



# THE ARMED FORCES OF LIBERIA TODAY

By Roland Murphy and Chris Wyatt August 13, 2019

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**Colonel Chris Wyatt:** Greetings, and welcome to the War Room podcast. I'm **Colonel Chris Wyatt** Director of African Studies here at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and today's podcast takes a look at post-conflict Liberia and the Armed Forces of Liberia, best known colloquially by its acronym, the AFL. Liberia emerged from a bloody and highly destructive Civil War in 2003. A transitional government held a caretaker role until the election that brought former World Bank Economist Ellen Johnson Sirleaf into office as President in 2006. During the transitional government of Gyude Bryant, Liberia agreed to partner with United Nations in a lead role for reforming the Liberian National Police and with the United States as a lead for the military. From late 2006 until 2010, the U.S. Embassy oversaw the demobilization of the former AFL, reconstitution of the new AFL, and the eventual transfer of an operational army to the Liberian Ministry of Defense in 2010. Much has happened in the ensuing years and one may ask many pertinent questions about the end result. Has the new AFL made the difference? What is the experience like from the inside? But one can say the new AFL has made extensive contributions to society in Liberia, deployed peacekeepers to Mali and Darfur, and played an essential role in combating the Ebola viral disease outbreak that emerged in West Africa in December 2013. Today we have with us here **Lieutenant Colonel Roland Murphy** who was in the 2nd cohort of the new Armed Forces of Liberia. Lt. Col. Murphy, welcome to War Room.

**Lieutenant Colonel Roland Murphy:** Thank you very much, Colonel Wyatt.

**CW:** It's a pleasure to have you here.

**RM:** Thank you very much. It is a pleasure meeting you again after a period of a decade plus. I'm so happy to be here in this War Room. It is an honor. I am grateful.

**CW:** Well I should let you know that Lt. Col. Murphy is the first Liberian army officer to ever attend the U.S. Army War College, and as you may have just discovered from our brief conversation a moment ago, in the interest of full disclosure, Lt. Col. Murphy and I are well-acquainted with one other. I was the U.S. army officer responsible for the security sector reform

for the National Defense program from June 2007 until September 2008, and during that time with help of many others, we completed most of the rebuilding program, growing from 105 soldiers to 2,137. When we first met, Lt. Col. Murphy was then, new recruit Murphy, and he's come a long way since then. So, as he said, more than a decade later here we are at the U.S. Army War College. So, this is sort of a bookend on a very long story. So, let me ask you this first question here Lt. Col. Murphy. When you first heard the announcement about the Armed Forces of Liberia and the recruitment drive that took place back in 2006, what were you doing back then?

**RM:** Thank you sir. In 2006, I've just graduated from the University a year prior, and it was a very difficult period for me because I had an elderly mother who was terminally ill then. I had to take care of her, and so that limited me from working, and I had to do a little business to sustain myself and continue to take care of my elderly mother until the announcement came around. I think it was something of vocation. I just felt the urge of going to participate and luckily for me, I did not have to travel to Monrovia, and the recruitment team was right at the Booker Washington Institute in Kakata. So, I just walk up to the recruitment center, and I did not tell anyone I was going to the recruitment center because looking at the past history, I did not want to be discouraged by any family member. So, I just walk straight in and you know the details: do the examination, the written examination, medical and physical examination, and that was it.

**CW:** So, you had just finished university, you were taking care of your mother who was in poor health. Yes, she was terminally ill as you said. And you were just trying to get by, and you saw this announcement and you didn't tell anyone in your family you were going.

**RM:** No, I did not.

**CW:** Okay, so, when you signed, what happened? Any response from your family?

**RM:** After I completed the recruitment process, pending a vetting, I told my mother and my elder sister, they were the only two persons I told. I told them, wow, I started a recruitment process today and I was successful by it's still pending a vetting. And my sick mother said, well that's not a problem, your grandfather was a soldier.

**CW:** So, you have a family history.

**RM:** Yeah, so, we've got a family history. In our family line, we have served the Armed Forces of Liberia. My two grandfathers, from father and mother, they both served the Liberia Frontier Force, and I had an uncle who served the old AFL. He died right after April 6<sup>th</sup>. And now, it's the new AFL. So, it's a family thing.

