

GREGORY M. DANDELES

---

## Liberia's Fourth Estate

**L**iberia was first established by the American Colonization Society in 1822 as a place to relocate freed slaves. While the idea had a mixed reception among both African Americans and abolitionists (was the US trying to free blacks from discrimination or free themselves of blacks?), there was little debate amongst the sixteen indigenous tribes of what would become Liberia...They wanted these new settlers out. After a series of battles and land deals negotiated at gunpoint, the former American slaves established a colonial aristocracy in West Africa. The colonists just happened to be black. Although the settlers called themselves Americans or Americo-Liberian, the natives knew them as Congo People, as most of Africa's slave trade came out of the Congo. When, in 1847, the Congo People declared their independence from the US, they modeled more than just their constitution after their former home. Though their nation's motto is "A love of freedom brought us here," the society they set up was nowhere near free. Under a one-party system, dominated from 1877-1980 by the True Whig Party, Liberia, a society created as a respite from institutionalized racism, instead, carried on the tradition against its indigenous population.

The Congo People were finally driven from power with a military coup in 1980, but the situation only got worse, as the Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, the leader of uprising and new president of Liberia, established his tribe, the Krahn, as the new ruling class. Civil war first broke out in December 1989, when rebels led by the half-Congo, disgraced Doe cabinet member, Charles Taylor, entered Liberia. Doe was captured, tortured, and killed in 1990, but the war, defined by child soldiers, rape,

looting, indiscriminant violence, and cannibalism, continued for another fourteen years.

Every side of the constantly shifting war demanded freedom, their definitions of freedom, however, like their military objectives were never clear. Peace finally returned to Liberia when the blood diamond dealing warlord and president, Charles Taylor, stepped-down from power under intense pressure from the international community. The nation's military, the Armed Forces of Liberia, or AFL, was disbanded, and the US State Department took on the responsibility of recruiting and training a new army that would respect the rule of law, human rights, and finally break the decades-long cycle of violence, instability, and discrimination. As one of the 44 Active Duty US mentors assigned to advise this brand-new military, I had, for the first 6 months of 2010, the uniquely difficult job of shaping what Liberians thought of the military that had so recently terrorized their nation.

I led a group of Liberian Public Affairs officers in setting up *The AFL Guardian*, a nationally distributed, monthly newspaper that would help put to rest the fears, tensions, and trauma of living in a nation whose armies were, for decades, made up of 20,000 child soldiers, some as young as 6-years-old, who were, according to Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "forced to kill friends and family members including their parents, rape and be raped, serve as sexual slaves and prostitutes, labor, take drugs, engage in cannibalism, torture and pillage communities." We had to convince the people that the new AFL was a "force for good." If we could train an army that trusts the democratic process, then, perhaps, the people would trust the army. Instead of another coup, the AFL could prevent the dissolution of democracy. If Liberians could understand the value of its new US backed government and army, perhaps this peace could last and we could break the cycle of violence that defines so many African states. I trained my lieutenants to find stories that evidenced this value... to kill the idea of the old AFL by drawing attention to the new AFL. But at the heart of this policy was the assumption that American ideals, the American way of conducting business, can work for anyone.

But we really know so little of Liberia, our only colony. Charles Taylor, for example, was a warlord and murderer, but as a man of strength and power, Liberians love him. He was elected with 97% of the vote in a legitimate election with a campaign slogan, "he killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I'm still going to vote for him." When the international community forced Taylor out of the country at the height of the war, the country starving, the capital under siege, my Liberian counterparts said he still had an 80% approval rating. I didn't believe it at first. I started asking every Liberian I met about Taylor. While those in power, in the military and government,

would never admit to an American that they supported Charles Taylor, the average Liberian was quick, upon hearing the former president's name, to tell me what a "fine Christian" he was, how they needed his "power" to bring Liberia to greatness. In 2010, Taylor was still on trial at The Hague for 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, but "when he is finally acquitted," a maid at the US Embassy told me, "the people will run through the streets with joy!" On May 30, 2012, Taylor was sentenced to 50 years in prison for the atrocities he committed in his support of rebel groups in Sierra Leone. He was the first former head of state to be convicted by an international tribunal since the Nuremberg trials, but he was never charged with any wrong doing for his role in the *Liberian* Civil War. Liberia, unlike Sierra Leone, lacked and still lacks the political will to prosecute their former president. Americans rationalize that Taylor's popularity in Liberia was a product of intimidation, the people voted for him to stop his rebels from attacking the capitol, yet his popularity endures. Even now that he is powerless and imprisoned in a distant county, many Liberians still love Charles Taylor.

