

Keeping you in touch with MERLIN around the world

## The day the earth moved



(Pictures by Tony Taylor)

### AFGHANISTAN

**It was a quiet Saturday in London. At 10 am Jules Pieters, Operations Director at MERLIN, switched on his computer to read the Worldwide Earthquake Monitor, a website he has checked every day for years. Only today would be different.**

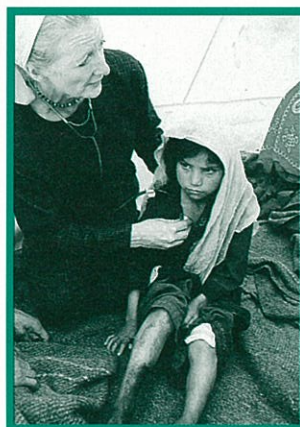
The website showed an earthquake had shaken northern Afghanistan just four hours before. It measured 7 on the Richter scale – more powerful than the previous quake in February, when thousands had perished. Jules called in the MERLIN team.

Within hours MERLIN field staff were filing reports from Faizabad, the nearest international airbase, only 100 miles south of the earthquake. The news was bad. Local sources estimated that 4,000 people might have died in the mud-walled villages of this remote mountain region.

Reliable information was scarce. All day, MERLIN staff in London and Faizabad raced to piece together an accurate picture of what had really happened. It confirmed their worst fears.



By 5 o'clock that Saturday afternoon, Jules knew enough to launch an emergency operation. At 5 pm the next day – only 36 hours after the quake itself – the first relief helicopter arrived in the epicentre.



On board were MERLIN nurse Valerie Powell (pictured left), local doctor Mohammed Rasheedi, four other aid workers, and enough medical supplies to begin.

In that first week, MERLIN rushed out doctors, nurses and a planeload of medicines. A tent hospital was set up in the worst area of the quake zone, and the most severely injured were ferried back to Faizabad hospital by helicopter. Other agencies provided clean water, tents, helicopters, personnel, in an international collaboration.

Thousands of survivors were found in their shattered villages, and given shelter, food, treatment. Many were so frightened that they refused to sleep indoors in case the roof fell in again. Thunderstorms and aftershocks scared everyone.

Thankfully, the weather held sufficiently for helicopters to fly to many villages. Other places in the mountains could only be reached by donkey.

Meanwhile in London, the field team's efforts were widely acknowledged in television and newspaper reports, and MERLIN launched an urgent appeal for funds.

Six weeks later, the emergency operation is nearing completion, and the long task of rebuilding homes – and lives – is just beginning.

### Stop Press

BBC TV followed MERLIN nurse Ailsa Denney to Congo-Brazzaville... Watch the result, a fly-on-the-wall documentary on MERLIN in action, in BBC1's new series *Women In Medicine*, at 9.30 pm on Thursday August 6.

# First 5 years – next 5 years

MERLIN is five years old this year. In those five years, it has grown continuously in the scope and quality of its operations. But it has stayed true to its original purpose and vision: to provide high quality medical care in emergencies worldwide, wherever and whenever it is needed. This year also sees the departure of Dr Christopher Besse, founder and Chief Executive, who is taking a well-earned rest after the rigours of creating a thriving agency from scratch. He is succeeded by Alastair Troup, who has worked for MERLIN since 1996 as Operations Director. On this page we mark the handover. Christopher reflects on the lessons of MERLIN's first five years, while Alastair sets out some thoughts for the next five...



## Looking ahead

BY ALASTAIR TROUP

I have just returned from visiting our programmes in Wajir, Kenya, and Maniema, Congo, and what an appropriate backdrop this provides for looking ahead. On the one hand, Wajir is an exciting initiative where MERLIN has effectively responded to an acute malarial epidemic by taking mobile clinics to the dispersed community; and on the other, in DRC, we are developing our support to resident and displaced communities by strengthening primary healthcare through training and provision of medicines.

