

Returning to the Land Mines

Why a modern-day Indiana Jones and former soldier is venturing into a war-torn region for what could be his riskiest expedition yet

This is a world of contrast, where barefoot children meet roaring military trucks, and tangled jungles meet satellites. It's a world where East meets West, and despair meets hope. It's where extreme courage and unbridled faith meet the satisfaction of knowing you've changed nations.

This is Overland Missions, a force in motion, bringing the gospel and humanitarian aid to some of the most geographically challenging places in the world. Established in 1999 by Phil and Sharon Smethurst, Overland is all about new frontiers. Combining trailblazing equipment and cutting-edge technology with backpacks and dugout canoes, they've already cleared a path into unreached villages in more than 40 countries, and their next mission is a risky venture to fulfill a longtime dream. More than 20 years after he fought as a soldier in Angola's civil war, Smethurst is returning to a country still loaded with land mines to bring the gospel of peace.

Pioneering missions in remote environments requires technical extremes, says Smethurst, who's been called a modern-day David Livingstone after the 19th-century Scottish missionary and explorer in Africa. With the motto, "Any road, any load, any time," Overland's bring-it-on mentality has a strong appeal to adventurous Christians.

"We play with all the big toys," Smethurst says. One of Overland's signatures is the use of highly equipped 4x4 trucks that help teams reach villages otherwise inaccessible due to harsh terrain, lack of infrastructure and even wild animals. The ministry has a fleet of nine 10-ton, ex-military trucks purchased from Holland and Germany, refitted in its workshops in Africa. The vehicles are equipped with satellite telephones

and satellite-based R-BGAN Internet for accessing Google Earth and other essential services.

Up to 22 people can ride in the all-wheel-drive vehicles, modeled after overland touring trucks but stripped of luxury elements for maximum mobility. Some can carry enough fuel, food, drinking water and camping equipment for long-term expeditions lasting up to eight weeks, according to Smethurst.

Imagine driving along a muddy riverbank in Africa when your truck breaks down. You can't call AAA to come and tow you to a nearby service station, so Overland's trucks are designed to be basic enough for their trained driver/mechanic to repair them on location when necessary.

Although military-style transportation is how it rolls, Overland doesn't classify itself as an "extreme missions" organization. "The ultimate goal is to get the message to the indigenous," Smethurst says. "If it comes on a donkey, I don't care. If it's a truck, I don't care."

Smethurst is also a pioneer in the cyber world. He created , a new Internet application that invites real-time posts similar to Facebook and Twitter but is organized around geographical locations rather than personal profiles. Creating threads called "Adventures," users can journal events or trips to specific locations, allowing others to track the activity and interact online.

Martine Lopez, Overland director of operations and co-developer of , says the latest version, launched this year, is open to anyone's use, though the app was created specifically to help advance the gospel.

"I feel it's going to be revolutionary in world missions," says Rodney Howard-Browne, international evangelist and pastor of The River at Tampa Bay in Tampa, Fla. Howard-Browne and Smethurst, both born in South Africa, frequently work and travel together in ministry.

Howard-Browne says missionaries often feel disconnected and forgotten while they're on the field, even though most of them have financial supporters. When needs come up on the mission field, friends using can respond immediately with prayer, finances and moral support.

"Every missionary needs to know there are people who love them," he says.

For churches and missionaries, is a Web-based meeting ground where Christians can follow one another's current and archived outreaches. It also provides greater accountability and communication with families and donors, and the ability to post updates and photos will be enhanced when the iPhone app (currently being tested) is released, Lopez says. Using means: "My life is unfolding in real time, and you can be part of it," he says.

Coming Full Circle

Smethurst hopes Christians worldwide will use to follow his next adventure. In August, he and his wife, Sharon, and their two children, ages 9 and 6, will spend a month scouting areas of southeast Angola to pave the way for a long-term work there. Sharon, the daughter of missionaries, grew up in Brazil and has also traveled extensively. She is an experienced worship leader and the vice president of Overland Missions.

"This is a major expedition in very remote Africa ... and will break open a whole new mission field for Overland Missions," Phil says.

Although a profound effort in itself, this long-awaited operation has a uniquely significant meaning for Smethurst. He gave his life to Christ at age 14 when he was a competitive surfer in South Africa, but it was his experience as a young soldier that opened his eyes to mission opportunities throughout the country. In 1987, when he was 18, Smethurst was drafted into the South African Army to fight in Angola's long-

standing civil war, and his upcoming expedition will be his first time returning to Angola for ministry.

The 27-year conflict began in 1975 following Angola's decolonization from Portugal. South Africa, which bordered Angola at the time, was covertly assisting troops against Russian/Cuban-backed forces. Smethurst served on the front lines at Cuito Cuanavale, the site of Africa's largest land battle since World War II.

"We were largely outnumbered and fought for months in foxholes," says Smethurst, adding that many soldiers were wounded or died in the trenches. "I would spend those days ministering and preaching to them."

After his term Smethurst traveled around Africa, preaching wherever he was welcome. Over the next six years he went to more than 40 countries as an international instructor for expeditions with Camel Trophy, an annual worldwide competition of Land Rover vehicles. The team-focused contests helped define his assignment to world missions.

