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At 14, a Liberian War Veteran Dreams of Finding a Way Home

By TIM WEINER

PAYNESVILLE, Liberia, Aug. 23 — "The war came before the rains in 2000," Dukuly Togbah remembered. "I was 10 years old."

Dukuly is a smart, tough country boy from the northern hills. He was one among the thousands of child soldiers who have fought this nation's grisly battles for 14 years.

He is 14 himself, born on Independence Day, July 26. His story is the story of Liberia. When he was in the first grade he started to fight with rebel forces and, when captured, he was forced on pain of death to fight for the government. He survived it all by the skin of his teeth.

With the chance that the war may be dying down now, Dukuly (pronounced Due-CLAY) has been out of combat almost three weeks, and lives in a shelter run by a Catholic charity here in Paynesville, on the outskirts of Monrovia, where he is learning to read and write. He stands about 5 feet 2 inches and weighs perhaps 100 pounds.

Three years and four months ago, he was taken from his village, Kambolahun, in Lofa County, near the borders of Sierra Leone and Guinea, by the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, known as L.U.R.D., who overran his village.

What happened to his family is unknown; it is very possible that they are among the 600,000 refugees among Liberia's population of three million.

The rebels tried to overthrow President Charles G. Taylor, himself a former warlord who fought his way to power on the backs of battalions of child soldiers, who seldom lack for weaponry.

Mr. Taylor, who left power Aug. 11, under indictment for war crimes in Sierra Leone, did not invent the practice of using children in combat.

But he did introduce the phenomenon to Liberia. Perhaps 10,000 children remain mobilized among government forces and the rebels. All the main factions used what they call Small Boy Units, sometimes abducting children, sometimes luring them with the promise of the glory of war.

Dr. Peter Coleman, the Liberian minister of health and social welfare, said of the child soldiers: "In some areas they are 40 to 50 percent of the fighting force. Young people with arms has become a way of life." Dr. Coleman said there were no social services or public health facilities in the nation to treat or rehabilitate the thousands of child soldiers.

Dukuly spoke vividly and dispassionately in English of his experience. By comparison, some of his youthful colleagues are so traumatized by the experience that they can hardly speak.

"I can remember I used to play with my friends, and sometimes we would go in the bush and set traps to catch meat," he said. "But since the war I can't see my friends.

"The first time I saw fighting I was 10 years old," he said. "It was dissidents and government. The dissidents were four or five in the village by the time the sun come up. They shot up my home and we all run in the bush. My parents, everybody run away, me too. I started running and they opened up firing. They captured me."

"So now I can't see my family," he said. "So I followed the people."

"I fought with L.U.R.D. in the bush," he said, learning to fire an AK-47, walking point, winning a battlefield commission and a nom de guerre. "I was the deputy commander of the Small Boy Unit under General Iron Jacket. They call me Quick to Fire. Iron Jacket gave me that name."

Iron Jacket's Small Boy Unit was about 100 strong, Dukuly said, and the rebel force under the general grew to about 2,000, including many women and girls abducted from villages to cook rice, catch fish and serve the men and boys. Babies were born in the bush.

The rebel force slowly fought its way south through Lofa County, battling government troops in at least four major engagements and countless skirmishes during the next three years, destroying villages and displacing tens of thousands of people in the process.

Liberia's government-run radio station reported late tonight that major fighting had broken out in Bong County, in the heart of the nation. The station broadcast unconfirmed reports that rebels had killed hundreds of civilians in recent days.

Many of Iron Jacket's troops used magic and ritual to protect them in battle. They called it medicine. They wore spent bullets as amulets and rubbed powders on their chests to shield their hearts from harm. They put on women's wigs to transubstantiate their bodies, to turn into someone else, to leave their physical beings and strengthen their spirits.

They also used cocaine for courage. The only psychiatrist in Liberia, Dr. Edward Grant, said drug abuse added to the horrors of war there. "These children are the most dangerous segment of the fighting machine," he said. "They have been used to commit atrocities under the influence of drugs."

"I can't lie on myself," Dukuly said. "I used to take it. It made me brave. Iron Jacket used to give me it. You take it in your nose or you smoke it in your grass. I used to feel brave. I used to get the mind to fire the gun. Sometimes we take it when we relaxing, but most of the time we take it in battle.

"Sometimes Iron Jacket would give me some kind of white chalk to rub on my body so the bullets can't touch me," he continued. "But I never used to like it. When I go on the battlefield, front-line troop, I can pray to God. When I come back, I can tell God thank you. I had my Bible in my pocket. I don't know how to read. But every time I go on the front line, I would knock it on my head, put it in my pocket and go.

"Sometimes the medicine my friends use, when the rocket come in, it can pick them up so the rocket can't do nothing to them," Dukuly said. "And when the bullet come, it just bounce off them. My best medicine was the drug — that drug called cocaine."

Tons of cocaine arrived in Liberia in the 1990's, government officials here said. They said war made the borders porous and turned the nation's ports into transshipment points for international smugglers of drugs and weapons.

Good fortune was also with Dukuly, along with guns and drugs.

"The reason I survive?" he said. "Because sometimes when we go into villages and my friends be beating and tying the people, I say, 'Y'all stop.' And sometimes when we get rice, I can divide it, give them one, two cup of rice. That put good luck behind me."

"Most of my best friends, they were killed," he said. "My friends who used to call me Quick to Fire. We used to wrestle together. But we ourselves, we also killed plenty. When they killed my friends and I feeling bad, Iron Jacket would tell me, my boy, that's war. You got to be brave."

In June, the L.U.R.D. forces fought their way to the edge of Monrovia. Then began the three major battles between the rebels and Mr. Taylor's forces known here as World War One, World War Two and World War Three.

"I fought World War One," Dukuly said. "We attack, we retreat. World War Two, the fighting were not easy. Too hard. The government come with plenty force. Iron Jacket, everybody leave. They leave me behind when government forces come back. I hid in an old car. And then they capture me."

"They caught me and tied me," he continued. "They wanted to kill me, but one general saved my life. To prove myself to the general, Sweet Candy, to prove I was a man, I had to fight. I fought one month for government forces against my people. I wanted to run away, to go to my men. If I go, they kill me.

"I feeling bad," Dukuly said. "I killing people's forces fighting my brothers, killing my brothers. But I had no choice. Many, many days I did not want to go fight, but if I did not, they would kill me."

Then came World War Three. "The last fighting, the L.U.R.D. men bring all the jungle mortars," Dukuly said. "They attack from all over. They killing us."

In the final days of World War Three, Dukuly ran for his life and found shelter with the Catholic charity, Don Bosco Homes.

A visitor at the shelter asked him what the fighting was all about. "I must say, I don't know," Dukuly said.

"Our commander used to say we going to kill Charles Taylor," he said. "For me, I just used to take the drug and in my head I know the government troop, that my enemy, so anytime I see them, I fire."

"Now I want to fight no more," Dukuly said. "I'm thinking about my people. I want to go to school. When I go to school, I want to be a teacher. I want to go back home."

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