As with all our programmes, this depends upon the dedication and professionalism of those in the field, maximising the use of local staff, working closely with local health services, and upon the best possible support from London (yes, we do try!).

This is our strength and the guardian of our reputation, and we can be justifiably proud of its recognition across the sector, and increasingly beyond.

So where now? Well, in many quarters in the UK aid sector there's gloom and despondency, but I don't share this. We are demonstrating that by focusing on sound medical practice with high standards and increasing professionalism, we can meet the needs of the beneficiaries, yet at the same time operate within the increasingly restrictive constraints of donors. We may not be able to provide regional solutions but we can significantly improve the lives of the worst off, now. Let us never fall into the trap of sacrificing individuals today for a theoretical solution for tomorrow. As Abdeen Ore, a nurse in Wajir said to me: "Anyone who thinks that poverty will be eradicated by the year 2010 hasn't been to Wajir – and there's not even a war there."

We will continue to concentrate on the emergency environment, but occasionally, deliberately, embarking on the unusual. Medical best practice will remain at our core, and our new training packages are all about delivering this as effectively as possible with the appropriate support. In the field, we will collaborate rather than compete, and will encourage others to do likewise. Our Achilles heel is our very limited independent funding and we are making strenuous efforts to reverse this. Increased private funding will greatly enhance our operations, giving much needed flexibility, increased security and better emergency response. It is critical to our future.

Finally, I would like to add that I deeply appreciate the task I have been given in MERLIN and interpret this as a challenge to preserve those qualities that make us different, which above all includes the unique MERLIN ethos and spirit that derives from our collective commitment to help others in a collaborative and modest manner.