In 2010, the new American-trained Liberian Army was not being fed, their tiny paychecks came late or not all, their trucks sat rusting without sufficient fuel, while corrupt commanders drove around all day in air-conditioned government vehicles. Soldiers purchased political favors from superiors and sexual favors from subordinates. Unmotivated, underpaid, and disgruntled, the average soldier's workday began at 9:00 am and ended at 2:00 pm. Some soldiers talked about again becoming an "African army," once the Americans had left. Generally speaking, if the public affairs team wanted a positive story about the new AFL, they had to create it first. In preparation for our first edition of *The AFL Guardian*, we set up medical outreach events where AFL medics provided free medical services to various communities. It made for a good story, but it felt fictional. It only happened so that we could report on it. We were constantly on the lookout for real evidence that something good was really happening... a story that would illuminate the larger truth of American ideals while, itself, being true.

Then, on February 27, 2010, while driving back to the Ministry of National Defense compound from the US Embassy, I came to a massive roadblock. There are over 11,000 UN peacekeepers in Liberia. Their presence is always felt. They make themselves hard to ignore in an attempt to prevent violence before it occurs. But this blockade was unusual. Two dozen UN trucks had closed down a street that would normally be congested with cars, motor bikes, and a sea of people flooding the streets, selling peanuts, fried rolls, and flip flops out of wheel barrows, lengths of fabric with bright African patterns piled high on the heads of market

women, roasted “cow meat” sold right off rusted grills fashioned out of old oil drums. Instead of intensifying the congestion, the roadblock had cleared the street of all people. I turned the truck around and started heading through downtown Monrovia’s maze of dirt roads and rubble streets. I asked the first person I saw, a girl selling boiled eggs on the side of the road, if she knew the cause of the massive barricade.

“Oh!” she replied. “Oh!” Is a common expression in Liberian English, it is used to show surprise, disgust, disapproval, approval, or is just thrown into the middle of a sentence to fill in the rhythmic gaps of the colonial language, almost as if to force the English language into the natural rhythmic pattern of Liberia’s tribal languages.

“The Policeman oh, they done shoot a-body over some money” the girl continued, “And so the people, they mad and they burn him oh,”

“They burnt him?”

“They beat him and they throw petro on him oh,” the girl said very matter-of-factly.

After the machete, fire is the weapon of choice for most Liberian mobs. “Gas boys,” as they’re called, sell gasoline by the jar at roadside stands that act as makeshift gas stations. When a mob gets angry, the boys are ready to make a sale.

The next morning, Liberia’s Ministry of Justice released an official statement that turned the story from a bizarre tragedy to the perfect headline for our paper. “Private Patrick Davis, an Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) soldier,” the press release announced, “attempted to rescue the police officer’s life before sustaining serious injuries when the angry mob spilled gasoline on him.” The press release, which cited the testimonies of “eye witnesses,” had some information that conflicted with the eyewitness account I had heard at the scene of the crime. The Ministry of Justice claimed, for example, that the murdered police officer, Inspector Amos Tutu, was singlehandedly arresting an entire “criminal gang” when a member of the gang attacked him with an iron rod. “Reacting in self-defense,” the release explained, “the late Inspector Tutu shot his attacker dead...”

Despite the improbability of this account, the Liberian chief of staff was very pleased with the news. “This is what I am talking about. We need more soldiers like this!” he exclaimed, pounding his desk with his open palm. He had already begun planning what medals would be awarded to the young private. The general was very excited about our plan to put the story on the front page of *The Guardian*. But if we were going to put this story in our paper, first we had to figure out what actually happened. While I welcomed the news that Private Davis had risked his life trying to save the investigator’s life, the rest of the press release seemed a bit far-

fetched. The United Nations still hadn't, at that point, allowed Liberian police to carry firearms. And one man obviously would not try and arrest an entire "criminal gang."

Within the next twenty-four hours, more reports from several of Monrovia's forty-seven newspapers further complicated the story. C.Y. Kwanue, of *The Daily Observer*, reported that, according, once again, to eyewitnesses, Investigator Tutu was on a patrol when he saw "one Preston Davies smoking marijuana in an open area." Officer Tutu pulled out his flashlight to see who was using this illegal but common drug, when the smoker's wife, having just had a light shined in her face, became upset and chastised the inspector for his rudeness. The argument escalated, and they set the inspector on fire.

