

The aid pilots of East Africa wing into war zones, execute low-altitude airdrops, and evacuate wounded rebel soldiers. Whether their motives are missionary or mercenary, all are ultimately sucked into the vortex of an epic—and tragic—struggle.

the dark skies of sudan

By Philip Caputo



airspeed: 200 knots.

The clouds part to reveal Nile River tributaries coiling back on themselves, and the tree-speckled savannas and malarial swamps of southern Sudan. Gradually, the C-130 Hercules I'm flying in descends from its cruising altitude down to a thousand feet. Below are dome-shaped mud-and-wattle huts, the brindled backs of cattle, a robed herdsman. Ahead, a big white X marks the drop zone, over which, in a moment, more than 16 tons of maize are to fall.

North with the dawn: Veteran flier Heather Stewart makes an early morning departure from her base in Kenya.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS STEELE-PERKINS

There is the Africa tourists know—antelope herds, tawny lions, stately processions of elephants—and then there's the Africa passing below us, the real one. This is the Africa Africans have to live with, boiling with intractable civil wars, groaning under oppressive governments, suffering from hunger, epidemics—all the biblical curses and probably a few the Bible's authors hadn't thought of.

Sudan, the biggest country on the continent (as big as the United States east of the Mississippi), has all those afflictions in proportion to its size. The mostly black southern Sudanese, either Christian or animist, have been fighting the mostly Arab, Muslim northerners, who rule this vast country, for the majority of the 45 years since Sudan gained independence from Great Britain. More than two million people have died, if not from bombs and bullets then from the famines and diseases spawned by the conspiracy of war, drought, and flood. The United Nations classifies southern Sudan as a region in a state of chronic emergency and has been flying food, medicine, clothing, and other assistance into the south for a dozen years.

I am aboard one such relief flight, called Foxtrot-12, carrying food to the southern Sudan village of Wang Kai. This old C-130, once flown by the CIA, is now a cargo carrier on contract to the United Nations. It flies out of the dusty, fly-blown, rubbish-strewn Kenyan frontier town of Lokichokio, the main air base for the UN aid program Operation Lifeline Sudan.

An airdrop is not a simple maneuver. At an altitude of only 700 feet, the Herc has to be slowed to "stall plus 20"—meaning 20 knots above the speed at which the wings stop working—and its nose brought up precisely eight degrees, turning the plane into a kind of airborne chute. I watch the altimeter as it winds downward: 1,000 feet . . . 880 feet . . . Captain Bob Potyok turns tightly to make his pass, one hand on the wheel, the other on the throttle levers.

The "door open" light flashes on the instrument panel. Away aft, the rear hatch drops, revealing a square of sky, against which the two loadmasters, tethered to the plane by static lines, stand silhouetted. The cargo bay is filled with two long rows of pallets piled high with white sacks marked with the World Food Programme's initials in blue letters. Potyok pulls back on the wheel, adjusts the flaps. The huge plane tilts upward, the loadmasters jerk the restraining hooks, and half the cargo tumbles out, the sacks falling like giant snowflakes.

Potyok makes a tight turn to check the drop. It's on the money. Another pass, and again the nose goes up. Potyok calls to the loadmasters through his radio headset, "Commence drop! Go, go, go!" And the second half slides out, the pallets rattling on metal rollers.

"Load away," the chief loadmaster informs the pilot as another blizzard of maize falls through the sky. The second drop is as accurate as the first. Then Potyok throttles up and the Herc lumbers back to cruising altitude for the return trip to Lokichokio—or Loki, as it's called by the pilots. The crew starts lunch as the autopilot takes over.

The bush pilots who fly humanitarian aid into Sudan are a varied lot, ranging from shady buccaneers to airborne do-gooders to



An airdrop is not a simple maneuver. At an altitude of only 700 feet, the Herc has to be slowed to "stall plus 20"—meaning 20 knots above the speed at which the wings stop working—and its nose brought up, turning the plane into a kind of airborne chute.

workaday aviators like Potyok, a 59-year-old Canadian and a veteran of the African skies. ("Ethiopia, Rwanda, Angola, Sudan: all the fun spots," he laughs, lighting a cigarette as we wing south at 20,000 feet.) What they all have in common is a willingness and an ability to fly in conditions that would give the average commercial-airline pilot chest pains.

