

# To the Ends of the Earth

Timbuktu – the setting for a young  
American's strangest adventure.

By Steve Saint

For years I'd thought Timbuktu was just a made-up name for "the ends of the earth." When I found out it was a real place in Africa, I developed an inexplicable fascination for it. It was in 1986 on a fact-finding trip to West Africa for Mission Aviation Fellowship that this fascination became an irresistible urge. Timbuktu wasn't on my itinerary, but I knew I had to go there. Once I arrived, however, I discovered I was in trouble.

I'd hitched a ride from Bamako, Mali, 500 miles away, on the only seat left on a Navajo six-seater airplane chartered by UNICEF. Two of their doctors were in Timbuktu and might fly back on the return flight, which meant I'd be bumped, but I decided to take the chance.

Now here I was, standing by the plane on the windswept outskirts of the famous Berber outpost. There was not a spot of true green anywhere in the desolate brown Sahara landscape. Dust blew across the sky, blotting out the sun as I squinted in the 110-Degree heat, trying to make out the mud-walled buildings of the village of 20,000.

The pilot approached me as I started for town. He reported that the doctors were on their way and I'd have to find another ride to Bamako. "Try the marketplace. Someone there might have a truck. But be careful," he said. "Westerners don't last long in the desert if the truck breaks down, which often happens."

I didn't relish the thought of being stranded, but perhaps it was fitting that I should wind up like this, surrounded by the Sahara. Since I arrived in Africa the strain of the harsh environment and severe suffering of the starving peoples had left me feeling lost in a spiritual and emotional desert.

The open-air marketplace in the center of town was crowded. Men and women wore flowing robes and turbans as protection against the sun. Most of the Berbers' robes were dark blue, with 30 feet of material in their turbans alone. The men were well-armed with scimitars and knives. I felt that eyes were watching me suspiciously.

Suspicion was understandable in Timbuktu. Nothing could be trusted here. These people had once been prosperous and self-sufficient. Now even their land had turned against them. Drought had turned rich grasslands to desert. Unrelenting sun and windstorms had nearly annihilated all animal life. People were dying by the thousands.

I went from person to person trying to find someone who spoke English, until I finally came across a local gendarme who understood my broken French.

"I need a truck," I said, "I need to go to Bamako."

Eyes widened in his shaded face. "No truck," he shrugged. Then he added, "No road. Only sand."

By now, my presence was causing a sensation in the marketplace. I was surrounded by at least a dozen small children, jumping and dancing, begging for coins and souvenirs. The situation was extreme, I knew. I tried to think calmly. *What am I to do?*

Suddenly I had a powerful desire to talk to my father. Certainly he had known what it was like to be a foreigner in a strange land. But my father, Nate Saint, was dead. He was one of five missionary men killed by Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador in 1956. I was a month shy of my fifth birthday at the time, and my memories of him were almost like movie clips: a lanky, intense man with a serious goal and a quick wit. He was a dedicated jungle pilot, flying missionaries and medical personnel in his Piper Family Cruiser. Even after his death he was a presence in my life.

I'd felt the need to talk with my father before, especially since I'd married and become a father myself. But in recent weeks this need had become urgent. For one thing, I was new to relief work. But it was more than that. I needed Dad to help answer my new questions of faith.

In Male, for the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people who didn't share my faith, who were, in fact, hostile to the Christian faith-locals and Western relief workers alike. In a way it was a parallel to the situation Dad had faced in Ecuador. How often I'd said the same thing Dad would have said among the Indians who killed him: "My God is real. He's a personal God who lives inside me, with whom I have a very special, one-on-one relationship."

And yet the question lingered in my mind: *Did my father have to die?*

All my life, people had spoken of Dad with respect: he was a man willing to die for his faith. But at the time I couldn't help but think the murders were capricious, and accident of bad timing. Dad and his colleagues landed just as a small band of Auca men were in a bad mood for reasons that had nothing to do with faith of Americans. If Dad's plane had landed one day later, the massacre may not have happened.

Couldn't there have been another way? It made little impact on the Aucas that I could see. To them it was just one more killing in a history of killings.

Thirty years later it still had an impact on me. And now, for the first time, I felt threatened because of who I was and what I believed. "God," I found myself praying as I looked around the marketplace, "I'm in trouble here. Please keep me safe and show me a way to get back. Please reveal Yourself and Your love to me the way you did to my father."

No bolt of lightning came from the blue. Surely there was a telecommunications office here somewhere; I could wire Bamako to send another plane. It would be costly, but I could see no other way of getting out. "Where's the telecommunications office?" I asked another gendarme. He gave me instructions, then said, "Telegraph transmits only. If station in Bamako has machine on, message goes through. If not..." he shrugged. "No answer ever comes. You only hope message received."

