

THE GHOSTS OF LUENA



Adam Niklewicz

TWO BRUSHES WITH DEATH IN ANGOLA, SEVEN YEARS APART, HAVE REINFORCED FOR ONE FSO THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WORK USAID AND SIMILAR ORGANIZATIONS DO.

BY JEFFREY ASHLEY

My life has long been enmeshed in adventure and risk. In addition to two brushes with death in Angola, I have been lost and hypothermic in the highlands of Scotland, ambushed in both Guatemala and Peru, violently seasick and despondent in the fjords of southern Chile, and marooned on an uninhabited island in the South Pacific. I have survived a bus accident in Argentina, a train derailment in the Andes mountains, a flood in Mexico, and a head-on collision in the wild bush of northern Namibia. I have seen war and violence in too many places to count, witnessed the horrific results of genocide in Rwanda, the astounding survival of post-genocide Cambodia, and have

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even felt the fierce hands of heated violence and assault on my own body. I understand risk and darkness. But I am also extremely lucky to have known and relished light and beauty as well.

From 1993 to 1994, shortly before joining the Foreign Service, I lived in Angola at the height of the civil war. I was working for a humanitarian relief non-governmental organization providing emergency public health interventions to vulnerable people in need of immunizations, prenatal care and maternal and child health care and nutrition.

In early 1994, I was on assignment in Luena, a city in eastern Angola that was frequently attacked and bombed by UNITA forces (the opposition party). Yet even as the fighting raged all around us, our team continued to implement and extend public health services to the people suffering from the conflict. Since I was in charge as the NGO site manager for the Luena program, I constantly had to figure out how to obtain logistics support for our operations in a place that was extraordinarily poor even by Angolan standards. With so many people to help, our resources would have been inadequate to the task even in peacetime. And we were surrounded by death and destruction, forcing me to make impossible choices over and over again.

But one day was particularly horrific, forever etched in my memory.

On a deceptively quiet Sunday in March 1994, my Brazilian colleagues and I were in the process of finishing a breakfast filled with laughter and glorious conversation when UNITA launched a heavy offensive. Since our tiny bunker could only accommodate at most eight people, I had to decide which of our neighbors and Angolan staff, if any, could join our expatriate staff there during bombing attacks.

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Such life-and-death decisions are, by definition, excruciating — but how much more so in the midst of chaos and panic. I remember asking myself, how could I possibly choose which of our friends and neighbors would find safety with us in our small bunker? (In fact, I could not even be sure that we would survive, given the intensity of the shelling.) What would I tell the many other desperate, innocent people who also sought refuge with us? That they could not come in because expatriates had priority? Who or what gave me the right to put a higher value on our lives than theirs? Me? Rules? Who? And how could I make the situation less frightening for everyone, or at least help them cope with it?

Somehow, I managed to make what I hoped were rational decisions. And while I will never know if I made the “right” decisions, I did all I could to protect as many people as possible from the attack.

I found out later that the civilian casualties around the city resulting from that UNITA attack were numerous, the violence enormous. But my staff were safe and fortunately our neighbors were spared, as well. In fact all of those in the compound were safe, even those who were not in the bunker with us. However, others in the central market approximately six blocks from our compound were not so fortunate. I don’t recall the precise number killed that day, but it was high.

I left Luena shortly after the attack on a medical evacuation due to severe malaria and hepatitis A. I was sent to Windhoek, Namibia, for medical care and recuperation. After my release about a month later, the doctors told me I could go back to Angola just long enough to pack my things and leave. The danger of another malaria episode was too great, especially given the lack of quality medical care in Angola. I knew they were right but I also felt I needed more time, that I had much more work to do, many more people to try to help in Angola. In particular, Luena was very special to me and, in its own way, beautiful despite the horror. But I followed the doctors’ advice. I returned to Luena and within 24 hours, packed up my few things, said goodbye to my friends and staff, and left, very heavy-hearted and weighed down by the chapters of my personal and professional life.

Ever since then, Luena has occupied a very special, very sad place in my heart. Memories of the Sunday attack, memories of the war, the desperation, the pro-

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found, nearly impossible needs, and my personal work there filled my thoughts long afterward.

The Return

After I finally left Angola, I spent six weeks recuperating in Los Angeles at the home of some close friends before going back to work. I then went to Rwanda, where I helped refugees in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. Shortly thereafter I entered the Foreign Service and began my work with USAID as a health officer in February 1995, serving in Tanzania and Cambodia.

When the opportunity to work in Angola as the General Development Officer and Director of Projects of the USAID/Angola Mission appeared, I felt the time was right to go back and attempt to finish the work I had left behind. I wanted to try ... again. So I bid on Luanda and was granted the assignment.

I returned in January 2001 to find a people even more war-torn and weary than I had remembered. But I observed and felt the same paradox of great beauty in its darkness and concomitant iniquity in its beauty that I had experienced eight years before. And I was just as driven to do my part to deliver quality public health services and create a healthier, perhaps better future for the Angolan people.