Another story, from *The Liberian Heritage*, revealed that Preston Davies, the murdered marijuana smoker, had, himself, served in the Liberian National Police for twelve years and may have owed his former colleague some money. Lt Kollie, my Liberian counterpart and the head public affairs officer for the AFL, told me that he had heard the fight was over a woman. "Well," I said, "there's only one person left who can tell us what happened. Let's go to the hospital and ask Private Davis for ourselves."

The John F Kennedy hospital is a classic example of early 1960s concrete Modernism. Since there has been little to no maintenance on the building in the past half-century, its low grade concrete is crumbling, turning the once futuristic angles and lines of the building's façade into ironic ruins. The walk to the hospital's main entrance was a walk through a massive, churning crowd. Long lines of sick and injured people were spilling out the front doors with the sounds of vintage typewriters clacking, children crying, and mourners wailing. A woman was collapsed on the ground beside the parking lot, moaning, screaming, and throwing her arms about madly. In a fit of moans, as if she could no longer contain her grief, she threw her body against the ground and began to roll around. About fifteen women dressed in the same traditional African lappas and head dresses sat quietly around her, not quite looking at her. "Someone has died," Lt Kollie said nodding in the direction of the women. "She must show her grief to let the others know how much the dead was loved." Funerals in West Africa last hours and usually involve loved ones throwing themselves on coffins, wailing, and threats of suicide.

Inside the hospital we were met by an official from the ministry of defense, two soldiers who were Patrick's friends, and Patrick's brother. We followed them through a labyrinth of hallways. We came around a corner and down a windowless hallway in which all the fluorescent bulbs had died. At the end of this nearly pitch-

black corridor, we turned another corner and climbed up two flights of worn-down marble steps. Room 206 was at the end of a hallway echoing with the screaming of a young woman. I couldn't understand what she was saying, but she sounded like she was dying, not of a disease or injury, but of violence. From another room, I heard the distinct buzzing and grinding of a saw. Having just passed three amputees on the way up to room 206, the sound took on a particularly sinister tone.

Third degree burns on his lower back and arms required that Patrick lay on his stomach, his arms hanging over either side of the small hospital bed. He had not slept, he told us, since arriving at the hospital. Before we started the interview, we presented the private with two cartons of mango juice. Lt Kollie had informed me that it is a custom in Liberia to bring juice when visiting someone in the hospital. We poured three glasses of mango juice and started the interview.

"I became involved in the situation," Patrick told us, "when some onlookers saw and identified me as an AFL Soldier and requested that I help with the situation." Patrick was from the neighborhood and everyone knew him. When friends and neighbors saw him in the crowd they started shouting for him, as a soldier, to do something to stop the police officer, who was standing over the body of the man he just killed, his weapon drawn, staring at the growing crowd. Patrick resolved to, as he put it, "prove his patriotism and avoid further disaster." He considered the Policeman, he said, to be a "uniformed brother," so he introduced himself to inspector Tutu and asked him to please turn over his weapon. Apparently, the officer just stared at Patrick. Patrick told inspector Tutu that he was a friend and that he would help him get away from the crowd, but that the people felt threatened by his gun. While he was talking, Patrick said, someone threw a bucket of Gasoline on both him and Tutu accompanied by "a flame of fire."

It certainly wasn't the story we had hoped for. When the chief of staff heard the real account, he encouraged us to keep it to ourselves. It was better, he thought, to let the good story linger, than to spoil it with the truth. The next morning, however, there was an editorial in Monrovia's *Daily Inquirer* alleging that Patrick Davis was Inspector Tutu's accomplice. The two had been, according to the article, harassing the neighborhood and abusing their power for financial gain, when vigilante justice set things right. Patrick may not have saved the inspector's life, or even tried to save his life, but he wasn't a criminal. Although Patrick was obeying the demands of an angry mob by trying to disarm a man the mob was about to murder, he was also trying to do the right thing. Patrick was trying to make peace.

The following day, things got worse. The Liberian National Police charged Patrick Davis with murdering Amos Tutu, the man the Ministry of Justice claimed

he rescued, the newspapers claimed he worked for, and we claimed he merely talked to. The police announced that they had discovered in their investigation that the private was one of the men who poured gasoline on Inspector Tutu. Some of the gas splashed back onto him, causing his burns. Having heard Patrick's story, seeing him in that bed, *with burns on his back*, I could not believe how this story could possibly be true. The charges were quickly dropped, however, when Patrick Davis died from his wounds early the next morning.

