Hugh and Ellen Farrior: A Life of Service in the Congo

Dr. Hugh and Ellen Farrior began their Congo journey in the summer of 1957. They were commissioned for missionary service in Montreat alongside other new missionaries, accompanied by their infant daughter, Hope, who had been born in February of that year. Hugh had just completed his surgical residency and was preparing to begin a life of medical mission service.

Their first destination was Belgium, where they spent a year studying French in Brussels. Hugh also studied at the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp, preparing for the unique medical challenges he would encounter in Central Africa. After completing their studies, the family traveled to the Belgian Congo. They first went to Mutoto to learn Tshiluba before arriving at Bibanga in October 1959.

Independence and Evacuation

Their arrival coincided with a period of enormous political change. The independence of the Congo in 1960 brought civil unrest and violence that threatened both missionaries and their Congolese colleagues and friends. The danger became very real when a grenade was thrown into a missionary's yard.

On July 11, with only a few hours' notice, the Farriors were forced to leave virtually everything behind. They boarded a mission plane to Luluabourg, now Kananga, and from there traveled by U.S. Air Force transport to Salisbury, Rhodesia, now Harare, Zimbabwe.

Hugh soon returned to the Congo with six other men—doctors and ministers—while Ellen, Hope, and other women and children returned to the US. Hugh returned to Bibanga, where during those first months he was sometimes the only missionary on the station. However, Tatu Lukusa Andre, the head of the hospital, was a conscientious and dependable colleague. Together they treated “overwhelming” numbers of wounded caught in fighting among the Lulua, Luba, and United Nations forces. Other missionaries joined him, but the experience left a lasting mark on the family. Ellen was haunted for years by the evacuation. She felt that she had abandoned her Congolese friends at a time when solidarity seemed crucial. That experience would profoundly influence her later decisions.

Returning to Bibanga

The Farriors returned to Bibanga in 1962 and remained there until 1965. Compared with the chaos surrounding independence, these years were considerably calmer.

Hugh's work was demanding. He frequently flew during the day to Lubondai to teach classes at IMCK and then on to remote dispensaries, providing medical care in communities that were difficult to reach by road. Hugh had acquired Naval aviation training, an essential skill given the distances and poor transportation infrastructure. He would then return to Bibanga and perform surgery at night.

It was during these years that Hugh began encountering a recurring problem that would change the direction of his medical career. He saw numerous women suffering from complications of pregnancy, particularly obstructed labor and other conditions requiring specialized obstetrical care.

Those experiences convinced him to pursue additional training. When the family returned to the United States in 1965, Hugh undertook an OB/GYN residency, completing it in 1968.

Ellen also stayed busy, teaching French, English and Sociology, enjoying the interaction with the students. One of her favorite memories was coordinating the annual Christmas plays, "Bididimbe". Creative and hilarious interpretations of some of the characters…specifically Herod's wife with a blond wig, were particularly memorable.

Back to the Congo

After Hugh's residency, the Farriors returned to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this time serving at Tshikaji and later Luluabourg (Kananga) in connection with the work of IMCK and both teaching at IMCK.

Life was extraordinarily busy. A typical day might begin with checking the short-wave radio for medical emergencies. Some problems could be handled by radio; others required Hugh to get into an airplane and fly to the patient.

He taught microbiology, saw patients from approximately 10:00 in the morning until 5:30 in the afternoon, and then returned to Tshikaji. There was rarely an opportunity simply to rest. A seriously ill patient might be waiting when he arrived, or there might be an emergency operation that needed to be performed.

Yet Hugh later remembered these years as almost *idyllic* compared with the uncertainty and violence of his first year in the Congo.

The Simba Rebellion

Ellen's experience during the 1960 evacuation had a profound effect on her. When the Simba rebellion created another period of danger in 1964, when Dr. Paul Carlson, and pilot, Burleigh Law were shot and killed,she refused to evacuate.

Their daughter Ruthie had been born in November 1963, making the decision particularly difficult. But Ellen had formed deep relationships with her Congolese friends and was determined not to leave them again.

Her decision reflected something fundamental about both Hugh and Ellen: their commitment to the Congo was never simply about a medical assignment or missionary posting. It was about relationships—with patients, colleagues, friends, students and communities.

Returning to the United States

In 1971, Hugh and Ellen made the difficult decision to return permanently to the United States. Hugh's mother was aging, and their daughter Hope was beginning high school. Family responsibilities made a return home necessary.

But leaving the Congo did not mean leaving the work behind.

They remained closely connected with IMCK and returned to Tshikaji on occasion, including trips when Hugh covered for physicians who needed to attend professional conferences.

Their commitment also influenced their children. Hope chose to return to Tshikaji for a college gap year, working with Dr. Johnny Miller and Elizabeth (Bizza) Nelson Britton in Under-5 clinics and at a Nutrition Center. Ruthie volunteered and then worked in Lesotho for several years, supporting women's initiatives.

The Congo remained woven into the fabric of the Farrior family.

Two Very Different Journeys to the Congo

Hugh and Ellen came to missionary service from remarkably different backgrounds.

Hugh was born into a missionary family in China. From an early age, he expected that he would continue his family's tradition of service overseas. Medical school and surgical training in addition to Navy pilot training gave him the skills he believed would allow him to serve others through medicine.

Ellen's path was very different.

She grew up in a politically connected and prosperous family in West Virginia. But her life changed dramatically when her father was injured during World War II. He eventually died as a result of those injuries when Ellen was only 16.

Ellen and her sisters were raised by their mother, who took on whatever work she could find to support the family. Through the trauma and uncertainty of those years, Ellen was drawn increasingly toward the church and toward missions.

By coincidence, Hugh and Ellen met on a train headed to a mission conference for young people in Lawrence, Kansas. They married in December 1954.

Their paths could hardly have been more different. Yet their shared faith, commitment to service, and love for people brought them together in a partnership that would shape the rest of their lives.

A Lifelong Connection

For Hugh and Ellen, the Congo was never simply a place where they had once worked. It became part of who they were.

They experienced political upheaval, evacuation, danger, medical emergencies, difficult separations and the enormous challenges of practicing medicine in remote communities. But alongside those hardships were friendships, shared faith, meaningful work and the privilege of serving alongside Congolese colleagues.

They cherished those relationships throughout their lives.

Their Congo story is ultimately not just a story about missionary medicine. It is a story about **faith, courage, friendship and a lifelong commitment to the people they came to serve**.