



PART 2

Angola

By Rodney Underwood

During the most demanding situations, we always connected with the best people. And that has been the case on this journey far too often for it to be a coincidence.

[Ben Jamin - Hasta Alaska - Kombi Life]

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~ Chapter 1 ~

It will only be for three months ...

One day in late 1994, while sitting in the back of a bakkie (the South African name for a small pickup truck), riding through a Rwandan refugee camp in Goma, Zaire, as part of a Jesus Alive Ministries (JAM) quick-reactionary relief team, I realised that this life of adventure, helping people in dire need, is the life I wanted to live, at least for a while longer.

We were coming to the end of our time as volunteers with JAM in Zaire and Rwanda, so I decided to apply to join JAM full-time and head up the quick-reactionary relief team. JAM accepted my application and went about sourcing more people to make up this team, as the rest of the volunteer team had gone back to their normal lives.

In the meantime, the man who was running the JAM base in Angola, I think his name was Ed, had given notice and the person who was to replace him was only available to arrive three months after Ed had left. The JAM management asked me if I would go to Angola, learn the base operation from Ed and hold the fort until the new person arrived. “It will only be for three months,” they said.

However, the new person never did pitch, and it took JAM over a year to source someone else. Once this

became apparent, they asked me if I would stay until they find someone else and then train the new person. I agreed and that is how what was supposed to be three months in Angola, became almost two years.

I arrived in Angola in January 1995. The drive from Benguela airport to our base in the town of Lobito, was littered with the burnt-out shells of Soviet tanks and South African armoured vehicles. The acne of artillery and bomb craters blemished the paradoxical semi-tropical arid landscape. Much of this was from the South African military incursion into Angola 20 years earlier in 1975, called Operation Savannah. Some of it was from the civil war between the Angolan government forces (FAPLA) and the rebel forces (UNITA) which was still raging on at that time. The South African Army, in which I was a conscripted soldier¹, had ceased its involvement in the war after 1988.

Home ... for now

The JAM base in Lobito was located on a thin strip of land called Restinga. Restinga stretched out like a thin, four-kilometre-long finger, between the Bay of Lobito and the Atlantic ocean, an idyllic tourist paradise before the war, which now lay in ruins. The base was a small fenced off patch of sand, a little way up from the beach, with a few smatterings of thorny scrub which hindered

¹ From July 1984 until June 1986.

walking around barefoot.

The only structures on the base were shipping containers, those big metal boxes they use to transport goods on ships. There were shipping containers for storage and others with doors and windows fitted into them, for one to be a kitchen/dining room, another to be a shower, while others were bedrooms. This is where I would live, eat and sleep for the duration of my stay in Angola.

The initial task

The task that I inherited from Ed was overseeing and supporting just over 20 soup kitchens, each feeding about 500 to 600 undernourished children daily. Many of these children were orphaned by the war. Some of these kitchens were in the city of Lobito while others were scattered all over the Province of Benguela in remote villages.

This required that Albert, my trusty interpreter/helper and I, drive every day all over the province of Benguela (sometimes together and sometimes separately) to visit each of these kitchens at least once a week. Sometimes this was over roads that, even though they were cleared of landmines, were still reported to have occasional detonations. This kept us nervously on edge when required to travel these roads. To add to the anxiety, we had to drive through at least 5 to 10 intimidating police

or military roadblocks each day which were almost never without incidents of harassment. Yet, Albert seemed to take these in his stride, which was more than I could say for myself.

Each of these soup kitchens cooked 25kg bags of blended food (provided by us) in 200 litre drums of water, either over large gas cookers or over large fires. We provided the drums and the gas cookers and replaced these when needed. We also collected the empty gas bottles, got them refilled at a government-run facility at the docks and returned them to the kitchens.

What I remember and what I don't

Once Ed had left, we were a team of four, with our two security guards Almeida and João, who took shifts to be on duty at our base around the clock. They also helped with the manual work around the base.

Like so many other young men in Angola, Almeida was full of energy and potential, which was robbed from them by the hopelessness of living in war-torn Angola. João was much older than Almeida or me. He was one of the humblest, unassuming, friendly people I had ever known. As I already mentioned, there was Albert, my trusty, always reliable interpreter/helper, without whose support, I don't think I would have made it through this very trying episode of my life.

This brings me to something that I need to add here: The memories of my time in Angola are very limited. I believe this is due to how long ago it was, but also due to the trauma of constantly being exposed to the grievous hardships that the people of Angola were going through, the constant of cruelty committed against others and due to me facing my own intimidation, threats, dangers and physical harassment over an extended period of time.

I am therefore very embarrassed to say that I can't even be sure that I remember my interpreter's name correctly. His name, Albert, may not even be that. This is particularly embarrassing since we spent every day that I was in Angola together and considering the immense support that he gave me.