**CW:** So, it's another story that's come full circle. So, both your grandparents served in the original organized military, the territorial Defense Force.

**RM:** Yes sir.

**CW:** Interesting. So, what was it like for you to join this new military and become a private and then later become commissioned as an officer as a university graduate and here you are today as a lieutenant colonel?

**RM:** It has been a very wonderful journey. It has been a very wonderful journey. Looking at the history of the AFL, where we came from, from the days of the Frontier Force, coming down to 1950 say, it's the new Armed Forces of Liberia, I mean the old Armed Forces of Liberia, coming to 2006, the new Armed Forces of Liberia, it has been a long journey for us. Being the first within such an organization that had no commanders, there was nothing like, or any attending or whatnot. You were just the first. You had no footprint. You have to walk in it the way you are. And you are the only officer to walk in it that way. It was difficult.

**CW:** We should probably share with our listeners, I'll tell a little backdrop here. So, they understand the full story. So, the old Armed Forces of Liberia during the 13-year conflict in Liberia, the long civil war, they were either inept or ineffective and some were complicit in crimes, or they really didn't do a good job of protecting people which is their role. So, a lot of civilians in society had a negative view of the AFL. Is that true?

**RM:** So, the 2008 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, categorized the old AFL as the civil war's violators of human rights, and that was not too good. So, there was a need, and the civil society, the population, the civilians saw they needed that. If we are going to have an army, it has to be an army that we would be proud of and we trust. So, I think that's actually what necessitated it, the demobilization of the old AFL, the restructuring of the AFL because the people lost trust in the old AFL.

**CW:** So, when you joined, it truly was groundbreaking in many respects because people didn't know what to expect. Is this going to be old wine in new bottles? Or is it going to be something new? You took a risk.

**RM:** Yeah, initially they were skeptical. There was a guy that went at the recruitment center along with me. When he got by, his parents were very angry with him and they were actually angry with him and they said, why do you want to join an army again to start killing people or to start doing this? I told them no, this isn't going to be the case. I was very optimistic, and I knew that things were going to work out.

**CW:** Well and they have as we have seen. And as history has borne out, it's been very fortunate. So, was it difficult for you to come in because as your friend discovered, his parents were not happy about it? So, I should also let folks know that if you weren't part of this process, as you and I were, it's really, I think, difficult to grasp just how important was for Liberia and for the Mano River region. Would you agree?

**RM:** Yeah, sure. It was difficult. Initially, people, you know, looking at what happened in Liberia during the crisis, we had insurgents crossing over from Liberia into Sierra Leone, into Guinea and into Ivory Coast. A lot of our neighbors in the sub-region were skeptical of Liberia. So, after the new AFL were formed, I'll tell you, there were watching carefully, and the story is different now. I don't know if you got this information. Recently we were in Sierra Leone, when we had a mudslide incident. We moved troops in to deliver humanitarian aid to provide assistance, we shared training opportunities at the Horton Academy. We do a lot of things together. With Ivory Coast, over the past years, we've been having synchronized operations, both land and water. And it has been going actually well. We are sharing intelligence. It has actually been working. The relationship is far better than it was 50 years ago.

**CW:** Of course Sierra Leone also had a very bloody civil conflict that went on for a number of years, and when I first arrived in Liberia, officials from the Economic Community West African States, or ECOWAS, and from the neighboring states—I won't mention which ones, but you already have—often said to me, we're very concerned that the Americans are training a super army, a super AFL. And they were concerned that the AFL would be a bad actor and as you said, it seems that that has not at all been the case. It's actually been an actor for positive.

**RM:** Yes, they believe that now. We are contributing immensely to peace in the region. We are actually building a force that represents the sub-region. And we are not only within the sub-region at the (Inaudible 9:34), we are representing Sudan.

**CW:** Yes.

**RM:** We are contributing to the peace in Sudan.

**CW:** And also, you had peacekeepers deployed to Mali for a few years down. Sadly, Liberian soldiers have lost their lives in that mission.

**RM:** So, we lost one soldier and five others sustained casualties. Some of them were permanently incapacitated. But that's part of peacekeeping. Those things come with sacrifice.