But the view from 20,000 feet—or even 700 feet—is not the view from the ground. I've been told that if I'm actually going to touch down inside Sudan, and if I really want to understand the world of relief pilots, there's just one person I'd want behind the controls.

With her short, blond hair, fair complexion, and brilliant smile, Heather Stewart could easily be a hostess at a Sussex garden party. In fact, she is the premier bush pilot in Kenya and Sudan, a direct spiritual descendant of Beryl Markham, the pioneering aviatrix who impressed Hemingway and wrote *West With the Night*. It's difficult to believe that Stewart is 61 years old; she not only looks much younger, she lives like someone half her age, piloting small planes into a war zone three or four times a week, across hundreds of miles of wild country.

Stewart is sometimes called All-Weather Heather, but the nickname was coined more for its rhyme than to intimate that she'll fly through thunderclouds. She is known as a careful pilot, meticulous about maintenance because she can't afford not to be. Flying into dirt airstrips where landing lights

are as rare as whiskey in a Shiite household provides enough excitement without the additional thrill of engine failure caused by negligence. There is also the chance the runway might be under fire. Just finding the right one is a trick—Stewart still navigates by dead reckoning. Follow your compass, check your speed, calculate your time, figure out where you are, and pray that you're right.

Stewart's meticulous approach to preparation hasn't always inoculated her against the unpredictability of flying in Africa. "One time, I was flying three C-130 Hercules pilots—an American, a German, and a Belgian," Stewart says in the offhand manner one might use to describe, say, denting a fender in a parking lot. "We were going to different airstrips to see which were suitable for a Hercules. We got to a town called Akabo. No one had flown there for ten years. The strip looked dry and landable, but there was only a dry crust on top, and underneath, black cotton soil. I was flying a Cessna 402. Its nosewheel and undercarriage weren't suitable for rough airfields, and we got stuck. We couldn't take off, and no one could come in." They had no food, save a bit of biscuit, and only river water to drink. "I radioed for a food and water drop, but it was three days before anyone could get anything to us."

The airstrip had been the scene of a recent battle in which rebels from the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) had driven off the government forces, she says. "There were thousands of mosquitoes and the heat was terrible and there was always the fear that the government forces would come back and attack. There were many dead



Aid and comfort
(clockwise from left):
Pilot Heather Stewart
greeting colleagues
at Lokichokio;
preparing for takeoff
from Chukudum; the
hardscrabble life in
Loki; a Sudan vista.
Opposite: A C-130
Hercules drops
16 tons of maize.

bodies lying about, and you can imagine what that was like. The German was a survival expert, but then he got stung by a scorpion and was in a great deal of pain. The plane with the food and water dropped morphine, and we shot him up with so much of it that he got stoned. Finally one of the Catholic missions was able to get a helicopter to us. I stripped the radio from the Cessna, and we got out." She smiles. "It was quite good to change my clothes and have a bath."

We are sitting beside the swimming pool in the compound Stewart built as living quarters for the expatriate fliers and relief workers based in Lokichokio. There are several such compounds, but Trackmark Camp is considered the Ritz of the lot. With its bar and pool, its stone-walled bungalows, and its hibiscus, it's an oasis in what is otherwise a squalid settlement of Turkana tribesmen: tin-roofed shacks and shanties, crowded warrens of mud-walled tukuls that look like umbrella tents made of twigs and straw. Scrawny goats and emaciated cattle wander the dirt streets, the air stinks of human and animal feces, garbage festers everywhere under reefs of flies. Loki sits beneath the Mogila Range on a thornbush plateau in Kenya's harsh, drought-stricken northwest. It's as dangerous as it is filthy. I've been warned not to leave the compound at night. Among the Turkana are many avid bandits, mostly because the drought has decimated their herds and made them desperate. Only yesterday, a car carrying four people was ambushed not far from town. The driver was killed and the passengers robbed, right down to their shoes.

Like Markham before her, Stewart is a product of the British Empire. Though born in England, she was raised in Nigeria and came to Kenya on a visit when she was 18. She married a much older army officer, bore two children, got divorced, caught the flying bug on a bush flight to Lake Turkana, married a second time, had two more children, and earned her pilot's license—all by the time she was 25. Five years and another child later, she was flying hunters into Sudan—good years, she says now—staying in hunting camps for a week or more, floating down the Nile on river barges in search of lion, elephant, and antelope.