## The founding vision

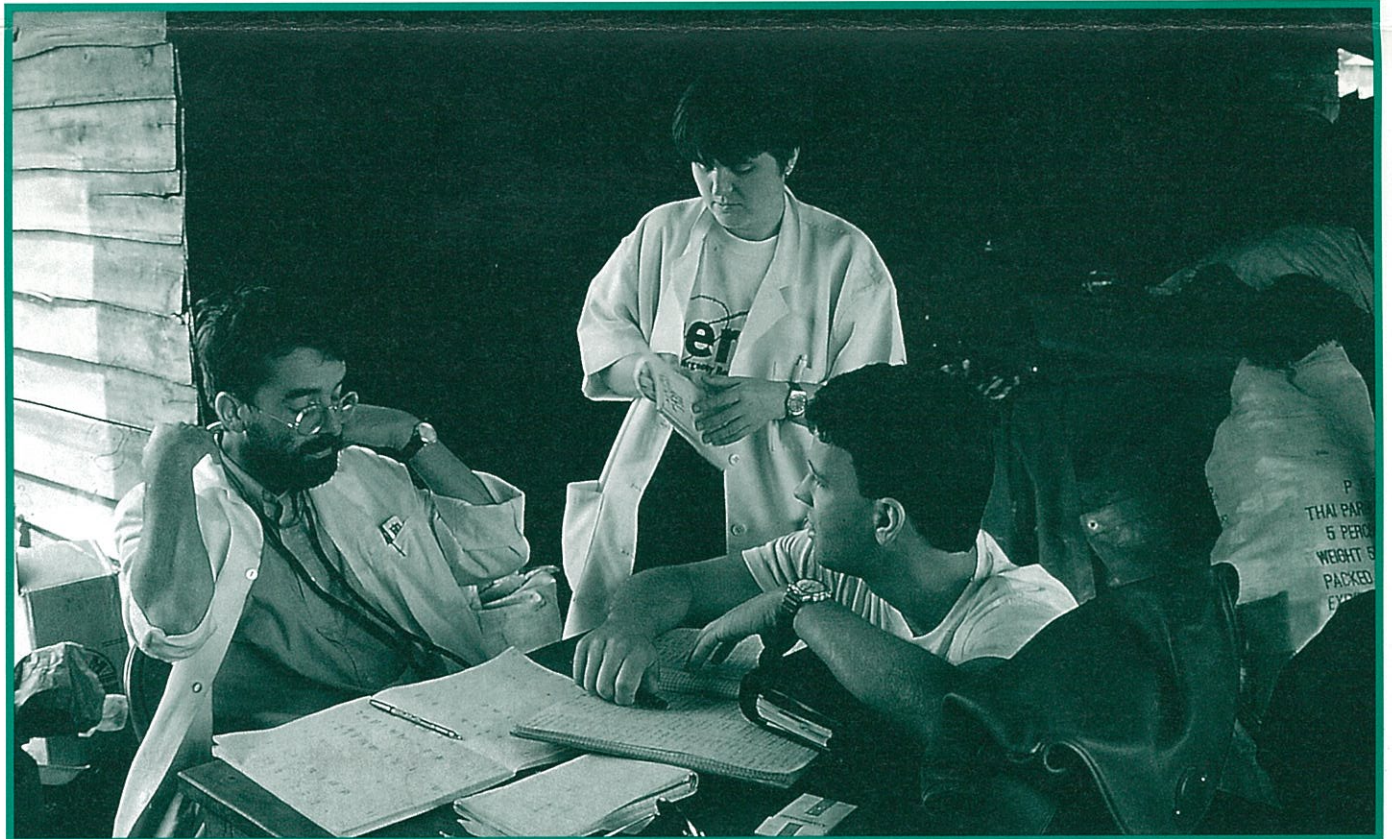
BY CHRISTOPHER BESSE

When I am asked what has been achieved in the past five years, many would like to know how many people we have reached, how many tons of medical supplies we have delivered, how many doctors and nurses we have sent to the field. Our expectations have exceeded on all these counts, but for me, in this as in medicine as a whole, I believe strongly that we should not only measure the 'cost' or readily quantifiable elements. It is impossible to quantify hope, courage, tolerance, warmth and freedom from pain: yet these are our driving forces. These are why our volunteers endure hard work and abstinence, face dangers, and plough on in rigorous conditions. They have to overcome fear, defeatism, apathy and selfishness, sometimes in difficult political and human rights environments.

We should not be afraid of natural idealism and, sometimes, naive d'esprit is appropriate. Volunteerism must remain the cornerstone of our commitment. Coercion, by financial or other means, cannot compete. For some, it may be an escape, but it is not escapism. The challenge for them is to distinguish between the Romantic, the Specious, the Flattering and the Plain Truth. When life's truest values are exposed, the humanitarian spirit can thrive.

We have chosen to work in emergencies, where energy, enthusiasm and drive are vital. When combined with a sound and focused medical mandate, the impact is formidable. We must nurture that urgency and weld it firmly to professionalism. Security and training are crucial. However, we must be careful not to ascribe too much value to the accumulation of knowledge as an end in itself. The powers of judgement are much more important than the acquisition of knowledge. As Confucius said: "A lion chased me up a tree, and I greatly enjoyed the view from the top..."

Since that far away day in January 1993, when Nick Mellor briefed MERLIN's first team, for Sarajevo, we have devoted our energy to the support of the three founding principles: Medical, Emergency and Volunteerism – a combination that has stood the test of time, but that will come under repeated assault in the future. It would be a shame to overdo the quantifying – let us listen to the victims of disaster, the children of Ndosho, Grozny, Sierra Leone... who count not the cost but the value of our work.



### A message from Peter Elwes, Chairman of the Trustees

*Christopher Besse stepped down as Chief Executive of MERLIN in April 1998. We shall all miss him and we all wish him well in whatever new venture he becomes involved. It is difficult to imagine someone of such unbounded vision and drive remaining inactive for long.*

*He leaves behind a substantial, forward-looking and committed organisation with a diversity of programmes and a rapidly growing budget. MERLIN has imprinted its ideals and its professionalism on the humanitarian world. It has shown what can be done with limited resources in extreme conditions. It is a great achievement and a lasting tribute to Christopher.*