**CW:** As you say, some of sacrifices soldiers make.

**RM:** We benefited from peacekeeping for more than 50 years.

**CW:** This is true. The United Nations Peacekeeping Mission to Liberia, UNMIL.

**RM:** We started with ECOMOG. We started with ECOMOG. We had Nigerians, Ghanaians, Sierra Leoneans. They contributed towards our peace. The United Nations moved in, and we benefited from peacekeeping. And it is time to reciprocate.

**CW:** So, you're paying it back.

**RM:** We got to pay it back. We need to sustain the peace in the region and internationally.

**CW:** So, not a lot of people outside of West Africa are aware that the Liberian military, the Armed Forces of Liberia are actually doing these peacekeeping missions. But some folks are aware that the Ebola viral outbreak that took place in the West Africa region, the Mano River region, so in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia in particular, the AFL did play a role in helping civil society. Can you tell us a little about that experience?

**RM:** That was a very bad experience for our nation. We had just recovered from a civil crisis, trying to build our economy, trying to build our health sector, our educational sector. And boom, the Ebola came in 2013 and in 2014 it became worse. The AFL, the first action we took was to put in measures to protect our own troops and the troops' families. That was the first action we took. And why are we taking those actions? The government asked that. We provide security and escort details for barrier teams because if barrier teams were overwhelmed and communities were angry because continual barriers within their environment, they feared it was not healthy for them. And they started attacking barrier teams. So, the AFL had to protect the barrier teams and the communities later were honest too that we needed to do that. And after protecting the barrier teams, we were attacked because the virus kept spreading. We were tasked to control the inflows of people from the rural area to Monrovia. Because the rural areas were safer than Monrovia. So, we tried. The government asked us to help in **(Inaudible 11:56)**. So, we had to deploy task forces around the country to control the influx of people from the rural area to Monrovia. And things kept getting worse. Two communities got so infected with the virus, we were forced to quarantine on government orders, and we had to quarantine. It was not something nice to do, but we had to do it to protect the larger population.

**CW:** When people not affiliated with the military often think of military armed forces, they think of combat, counterterrorism, things like that, perhaps peacekeeping. Often times the role of the military in response to a national disaster or a disease, a viral outbreak like this, is overlooked. I suspect that some of our listeners might be surprised to find out some of the things the AFL was doing.

**RM:** Actually, they were surprised. And they appreciated it. You know when the U.S. military personnel moved in, we joined them, and we constructed a lot of ETUs around the country and those ETUs actually served the purpose.

**CW:** Those are the Ebola Treatment Units?

**RM:** Yeah, the Ebola Treatment Units.

**CW:** So, the reason I mention about the unusual role is that if you send troops like here in America out to fight forest fires, it's dangerous. But the fear is the fire, you can see the fire. When it's Ebola and it's a virus, you can't see it.

**RM:** No, you don't see it. You are fighting an enemy that you cannot see.

**CW:** And you are trying to protect people who may not realize that you are doing something in their benefit.

**RM:** I can remember that when we took some inspection trips at the West Point, one of the communities we quarantined, and there was this guard that decided to break the quarantine. He jumped over the fence around PHP, end of the Mamba Point. I think you are familiar with...

**CW:** Yeah, I do know the area very well.

**RM:** And unfortunately, he was so weak, and he just dropped and we told the soldiers, do not touch him and he started vomiting and bleeding and we had to call an ambulance to come pick him up to take him to the Ebola Treatment Unit. It was a bad experience, but we are soldiers, we do what we have to do.

**CW:** Well, I think that of all the things, perhaps the peacekeeping missions are obvious, but I would say that from my perspective, just to share with you, that the AFL's response in the Ebola outbreak is evidence of what we were hoping to accomplish. The Liberians and the Americans, we wanted a professional, apolitical military response with civil authority who set an example for the country and for the region. And I would have to argue that it certainly, in that case, that the AFL has shown that's what the AFL is today.

**RM:** So, we did that, and we are still up to the task of doing more.

**CM:** So, looking back at that historic period, we're talking about 2007/2008, at the time when you and I and so many others put our hearts and souls into trying to build this new AFL.

**RM:** Sure, sure.

**CM:** What comes to mind for you? For me it's the sight of dedicated, disciplined young Liberians marching in formation, proudly restoring honor in ceremony after ceremony. People don't understand the band was there, the AFL band. When I first arrived in Liberia, I would watch Liberians who knew the history of Liberia, who suffered through the conflicts, who had lived there, would come to ceremonies, and the tears of joy that would stream down their eyes. And then you'd see the soldiers walk by disciplined, professional, polite, friendly. So, that's my enduring memory. What about yourself?

