

A group of children in a village near Wasolo greet Paul Carlson during a visit to administer polio shots.

by BOB SMIETANA

# H O L Y H O S T A G E

Warren Berggren was dying. It was April 1964. Berggren and his wife, Gretchen, both missionary doctors, were stationed at a hospital in Tandala, just north of the equator in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Stomach surgery for ulcers a few months earlier and a heavy workload—he'd been on duty for several days with little sleep—had left Warren at risk for malaria. He got a bad case, combined with pneumonia, leaving him delirious and near death. Desperate for help, Gretchen radioed doctors at other mission hospitals, who gave her advice on treatment.

Then she heard from her friend, Dr. Paul Carlson, who was at Wasolo, 330 miles away. Within minutes, Paul, his wife, Lois, daughter, Lyn, and nurse Jody LeVahn were in a truck on their way to Tandala.

"I would never have asked Paul to leave his station," Gretchen Berggren says. "But he knew I needed him and he immediately decided to come."

Getting to Tandala meant seventeen hours of bone-jarring travel over jungle roads. Along the way, Paul stopped at several mission stations for fuel and to look for intravenous quinine, which offered the best hope for treatment. He finally got some from a Haitian doctor serving with the World Health Organization.

The quinine worked. After several long nights, where Paul kept vigil by his friend's bedside, along with LeVahn and Dr. Helen Berquist from the Covenant station at Karawa, Warren Berggren pulled through.

Some forty years later, Gretchen Berggren still remembers Paul's act of kindness. "He really had this wonderful buoyancy and this ability to organize his life so he could drop what he was doing and reach out to someone else at a moment's notice," she says.

**The Need Is So Great.** Paul Carlson's journey to the Congo had begun three years earlier, when he received an urgent appeal from the Congo Protestant Relief Agency.

When Congo gained independence in 1960, some 500 European doctors fled the country overnight, leaving the Congo's medical system in the hands of the few missionary doctors who remained. (In 100 years of colonial rule, the Belgians had not educated a single Congolese doc-

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Bob Smetana is features editor of the *Companion*. Editor's note: This article includes information from interviews and from *Monganga: Dr. Paul Carlson in the Heart of Congo*, a documentary that premiered at the Annual Meeting (see page 12).

tor.) The Berggrens and other missionary doctors organized the Congo Protestant Relief Agency, which recruited Christian physicians to help fill the gap.

Though Paul had felt a call to missions while growing up, it lay dormant for years during his medical training. At thirty-three, he was about to finish a surgical residency at Harbor General Hospital outside of Los Angeles, and was thinking about joining a practice in nearby Redondo Beach.

At first, Paul had gotten a request to go for a year, but with his commitments at home, he had decided against it. But then a second appeal came, asking for a four-month commitment. Knowing Paul might jump at the idea, Lois says that her first instinct was to toss the letter out. But she didn't have the heart to.

"I did put it at the bottom of the pile," she admits in her book, *Monganga Paul*, "thinking that he wouldn't find time to get to it until it was too late."

But he found the letter, and wrote a response in a spare moment during a late night shift at the hospital. He was so busy that he didn't tell Lois until a notice arrived with his date of departure—July 18.

With two small children at home and a mortgage to pay, Lois wasn't thrilled about Paul leaving. But she got a job as a nurse three nights a week at Harbor General to pay the bills and let him go.

Paul's boundless enthusiasm and compassion for people were perfectly suited for Congo. After a few weeks of orientation, he was stationed at Wasolo, where his work caught the attention of Congolese Covenant church leaders. They invited him to become a career missionary called specifically by the Congo church, says Sambe Duale, senior research manager and infectious diseases adviser on the Support for Analysis and Research in Africa Project.

"When Dr. Paul went to the Ubangi and then to Wasolo, the work that he did was really impressive," says Duale, one of the first Congolese doctors at Karawa. "This is why the church wanted him not for a short term—but to come back for the long term."

It was an invitation Paul was ready to hear, says President Glenn Palmberg. Speaking at the Covenant Annual Meeting this June, Palmberg said that Paul had become a "holy hostage" when he looked "into the faces of his brothers and sisters in the Congo" and felt God's call to come and stand beside them.

