

# A Pilot's Perspective: Flying in Politically Unstable and Hostile Environments

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War. Coup. Rebel group. Terror Cell. Political  
unrest. Instability. Disease. Global pandemic.  
Riot.

These words are all too familiar. They may send a shiver down your spine, or evoke a certain sadness as you recall a memory of an event you witnessed. Worse yet, they may now be so familiar that they elicit no reaction at all. For many of us committed to a humanitarian purpose however, our basic nature responds with...

Aid. Help. Rescue. Relief. Response. Relief.  
Life.

We may have different paths, different beliefs, different reasons for helping, but there is one place where stand on common ground. We are united in purpose and mission.



We are not the doctors.



We are not the ambassadors or the diplomats.





We are not the military or the translators or  
the nurses.



We are behind-the-scenes humanitarians enabling others to do their jobs by getting them from Point A to Point B safely through the industry we know best.



We are the aviators.





We are the life support.



Whether we have a plane full of diplomats  
on a mission to assess the effectiveness of a  
refugee camp...





or are carrying doctors for a life-saving  
medical program...



or removing aircraft seats to make room for a stretcher during a medical evacuation...





around the globe, we are there.



We have responded to refugees in the aftermath of war in the Middle East, flown doctors during pandemics in West Africa, and transported people to hospitals as a result of politically unstable environments in many parts of the globe.





# West Africa

Chaos. There is no other word that better describes what took place on March 2, 2001. I was the pilot of a King Air 200 on a flight from Conakry, Guinea to Freetown, Sierra Leone. My passengers has no idea that we had departed just minutes before catastrophe erupted in the city. I heard the voice of our director in West Africa frantically screaming through the HF radio. He said, "I don't know what just happened but there was an explosion near our house! People are running, hundreds of people. There's a riot breaking out! What's your location? Over."

Our mechanic responded, "I'm at the hangar. Something was just dropped near the runway and a huge explosion went off! Explosions everywhere! Thousands of people are running from the airport and over the runway! Debris is everywhere! Over."

Then the instructions and gathering of families began: "We're under attack. Gather the kids and the passports! Get inside and lock all the doors. Explosions and fires are all over the city! Over."

Then the instructions to my aircraft: "Do not land in Conakry! Repeat. Do not land in Conakry! We are under attack! Divert to Liberia and await further instructions. Over."

Was the city under attack? Did the rebels from up country attempt to take over the capital? Are we being bombed? Who all is dead? My fellow workers frantically tried to unite with loved ones, gather emergency rations, and stay clear of the chaos. People's clothes rattled on their bodies as explosions continued to blast. As we listened to the screams over the radio, the other pilot and I didn't utter a word as we tried to comprehend all that was being transmitted. We flew along without a word spoke but it was far from quiet in our headsets. We had to uplift maximum useable fuel in Liberia and prepare for an emergency evacuation for those stranded in Conakry if it became possible. But for now, we were going to Liberia for an indefinite amount of time.





### Humanitarian Aviation Organization

- Started in 1984
- Provides relief and assistance during natural disasters and crises
- History of operation in 36 countries around the globe
- Fully committed to increasing flight safety and service through technology, strategy, and professionalism
- CEO Dave Carlstrom  
(dcarlstrom@airserv.org)

Thus began my three years of flying in West Africa for Air Serv International on a contract with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.



I always reflect on my time in Africa by first reflecting, in comparison, on the boredom of flying in the United States. But you see, in aviation, we like boredom. We don't need "excitement" in aviation. When I graduated from flight school. The keynote speaker summed up a career in aviation for all of the parents in the audience. As we sat in our newly issued flight uniforms with crisp white shirts and bright epaulettes, he told our parents, "Aviation is a series of hours upon hours of boredom interrupted by moments of sheer terror."

Our job is to make sure that the moments of sheer terror never come to fruition.





Although a humanitarian pilot does not have the same level of safety oversight as a regulated airline, the potential negative outcomes are certainly the same. I might go so far as to say that in addition to the concerns facing an airline pilot, the humanitarian pilot faces an increased level of risk on a day to day basis due to politically unstable and hostile environments.