Most everyone in the AFL had grown weary of the situation. The medals were canceled; there wasn't even a military funeral. I felt obligated, however, to clear the name of this almost hero. So Kollie and I drafted a story with the headline "The AFL Loses a Hero." The title was a bit of an exaggeration, but the article itself focused on Patrick as a person. We quoted his superiors, who described him as "disciplined, respectful, hardworking, and a dedicated soldier" and his friends, who told us how Patrick was a devout Christian who spent most weekends in the barracks or at church. In regards to February 27th, we simply explained: "Believing strongly in the AFL creed and in the bond that exists between uniformed servants of the people, Private Davis attempted to diffuse the situation and the increasingly angry crowd by talking Inspector Tutu into leaving the area." We didn't mention his attempt to first disarm the man. We didn't lie; we just emphasized Patrick's noble intentions rather than his naïve actions.

Two days before the story was supposed to go to print, three AFL soldiers were arrested for murder. The men were accused of starting a riot that left two people dead in the village of Good Smell No Taste. Lt Kollie and I got in our truck and headed to the prison to interview the accused. In a bare, windowless concrete prison cell, locked behind a rusting iron gate, the men, still dressed in the military fatigues they were arrested in, emphatically and repeatedly told us this was another case of police corruption. They were only in the area to save their family homes from the fires and destruction of the riot. "But why would they arrest only you three?" I demanded.

"Because they know we are soldiers!"

"This is very common Sir," Kollie insisted. "The police think that all of the AFL are criminals... Like in the war."

The irony of the situation is that while the AFL was completely dissolved following the war, the Liberian National Police maintained a majority of its forces. They are known to still demand bribes and harass the innocent, but this seemed a bit extreme. The police may be corrupt, Inspector Tutu did, after all, shoot an

unarmed man with an unauthorized weapon, but there was no way they were just rounding up AFL soldiers and arresting them for being in uniform.

When it was clear this was all the men had to say about the matter, I told Kollie to get in the truck so we could go to Good Smell No Taste and interview some of the villagers and see if we could find some eye witnesses who could give us a less biased account of what transpired during the riot. It had been raining all day. Liberia is, with nineteen feet of rain per year, the second wettest inhabited place in the world. As we drove, the rain began to intensify. Thunder was crashing in long rolling sequences. "This is the real rainy season," Liberians liked to say, "when the sky begins to fall."

"I'm sorry Kollie!" I had to yell over the thunder and rain as I drove. "I know those guys are your friends, but that story didn't make any sense! Now that I think about it, we should interview more people in the Patrick Davies case!" I looked at Kollie. The normally jocular, enthusiastic lieutenant who loved to go out on location for interviews seemed nervous. He was scanning the road ahead and fidgeting. I assumed he was upset about my second-guessing his comrades, but I had never seen him like this before. This is a man who grew up during the war. He escaped the violence of Taylor's siege on Monrovia by making the four-month trip through mountains and thick rain forest to his ancestral village in Lofa County on foot. He was thirteen years old, travelling only with his younger siblings. Years later, he came face to face with Charles Taylor. Taylor, stepping out of his armored car in a crowded marketplace, surrounded by bodyguards and armed members of his Anti-Terrorist Unit, pointed at the now sixteen-year-old Kollie and told him to come and join the fight for Liberia's freedom. The two boys to Kollie's left and right rushed to the car, clamoring for the chance to hold a weapon and have, for the first time in their lives, the power to feed and take care of themselves, the power to take what they wanted. Kollie didn't move an inch. He stood his ground and watched as the convoy sped out of the market kicking up the bright red dust of the dry season. Kollie was part of the minority of Liberians who saw Taylor as the thug he was and the only person I've ever met to stand-up to a mass murderer. I could never have imagined him nervous, but now, as we turned off the main road, toward the village, he was clearly agitated, almost jittery as he intently stared out the window.

"Alright Kollie," I began, as I slowed the truck down to stop on one of the road's few dry spots, "what is wrong with-

"No Sir! We should not stop here. It is not safe!"

"What is the matter?!" I said, as I obediently put my foot down on the gas.

“No Sir, turn around, we should not have come here like this... in uniform. These people are very angry with the army. This morning, a soldier told me, they threw rocks and gas at an AFL truck driving into this area. We should not be here.”