"That's when the trace of God in him connected to the trace of God in them," Palmberg said. "And he was a hostage—a holy hostage from that day on."

At the 1962 Covenant Annual Meeting, the Carlsons were consecrated as missionaries. Paul left for England to study soon afterwards. Lois and the children, Wayne and Lyn, joined him in mid-December. After language study in

France, the Carlsons arrived in Wasolo in the summer of 1963.

**A Prayer of Thanks.** It was a happy time for the Carlsons. The work was hard—Paul would treat an average of 200 patients a day—but home movies of them swimming and photos of them enjoying homemade root beer on the porch of their house in Wasolo show a family that loved their new life, despite its difficulties.

There was always a sense that their presence was making a difference. In *Monganga Paul* (Lingala for "Doctor Paul"), published a year after Paul's death, Lois recounts a trip to the village of Nzale, where a mission dispensary (a small clinic staffed by a nurse) was located. There they found a woman who had been in labor for three days. After a tense two-hour drive back to Wasolo, Paul operated on her, saving both her life and the baby's.

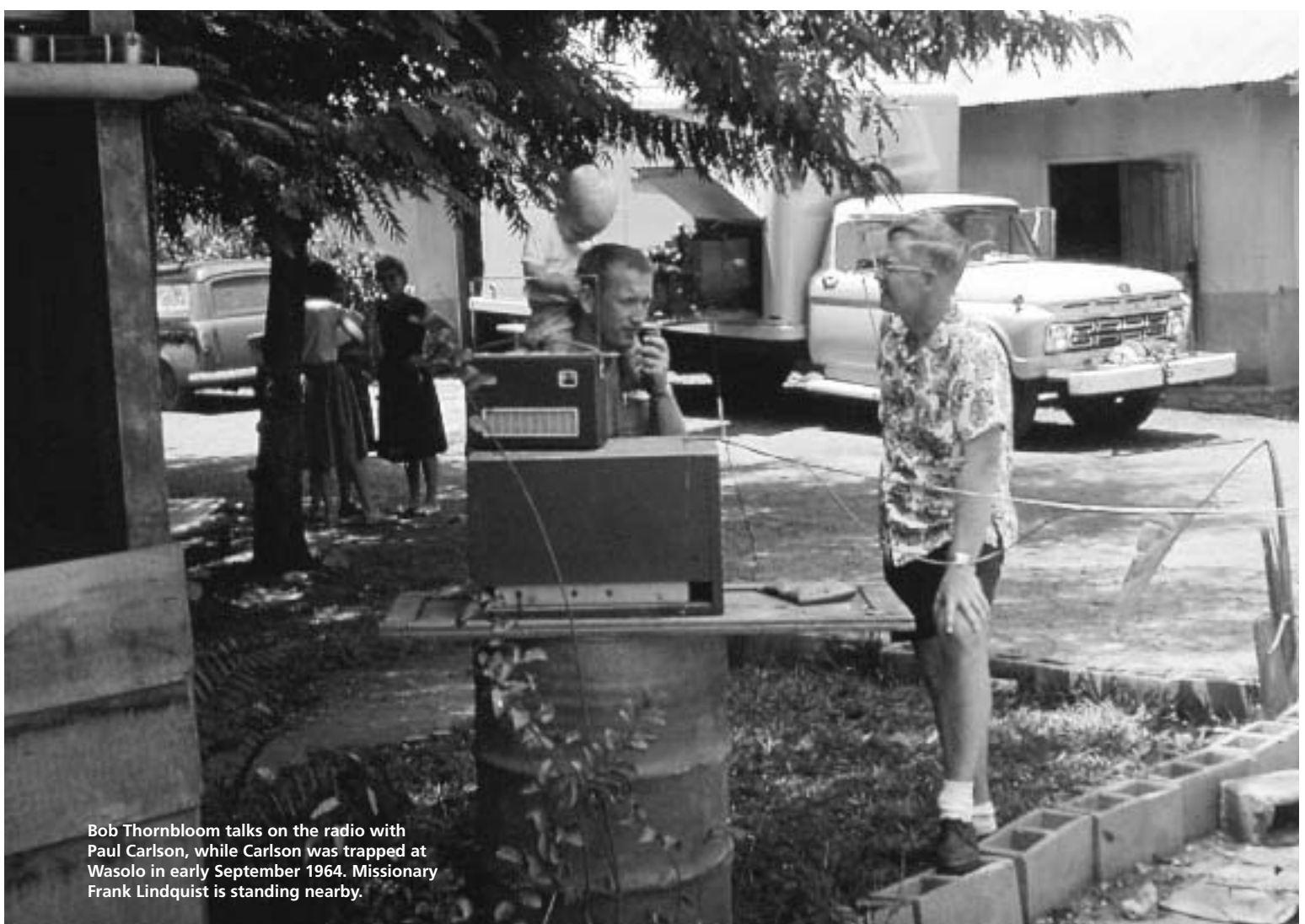
"Paul was very happy," Lois wrote. "He knew if he had not chanced by Nzale that day, another mother and child would have died."