*The Trustees have given careful thought to how MERLIN should be organised for the future. They face the task of, on the one hand, preserving the principles on which the charity was first formed and, on the other hand, ensuring that the organisation is strong enough to meet the tasks ahead. This will require good management, high medical professionalism, proper accountability and effective marketing. This needs to be done sensitively, in full recognition of the ideals that drive MERLIN people.*

*There has been a smooth handover of responsibility to Alastair Troup as Chief Executive. He is very effectively supported by his Heads of Departments. They have my full confidence and good wishes, as do the staff and volunteers.*

"In a short period of time, MERLIN has established for itself a deserved international reputation. I know that many in DFID admire the good work you have achieved in emergency health care in some of the world's most difficult trouble spots. Dr Besse leaves MERLIN in good shape to face the future and I am sure his successor will continue this fine work."

George Foulkes MP,  
 Minister for International  
 Development

# Letter from the field



(Picture Rob Bennet)

# Esther's tale

**LIBERIA** Esther is a teacher from Sierra Leone. Now she's one of more than 30,000 refugees in Liberia relying on MERLIN's help. This is her story.

"The men came to my town on 15 March. They started to kill people in every house. They kicked in the doors and shot everyone inside. Soon they came to my house.

They shot my 18 year old son, Joseph, in front of me. The rest of us tried to escape by the back door, but my youngest son, who is three, was left behind.

I ran back to the house although I was very scared. The men had gone. I found my husband dead and they had shot Joseph in the stomach many times. I used my head scarf to tie his wounds and dragged him to the door. But the killers came back. One stuck his foot through the door and fired through the gap. He shot me in the back while I was trying to save my son. That was the last time I saw him. He is probably dead.

My 15 year old daughter, Amara, ran away. I do not know where she is now.

But I am very fortunate. They did not kill me, my two youngest children or my grand-daughter. All the time my back was bleeding. People from my town put me in a hammock and carried me through the bush away from the fighting.

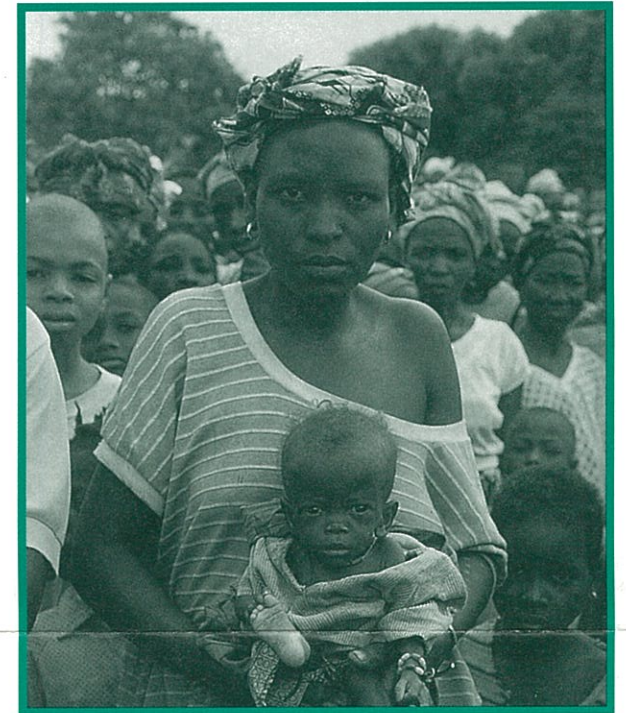
After 10 days we reached MERLIN's health post on the Liberian border. MERLIN took me and my children to another hospital where my back was treated. Now I am getting better and I can walk well.

For 12 years I was a teacher.

Now I have nothing. My son Joseph was my first-born and very clever. He had just finished studying. He would have looked after me when I was too old to work. Over 100 people were killed that day. He is probably dead now too.

Now I need to find work and look after my children. They only have the clothes they ran in and cannot even go to school. When I am well enough to leave the hospital we will have nowhere to live. I want to return to my town and look for my daughter and find out if Joseph is dead.