Sometimes the information a humanitarian pilot receives just happens to be less reliable, more scarce, or perhaps omitted altogether. This creates a constantly challenging environment for our organizations regarding...





## Personal Security: Carjacking

In 2002, my car was breached by a soldier who just really needed to get a ride. He climbed in my car with an AK-47 pointed to my head and demanded I take him up country. The inebriated guards at the police barricade ended up coaxing him out of the truck and I made it home safely.



## Inaccurate Weather or Field Condition Reports:

Although the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) that stretches across the continent provides a solid squall line of thunderstorms on a fairly regular basis, it is the storms that are not predicted or reported that are the most threatening.



Only in Africa have I ever encountered unforecasted rain so heavy that it stripped the paint off the aircraft and set off the EGPWS (enhanced ground proximity warning system) due to the sheer magnitude of the storm and the associated volume of rain.





## Political Unrest: Military Coups

On a flight into Abidjan in 2002, Abidjan Tower cleared us to land. After we landed however, Tower failed to hand us off to Ground Control. When we called Ground Control, there was no answer and when we taxied off the runway and onto the military ramp, there was not a soul to greet us. Upon opening the aircraft door and hearing the all too familiar sound of guns being fired, we confirmed that the airport had been taken over by rebel soldiers.



## Fuel Quality and Availability: Fuel Replaced By Water

Fuel contamination was often an issue. Jet A was an easy replacement for kerosene in night lanterns, so an aircraft sitting overnight was a rich target.





We hired guards to watch the aircraft overnight and tested the fuel for contamination each day. Some of the issues would be straight contamination from the barrels, missing fuel out of the tanks, or worse yet, the fuel in the aircraft tanks replaced with water.





Another concern was the availability and readiness of the fuel. In most stations, we had the fuel trucked into a storage unit near the airport. When we needed fuel, we would roll the 50-gallon barrel down the dirt trails from the storage unit to the aircraft.



After testing the fuel for contamination, we would take turns hand-pumping the fuel into the aircraft. Most places were not able to store or maintain a generator, so an electric pump was not a possibility. Thirty minutes of hand cranking equaled thirty minutes of flight. And yes, I would always take a turn.





*Lacey and the guys in Kissidougou*



As pilots, our job is to ensure that not only our passengers, but all of our employees as well, arrive home safely. In the course of providing that service, we often learn the stories of those we're serving as well.





It did not escape my notice when six children under the age of ten apprehensively boarded my plane in April 2002. I was surprised by the unusual quiet that seemed to echo off the walls of the airplane. Their nervous grins and huge eyes anxiously looked toward the flight deck in search of consolation. This was the first time any of them had flown, and they did not have the reassurance of a parent by their side. These children had been "lost" and were now "found." They had each become separated from their families during the war in Liberia years before. I wanted to gather them in my arms and erase any harm that had come to them during that time alone. Instead, I started the engines of my Air Serv plane bound for Sierra Leone. On this reuniting flight, I had the unique opportunity to carry these little ones home to mom and dad.





What I was doing was never more personal to me than on a day in 2003 when I received a radio call to medically evacuate a refugee woman who had lived her entire life in a village in the rainforest. Her hand and half her other arm had been cut off by rebel soldiers. There were tourniquets on both her arms and she was heavily bandaged. As she no longer had any hands, I leaned over to fasten her seatbelt. At that moment, my eyes met hers. Although I did not know her language and she did not know mine, we communicated something to each other that will be forever etched in my mind. She knew I had traveled far to enter her world, which was far different from my own. She knew I had come to help her. I could see the fear in her eyes, but she could find comfort in mine. As her tears began to form, I knew she was eternally thankful and as I wiped away my own tears, she saw compassion in physical form. After this moment of time standing still, we knew we needed each other. She knew I came to save her life, and she reminded me of how precious life can be.



There were times I struggled emotionally with sights you would never wish to see in a lifetime. But through it all, being there was a gift. As humanitarian pilots, we are the means by which people are reunited, flown to hospitals, and provided emergency support. Through aviation, we have come to know the meaning of a global village. All around us, people are hurting or hungry, weak or poor. We have this incredible opportunity to provide help to the suffering and hope to the lost. That is why we do what do.