But unfortunately, many of the memories of my time in Angola (including people's names) are either gone or extremely vague. There were so many good people whom I got to know. Many who were especially supportive friends and yet, to my shame, I can't remember many of their names. (I'm not even sure of Ed's name.)

I was also unable to keep contact with anyone once I finally left Angola, as this was before social media and the communication systems in Angola at the time were almost non-existent.

So, if you are reading this and I mention you but I get your name wrong or I have forgotten your name, please forgive me.

Of the things that I do remember, many are so vague that I am unable to make enough sense of them to be able to retell. Then there are some things that I do remember but are too emotionally difficult for me to retell.

Regret

If only I could go back in time and change

This is the age-old phantom, with which many of us have often wrestled. However, if I actually could go back in time, back to Angola, the one thing that I would change is the way that I valued my staff. As an ignorant foolish young man, to my shame, I still had so much to learn about the value of people. I merely saw my staff of workers as exactly that, workers, nothing more.

In my last few days there, I was reminiscing about what I had achieved for my workers, specifically my two security guards, Almeida and João. I had largely improved their working hours by employing more part-time workers. I changed their wages from a monetary system to a food-for-work system, which with the local currency having virtually no value at all, meant that they were now getting a food wage worth many times more

than what they were previously getting. I was also able to offer many young people part-time employment.

As I was thinking about all this, I was feeling fairly good about myself, when out of nowhere, I had an unexpected epiphany:

“Unless you see your workers as people with hopes, dreams, goals, expectations and potential for the future and have worked with them towards that future, no matter how good you have been to them, you have treated them no better than a good farmer treats his cattle.” Right there my pride turned to shame. This revelation has had a profound impact on how I would view people who would work for me and with me in the future.

~ Chapter 2 ~

The work grows exponentially

Shortly after Ed left the soup kitchens to me, the European Union donated 5500 tons of food to JAM to be used in Angola. This consisted of bags of maize meal, bags of beans, bags of sugar, tins of oil and bags of milk powder. To put this in perspective as to how much this actually was, the United Nations' World Food Program in Angola only had 2500 tons of food. As a result, my task grew exponentially. In addition to running the 20 plus soup kitchens, I was to arrange the transportation and warehousing of the five and a half thousand tons of food. I was then also responsible for distributing some of the food to needy communities and refugees. The bulk of the food was used for wages in food-for-work projects, such as rebuilding schools, latrines, community centres, etcetera. We also initiated other food-for-work projects such as planting trees in various villages with saplings that JAM sourced from donors. Albert and I approached various community leaders and asked what projects they needed to be done in their village. They would be required to find the workers, and we would supply the needed resources and the food to pay for the labour. We then oversaw the projects to ensure their smooth running. At one point in time, I was overseeing about 7000 workers and paying them with food.

The ingenious portable food factory

I would occasionally get a message from AMI Importers and Exporters at the Lobito docks that shipping containers had arrived for me and that I needed to arrange for a truck and trailer to collect them and a crane to off-load them at our base.

On one occasion AMI had another delivery of two shipping containers for me. In these, JAM had sent a portable food factory to blend the donated food into 25kg bags of a specially formulated (by nutritionists) anti-malnutrition mix that could be used by our soup kitchens. This factory was ingeniously designed by JAM's leader and founder, Peter Pretorius.

The factory was made up of two shipping containers transported on the back of a truck with a trailer. The truck had a built-in crane to load and offload the containers.

JAM also sent one of their veteran drivers to drive the truck and help with the construction of the factory. He was a tough South African ex-farmer who had driven trucks for JAM all over Africa. I can't remember exactly how long he stayed with me in Angola; it may have been a few months. His is also one of the names that I am not able to remember. For this I humbly apologise. I do, however, remember that his wisdom and field experience that he shared was invaluable.

The containers were placed on the ground, side by side

with about six metres between them, each with the main entrances facing the same direction. Both containers had a smaller door cut into the side near the back. These doors were on opposite sides of each container, so that when the containers were placed side by side, the side doors would face each other. One shipping container carried bags and tins of the various food types donated by the EU. The other had machines for blending the food. The container with the machines also carried sheets of corrugated metal, some planks and empty 25kg bags.

The corrugated metal sheets and planks were bolted together to build a tunnel of two walls, a roof and a floor which connected the two containers into a U shape, so that one could pass from one container to the other through the side doors and the tunnel. The tunnel's width was about two and a half metres as was its height. It was about six metres in length, almost the size of a shipping container. The blending machines were placed in this tunnel between the two containers.

The food was then brought from the one container, through the side door into the tunnel. This was then blended and packed into the opposite, now empty container, in 25kg bags.

