

## MAY 25<sup>th</sup>, 1997...ANOTHER SHOCKING DAY IN SIERRA LEONE

### TROPICAL AWAKENING

Yes, I heard the muted sound of 'pop pop' outside at I rolled over at the usual 6 o'clock. We are used to these tropical sounds; they were similar to the landing of the large hawk like birds in the unattractive concrete bungalows of Seaside Cottages where I resided on the peninsula of Freetown, Capital of Sierra Leone. The muted 'pop pops' were more frequent than normal and by the time I opened the door to look for the birds it became obvious the sounds were more like mortars and gunfire....and not too far away. I had not experienced military uprisings first hand but knew virtually all attempts to overthrow established regimes began in predawn hours. So there it was... I was pretty close to the action. Having spent one-third of my life working in the tropics this was going to my first contact with this experience.

About an hour later Klaus the fit middle-aged German diamond prospector, who like many before him was being taken for a financial ride by his local partners, knocked the door. In a dither, uncharacteristic of the usually calm Klaus, he announced a 'coup' and the shooting was indeed nearby at three restaurants we all frequented. He was walking to the Mammy Yoko Hotel (about one-third mile away) and invited all at the in the Seaside Hotel to join him. What to do? The mind instantaneously races through thousands of thoughts and imageries...from the worst imaginable to the... oh, hum...'quashed' quickly by the authorities. As I knew a couple of chaps in the hotel complex I decided to let Klaus go first to the Mammy Yoko...and I thanked him for his generous offer.

Preparing not exactly what to do or expect...and having ample luggage etc. for the year's stay with the Ministry (of Health) I was reluctant make a dash for the Mammy Yoko before getting some information. By coincidence the local radio English broadcast which normally had lively African music beating away at that time of day was interrupted and an announcement began by a brigadier someone saying that indeed the Government was overthrown and - who care what the rest of the message was!!

### SUBCONSCIOUS PREPARATION

Having recently survived a very serious bout of malaria (the subject of another story) due in no small measure through the very kind support of Rudy another German fellow and my next door neighbor I felt strangely mentally prepared for the coup. Rudy, stocky, in his late 50's - as an engineer, self-taught in English, spent 30 years of his life on various field level projects throughout British influenced Africa. Rudy was the only person I ever met who knew and had a 'rough and ready' predictable model to understand African culture, its nuances and people throughout the spectrum. Of course, I had met talented Fathers, doctors, nurses and the like, as well as way too many (especially international) bureaucrats and consultants of every stripe... but Rudy had the key and bless him, he was always ready to share his insights.

Recently Rudy and I spent many evenings planning how I was to get the Ministry to provide me with a car, an essential element in the contract, which was conveniently overlooked (or ignored) upon my arrival three months before. Like a Grand Master Rudy

was able to follow the respective moves the Ministry made to my advances and more significant was his immediate sensitization to each of the players during each day's event. Marvelous really as his smile and cool beer greeted my sweaty shuffle back from the Mammy Yoko road to learn how 'his moves' went that day. How delighted Rudy was when I drove up with the new KIA (Clarius) less than a week before his departure. Rudy indeed had another Victory and his generosity was absolutely infatuating. A real gentleman and was certainly a member of my special Joie de Vivre Club.

Of all the stories Rudy told which stuck in my mind were a series during the previous (1992?) coup in Sierra Leone. During these times Rudy was working in an agricultural project upcountry, which involved the gambit of personal and technical skills to face a thrill-a-minute life. Of all the incidents that likely reinforced my thought and action were the machinations Rudy described when driving through the various (often-random) checkpoints. Laugh you might - how when the drunken and drugged soldiers' AK47 barrels were directed through the windows at him...he merely (and literally did so with a flourish gesture) pushed them aside and said: "Come on man. Vaht the Hells Up? Put that thing down. I've got to go now" (or words to that effect). Rudy's conclusion was simple: Take Charge "these people are easily intimidated by forceful personalities". And then Rudy would give countless examples of specific African local culture and society to justify his conclusion and predictable behavioral model. What one has to understand is: in the crisis situation one has zero time to react. It must be instantaneous.

#### GREETING AN UZI

About 10:00AM the shots subsided, and the eerie calm settled in the hot tropical morning. I decided to go the 200 yards to the front office to phone the computer chap and tell him our program to meet today would likely have to be postponed until Monday. The outside was deserted and only a few distant 'pop pops' were heard. I made the call to Melvin. The line was clear, but I could hear gunshots from his end. So, it was agreed we would meet in the next days.

Just as I was putting the phone down, my God, I froze in place...my legs like in concrete. About 25 yards away on the dirt road at the entrance of the office a very battered Toyota (similar to the 'bombed out wrecks' of taxis we rode in the 100 plus degrees Jakarta during the 70's) stopped - and out stepped two uniformed soldiers and a taller third fellow. Shaking in my swimming suit, tee shirt and flip-flops, I wondered what going to happen and what to do. You do not get much time for thinking...you are on instinct and autopilot. Full stop.