A prolific letter writer, Paul Carlson sent updates to supporters back home. In one, after walking them through a day in the life in the clinic, he closed this way: "And as you go out to turn the light plant off at 9 p.m., you look across the Congo skies and see a little campfire still lit down by the hospital, reminding you to breathe a prayer of thanks that you could have spent a day here—to breathe a prayer of thanks for the medical work in Congo. Pain was relieved, a life saved, and another chance gained to let someone else know Christ."

**A Country in Chaos.** Since gaining independence in 1960, Congo had been in chaos. In the years prior to independence, a century of pent-up anger had exploded toward Belgium, which had exploited Congo's vast natural resources of copper, diamonds, and rubber with brutal policies that killed millions of Congolese. The anger was so great that independence came almost overnight—giving the new government little time to organize. Within a year, Patrice Lumumba, Congo's first prime minister, was forced from office, then arrested and murdered by mercenaries working with Moïse Tshombe, leader of the breakaway Katanga province, where most of Congo's mineral wealth lay.

Since independence, 20,000 UN troops had helped keep the peace in Congo. On June 30, 1964, they left Congo. Just a few days earlier, Tshombe had become the country's new prime minister, healing the rift with the Katanga province.

Within five days, Simba rebels—who idolized the slain Lumumba—had taken Stanleyville (now Kisangani) and captured Michael Hoyt, the U.S. consul there. Soon the



Bob Thornbloom talks on the radio with Paul Carlson, while Carlson was trapped at Wasolo in early September 1964. Missionary Frank Lindquist is standing nearby.

rebels had reached the Ubangi region of Congo, where Covenant missionaries were stationed.

The Simba rebellion spread so fast in part because of the fearlessness of their young soldiers. Fueled by hatred toward Tshombe, they had gone through an initiation they believed would make them invulnerable. They chanted “mai mai”—Lingala for water—as they believed bullets fired at them would turn to water, says Chuck Davis, a former African Inland Mission missionary.

Davis recalls seeing “twelve year olds with automatic weapons running right into the face of a machine gun, because they believed they were invulnerable.”

“This would frighten the person shooting the machine guns,” Davis says. “These kids were fearless.”

In one of his taped messages home, Paul talked about the possibility of being evacuated. “In days like these we certainly have to leave the future in God’s hands,” he said.

Wasolo was just ten miles from the Ubangi River, marking the border with the Central African Republic (CAR). On Thursday, September 3, the Carlsons and Jody LeVahn took the mission truck to the river, and crossed in dugout canoes.

Because the mission station was so close, Paul went back several times to care for patients left at the station. Though the Congolese nursing staff remained there, Paul’s expertise was still needed.

There was another factor influencing Paul’s decision, says Covenant missionary Bob Thornbloom. The leaders of the Simbas were considered communists, having received training and support from China. Thornbloom says there was a fear that the situation in Congo was paralleling the Communist Revolution in China, which ended missionary work there.

“We thought that basically it was going to go just like China,” Thornbloom says. “It would be all gone, and we would be gone for good.”