Once all the blending was complete, the machines, the tunnel walls, tunnel roof and tunnel floor were dismantled and placed into the container that had earlier contained the unblended food and was now empty. The

containers were then loaded onto the trucks to move on to the next location.

The whole process of offloading and building the factory so that it was ready to work, took a few hours. Packing the factory up again, ready to travel, also took a few hours. The idea was that if the war took a turn and headed in our direction, we would be able to pack up and evacuate the area before the conflict reached us.

Mr King

Not only did AMI do importing for us, but we would also hire trucks and cranes, rent warehouses and on occasion buy a truck load of water from them.

AMI was run by a man whom I knew as Mr King. He and his family seemed to take a liking to me, often inviting me to join him, his wife and their two children for family meals. His daughter, Patricia, who was in her final year of high school, taught me most of the Portuguese that I learned in Angola. I also often got a guided tour of Lobito from the back of her scooter. Lobito was a city of vast contrasts, where people lived in absolute poverty. Yet in places, on the same street, the affluent also lived in their relatively luxurious houses. Due to Mr King's success in business, the King family were of the fortunate few to be comparatively well off in this devastated, battle-scarred part of the world. Sharing meals in the safety and

tranquillity of their home was a comforting escape from my day-to-day trials.

I previously mentioned the lack of communication systems in Angola at that time. This was still the time before cell phones and Lobito (it seemed) did not have a working land-line telephone system or a working postal system. The AMI office was my only means of communication with our head office in South Africa via a telex machine, which Mr King kindly availed to me. With this, I could send short messages and then I would wait for up to a day for the reply. The only reasonable way for me to communicate with my family, or anyone back home was to send a telex message to JAM's headquarters and ask them to pass the message on and to return any replies to me via the same telex system. This is how I learned of my grandfather's passing.

Another method was to write a letter and wait for someone from JAM to fly in from South Africa for some reason or another, and ask them to post my letters in a South African post box, when they got back home.

Warehouses and Wonders

To warehouse five and a half thousand tons of food was a mammoth undertaking. As I mentioned earlier, this amount was almost double what the United Nations World Food Program in Angola had. I can't remember exactly how many warehouses we used, but I do

remember that these were each much bigger than a large school hall and were located at various places over Lobito. Once the food started arriving over a period of many days, I had to arrange trucks, hire armed guards and labourers. The labourers were to offload the arriving food into the warehouses and later to stack the food onto wooden pallets. They would then continue working in the warehouses restacking where needed, helping with stock counting and control. They would also eventually reload the food onto trucks for distribution. The guards, armed with AK47 Kalashnikov assault rifles, were to guard the food in the warehouses and in transit to the various distribution points. I remember spending plenty of time on admin, keeping track of every bag or tin that entered and exited the warehouses, where they went and what they were used for.

It was at one of these warehouses in a very rundown part of the city that I had two scary but impactful experiences.

On one occasion, I saw a young homeless child sneaking around the warehouse. I shouted a challenge to him, causing him to bolt out of the warehouse, over the dusty street and into a broken down, abandoned building. I pursued him into the building to see if I could direct him to one of our soup kitchens, but he was nowhere to be found.

As I ascended a rickety dust-covered staircase, suddenly, out of one of the remnants of a room, emerged a soldier, still in uniform. I could immediately see that he was

stoned out of his mind. In an absolute rage, with bloodshot eyes rolling in their sockets, he came at me with a drawn bayonet. I froze in fear and then, out of pure instinct, I shouted the only word that came to mind, the name 'Jesus'. Instantly, he paused, shook his head, slightly confused as to how he got there. With clear eyes, he looked at me and asked what I was doing there. He had so completely calmed that I was able to speak with him about what had just happened between us. I can only hope that this incident had as much impact on him as it did me.

The second incident worth mentioning, happened one day while taking stock in this same warehouse. Another soldier, also stoned, drunk, or both, staggered into the warehouse shouting, “Onde está seu chefe?” (“Where is your boss?”)

The workers all called out, “aqui está ele” (“here he is”) pointing to me.

The soldier looked in my direction and repeated more aggressively, “Onde está seu chefe?!”

Again, the workers pointed at me with a more nervous, “aqui está ele!”

He walked right up to where I was standing, still shouting, “Onde está seu chefe?!” Somehow, he was unable to see me, despite me being about half a metre right in front of him. I'm not sure if this was because he was so stoned or if it was God's divine protection, but he then turned around and in frustration, walked away. As he left the warehouse, the workers and I could see that

behind his back, he had a hand grenade in his hand.

