

Caught in the Crossfire

When fighting broke out in Kinshasa, Covenanters Curt Peterson and Roger Thorpe experienced a night of terror and grace. | BOB SMIETANA

When the phone rang at 2:30 on the morning of Friday, March 23, Eileen Thorpe wasn't upset. If anything she was glad.

Eileen's husband, retired Covenant missionary surgeon Roger Thorpe, had been in the Democratic Republic of Congo for about a week. She figured that Roger, who was traveling with Curt Peterson, executive minister of world mission, was calling with an update.

The call came as a relief to Eileen. She had been uncharacteristically worried about Roger, with a feeling in the back of her mind that something wasn't right. She told friends at church hours earlier, "Just pray for Roger and Curt and the other people coming back

home from Congo."

"I don't know why I felt that way," Eileen said later.

On the other end of the line Roger's voice was quiet and calm, but distant—calls from Congo always have a slight delay, as the voices make their way to the other side of the world. "We've had a bit of a rough night," Roger said.

In Congo, a rough night could mean a minor inconvenience—like the time the Thorpes stayed in a Kinshasa guesthouse and their room was invaded by driver ants—they spent the night swatting away ants. Or it could be more serious.

"Hopefully, you'll be able to sleep now," Eileen told Roger. There was no response. Roger had hung up.

Eileen began to wonder if he had been through something more severe than "a bit of a rough night."

She was right.

While in the capital of Kinshasa, preparing to return home to the States, Curt, sixty, and Roger, seventy-five, had been swept up into a war zone. They had been robbed, shot at, taken captive, and spent the better part of a day caught in a crossfire between police officers and armed militia. Like millions of people in faraway, war-torn places like Darfur and Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon, they were caught in a whirlwind of chaos and violence, bystanders in the wrong place at the wrong time.

For at least one day, they understood what life is like for some of the world's



A Congolese soldier waits on a street corner in front of a United Nations armored vehicle as fighting broke out in Kinshasa on March 22.

most vulnerable people. In the midst of that chaos, they experienced kindness at the hands of strangers, and knew that whether they lived or died, God was with them.

A quiet beginning

In mid-March, Roger and Curt traveled to Congo with Harvey Drake, pastor of Emerald City Bible Fellowship, a Covenant church in Seattle, and Covenant missionaries Keith Gustafson and Pete Ekstrand. Harvey and Curt spoke at a pastors' conference in Karawa, which drew more than 800 ministers of the Covenant Church of Congo (CEUM). Roger met with doctors at the Covenant hospital in Karawa, where he had first gone as a surgeon in 1965.

More than 6,500 people attended the opening service, which lasted more than four hours and featured seven choirs. For his sermon, Curt spoke about Jesus as the good shepherd, drawing on Psalm 23: "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters. . . . Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

The pastors he spoke to had lived through a decade of devastating civil war, which killed more than four million people. "I tried to identify with the suffering of the Congolese and how much they had faced in a time of war," Curt says, "and how I wanted to claim that the good shepherd is with us in the presence of threats and the darkness of death."

After the conference, Roger and Curt flew to Kinshasa for a few days before going home. They stayed in a guesthouse at the Centre D'Accueil Protestant, run by another Protestant denomination. The guesthouse was surrounded by a high wall with a large iron gate. On the outside of the gate were the letters, "C.A.P."

On the morning of March 22, Roger and Curt went out to pick up surgical supplies for the doctors in Karawa and to stop at the home of Pastor Mossi, who serves the Kasavubu Church—a large CEUM congregation on the outskirts of the city. The pastor's wife, Martine, had a new baby, and Curt, who was leaving that night on an Air France flight, wanted to visit.

Trouble

As they drove in a car owned by the CEUM, Roger noticed the driver was taking an unfamiliar route. When he asked about it, the driver said that there had been some trouble in the area.

For weeks, a standoff had been brewing between President Joseph Kabila and Jean-Pierre Bemba, a businessman, opposition leader, and Congolese senator. Bemba had lost to Kabila in a disputed run-off election in 2006, and the two remained bitter rivals.

