

Untold Story | A blackout on operations by South African soldiers fighting rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo has left historic battles shrouded in mystery. Now writer Stephan Hofstatter and photographer James Oatway, who reported on two of the battles from the Congo, have been granted exclusive access to the men who fought in democratic South Africa's most successful military operation. This is their story

A routine drill that turned into war

ON Wednesday August 28 2013, two old Soviet T55 tanks that were parked outside the South African base at Munigi hill overlooking Goma roared into life and trundled up the road into enemy-occupied territory. The South Africans thought nothing of it. For weeks, Congolese soldiers had fired up their T55s to run their engines and reconnoitre rebel movements. That morning, a routine drill turned into war.

At 6.15am, the tanks opened fire on M23 positions dug into Triple Towers hill 5km from the base, in an area known as Kibati Heights. Within minutes, a force of 1 500 well-trained rebels, armed with mortars, 12-barrel anti-aircraft rocket launchers called Katyushas, a Russian SPG-9 anti-tank weapon mounted on a pick-up truck and assault rifles, returned fire. They overshot the tanks, raining shells on the camp. One landed on the outskirts of Goma, injuring several civilians.

"It caught us totally by surprise. Those guys are not very accurate with their weapons," said Captain David Williams, commander of Alpha Company.

A 14.5mm round whizzed through the kitchen while the chef was preparing breakfast. Henceforth, he cooked in battle gear, including helmet. By the end of that morning's shelling, six South Africans were being treated for shrapnel wounds, some returning to the front within hours.

The 850-strong South African contingent of the new Force In-



CLARION CALL: A Congolese soldier blows a South African vuvuzela to summon his comrades for a church service close to the frontline during the Battle of Kibati near Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Picture: JAMES OATWAY

at Moja Mutaho to the west.

The South African combat troops in the DRC were trained in jungle warfare by Colonel William Dixon, who had just returned from battling 7 000 Seleka rebels with 200 paratroopers and special forces operatives in the Central African Republic.

On August 23, soon after M23 shelled Munigi base, the UN war machine sprang into action to support a Congolese army attack. The Battle of Kibati would last almost three days.

Lieutenant Bubele Zote had a bird's-eye view of the fight while providing co-ordinates for mortar and artillery fire. Attack helicopters pounding M23 positions were initially ineffective because the rebels had dug themselves in too deeply.

"Every night convoys would be seen removing the M23 dead from the battlefield," said Zote.

Next came the ground assault. This was extreme combat terrain. The Route Nationale 2 runs north from Goma parallel to the Rwandan border through

a jumble of rolling hills, steep, densely wooded cones separated by grassy plains and rugged fields of razor-sharp rock spewed out by the majestic Nyiragongo volcano. Opportunities for ambushes, sniper hideouts, concealed machine-gun and mortar nests, command posts and high-lying trenches for small-arms firing positions were legion.

By noon, the Battle of Kibati was over, leaving about 500 rebels dead

Fuller's Task Group Alpha made several advances in the next two days, sending snipers and Congolese special forces to within 1km of M23 positions to take out strategic targets, including the anti-tank weapon.

Mamadou confirmed that a South African sniper had a major impact on the battle by killing six M23 officers in one day, including a spectacular shot

at a distance of 2.125km. This is the sixth-longest confirmed sniper kill in the world. Gysman described the sniper, who did not want to be identified, as "a very proficient shot".

On Thursday, Fuller had a brush with death. He was directing mortar fire at Triple Towers 2.5km from the south with the Congolese army closing in from the west. "Then the M23 picked up my position."

Shells started raining on the roofs of his Mambas. He ordered his men inside the vehicles while machine gunners on their return fire.

He shouted to Tanzanian Major Khatib Mshindo that they should withdraw.

Seconds later, a shell landed between Mshindo's legs. Fuller yelled for a medic and was mid-sentence when another shell landed between his legs. Luckily, the soft ground absorbed most of the blast, although the vehicles to his left and right were peppered with shrapnel.

"It was just not my time," he said. Mshindo was not so lucky. He was evacuated to the base and died of his wounds.

Riflemen Asanda Bisha operated a Mamba machine gun during the fight. "It was scary when the bombs started falling," he said.

He continued to return fire and scan the horizon to select targets with his binoculars. "You get scared of being shot and you have to shoot back. But there are others in the vehicle you have to protect."

The final push began on Friday morning with the Ukrainian helicopters "striking like hell and making a success of it this time", in Gysman's words.

