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Exactly two years after a Frontline Fellowship field team of four were released from prison in Zambia, eight missionaries on a Frontline mission were forced into Mozambique at gunpoint by a heavily-armed mob of Frelimo troops. This dramatic incident received widespread coverage in the USA, South Africa and Zimbabwe, on radio and TV and in the press.

### **MEDIA HATCHET JOB**

What distinguished this incident was the vicious disinformation published by many newspapers, which placed our lives and liberty at serious risk. While we were being interrogated by SNASP Secret Police at the notorious Machava Security prison, sensational headlines declared: “RENAMO SPONSORING CLERGYMAN CAPTURED” (Business Day, 30 Oct. 89), “BAPTIST MINISTER IS FRELIMO’S TOP CAPTIVE” (Harare Herald, 30 Oct. 89), “MISSIONARIES LINKED TO RENAMO” (The Star, 31 Oct.), “BAPTIST MINISTER MOST IMPORTANT RENAMO BACKER” (Natal Mercury, 30 Oct.), “THE CURIOUS MISSIONARIES WITH COMBAT EXPERIENCE” (Weekly Mail, 3-9 Nov.), “EVANGELISTS OF THE RIGHT PREACH A GOSPEL OF THEIR OWN” (Sunday Tribune, 5 Nov.), and “A QUICK RETURN TO FREEDOM FOR THE MERCENARY PRIESTS” (Weekly Mail, 3-9 Nov.), amongst many other examples.

All of these irresponsible articles originated from Harare, Zimbabwe, and were written by either Steve Askin or Peta Thornycroft. Their stated source of information was “The Ecumenical Documentation and Information Centre of Southern Africa” (EDI CESA). The speed with which these hate-mongers spread their accusations throughout the South African media — even over Radio 702 and SATV — is nothing short of amazing. What is surprising is that so many editors and producers could have allowed such Irresponsble journalism to jeopardise the lives of missionaries in a communist jail with unproven speculation and slander. And the motives of the Harare reporters and their timing is highly suspect.

### **BACKGROUND TO THE ABDUCTION**

During my May/June 1989 speaking tour around the USA, I was asked by the President of the California-based Christian Emergency Relief Team (CERT) to help them establish contacts in

Africa for their first relief mission to this continent. CERT is a highly respected medical mission with extensive experience in providing medical care to war victims in Central America, Lebanon and Afghanistan.

By the time the six Americans arrived on 22nd October at Lilongwe, in Malawi, I had prepared for them to visit numerous mission stations and clinics which are involved in caring for Mozambique refugees. Officially, over 850 000 refugees from war-ravaged Mozambique have sought refuge in Malawi. For a small, overpopulated, land locked country like Malawi, this has presented a monumental economic crisis. The desperate need for medical assistance in those areas was obvious.

None of the members of the American medical team had ever been to Africa before. Some of them hadn't even been out of America before. So, by way of orientation, the Monday (23rd October) was given to inspecting the hospital facilities at our host mission station. On the Tuesday (24th October), I showed the CERT team around various refugee camps and border villages, where they experienced some of the desperate need and suffering of the Mozambique people. At several points they looked across the border at burnt-out villages and bombed-out buildings and shops in socialist Mozambique.

### **A WRONG TURN**

Then at about 3 p.m. that afternoon, we took a wrong turning and found ourselves driving towards a Frelimo border control check point. Three camouflaged soldiers with Soviet assault rifles were visible beside a thatch-roofed structure, and a simple pole lay across the road. In the distance, beyond the check point, we could see several bombed-out buildings and a tattered Frelimo flag. Clearly we were heading towards the border.

Stopping in good time before the check point, one of our group, Steve, got out, walked to the approaching soldiers and tried to explain that we were lost and had taken a wrong turning. He asked for directions but was shouted down by the agitated Frelimo troops, who cocked their AK47 assault rifles and made threatening gestures to him.

### **MOB RULE**

Seemingly from nowhere another 15 communist soldiers appeared and encircled our vehicle, shouting abuse and pointing their machine guns at us. Steve offered the soldiers some Gospel booklets and this clearly aggravated them, leading to more rifles being cocked and further abuse. More soldiers arrived. The mob hysteria escalated with every soldier screaming his own

questions and searching whomsoever he pleased.