Kabila's government ordered Bemba to disband his armed guard of about 200 soldiers—as a senator, Bemba was allowed only limited security staff.

Bemba, like several other opposition leaders, refused to disband his guard, citing security concerns—several of his supporters, including a prominent lawyer and several journalists had been arrested, and there were rumors that at least one former presidential candidate had "disappeared."

"Our troops will not move until measures are taken to assure his secu-



Curt Peterson and Roger Thorpe

rity," Bemba adviser Fidel Babala, told Reuters on March 21. "There have been several attempts to kill him."

As tensions mounted, UN troops surrounded Bemba's house as a precaution. Though the UN keeps the peace in Kinshasa, there had been several skirmishes between forces loyal to Bemba and government forces.

While Curt and Roger visited Pastor Mossi's family, their CEUM hosts—a driver and a protocol officer—began making calls to check on conditions in the city. The protocol officer was told, "If you are out there, wait. Don't try to come back," says Roger. "This was the first that I realized that there were some real problems. Through the afternoon he called and was told the same thing—wait, wait, wait."

Finally, their driver spoke with a captain from the national police, who was also a Covenanter. According to his contacts, it would be safe to travel to

Bob Smietana is *Companion* features editor. For more on this story, including video interviews with Curt Peterson and Roger Thorpe, log on to www.covchurch.org.



Curt Peterson spoke at this gathering of more than 1,400 Congolese Covenant leaders.

the Hotel Memling, where Air France has its office. From there, Air France could transport Roger and Curt to the airport, or, in an emergency, get them across the Congo River into neighboring Brazzaville.

Early in the afternoon, Roger and Curt set out for the hotel, accompanied by their driver, the protocol officer, and the police captain. At first things went well—then traffic backed up, as the police had blocked off the street. They turned a corner to try an alternate route, and everything changed.

“We saw deserted streets—absolutely deserted, and started hearing the gunfire,” Roger says.

Along the side streets, civilians and some soldiers were crouching along the walls of buildings, staying out of the line of fire. The car came across another group of police and stopped again, a few blocks from the Hotel Memling. The police decided their best option was to go on by foot.

“They gathered around us,” says Curt. “There were three armed policemen who joined with us and walked with us maybe six or seven blocks. And as we got further down the road, we heard some pops of rifles, and then came to a corner. In that square there was a lot of firing, and we seemed to be in the crossfire. At that point, we were pulled back by the policemen—each took an arm and pushed us against the wall.”

After a few minutes, the shooting

died down. The officers grabbed Roger and Curt and rushed them across the square toward an imposing stone building with pillars and a glass front. A sign identified the building as the offices of the Special Services of the Congo National Police, Kin Maziere.

Inside the building, they saw a flurry of activity. Several officers escorted men in handcuffs—they had been caught looting in the area. A civilian office worker, dressed in a brown shirt, led them to an office and told Roger and Curt that everything would soon be under control. If they needed anything, he would take care of it for them.

As they listened to the sound of gunfire outside the building, Curt noticed a small book on a desk—a Gideon New Testament with Psalms in French. He asked Roger to read from Psalm 91: “You who live in the shelter of the Most High... under his wings you will find refuge... You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day...”

As they waited, another office worker came into the room. He sat at his desk and pulled out a Bible. He read and then closed the book, his lips moving silently in prayer. Another officer came in and ushered Curt and Roger to the office of Captain Symphorien, the station commander. “Be calm, everything will be all right,” he told them, his voice full of confidence as he pulled on his beret and shouldered his rifle, then walked out of the office.

Over the next few hours, they remained in the captain’s office, as people came and went, and the fighting intensified. One officer came in to recharge a cell phone; another to get more ammunition. Journalists who had also been caught in the violence were brought in as well. They turned on a television—no news of the fighting, just an afternoon talk show, of all things.

As the late afternoon turned into night, things became more worrisome. Captain Symphorien came back for more ammunition, again telling them to be calm. This time, however, he pulled on a flak jacket before leaving.