After a decade as a company pilot for foreign firms—"Quite boring," Stewart says—and a stint flying for film director David Lean (*Lawrence of Arabia*), she took to delivering khat into Somalia. The

mildly narcotic plant is legal there and is the drug of choice among the otherwise teetotaling Muslim Somalis. One day, she was refueling her plane at a Somali airfield.

"I never had enough fuel for a round-trip, you see, and I had to get out on the wing with jerry cans," she says. "Well, a gun battle between warlords broke out then, and there were bullets whizzing all around. I finished up and got in the cockpit—my plane had six bullet holes in it, and a bullet passed right through the cockpit, past the back of my head. That made me think. So when somebody said, 'Go fly in Sudan, they really need people there,' I went. It was safer than Somalia and more predictable."

Which, I think, speaks volumes about what Somalia was like.

Stewart helped establish the Lokichokio airfield for the UN in 1989, the year she founded Trackmark. At that time, she says almost wistfully, "it was just me and my airplane." In those early days, she did a lot of flying for Catholic missionary priests in Sudan's

Western Equatoria province. Stewart would take off before dawn on the two-hour flights, land, throw camouflage netting over her aircraft, and then leave at night, guiding on a flashlight held by someone standing at the end of the runway. To honor her efforts, the missionaries brought her to Rome for an audience with Pope John Paul II. This good Protestant woman knelt and kissed his ring, but, to make sure all religious bases were covered, she later flew the Archbishop of Canterbury on a tour of southern Sudan.

Despite the large web of relief efforts intended to aid them, the plight of the southern Sudanese remains heartbreaking. The current Islamic government in Khartoum (often called GOS, for Government of Sudan) has pursued policies nothing short of criminal. It denies aid to southern Sudan's victims of hunger and disease and drops cluster bombs on churches, missions, and defenseless villages, massacring thousands of people and driving thousands more from their homes. It has even revived an ancient institution: Squadrons of Arab horsemen are sent to raid southern villages, where they kill the elderly and men of fighting age and capture young women and children to sell them into chattel slavery. The slaves are beaten, branded, and often forced to convert to Islam. Responding, in part, to rising concern for the southern Sudanese among Americans, the Bush Administration recently named former senator John C. Danforth as a special envoy to the region in the hopes that he can broker a peace agreement between north and south. ▶



Contested terrain: For more than 30 years, the government of Sudan, based in the Islamic and largely Arab north, has been at war with the largely black Christian and animist southern Sudan. Many humanitarian flights take off from Kenya's Lokichokio airfield, often in defiance of the government's attempts to restrict flights to rebel strongholds.



Long way home
(clockwise from top):
An SPLA soldier
guards an airstrip in
southern Sudan;
after nine years
in exile, Sudanese
refugees glimpse
their homeland
through an aircraft
window; refugees
boarding a
repatriation flight.



The United Nations has been airlifting humanitarian aid to the southerners since 1989 (the same year the Sudanese government declared the war to be a jihad). Under the auspices of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS, in bureaucratese), the UN's World Food Programme, UNICEF, and dozens of non-governmental organizations have delivered a tonnage of aid that by now exceeds the amount flown during the Berlin airlift of 1948. There is a catch, however: an agreement the UN negotiated with Khartoum when the relief effort began. Under its terms, OLS flights out of Lokichokio must file advance notice with the Sudanese government. The government then gives or withholds clearance to land.

Food is a weapon in Khartoum's arsenal. The SPLA rebels control much of southern Sudan. In response, the government often prohibits relief flights from landing in SPLA-dominated regions or in areas where it is attempting to starve the southerners into submission. The UN's compliance with this arrangement has created a kind of aid vacuum that's been filled by a number of maverick operations that work outside the OLS umbrella, free from Khartoum's rules, free to send relief wherever it is needed. Renegade aviation companies deliver their cargos to the no-fly zones in defiance of Khartoum's warnings that their planes will be shot out of the sky. The pilots and crews call it "flying on the dark side." Some pilots flying these missions file false flight plans, or no flight plans at all, to minimize the risk of being shot down or being captured when on the ground.

Stewart has flown on the "light" side, ferrying supplies to approved landing strips on UN contracts, but she also flies on the dark side for aid groups operating beyond the pale of UN oversight. One of these is Christian Solidarity International, a Zurich-based organization that redeems Sudanese slaves, buying them from their masters through middlemen and setting them free.