I would like to start teaching again and look after my family. But I cannot do any of these things until the war ends. Until then, I am a refugee."



## Liberia: the untold story

The media storm over British involvement in Sierra Leone has obscured the desperate plight of thousands of refugees who fled the country during its recent civil war. Over 30,000 of these people are now being cared for by MERLIN volunteers, just across the border in Liberia. This is a story the British media has not reported.

Dr Joe Bourne, MERLIN's doctor in Vahun county, Liberia, explains: "We are seeing over 1,500 people in the clinic and health post here every week. Most are suffering from malaria, diarrhoea and malnutrition."

At this tense border point, MERLIN is the only aid agency. It is running health posts in the refugee camp, a 40-bed hospital ward, and a mass vaccination campaign against measles. Refugees are screened for health problems and nutritional deficiencies. But their problems are more than medical, as the story of one woman (right) shows.

As Dr Bourne says: "When they can go home, and we can go home, everyone will be better off."

Above: Liberia after the rain...Volunteers Jenny Hopps and Rupert Gill travelling through the dense forest as the seasonal rains begin. Right: Pity the child... refugees shelter at Vahun camp on the Liberian border, where MERLIN is providing the only medical care.

## Working around the clock around the world

**February** **Afghanistan:** An earthquake hits Rostiq district of northern Afghanistan, killing up to 4,000 people and making thousands more homeless. MERLIN leads the first convoy of humanitarian aid supplies to the affected area, from its base in nearby Badakhshan. MERLIN vaccinates over 20,000 children under 15 years of age against measles.

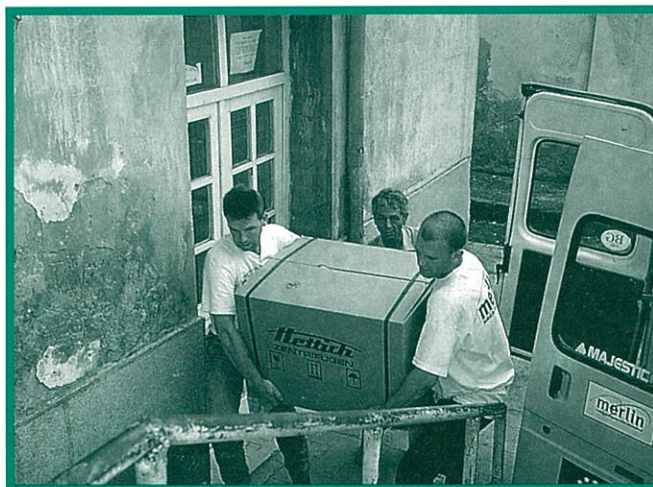
**Kenya:** Kenya is facing its worst malaria epidemic ever. Up to 200,000 people in Wajir district in the remote northeast are at risk and mortality rates are reaching catastrophic proportions. Widespread rumours blame the deaths on Rift Valley Fever, but a MERLIN assessment concludes that malaria is the problem. MERLIN launches a two-pronged operation: using three mobile clinics to reach up to 1,500 people in need of treatment or vaccination each week; and distributing bednets impregnated against mosquitoes, to prevent the spread of the disease.

**Sudan:** Fatal if not treated, Sleeping Sickness has reached epidemic proportions in southern Sudan. 60,000 people are at risk. MERLIN trains local health workers to treat the disease, educates local people to recognise the symptoms and introduces fly-traps as a cost-effective method of controlling tsetse flies which spread the disease. If successful, the MERLIN approach will be extended across a belt of sub-Saharan countries threatened by the disease.

**Indonesia:** MERLIN launches a six-week assessment in the remote highlands of Irian Jaya. Tribal peoples in the mountains and forests are suffering a famine caused by the El Nino weather phenomenon, which makes them acutely vulnerable to diseases such as malaria, as well as to malnutrition. Funds for this programme are sought.