The makeshift valve

At one end of our base, we had a large concrete water cistern sunk into the earth so that the top of it was level with the ground. It was rectangular, about 2 metres deep, 5 metres in length and 3 metres wide. It had a metal manhole cover and ladder rungs built into the side on the inside so that one could climb down into the cistern. Inside, at the bottom, protruding out of one of the sides, there was a pipe opening, about 10 cm in diameter, through which the local municipality could supply water into our cistern. We would then have an electric water pump, to pump the water from the cistern to tanks on the roof of the shipping container which was the kitchen. From these tanks we fed water to our taps. The water was not safe for drinking as it came straight from the river that carried many waterborne diseases, including cholera. We therefore had to boil a large pot of water daily, for at least forty minutes, after we had poured it through a sheet to remove impurities. Once cooled we would have enough drinking water for the day.

Everyone along Restinga also had similar cisterns and because we were all just above sea level, our cisterns were all at the same height and were all interconnected. This I discovered when on occasion the municipal water supply would dry up and I would then have to buy a

truckload of water from AMI, which also came directly from the river. The truck would arrive and fill our cistern through the manhole at the top. Soon, however, our newly purchased water would run out of the supply pipe, into everyone else's cisterns, which made it useless to buy water for the base when we had none. One solution was to block the supply pipe closed and only buy our water from AMI. This was not really viable, as the municipality still supplied water fairly regularly.

The only other alternative was to somehow build a one-way valve that would allow water to come in but prevent the water from leaving again. Resources were extremely limited. As I pondered over this at breakfast one morning, I suddenly had an idea! In my mind I could picture how I was going to do this, almost as if I had drawn it on paper.

Quickly, I searched through what I had stashed away in our storage containers and found what I needed; fibreglass sheets, a tin of fibreglass resin, about ten metres of PVC piping, duct-tape and two empty one litre plastic bottles.

I cut off about two and a half metres of PVC pipe, of which I inserted about twenty centimetres into the cistern's supply pipe. I then sealed the cistern's supply pipe off with the fibreglass and resin so that water could still flow into the cistern, but only through the PVC pipe. I then duct-taped the two plastic bottles to the far end of the PVC pipe, which was flexible enough to allow the

bottles to float on top of whatever water would be in the cistern, keeping the opening of the PVC pipe above the water surface. This then allowed water to flow into the cistern through the PVC pipe. When the municipal water table was above the level of the end of the PVC pipe the higher, external water pressure would cause the water to flow into the cistern. When the municipal water table dropped below the end of the PVC pipe the floating bottles kept the PVC pipe's opening above the water level in the cistern, preventing any water flowing back out.

As a result, we kept whatever municipal water we had for longer, meaning that we needed to buy water less often. When we did need to buy water, we didn't end up sharing it with the entire Restinga.

~ Chapter 3 ~

The FAPLA major

Towards the end of my stay, a Portuguese family, José Cardoso, his wife Ana and their young daughter arrived in Lobito as the ones who would finally take over the running of JAM's operations in Angola from me. José was a man who would not shy away from anything. He was always ready to tackle any task. He was also innovative, raising chickens for their eggs and meat at our base.

One afternoon, while driving to show José the location of one of our more remote soup kitchens, we were heading back to Lobito. As we came around the corner of a dusty track through some thick bush, there was a chain suspended across the road, blocking our path. I recognised this as an unofficial roadblock and prepared myself for trouble.

As I suspected, as soon as I brought the vehicle to a standstill, a group of soldiers appeared out of the bush, pointing their AK47s at us. Shortly after an officer approached us. By his uniform and insignia, I could see that he was a FAPLA major. "You are going to Lobito. You will give four of my men and me a ride into Lobito." he instructed.

"No, I won't," I countered, "because you're misusing your authority in an attempt to force me to take

you. Had you just asked, I would gladly have obliged.”

At this, the major got quite aggressive as he pushed past me to climb up onto the back of the bakkie. I was, however, not going to allow this, so I grabbed him to stop him from climbing up. At once, I became aware of AK47 rifles being cocked, but I stood my ground, “Major, if you tell your men to lower their rifles and be polite enough to ask me for a lift, I will take you and your men to Lobito.” It was not easy to hide my relief when he did just that. Back in the bakkie with the major and his four men in the back, José admonished me. “You’ll get us all killed!” he exclaimed.

I answered, “I’m sorry, but I have to stand up for what I believe is right.” As we approached the city, down the last sandy hill, I had a strange conviction that I had not treated the Major with love (God’s love). This doesn’t mean that I should have backed down. By no means! But it was about how I treated him, with a lack of respect. Although this seems quite silly in hindsight, I stopped the bakkie, gave each of them a JAM calendar and offered to take them all the way to the front gate of their base.

The FAPLA commandos

One day, I was walking through a somewhat rough part of the city, when I was approached by a soldier in FAPLA commando (special forces) uniform.

