

OPINION | The Battle of Bangui: Too many unanswered questions

news24 Stephan Hofstatter, Warren Thompson and James Oatway

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The dog tags of Corporal Ntebaleng Andrew Mogorosi. (Picture: James Oatway)

*Eight years after the Battle of Bangui, the SANDF has done two inquiries, but is yet to release the findings. But it is also clear that the SANDF deployment to the Central African Republic was unlawful from the start, write **Stephan Hofstatter, Warren Thompson, and James Oatway.***

In March 2013 a small contingent of 200 elite South African National Defence Force (SANDF) members confronted a rebel army several thousand strong bearing down on Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic.

When the fighting was over, 13 South Africans and about 600 rebels, maybe more, lay dead. Another two SANDF members later succumbed to their wounds.

Among the battle's many unsung heroes is Rifleman Motsamai William Bojane.

In our newly released book, *The Battle of Bangui: The inside story of South Africa's worst military scandal since apartheid*, we relate Bojane's remarkable story, pieced together from interviews with his widow, Kele, and fellow paratroopers.

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Known to his friends as Mr Fearless, Bojane was among 120 paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion's Charlie Company manning a stop line just outside Bangui. His picture is among more than 70 mostly formerly unpublished photographs in the book.



Rifleman Motsamal Bojane, who was known as 'Mr Fearless' to his friends. (Picture: Supplied.)

When it became impossible to hold back the overwhelming force of advancing rebels any longer, they were ordered to withdraw under fire from two hills straddling the road. The paratroopers covered for one another as best they could. No one lost their nerve.

It was just getting dark when the paratroopers piled onto a convoy of open vehicles that set off for Bangui.

In a testament to their remarkable bravery and discipline under fire, none of the men of Charlie Company was killed or wounded during the withdrawal.

Minutes later the convoy slammed straight into an ambush.

Everyone leapt from their vehicles and scrambled for cover as best they could while returning fire.

Most of the shooting was coming from their right, where some of the ambushers armed with AK-47s had taken cover behind a wall. Others began to spill from houses, firing on the paratroopers. Some of the men became locked in deadly hand-to-hand combat – 'eyeball to eyeball', as one put it.

One paratrooper was killed by an enemy bayonet. Another bludgeoned his adversary to death by pounding his skull with his rifle butt.

Lance Corporal Shane Smith was forced to plunge his seven-inch Ka-Bar US Marine Corps combat knife into a rebel's chest.

Fighting retreat

With the rebels beginning to surround their position, permission was granted to abandon the vehicles. It was time for a fighting retreat. Providing covering fire for each other, they crawled or bounced from shelter to shelter.

Some of the wounded volunteered to hold the line.



Some of the Seleka fighters were battle-hardened veterans of wars fought in Darfur and Chad. This soldier armed with an RPG was part of a unit stationed near Damara. (Picture: James Oatway)

Bojane was among them. He was seen grabbing a rocket propelled grenade launcher to provide covering fire for one of the retreating groups. He dropped to his knee and raised his weapon to his shoulder. But before he could fire he was hit in the shoulder and fell.

Rather than flee with the others, Bojane insisted on staying where he was to fight to the death. He batted away the hands of the paratroopers who tried to carry him to safety. "Guys, carry on! I'm gonna die with them," he declared, and began firing off the RPG as his comrades got away. He never made it home.

Given how courageously many South African soldiers fought, it's rather curious that the SANDF has not done more to publicise and celebrate their acts of valour, leaving the broader public with little inkling of the heroic sacrifices men like Bojane made.



Members of the Brigade Rouge unit of the Seleka rebel group, whose commander General Hassan Achmat (centre) engaged the SANDF in the Boall road. (Picture: James Oatway)

The reason for this reticence by the army top brass is no doubt that renewed media scrutiny will also throw up all sorts of ugly, unpalatable truths about the battle. As we discovered in the course of our research spanning more than seven years, with exclusive access to dozens of participants on both sides of the conflict, the heroism of individual soldiers was blighted by the secret diplomatic and commercial deals that led to their deployment.

