The DC-3, with its single passenger banks steeply over groves of green oil palms and prepares for a landing at the Sassandra airport. A glimpse of the airfield through a porthole of the landing plane reveals a red, earthen runway, bordered on either side by irregular rows of towering, red termite mounds. This distant view of fifty or more termite castles is my introduction to Macrotermes natalensis, one of several species of the soil-dwelling Termitidae. These pale-colored, soft-bodied social insects are very common to the Ivory Coast and among the most populous residents of the Southwest Region. From this moment until my departure from Africa two years hence, few activities in my domestic or professional life ever again will be entirely free from their ubiquitous influence.

Viewed from the descending plane, the rust-colored "white ant" mounds stand out in sharp contrast to the soft green backdrop of closely-spaced oil palms. Luxuriant jungles, partially obscured by a grayish haze, encroach upon the airfield and plantation from all sides.

The ancient plane floats lazily downward toward the runway apron, then glides in for a bumpy landing.

I step out into the humid heat of midmorning and am met by a representative of the Development and Resources Corporation, the organization responsible for the soil survey of the Southwest Region. Following a brief exchange of greetings, the D.R.C. official and I begin the 8-kilometer drive to our living quarters in the port village of Sassandra.