

# INTO LIBERIA

*The following article was written in 1990 and is being reprinted here for those who have read the book "Crossing the Darien Gap" by Andrew Egan and have requested that he share some of his writing about Africa. This was written during the early years of the civil war that began in Liberia around Christmas 1989, and shortly before civil war erupted in neighboring Sierra Leone later in the 1990s.*

I climbed from the soft mud of the riverbank into the canoe. The dwarfish paddler heaved against the shore and sent us drifting into the murky river. They call the river the Mano, and the shore behind us is in Sierra Leone. But paddling toward the opposite bank drew us toward the true destination in my West African pilgrimage – Liberia.

To be a white man journeying to Liberia in 1990 was peculiar enough; to journey by canoe even more so, and those that had heard of my plans often enquired whether I wished to be shot.

"I had a friend there," one U.S. Peace Corps volunteer had

told me. "He had his hands in his pockets at a checkpoint as they were lowering the flag. They threw him in jail for it."

Such stories contrast with the tranquillity I had felt in Sierra Leone, Liberia's neighbor to the west. As one man explained, Sierra Leoneans do seek amelioration, though only by throwing their hands into the air and beseeching, "It's all up to God."

But leaving it to God is not what rebel leader Charles Taylor intended for Liberia when he launched its current revolution on Christmas Eve 1989. The incursion soon developed into civil war – and threw Liberia into crisis.

As the boat thumped onto the opposite shore I stumbled out and climbed the bank, then walked along a trail toward a mudhouse beneath the jungle leaves. Above the hut, in the sticky air, dangled a ragged Liberian flag.

Immigration was brief, though complete only when I paid a "service fee" to the official.

A soldier scrutinized me. He wore fresh fatigues, American issue, and clasped a commanding weapon. Through phantom-like sunglasses he carved an expression of defiance.

There were irritations that first evening in Liberia. The irritation of having to wait by the solitary outpost until morning, when some type of vehicle would hopefully leave for the capital. The irritation of the man charging me a "special fee" for a humble

soda pop. The irritation of the village chief accosting me as "My friend!" and offering me a bed for the night for six times the proper price.

I declined the bed and instead spread myself and my pack on the grass among some Liberian travelers, who found it shocking to see a white man preparing to sleep on the ground. Soon after, however, a man emerged from a mudhouse and beckoned. He had white hair and dusty black feet. He offered me a seat and some coffee. Later he gave me a bed for the night in his house.

The next morning I found transport to the capital, Monrovia, on the back of a cargo truck. As we drove through the interior of Liberia toward the coast, I began to sense the tension of the war. It beamed through the eyes of the child soldiers, and it echoed through the streets of the capital. It intensified daily, straining the foundations of the nation – an elastic stretched with burly arms, with a razor dragging across its middle.

I arrived in Monrovia when many were leaving. The rebels were absorbing the country town by town, and moving toward the capital. Government soldiers wore jeans and t-shirts under their uniforms – when the rebels attacked, they could strip to civilian clothes and flee.

By this stage in the war most postal and telephone communications had crumbled. The rebel advance had severed the

only road linking the entire country. Paranoia prevailed as Liberians awaited the inevitable assault on the capital.

On my second day in Liberia an army officer at a roadside checkpoint accused me of being a communist spy.

"Where will you meet your contacts?" he demanded.

"I have no contacts," I replied

"Aha!" he declared to the bewildered soldiers around him.

"I can tell that you've orchestrated your answers to sound like the truth."

Lacking evidence, he eventually freed me.

I vividly recall the second last night I spent in Monrovia: a double round of machine gun fire cracked the stillness of the night outside my window, waking me instantly. The tribal death squads. Almost every daybreak revealed their victims by the roadside, heads dismembered. After seeing three of the mutilated corpses stacked in the hospital morgue, I began to understand the horror of this revolution.

The Liberian tragedy was hardly the intent of the American Colonization Society when they settled a group of former American slaves on the West African coast in 1820. The former slaves had adopted an American-style constitution and maintained close relations with the United States. Liberians even named their capital city after former U.S. president James Monroe.

In 1980, however, Sergeant Samuel Doe staged a coup and successfully deposed then-President Tolbert. And for the first time Liberia had a chief-of-state that wasn't Americo-Liberian.

What followed, unfortunately, was not only a decade of oppression, but a decade of insurrection. Ten years after their introduction, the Doe years climaxed with Taylor's Christmas incursion.

After half a month in Liberia I had to leave. This was arduous. A gasoline shortage was stranding vehicles throughout the country. The fare to travel from Monrovia to Sierra Leone had surged from 20 to 1200 Liberian dollars. It took half a day to find transport. And when I finally found a bus it broke down a few miles from the capital in the late afternoon and I had to return to Monrovia. (Travel after 6:00 pm outside the city was prohibited.)

The next day, with the capital throbbing in trepidation, I chartered a taxi and made it to the isolated border post where I'd entered Liberia.

As evening fell upon the African coast I climbed into the same canoe that had ferried me from Sierra Leone two weeks earlier. Behind me the soldiers began lowering the ragged Liberian flag.

The paddler heaved against the shore and sent us drifting into the current. I felt the tensions lift.

We soon thumped onto the opposite shore. I climbed from the boat onto the soft mud of the riverbank.