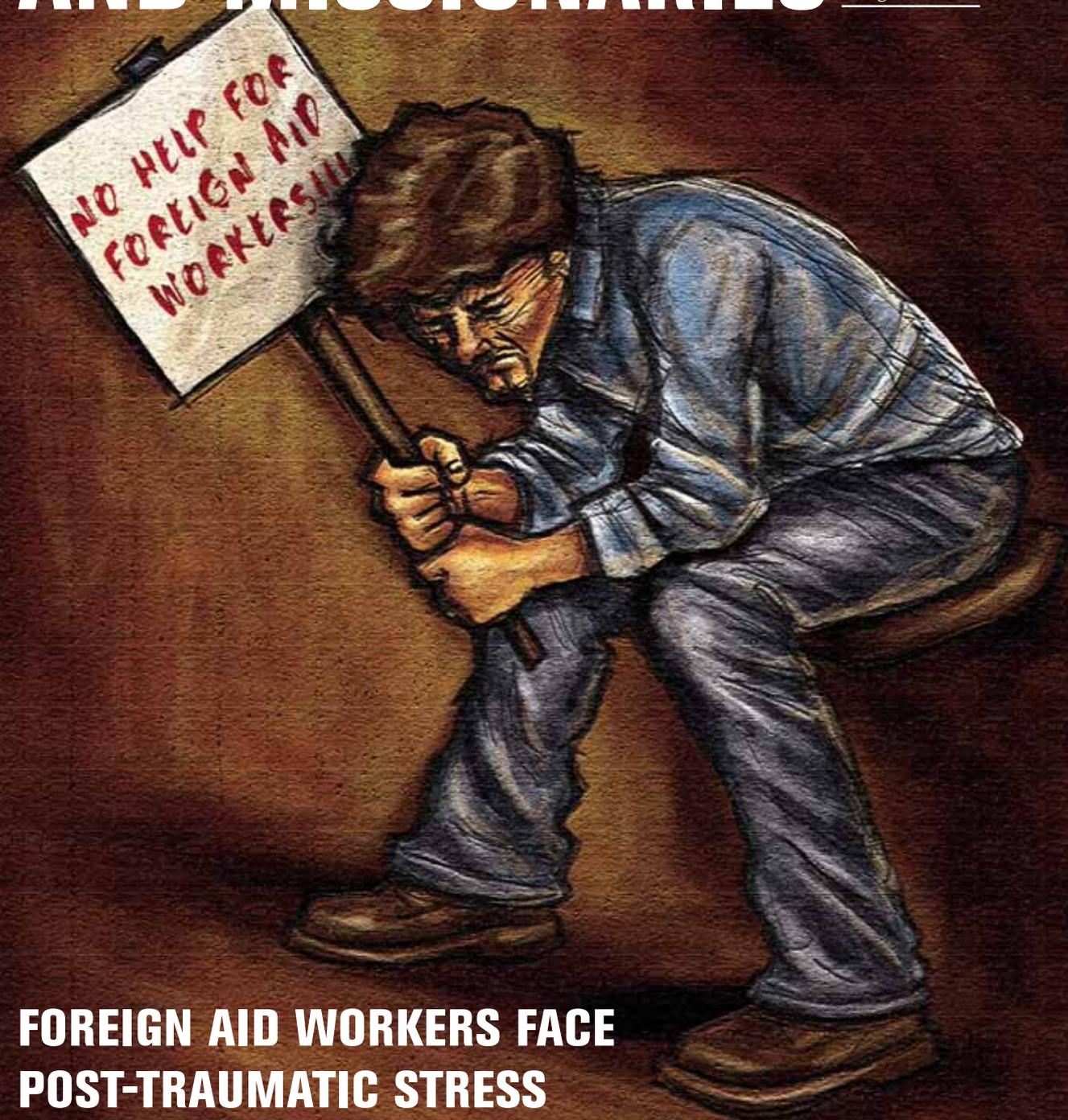


MISFITS, MERCENARIES AND MISSIONARIES

Craig Silverman



**FOREIGN AID WORKERS FACE
POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS**

In October of last year Howard Hollingsworth ate a banana split. Or, to be exact, Hollingsworth ordered a banana split. It was placed in front of him in his hometown of St. Louis, Missouri and although he may have had a few bites, he couldn't finish it. With each bite, each look at the tower of ice cream, fruit and chocolate sauce melting comfortably at room temperature, his mind flashed back to the desert—back to the refugee camps in Chad where only days before, he was coordinating aid for 175,000 Sudanese refugees who had fled their country's civil war on foot and in ramshackle trucks.