“You! You’re South African, aren’t you?” he

challenged, “So you were a soldier, weren’t you?”

Even though he probably saw any South African ex-soldier as an enemy in the war they were still fighting against the UNITA rebels, I had become well known in those parts due to the work I was doing there, so there was no point in me denying it.

“Follow me.” he instructed. As he was armed and didn’t seem to be giving me any choice, I followed him through a number of alleyways until we came to a courtyard between buildings. There were a few old tables surrounded by wobbly chairs. I was told to sit. So I sat.

He called a young boy over, to whom he whispered a few inaudible words. The boy ran off. Soon the boy returned with four more soldiers, all armed and wearing the same commando uniforms. As you can imagine, I was feeling a little apprehensive, as I had no idea what they intended. He then called over to a man standing nearby who turned out to be a waiter. He asked me what I would like to drink and ordered drinks for all six of us. At this point I was really confused as to what was going on. The waiter disappeared into a nearby building, re-emerging with our drinks. Once we had received our drinks the soldier toasted me and said, “I’m buying you a drink because you and I are brothers in arms, it’s the politicians that put us on opposite sides.” I was flabbergasted as a wave of relief washed over me. This was completely unexpected.

The conversation that followed was enthralling. To hear the stories, opinions and views of soldiers from the other

side, with the understanding that these soldiers were still in the thick of a war in which we were once their enemies, was astounding.

He then told me to meet him the next day in the same place with my bakkie. I asked why, to which he answered, “You’ll see.” So as instructed, the next day I drove to the same place, to find the same five soldiers already there.

With all of them in my vehicle I was directed where to go. It turned out that they were taking me on a tour of some of the abandoned Cuban army camps. As an ex-soldier, to be walking through the same camps and barracks where our previous enemy had trained, marched, eaten and slept, was surreal.

I noticed that the motivational slash propaganda posters that still hung on the walls looked so similar to the ones that we had up in our barracks. Just these were in Spanish and Portuguese, whereas ours were in English and Afrikaans. Also, I’m a little shy to admit that my first thought was, “Our obstacle courses were a lot higher and longer than these.”

What an absolute privilege and honour it was, to have met those men and have this experience with them.

The richest man in Lobito

Due to the ongoing civil war, the local currency, the Kwanza, had in effect no value. When I first arrived, the Kwanza had a value of 1.8 million to the US dollar. When I eventually left, almost two years later, the Kwanza had plummeted even further to a value of 45 million to the US dollar. We would sometimes joke that you couldn't give a million Kwanzas to a begging street kid. In reality this wasn't far from the truth. Therefore, the commodity that had the most value and was actually seen as currency, was non-perishable food. Taking this into consideration, I had been given charge of more food than anyone else in Angola, with the possible exception of the government. As I mentioned previously, I even had substantially more than the United Nations. Consequently, most people there saw me as the richest man in Lobito, even though I was living in a shipping container, washing my clothes in a bucket, only having cold showers, needing to eat from the bulk food storage and sometimes catching snakes, leguaan, crayfish and crabs just to put some meat into my meals. I did have a budget to run our operations, but this was not for personal use.

Inevitably, my access to this amount of food, seen as wealth, attracted the attention of some powerful corrupt people, who also wanted their piece of the metaphorical pie that I was holding. I would regularly get visits from these unscrupulous men, some politicians, some high-

ranking policemen and others trying to persuade me into their schemes. After many months and many wasted hours of entertaining these visits, I eventually had enough. I stood up one day and said, “Gentlemen, I have come here to help your country in her time of dire need, but what you are wanting to do is hurting your country and your people, so I will ask you to please leave.” Each man stood up and as was customary, despite their anger at me, took my hand in two of their own, shook it with a broad smile and walked out. The last man to leave, a high-ranking policeman, did the same. As he shook my hand he said through his smile, “We will kill you.” and also left. For a while, I just stood there with a cold sweat of fear that passed through me like a haunting of wraiths. I now dreaded the prospect of travelling around the province, especially the roadblocks. I would approach each roadblock and wonder if this was the one where the policeman’s promise was going to be carried out. The roadblocks were already intimidatingly and physically abusive enough before the threat. But now, after the threat, they were terrifying. I eventually got to a point where I felt that I couldn’t go on.

There is a phrase in the Bible in 1 John 4:18 that reads, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” I could never understand this before. Surely, it’s faith or trust that casts out fear. How can it be love? It just didn’t make sense to me.