Though Stewart says she strives to stay neutral and to avoid "getting caught up in the glamour of the cause," she confesses that she flies medevacs for wounded SPLA guerrillas when called upon. "I always make sure to carry a jar of Vicks with me," she says airily. "I put a little in each nostril. The stench of gangrene can be overwhelming in a small plane."

On other occasions, Stewart has ferried SPLA commander in chief John Garang, along with his staff officers and bodyguards. "There are all these big guys with guns on your plane, and when you land, more guys with guns, all over the place," she says. "It's flying dangerously; it's quite a buzz, really. I'd much rather do that than fly a bunch of fat tourists to look at lions."

She has carried all sorts of cargo—except weapons. "I've been asked to, but I don't," she says. "Not for moral reasons. It would be reported if you flew arms, you'd get known for that, and people wouldn't fly with you, because it's too big a risk. I've flown contracts with the UN, and I would have lost all that work if I were known as a gunrunner." I had come to Africa, in part, to investigate the rumors that some relief pilots moonlight flying guns to the SPLA—and to learn why. Stewart is quick with an answer: "They do it for the money," she says crisply. "If they say it's for any other reason, it's just bullshit." But



"It's flying dangerously," Stewart says of her flights transporting rebel soldiers and officers. "There are all these big guys with guns on your plane. It's quite a buzz, really."

with reflection, she concedes that there may be other motives as well. "They like to think they're getting away with something," she adds. "What is forbidden is always more attractive."

The war in Sudan isn't just between southerners and northerners, Muslims and Christians. It's also a war of southerners versus southerners, ancient tribal feuds elevated into savage ethnic battles. Nearly ten years ago, Riek Machar, the SPLA's second in command, fell into a bitter dispute with Garang over how to run the war. Machar is a Nuer tribesman, Garang a Dinka, and the Nuer and Dinka have warred with each other for generations. Machar ultimately broke with Garang and formed his own faction of the rebel army. In 1991, his warriors attacked Garang's hometown of Bor, burning it to the ground, committing unspeakable atrocities, and driving the people they didn't kill into the bush.

Today, I'm tagging along as 64 of those people, after years of exile in refugee settlements, return home to Panyagor, a town north of Bor (and some 300 miles northwest of Loki) that was caught up in the Nuer rampage. A lumbering Antonov-32, piloted by a cheerful Russian who would give only his first name, Valery, takes off from Loki, lands at Natinga, just inside the Sudanese border, and

loads its passengers, mostly women, children, and elderly men and women. One boy carries a Chicago Bulls duffel bag; a tall man sports a baseball cap that says "Jesus is The Way."

Crowded into the Antonov's cargo bay, which is also crammed with a half ton of maize, the refugees sit quietly, stoically, though the small children start to cry as the overloaded plane rumbles down the dirt landing field, groaning, rattling, straining to get airborne. Eyes stare blankly out of coal-black faces as the plane wings up to 20,000 feet, then over desert and swamp and savanna until it touches down at Panyagor, a tight cluster of domed huts behind a bamboo stockade.

The refugees file out, returning to the home they haven't seen for almost a decade. Relatives and friends swarm to greet them, but the reunion is surprisingly subdued. The men shake hands; women exchange brief embraces. It's as if these people had been away for a two-week holiday. I've been told that the Dinka are not demonstrative by nature, and I suppose this, in addition to the sufferings they've endured, accounts for the suppressed emotion. Lanky SPLA guerrillas saunter about, AK-47s slung over their bony shoulders, and a Dinka official, Elijah Malok, profusely thanks Captain Valery and his five-man crew. "This is a great thing, and we are grateful to all who made this possible," Malok proclaims. Meanwhile, the Antonov's navigator, Vladimir, goes to pet a yellow bird attached to a string on a young boy's shoulder. The bird bites his finger.

Both Valery and Vladimir work for Skylink Aviation, one of the renegade outfits willing to fly to areas the government has declared off-limits. Since Panyagor is one of these, we don't stay on the ground long enough for me to learn much beyond what I've already come to know: Oftentimes, the south Sudanese are their own worst enemies.