A mortar round hit the building, the explosion shaking the walls and floor and shattering glass. “Before I knew it, I was underneath the desk. Roger was down on the floor,” Curt says. “That’s when it felt like that there was something developing that was more serious.”

On the wall hung a picture of Jesus, and below it were posted handwritten Scripture passages. Curt and Roger felt surrounded by God’s presence as they read: “Be anxious for nothing but in everything with prayer and supplication in thanksgiving make your requests known to God and the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

As the night wore on, things outside the police station vacillated between moments of intense fighting and relative calm—long bursts of automatic weapon fire, then quiet. A mortar hit the building, the light flickered for a moment, then came back on.

“I kept looking for some piece of paper so I could write a note to my wife, so that I could have something in my pocket in case things turned to the worse,” Curt says.

Roger too began to worry. “Once darkness fell, I began wondering, wait a minute, what is going to happen here.”

What exactly was happening outside the police station was unclear. The standoff between Bemba and Kabila’s

forces had come to a head. No one knows who started the fighting, but for the militia loyal to Bemba, it seems the police station became a target because of the arms stored there.

When officers came in the room, Roger would ask for details. “Are there any wounded?”

“Yes,” they said.

“Any killed?” he asked.

“Oh yes, some wounded, some killed,” an officer told him.

For Roger, almost as bad as the tension of being under fire was the feeling of helplessness. He wanted to help but had nothing with him—no bandages, no needles, no stethoscope, no sutures. There was nothing he could do to help the wounded. It was a feeling that ate at him as he waited.

A providential request

By now, it had been at least twelve hours since Roger and Curt had left Pastor Mossi’s house, and they needed to use the bathroom.

When things were calm, Roger passed on their request to another police assistant, who led them out of the office and toward the bathroom. As they approached the lobby, there was a sudden burst of gunfire, as if the building were being stormed. They ran across the lobby and into another office—this time a converted cell with concrete block walls and a steel door. Inside were several desks, chairs, and a small couch. File cabinets and boxes had been piled up as partitions. Office workers had bunkered down in the cell. Roger and Curt sat on the couch, hidden from sight. At some point, the assistant left to join the police officers.

A barrage of gunfire ensued. Several mortars hit the building. The lights flickered out. More gunfire. The bathroom was long forgotten. Then the police assistant stumbled in, crying out in agony. He had been shot in the back and was bleeding profusely.

“We need to get his shirt off,” Roger said, as they rushed to help the injured man. Using a Swiss Army knife they found, they half cut and half tore the

THE AFRICAN PARABLE IS SO TRUE—when the elephants fight it is the grass that is trampled and suffers.

shirt off. Roger listened to his chest and could tell the bullet had gone through the man’s lung. The man cried out in pain. “I’m dying.”

Roger did what he could. In a hospital, he might have saved him. In this jail cell, in the midst of the battle, there was little hope. “I was convinced he was going to bleed to death. We were able to tear up a shirt and put it around him and he laid down on the floor,” says Roger. “A lot of blood—on our hands, on our clothes, on our shoes...” His voice trails off. “I was able to talk to him, I was able to ask if he was a believer. He assured me, yes...”

Another pause, the tears and memory overwhelming Roger. “I was able to pray with him... that’s all.”

For a while, they comforted the assistant as best they could. Curt prayed, while Roger translated. By now, the nonstop gunfire had reached the cell door. The office workers in the cell crouched down and motioned for Roger and Curt to do the same. They hid behind a wall of cardboard boxes, with the injured man at their feet.

A little while later, the door burst open. The militia outside had overrun the building and were now searching room by room. A voice called out, “Who is in there?”

The injured police assistant, lying on the floor, replied, “I’m in here.”

“Come to the door,” the voice said. “I can’t, I’ve been shot,” the man replied.

The voice insisted, “Come to the door.” The police assistant crawled across the floor, exposing himself so the others would not be found. As soon as he reached the light of the door, a single shot rang out, killing him.

Roger and Curt realized that they would be next if the militia found them. The worst had come.