One morning I was sitting on top of my shipping

container bedroom, praying. Looking out over the ocean, I told God that the fear was too much and I needed to go home. I was done. In tears I sat there with nothing more to pray, when an inexplicable peace came over me as I felt that God was telling me, “Rodney, if you love a man, you cannot fear him.” Right then, I was able to see the soldiers and policemen through God’s eyes, as he sees them, with the love and compassion that He had for them. This was something that I could not do on my own. The fear was gone. With that, the phrase in 1 John 4:18 now made sense. From then on, I was able to approach the roadblocks without fear. The intimidation and abuse didn’t lessen and the threat of being killed was still as real as ever, but the fear of it was gone.

~ Chapter 4 ~

A praia e o mar

At the end of an arduous day in Angola, the beach and ocean being right next to our base, provided a welcome getaway. Any moment that my duties would release me, I would bolt out of the gate onto the adjacent beach with my mask and snorkel, straight into the refreshing water of the Atlantic Ocean. Being submerged in water has always been my happy place. It was my thing. I could hold my breath longer than most people I knew. My personal record for swimming underwater with one breath and no fins was 80 metres. All my life, if an activity involved water, I was there, whether it be surfing, underwater hockey, free diving, scuba or just swimming. So having this oceanic wonderland right on my doorstep was a gift.

The Restinga beach, about four kilometres long, is split into sections of about 200 metres each, by breakwaters formed of large rocks and boulders, which stretch out about 50 to 70 metres into the ocean. The ocean floor dropped so steeply that at the furthest point of a breakwater it was between 10 to 20 metres deep. The steepness meant that there were no large waves and the breakwaters kept the water relatively calm with excellent visibility. This made for ideal diving conditions and the base of each breakwater was teeming with fish and crustacean life. I would spend a good deal of time at the

bottom of the ocean around these breakwaters, hunting for crayfish and crabs, despite often being warned by the locals of sharks.

On one occasion, I was down at about 15 metres at the base of a breakwater, when I looked up, I could vaguely see the silhouettes of two young guys who had watched me dive in. They were running about on the breakwater looking down in a panic at where they last saw me. I guessed that they thought that I had been down there too long and were concerned that I may have been drowning. Eventually I heard a muffled splash and looked up to see one of them dive in and try to swim down to me. He got about halfway and turned back up. On a mischievous whim, I swam around the end of the breakwater and came up on the other side. I climbed out to find the two lads frantically staring into the depths. I came up behind them, looked down into the water with them and asked what they were looking for.

“There’s a guy down there!” they answered, still in a panic. “He’s been down for a long time. We think he’s... Oh... It’s you... But how?”

I explained and we all had a good laugh together.

Going for long walks on the beach was another means of escape. The beach had so much to offer as a distraction. There were the beach volleyball and soccer games, the beachside open-air restaurants with people sipping on drinks, the fishermen, people swimming and the sunbathers who were always friendly and often invited

me to sit with them and chat, notwithstanding that these were often women with no qualms about sunbathing topless.

These walks were my therapy, opportunities to sort out my thoughts, pray and process all that I was experiencing daily, especially in the cool of the evening.

One night, on one of these walks I had one of my most memorable experiences ever. It was a dark, moonless night. The ocean waters were pitch black except for the very faint white splashes of the tiny waves. When slowly these dim white splashes seemed to light up, first faintly, then getting brighter and brighter. Until each little wave break was a bright blue luminous glow. The fish started to go crazy and kept on jumping up into the air, splashing as they landed back into the water with a blue flash. At first, I was confused as to what was going on, but then I realised that this was fluorescent plankton, known as “Bioluminescent Dinoflagellates”. I had previously read about these plankton that glow when the water is disturbed around them.

This was an opportunity that I was not going to miss. I stripped down to my shorts and dived into the pitch-dark water, which instantly exploded into a myriad of lights all around me. It was absolutely indescribable!

I got back to the base still buzzing with excitement, eagerly needing to tell someone about it...

But I had no one to tell. My family and friends were in another country, with no way for me to speak to them. I

was even unable to go and tell Almeida, who was on guard duty that night, or almost anyone else there, as my Portuguese was not yet at a level where I could start to describe what I had just experienced. Consequently, this was one of the times that loneliness would set in like an oppressive tormentor.

My every day was full of people, mostly people who saw me as someone who could provide something to relieve their struggles, or people with whom I would conduct business, but almost no one with whom I could actually have a conversation on a personal level. There were the occasional exceptions, such as the King family. But, when I got home in the evening, after a tough day, back to the base of shipping containers, I was alone. It was times like this when the loneliness would become so extreme that it would literally make me panic with claustrophobia. Now I'm someone who can handle small spaces, like crawling through narrow underground tunnels linking caves, without feeling any anxiety or claustrophobia. But the loneliness that I felt in Angola at times, felt like it was crushing me. I have never felt this at any other time in my life.

