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I Was There

by A. G. Hawke

Bangin' In Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone, West Africa, at the end of 1998, was to experience one of the greatest fiasco's in that country's decade-long bloody war of greed and games.

All types of characters had drifted in and set-up shop. First, there was the government of Sierra Leone itself, which didn't pay its army — which subsequently revolted and expanded the rebel forces.

Second, we had the Nigerians, who came to supposedly assist the ailing government in order to demonstrate their prowess as the dominant power in the region. However, they really arrived to ensure that the rebels remained in the bush to oversee the mining operations which allowed the diamonds to flow unabated into the greedy and bloody hands of the wealthy cartels.

Next, you had Uncle Sam, trying to support the Nigerians by making them look good in West Africa in hopes that they would conduct a civilized upcoming presidential election which would spawn a favorable government inclined to grant favorable oil concessions to U. S.-based multinationals.

The UN at that point was a non-entity. They merely had some observers on the ground, all from countries who couldn't (or wouldn't) punch their way out of a soggy paper bag. Personnel were more occupied with enjoying the local brothels and pocketing their fat per diem checks than getting the war fought — and finished.

Then there were guys like us: former soldiers, working for private companies who were not so encumbered with laws and politics.

On the opposing side lurked the Rebels, also known as the RUF (Revolutionary United Front).

Led by a former Corporal/E-4 radio operator turned drug-doing, big-talking, mass murderer and torturer, the RUF is a mix of all types of people. The Sierra Leone Army, which revolted against their non-paying government, combined with Rebels and Liberians, comprise a good portion of the "soldiers." However, many were old men, women and children — especially children — who were forced into service by the RUF.

How could they be pressed into service? Many were forced to kill their parents — or die. Usually, they chopped off their limbs. Then they were made to dance around and sing songs of joy and praise to the RUF and its evil leader, Foday Sankoh. Many times you would see the children used as shields or front-line troops during the advance in an assault, forcing the good guys to kill children or be killed themselves.

Some of the favored RUF pastimes besides the aforementioned lopping off limbs, were raping women and children, and slicing open pregnant women, then gambling to see whether a boy or girl fetus would fall out. Lovely people.

Finally, down in Liberia, the rebel leader, Charles Taylor, erstwhile supporter of the RUF thugs, became president by being more brutal, hostile and aggressive than his foes. In the end, the U.S. (former lord of that colony) acquiesced. Taylor's burgeoning offshore accounts, flush with diamond-field proceeds, must be grateful. In West Africa, brutality's the key.

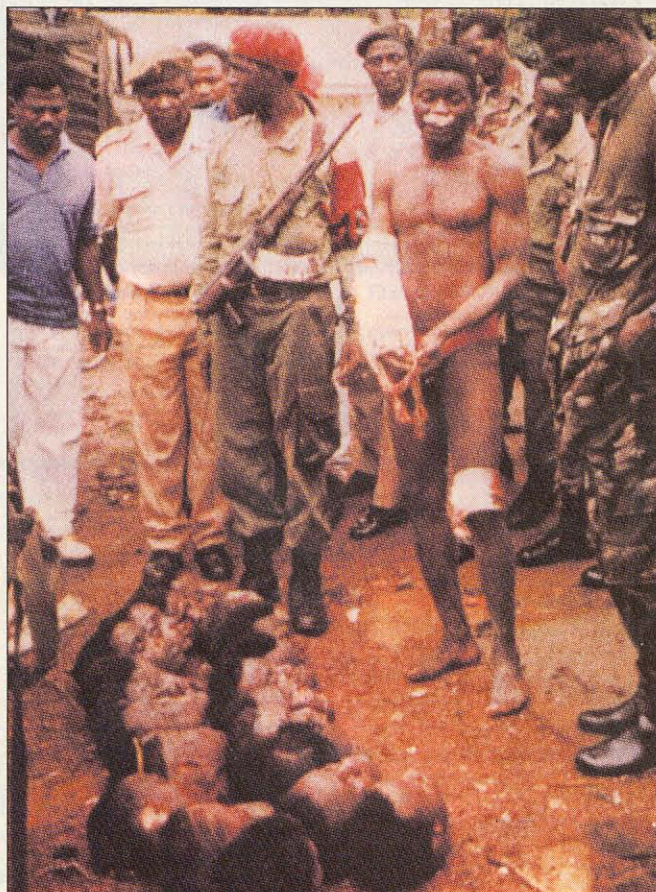
And so, too, in Sierra Leone, the former British colony.

I was working with a helicopter company doing transport missions in Sierra Leone. We were getting word from the front that the



Craigie Grice

(above) After the slaughter in January 1999, many bodies were taken to the local Connought Hospital — and left outside for days due to the high number. This shot was taken in February after our return to Sierra Leone. (below) The ECOMOG response to the rebel atrocities. It was hoped that actions such as this would spread fear to the RUF.



Craigie Grice

rebels would soon be advancing on Freetown. This was nothing new. However, this time, things were different. We were speaking with soldiers off the front lines and they were saying that there were some white men amongst the rebels. This seemed rather benign to the outsider. However, in Africa, it is quite common that the African soldiers often lack discipline, especially when it comes to fire control. Therefore, the average white soldier is usually venerated for his ability to actually drop a target when he takes aim. Black Africans frequently empty their magazines without hitting their target.