When I get back from Panyagor, Stewart has just returned from a grueling mission in which she flew solo (*Continued on page 157*)

THE DARK SKIES OF SUDAN

(Continued from page 134)

about 400 miles to Rumbek, a Sudanese town west of the Nile, where she picked up a Catholic bishop and two missionary priests. On the heels of a three-hour return flight through rainy-season storms, through treacherous downdrafts over the Didinga Hills, and on into the hot currents swirling over Kenya, she is showered and coiffed and having dinner with me.

She tells me that the flight to Rumbek was especially important at this time, because Trackmark badly needs the revenue. The thing to understand about the aid business is that it is a business, and for bush pilots who own their own aviation companies, it's not all daredevil soaring on silver wings into the African wilds.

Only a couple of years ago, Trackmark had 14 airplanes either owned or under lease, 22 pilots, and a large ground staff. Stewart had built an office in Loki and opened another at Wilson Airport in Nairobi and then became a part-time hotelier when she set up Loki's Trackmark Camp. Today, though, the company is down to three airplanes and four pilots. The unpredictability of the relief business and dwindling UN contracts have taken their toll.

The next day, I learn that Norwegian People's Aid needs 1.2 tons of medical supplies flown to its hospital in Chukudum, a Sudanese town not far over the border. I need to get into Sudan. Heather Stewart needs business. So I charter her to fly me and the supplies. I am a relief worker for a day.

Sitting beside her in the copilot's seat, I watch Stewart cross-check her GPS against the navigation sheet. She gets a pressure reading from the Loki tower, adjusts her altimeter, and requests clearance for takeoff. The 14-seat Cessna Caravan rolls down the runway and leaves the ground at 80 knots. Most planes seem to labor to get airborne, but the Cessna soars so effortlessly that it feels as if we're riding on the back of a hawk. It's early afternoon, and as the heat rises from the scrub desert below, the ride gets bumpy. As we pass over a mission church not far from Loki, Stewart smiles and lets me know that she has a bad-girl side.

"I fell madly in love with the Catholic priest here some time back," she says. "To say hello, I used to buzz the mission, coming back from Sudan."

We bank over the Mogila Range, then bear westward into a sun tarnished by a

late afternoon haze. The land below is a patchwork of red and tawny spotted with green. The winding galleries of trees mark the rivers, but there is no water in them, and the slopes of the mountains to the north are fissured and brown. Ahead loom the Didinga Hills and Sudan. Our destination gives the mission a certain dash: Chukudum is in a prohibited zone. We're flying on the dark side.

Or almost. It's possible that Khartoum turns a blind eye to unauthorized flights like ours. The government may be reluctant to carry out its threat to shoot down aircraft carrying grain or vaccines or blankets for fear of adding to Sudan's reputation as a rogue

"Mama, I'm flyin' good to the good and bad to the bad," one pilot of fortune used to tell his mother. Several years and conflicts later, he would say, "Mama, I'm flyin' bad to the bad, because they're all bad."

nation. So some renegade aviators fly not so much on the dark side as in a gray zone, not quite legitimate, not quite outlaws. But there are a few who fly in what is unquestionably the contrabander's night. I had met two of them at the beginning of my trip, and they gave me a glimpse into the shadows.

Through a haze of cigarette smoke, I watched the shaky video image of an Antonov descending out of the morning light, its nosewheel reaching for the airstrip, a red scratch on the face of the savanna. As the Antonov rolled to a stop, its twin turboprops churned up a maelstrom of laterite dust that caused the men waiting on the ground to turn their heads aside. There were about 20 of them, all dressed in jungle-green camouflage and armed with AK-47s, except for two who wore pistols and the scarlet berets that identify high-ranking officers in the SPLA. The officers approached the aircraft, and five Russian crewmen filed out the door.

The Russians were flying for a company owned by my chain-smoking host, a Kenyan I'll call Martin Williams because he fears reprisals from the Kenyan government if his

real name is used. We sat watching this in a house not far from Williams's office in Nairobi. He and a freelance American flier named Dale Roark had been tutoring me about the relief effort in Sudan, liberally seasoning the facts with piquant observations about the war, the guerrillas, the Sudanese government, and the United Nations. They hoped this video of an actual mission might illustrate the points they were trying to make.

Williams is a big man, six foot one and over 250 pounds, with powerful arms, a tree-stump neck, and a torso like a 50-gallon drum. His grandparents migrated to Kenya from the Seychelles. With many of the world's races in his ancestry—white, black, and Asian—he has a burnt-sienna complexion and is the eternal outsider, a man without a tribe in a country where tribe means everything. He speaks of his commitment to the people of southern Sudan with a battered but still passionate idealism.