Yet as soon as I arrived in Luanda, I knew I had to get back to Luena, a place that had been locked in my memory and heart. I had to make peace with the war I saw there, the war I felt in my heart as a result of the decisions and choices I made that dark Sunday back in early 1994. Fortunately, my opportunity soon presented itself.

On Wednesday, July 11, 2001, I traveled to Luena with two colleagues as part of a 10-member delegation led by the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Health, a tremendously gifted, dedicated and passionate Angolan senior government official. We were on board a 10-seat, twin-propped United Nations World Food Program plane, on a mission to establish a five-year, \$5 million malaria prevention program sponsored by USAID.

It was my intention to conduct a small, private meditation ceremony of forgiveness there, so in my backpack I was carrying some blessed Buddhist jah

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sticks (incense) I had obtained in Cambodia. I wanted them with me so that I could light them as soon as I arrived. This rite would enable me simultaneously to embrace Luena and finally let her go once and for all.

As we began our descent toward the runway at Luena Airport, our pilots lost control of the King Air plane about 1,000 feet up. Perhaps because they had to follow the spiral-down descent pattern mandated for landing in the many war-torn areas of Angola, the pilots misjudged the runway of the airport and the plane narrowly missed hitting the trees. It slammed into a land mine field about 30 meters outside the entrance to the runway leaving a deep hole where it hit the earth.

Part of the landing gear collapsed and the plane bounced up and smashed into the cement lip of the runway entrance, collapsing the remaining landing gear. That very likely saved our lives since the plane automatically stabilized itself after impact. Had we not lost both landing gear, the plane would have rolled over and surely exploded.

After we hit the lip of the runway, the plane slammed onto the runway and dragged on its belly for over one kilometer. I heard the sickening, deafening sound of metal scraping against tarmac and was petrified that the floor of the plane would rip up and tear my legs off. In fact, I was more focused on losing my legs than the possibility of the plane exploding, at least at those moments of the crash-landing.

By another piece of luck, as the plane careened against the tarmac, the propellers hit the runway and were damaged, but the wings (where the fuel tanks are stored) did not touch the ground. Had they made contact with the runway, as we were told over and over again afterward, they would have ignited and exploded.

During the crash, I closed my eyes as countless thoughts flooded my mind. I thought of love and a lover and those who I believed loved me. These particular thoughts gave me a modicum of solace as I confronted what I fully expected was impending death.

The plane finally came to a stop in the middle of the runway. When the initial shock of the crash subsided, I shouted that I smelled smoke and burning metal. I had to repeat the admonition before I got a reaction

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from anyone. A few moments later a USAID colleague of mine who was seated in front of me also smelled burning metal and shouted the same warning. Yet the pilots remained silent for what seemed like several minutes before reacting. At first I thought they had been seriously injured or killed, but they were just in shock.

I attempted to get the door of the plane open, but I couldn't. I initially thought that was because I was too dazed to read the instructions properly, but I learned later the door was too severely damaged to open. At the time, all I could think was that it would have been my fault had we been unable to get out of the plane in the event it caught fire. The thought haunted me even after we all eventually escaped safely through the emergency window and saw the extensive damage of the plane.

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Finding Peace

Although some of us had bumps and bruises and we were all in shock, we fulfilled our mission to provide resources for the malaria program. We solidified a bond of friendship and camaraderie that I think will forever remain constant in our lives. And we each took with us in our privacy profoundly personal feelings of a most momentous event.

Before we left Luena after the crash, a USAID/Washington colleague who had been with me in the plane helped me light the jah sticks I had brought. We stood silently next to the wreckage on the runway and watched a solemn wind carry the smoke of the incense into the quiet breeze and grayness of the sky as we bowed our heads and meditated. It was a very special moment, one I will always hold

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sacred with my friend and colleague.

While I had already spent six months in the constant turmoil of Angola prior to the plane crash, the accident forced me to take a break from all my responsibilities and exigencies. I needed to rest, to come to terms with what I was feeling and all the memories it summoned up, good and bad.

So I went to the States to reflect, to spend time with people who care for me, to laugh and spill some tears and sleep late, to read literature, eat good ice cream and drink good coffee, and to embrace the comforts of ubiquitous opportunity and option.

I spent a month there before returning to Angola refreshed and restored, reminded of what is truly important: love, beauty, compassion, empathy, friends,

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goodness and giving. The crash helped me see more clearly that those qualities are my constant companions. And I am convinced they are infinitely more important than any one experience, even one that could have easily ended my life.

Angola will always be in my soul, as are my colleagues who experienced the crash with me. But despite the accident, I believe the ghosts of Luena are now put to rest. I now embrace my work with renewed commitment. I have no greater passion than the pursuit of

beauty, the opportunity for giving and helping the many who are bereft of basic public health care around the world. And forever I am reminded, forever certain, that even in darkness and iniquity, there is joy. ■