“We were hand in hand on the couch—clammy, cold hands, knowing this was the end,” Curt says. “I wondered where I would get hit; I wondered what it would feel like, how long it would take. But then they left.”

The reprieve was brief. When the militia returned to the cell and began looting, they discovered Curt and Roger. The room was filled with angry shouts as militia threatened them with their rifles, frisked them, and demanded everything they had—wallets, a camera, money.

A soldier took Roger’s credit card,



An abandoned camp in Kinshasa, once occupied by militia loyal to Congolese senator and former vice president Jean-Pierre Bemba.

and tossed his wallet on the floor. As it fell, several cards inside scattered. Quickly Roger snatched up a few of them, including a laminated credential identifying him as a Covenant missionary.

The militia demanded to know who Roger and Curt were and where they were from. They refused to accept their claim that they were missionaries. Exasperated and fearing the possible consequences if his answers proved unsatisfactory, Roger showed them the laminated credential. Seeing the card, the militia relented and ordered Roger

was the man who had first greeted them at the police station. “Friend, I have been crying for you,” he told Curt. He had lost track of them when the building was overrun and feared the worst.

Into the fire

Over the next hour or so, the militia traded fire with government troops outside the station. A pickup truck pulled up and the militia began tossing boxes of guns and ammunition into the bed. A dozen soldiers climbed in as well, taking Roger and Curt with them.

most part, they treated Roger and Curt with respect. Roger overheard several soldiers saying in Lingala, “What are we going to do with these two white men?”

There wasn’t much time for talking, as the compound soon came under fire. Roger and Curt were led to a shelter between a truck and a cinder-block wall and given cots to lie down on. They spent most of the night there, accompanied by half a dozen young soldiers. Several of them played video games on their cell phones, or sent text messages to friends. They were no more than teenagers, Roger realized.

Even by the wall, Curt and Roger remained in danger. Time seemed to slow down as they could do nothing but wait for hours as rockets, bazookas, mortar rounds, and bullets flew overhead. They felt it was only a matter of time before a mortar landed in the middle of the trucks, or a stray bullet hit them. Even if they made it through the night, once the government troops entered the camp, the odds of their survival were slim. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. During the night, they thought of Paul Carlson, the Covenant missionary doctor who died in a rescue attempt in Congo on November 24, 1964.

There was at least one light-hearted moment to break the tension.

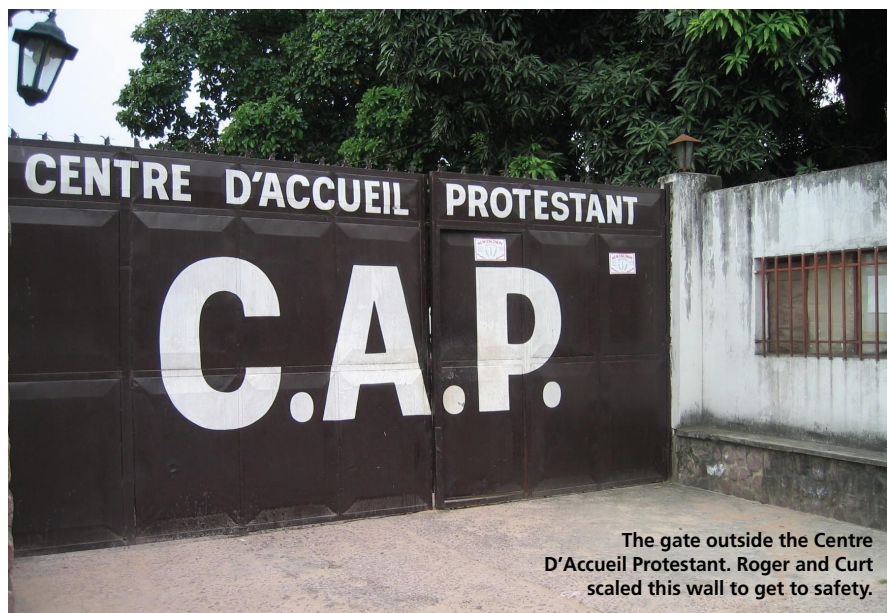
As they were waiting Roger mentioned that he was praying for strength to endure whatever happened.

