

Ken Elliot

Australian Medical Missionary - Burkina Faso, West Africa

Scorpions, sandstorms and scurvy. This is the true testimony of how Ken Elliott survived seven years in the desert as a prisoner of Al Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda is an Islamic militant organization who spearhead a global Islamist revolution to unite the Muslim world under an Islamic caliphate, (an Islamic political system). Its membership is mostly composed of Arabs, but also includes people from other ethnic groups. *Wikipedia*

Imagine this: you are 82 years old, you were kidnapped by fanatical Islamic extremist months ago, and you are somewhere in the Sahara Desert.

You have one companion, a Romanian fellow hostage, 40 years younger than you. You have nothing to read, nothing to listen to, and your guards won't speak to you.

They won't let you leave your makeshift shelter for fear you'll be spotted by French or American surveillance drones.

It is ferociously hot in the daytime, and bitterly cold at night. You have one blanket. You dig into the sand to try to make your bed more comfortable and you get bitten on the hand by a scorpion.

The pain is acute. It gets worse and worse. It travels up your arm to your shoulder. You have no painkillers, no treatment of any kind, so you wait for the pain to fade. Eventually, after two days and nights, it does.

Now imagine that day follows identical day, and night follows identical night, for seven more years. And that you get bitten by scorpions 20 more times – on one occasion, the pain travels up to your right shoulder, across to the other, and down to your left hand.

The exclusive story of how Ken Elliott survived seven years in the desert, shown on the program 'Foreign Correspondent' on ABC TV, Australia.

In 1972, Dr Elliott and his wife Jocelyn, from Perth, Australia, founded a hospital in the West African country of Burkina Faso. They ran it for 44 years. Ken operated on thousands of patients, from all over West Africa, charging them little or nothing.

Then, in January 2016, Ken and Jocelyn were kidnapped by Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militants. Jocelyn was released soon afterwards, but Ken was kept hostage for seven years and four months. He was quietly released last year, aged 88.

In his first interview since his release, Ken Elliott has told the interviewer about acute boredom interspersed with rare moments of fear; about heat-stroke, and bitter cold; sandstorms that nearly blinded him, and a diet that nearly killed him; and about his abiding faith in God, who he believes brought him safely home in the end.

On the same night that the Elliotts were kidnapped from their home near the northern border, the Al-Qaeda militants had launched a savage attack in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou.

In the Café Cappuccino, a favourite haunt of ex-pats on the main street of the city, guests were gunned down without mercy. Thirty people were killed – including 20 foreigners.

Kidnapping for ransom had been a standard fundraising ploy of the Islamists for more than a decade. Dozens of foreigners – mostly white European mining engineers, missionaries, aid-workers, or tourists – had been kidnapped and held for months or years.

Usually, in the end, European governments had covertly paid ransoms for their release. Some estimates put the kidnapers' earnings from ransoms since 2008 at well over \$200 million.

But the Elliotts were not tourists, or workers for a foreign company, or visiting aid workers. They had lived and worked in Djibo for 40 years. They arrived in 1972 in their well-used Land rover, with three small children and almost no money, with a mission to provide medical treatment. There was no hospital, and especially no surgeon.

Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world. There are no two-storey buildings, no private cars, few bitumen streets, and a lot of donkeys. It is hot, dusty and remote.

Devout Christians both, they agreed when they married that God's purpose for them would not be fulfilled if Ken's medical skills were exercised in Australia.

"Australia was packed out with doctors more or less, at least it seemed to us," says Ken.

Most such enterprises require the need to raise funds. But Ken and Jocelyn did not do this.

"We had this idea that we would not ask for funds but only pray for them, up there," Ken said. "It was just amazing how we got what we needed when we needed it."

Their surgical equipment, and much else besides, came from the gift of an unused Cold War emergency hospital that the American ambassador gave them as an unsolicited gift. Friends, relatives, strangers, churches in countries they had never visited, came through with donations.

The hospital was very basic. There were no beds, because their patients were used to the floor, and in the heat preferred to sleep outside. Jocelyn raised and educated their children while Ken became a full-time surgeon. Ken treated hernias, cysts and tumours and broken bones.