I spun the truck around, plowing through the foot of water that had gathered on either side of the road. As I quickly looked around to make sure I was not splashing any innocent by-standers in the process, I noticed that in the doorway of every mud home that lined the road men stood, staring at our white SUV with military markings.

“So those soldiers did start the riot,” I said, as I sped back toward Monrovia.

“They were trying to arrest some men who sell drugs here.”

“Why? That is not their job; that is for the police.”

“Yes Sir, and the police, they get many bribes from this place.”

“And our soldier held a drug bust in the hopes of getting bribes?” I asked, knowing the answer.

“Yes Sir... But these men did not want to also bribe the army... And so they fought back...”

“Why didn’t you tell me before Kollie?”

After a long silence, Kollie, still looking out the truck window, said, “I was ashamed Sir... I am ashamed... I am sorry.”

In retrospect, I don’t think Kollie withheld the truth to protect his friends so much as to protect his idea of the AFL. This is a man who risked his life to avoid serving in a corrupt, murdering army, only to join the army anyway. His father was the head doctor in the pre-war AFL. He was a good man, who served nobly in a reasonably just army. Kollie wanted the same for himself. His desire to see a just AFL is probably what landed him his job as the head of the army’s public affairs team.

“I understand,” I said, “but I can’t help you do your job, which is to report the truth, if you keep protecting me from the truth... We need to make the AFL look good, but if you don’t do so with the truth, no one will believe a word you say...”

“I know this Sir...”

We drove on in silence through the flooding streets of the capitol. After a few minutes Kollie said, “I do not believe the late Patrick tried only to talk to the late Officer Tutu into giving up the gun... The late Patrick grabbed the officer from behind, and knocked the weapon from his hand. The people, they grab it and poured the gas on both of them. When they lit the policeman, both caught on fire. Lt Varpeh was there and saw it happen and told me three days ago... I did not want to ruin the story.”

“That’s why his burns were on his arms, where he was holding the policeman down. And his back, which would have been facing the crowd when they threw the gas.” I said, more excited about finally hearing the truth than disturbed that Kollie knew it this whole time. Patrick wasn’t part of the mob that killed inspector Tutu, nor was he trying to save that LNP officer’s life. He was attacking him. But then, he was also disarming a murderer... an act that would be heroic if he was not, in the process, unwittingly enabling a second murder.

It was important that *The AFL Guardian* run Patrick’s story, and that the story was truthful. But how much truth could we really tell? Ultimately, none of the new revelations changed much for our story. Patrick was still a good soldier who was killed in the process of trying to diffuse a violent situation. He did more to help than we thought, but ultimately caused more harm as well. Rather than get into the complex details, we kept our story vague. The one change I made to the story was the title. “The AFL Loses a Hero” became “The AFL Loses a Soldier.” I also insisted on moving the story from the front page to the back page of the paper. The rest of the story remained true, but without the whole truth. It was already as close to the truth as it could be. Any closer and it didn’t really have a point... other than chaos. Patrick was neither the murderer the police tried to make him out to be nor the hero we hoped he was. Not unlike the Americans who taught and mentored the young man, Patrick swept in, confident in his power and moral position. His intentions were noble, but naive. He had no idea what he was getting into, and instead of saving the day, he was burnt to death along with a man he intended to help... by a mob he hoped to pacify.

The closer we got to finding an accurate picture of what actually happened to Patrick Davis, the further away we seemed to move from being able to say anything conclusive about it. We lost, in the denseness of facts and events, anything definite, right, wrong, anything that could resemble a hero, villain, or moral. But the truth is always somewhere in between any conclusion. To know the real story, after all, is to be unable to tell it. We tell stories to believe in something, but the truth, revealed in its complex entirety, leaves us nothing to believe in. It simply is.



Liberia is lush with rainforest. This enormous cotton tree in Robertsport grows right on the pristine beach of what used to be a resort town for the elite descendents of freed American slaves. The beach is still beautiful, but the town itself is little more than a collection of concrete ruins.



In Monrovia buildings bombed out during the fourteen-year civil war have been laid to waste for so long that, with the help of 19 feet of rain a year, the jungle has begun to reclaim them. Amazingly, this building is, even in this condition, still in use.



In these ruins, Liberians flock to Monrovia for what little infrastructure and commerce still exists. According to the UN, more than one-third of Liberia's nearly four million people live within a fifty mile radius of Monrovia, a city without public water or sewage, a city that has not had electricity since 1992.



