

# The “Mercy Ship” and My Experience of Volunteering in Freetown Sierra Leone, West Africa

Submitted by Torey Erdman, RN  
Rockyview General Hospital, Calgary, Alberta  
SCORNA  
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Last fall I had the wonderful opportunity to volunteer on the *Africa Mercy* hospital ship that, at the time, was docked in Freetown, Sierra Leone in West Africa. A close friend and colleague of mine Tara Leece, RN and I worked as Operating Room nurses onboard the vessel for 5 weeks. Overall, our journey was very eye opening and humbling. The experience was challenging at times but also very rewarding and exciting. I would like to share with you a little about the Mercy Ships organization, life on the ship, the surgeries we were involved in and the culture of Freetown in hopes that I may encourage you to volunteer with Mercy Ships in the future.

## Mercy Ship Organization

The Mercy Ships organization has been serving West African countries since 1978 and the *Africa Mercy* is the largest charity hospital ship in the world. With 6 operating rooms and a 78 bed ward for patients, the volunteers are able to provide healthcare to some of the poorest countries in the world. The *Africa Mercy* is crewed by 450 volunteers from around the globe who come to offer world-class medical assistance. The ship is renowned for providing life changing operations, but also dedicates endless effort towards community development projects such as water and sanitation, education, health, dental care, agriculture and infrastructure development. For more information I would encourage you to visit the website, [www.mercyships.org](http://www.mercyships.org). The *Africa Mercy* will be serving Guinea starting at the end of August 2012 for 9 months.

## Life on the Ship

While I was onboard the *Africa Mercy* there was 400 volunteers of 33 different nationalities. Most volunteers stayed in 8-10 berth cabins but Tara and I were fortunate enough to share a 4 berth cabin. Our room had 2 sets of bunk beds, a small bathroom with shower, a little sitting area and storage area. It was cozy and did not offer a lot of privacy, but everyone was very pleasant and easy to get along with. Meals were provided 3 times a day buffet style up in the cafeteria. Other services on the ship included a Starbucks coffee shop, an internet cafe, a pool, lounging area, crew kitchen, meeting areas, a small store and a gym. We worked Monday to Friday and generally did 8-to-10 hour work days, depending on what surgeries were being performed. We also took call for the evenings and weekends, which meant we had to stay aboard the ship to be available. Our days were busy but rewarding.

## Surgeries

When I first arrived I started working in ophthalmology where we would do, on average, 30-40 cataract surgeries a day between 2 rooms that each had 2 operating beds. Patients would come aboard the ship in the morning, have their surgeries, receive free hot lunches and then return home the same day. The following day, they would return to the ship to have their eye patches removed and for me, watching their expressions was a highlight of the trip. Many would jump up and down or start dancing and singing because they were so happy to have their sight returned. The rest of my time was spent doing Plastics, General, ENT (ear, nose, throat) and Maxillofacial surgeries. Plastics consisted of varying operations from burn contracture releases, skin grafts, reconstructive work and removal of disfiguring scars. In general surgery we saw many hernias, hydroceles and lumpectomies. In ENT and Maxillofacial we were doing sinus surgery, cleft lip and palate repairs, and removing large mandibular tumors. The tumors we saw were usually massive in size, at least as big as a grapefruit, and not only were they very disfiguring, but they could potentially compromise the airway and esophagus. Often we would have to remove part of the mandible in order to take out the giant mass. We would then plate the jaw covering the metal plate with an ischial hip bone graft to prevent the metal from eroding through the skin. And in one case, we used a patient's rib to re-build the jaw. It was fascinating to be a part of these surgeries and so rewarding to see the patients afterwards.

We worked with various surgeons and anesthesiologists from all over the world who brought their own specialties to the ship. For some it was their first trip and others were returning for the 6th or 7th time. Everyone was very pleasant and understanding to work with. Sometimes we wouldn't have the instrument or product they wanted available, so as a team we would get creative and try to come up with an alternative. Everyone was very understanding that our resources were limited on the ship. It was a wonderful environment to work in and be part of such a great team dynamic.

## Freetown Culture

Tara and I managed to get off the ship as much as possible either after work or on weekends. Walking around town proved to be overwhelming at times. The sheer poverty of the African population was hard to comprehend at first. There were thousands of people (over a million in Freetown) crowding the dirt streets, intermingled with various carts, wheelbarrows, donkeys and cars of all sorts. It proved to be an adventure every time we left the ship and we would often return exhausted both physically and mentally from the challenges we encountered out in town. That said, the people of Freetown were great. There was a brutal civil war that occurred from 1991-2002 where approximately 50,000 civilians were killed either by rebel forces or government soldiers. The effects of the war were still visible and the destruction that

occurred was unimaginable. Today there is an overwhelming sense of unity and pride among the people. Forgiveness pours from everyone's hearts, as no one really understood the war and who was fighting for whom. And although their eyes tell stories of death and destruction, their smiles are full of expression and positivity about the future. I feel very fortunate to have met some fabulous kindhearted individuals who have touched my heart forever.

As Operating Room Nurses, I think we are very lucky we are in a profession that allows for some wonderful travel experiences. There are many other volunteer organizations always looking for OR nurses. I feel very privileged that I can offer my skills as an OR nurse in other countries around the world. I am so proud to be an OR nurse and can't wait to see what other adventures I get involved in to help others in developing countries. I hope my experience has sparked your interest in volunteering in a developing country. I would strongly recommend the Mercy Ships Organization as I think it is a great way to be introduced to a third world country while you still have some great amenities on the ship.

#### References

Mercy Ships Canada Website: <http://www.mercyships.ca/home.html>. Accessed May 28th 2012.

Torey Erdman