Patients came from all over Burkina Faso; from Mali and Niger, from the Ivory Coast and Benin – and of course, from the local town, Djibo. The majority were Muslim.

When asked whether Ken prioritized Christian patients he said, "Whether you are Christian, or Muslim, or without religion, it doesn't matter to him. You come along, you are a human being, you get treatment."

And for the next seven years after the kidnapping, the Australian public heard next to nothing about Ken Elliott. A video released by his captors in 2017 featured him and five other hostages. They were forced to make the video, asking the Australian government for ransom money. But there was no more communication that that.

Then, in May 2023, Ken Elliott was quietly released. He was 88. He returned to Perth, which he had left in the mid-1960s. And finally, in early 2024, his story was told and went to air.

When asked for more details about the kidnapping he said, "Jocelyn and I had no alternative but to go along with them," says Ken. "We were driven in a ute into the bush."

Three days later Jocelyn was released, but Ken was driven far to the north through the desert. For most of that time, he was with a fellow hostage, a Romanian called Julian Ghergut, who had been a security guard at a manganese mine in Burkina Faso when he was kidnapped.

"When I met Julian," says Ken, "he had been a captive for nine months. 'How can anyone stand this for nine months?' I asked myself. I ended up being there for seven years and four months."

Julian was eventually released a few months after Ken in 2023. There was a 40-year age gap between them, and they were very different people.

"But I was grateful to him," says Ken, "and I hope he was grateful to me."

On one occasion at least, Julian Ghergut may have saved his life. Ken was out in the desert, answering a call of nature, when a sandstorm blew up. Soon he couldn't see his own hand in front of his face. He was guided back to the camp by Julian bashing a tin plate with a spoon. Without shelter, Ken might easily have been buried alive.

There were other hazards, apart from sandstorms, scorpions and boredom. The diet was appalling. Boiled macaroni for breakfast; damper torn into pieces and soaked in water – "soggy bread," Ken calls it – for lunch. And sticky rice, which Ken couldn't eat, for dinner. No fruit. No vegetables. The occasional bit of meat when a sheep was slaughtered.

After a while on this diet, Ken contracted scurvy, the disease that struck down so many pre-modern sailors, and that Captain Cook famously warded off with pickled cabbage. It has many symptoms, one of them internal bleeding into the muscles of the legs.

Ken's legs swelled up. For months, he couldn't walk. He could barely crawl. His captors said they couldn't find any vitamin C.

Eventually, one of the "bosses", as Ken calls them, came and looked at his legs. The next morning he found five different brands of Vitamin C by his sleeping place. "I started to get better after that."

His captors showed no interest in using Ken's medical skills. Some of them were profoundly skeptical about Western medicine anyway.

"Muslims don't get sick," one of them pronounced – which after decades of treating sick Muslims in Djibo, came as news to Ken Elliott.

Of course, they tried to convert him. But Ken was adamant: "The Lord has been good to me. There's no way I was going to dishonour Him by converting to Islam. Or even pretending to convert."

"Didn't you ever feel that God had abandoned you?" asked the interviewer.

"Never. No. He was always there," said Ken.

The Elliotts have been assured by the Australian government that no ransom was paid and no other benefit bartered to the kidnappers for his liberty. They agree with the government's policy of not paying ransoms.

"That would just encourage more hostage-taking all over Africa, expatriates or local people," says Jocelyn. And Ken confirms that he told Jocelyn before she left him that he didn't want anyone to pay a ransom for him. "Absolutely not."

The reason for Ken's release remains a mystery. Perhaps it was to do with a complex multi-government deal involving the release of Islamist prisoners – though the Australian government is not revealing any information.

For the Elliotts, there's no mystery.

"We believe that the only reason why we were released," says Ken, "was because there were a few hundreds, if not thousands of people praying for it. And we believe in prayer."

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-08-29/ken-elliott-burkina-faso-al-qaeda/104274992>

Activities

1. Outline Ken's work in Burkina Faso.
2. What indicates Ken's generosity towards Muslims.
3. List 2 incidents that show Ken's great faith and trust in God.
4. What disease did Ken come down with as a result of his diet in captivity? What is the cause of this disease? How did God answer his prayer for healing?
5. What is a ransom? Why did Ken not want the Australian government to pay a ransom?