Hollingsworth has spent most of the last decade of his life as a humanitarian aid worker in conflict and disaster zones. During the war in Afghanistan, he served in that country and at a refugee camp in Pakistan. He dug and drilled wells in Chad as a member of the Peace Corps and spent years doing much of the same in the Republic of Guinea after that.

His pay is deposited in his account back in the U.S., but is often left untouched because each time he comes back to North America, he finds himself leaving again a few weeks later.

He once bought an electronic drum kit so he could start practising again. It now sits in a friend's basement. He estimates there are three or four bicycles sitting in his parents' house that he never rides. He's thinking about spending a couple of thousand dollars on a stereo, but doubts he'll go through with it.

Hollingsworth has had malaria roughly 14 times, been robbed at gunpoint, given a speech to Kofi Annan, and ignored the presence of a visiting Angelina Jolie as he argued with his boss about how to run the refugee camp in Chad. During his time there, he recalls coming upon a group of Sudanese children drawing pictures, which they handed to him as gifts. The drawings were of tanks and men with guns.

"It was pretty touching but pretty damn sad," he says.

On a November night in Montreal, Hollingsworth sat in a friend's apartment drinking scotch and beer and trying to articulate why he, like so many humanitarian aid workers, finds it almost impossible to return to the life he knew in North America.

"The work is a total rush, it is totally addictive," he says. "You get to meet new people, you are constantly travelling and helping. Every day it is just up and down emotionally. It's a drug—totally a drug."

Hollingsworth had just arrived from a trip to Ottawa to debrief officials at CARE Canada, a humanitarian organization affiliated with the one he was working for in Chad. Now he wasn't sure what he was going to do, but it was most likely that he would soon take his duffle bag and head off to the next disaster zone.

At 34 years of age, he is tall and thin, and speaks softly and slowly but swears a lot when talking about his experiences. He rarely looks up as he climbs back into his memories of Chad and the other places he has worked.

"It is hard to explain...I build walls and try not to think about it, you know," he says. "I don't think that's necessarily healthy to do but it seems like some kind of survival mechanism."

He expects that one day—maybe soon—the scenes of hunger and death and war that he has subjected himself to over the last few years will catch up with him. And that's one reason why he keeps going back. That's why others like him take contract after contract—so they don't have to go home and think about what they have been through. Eventually, it will take its toll.

"Part of problem is that it is addictive...every day, every moment you feel alive," he says. "Your ego swells too because you are in meetings talking about how to help people and people are listening to you and respecting you... Aid workers are a funny bunch," he says.

They are also often Canadian. Anecdotally, Hollingsworth recalls working with or under Canadians in most places. A spokesperson for Oxfam Quebec also says that, "a lot of Canadians are going overseas as aid workers, or are engaged in long term development works."

Exact numbers of Canadian aid workers are hard to come by, due to the number of organizations within Canada sending aid workers, and the number of Canadians who may be working for international organizations.

Oxfam Quebec, as an example, says it has five people working in aid and development overseas, four of which are Canadian. The Canadian Red Cross has 59 workers overseas, of which 13 were in tsunami-affected countries as of early January. At the same time, CARE Canada had 28 Canadians abroad, and was preparing to deploy another eight workers. CARE estimates that an average year will see it place 20 to 25 Canadians abroad.

The numbers aren't staggering, but they gain significance with the reality that most humanitarian missions rely on hiring locals to work under the direction of just a few professionals. For example, the refugee camps in Chad that Hollingsworth was helping manage housed 175,000 refugees. When he left, there were 15 professional aid workers on site. The rest of the team was made up of Chadians they hired.

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Dating back to 1960, 87 Canadian aid workers have died while in the field. Some died of natural causes, others perished in car or airplane crashes, but a large number were killed while trying to deliver aid.

Vatche Arslanian, a Canadian Red Cross Member on mission in Iraq died in 2003 when his vehicle was caught in cross fire in Baghdad. Tim Stone, the executive director of non-governmental organization PATH Canada, died when his plane was hijacked and then crashed off the Comoros Islands in 1996. There are other instances of workers being shot, bombed or killed while being robbed in places all over the world.