Roark, also a big man, though not as big as Williams, would choke if you suggested that he was an idealist. He has elevated cynicism into something like a personal religion. He has no use for do-gooders of any stripe, considering himself a mercenary pilot who will fly for anyone so long as the money's right. He describes his transformation from world saver to cynic in a litany that is also a partial résumé of his flying career:

"Back when I was flyin' for the Contras in Nicaragua, my mama would write and ask me, 'Dale [he pronounces it DAY-ull], what are you doin'?' I'd write her back and tell her, 'Mama, I'm flyin' good to the good and bad to the bad.' Later on, when I was flyin' photo-mapping missions in the Gulf War, which we fought for those useless Kuwaitis, I'd tell her, 'Mama, I'm flyin' good to the good and bad to the bad, but it sure is hard to tell the difference.' A while later, when I was in the war in Yemen, I told her I was flyin' good to the good and bad to the bad and there wasn't any difference. And now that I've been in Africa, I tell her, 'Mama, I'm flyin' bad to the bad, because they're all bad.' "

There is a zest to Roark's jaded view of life in general and of Africa in particular. But after listening to him for a while, I'd begun to wonder if his cynicism wasn't a tad artificial—not exactly a coat of protective armor around a vulnerable heart but, rather, a prophylaxis against sentimentality. ➤

THE DARK SKIES OF SUDAN

At any rate, Roark's actions often belie his words; he is a walking contradiction. To begin with, he's a cowboy who likes to claim he's an Indian. Born and raised on a farm in western Oklahoma, he's of mostly Irish ancestry but gets a chuckle out of flashing a card proclaiming him a member of the Southern Cheyenne tribe. Politically, Roark is a composite of a libertarian and a conservative Republican, but he once flew the Grateful Dead on tour and befriended Jerry Garcia, not exactly an icon of the right. In keeping with his contrary nature, he has taken hair-raising chances on behalf of the southern Sudanese, despite his claims that he's allergic to altruism. In 1996, he and one other pilot were the only aviators willing to defy a Sudanese government blockade and fly food, blankets, and medicine to victims of a devastating flood in a town called Pochala, on the Ethiopian border. For several weeks, risking ground fire, as well as the hazards of landing at a dirt airstrip hemmed by floodwaters, Roark flew more than 50 missions, often in a dangerously overloaded plane. The head of one nongovernmental aid group told me that hundreds of people owed their lives to Roark and the other pilot.

Still, Roark insisted that he hadn't stuck his neck out because his heart bled for the victims. He also denied that it was for the money and confessed, "Every morning I wake up wonderin' what I'm doing here. I honestly don't know."

Later on, I turned to Williams for an answer, but his wasn't much better. He saw no end to the crisis, no hope for peace, and yet, he continued, there was something special about the southern Sudanese that drew you in, compelled you to make a commitment.

"You see guys out there who've been fighting since they were 14 and who can tell war stories all day that will curl your hair, but put a piece of ice in their hands and they're amazed. They've never seen or felt ice; they've never seen water turned to stone."

That was when he urged me to see the video of a mission he called Operation Rescue, which had taken place only two weeks before I arrived in Nairobi.

The airfield where the mission's Antonov had landed was near the town of Yei, an SPLA stronghold about 50 miles north of the Ugandan border, Williams said.

After a few moments, the two SPLA

commanders shown in the video shook hands with the flight captain. The camera panned to the edge of the airstrip and lingered almost lovingly on the goods: seven tons of assault rifles, machine guns, mortars, mortar shells, rocket-propelled grenades, antitank mines, and small-arms ammunition in metal boxes stacked like bricks. Rebel soldiers haphazardly loaded the weaponry in the Antonov. I can't say that I was shocked to learn that the gunrunning stories were true, but I was surprised that the two pilots were willing to show me such clear documentation. I was an eyewitness one step removed.

Then the video showed the airstrip at Atar, hundreds of miles north of Yei in the Nuba Mountains. Low hills rose in the background; in the foreground, the Antonov was parked at a skewed angle at the very end of the runway. Mortar or artillery fire thumped in the distance.