Connecting with the best people

Angola was a land of extreme contrasts. The soul-destroying loneliness that I just mentioned in the previous chapter, was juxtaposed with occasional times of connecting with incredible people.

Jovens Com Uma Missão (JOCUM) the Brazilian arm of Youth With A Mission (YWAM) had their Angolan base in a village called Catumbela which is about 15 kilometres south of Lobito. Ed introduced me to them when I first got to Angola. This was a wonderful group of people from Brazil, made up of full-time staff who had committed their whole lives to helping the people of war torn Angola and volunteers who would come out for a year or more to assist in their work. The base was founded and run by a couple named Ismael and Sibeli who had a young toddler daughter still running around in nappies. As far as I understand from their Facebook page, Ismael and Sibeli are still with JOCUM in Angola. Although they have moved to the city of Huambo.

Through these people I got to really appreciate and love Brazilian culture. They came across as such vibrant and carefree people. Any chance I got when passing through Catumbela, I would pop in to visit. Despite the language barrier, I felt a real connection with them. There was a tangible sense of peace and community at their base.

These were tough resilient people who had endured many trials. Even their base was constructed from bare rustic essentials. Despite having lost friends and family members to the hardships of the war and diseases such as malaria, they never considered leaving.

One day I was at my base when a vehicle stopped and hooted frantically at my gate. I went out to find a few of the JOCUM people, looking very worried. They had one

of their guys with them who was so sick he couldn't even walk. We carried him to my bed. He was delirious and sweating profusely. According to the JOCUM nurse who was with them, he had a severe case of malaria. He was in a very bad way. We weren't sure if he was going to make it. The nurse put up a one litre drip of quinine which she poured into him intravenously. Later a doctor confirmed that this was just in time to save his life.

In my time in Angola, I got malaria twice. Mine was not as bad, but it was bad enough. When asked what it was like, I would best describe it by saying, "You get to a point where you're scared that you're going to die and then you get to a point where you're scared that you're not going to die." However, my friends at JOCUM were there for me while I was going through this. As I said, wonderful people!

The UNAVEM soldiers

Another group of South Americans that I got to know and admire, were the Argentinian United Nation soldiers. These were soldiers from Argentina who were 'lent' to the United Nations peacekeeping force known as UNAVEM. Their job was to perform mine-clearing. This, in a country with an estimated 20 million unexploded land mines², which is 6 million more than the entire population of Angola. They would arrive as

² According to UNAVEM at that time. (1995)

playful vibrant young men, full of life. They would go out into the field for two weeks at a time, and those who survived, came back as shell shocked veterans. I can only imagine what they went through out there.

I made friends with one of them. His name was Augustinio. Even though he spoke Spanish, it was similar enough to Portuguese and by then, my Portuguese was sufficient enough to be able to struggle through a conversation. Just before he left for one of his patrols, he gave me his blue UN soldier's cap, which was part of their uniform. I asked if he wouldn't need it, to which he answered that while on patrol he wouldn't need it and he could get another one when he got back. He never did make it back. I have his cap still and am honoured to wear it in remembrance of him.

Visiting volunteers

There were times when the tedium and isolation was interrupted by the arrival of volunteers from churches worldwide. These volunteers would be sent to us in Angola, to help us with our various projects. They were not only of great value to the work we were doing, but their company was truly welcome. Among others, there was Chris from Canada and Odette from Brazil who had both come out for a few months. Then there was a team of young people from England, made up of one girl and four guys, who came for a few weeks. We also had the well-known televangelist, James Robison, with his team

and film crew, visit us in their private jet, to film a documentary on the work we were doing, to take back to the USA to show their donors and contributors what their donated dollars were being used for.

Having these volunteers visit, gave the excuse for a bit of relaxation and exploration over the weekends. I have always enjoyed showing people around a place even back at home, as it allows me to see the place through fresh eyes. Therefore, taking them to remote, secluded, pristine beaches, guaranteed to be deserted, was a treat not only for them, but for me too.

However, they also got to see the more harrowing side of war-torn Angola. Such as, one day, when they were out at a regular food distribution point with Albert. I was back at the base slogging through paperwork, when Albert drove in, shouting that I needed to come with him urgently! I jumped into the vehicle with him and we drove off, back to the distribution point. On the way he explained that the team had a hostile mob bearing down on them with aggressive intent.

We stopped on a hill, where we could look down a desert valley, to see where our team had already offloaded the bulk of the food from the truck. It was a hot, dusty day, in an arid area of sparse vegetation. On the one side was a neatly formed queue of people from the nearby village that was to receive the food that day. Coming from the other direction was a large mob of people quickly approaching the truck and distribution team which

included some of the visiting volunteers. The mob had already started throwing large stones and rocks at the team. I am not sure what prompted me to do what I did next. I ran down to a point in-between my team and the mob, walked up to the leader of the mob, took the rocks out of his hands and placed them down on the ground in front of him. What happened next, I can't explain, but as I did that, the entire mob stopped in their tracks, looked at each other, turned around and hurried off in the direction that they had come. I've never been able to figure out why they did that, but they did. I believe it was God's intervention.

