

Duweh the Mighty Elephant? by Ed Landry

On my first trip to Africa I was in Nigeria and Ghana, and it was there that I got my official African name. After a long pastoral seminar, I was given a traditional African robe and christened “Duweh” which means “mighty elephant.” Don’t ask what it means because they would not tell me why. Let’s pretend together that it means I am seen as great and mighty and invincible. Their smiles indicated that it may mean something else, but let’s stay with great and mighty and invincible. So when it came time for a second trip to the dark continent, Duweh was ready. Duweh is great and mighty and invincible.

Back to Africa

It was quite a difficult trip to get to Liberia. When I arrived in the Ivory Coast, I learned that the boarding pass I had which was to take me on to Liberia was for an airline that did not exist. I actually had the boarding pass in my hand, but there was no such airline. The really strange part was that nobody was surprised. Just another boarding pass for an airline that nobody had ever heard of. How can that happen you say? Simple, this is Africa. Surely you must have received one of those scam emails from a special dignitary in Africa who has millions of dollars he wants to put in your bank account. I get those all the time. Welcome to Africa.

Previously I wrote about how the great and mighty and invincible one dealt with a common spider (the size of a bush hog). After a week of teaching by day and hand to

hand warfare at night with creepy crawlees, it was time to leave Liberia. War had broken out again, and bodies were being brought in from the countryside. Stories were making the rounds that the main airport (the one I arrived at) was bombed. UN peacekeeping forces were inspecting all vehicles leaving Monrovia. With this cheerful news I made it URGENTLY CLEAR to my seminar coordinator that I needed to get to the airport very early in the morning. I thought that would have been obvious, but I wanted to make sure they understood that as much as I loved being with them that week, I also had a family I wanted to see again. One flight per week came in and out of the country, and it was beginning to be clear that this one could be the last flight out for a while if it got out.

My flight was supposed to be at 10 a.m. I had no ticket and my passport had been taken by Liberian authorities. Oh, did I tell you that when we sorted out that minor detail in the Ivory Coast that I had a boarding pass for an airline that didn't exist that they found one seat on a Russian transport plane into Liberia, a one-way ticket. Yes, I left on a ministry trip by myself for an African conference with a nice itinerary and all boarding passes neatly in my briefcase. A day later I was trying to negotiate for a one-way flight on a Russian transport plane and doing it all in French. I don't speak French. I think God loves doing these things. You want to know how to increase your prayer life and your faith? Simple, just book a one-way flight on a World War II Russian transport plane into one of one of the most dangerous war torn countries in West Africa.

After I had arrived in Liberia and found my contacts and did the traditional kissing of the ground ceremony, I surrendered all my official documents to the Liberian authorities and never saw them again all week. I wondered if I ever would.

I had no idea who had what and if my promised return ticket would even show up. I had no idea where the domestic airport was that was being used, and rumors abounded of roadblocks which were set up around the city. So I told them I wanted to be underway at 6 a.m. at the latest for the airport. I was packed and on the curb at 4 a.m. to be safe. UN vehicles were roaming the streets even at that hour.

6 a.m.. Nobody. 6:30 a.m.. Nobody. 7 a.m. Nobody. 7:30 a.m. Nobody. Pace, pace, pace in front of my spider infested hotel. More UN security vehicles racing around the city streets, some with lights flashing. 8a.m.. Nobody. Getting really nervous. Really nervous. No phones, no electricity. I don't know anyone. 8:30 a.m. – a taxi pulls up and two familiar faces get out. The first taxi broke down they say. But it is 8:30! Never mind, let's get to the airport. VERY NERVOUS.

But wait, there is a problem. They tell me they need to make a copy of the report, they are sending back to the Bible League who sponsored this church planters seminar. I told them, "Never mind," since I know the Bible League folks and I will make the copy when I get to America. No, they insist on making the copy now. But there is no electricity in the city. No problem. One of them has a friend who has a generator, and he has another friend who has a copy machine. I know what you are going to say but please don't. This is Africa. So we spent an hour going from place to place, and by the time we transported the generator and finally got it to the place where the copy machine was, the guy was not there. We took it back and they decided that the copy was not all that important anyway. 9:30 a.m. We still haven't left the city and war has broken out. The last flight that will ever leave the country is leaving in 30 minutes. I have no ticket, no

passport. I have gone beyond nervous. I am sick. But my two new Liberian friends are calm as can be. But they are not leaving so they don't have to be nervous.

We left for the airport. The driver is happy and has the love of Jesus. He is not in a hurry. Why couldn't I have the mad Muslim I had in the Ivory Coast who drove so fast, my knuckles didn't get their color back until the next day. No, I have the world's most joyful and slowest taxi driver. Well, what do you know, there's a road block. Cars are pulled over, they are taking the seats out, and looking in every orifice. When we finally get there, I tell them I am a missionary named Duweh, the mighty elephant, and I need to get to the airport. They tell me that they are happy to meet Duweh, the mighty elephant, but they still have to take the seats out and check every orifice.

Finally we get underway and when we pull up at the domestic airport, it is pandemonium. It is like everyone in Liberia wants out. I imagine it is because of the spiders. I am guided by my two calm friends into a room all by myself, and then they sit down next to me and nobody says a word. I look at my watch. 11 a.m.. Now, normally that is not the best time to arrive for a once a week 10 a.m. flight, but what do I know. This is Africa. Then I see what had to be the most disheartening sight of my life. The three of us watched, in total silence, as the only airplane at the airport slowly taxied out to the end of runway. In the calmest, cracking voice I could come up with I asked, "Is that my plane?" "Yes." We watched. The plane went down the runway. But halfway it stopped and slowly came back to the terminal. "What is he doing?" "The pilot wants to make sure it works." It was that same old Russian cargo plane converted to a passenger liner. It would be like flying in a World War II bomber with folding chairs. I knew this because I had arrived on it. Yep, it worked so now, they would load the plane.

Then the door opened to the room we were in. When it did, I noticed the letters VIP on the door. I wondered why all the shouting people were outside in this big lobby, and we were the only ones in this small private room. The man who walked in the door seemed familiar. He walked over to me and politely handed me a boarding pass and my passport and thanked me for coming to his country. I was dumbfounded . I asked who he was, and my new friends told me that he was one of the 180 pastors who had attended the church planting seminar. I then remembered him. But what was he doing with my documents and why was he at the airport? “Oh, sir, he is the airport controller. He’s in charge of the airport.” “So, I guess I am not going to miss my plane.” “Oh, sir, you are the guest of honor. They would hold the plane for you all day if needed.”

It is pretty much impossible to describe my feelings after that. Humbled to be sure. Who am I to get such treatment. Angry that they didn’t tell me sooner so I could have enjoyed my morning instead of fretting. Even angrier at my attitude and my lack of faith. Once again I had been reminded that God is the great controller, and he does not always make his plans as clear to us as we would like. Whether it is a flight, something else out of our control or Leukemia, it is all the same. He is the controller and we need to rest in his judgment. I need to remember this; I thought elephants were supposed to have good memories.

Thank you, Lord, for this lesson again. Help me learn it this time. Thank you, Lord, for Leukemia too. I may not understand it all, but you do, and I will rest with you. And thank you, Lord, for that giant spider that crawled up my leg the first night. On second thought I am not that well along yet in my faith. Ignore the spider part.