

Tenneh Dolocon

The Wounds of War Are Not Easily Healed

Monrovia | 9 August -- The Liberian Civil War ended three years ago, but for Tenneh Dolocon the struggle continues. The wounds of war, it seems, are not easily healed.

It was a vicious conflict, even by African standards. The Liberian Civil War dragged on for 14 long years. Everyone lost someone. There was heavy fighting in the capital as recently as 2003. More than 15,000 United Nations peacekeepers remain in the country.

Tenneh was a toddler the day in 1994 when rebel soldiers stormed into her family's rural

compound; just a few huts in a jungle clearing. She was strapped to her mother Musu's back in the African fashion; snuggled just above mom's hips and held in place by a long piece of knotted cloth.

When the shooting started

Musu snatched open her front door, hoping to bolt for the safety of the trees just a few steps away. But the rebels were right out-

side and a hail of bullets met mother and child on the doorstep. Musu fell to the ground, mortally wounded, with Tenneh still strapped to her back.

Tenneh was hit by the same

bullets that killed her mother. One passed through her right shoulder, the other lodged in her left thigh.

Musu's mother, Tenneh's grandmother, snatched the bleeding child up and ran. Family bandaged the wounds as best they could without suspecting that a bullet remained inside the leg. After her injuries healed, Tenneh was sent to live with an aunt in the capital city, Monrovia.

Tenneh did well for a time. But not long after turning three, she started complaining about pain in her wounded leg. The pain quickly got so bad Tenneh was crying day and night and

needed a walking stick to hobble around.

Grandmother came and took Tenneh back upcountry where the family consulted a witch doctor. No one wants to speak of the incident now, but whatever was done to Tenneh left her much worse off. Her old bullet wounds got infected. She was lucky to survive.

It took three months, but the wounds eventually healed up once again and she was able to lay the walking stick aside. Ten-



Tenneh keeps the bullet fragment surgeons removed from her leg in a pill bottle beside her bed.

The rebels were right outside and a hail of bullets met mother and child on the doorstep.

neh's aunt says she's always been a sickly child, probably because of chronic infection at the wound sites.

Still, Tenneh has been able to do most of the things other Liberian children do. She goes to school; her favorite subject is history. She plays with her best friend; they love to braid each other's hair. She does chores for her aunt; running to the market, fetching water, sweeping the house.

Now 15 years of age, Tenneh's always been a shy, somber child her aunt says. Tenneh stares down at her clasped hands when asked a question and speaks in little more than a whisper. She smiles only rarely, but when she does it's a slow, warm, wide smile that completely transforms her face.

One year ago, more than a

dozen years after she was wounded and her mother killed, the Liberian Civil War rose up to haunt Tenneh once again. Once again the pain in



Above: Mercy Ships volunteers change the dressing on Tenneh's shoulder. Left: Physical therapists had Tenneh up and walking soon after surgery. Top Left: Tenneh is comforted by a crewmember during a difficult moment.

her wounded leg and shoulder returned. Once again she was unable to walk without assistance, and still no one sus-

pected a bullet was lodged in the old wound. To make matters worse, a new wound sprang up on Tenneh's side.

The family finally decided to consult a medical doctor, a task requiring a long trip and money that was hard to come by. The doctor they saw could not help, but referred Tenneh to Mercy Ships.

X-rays revealed the cause of the recurring leg pain, a bullet lodged against the femur in the left thigh, which Mercy Ships surgeons removed. Chronic infection at

both wound sites had seeped into the bone; an extremely painful condition called osteomyelitis.

Doctors suspect the new infection in Tenneh's side was related to the two older wounds. The chronic osteomyelitis apparently migrated from the gunshot sites and settled in a rib. Surgeons removed dead and damaged tissue at all three sites. A round of antibiotics took care of the rest.

Tenneh says she's pain free now and she's clearly happy about that. But looking into her troubled eyes it's easy to see that a deeper, more personal pain remains. The wounds of war, it seems, are not easily healed.

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