"It taught me that to reach people, it cannot just be a concept from a mountaintop experience," he says. "You actually have to go out and do it."

During the war, which ended in 2002, an unknown number of land mines were planted in the oil-rich country. Estimates have ranged widely from 500,000 to 6 million, and despite successful demining efforts over the last decade, hundreds of active mine fields remain, endangering the population and travelers. "This has largely hindered the gospel going into that region," Smethurst says.

Two of Overland's most experienced missionaries—David Killough, director of recruiting, and Dan Hoyme, training director—went on a short-term expedition to Angola in 2007.

“The country was in such a state of decay from 40 or 50 years of war,” Killough says. Between the ravages of war, the rainy seasons and residual land mines, the road conditions were onerous. Killough observed that the potholes were “big enough to swallow a truck.” Land mines known to be deactivated are marked, however.

Despite what he describes as an extremely difficult and dangerous trip, Killough plans to return to Angola in August with his wife, Fiona, to accompany the Smethursts on their monthlong scouting expedition.

“I do really well in a challenging situation when the odds are against me,” Killough says. “I see it as a desperate need. The Word says God wants none to perish. In my mind I saw a vision of what could be: the gospel being the key to restoring the nation, and not letting the circumstances dictate the vision.”

Although Howard-Browne has not been to Angola, he’s traveled extensively in Africa, including remote areas that lack basic facilities and infrastructure. “You’re dealing with wild animals, [unreached] villages. ... You don’t know what you’re going to face,” he says. “It’s like going back 50 or 100 years.”

Preparing the Way

It may sound like Indiana Jones-style evangelism, but there’s more to this Overland Missions than adventure. Without proper training and support, well-meaning Christians aren’t prepared for the hardships of foreign missions, Smethurst says. With 70 long-term missionaries on the field, the Pentecostal, team-oriented ministry welcomes any believer who has a love for God and the church—but a lack of discipline isn’t tolerated.

“You cannot be dysfunctional in the Third World,” Smethurst explains.

Long-term applicants must complete an intensive three-month

Advanced Mission Training (AMT) program that takes place in Zambia, near Victoria Falls, where Overland is headquartered. "It's not pseudo," Smethurst stresses. "It's a real environment, real people, real needs, real technology and engineering we have to use. After three months [of AMT], the fantasy is gone and you'll know if you can handle it or not."

In 2014, the Killoughs are planning to relocate to Angola, along with Hoyme and his wife, Rachel, who are expecting their first baby. They will serve as the forerunner team in southern Angola where there are four known unreached tribes.

They'll determine which areas have been safely demined, establish relationships and begin networking with pastors in outlying cities who speak the local dialects. Rachel currently is studying to be a physician's assistant, and eventually the team will partner with a missionary hospital in Lubango.

Although visitors to Angola need an official invitation to travel there, the general African response to outsiders is welcoming, Hoyme says. "If there's resistance, it's probably more to the gospel and how that could change their lifestyle in some way," he adds. "There may be churches in the area, but the truth of the gospel is mixed in with tribal traditions."

Overland's strategy is not to Westernize the world but to establish thriving communities of Christians led by indigenous pastors. To do that, Overland builds relationships for several years, training and discipling leaders within 100-square-kilometer regions they call "sectors."

The next stage is the development of locally led humanitarian aid such as health care, education, well drilling and microenterprise. Finally, a Rural Pastors' Network is established to help local leaders take on the work long term. "You have to be careful not to create a dependency on humanitarian aid," says Hoyme, who has a degree in civil engineering.

Marrying the preaching of the gospel with acts of service requires a delicate balance. Ministries worldwide differ on how to approach what's known as the "social gospel," or the "rice gospel."

"What you get [people] with is what you keep them with," Killough says. "We believe 100 percent of the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Everything else rides on the coattails of people's lives being transformed."

Howard-Browne emphatically agrees. "The Great Commission was, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel,'" he says. "That must be the focus of missions; otherwise they are all humanitarian efforts."

Having traveled extensively together, Howard-Browne and Smethurst have a full-gospel approach to missions—to see people "saved, healed and set free," Howard-Browne says.

The Human Touch

With infrastructure, training operations and aid programs in place, Overland is ready to expand its long-term missions. Believing the church should leave no stone unturned when utilizing modern technology, the ministry invites supporters to use apps such as to link up with workers on the field and become fully engaged extensions of Overland teams. "Ultimately, on the mission field, it's all about your family and your team and what you accomplish together," Smethurst says.

Yet he is adamant that technology should never replace face-to-face discipleship. "We cannot infuse the culture of the kingdom of God by email or books," Smethurst says. "The Bible says we are God's epistle. Sooner or later, someone must arrive in flesh and blood to impart culture."

Overland Missions is positioned for challenges, but Smethurst says the ministry's greatest obstacles are funding and human

resources. What was true in Jesus' day is still true today: "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (Matt. 9:37, NIV). With a vision to reach every person in each of its sectors, Overland is recruiting career missionaries.

"The call to the nations means traveling outside your comfort zone where your voice has an accent," Smethurst says in his distinct South African English dialect. "Christians need to know there is a call and a ministry that will recruit them."

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To digitally follow Smethurst to a remote African village [click here](#).