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From Liberia, with Mercy - a modern day Christmas story

The operating room is somewhat cramped, the halls narrow and the orderlies from all over the world, but little else would distinguish this hospital from any other.

Except that this hospital has been built inside a ship and that outside its cool confines is the port of Monrovia.

Below deck aboard the Africa Mercy, a hospital ship operated by the charity Mercy Ships, Dany Kyburz, a 29-year-old Swiss operating-room nurse prepares for surgery.

For this two-month mission on the ship, she is on a team specialising in repairing a devastating childbirth-related injury known as obstetric fistula.

They are part of a larger cast of medical professionals trying to fill the gap between what's offered by constrained African governments and the serious challenges facing many of their citizens. Most surgeries Mercy Ships provides are unavailable in these countries - at any price. Here, they are free.

The charity will leave Liberia by the end of the year, having spent ten months repairing cataracts, cleft lips, burns, disfigured limbs and removing massive craniofacial tumours.

In the operating room, or off-ship, within a community rehabilitation project, there are few apparent differences between Mercy Ships and other NGOs whose signs pepper the roadsides of poor countries around the world.

However most of the staff with Mercy Ships are not only volunteers but pay for their stays on the ship. They are often sponsored by churches, community groups and private donors from their home countries; the charity says this allows it to direct its entire resources to beneficiaries.

Switzerland, a landlocked country, would seem an unlikely place to launch a maritime opera-

tion, but Switzerland was absolutely key to the founding of Mercy Ships.

The story began 30 years ago in the city of Lausanne with Stephens, a young American missionary. From his account, he had a vision, a lot of enthusiasm but not much else. Originally from Colorado and having come to Switzerland to train with the Christian organisation Youth With a Mission, Stephens had the idea of establishing a fleet of hospital ships and began the process of soliciting support. With its many financial institutions, Switzerland would be a good place to start, he thought.

He fortunately had contact with the owners of Suisse Atlantique, at the time one of the country's major shipping firms, who advised him as he developed a feasibility study and financial plans.

Unbeknown to him, somebody had put in a good word on his behalf to a major Swiss bank, which would provide financing. He was 33 years old when he won the vessel at auction. The \$1 million purchase price of the ship Victoria amounted to half its scrap metal value. But with an army of volunteers and years of patience, Mercy Ships over four years retrofitted the former cruise liner, re-christened Anastasis - Greek for "Resurrection" - and the rest is history.

Since 1978, the organisation has put several ships into service but has decommissioned all but the Africa Mercy, a converted Danish rail ferry, which allows the organisation to operate more efficiently. Mercy Ships is studying whether it should expand its fleet with another used ship or whether it should build its own. Studies are under way of the Indian subcontinent and several different nations in Asia. But Africa alone could certainly use two ships if not more.

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