**RM:** I think we share a similar memory. Mine is in the same line. But what actually impressed me, and I still feel proud about it, was when it was my time of graduation, the IET, when we were marching.

**CW:** The Individual Entry Training.

**RM:** Yeah, the Individual Entry Training. And we were marching, and you could hear from the crowd **(Inaudible 15:24)** it means that is those are our own people, those are our own children, those are our own family members that have decided to protect us. And they were very proud, and some were weeping and waving flowers and it was very nice, and I will never forget that scene.

**CW:** Yes, I was there. I remember it too. It's evoking memories now. It was quite an interesting time. Some of the interesting things that also took place, you may have observed not a direct participant, but our first truck driver class was predominantly female soldiers. And so, Liberians would see the female soldiers driving these large trucks. I remember it at Stop Light which is a famous part of town there. The trucks were stopped for traffic and people started climbing up in the trucks when they saw Liberian women drive.

**RM:** To confirm. And one time, we arrived to Gbarnga, we were in support of the Ministry of State because a person was going there for the Independence Day celebration, July 26<sup>th</sup>. And we had a luncheon break and those girls got down from the truck. There was a huge crowd running around, wow, you girls are driving the army vehicles? It was so nice, actually it was good to have, you know when you are having a restructuring program in a military institution, it is necessary. What I observed, it is necessary to have civil participation, to have the civil society input, to have their recommendation. Then they become part of the process and they appreciate the process, and Liberia is a very good example.

**CW:** Well, I would have to agree with that. One of the main thrusts of the efforts we were trying to do, one of the things I focused on was civil engagement, getting the community involved. One

of the things we frequently did was we went on the UNMIL radio which was the only national radio network.

**RM:** The one across the country.

**CW:** All over the country. And they had the morning program “Coffee Talk,” or “Coffee Break.”

**RM:** “Coffee Break.”

**CW:** “Coffee Break.” And so, I frequently went on there to talk about the AFL and I brought AFL soldiers on, and the day that I brought the female soldiers on there who were truck drivers, the announcer was asking me questions and so I said, why don't you ask them? They are in the AFL, not me. And you should have heard the people calling into the program that day. It was quite amazing.

**RM:** That was amazing. That was nice.

**CW:** So, the first cohort, you were in the second cohort, the second class. But the first cohort was a proof-of-concept sort of thing in which the Americans said, let's try this and see if we can actually do it and go through the recruiting, vetting, the training. But from that first cohort, there were nine lieutenants. And among those lieutenants, they've done quite well. So, we have in there Daniel Ziakhan who became a major general and Chief of Staff of the AFL and now is the Defense Minister.

**RM:** Yeah, the Defense Minister.

**CW:** And then behind him, Prince Johnson who is now the Chief of Staff. And then, Brigadier General Geraldine George.

**RM:** The first female Deputy Chief of Staff and the first female general in the Armed Forces of Liberia. We are general-sensitive.

**CW:** I can see that. We certainly made an effort at it. It was a challenge though because of the long conflict, one of the requirements the Liberian governments set was that every soldier would have a high school diploma or equivalent. And of course, it was difficult.

**RM:** That was a key requirement.

**CW:** Do you think it was important for the force?



**RM:** It was important because to have a force that would respect human rights, it has to be educated.

**CW:** Another part of what we did, it happened less so with your class and afterwards but certainly the first class, is a big portion of their initial training involved civics and human rights law and things like that, so they had an appreciation for the history of Liberia, its political system and the role of the military. Do you think that plays an important role?

**RM:** We still teach them civics.

**CW:** Oh, you do indeed?

**RM:** We ran two recruitment classes on our own in 2013 and 2015. It's still part of the curriculum. We still maintain the models and continue with it.

**CW:** Wow, I think I want residuals for that. It must be a successful program.

**RM:** It was successful. We brought in additional three hundred recruits in two phases.

**CW:** Excellent. And of course, after my departure something we put in motion, but finally the Coast Guard was established after the Defense Act was amended. So, you have a coast guard now too.

**RM:** We have a coast guard. They are doing extremely well. They made a lot of arrests. They are protecting our waters.