**USA:** MERLIN doctors present papers on emerging infectious diseases at a major international conference organised by America's Centers for Disease Control, in Atlanta, Georgia. The papers are based on findings from MERLIN fieldwork: Lassa fever in Sierra Leone, malaria in Tajikistan, and tuberculosis in Moldova.

**March** **Sierra Leone:** As the civil war escalates, 55,000 people flee into neighbouring Liberia and converge on Vahun in the country's northeast. MERLIN provides first aid as hundreds



Here come the heavy brigade: MERLIN stalwarts Vince Diamond (left) and Pete Spink deliver laboratory equipment to clinics in Albania. MERLIN is monitoring developments there in case the political situation leads to a refugee crisis. (Picture Tim Healing)

pour across the border each day, and sets up a make-shift 20-bed hospital to help people in need of further medical care. Staff work round the clock to help local clinics cope, and to ensure that refugees have clean water and adequate sanitation.

**Chechnya:** Faced with deteriorating security and an increasing threat of kidnapping, MERLIN, the largest medical agency in the country, decides that safety of personnel can no longer be maintained and makes the difficult decision to close its programme after three years.

**Russia:** MERLIN, Russian Ministry of Health officials and the British Government's Know How Fund meet to discuss MERLIN's tuberculosis control programme in Siberia and ways to disseminate MERLIN's pioneering work throughout Russia.

**London:** MERLIN runs its first management training course for field staff, following the success of its new public health course in

February. Designed to guarantee the quality of emergency medical relief programmes, these courses will be run throughout the year. They are funded by Glaxo Wellcome plc and the Department for International Development.

**April** **Albania:** MERLIN begins a programme to supply equipment and train staff at 30 laboratories nationwide.

**London:** Alastair Troup, previously Operations Director, takes over from Christopher Besse as MERLIN's new Chief Executive. After 5 years at the helm, Dr Besse takes a well-deserved holiday.

**May** **Nagorno-Karabakh:** MERLIN returns to one of its earliest programmes, completed 5 years ago, to re-assess health needs and immunisation services. Assessors discover that the original programme is still being maintained by local health workers, including vaccination schedules and equipment.

**Tajikistan:** Intensive training in infectious diseases for large numbers of clinical and laboratory staff is now in full swing. The team hosts an EC delegation who see the training at first-hand.

**Sudan:** As the world becomes aware of a potential famine in southern Sudan, MERLIN joins other leading aid agencies in launching a joint UK appeal which raises £5.5m. Reports are carried on major TV channels and national newspapers.

**Afghanistan:** A second earthquake hits the region, worse than the first in January. 4,000 people are feared dead. MERLIN leads the international relief effort in Badakhshan. The team's work is reported in national and international TV and newspaper coverage.

RESPONSE is published quarterly by MERLIN, a British medical charity which provides emergency medical care in disasters worldwide.  
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 Telephone 0171 487 2505, fax 0171 487 4042, email [hq@merlin.org.uk](mailto:hq@merlin.org.uk)  
 Registered charity number 1016607



(Picture Sarah Hall)

## Jackpot!

£433,000 of national lottery money has been awarded to MERLIN to train doctors, nurses and other volunteers for overseas aid missions. Based on MERLIN's expertise in running public health programmes in disaster zones worldwide, these training courses will be open to anyone wishing to work overseas.

Chief Executive Alastair Troup said: "The effect of this grant will be wide-reaching. MERLIN will open the training courses to all UK aid workers, as our contribution to increasing the quality and professionalism of Britain's overseas aid."

"This grant will help save lives directly. The more training we can give our volunteers in advance, the more lives they can save when disaster strikes."

"Our field staff are ordinary British people in extraordinary places – earthquakes, floods or wars. The lottery grant means that we can provide specialised training for the conditions they will find, whether in Afghanistan or Albania."

The grant from the National Lottery Charities Board is spread over 3 years. It will fund courses on public health in emergencies, management of emergency medical projects, and project support in emergencies.

The courses received funding for this year from Glaxo Wellcome plc and the Government's Department for International Development. The lottery funding enables them to carry on into future years.