Paul went back to make sure his patients would be all right, Thornbloom adds, because once he left, “there would be no doctor.”

On Sunday, September 6, Paul kissed his family goodbye, promising to be back on Wednesday. He had planned that this would be his last trip to Wasolo.

But on Wednesday, word came that the rebels had reached Yokoma, the village that stood between Wasolo and the river. Paul was trapped. Over the next few days, the rebels sent messengers to Wasolo, asking for medical supplies. Since the rebels knew he was there, Paul believed that if he left, the rebels would retaliate against the hospital staff.

Gebanga Joseph, whose brother Wanzi was head nurse at Wasolo, offered to take Paul and hide him in the jungle. “He refused this,” Joseph wrote in a letter to Lois, “saying it would not be bad for him to go, but if he went, the peo-



November 18, 1964: Paul Carlson (far left), Jon Snyder, and U.S. Consul Michael Hoyt listen as a Simba leader announces Paul's imminent execution. Six days later, he would be shot in a rescue attempt.

ple he had just operated on would die, and if the rebels heard he had left, they would kill all of us.”

For a few days, Paul kept in contact by radio. Then the messages ceased. On September 18, the rebels came to Wasolo and ransacked the hospital. They murdered two of the Congolese nurses—Constant Kokembe and Boniface Bomba—and took Paul hostage.

Tebu Alphonse, one of the surviving nurses from Wasolo, describes the last days at the clinic this way: “Paul Carlson was a good man. Paul said if he were to leave, the rebels would come and ruin the hospital. We nurses couldn’t convince him to go. He stood and hugged me: ‘Don’t leave your work Tebu.’

“Then I knew our doctor was going to die, and tears came to my eye. When they came and took him, Paul had just prescribed medicine for a child. I went to get the meds. I heard a truck. I heard a gun and we ran away.”

At first, Paul was held in Buta, along with some Catholic priests. He was beaten and mistreated at times, but no worse than the others. The Simbas by then had already killed a number of missionaries and thousands of Congolese civilians, and taken more than 1,000 foreign hostages.

Then he was found by Christophe Gbenye, a Simba leader, who falsely accused him of being “Major Carlson,” a CIA spy. Paul was taken to Stanleyville, and several times a date of execution was announced. Each time the deadline passed and he was still alive.

Paul wrote a number of letters during this time, handing them over to fellow hostages or others he thought could

get them to his family.

On September 24, he wrote from Buta, “I have to proceed to Stanleyville as I am an American. I hear things aren’t too bad. Forgive me Lois, the worry.

“I was wrong to stay but I feel I put it all in God’s hands and must leave it there. I have learned with the apostle Paul—for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Then on September 25, just before being taken to Stanleyville: “My dearest Lois, Wayne, Lyn, Mom, Dad & all—I have to go to Stanleyville. I do not know the future. I do not expect to see you in this life again. I’m sorry honey I did this to you but I didn’t realize. I trusted in God and there must have been and is a reason for all of this. Tell everyone to labor harder for Christ for me.

“I love you very much and one of the hardest things has been to be causing much suffering. . . . Tell everyone at our mission we must just follow Christ.”

Lois and most of the other Covenant missionaries remained in Bangui, capital of the CAR. There they often met to pray for Paul, ending with, “Thy will be done, Lord.”

“I remember stopping them and saying, ‘Don’t pray that way—pray that he will get out,’” Lois recalls. “I was desperate—I didn’t want it to turn out any other way than to have him get out.”

On October 18, Paul and a group of American prisoners, including U.S. Consul Michael Hoyt and Jon Snyder, a Mennonite conscientious objector, were paraded in front of a crowd, where Gbenye announced Paul would be executed. A Greek photographer was there as well, to docu-

ment the execution. Photos from that day show Paul at the back of a group of bearded Americans, his face anguished.

He slipped his New Testament, which also served as his journal, out of his pocket and handed it to Snyder, saying, "Please give this to my wife, Lois."

But there was one more reprieve for Paul, as the hostages were led away from the crowd and back to their jail. Paul led them in a prayer of thanks. Snyder returned the New Testament.