Experiences like this and others, I'm sure, gave these visitors a lot to tell when they got back home.

The trips to Benguela airport, to fetch these volunteers, were buoyant with anticipation. It was always exciting to know that there would be new faces around supper that evening.

Taking them back to the airport, however, was another story. Being a time before social networking, I knew that I was saying goodbye to people with whom I had bonded closely through extreme experiences and would probably never see again. These goodbyes were never easy. This trend of continual dispiriting and permanent goodbyes continued through my years that followed while working at a remote adventure farm called Bekezela. Even today, when people are leaving for an extended period of time, I tend to shy away from the farewell gatherings.

Pilots and nurses

The United Nations' World Food Program, known as "Programme Alimentaire Mondial" (PAM) in Portuguese, contracted a South African air charter company, Rossair, to fly supplies into Angola from Lanseria airport in South Africa. This meant that their South African pilots would regularly fly their Beechcraft King Air 200 aeroplanes from Lobito to Lanseria and back. Being a fellow South African, I made friends with them easily on the rare occasions that I ran into them.

Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) is a missionary organisation of pilots that became known worldwide when five of their missionaries were attacked and killed in 1956 by the Amazonian Waorani tribe of eastern Ecuador, with whom they were trying to make contact. Family members of these missionaries returned to the same tribe and through their forgiveness, some of the tribesmen who had killed the five missionaries, converted to Christianity. This remarkable story has been told in the book, "Through Gates of Splendor" by Elisabeth Elliot, wife of Jim Elliot, one of the killed pilots.

When I was in Angola, MAF had a base in the city of Benguela which is about 45 kilometres south of Lobito. These kind and unassuming people, always ready to help

others where they could, were also introduced to me by Ed.

On the few occasions that I needed to get back to South Africa, I would get a lift with MAF who flew regularly to Windhoek in Namibia, and back. They were quite willing to take me with them to Windhoek (for free), from where I would have to take a commercial flight to Johannesburg. I would then return by the same route or come back with a JAM flight.

Later on, I found another option. This was with the Rossair pilots who flew directly to Lanseria airport in Johannesburg, not too far from where my Dad lived and where I would stay for my short visit. I would go to the airport in Benguela, walk up to their aeroplane and literally put out my thumb like a hitchhiker to indicate that I would like a lift. They were always happy to have me along. When I asked if I could also return with them, their standard answer was, “First we pack the beers, if there’s still space, we’ll fit you in.”

On Saturday the 24th of June 1995, South Africa played against New Zealand in the Rugby World Cup final which was hosted in South Africa. Our first fully democratic elections were conducted just the year before. Given the immense changes our country was going through, this world cup was of vital significance to the unifying of the people of South Africa. Our new

president, Nelson Mandela was making sure that this was a huge nation building event. We had to win!

Being South Africans, the Rossair pilots and I were rugby mad. We loved our rugby. We desperately wanted to watch the final somewhere. Unfortunately, we discovered that the game was not going to be televised anywhere in Angola. However, one of the pilots remembered that he had seen a two-way shortwave radio at the Red Cross base. His idea was to use this radio to tune in to the BBC to listen to the game. I was then elected to go and 'sweet talk' the Red Cross nurses into letting us listen to the game on their radio. The pilots chose me because I already had a rapport with some of the nurses as they were amongst the previously mentioned sunbathers that would invite me to chat.

The nurses loved the idea. So, there we were, gathered at the Red Cross base, instead of watching the game we were listening to it, from a distant British radio station, on a static filled, hiss of a signal, emanating from a radio normally used for two-way communication. But this, in no way, dampened the mood. What a sight we must have been to those nurses. We were completely immersed in the emotional ups and downs of the game, exploding in ecstasy as South Africa won in extra time by just one drop goal. Even the nurses were caught up in the excitement and seemed to enjoy sharing the moment with these strange South Africans for whom they seemed to have quite an admiration. We may never know what it was like back home, in South Africa, on that day, but it

was surely a day that we would never forget. Not to mention what an iconic moment that was for our country and how important it was as a unifier of her people going through such extreme political change at that time.

This was a time of change. Change for Angola. Change for South Africa. Change for me. There were many lives that were changed for the better because we were in Angola, but the change in me and my outlook on life, because of my time there, was immeasurable. When asked about Angola, I would often reply, “I believe that God was more concerned with the work that Angola did in me than the work that I did in Angola.”

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