

# EMBRACING **S**uffering in SERVICE

**Libby Little and her husband, Tom, served for 34 years in Afghanistan, providing medical assistance and training. Just days after Libby wrote this article, Tom, along with nine other members of IAM's Nuristan Eye Camp team, was brutally murdered while returning from a medical mission. Libby will be our guest speaker at the 2012 Interserve Day in April.**

I want to share from my own three decades of serving and raising a family in one of the most war-ravaged countries in the world.

For most Westerners, the opportunity to embrace suffering in service is getting rare. Stringent security and evacuation protocols, government advisories, threats of litigation, and pressures from relatives and supporters, all make it difficult for mission people working in conflict zones to stay near to those who suffer. "To stay, or not to stay" is a relevant question for today's mission personnel working in dangerous places.

In today's world of instant access to news, mission agencies may feel compelled to "do something" when danger arises. Although the Bible gives examples of varying responses to danger, the mission agencies' "something," more often than not, may be to encourage or order an evacuation. Consequently, what might have been a God-appointed time to embrace suffering, or at least embrace those who suffer, may be prematurely aborted.

According to a United Nations study, "The World at War", increasing areas of the world today are involved in "intrastate wars" where 75% of the victims are non-combatants. That figure represents a staggering story of human suffering and enormous needs.

I can remember two occasions when we and others stayed "in the same boat", as it were, with people who were caught in conflict and suffering. On one occasion we had to stay (it soon became too late to leave) but on the other occasion we had a choice, and we chose to stay.

The first occasion happened in the late 1970s in a part of the country where only about one dozen foreigners were living. My husband and I and our two daughters had been sent to this city, where blinding eye diseases were endemic, to complete the construction and opening of an eye hospital.

One March morning, rumours circulated that a citizens' uprising was brewing against the foreign political advisors sent there from another country to prepare for a subsequent



invasion. We woke to the deafening blasts of government tanks firing on the crowds forming in the bustling open market, and fighter jets strafing our streets lined with mud-brick houses.

During the first lull in fighting, a military convoy was organised to take the foreign advisors and government sympathisers to a safe place. We were also offered a place in the convoy. Our neighbours, however, assured us the worst was over, so the convoy came and left without us. As the fighting grew worse, and streets were abandoned, our neighbours fed us fresh bread and sweet milk. Some took turns



guarding our gate, motioning angry mobs to pass by our home. When the fighting ended, they referred to us as “the people who stayed”.

Months later the hospital opened and we began preparing for Christmas. Not wanting to miss any chance for a party, our daughter invited her friends and their female

relatives to a birthday event for Jesus. They packed themselves into our home to hear the Christmas story of Immanuel, God with us. God blessed the painful times we had experienced in that city.

The second occasion happened in the country’s capital during the mid 1990s. For months, opposing rebel forces fired rockets, sometimes a hundred a morning, into the streets. We were less than 20 foreigners, mostly medical personnel, and one child, our 10-year-old daughter. We lived in dark, sandbagged, first-floor rooms. Each morning we saw mounds of dirt piled outside

our neighbours’ houses, revealing their attempts to dig makeshift underground shelters. We spread the word that we had a basement, and our neighbours were welcome. Whenever rocketing began, they filed in quickly through the gate and down the basement steps. With each incoming round of rockets, they moaned prayers and cried. In my own fearful state, all I could do was whisper the name of Jesus.

One of those women returned recently from her new home in Australia, and told me that during those times in the basement, whenever she heard the name of Jesus she felt a warm sensation in her body. Later, when she left for a neighbouring country, she sought out Christians who could tell her more about the One who had warmed her heart.

God blessed those occasions and visited us with His power. His amateur followers, stricken with stage fright, forgetting their lines, were acting out in miniature something of His own Grand Narrative — Immanuel, God with us — in the miserable mess. The scenes set the stage for the Holy Spirit to work in a mighty way.

May the fruitful door of opportunity to embrace suffering in service, or at least embrace those who are suffering, remain open for the sake of God’s Kingdom. “Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell. I want to run a rescue mission within a yard of Hell” (C.T. Studd). ☞

## PRESS RELEASE FROM IAM

**[8 August 2011] A year ago, on 5 August 2010, ten members of the Nuristan Eye Camp team were killed in southern Badakhshan.**

Many people have asked how the work of NOOR, IAM’s eye care work, has been impacted by the tragedy. The staff were deeply shocked and moved by the death of their colleagues. However, rather than giving up, they have rallied together and recommitted themselves to the work of those who were killed, and, against all odds, NOOR has remained strong. We thank our Afghan staff in NOOR and in our other projects for their commitment to serving under the most difficult circumstances. We also want to thank everyone who supported us during the dark days of August 2010.

We also thank God, because He is the one who is ultimately supporting all of us through this valley of darkness. We still do not know why God allowed this disaster to happen. On this side of heaven we may never find out. What we do know is that He has been with us, and with the families of those killed, as they come to grips with the loss of their loved ones.

Although we serve in a country with many risks, we feel so privileged to be able to live and work here. For many of us, the deaths of our colleagues have resulted in a renewed commitment to work alongside the Afghan people. Through this shared suffering, we have grown closer as a community.

The one year anniversary has helped us to reflect on how God has helped us through this year, and, for many, has brought further healing as we experienced God’s mercy and grace. ☞

For full press release go to [www.iam-afghanistan.org](http://www.iam-afghanistan.org)