

8 VULTURES' PICNIC

Answer: It's Monrovia. The capital of Liberia is named after the U.S. President James Monroe, who helped former American slaves give birth to the longest-lived democracy in Africa, founded in 1847. Its democracy dropped dead when, in 1980, a Corporal Sam Doe marched every member of the elected president's cabinet out to the nearby beach, tied them to poles and shot them, TV cameras rolling. Ronald Reagan was elated and helped the killer dictator Sam Doe turn Liberia into a Cold War killing zone. One in ten Liberians would die.

Richard and I arrived in Liberia without two clues to rub together. But Ricardo had one. He had just learned some Arabic the hard way: As an involuntary guest of some bad guys in Basra, Iraq. He said, "You know, *Hamsah* in Arabic means 'Five.'"

Ah.

More significantly, a Hamsah looks like this:



The symbol is Lebanese. Of course.

MOTOWN

By the age of fifteen, Rick Rowley was doomed. Born in the middle of Nowhere, Michigan, a wasteland of rust and snow so awful we let autoworkers have it. As a kid, Rick would put his head down on the railroad track and wait for the rare vibration of a train on the move far away. He was fifteen years old on the day he got up and followed the hum down the track. He walked for over two hundred miles, surviving on peanut butter and Wonder Bread all the way to Motor City: Detroit.

Rick wasn't running away; his parents were OK. He was running to something; who knows what the hell it was.

Rick never made it back to Nowhere.

He listened. He looked. And he found that other people's stories were more important than his own.

Along the way, he picked up a small camera that listened and looked with him. He found more stories in Argentina inside the IMF riots, then six months in the Yucatan jungle, learning Spanish with the Zapatista guerillas, who named him Ricardo, then somewhere along the way a stretch at Princeton University, then several stints in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in Lebanon, with Hezbollah.

He held the little thing, that digital camera, weirdly, cradled like an infant. The first time he filmed for BBC News, at my insistence, Jones said, "What's that? Some kind of toy camera?" No, it's my gun.

Ricardo doesn't like to talk about himself. It took three deadly potent drinks at a bar in West Africa to find out about the railroad track, Hezbollah, Princeton.

He's off now, un-embedded.

Ignoring Jones's advice, he made it back to Iraq to catch warlord Abu Musa's last arrogant words before Abu was blown into small wet pieces. Rick's a lucky guy. So far.

TATITLEK VILLAGE, Blich Island, ALASKA

Chief Gary Kompkoff stood on the beach, watching the Very Large Crude Carrier VLCC *Exxon Valdez* bearing down on Blich Reef. Kompkoff was wondering, *What the hell?*

It was near midnight, starlit and clear. As the ship's shadow loomed, the whole village joined him on the beach, wondering, *What the hell?*

Kompkoff told me he thought it was some kind of dumb-ass drill. Even a drunk couldn't miss the turning halogen warning beam lighting up their faces every nine seconds.

It wasn't a drill.

Now, don't get the idea that these were just a bunch of dumb Indians stunned by the appearance of the white man's supertanker. They didn't have televisions, but they did have training in oil spill containment.

Containing an oil spill on water isn't rocket science. Whether it's a busted tanker or a blown well, you do two things: First you put a rubber skirt around it. The skirt is called a "boom". Then you bring in a skimmer barge with a big sucker hose hanging off it and suck up the oil within the rubber corral; or you