

Original, unedited version

What am I doing here ? Looking back over a range of experiences on several continents, there are a number of situations when that question might well have been appropriate, though I don't remember asking it at the time. Probably I was too scared. One of them certainly would have been a morning in April of 1961. I was lying on my side on a cement floor, my back tight against an outside wall of a brick house with a tile roof. Students from our Bible School, with their little ones, were strung out along the various walls, and we had a reason for that position. If the heavy tile roof were to cave in under bombardment, the safest place would be along the carrying walls. The sounds from outside included both bombing and strafing. With us inside, parents were comforting their crying children. Today that town is *Mbanz' e Kongo*, but in those days it was known as São Salvador do Congo. It was the colonial administrative seat for a District in what was then Portugal's overseas province of Angola. We were in the opening days of the struggle for independence. My students and I were trapped in the middle of that struggle.

The trauma of one's first three or four wars is the worst. After that we become accustomed to them to a degree, the panic and terror recede. But in those opening days of the Angola war I must admit to a very real fear of which I am not proud. As people of faith we try to bring that faith into the stressful situations of life, to deal with the unknown, that which threatens, events which are utterly beyond our control. In the case of our family, exposure to repeated hostilities was not a planned process, it just seemed to happen in those places where we have been ministering. In retrospect we perceive that it is in situations of great trauma where our presence seems to have made the greatest difference to others. That being the case, there are lessons to be learned, insights to be shared which may have value to those experiencing stress of various kinds, and not just related to violent conflict.

Legend has it that the open hostilities in Northern Angola began on March 15, 1961. Those of us who were living at Calambata, fifteen kilometers north of Sao Salvador, move that date one day earlier. There were disturbances but no deaths at Nsenge where a mobile clinic was set up for the obligatory administration of pentamidine, used to control sleeping sickness. However, on that same day a plantation owner was shot off his tractor in the fields behind the compound where our houses and the Bible Institute were located. Fernandes was on his way to see me, to return the wagon he had borrowed. He seems to have been the first casualty in that long conflict. The open hostilities which spread the following day across much of Northern Angola eventually led to the establishment of Angola as an independent nation rather than a colony.

We had gone with colleagues to Portugal in October 1957 for language study. Protestant missionaries were not really welcome in Portugal's overseas Province of Angola, but were tolerated under certain conditions. One of those conditions was that our work be done through the Portuguese language. Another condition was that any institution such as ours must have a Portuguese national in residence on site. From our arrival point at Cabinda, we had been invited early to transfer to Calambata to head up the Institute, which also involved teaching classes for the twelve teacher-evangelists and their wives. We did this with a sense of urgency, as if to gain back the decades when such training had not been possible. More than a year in Portugal had ingrained an awareness of the heavy hand with which Portugal as well as its overseas provinces were governed. Secret police and paid informers were everywhere, with beatings, imprisonment and deportation of the native population. We concentrated on the task at hand, scarcely aware of the pace of political awareness which was developing around us. We were certainly ignorant of the reality that we were living out the closing days of the colonial era which in that part of Africa was more than four centuries old.

Rewritten Version

I was lying on my side on a cement floor, my back tight against an outside wall of a brick house with a tile roof. Some two dozen students from our Bible school, with their children, were strung out along the various walls; head to feet, feet to feet, head to head, it didn't matter – just get against a wall and hold the little ones to comfort them. We had a reason for that position. If the heavy tile roof were to cave in under bombardment, the safest place would be along the carrying walls.

The angry roar of propeller aircraft engines passing at low altitude sent the little ones into bursts of crying again. We could hear both bombing and strafing. Bombs were falling in the valleys and forests outside the town. The strafing seemed to start at the bottom of the hill, proceeding upward toward us. The shooting became louder and louder until we could hear the double blasts – the explosions from the guns and the detonations on the ground. Close enough in fact, that we could feel the shock, but our shelter was never hit.

Inside, where we had gathered after breakfast for our morning routine of devotions and planning the day's activities, we listened, prayed, sang hymns, and tried to make sense of what we were hearing and experiencing.

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In October 1957 my wife Virginia and I, with our one-year-old daughter Carol, had gone with colleagues to Portugal for language study. Protestant missionaries were not really welcome in Portugal's overseas province of Angola, but were tolerated under certain conditions. One of those conditions was that our work be done in the Portuguese language. Another was that any institution such as ours must have a Portuguese national in residence on site.