

# m/v Caribbean Mercy

In Memory of....

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## Ship of Hope

### An Anastasis Story

By Ian McColl



m/v Anastasis

The April night was hot and sweaty when we landed in Banjul, capital of The Gambia. A Land Rover drove us to the wharf jutting into the muddy river where a stately old passenger liner was berthed, her white hull almost luminous in the aura of her lights.

At the top of the gangway we were greeted by a tall surgeon wearing operating scrubs. "We have to do one more tonight," said Gary Parker, 48, a Californian plastic surgeon and the ship's chief medical officer. "Could you start right now?"

This was no cruise liner, but the Mercy Ship Anastasis, a vessel that brings health and hope to some of the world's poorest people. And my wife Jean and I, both doctors, were the new volunteers.

We dumped our bags in a cabin and went straight to the theatre, where we

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changed and scrubbed up. Our patient was a girl disfigured by a hole in her cheek so wide that we could see her back teeth. It was the work of a flesh-eating infection.

Skilfully, "Doctor Gary" created a pedicle, or roll of flesh, on the child's forehead. Then he cut one end free and "planted" it in her chin. In a few days it would bond, then he'd separate the other end and unroll the flesh to fashion into a new cheek. Soon the girl would go home with a new face, her life transformed.

It was the team's fourth big operation that day, in a theatre so cramped that to get from one end of the table to the other, nurses had to wriggle under tubes and wires. Nobody lost their rag or looked at their watches, as happens all too often in the NHS.

Equipment was old-fashioned, but the cheerful "can-do" spirit on board was infectious. "I need a Jolls retractor," I said, expecting it to be slapped into my hand.

"We don't have one!" said Deidre Graham, the theatre nurse.

"Well, what have you got?"

"I can give you a pair of hands."

So began our first stint with the international charity Mercy Ships. For the next two weeks we came out of the operating theatre only to eat and (briefly) to sleep. I'm professor of surgery at Guy's Hospital in London, but I hadn't operated so intensively and for so long since I was a young houseman, and I loved it.

Anyway, to slow down was unthinkable. Daily, people streamed up the gangway for plastic surgery and eye treatments—infants whose food bubbled out through their noses because they were born with cleft palates, faces bulging with tumours, children grossly disfigured by burns, squints or horribly distorted eyes, men and women with pendulous goitres beneath their chins, people of all ages blinded by cataracts. For many, with no access to health care, the Mercy Ship was their only hope.

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In the 27 beds in the ward below the operating theatre, every face was swollen, bruised and bandaged, but on our early-morning rounds we'd see the patients borrowing mirrors after their operations. They'd turn their heads and flex their smiles, getting used to new appearances.

All hearts were melted by a mother spotted on the stern deck pointing out the world to the little boy in her arms. His cataracts had just been removed and he was seeing for the first time. "That's the sky and it's blue," she told him. "And those trees, they're green."

The four-strong Mercy Ships fleet is largely unknown and unsung because it raises money in modest ways. I hadn't even heard of it until the Anastasis docked in London in 1996, and Jean and I were asked on board.

Usually it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the needs of the Third World—with roughly one in four of the world's population having no access to formal medical care and nearly half the world's 45 million blind capable of seeing if only they could have a simple cataract operation. But what we saw on board the Anastasis transformed our notions of what ordinary people can do.

From captains, surgeons and accountants to lab technicians, cooks and engine-room greasers, every person is not only a volunteer working round the clock, but is paying to do it. For part-timers like ourselves it was easy to pay our own air fares and living costs, but most have to make enormous sacrifices. Second engineer Jakes Broodryk, 42, and his wife Nicky, for example, sold their dream house and business in South Africa, their three children sold their horses, and the family moved into two tiny adjoining cabins on board.

Like almost all the 750 crew and office staff based in 16 countries around the world, the family is supported by friends, relatives, community groups and a church back home.

Such intense motivation accounts for the tremendous spirit on board.

Everyone who could, dropped tools and formed a human chain to load medical supplies from the dockside. My nurses spent a lot of their free time on hands and knees, cleaning steelwork in the engine room. With everyone doing their

bit, and a bit more, heroic operations that would cost thousands of pounds in Europe can be done for next to nothing.

Mercy Ships spends just £6 on each person cared for.

A group of young people from all over the world were doing mission work in The Bahamas in 1964 when they took shelter from a hurricane. As houses around them blew away, a teenage girl prayed aloud: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if God sent a big white ship filled with doctors, medicines, blankets and building materials to help people hit by this disaster?"

The idea lodged in the mind of Don Stephens, a 19-year-old from Colorado. Later, running the European and African office of Youth With a Mission in Switzerland, he realized that a ship manned by experts and self-contained with its own water, power, accommodation and medical supplies, would be the ideal way to get round corruption and bring help to needy people in poor countries.