"They were very close," Williams said. "There was fighting on the airstrip only 30 or 40 minutes later." Meanwhile, a platoon of guerrillas unloaded the cargo. These fighters were as lean as underfed cats, and nowhere near as well turned out as those at Yei—the very image of ragged bush rebels. Several were armed only with spears.

As the weapons were distributed, village women ululated in celebration, their strange, warbling cries mingling with the muted thud of shell fire. Guerrillas shouted and embraced the crew, then laid down their spears and ran off toward the front with their new AK-47s, machine guns, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades. In a twinkling, their mode of warfare had passed from the Bronze Age to the modern.

And what happened at Atar? The story, it turns out, has a happy ending. The arms gave the rebels the means to fight off the militia attack. The town and its airstrip remained in SPLA hands. It was one very small triumph in a very long war, a triumph that Roark and Williams readily admitted could be meaningless as far as the big picture went.

"Martin Luther King said that people with good intentions but limited understanding are more dangerous than people with total ill will." Williams, sipping the scotch I had brought him from the duty-free shop in London, was waxing philosophical. "When I first got into this business, I thought the UN and all the nongovernmental organizations were people with good

intentions who didn't understand what the people really needed, like arms to defend themselves instead of medicines and tools they didn't know how to use. So I got involved in stuff like this. I thought these SPLA guys were going to kick ass and liberate the south, but now we've got Africans fighting Africans, and I realize it's hopeless."

Later that night, Roark and I had a drink at the venerable Aero Club at Nairobi's Wilson Airport. Roark confessed he'd personally flown dozens of gun runs for 748, an air-relief company he had set up in 1996 with the young American aid organizer Kevin Ashley. Some of the arms flights made as much as \$18,000; some did not make a dime. He showed me a shareholders report for 748. It was as thick as a phone book, with numer-

As she lowers the wheels, Stewart tells me that last year, just minutes after she took off from this same landing field, a Sudanese Air Force plane came over and dropped 15 cluster bombs. A little something to think about during our stay.

ous entries listing the date and income for every flight the company made in 1998. He marked off which were gun runs, and after several came the notation "Not Paid."

"You really didn't make a dime?" I asked. "Or were you trying to hide the income?"

Roark shook his head.

"Then you must have had other reasons."

"There's two kinds of pilots flying in Sudan," Roark said finally, "those who defy the government of Sudan, and those who don't."

That remark was as revealing as Roark was likely to get. He ran guns into Sudan because there were people, inside the country and out of it, who said he couldn't. End of story. But a memento hanging on the wall of his apartment suggested that he may have cared about the people of the Nuba and southern Sudan more than he liked to admit. It was a carved wooden water gourd, with these words painted along its edge: "Our Thanks and Gratitude To Capt. Dale for his great deeds to Safe and Assist Us—The people of the Nuba Mountains." (Continued on page 162)

(Continued from page 159)

During the flight to Chukudum, Heather Stewart takes notes on a pad strapped to her right thigh—she'll use the information to fill in her log later on. We're at 10,400 feet, cruising at 120 knots through a canyonland of cumulus.

"Visibility's awful, isn't it," she says in her best BBC voice.

It sure is: The haze looks like the smoke from a forest fire. We are over Sudan now, and I am receiving a lesson in the unfairness of God and nature. Kenya, only 60 miles away, is starved for moisture, yet the Didinga Hills below are lush and green, the rivers sparkle, a rain cloud sweeps the horizon. Stewart flies around the highest ridges to avoid getting caught in a downdraft, then begins her descent. The Cessna soars over rocky crags that rise like temple towers from the jungled hillsides. A rainbow shimmers over a bright green valley. It makes not an arch but a full circle, a gigantic, glittering ring of color. It's easy to see why Stewart loves what she does.

The airstrip is a scar on the valley floor. Now I can see tukuls showing through the trees, as well as farm fields, a road, and the brick buildings of an abandoned Maryknoll mission. A rocky pinnacle rising above it all lends a fortresslike appearance to the place. As she lowers the wheels, Stewart tells me that last year, just minutes after she took off from this same landing field, a Sudanese Air Force plane came over and dropped 15 cluster bombs. A little something to think about during our stay.

Stewart's landing is a "greaser"—not a bump, just a sweet, smooth roll over the hard-packed dirt. A squad of SPLA soldiers appears out of the bush. A Land Cruiser and a flatbed truck are parked nearby on a rutted road.