We were forced out of the vehicle and searched several times by different soldiers. Finding only some cameras and quite a large amount of Gospel literature, they started demanding to know our occupations. When Carol declared that she was “a paramedic”, more weapons were cocked and the ugly mood of the mob deteriorated further. It seemed that in the translation into Portuguese they had misunderstood the term paramedic” to mean something military.

As the situation continued to deteriorate rapidly, some of the American medical team started waving their US passports. This caused somewhat of a lull in the hysteria as dozens of obviously illiterate Frelimos gathered around the few who could read, and listened to their painful attempts to read the nationality on each passport. Some seemed clearly impressed, and declared “Americanos-Amigos”, but other disgruntled ideologues muttered “imperialismo”, “capitalismo” and other presumably negative opinions.

Suddenly, a primeval shout of discovery led to an electrifying series of yelps and shrieks throughout the ever-increasing mob — they had discovered George’s South African passport. With animal-like viciousness, some dancing with delight, others spitting hatred, they pounced on George, searched him again and excitedly discussed “Africa du Sul” and “Apartheid”, “Pieter Botha” and “Racismo”. By this stage we had endured their savage mob hysteria for nearly three hours!

One officer declared that we could all go, except for the South African. Obviously we refused to accept that. Another officer then announced that we could all go but that the vehicle had to stay with them. Yet another’s solution was that everyone could go but the cameras and passports had to be confiscated! In amazement we stood and watched the mob of Frelimo troops argue amongst themselves as to what to do with their supposed “catch”.

Repeatedly they tried to force us across their check point at gunpoint. This we steadfastly refused to do. Then they tried to push the vehicle across. However, as they seemed oblivious to the function of a hand-brake and as the vehicle was in gear, they could not even budge it an inch.

## **A NIGHT OF FEAR**

With the light rapidly fading, the soldiers became more agitated and rougher as they tried to force us across their border post. One even tried to start the vehicle with our petrol-cap key. An ugly situation developed as they accused us of giving them the wrong keys. Then, at gunpoint, they ordered all eight of us into the vehicle. For the first time in four hours we had a quiet lull in which to pray together.

So, while Frelimo troops threatened to blow up our vehicle with their RPG rockets and kill everyone of us if we tried to move, we bowed our heads and committed the whole unbelievable situation to God, trusting Him to protect us and deliver us from evil. That act of faith was the beginning of a cramped and sleepless night in the uncomfortable four-wheel-drive vehicle. It was also the beginning of a week of imprisonment and uncertainty.

Some fifteen or more Frelimo soldiers slept around our vehicle. On occasions they peered through the windows at us. Sometimes they cocked their assault rifles and at least once I clearly heard one of them shouting the only English he seemed to know: "You will die"! We each sat in silence, preoccupied with thoughts of our loved ones, reviewing our lives and speculating on our immediate future.

All too slowly the long night passed and daybreak came. The soldiers filtered back up the hill, and soon only three Frelimo troops were visible. One thoughtfully brought us a bucket of water to wash our faces in. The situation seemed to have been defused. Hours passed without incident or explanation.

### **AT GUNPOINT, BY ARMoured CAR**

Then suddenly, two GAZ trucks arrived, packed with Frelimo troops. Within minutes, dozens of heavily-armed troops were pouring down the hill and surrounding our vehicle. At the same time, from the other direction, a blue Malawian Police landrover appeared and stopped within sight of the large contingent of Frelimo troops. A messenger brought a letter from the Police, demanding that we be released into their care. The entire Frelimo mob laughed and then at gunpoint they forced us across the check point into Mozambique. Although they promised that it would only take ten minutes and then we would be released, our hearts sank as we crossed the "point of no return".

At the top of the hill, amidst the bombed-out buildings, surrounded by over 70 Frelimo soldiers, we waited. Suddenly, a noisy Soviet BTR armoured car rumbled into view and, screeching to a halt, covered us with a cloud of dust. As we were bundled into the battered BTR, with 16 soldiers

as escorts, our hearts sank. It didn't look as if we would be released in ten minutes!