Streets in Monrovia are used as much for markets as driving. And with limited roads, a ten mile trip could take two hours in the rainy season.



Commerce revolves heavily around goods donated by western charities. Here, in Monrovia's water market, a man sells used shirts from the United States.



A restaurant in Monrovia celebrates the end of war while rusting but still necessary razor-wire shows its ever present aftermath.



The war's most lasting impact on Liberia is the poverty created by decades of violence. Liberia remains, even in peace, the third poorest country in the world. According to the International Monetary Fund, Liberia's per capita GDP is a mere \$395, compared to \$47,123 in the US.



Fourteen years of civil war meant fourteen years with virtually no public school.

Today, men and women in their mid-thirties proudly work to complete their primary and secondary education. Here a rather mature boy scout, yet another reminder of American influence on Liberia, stands at attention during the 2010 Armed Forces Day Parade.



These soldiers, trained by US contractors and mentored by active duty US military, are an essential part of Liberia's recovery. The former military, responsible for the coup that eventually descended Liberia into war and chaos was, by the war's end in 2003, made up of child soldiers, rapists, drug addicts and cannibals. A disciplined, educated, responsible military and police force are essential for Liberia's survival.



The root of the cannibalism and ritual sacrifice that made the Liberian Civil War so very brutal can still be seen in Liberia's interior. Here, outside Careysburg, we came upon a Bush Devil from the Kpelle tribe, one of Liberia's 16 indigenous ethnic groups. Bush Devils, whose spiritual leadership and governing powers often exceed that of a village's chief, helped perpetuate among young rebel and government soldiers the belief that eating the heart of your enemy can make you invulnerable to bullets.



The Bush Devils of some tribal secret societies are so sacred women are not permitted to look directly at them; their names can only be mentioned in whispers. With a few US dollars, however, we got an impromptu show from this particular man. It is the complete and utter foreignness of the various cultures that make up Liberian society that makes it so difficult for the US to exert any power or influence in the region.

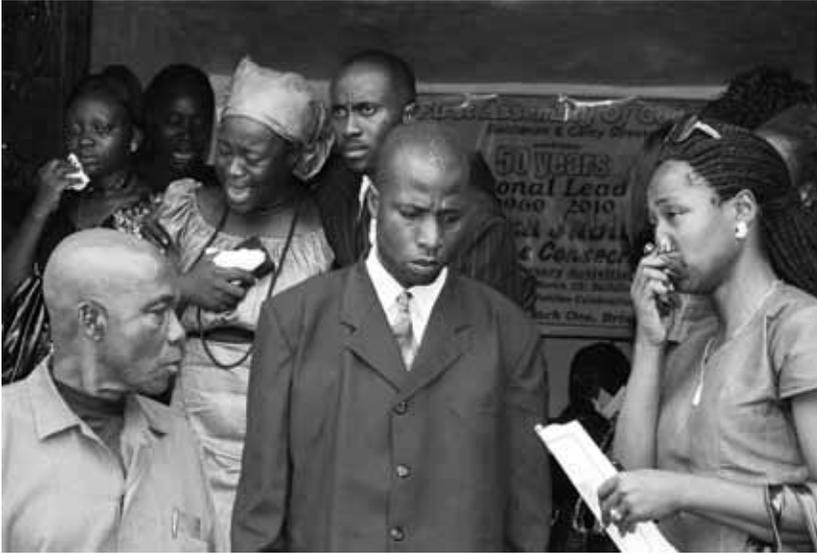


Even amongst the troops we train and mentor, there is an essential “Africaness,” we struggle to understand, but do not dare attempt to alter. Here, soldiers perform a celebratory dance after winning a soccer match against another unit.





Most Liberian customs, however, can be quite inspiring, whether it is a kola nut given as a gift the first time you meet someone or an acquaintance's quickness to put an arm around your shoulder in friendship. At a funeral, it is almost expected that a family member becomes so overcome with grief that they must be dragged away from the coffin of the deceased.



Liberians, for all they have been through, remain the most empathetic people I have ever met. Their hearts retain, after so much suffering, both the capacity to grieve and the audacity to hope.

---

**GREGORY M. DANDELES** is a captain in the United States Air Force. In 2010, he deployed with a U.S. Marine Corps detachment to Monrovia, Liberia, serving in the initial stages of Operation Onward Liberty.