Paul and the other hostages from the U.S. Consulate were taken to the Hotel Victoria, where more than 200 Europeans and Americans, including women and children, were being held. The Simbas were worried that Western powers would attack them in an attempt to free the hostages and wanted them all together. The commander of the Simbas sent a telegram to rebel Major Tshenda in Stanleyville: "Americans and Belgians must be guarded in a safe place. In case region is bombed—exterminate without asking for explanation."

On November 24, Belgian and U.S. forces received the go-ahead from President Lyndon Johnson for a rescue attempt, using troops parachuted into the Stanleyville airport. When they saw the paratroopers, the rebels herded all of the hostages out of the hotel and sat them down in the middle of the street. A jeep filled with soldiers pulled up with a machine gun in back, and after an argument among rebel officers, the soldiers opened fire on the crowd. When they paused to reload, about 100 hostages began to scatter. Paul and Chuck Davis ran to a nearby house. Davis jumped the porch wall, and had reached over and grabbed Paul to pull him over when a Simba came around the corner and shot Paul in the back five times.

**He Was One of Us.** After Stanleyville was secured, Covenant missionary Dan Ericson came to identify Paul's body. One of the other hostages had retrieved Paul's New Testament, and asked Ericson to give it to Lois. The last entry, dated November 23, read simply, "Peace."

After talking with Paul's family back in California, Lois decided to have Paul's body taken to Karawa, to be buried in the small missionary cemetery there. The defeat of the Simbas at Stanleyville meant that it was safe for the family to fly into Gemena and drive to Karawa.

Lyn Carlson remembers riding along the road leading to Karawa on the day of the funeral. "It looked like a Palm Sunday—because the children were all lined up, holding native flowers," she says. "It was just beautiful—a beautiful tribute to my dad."

Zecharie Alengi, president of the Congo Covenant Church, which had called Paul to serve as a missionary, spoke at the funeral, as did Enoc Sakofio, the Congolese

administrator of schools at Karawa.

"He came, he lived, he worked, he died for us," Sakofio said. "He was just like Jesus—who came, who worked, who lived, who died for us. . . ."

After the funeral, Lois and the children remained in Bangui after the new year. While she was there, she received the letters Paul had written while taken hostage. They had been handed from person to person until they reached her.

Within seven months of Paul's death, Covenant missionary doctors returned to Congo, to carry on their work. In 1968, a new hospital and agricultural project—the Institut Medical Evangelique de Loko (IMELOKO)—was founded, in the memory of Dr. Paul Carlson. The hospital had been built but never opened by the Belgians. Paul had dreamed of making it into a Covenant hospital.

"But Paul himself said, there is no way the Covenant can afford this," Lois says. "But through his death it became a reality—sometimes we wonder if he knows."

**I Have Peace.** The Berggrens were back in the States when they heard the news of Paul's death over the radio. They were studying at the Harvard School of Public Health—Warren's health ruled out a return to a tropical climate for several years. They had been praying for Paul, along with a number of African doctors who were studying there. They had also gotten a letter from Paul, written before he was a hostage.

"He said, 'I feel like it's God's will for me to be here, and it's God's will for you to be there. I have peace about this,'" remembers Gretchen.

The Berggrens went on to have distinguished careers in public health—serving for more than thirty years in rural Haiti, and working on projects around the world. That work brought Gretchen into contact with "many wonderful people," she says, adding that she met Mother Teresa twice.

"But that was secondary to knowing Paul Carlson," she says.

In June, while the life of Paul Carlson was being celebrated at the Covenant Annual Meeting, Warren Berggren, now seventy-four, was leading a group of Episcopal doctors and nurses to Haiti.

They were working with a young priest friend who had recently been kidnapped and beaten by thugs. Some of the doctors were reluctant to go, because of the recent troubles in Haiti. But Warren told them that's why they needed to go. "We ought to go now," he said, "because they need us."

Gretchen says her husband is following in the footsteps of his friend Paul Carlson. "I am sure that in Warren's response to go to Haiti, he is remembering back to what Paul Carlson did for him." □