Since we were in the region, we knew most everyone there and there were no whites working with the rebels unless they had been brought in from the outside. As it turned out, there were about a dozen of east European stock. We found this out later as they brought the heads in of a couple after a few battles. They were most likely *Spetsnaz*-types on the payroll of Taylor and flown in by Khadaffi connections to change the tides, which, for a time, they did.

We proceeded on a routine 30-minute flight to pull out dead and wounded. We radioed ahead for a sitrep and was ensured that all was a go; good weather, LZ security, etc. By the time we arrived, the RUF had routed ECOMOG and lay in wait.

We spotted the village from the air but it seemed a ghost town and knew something was amiss. As soon as we'd loaded our KIAs and were about to lift-off we came under heavy machine-gun fire.

We were just a little upset that our allies hadn't warned us and wondered where a battalion could have gone in such a short time. We flew down the highway in search of a lost army and after long moments saw about 900 men, asses and elbows, tearing down the pockmarked road. As we touched down the army was in complete disarray and panic. They began to mob us and we were forced to beat them back. My rear doorgunner was pulled from the back, unbeknownst to me. I signaled my pilots to pull up and out as we could be of no use here. But as we broke ground plane, I saw that my rear doorgunner was MIA. Loneman was a former French Foreign Legionnaire (American), who later joined the 101st Air Assault. Just the day before, he had seen a convoy of his buds, french-fried by the

RUF. I turned around to yell at my pilot to return for the rescue. As I looked back to point to the door to show him why I would make such an insane request, we saw a rifle fly in the door. I stood on my toes and looked down and saw that Loneman was hanging onto the chopper with one hand and trying to kick free of three African soldiers holding on to his legs.

I couldn't get back in time to assist him as we already had too many dead and wounded aboard obstructing my path to the rear. Loneman, with a freshly fractured rib, shook them loose 90 feet in the air and, minus a new watch, barely managed to scramble inside.

That was when we knew that the rebels were coming — and that ECOMOG was losing the war.

Within a few days, a general evacuation was called as the rebels steadily advanced to the outskirts of the capitol city, Freetown. Two days later we awoke to the distant *rumbling* artillery and mortars, the subsequent *crackling* of gunfire in the streets and the high-pitched, out-of-control chatter of everyone "crying wolf" on all our walk-about's radio channels. We were asked to assist in the evacuation with our two helos (both Mi-8 "Hips").

After gathering up our AKSs, Glock 17s, extra mags and Mule Packs with grenades, maps, GPSs, medical kits, flashlights and Power Bars (for any E & Es), we flew for the better part of the day and evacuated most of the citizens in our assigned sector of the city. I then had to send one of my choppers out of country to the nearest safe haven with most of my crew and staff and kit so that we could resupply for ongoing, and perhaps long-term, Medevac and troop-support operations. Only myself, my three best pilots and a minimal kit remained. But we were to depart the next day, Christmas Eve ... or so we believed.

Like something out of a very bad movie. I literally watched my secondary chopper melt into the sunset when I heard the sound of machine-gun fire on the radio.

Our South African chopper brother was taking fire. He had con-

I Was There

Continued from page 17

tinued to assist ECOMOG as we evacuated the citizens but now he was hit and going down. Our base got his coordinates and I threw on my kit and, with my crew, jumped into the cockpit. We fired up the turbines.

We picked up 38 WIAs, in the same AO as our downed friend who, fortunately, had landed safely, though his ship had taken numerous rounds. He said he'd handle any needed repairs and expected to be up and running in 45 minutes. He then advised that the wounded we had just picked-up were actually RUF rebels who had defected back to our side — who'd informed him that there was a \$1 million dollar price on our chopper, courtesy of Charles Taylor, and a \$10,000 dollar tag on each of our heads.

I just knew I was going to have a shoot-out with the 38 we'd just evacuated. All stared at me, their weapons up, locked and loaded. I had no choice but to suck it up — and to begin beating them about their heads and shoulders, yelling at them to point their weapons downward. A little brutality sometimes pays lifesaving dividends.

No sooner had we returned to base and off-loaded our human cargo, we began receiving panicked radio advisories that the rebels were now attacking the city's outskirts with increased ferocity and to get airborne for further Medevac and troop-support missions.

That evening, we tried to get one more batch of civilians out, but the ECOMOG guards at the hotel would not permit us to land without charging us and each person on the ground the non-negotiable price of \$1,000 dollars per person to leave. We landed anyway and I told the people to disregard them and board. One of the guards pushed me away and I punched him. Bleeding, he reached for his weapon but I drew down on him first. The citizens, afraid by the display, refused to board.

We left them there in fear of their own protectors and we went to refuel and make ready for our own exodus the following morning.

We celebrated Christmas Eve with wine and women and departed at 0600 for Gambia — where we were welcomed by three truckloads of soldiers with rifles and placed under arrest ... but that's another story.

During our "R & R" in Gambia (home of the Shuttle's alternate LZ) we were informed that the Brits had departed Sierra Leone, and that Foday Sankoh was released due to RUF pressure — only to become Vice President. Such is Africa. ✕

A. G. Hawke, with whom I spent a raucous 1993 New Year's Eve in Baku, Azerbaijan, has spent much time in some of the world's true hellholes. This is his second I Was There.

— Tom Reisinger, Assistant Editor