For an hour and forty minutes we raced through war-ravaged countryside. From the back of the armoured vehicle I saw two destroyed mission stations, five bombed-out churches and twelve burnt-out villages. Most of the countryside was blackened from fires, and I only saw one animal — one buck.

### **PRISONERS OF SOCIALISM**

At last we arrived in Ulongwe, the district capital of Angonia. There we were handed over to the District Police HO of the PPM. After the irrational Frelimo soldiers, it was actually a great relief to be in the cordial hands of the Mozambique Police. We were separated, searched and interrogated. As the story emerged, the police were clearly amazed at the army's blatant stupidity.

The police inspector who dealt with us was critical of the Frelimo commander who had ordered our abduction: "You were lucky he did not shoot you all and blame it on the bandits! He is a fanatical Marxist. He trained in Russia and he hates all whites. He was the one who ordered the shooting down of the civilian Malawian aircraft over-flying Angonia from Lilongwe to Blantyre in 1986. He was promoted for that. Perhaps he thought that capturing eight foreign missionaries would get him further promotion!"

However, despite some sympathy and fair treatment from the police, we still remained prisoners. The district police referred our case to the secret police, who passed the buck to the acting district commissioner, who handed our case over to the local member of the central committee, who radioed the provincial authorities in Tete, who consulted with the national authorities in the capital, Maputo. If ever we needed an object lesson in how clumsy and unworkable socialism is, we experienced it in Mozambique. The bureaucratic hierarchy of centralised control so smothers initiative that no-one is willing to make a decision and take responsibility. Everyone ducks the issues and passes the buck.

And so, as we waited and walked up and down in the police yard for three days, the awkward process of shuffling responsibility continued. In Ulongwe we had neither toothpaste nor a change of clothes (nor plumbing or electricity). We got dirtier and more uncomfortable as the hours dragged by. We prayed a lot, we shared verses from the Bible from memory and we speculated on what every event could indicate about our fate. For the American medical team, their first week in Africa was certainly turning out to be a crash course!

For me, I wondered how long it would be before news of our capture was published and how long it would be before people started recognising my name and connecting us with Frontline Fellowship. After all I had done and written, it seemed inconceivable that they would miss my identity, Bible smuggling, unorthodox entries, evangelism amongst Renamo and Frelimo troops, documentation and research on communist persecution of the church, testifying of human rights abuses before International Human Rights groups. All that could have been enough to put me away for a long time — if they had known who I was.

### **BY SOVIET HELICOPTER**

Suddenly, on Saturday morning, two Soviet Mi-8 Hip helicopters thundered overhead. An army landrover raced down the road towards us and several soldiers dragged us out and loaded us onto the back of the vehicle. At breakneck speed we were jolted over the potholes towards the clearing beside the army base, where one Hip helicopter was hovering. The second Mi-8 circled overhead.

To our surprise, the helicopters were in Soviet Air Force colours and were piloted by four white Russians in each. We were divided into two groups — four of us went in one helicopter, the rest in the other Hip.

“How are you? Have they been treating you well? Are you all right?” —the Russian pilots asked in concern at our appearance. One Russian kicked a Frelimo soldier for manhandling one of our people roughly. “These Frelimo are scum,” we were told by the Russians.

As the helicopters lifted off and began our flight at tree-top level, the Russian crew brought us some soft drinks in cans. “They are good,” we were told, “The cool drinks are from South Africa.” Our co-pilot then gallantly offered his seat to Lucille so that she could have a better view.

We flew for forty minutes over burnt-out countryside, destroyed villages, bombed out houses and burning fields. Four kudu (buck) were the only sign of life that I saw during the flight. The extent of the devastation was staggering.

“Why are all the villages and crops burnt down? Who is responsible for this?” I asked.

“The Frelimo government burns it down to starve out the resistance,” declared one Russian in a matter-of-fact way.

The Russians told me that they had been “chosen” to come to Africa, how sickened they were by the suffering and devastation in Mozambique, and how much they were looking forward to going home soon. They pointed out some bullet holes in the cockpit and related the close call they had had the previous week when “Renamo bandits” had shot at their helicopter.