Comments on this year's courses indicate their value. One participant, a midwife, said: "This course has proved essential for me. I can't believe I would have thought of going overseas without it." Another, a nurse, concluded: "The course was everything I wish I'd been taught before I went on my first mission."

Pictured here are Lucy Markby (left), Anna Cressey and Glyn Taylor during the recent course on Management in Relief and Emergencies.

Courses run throughout the year and details can be obtained from the Training Unit, MERLIN, 14 David Mews, Porter Street, London W1M 1HW (tel 0171 487 2505). There is a course fee which is substantially refunded for participants who go on to volunteer with MERLIN overseas.

### Lonely Planet discount offer

Lonely Planet will give a £1 discount to readers and a £1 donation to MERLIN for each travel book bought through Response. See this issue's special flier.

### Agencies join hands to appeal for Sudan

In May the leading British aid agencies launched a joint appeal for southern Sudan. MERLIN was among the 15 members of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) who together raised £5.5m for relief there.

## Thank you

MERLIN would like to thank the following major donors:

- Ashden Trust
- AXA Provincial
- Beatrice Laing Charitable Trust
- PG and NJ Boulton Trust
- Bower Trust
- Brownless Trust
- Cameron Ross
- Dresdner Kleinwort Benson
- Endline Machinery Ltd
- Garnett Charitable Trust
- JAR Charitable Trust
- Jerwood Foundation
- Key Travel
- Lonely Planet
- Loseley and Guildway Charitable Trust
- EM MacAndrew Trust
- ED&F Man Charitable Trust
- Mark Gilbey Charitable Trust
- Peter Moores Foundation
- Reuter Foundation

## Where in the world...?

Volunteers in the field (as at 20.5.98)

<b>Afghanistan</b> Jim Campbell Katie Cuming Panna Erasmus Maria Kirwan Valerie Powell Teresa McCreery Philip Upson Kathleen Skinner Glyn Taylor Caroline Ward Matthew Youngs	Alastair Shields Edith Milham
<b>Albania</b> Vince Diamond Catherine Eldridge Teresa Keefe Peter Spink	<b>Tajikistan</b> Teresa Van den Acker Barbara Percy Jamie Richardson Rob Stevens Simon Taylor
<b>DR Congo</b> Francois Briant Rebecca Brown Jonathan Campbell John Cobley Francois Declerck Christiane Steinert Olivier Wszolek	<b>JUST BACK</b> <b>Afghanistan</b> Drew Gilmour Dale Lightening David Newall Catherine Plumridge Adrian Porter Susan Sandford Glyn Taylor
<b>Irian Jaya</b> Jean Bernard Bouvier	<b>Chechnya</b> Rob Bennett Tim Chiswell Christophe Petit Gail Taylor
<b>Kenya</b> Annette Alcock Kamar Goddard Niall O'Keefe Sarah Smith	<b>Congo-Brazzaville</b> Ailsa Denney Carole Jegrou Marie McGrath Peter Sinclair
<b>Liberia</b> Simon Arthy Katie Attfield Shaun Bickley Marianne Boillat Joe Bourne Sue Cutter Jenny Gielen Jenny Hopps Mary Houldsworth Joseph Inganji Rachel Lavy Pete Medway Stewart Shepherd	<b>DR Congo</b> Linda Cook Jane Drapkin Paul Driscoll Marianne Parry Valerie Plaid
<b>Siberia</b> Jerry Cooper	<b>Kenya</b> Rendt Gorter Ronald Quist Jos Wisse
<b>Sierra Leone</b> Peter Crawford Andy Featherstone Brian Ingle Nzenge Mutota	<b>Liberia</b> Sophie Bruas Anna Cressey Stephanie Daniels Jenny Hopps Wendy Melville Derrick Tate
<b>Sudan</b> Sara Nam Uzo Okoli	<b>Moscow</b> Megan Thomas
	<b>Siberia</b> Gini Gleissburg Paul Kitchener
	<b>Sierra Leone</b> Richard Corbett
	<b>Tajikistan</b> Justin Tait

To volunteer call 0171 487 2505

## This is where YOU can help

Day in and day out, our field teams are grasping new challenges, taking risks (albeit calculated ones) and investing in the future. I need to know that we can provide their support, and that's where you come in.