In 2001, the Monument to Canadian Aid Workers was unveiled in the Rideau Falls Park, along the banks of the Ottawa River, to commemorate their contributions and the "long-standing value of Canadian citizens to provide development or humanitarian assistance to vulnerable people and victims of conflict abroad."

There are many stories written about the post traumatic stress suffered by journalists and soldiers in conflict zones. But those who work at the fringes of these conflicts, providing aid and shelter to the displaced, suffer the same fate. Their story—and the consequences of putting themselves on the line—goes largely unreported. In the end, as Hollingsworth told me, they end up being refugees themselves, unable to return to the home they knew, forever changed by a situation they did not create.

Researchers are beginning to take note and humanitarian aid organizations now offer counselling services to their

workers, although this mostly takes place after the person has served for months. In the field, they are left to their own devices, and most look for crutches like alcohol, drugs or “emergency sex” with other workers to help them cope.

In fact, *Emergency Sex* is the title of a book by three former UN humanitarian workers, Kenneth Cain, Heidi Postlewait and Andrew Thomson. The book chronicles the horrors and frustrations they experienced while serving in places such as Rwanda and Somalia. It was written to educate people about the experiences of aid workers, and also as a cathartic exercise for the authors.

Cain, who was just days away from heading to Asia to write about the tsunami for *GQ* magazine, recalls one day in Rwanda when he began to realize the toll the work was taking on him.

“A person with the International Red Cross had a trauma checklist brochure with them,” he says from his apartment in Brooklyn, New York. It asked questions like: ‘Do you drink to excess?’ ‘Are you angry more often than you used to be?’ ‘Do you have nightmares?’ ‘Do you use sex as an outlet?’ and it went on and on,” he says. “There were like 20 questions and we were all in a chorus saying ‘yes.’

“The guy turned it over and it said that ‘If you said yes to more than two questions you should immediately seek psychological counselling,’” recalls Cain. “It was comical because our condition

was so much worse than what they said constituted trauma. There are largely no resources and you are left to fend for yourself.”

Cain’s anecdotal evidence of his trauma is backed up by research.

A 2001 study published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* found that 30 per cent of returning relief workers reported stress symptoms, and roughly 10 per cent could have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder.

“Up to one-third of the staff reported having personally experienced traumas such as being threatened with physical harm, experiencing a life-threatening illness, being within the range of gunfire, or being shot at,” Cynthia Eriksson, an assistant professor of psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, who co-authored the report, told one publication.

A 1998 World Health Organization survey of aid workers found that half of the respondents said they were unable to function well on the day they were interviewed. Sixty per cent of them reported general fatigue, and half had frequent headaches. Other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder including anger and nightmares were also common.

Two of the larger Canadian aid agencies, Oxfam Canada and CARE Canada work with the Ottawa-based Global Development Group, an organization that has pioneered a program to assist aid workers. Its C3 program, which stands for counselling, critical



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response and consultation, provides counselling services to workers before, during and after their deployment.

“Trauma among aid workers has been going on for years and years,” says Gillian Barth-Davis, the vice-president of human resources for Global Development Group, adding that aid workers are increasingly exposed to more trauma-inducing experiences than ever before. “Today this program is the exception but increasingly there is no choice but for it to become the rule.”

“Tell him about the time you were robbed, Howard,” suggests Hollingsworth’s Montreal host, a friend who served with him in the Peace Corps in Chad back in 1994, when they were less than two years out of university.

Here is how he describes the scene when armed thieves barged into his compound in Pakistan: “It was just early in the morning and I was sharing a room with my boss and I heard a racket. We were living in a big compound and that night there were four ex-pats, 30 Afghans and Pakistanis and some armed guards inside. I thought [the noise] was just people waking up for the call to prayer but I looked at my watch and it was 4:30. I realized that call to prayer was not for another hour. I went to the door and it was locked, so I yanked on it really hard and there was a guy with an AK-47 pointed at my chest. I put my hands up and walked back slowly and [told my boss] ‘We’ve got a problem...’