Taking night trains to ports all over Europe, Don inspected ships. In Venice one day in 1977, he climbed a rope ladder up the high side of a mothballed Italian liner. The Victoria had nine decks and was 522 feet long. "Shouldn't we get something smaller?" Don's wife Deyon asked dubiously as they explored cabins for more than 800 passengers and crew.

"She'll never be big enough for the job we have to do," he replied.

With a million-dollar loan mainly from a Swiss bank, Don bought the ship and had her towed to Piraeus, the port of Athens. He and Deyon moved on board with their four children and a growing team of deck officers, welders, plumbers, engineers and electricians recruited through his lectures to churches worldwide.

After four difficult, money-scrabbling years the old ship, now called Anastasis (Greek for resurrection), began by taking a sawmill and medical supplies to Guatemalan Indians. But it was in Mexico, where her crew built shelters and ran health clinics after the devastating 1986 earthquake, that she became a mercy ship. Out of friendships the crew made on shore emerged a real need.

Many of the children suffered cleft palates. "Isn't there something you can do?" they pleaded.

Gary Parker had just joined the ship for a three-month stint, but he grasped the nettle and after 14 years is still at it. In 1991 Anastasis transferred to west Africa, where she now works in a different country every year. Other ships work in Central America and the Far East.

The ship's medical work focuses on head problems—plastic surgery, blindness, dentistry—because they require little aftercare. An advance party hangs posters in health clinics inviting people to a screening day. Soon after the ship arrived in Banjul, well over 5,000 people had lined up in the sweltering sun in a football stadium.

The three-day screening is heart-rending. So many needy people, hundreds of cancer cases, must be turned away, though each one is counselled. Finally, about 500 are selected for surgery, leaving room for a second screening later. For only after news of success stories filters out do many with the worst disfigurements have the courage to come out of hiding: the man who can't open his mouth and feeds by rubbing food between his front teeth, a boy whose nose was torn off by a gorilla.

Your heart goes out to them because they are outcasts. In some remote villages the midwife snatches newborn babies with cleft palates and buries them alive. Or mother and baby are frozen out of the family because they seem to have been touched by the devil. Neighbours throw stones.

At first I didn't understand why patients winced and shrank away when I took their hands. Then it dawned on me that it must be years since a human had dared to touch them. But when I stroked their arms I sensed that they saw something completely unknown and extraordinary: a glimmer of hope.

One afternoon I'd just finished a goitre surgery when Dr Gary sent for me. "Come and tell me what you think we should do here."

Sitting in a small cabin was a slim teenager, his head half covered by a brown blanket around which he nervously peered with one fear-filled eye. "This is

Mutala and he's 16," Dr Gary said, gently removing the blanket.

In medicine you try not to show surprise at the gruesome things you see, but this was ghastly. Hanging from the side of the boy's face and reaching halfway down his chest was a tumour as large as his head. Though technically benign, it had swallowed up his left eye and ear. Ulcerous, emitting a foul stench, the skin scarred by the attempts of his parents and witch doctors to remove it, the tumour weighed more than five pounds and Mutala had to carry it as he walked along.

Villagers thought he was possessed and avoided the isolated hut where he slept the day away, coming out only at night to eat scraps of food left by his door. His cousin had been taking him on one more fruitless round of hospitals when they saw a Mercy Ships vehicle and asked for help.

The surgical list was full, but an operating team of 15 agreed to work through Easter Saturday, a rare ship's holiday, and crew with matching A-plus blood stayed on board. Putting Mutala to sleep with an anaesthetic mask was difficult because his mouth had become a massive cavity inside the tumour. His distorted anatomy was jungle territory: a tiny vein on the side of the jaw, for example, had grown bigger than any other blood vessel in the body, and to cut it inadvertently would have caused catastrophic bleeding. Even so, we transfused 12 pints of blood during the exhausting, day-long operation.

The last time we saw Mutala he was peeping between the curtains around his bed, a small smile in the corner of his mouth that could move under the bandages. While the ship is on her next mission, in nearby Benin, he will be brought for more plastic surgery to rebuild his features.

During the ship's stay in The Gambia, nearly 800 patients had come down her gangway dancing on sunshine. They could look the world in the eye. Some even carried letters provided by the ship to explain why their appearance no longer matched the photos on their ID cards. According to a hawker outside the wharf gates, local people came every night to gaze at the white ship bathed in her halo of light. "They say they can see angels on her decks," he

said.

It wasn't hard to imagine. When Jean and I left the Anastasis we had voyaged no sea miles, yet we discovered new horizons of compassion and human need. For this was a ship that carried that rare, most valuable commodity: a cargo of mercy.

***Edit***

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