Betrayed

This is a particularly bitter pill to swallow for the widows and surviving family members of those sent to die.

"I'm fuming. I'm feeling betrayed," Kele Bojane, the widow of the fallen soldier, wrote in an Instagram post after reading our book.

She cited the mysteriousness of the deployment, the diplomatic machinations kept secret from the public, and the assortment of shadowy commercial interests held by powerful businessmen and their politician friends.

"Now that they are exposed, how do they even fix this!!!!?" she asked.

"We demand a public inquiry. Justice must be served."

The SANDF has actually held two boards of inquiry into the debacle in Bangui, but refuses to release the findings, claiming that they contain classified and confidential information, without providing details.

We suspect the real reason is that the Department of Defence is hell bent on covering up the litany of strategic, tactical, and logistical blunders that ended in a military disaster— as well as their official verdict of who should be held accountable.

This is clear from the high-handed, arrogant way the department treated us when we submitted a Promotion of Access to Information (PAIA) request for copies of the reports.

At every step of the way they had to be reminded, cajoled, or threatened by our lawyers to fulfil their obligations under the law.

In fact, the department has declined to respond to a single question we put to them in the last two years, including about the mental health of the soldiers who survived.

Another startling discovery we made during our research is that the SANDF deployment to the CAR was unlawful from the start.

We obtained an independent legal opinion from two practising advocates and members of the Cape Bar, Kessler Perumalsamy and senior counsel Anton Katz.

They analysed a raft of internal documents and parliamentary tablings, including exchanges of diplomatic notes between South Africa and the CAR from 2006 to 2013, and guidelines for bilateral agreements drawn up by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco).

They pointed out that the 2007 memorandum of understanding that led to the original troop deployment under President Thabo Mbeki, and President Jacob Zuma's subsequent reliance on it, was unlawful.

Incorrectly treated

From the beginning it was incorrectly treated as a routine agreement that required minimum parliamentary scrutiny even though it put South African lives and assets at risk over an extended period.

The second legal flaw was that even these parliamentary tablings were routinely done woefully late, even though the law stipulates Parliament must be informed "promptly".

The third issue was that the secretive Operation Morero, which provided CAR President Francois Bozize' with SANDF special forces operators as personal bodyguards, was hidden from the public for years.

That presidential letters to Parliament did not provide all the reasons for the deployment also rendered it unlawful, Perumalsamy and Katz concluded. These revelations must no doubt add to the fury and frustration of those left behind.

The Battle of Bangui tackles different strands of what has been described as South Africa's **"Black Hawk Down"** moment.

For military buffs, what matters most is the minutiae of what happened on the battlefield: who took, held or was driven off a particular topographical feature; the strength in numbers and weaponry of the combatants in each clash; the quality of tactical intelligence and strategic choices; the efficiency of logistical arrangements; and the effectiveness of operational and overall command.

Those drawn to political scandal will no doubt focus on questions raised about why South Africa deployed a combat force to the Central African Republic (CAR) without any peacekeeping mandate from the United Nations or African Union, and without parliamentary approval or any regional backing; the involvement of ANC-linked companies and personalities seeking to exploit the country's mineral wealth; and the secretive, behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing between two corruption-tainted presidents, Zuma and Bozize, leading up to the battle.

A dubious war

When researching the CAR's history and how its conflicts fitted into the regional mosaic, our particular focus was on how civilian populations were repeatedly re-traumatised through the violent scramble for riches by conspiring local and foreign elites.

Although we drew on the work of leading scholars in the field, our own interviews with historians in the CAR, civilians at the battle sites, and other inhabitants added a richness of texture we could not have found in books and research reports.

We decided, as best we could, to tackle each of these topics, and combine them into a single, coherent narrative – one that tells the human story behind the battle, too, of participants on both sides of the conflict and the civilians caught in the crossfire.

But at its most basic level, this is the story of how 15 men were sent to die in a dubious war. As we wrote in the preface to our book: may such folly never be repeated.

- *Stephan Hofstatter, Warren Thompson and James Oatway are the authors of 'The Battle of Bangui: The inside story of South Africa's worst military scandal since apartheid', published by Penguin Random House.*