They sauntered in, and in the friendly African way, made a cordial greeting of Hello. The uniformed chap with the Uzi, just after pointing the rifle at my chest and nose; then sliding it across the counter near the phone - gave me the traditional West African handshake, which involved a full movement and rotating the joint clasped hands. (The Ghanaians actually end the cordial hand shaking with a clicking sound using one's thumb and little finger...but apparently that custom had not traveled this far West...or perhaps this meeting was not as cordial as I had thought.)

After the perfunctory 'How is it going' the smaller one in the clean uniform grabbed my Nepalese glass case and said, "You come with us". Instinctively I grabbed my glass back and said, "I need these." ... and... "I do not think that is a very good idea!!" Moments felt like the proverbial years but those 'dead' moments were important. They

shifted the level of perceived strength away from them and to their captive, myself. Their momentum was lost and the taller uninformed chap immediately on my left said "Alright take it easy" as he could see my legs uncontrollably shaking. In the next instance I repeated the phrase: "I did not think that is a very good idea". Then the smaller one with the eyes popping out of their sockets and most likely on drugs (but I smelt no alcohol among the three - we surely were close enough and in the steamy tropical heat it should have been evident) demanded the keys to the KIA and I said "I do not have them; the car is not mine."

By this time the momentum had switched, and they were looking for a 'graceful' way back to their car. The taller fellow said OK we will walk you back to you room. "No", I said, "I need to wait a minute. I will go back soon". The one who shook hands picked up his Uzi and they all retreated with the smaller one saying, 'We will be back for the car'. And they did...they beat the car with a mere 210 kilometers quite literally 'to death', an ominous sign, after a couple hours.

#### Another for the Memory Bank

Was the instinct directly Rudy's stories or the combination of my work in rural Africa and Asia since the late 60's or just a very lucky combination...or was somebody 'above' just looking out for me? Mystery it will remain, and we do not want to test fate.

Subsequently after four long days at Mammy Yoko Hotel I departed on a very old and decrepit Russian helicopter, not very high over the Atlantic to Guinea, guests of four World Bank officials and out of harms way. What unbelievable pity we learned of the absolutely grotesque inhuman acts conducted on the Sierra Leonean populations during the coup d'etat and subsequent year, which began on that fateful sunny morning of May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1997...a day that will live in my mind in infamy.

I am in touch with Rudy and we may rendezvous in Spain to help him build his house when the long winter lingers in the North. Tropical Spain sounds pleasant and there are always more stories and cold beer with Rudy and his wife.

Three Post Scripts including two positive but a new enormous negative one will update this story to early January 1999. First, on the positive side, by the third quarter of 1998 I had been in touch with my colleagues from the Ministry and they kindly arranged to transfer an amount to my bank for my salary up to the coup, some 15 months before. Also we were negotiating another amount for the subsequent dislocation and return air and allied costs. This was appreciated given the giant problems Sierra Leone was facing after this coup as the elected government was reinstated in the Spring of 1998. Of course it also points out the vagaries of being an independent consultant as we learn we become fodder for giant and well-established institutions and their bureaucrats. So what else is new?

The wrenching news came in the last week of 1998 when the rebels had regrouped and causing interrupted havoc to the rural population in much of the country side, actually had taken over several provincial capitals...and even lobbing rockets to Freetown New Year's Day 1999. And it is highly possible that the government may fall to the rebels again. What a major pity especially for the most vulnerable population, but also for the whole of Sierra Leone. Most unfortunate there is not much optimistic for Sierra Leone. Yet, if some sanity and less greed would ever miraculously emerge it is possible the per capita income in Sierra Leone, with its tremendous wealth in a variety of natural

resources and abundant farmland and small population (about 3 million). This is even more tragic when we note the Sierra Leone is in the special club: among the ten LOWEST Per Capita Income, according to World Bank estimates of several years ago...and the effects of 1996 and now will only push their PCI to a LOWER level.

Rudy and I had a lovely chat New Years Day 1999. I caught him before the New Year's Eve revelry although he said he and Crystal will usher in 1999 quietly at home, as I did. He had just completed restoring the 1947 tractor in the afternoon, so he was pleased to have reached that goal, within budget and right on time, to the date he planned. That's our Rudy man of the world in Africa or at home, Rudy is always at 'home'. Rudy was delighted to say their grandchild was now six months old as his daughter and family live in the flat above Rudy and Crystal. I mentioned we were below zero Fahrenheit and a 'blowing. Then we spoke about Sierra Leone and he mentioned that he had just in the afternoon news that the rebels were indeed lobbing rockets into Freetown...too many ammunitions still 'in the bush' Rudy said. As life has its Ying Yang, Rudy and Crystal will be driving to Spain end of January for a few weeks. Then they return in May after the planning permission is approved to begin with building their second (best not to refer to it as a retirement) house...and I would be welcome as Rudy's Apprentice No. 1. Why not, it sounds like another of life's great opportunity to me.

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