As the images of destruction raced past my eyes, my mind was reeling with the implications of this flight. Suddenly we were circling Tete airport. I pointed to the bombed-out remains of a control tower, two devastated hangers and some burnt-out aircraft. “What happened?” I asked.

“The Rhodesians bombed Tete airport in 1979,” the Russian explained.

### **OVER TO THE SECRET POLICE**

After landing, we were raced across town, at breakneck speed, to SNASP secret police headquarters. There we were photo graphed and interrogated separately, then driven, in unseemly haste, back across the mighty Zambezi river, back to the airport. The secret police forced us onto a Soviet Antonov 26 transport aircraft, and we were then flown to Maputo. Throughout the three-hour flight we saw areas burning and large sections of blackened, scorched earth.

By the time we landed in Maputo it was pitch dark, and I was mentally prepared for torture and lengthy imprisonment. The ramp of the AN-26 lowered to reveal about 20 helmeted military policemen, armed with AK47 assault rifles. With a prayer in my heart for strength, I walked down the ramp into the darkness, to be ushered into waiting vehicles by the mob of MP's.

What followed was the, by now predictable, race across town at breakneck speed over pot-holed roads, down unlit streets. We saw crowds of people lined up outside the shops, and communist slogans painted on many walls.

### **MACHAVA PRISON**

As we pulled up outside the metal gates of Machava Security Prison, my heart sank. Machava was notorious for its human rights abuses and was cited in the latest Amnesty International annual report as the site of innumerable tortures and human rights violations.

Each of us was separated and placed in pitch darkness, in solitary confinement. My concrete cell was 2 metres by 2½ metres long. Its only furniture was a thin, flea-ridden mattress, with two fairly clean blankets. Cockroaches scurried across the mattress as I sat down on it, and persistent mosquitos attacked me in swarms for the whole night.

With a heavy heart I sought the Lord in prayer, interceding for each of our team and for our loved ones at home. Then I started singing hymns of praise. Some of the others joined in the singing. Suddenly screams for help cut us short. “Help us — there are men in our cell!” It was Lucille’s voice. “Help! There are four soldiers attacking us,” Carol’s frantic cry echoed down the corridor.

In shock, I started shouting. All of us shouted for help, threatened the attackers and prayed aloud: “God help them please,” “In Jesus’ Name, leave them alone,” “God will judge you for this.” I heard Lucille’s husband, Fred, groaning in desperation and helplessness. We banged on our cell doors in a futile attempt to get out. Then suddenly we heard Carol say, “Its okay — they’re going.. .they’ve gone.” We heard their cell door slam and the rattle of the bolt “We’re all right, they’ve gone,” Lucille assured us.

I fell down in thanks to God for such a swift answer to prayer. All of us were overcome with anger and a sense of outrage at the treacherous and cowardly way we were being treated. We felt frustrated and vulnerable, helpless to protect Lucille and Carol. Throughout that long night my emotions went through many stages, from fear to anger, to faith in the Lord.

Daybreak found me singing songs of praise, confident in the Lord’s sustaining power. Lying down on the ground, I prayed aloud the Lord’s Prayer under the door and into the corridor. The others joined in, and soon we were sharing Scripture verses, hymns and Psalms together. It was a dramatic and meaningful experience. George then sang all four verses of the South African National Anthem — “Die Stem”.

Then the interrogations began. Throughout that Sunday, the secret police came and took each of us, one by one, to be photographed and interrogated. When my turn came, I was ushered down a dark and dirty corridor, into a sorry little office, where everything was broken and dirty.

“I am the devil,” declared the SNASP investigator, by way of introduction. “Not only am I a Leninist, I am a Stalinist. I studied three years in Czechoslovakia!”

“Well, I’m a Christian,” was my reply.

“I don’t like Christians,” he declared. I was then subjected to a long monologue about how God didn’t exist. How Jesus was the first communist. How all Christians must become liberation theologians and how the function of the church should be to advance the revolution!

“I cannot agree with that.” In reply I gave him a lengthy discourse on the Renaissance, the humanistic philosophy of Voltaire and Rousseau, and the resultant French Revolution.