Now what? The sun was crossing toward the horizon. If I didn't have arrangements made by nightfall, what would happen to me? This was truly the last outpost of the world. More than a few Westerners had disappeared in the desert without a trace.

The I remembered that just before I'd started for Timbuktu, a fellow worker had said, ""here" a famous mosque in Timbuktu. I was built from mud in the 1500's. Many Islamic pilgrims visit it every year. But there's also a tiny Christian church, which virtually no one visits. Look it up if you get the chance."

I asked the children, "Where is *L'eglise Evangelique Chrestienne*?" The youngsters were willing to help, though there were obviously confused about what I was looking for. Several times elderly men and women scolded them harshly as we passed, but they persisted. Finally we arrived, not at the church, but at the open doorway of a tiny mud-brick house. No one was home, but on the wall opposite the door was a poster showing a cross covered by wounded hands. The French subscript said, "and by His stripes we are healed."

Within minutes, my army of waifs pointed out a young man approaching us in the dirt alleyway. Then the children melted back into the labyrinth of the walled alleys and compounds of Tumbuktu.

The young man was handsome, with dark skin and flowing robes. But there was something inexplicably different about him. His name was Nouh Ag Infa Yatara: that much I understood. Nouh signaled he knew someone who could translate for us. He led me to a compound on the edge of town where an American missionary lived. I was glad to meet the missionary, but from the moment I'd seen Nouh I'd had the feeling that we shared something in common.

"How did you come to have faith?" I asked him.

The missionary translated as Nouh answered. "This compound has always had a beautiful garden. One day when I was a small boy, a friend and I decided to steal some carrots. It was a dangerous task: We'd been told that *Toubabs* (white men) eat nomadic children. Despite our agility and considerable experience, I was caught by the former missionary here. Mr. Marshall didn't eat me; instead he gave me the carrots and some cards that had God's promises from the Bible written on them. He said if I learned them, he'd give me an ink pen."

"You learned them?" I asked.

"Oh, yes! Only government men and the headmaster of the school had a Bic pen! But when I showed off my pen at school, the teacher knew I must have spoken with a Toubab, which is strictly forbidden. He severely beat me."

When Nouh's parents found out he had portions of such a despised book defiling their house, they threw him out and forbade anyone to take him in; nor was he allowed in school. But something had happened; Nouh had come to believe what the Bible said was true.

Nouh's mother became desperate. Her own standing, as well as her family's, was in jeopardy. Finally she decided to kill her son. She obtained poison from a sorcerer and poisoned Nouh's food at a family feast. Nouh ate the food and wasn't affected. His brother, who unwittingly stole a morsel of meat from the deadly dish, became violently ill and remains partially paralyzed. Seeing God's intervention, the family and townspeople were afraid to make further attempts on his life, but condemned him as an outcast.

After sitting a moment, I asked Nouh the question that only hours earlier I'd wanted to ask my father: "Why is your faith so important to you that you're willing to give up everything, perhaps even your life?"

"I know God loves me and I'll live with Him forever. I *know* it! Now I have peace where I used to be full of fear and uncertainty. Who wouldn't give up everything for this peace and security?"

"It can't have been easy for you as a teenager to take a stand that made you despised by the whole community," I said. "Where did your courage come from?"

"Mr. Marshall couldn't take me in without putting my life in jeopardy. So he gave me some books about other Christians who'd suffered for their faith. My favorite was about five young men who willingly risked their lives to take God's good news to stone age Indians in the jungles of South America." His eyes widened. "I've lived all my life in the desert. How frightening the jungle must be! The book said these let themselves be speared to death, even though they had guns and could have killed their attackers!"

The missionary said, "I remember the story. As a matter of fact, one of those men had your last name."

"Yes," I said quietly, "the pilot was my father."

"Your father?" Nouh cried. "The story is true!"

"Yes," I said, "it's true."

The missionary and Nouh and I talked through the afternoon. When they accompanied me back to the airfield that night, we found that the doctors weren't able to leave Timbuktu after all, and there was room for me on the UNICEF plane.

As Nouh and I hugged each other, it seemed incredible that God loved us so much that He'd arranged for us to meet "at the ends of the earth." Nouh and I had gifts for each other that no one else could give. I gave him the assurance that the story that had given him courage was true. He gave me the assurance

that God *had* used Dad's death for good. Dad, by dying, had helped give Nouh a faith worth dying for. And Nouh, in return, had helped give Dad's faith back to me.