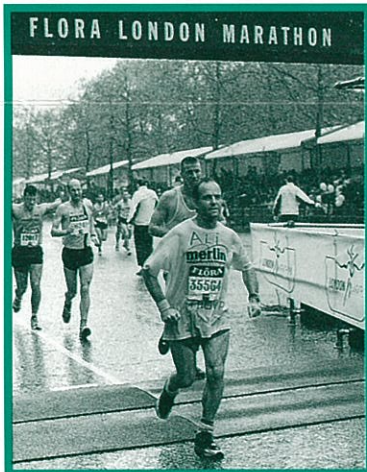
And you don't have to go to the field to do it. I am seeking friends of MERLIN who would be prepared to act as focal points for fund-raising events. The event may be a sponsored activity like a school run, a ball, an individual sporting target, whipping up university rag/charity sponsorship, a local bring-and-buy sale, a 'jail-break' or whatever. In fact it is only limited by your imagination (and the law!).

The key to this is your assistance in generating the enthusiasm and organising the event (or persuading someone else to). We will give you the technical back-up, along with MERLIN t-shirts, but we need friends in far places to do the hard work for us.

As a taste, last year we held a MERLIN Ball, played the City Foreign Exchange game, and watched the army run for 24 hours for MERLIN. This year Hugh Crossley slogged through the Marathon des Sables, an arduous 150-mile run across Saharan sand dunes in over 40 degrees of heat. And even I ran the London Marathon (see picture), along with Luke Aherne, Sam Allpass, Jonathan Duplock, Paul Gazzard, Dennis Hannant and Bruce Laurence; while Ross Cattell ran the Paris Marathon for us.

Meanwhile, two other MERLIN supporters, Paul Handley and Jonathan Lees, are currently mountain-biking along the historic Silk Route to China. Paul and Jonathan organised the expedition themselves, arranging sponsorship to fund their 3-month trip across Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Please can you help us raise money this year for our 5th Birthday Appeal. Every penny WILL make a significant difference to our field teams and those we are trying to assist. Good luck!



### Your chance to...

#### Jump from a plane

We're planning a sponsored parachute jump and we need more names. If taking a flying leap has ever appealed, now's your chance.

#### Run a marathon

Next year, we will have 25 places in the London Marathon. We would like to hear from anyone who might be able to raise at least £1,000 in sponsorship – oh, and run 26 miles.

#### Trade in the City

On 20th July teams of foreign exchange traders – including Bank of America and Barclays Bank – will spend a boisterous evening playing a simulated game of competitive trading. If you work for an organisation with a foreign exchange trading department – or know someone who does – call us.

Call our fundraising team on 0171 487 2505

*Alastair Troup*

Alastair Troup, Chief Executive

## Please support the MERLIN Fifth Birthday Appeal

I would like to take part in the MERLIN 5 Appeal –

Please send me information on how to join the 5 Appeal

I would like to help the 5 Appeal by enclosing a donation for –

£20  £50  £100  £250\*  Other £ \_\_\_\_\_

\* If you are a UK taxpayer, and you give a donation of £250 or more, it is worth a third as much again to us when you fill out a Gift Aid form. We would be delighted to send you one.

I would like to make my donation go further –

- Please send me information about making tax-efficient donations
- Please send me information about making a covenant or standing order pledge to MERLIN
- Please send me information about making a legacy pledge to MERLIN

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Job Title \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation \_\_\_\_\_

Please make cheques payable to 'MERLIN'. For credit card donations, please call 0171 487 2505. Please return this coupon to: MERLIN, 14 David Mews, Porter Street, London W1M 1HW. Reg. charity 1016607.