**CW:** And doing some drug interdiction and search and rescue.

**RM:** A lot, a lot. Even on illegal, unregulated, unauthorized fishing, a lot of arrests. And the U.S. government has done extremely well. They have constructed a boathouse in Monrovia, at Freeport. They also built a pier system also. They have constructed another boathouse in Buchanan. That was just dedicated a few months ago and there are plans to do some in Sinoe and Maryland.

**CW:** So, Maryland. That would mean the southeastern county.

**RM:** The Coast Guard will be able to patrol entire coastal land because most of the violations on sea are within our region from Buchanan coming down to us.

**CW:** So, the final third of the coastline is...

**RM:** There were (Inaudible 20:35).

**CW:** Well the AFL has succeeded in many respects as we have talked about here, but any military can always improve. We can always make things better.

**RM:** There is always room.

**CW:** Exactly. So, is there any area that you think where folks, foreign donors, those who may want to help the AFL in Liberia that might be able to help the AFL improve?

**RM:** There are two areas that I'm going to give you in terms of priorities.

**CW:** Okay.

**RM:** The first is there was an NCO academy. The AFL had decided to build an NCO to establish an NCO academy. You know when DynCorp left, the highest NCO training we got was BNOC—The Basic Non-commissioned Officer Course.

**CW:** For our listeners I should explain that you are talking about non-commissioned officers and initial training to be leaders for junior.

**RM:** Yeah, for junior. So, we had BNOC training for our NCOs and there was no training for advanced courses. So now we have to send it out of the country. So, we intend to have an NCO academy where we will be able to provide basic, BNOC, and advanced NCO courses. Because you know the NCOs are the Bible of the army. If you have a strong NCO core, you have a stronger army.

**CW:** I agree.

**RM:** That's one of the key areas that anybody coming in to give a hand, we appreciate.

**CW:** Of course, one of the challenges with the advanced course is that you may get invitations from abroad but it's never enough to meet the demand.

**RM:** It's never enough. You know its gratis.

**CW:** So, let me ask you this question before we wrap up here. So, what do you think the next 5 years holds for the new AFL? At some point, by the way, we are going to have to stop calling in the new AFL, right? It's been 12 years.

**RM:** You know, sometimes you are not the first one saying that. I think it has gone for more than 13 years and we should be calling it the AFL. But a lot of folks that experienced the war are not comfortable just saying the AFL. Because by saying the AFL, it reminds them of some bad days of the AFL. So, to bring themselves some relief, they prefer to say new AFL.

**CW:** So, I suspect it probably is for another generation

**RM:** It is for another generation before that will be erased. Because a lot of folks feel that by saying the AFL it's ambiguous. Which AFL? Because it brings back a lot of old memories.

**CW:** Well, it was quite a horrific war so...

**RM:** A lot of are comfortable with the new AFL. And I think it's okay.

**CW:** Well, Lt. Col. Murphy, if there is anything you would like to share with us before we close?

**RM:** I think what we are going to look at now in the next five years is to have a force that will be robust enough to respond to national and regional issues, to have a force that will be able to serve as a nation-builder and to implement the peace, always.

**CW:** Excellent.

**RM:** It was a nice time being with you. Once again, I appreciate it and I appreciate the time that you provided me to be here. It's an opportunity being the first Liberian officer to attend such a prestigious college. I think it's a challenge and also an opportunity that I need to continue to strive. Because I always say, we are where we are, we have all these success stories because of good training and a robust leadership.

**CW:** Well, those are key things. Training matters and leadership sets the guidelines.

**RM:** The training we got is very good. And I think that's why we are where we are today. Thank you very much.

**CW:** Well, I'd like to thank you once again for joining us on the War Room podcast. Thank you kindly for your insights and your views. More than 13 years in post-conflict effort to rebuild a credible, apolitical institution focused on defending the nation's and the people's freedoms, we

see clear signs that the AFL has in many respects succeeded. And if anyone was looking for evidence that the new AFL would develop into a professional military, I offer the enrollment of Liberia's first-ever senior officer to the U.S. Army War College as a sure sign that the AFL went in the right direction. Lt. Col. Murphy, once more, I thank you for joining us in the War Room and sharing your time with us.

**RM:** Thank you very much, sir. It was a pleasure.