“Roger,” Curt replied. “I am praying to get rescued.”

Later, things turned more serious, and it came time to say goodbye. “It has been an honor and a privilege to know you. And I am thankful for you,” Curt said. Roger nodded his head. “After forty years, this is how it ends.”

Over the wall

By 5:30 a.m., things began to disintegrate at the camp. One of the trucks had a machine gun mounted on it, and several soldiers moved it to the front of the line, preparing to repel an imminent assault. Others fled toward the



The gate outside the Centre D'Accueil Protestant. Roger and Curt scaled this wall to get to safety.

and Curt to follow them.

Out in the lobby, all the police were gone. Many civilian office workers were sitting against the walls. Militia filled the station, dressed in military fatigues, and carrying AK-47s. Most were in their late teens or early twenties. No one seemed to be in charge. One soldier, bare-chested and wearing a bandolier of bullets, began threatening some of the office workers. He seemed completely out of control. Other soldiers were cheering, shouting, and gathering ammunition and weapons. A soldier began taking the names of everyone in the lobby, about forty people in all—he seemed to be making a hostage list.

While they rested against the lobby wall, an office worker came and sat next to Curt. Dressed in a brown shirt, he

Curt ended up lying on top of boxes of guns, with his feet hanging over the back of the truck. As long as his head was down and out of the line of fire, he wasn’t going to complain. As the truck went tearing down the road with no lights on, Curt looked up and saw the Hotel Memling flash by.

The truck then pulled off into a side street, past a sand-bagged barricade and into a compound run by Bemba’s guard. The street ran between two sets of walls, with trucks parked along both sides, and ended by the Congo River, where tents for the militia were set up. Through a gap in a wall, Roger saw more tents, housing women and children—the families of the militia.

Militia swarmed the pickup, pulling out the guns and ammunition. For the

river. Roger and Curt looked for an opportunity to flee as well. Waved on by a soldier, they joined the throng of fleeing women, children, and militia.

A women holding a toddler and leading two small children looked at Roger and Curt, and said simply, “Help.” They each picked up a child and kept going, the children clinging to them in fear. Rockets hit the buildings around them—every time one went off, all the women would duck in unison, a hundred of them all in a row.

At one street corner they came across a badly injured woman—her ankle had been hurt in an explosion and she couldn’t walk. She begged for help, but with the children in their arms, there was nothing Roger and Curt could do. A pickup truck came by and someone flagged it down. They loaded her in the back and drove off.

A mile down the road, Roger and Curt all of a sudden saw a gate with the letters “C.A.P.” written on it. Somehow, they had stumbled upon their guesthouse.

They ran to the gate and began banging, asking to be let in. Behind them there was an explosion as a mortar round hit a fuel dump, and black smoke filled the air. They banged again, and one of the Congolese staff came to the guard house by the gate and told them to go away.

The women and children stopped with Curt and Roger, and pleaded with them to open the gate and get them to shelter. All the while militia kept streaming by and rockets and bullets flew overhead. But no one inside would open the gates.

Roger and Curt knew that their best option was to stay and find a way into the guesthouse. It was a heart-breaking decision. They set the children down and watched as they and their mothers walked away.

“I never heard children with such panic and fear in their hearts,” says Curt. “That’s when I realized that this picture is getting worse for them. We may be safe. They had to keep walking.” According to news reports, many of the militia and their families made it

to UN safe havens.

As they stood outside the gate, Curt got the idea to try and climb over the wall next to the gate and get into the compound that way. Before he could try, a soldier appeared. He screamed at them, threatening to shoot unless they gave him their wallets and cell phones. He jabbed at Curt with his rifle, as he and Roger held up their empty hands. But the soldier never pulled the trigger. When Roger explained that they had already been robbed, the soldier gave up and headed back down the river.

When the soldier was out of sight, Curt stood on a small ledge and grabbed hold of bars that covered a window, and started to climb. He could hear gunfire as he climbed and worried he would be exposed to sniper fire. When he reached the top, he realized that much of the roof was covered by a tree.