Simultaneous pounding by Tanzanian artillery and South African mortars continued, destroying M23 rations and weapons caches. When "the target was soft", Fuller and Mshindo were sent to storm the hill.

By noon, the Battle of Kibati was over, leaving about 500 M23 rebels dead, bringing to an end democratic South Africa's most successful military operation.

Captain risked his life for a stranger

CAPTAIN Reagan Campher was riding in the lead vehicle of a convoy of three Mambas in hot pursuit of a detachment of M23 rebels when the ambush was sprung.

"That morning, the South African and Tanzanian soldiers of the UN's Force Intervention Brigade had been put on high alert after receiving reports that a group of 20 to 30 rebels had slipped past their perimeter patrols and were heading towards their base at Kiwanja, about 80km north of Goma.

Campher was a machine gun platoon commander deployed with the technical headquarters of the Mamba.

As early October, South African and Tanzanian troops were secretly flown over the frontline in Oryx helicopters and Ukrainian Mi-26 helicopters big enough to transport two Mambas. They were dropped at the UN base at Kiwanja, a stone's throw from the M23's administrative headquarters at Rutshuru.

The troops spent two weeks deploying in strategic positions to block rebel escape routes as the Congolese army closed in on Rutshuru from the north, south and east, forcing the M23 to split its forces along three fronts. Because the area was heavily populated, the peacekeepers were prohibited from using artillery and mortars. They claim as a result that no civilians were killed during their operations.

On October 27, rebel units trapped west of the UN cordon were trying to join their comrades retreating towards Bunagana on the Ugandan border. Campher found himself pursuing one of those M23 units. Some of the rebels took off their uniforms and fled into Kiwanja and melted into the civilian population. Others surrendered. But a small group continued east up Governor Hill on the road to Rutshuru.

The peacekeepers drove three Mambas in staggered formation 50m apart, each transporting 10 soldiers and a machine gunner perched on

the roof. They chose a small house as their next checkpoint.

"When we got there, a rebel came out of the house spraying bullets at us with an AK47. We engaged on the left but came under fire from the right too, so I ordered my men to move back 200m," said Campher.

As his Mamba raced back down the road, he saw a Tanzanian soldier behind a bougainvillea. "As soon as I jumped out I came under fire. My members gave covering fire as I ran," he said. "He was lying on his face, but I found a weak pulse. I called for a medic, but he couldn't reach us because of the volume of fire, so I dragged him back to the Mamba myself."

Rajah Ahmed Mlima, a Tanzanian special forces lieutenant, died on his way to hospital. Campher cannot explain why he had risked his life in a bid to save Mlima's.

"The good training kicked in," he said.

In such moments, time slows down. He recalls thinking about his family, "about being home", as bullets whistled past his head. He can still see the beautiful canopy of purple flowers shading Mlima in his dying moments.

Within a week, the Congolese and UN intervention brigade forces had driven the M23 rebels from Rutshuru to their last strongholds, the hills of Tshanzu and Runyoni near Bunagana on the Ugandan border. On November 3, the rebels shelled Bunagana from Tshanzu, killing six civilians.

The next day, the UN deployed Rooivalk helicopters. Three Rooivalks had arrived in Goma a week earlier. At 5pm on November 4, two Rooivalks fired dozens of rockets at M23 bunkers on Tshanzu and Runyoni, destroying an anti-aircraft gun.

"It was the first ever deployment of the Rooivalks and it was highly successful," said Lieutenant-Colonel Altin Gysman, officer commanding the 6 SA Infantry Battalion.

"We achieved final destruction of M23 by Rooivalk."



Lieutenant-Colonel Altin Gysman



Captain Carl Fuller



Captain David Williams



Riflemen Asanda Bisha



Captain Reagan Campher



Lieutenant Bubele Zote

They kept their cool as all hell broke loose in jungle battle

THEY came out of nowhere, charging down the hill firing wildly, high on banana spirits and wearing war charms they were utterly convinced could turn bullets into water. It was 4am. A heavy mist had descended on the camp, leaving it in pitch darkness. They came in waves from the south, east and north, firing from 300m, then 80m, then 2m, yelling in Swahili that they wanted food and weapons. Four machine guns perched on a hill 200m away kept up a steady stream of fire.

On General Janvier Karayiri's Patriotic Alliance for a Free and Sovereign Congo were intent on overrunning the UN base at Nyiabiondo, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a small town in the mountainous jungles that rise beyond the fertile plains of Masisi, 70km west of the provincial capital, Goma.

