he got home.

What a welcome awaited us – particularly for the father-of-three – as all our colleagues met us at Dakar airport!

Our accommodation was again grossly overcrowded, so I quickly made plans to continue on to The Gambia by bus. That brought the modes of transport for our getaway to eight! Although I and some of the others had, in true British style, considered the whole adventure something of a lark, once I made it to The Gambia the reaction set in. I vomited for several days nonstop, proving myself a mere mortal after all. However, I believe during this time I was closer to the Africans and to God than ever before.

Postscript

It would be a year before the President of Guinea-Bissau was ousted and allowed to leave the country on health grounds. Few other deposed dictators have been so lucky.

I returned 'home' after about six months to the south of the country, where there was no fighting. The return journey by land was less exciting than my departure though not without its moments.

I found our village packed with refugees from the city, mostly staying with distant cousins they hardly knew. My house – a sitting room and three bedrooms – was fully

occupied, with one family of seven in one room and an indeterminate number of young people filling everywhere else.

At least they had not been idle. They had managed to grow mountains of peanuts which, now that they had been harvested, had to be dried. So, they were piled up in the sitting room most of the time. Inevitably they had attracted other uninvited guests – rats love peanuts, so they were everywhere. At least it was good to be home.

The next problem was ... besides peanuts, what were we going to eat? And, how to cook it? No oil, no gas, very little charcoal, which I'd never used before. Another new skill to learn. It is at times like this when you discover who your friends are!

Soon, the city people started to drift back home as the danger was almost over. Our little village shrank back to its peaceful self. My Land Rover was returned to me intact. Most cars had been confiscated by the military and were never returned but mine had had a busy time distributing food supplies by famine agencies, as I had left it in the care of a missionary in the south.

God is faithful. You never really know it until you go through the tests.

Margaret Davies served in Guinea-Bissau from 1986–2004 in both midwifery and evangelism roles. The civil war lasted from June 1998 to May 1999, during which about 3,000 foreign nationals were evacuated by ship to Senegal. An unknown number of nationals were killed, and about 350,000 displaced.



STRONG TOWER

Olive Howard

(IVORY COAST – WEST AFRICA 1988)

*The name of the Lord is a strong tower,
The righteous run to it and are safe.*

(Prov. 18:10)

In our town in the forest region where I worked as a Bible translator among an unreached people group, there lived a man possessed by unclean evil spirits. At certain seasons of the moon, he became very vocal, roaming around the town. People kept their distance ...

His family lived in our neighbourhood at the top of a hill. We'd hear him passing on the road. On our property we had two bungalows, and, at that time, we were four lady missionaries living there. Two of us were long-term and two were new arrivals to Africa, staying with us for a while to learn the culture and become acclimatised to African life. We each had a new arrival living with us.

This man had spent some time receiving help and Biblical counselling at the prayer centre in the north of the country – but he would not obey their rules and was asked to leave. So, he returned home to our town again, unchanged.

Late one afternoon, we heard him on the hill, shouting. Arriving in front of our gates, he stopped and started rattling the gates to open them, yelling: ‘I’m going to kill them!’ The four of us ran quickly into our houses, locking the doors before he got into our yard. We had two large barrels filled with water installed on a tower, providing water for our houses (there was no running water system in the town at that time). He made for the pipes and broke them – all the water poured down. Then he came over and started banging on the wooden panels of my front door – still shouting. The panels began to give way and I could see him through the cracks!

I started shouting, ‘Go away! Go away!’ but to no effect. Then I yelled: ‘IN THE NAME OF JESUS GO AWAY!’ Immediately his hands dropped limply to his sides – not another murmur. He turned to leave through our gate. Then he noticed our car parked, and some new bricks drying alongside.

He picked up three and threw them at the car. One hit the roof, the second broke a window and the third one missed. He left and walked home ...

Neighbours came round to see what had happened, and to assess the damage. By now it was dusk. We saw that

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we would need a carpenter right away to repair the door – one came quickly, to make the house secure for the night. Then it started raining. We stopped to praise the Lord for answered prayer – we were all safe, unharmed. The Lord truly was our strong tower!

We phoned our Field Leader to report what had happened, and the next day he sent one of the team down to check up on us all. That night God gave us peace in our hearts, and we slept well. The following day we did a prayer walk round our property, praising God and claiming His protection.

The culprit passed our gate often, but never tried to enter again. Proverbs 18 verse 10 was our salvation. Hallelujah!

On 7th July 1958, Olive Howard boarded the 'Niger Palm' at Tilbury Docks, London, bound for the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire). She served in evangelism, teaching and Bible translation, and returned to the UK in 2001. Thereafter, she headed up regular Parents' Days to support parents of missionaries on the field.



CRASH!

Margaret White

I was a missionary teacher in Ibambi, north-east Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Our nearest town for supplies was Isiro, fifty miles away over a horrendously bad road. Before each trip, the African Christians would pray with us for a safe journey.

On 15th September 1985, my friend Beryl and I had just completed our monthly shop with reasonable success and were heading to lunch with friends on the outskirts of town before tackling the long road home. An old narrow-gauge railway track runs through the town but there was no longer a regular train service, just an occasional engine. It crosses the road quite a lot, but nobody pays any attention to it. There are no level crossings. As we passed the Post Office, we noticed a stationary diesel engine, with number 91 at the front and 92 at the back. My letter from home said my four-year-old nephew had started trainspotting with my Dad,

and we laughingly wondered which number they would note in this case.

I was driving towards the long grass near the stadium, one of the places where the road crosses the track, when beside me Beryl screamed. I braked and stalled. The train was suddenly right there! Bang! We went flying through the air, with me frantically braking and steering (useless, of course) so that it wouldn't hit us a second time. We both thought, 'This is it. Here we come, Lord.'

Then, 'You okay?'

'Yes. You?'

'Yes. Just glass in my hair. Let's get out of here.'

A crowd quickly came running and yelling at the train driver. We realised he was in danger of being attacked by the mob, so we screamed in every language we knew to leave him alone. It wasn't his fault. The local military commander, General Yossa, arrived, dispersed the crowd, and took us to our friends.

He got our two American nurse friends to come and check that we were okay. We ended up staying the night with them. I can still see their dinner table that evening, set for a feast, with pink table cover, candles and glasses, flowers and a cake with gleaming chocolate frosting like in a magazine.

'Are you celebrating something?' we asked.

'Sure! We're celebrating that you girls are able to be with us this evening. Thank You, Father, for answered prayer, and keeping these girls safe.'

CRASH!

The next day, when we saw the Land Rover, crumpled and with a badly buckled chassis, we couldn't believe we had come out of that mess alive. Thank You, Lord.

Radio Message: 'Nobody was hurt, but the Ibambi Land Rover was hit by a train in Isiro.'

Margaret White served in Zaïre (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) from 1970–1996, first in the secondary school to help young Christians enter the professions, and then travelling to the village churches for discipleship and mission awareness seminars.