“I rolled across the roof because it was rusted out and I was afraid I was going to fall through,” he says. “I went across and got to the other side and got down.” Despite his pleading, the staff still refused to open the gate.

Curt went back and told Roger that he would have to climb over the wall as well. With Curt directing him, Roger made it to the roof and jumped down into Curt’s arms. There was no heroism, they claim—both men were terrified, and all the time aware of all the people they could not save.

Once inside, Roger convinced the staff that they were guests, and that seemed to calm them down. They also found another American who had been trapped inside when the fighting started, and learned that hundreds had been killed during the fighting. Government officials put the death toll as high as 600.

They guzzled glass after glass of water, and rested for a while. Then they called home on Curt’s cell phone, which he had left behind. Curt reached his wife, Martie, and was able to relay their story. Roger called Eileen, and was able to tell her they had “a bit of a rough night” before he lost contact. They had been worried about their families, won-



Eileen Thorpe, Laurie Thorpe, Roger Thorpe, Christine Olfelt, Curt Peterson, and Marti Peterson

dering if news of the violence had been reported. But no word had gotten out. Despite the intense fighting in Congo’s capital, few outsiders knew.

Over the next twenty-four hours, Curt and Roger were out of immediate danger, while the fighting continued. With the help of Byron Amundsen back in Chicago, they contacted the U.S. embassy and found out that eighty-five Americans had been trapped there. An embassy staff member told Curt that once things settled down, they would send an armored personnel carrier. Until then, she said, “stay low and stay put.”

As word of their story got out on the Covenant’s website, Curt’s cell phone began to ring. A missionary from Ecuador called, while others text-messaged. President Palmberg called as well.

Back home in Chicago, Eileen called Byron to get more details and shared the news with her family. Then she got dressed and walked to Covenant Offices, where she works for the Department of World Mission. More than thirty years as a missionary had taught her that the best way to deal with a crisis is to retain a sense of normalcy. She didn’t want to wait around the house and worry. “I don’t want to feel helpless,” she told a coworker.

That morning staff at Covenant Offices gathered in the chapel to pray for Roger and Curt. Eileen and Roger’s daughters, Laurie, a doctor at Swedish Covenant Hospital, and Christine, a seminary student who works for the Department of the Ordered Ministry, were there as well. Eileen sat at the piano and began playing an old Swedish hymn from memory: “Day by day, and with each passing moment, strength I find to meet my trials here....”

When Eileen finished, Byron Amundsen gave an update on Roger

and Curt's situation. Just then, his phone rang. From the guesthouse, Curt had sent a one-sentence message. "We are safe."

By the following morning, the fighting had subsided, and Curt and Roger were able to leave the guesthouse. That night they were on their way home, arriving on Sunday afternoon.

Their families met them at the airport. After they embraced, the first thing that Roger's daughter Christine did was reach over and grab her dad's passport. "I don't think you need that anymore," she said. He was, at least for now, grounded.

A few weeks after returning home, Curt got back on a plane to visit mission work in South Africa, and then on to Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. The first time he saw a soldier with an AK-47, he flinched, the memories rushing back. But he refuses to give up.

"It is amazing to be held in the grace and the hands of God. And you cannot live life from that moment on, without a consciousness of both God's presence and God's continued call," he says. "It is about God redeeming the world, and I want to be part of that.

"The good news is really good news. And it is for all people and it may cost—for us it was a day. For our brothers and sisters in Congo it's day after day, and they are the victims of random violence, and of power. The African parable is so true—when the elephants fight it is the grass that is trampled and suffers."

Roger too refuses to give up hope. When asked if he has any regrets—if he feels that his forty years in Congo have somehow been wasted, given the country's continued struggles, he explains, "They say all's well that ends well. It's not true for that country, for those people. It has not ended well. I have this fear that our Covenant people are going to say, 'Come on, let's look elsewhere.... I want to get the word out. We're still needed there. There are people there doing God's work, but they need help. We have to help them. I hope that message goes out.'" □