

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was nighttime when I arrived in Gabon. As had that unforgettable blast of heat and smells met me in the door of the plane when I first arrived in Vietnam, the fragrances and music of Africa greeted me first in the dark of that night. The scents in Vietnam were scorching air mixed with jet fuel at the base where the plane had landed. In contrast, the airport in Africa was near the ocean, and the hot air seemed stilled by the scent of flowers mixed with ocean breeze. I was immediately in love; the intrigue so powerfully pulling me in, I could give no resistance.

The next morning I saw Africa for the first time. There were modern buildings flanked by mud shacks - a ghetto mixed with the modern world. Suits and ties mixed with bare feet and traditional dress. Cars traveling alongside carts pulled by hand. The haves and the have-nots, the stark rich and the stark poor, all mingled together. Everywhere there was the music, the beautiful music that is only African: a mixture of instruments I was not accustomed to hearing- udu, djembe, doum doum, bougarabou and kora -blending together in an almost unearthly harmony, and sounds of constant drums!

The intrigue and fascination of Africa would quiet my anxiety-ridden soul. Not heal it, but calm it. There was so much to see, to learn, to take in. I was deeply fascinated with this new experience that for the time being relieved the gnawing of past preoccupations. It was probably the only type of extraordinary adventure that could have excited me beyond the focus of war. Africa would be a therapy long and desperately hoped for: It created a balance in my mind and soul.

Michael S. Orban
Souled Out: A Memoir Of War And Inner Peace

I was absorbing Africa and soon I would be going deeper into the interior, away from all modern conveniences; leaving centuries behind. My project was to build a school in the most rural, isolated area of the country, deep in the jungle. I would also be responsible for training and transferring building trade skills to four local men who would then train others. The school would provide the chance for the children there to learn to read, which I consider to be the most important and enjoyable of all scholastic skills. They would also learn math and science, but they could do no other studies without reading. This may seem insignificant in America, but visualize a place where no one has seen a book or understands its purpose. Now think about how the world would open up to them when they learned to read! Books have always been great friends and teachers for me; I would never have come to Africa if I had not been able to read about the place as a young child. I was proud and excited to be a part of what I was told President Bongo was doing for his country of Gabon at the time; providing schools and hospitals for remote peoples. I would find the need for hospitals desperately needed, though I could not have foreseen how desperately. I felt I was helping to make the world a better place and genuinely balance the destruction I had participated in while in Vietnam.

There were sixteen volunteers in our group. We were to be sent in pairs to different villages around the country to build these schools. But first, we had to learn the language. Gabon was a former French colony so the national language was French. We were sent to Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic for an immersion course in French and cultural studies. We spent our days in formal French classes and the evenings on the town plying our French on the friendly people of that capital city, absorbing the culture. The people of Central Africa were very warm and it was fun engaging them in simple phrases. This gave us all good laughs. I enjoyed the street vendors who sold their many varieties of wares, and especially the fresh Capitaine fish they caught in the Ubangi River and grilled fresh right there on the streets, seasoned hot and unforgettably delicious. Sold and wrapped in old papers, we ate the fish with our fingers. I loved the smells, the ever-present African music, and the beautiful colors of dress. All of these were a pure pleasure to experience.

While in Bangui I witnessed two amazing events. On a sweltering hot day millions upon millions of locust swarmed in over the outskirts of the city, blanketing the ground and darkening the sky. It was eerie to see such an impressive act of nature. I had heard of these locust swarms and how they devoured every bit of green growth, leaving barren fields and starving