“What I remember is—you know how you brace yourself for a loud noise?—all I was doing was turning my head... I thought my roommate was going to be shot. Then [more thieves] came in and fucked with me. One had this grenade with the pin between his teeth. I was trying not to look at him. He was the leader.

“They took a bunch of money, watches, mobile phones and stuff. This crazy guy next door to us was like ‘Oh come on in’ to the thieves. He was totally relaxed. When they took his phone, he said, ‘Wait a minute, you have to take the charger.’ He was from Azerbaijan. Later we did a debriefing to help us out, and he didn’t understand the seriousness of it. Afterward, when we talked about what we each experienced, I said ‘Man I thought you were dead’ and they said ‘Man I thought *you* were dead.’

Then I swallowed a big lump of hash.”

Aid workers are a unique group just by the choice they make to do this work. They rush themselves into places where many locals don’t even want to be and spend months or years living in Spartan conditions with few breaks—all to do work and see things that the average person can’t fathom, let alone seek out. “Aid workers by and large tend to be very hearty individuals,” says Barth-Davis. “It is sometimes difficult to get them to accept the fact that it would be beneficial to sit down [with a counsellor].”

Cain, the former UN aid worker, says many come to the work with existing baggage or choose it because they do not feel at home where they live or with who they are. “People who choose this work are a little hyper-conscious anyway,” he says. “There is a reason why they don’t blink at volunteering to serve in a war zone. That makes them not in the mainstream to begin with. They are a self-selected group of people who have their own set of issues.”

Their uniqueness is only reinforced when they return home and try to relate to their friends and family. “When you come back you need to talk about your experiences but find most people don’t understand what you’re talking about,” says Mia Vukojevic, who served as a press attaché during the Balkans conflict in the 90s and now works with Oxfam Canada. “When I left the Balkans for good and came to live in Canada, my adrenaline ran at a certain level for months. You get used to functioning in crisis mode and then you arrive here and everything seems so weirdly slow. No matter how much work you do, you feel you are not achieving enough.”

Hollingsworth says his first memory of humanitarian aid work comes from his experience with the Peace Corps in Chad. It’s one that would have made most pack up and leave.

“I had just turned 25 and had crapped all over myself,” he says. “I was sick, just throwing up and by morning I didn’t have the strength to get up.”

Still, he stayed there for two-and-a-half years. When he left, he swore he’d never go back. “The first time I left Chad I was drunk as a skunk and happy,” he says. “Ever since, every place I’ve left I’ve cried.”

Hollingsworth talks about wanting to get back to a “normal” life, and he is currently in a relationship with a fellow aid worker whom he met during his time in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They talk about getting married and having kids, and he says that’s what he wants.

“One thing I’ve learned is that what’s important to me are my friends and my family...but by doing this work I don’t contribute to any of that,” he says. “It’s really kind of fucked up.

“I just don’t know what else I can do,” he says. He thinks he might like to become a bike mechanic.

“Sometimes I wonder if I should just take a job to support a family and take time outside of work to do the things that make me happy,” he says. “Certainly, I haven’t been doing that.”

He is trying to come to terms with why he continues to do the work when he realizes the toll it takes on himself and those around him. “Anytime I am home and can’t handle it anymore, I run away to another country,” he says. “A person

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from Oxfam told me there are three kinds of people who do this type of work—misfits, mercenaries or missionaries... I’m any one of those three on a given day. I’d like to make a break but already I have started looking for jobs. I’ll probably end up going back out into the field.”

When the tsunamis struck Asia and Africa on Boxing Day, I immediately thought of Hollingsworth. I also made a bet with myself that he would be there. I sent him an e-mail in January to ask for an update.

“After Montreal, I was just trying to sort through thoughts,” he replied. “[I was] going to the gym everyday and started to talk to a shrink which was very helpful. [I] did not see too many friends, though, just depressed I think. I am in Liberia at the moment. Been here a few days, waiting... to go to Asia. The other option was to find a job here, and there are plenty, paying way too much, and there is a lot of work to be done here, but it does not interest me. So, we shall see, hoping to go over there for a while, but I really need to see a shrink... but it was like that before the work...”

This is how he signed off: “Hopefully people will see that anyone can do the work if they want to.”



Though it is difficult, foreign aid work can be very rewarding. Seen here, Gilbert Corniglion (right), enjoys his work as a Canadian Red Cross delegate in Sri Lanka.