And the soldiers of 6 SA Infantry Battalion — whose home base is Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape — were determined to stop them.

Captain David Williams was in charge of Alpha Company — 145 men equipped with Mamba

armoured personnel carriers, R4 rifles, machine guns, mortars and grenade launchers. They formed part of the UN's Force Intervention Brigade supporting a force of 200 DRC soldiers camped nearby. Their job was to disarm the Mai Mai rebels operating in these mountains and kill those who resisted.

Williams had received intelligence the night before that an attack was planned. His troops were battle-ready and he was not too concerned.

"Until then, we believed that wherever the FIB is the Mai Mai will run away," said Williams.

The rebels had fled from engagements in early April, when Karayiri's men had occupied strategic heights west and north of Nyiabiondo.

At that time, the Force Intervention Brigade had sent 35 vehicles to the area from its base 70km away at Sake, near Goma. It had been a 10-hour drive on atrocious roads — and the South Africans had then walked for another eight hours into the mountains, a company

of Congolese soldiers carrying their heavy weapons and ammunition. Three Rooivalk attack helicopters were on stand-by at Goma airport, a mere 10-minute flight away.

Each time the South Africans advanced and launched a mortar attack, the rebels — armed with machine guns, assault ri-

ves, mortars and 12-barrel anti-aircraft rocket launchers — retreated to the northwest until they reached Mount Sinai. Then the Rooivalks were called in.

"Each of them made six turns. The rebels — those who were still alive — withdrew," said Williams.

But Karayiri's attack on April 30 disproved the theory that the Mai Mai would run at the first whiff of cordite.

Williams made frantic calls for an Oryx helicopter to evacuate the wounded. For one excruciating hour the men waited in suspense.

Williams was clearly trying to bulls**t us," said Fuller.

During this period, South African troops were engaged in

"All hell broke loose that morning," said Williams. "Bullets were flying through our tents and sleeping bags."

The attackers were wearing Congolese army uniforms, making it almost impossible to tell friend from foe.

"It took great discipline for the men to fire only when ordered to do so," said Williams.

He deployed his men and machine guns on the left and right perimeter, ordering them to fire simultaneously when he launched a second flare.

By the end of the three-hour battle, nine Congolese soldiers had been killed, several were injured, dozens of Mai Mai of a force of 100 were dead and three South Africans were wounded. One of them, Rifleman Sthabiso Mzibuko, was seriously hurt, but he has made an almost full recovery.

Karyiri claimed to be defending the local people against "foreign invaders and their allies".

These "allies" included the

M23 rebels, who the UN said were trained, sponsored, equipped and sometimes led by Rwandans, and notorious Rwandan-aligned local militiaman Ntalo Ntalo Sheka. He is accused of ordering mass rapes and beheadings.

Most observers believe that both the Patriotic Alliance and

skirmishes with Mai Mai groups around Kitchanga, west of Rutshuru, the former M23 administrative headquarters. Late in November, 6 SA Infantry's Alpha and Bravo companies were airlifted to Pinga, where locals were being raped and murdered.

"I deployed my platoons and recce to protect the local population," said Bravo Company commander Captain Carl Fuller.

"We made it clear to Sheka that we were not going to tolerate these murders and rapes and clashes with other groupings."

The day the FIB force landed in Pinga, Sheka "gave a clear indication" that he wanted to surrender, said Fuller.

Within days, he held a "farewell parade" for the UN commanders, surrendering one platoon that included children, a mortar, a rusted mortar shell that "I think came from World War 1", 15 rounds of ammunition and one pistol.

"He was clearly trying to bulls**t us," said Fuller.

That night, Sheka and his men vanished into the mountains.

"He didn't arrive for an appointment the next day. We tried to locate him, but the locals refused to give us any information. We went on vehicle patrols and aerial reconnaissance, but Sheka was nowhere to be seen. He was a ghost."

The South Africans were withdrawn to Goma in January, but Sheka, who commands about 3 000 men, attacked Pinga again within a week, prompting the UN to redeploy them.

"When the Force Intervention Brigade is not there, the rebels take over," said Fuller.

Nyabiondo was the last battle fought by 6 SA Infantry Battalion before it returned to Grahamstown on May 28.

It was replaced by 5 SA Infantry Battalion, based in Ladysmith. The relieving force is supporting Congolese troops in driving the remaining Mai Mai rebels into a cordon in the mountains north of Masisi and preparing for a final ground and air assault.

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