My SNASP interrogator then launched into a bitter attack on “capitalism” and gave a defence of socialism. He then rambled on about mythology, and ended up attacking Margaret Thatcher’s economic policies. Amazed at how incompetent and inefficient this member of SNASP was, I proceeded to give a lecture on the Reformation. He then got very enthusiastic about Marxism, declared the interrogation over, and sent me back to my cell.

I had been praying that God would confuse the minds of His enemies and blind their eyes to my identity. And this is clearly what had happened. They still hadn’t realised my identity, nor had they guessed our connection with Frontline Fellowship.

Late that afternoon, our cell doors were opened, and we were led out, placed in jeeps and driven at characteristic break neck speed across Maputo to the downtown headquarters of the secret police. There we waited for hours, cheerfully chatting to one another in a waiting room. I assumed that this was another interrogation technique, after solitary confinement and

interrogation, to put us at ease, together, and monitor our conversations, to see if we would incriminate ourselves in any way.

Then a delegation of security officials walked in and gave us an almost gracious speech, regretting our “accommodation arrangements”, promising that they had arranged for “better accommodation in a motel,” expressing appreciation for the work of relief agencies, and assuring us that everything was being resolved. Our group was overjoyed as we were led back into the jeeps and raced back across Maputo to Machava prison! We were stunned as they escorted us back to the same cells and locked us in for another long, mosquito-infested night. They even refused to give us any water to drink. We were all very thirsty. A large rat appeared and stared at me as I started singing again. The walls of our cells were covered in Christian graffiti — “Please God help me”, “Jesus is my Lord and Saviour”, “I haven’t eaten for 38 days”, “God is my refuge”, many verses, some crosses and fish symbols. We were not the first Christian prisoners in these cells.

The next day we waited in vain for water and for more interrogations. Nothing. Only a bowl of porridge without spoons. I refused to eat like a dog, and so for the third day, refused the offered food. No news. Just waiting, exercising and praying.

Then, late that Monday afternoon, they came for us, separated the women and George from the rest of us and drove us into Maputo on the back of a garbage truck. The squalor and filth of the dilapidated capital in its sea of squatter shacks was depressing. We drove the same route back to the SNASP HO in Maputo, and then, without explanation or apology, we were unceremoniously handed over to our respective embassies. But George was missing. So also was \$380, all of our film and Carol’s U.S. passport.

### **A RACE AGAINST THE CLOCK**

Suddenly we were conscious of how dirty we had become without any opportunity to wash or change clothes for seven days. Scarcely daring to believe we were free, we were led off to our embassies and a bath. When I learnt of all the irresponsible journalism in the South African media, with articles accusing me of being a “Renamo resistance spy” etc., my heart sank. I spent a sleepless night, praying for George — who we thought was still being held — but who had actually also been freed. I was certain that when Frelimo read the articles identifying me as the Director of Frontline Fellowship, and the one who had documented hundreds of atrocities and acts of communist persecution against the church, they would re-arrest me at the airport. I scarcely dared believe that even their clumsy bureaucracy could be so slow as to miss this opportunity. I prayed for God to confuse the minds of His enemies.

The next morning aside from the air ticket, I was forced to pay for an “exit visa” and “airport tax”

at Maputo airport. So, cursing socialism and the theft mentality of these beggar states, I boarded the little 10-seater aircraft which would fly me to freedom. As we taxied down the runway, I was amazed to see eight Soviet Mi-24 Hind helicopters, three AN-26 and an IL-76 Candid. Clearly, despite Western aid, the Soviet influence is still present in socialist Mozambique.

As we flew above the road from Maputo to Komatipoort, I saw many dozens of burnt-out, shot-up vehicles beside the road. I remembered the ambush I had survived on that same road in 1985 on my motorbike. Only as we flew over the border into South Africa at Komatipoort did I feel free. It was the same feeling as when I drove across the border into South Africa after sixteen days in Zambian jails in 1987. God had once again “opened prison doors and set the captives free.”

Ahead of me was the joy of being re-united with friends and family, and my wife. And the prospect of being able to continue this mission for God, even more grateful than ever before for the life, health, liberty and opportunities which God so wonder fully provides.

And to all of you who prayed and worked for our release — THANK YOU.

Peter Hammond