It's getting dark, and we quickly off-load the supplies—latex gloves, syringes, surgical instruments, antimalaria medicine—and pile them into the truck. Stewart works alongside us, then climbs back into the cockpit and wings off. In a moment, the Cessna is a white model airplane against the green hills. One moment more, and it's gone.

Just a few years ago, Chukudum was a thriving town, or as thriving as a town can be in southern Sudan. The Maryknoll sisters ran a preschool and religious center at their mission station. Catholic Relief Services was active here. Norwegian People's Aid had built a 120-bed hospital with equipment

that had been flown in by Dale Roark, among others. But Chukudum was also an SPLA stronghold; it was bombed several times and was menaced by government-supported militia forces based in the garrison town of Kapoeta, 30 miles to the north. Although the militia was beaten back, the fighting was so ferocious that the Maryknoll missionaries fled. The mission schoolteachers, the staff of Catholic Relief Services, and most of the townspeople did likewise. But the Norwegians remained.

I spend three days in Chukudum and attend Mass in the church, where the pews are logs laid down on the floor and where broken beams hang down from the ceiling. The dome over the altar has been blown out, and through it I can see the sky and the hills

The war in Sudan isn't just between southerners and northerners, Muslims and Christians. It's also a war of southerners versus southerners, ancient tribal feuds elevated into savage ethnic battles.

behind the mission. The choir is very good, singing hymns in the local dialect to a drum rather than an organ. Because there is no priest, the Eucharist cannot be given, but the rest of the ceremony is presided over by a deacon. In the middle of his sermon, the congregation on one side of the aisle suddenly stirs. People jump up and begin to bolt; others mill around, seemingly in a panic. One man raises a stick over his head and swats at something on the floor. A few people gather in a circle and stomp their feet. I am mystified and wonder if the deacon's homily has angered his parishioners. Then the man with the stick dashes to one of the side doorways and throws the stick outside. Something is coiled around it—a puff adder.

The things you see in southern Sudan will turn your stomach when they don't break your heart. I tour the hospital the next day. The long, low, mud-brick bungalow is doubtlessly better than no hospital at all; but I would not want to be a patient in it. It is dim and foul-smelling; tuberculosis victims cough and hack, mixed in with other patients

because there is no isolation ward for them. Starving children stare at us with wide, expressionless eyes. There are bullet wounds, snakebites, and malaria, and in the yard outside, an orderly in a green smock holds an electrical sterilizer over a campfire to cleanse surgical instruments; faulty wiring, he explains, shorted out the sterilizer coils. Nearby, 40 or 50 people in tribal dress hover over cooking fires in the shade of tamarind trees. They are relatives of the patients, and the yard is the only place they have to stay.

I am shown the X-ray facility. It's a round, mud-walled building that resembles a hut. Inside is a fairly new Siemens X-ray machine, a table, a lead shield, all the accessories. Only one thing is missing, the British-trained technician tells me: film. The hospital has not had any X-ray film for eight or nine months. I am thinking about all those guns that must have been flown into and out of Chukudum. My God, couldn't someone have brought in X-ray film?

How gratifying it would be to report that all is as it should be: The southern Sudanese are united shoulder to shoulder to fight an oppressive regime. The United Nations, with total lack of self-interest, pours in aid to the suffering victims. How gratifying it would be to report that all is black-and-white, that there is no corruption, no gunrunning, no self-defeating tribal warfare. Poor, bleeding Sudan, afflicted by the sword, famine, pestilence. I recall the puff adder in the mission church. The serpent in the garden. It's too symbolic to be symbolic.

I receive a radio message from Stewart late on the third day. She says she will land at precisely 5:25 p.m. It's now 4. The airstrip is several kilometers away, and Chukudum's two vehicles are not available. I heft my pack and, escorted by seven guerrillas, hoof it out at a brisk clip. I know Heather. I know that if she says she'll arrive at 5:25, she'll be there at 5:25. We make it with time to spare. A wicked thunderstorm is forming to the south and west: jet-black clouds, rain so dense it looks solid, lightning that blazes horizontally, like huge tracer bullets. At 5:23, the Cessna appears off to the north. Now we'll see if All-Weather Heather lives up to her name. She brings the plane in, and more medical supplies are off-loaded. Then we take off, climbing eastward over the hills just as the storm rolls over the airstrip like an ocean wave. ▲