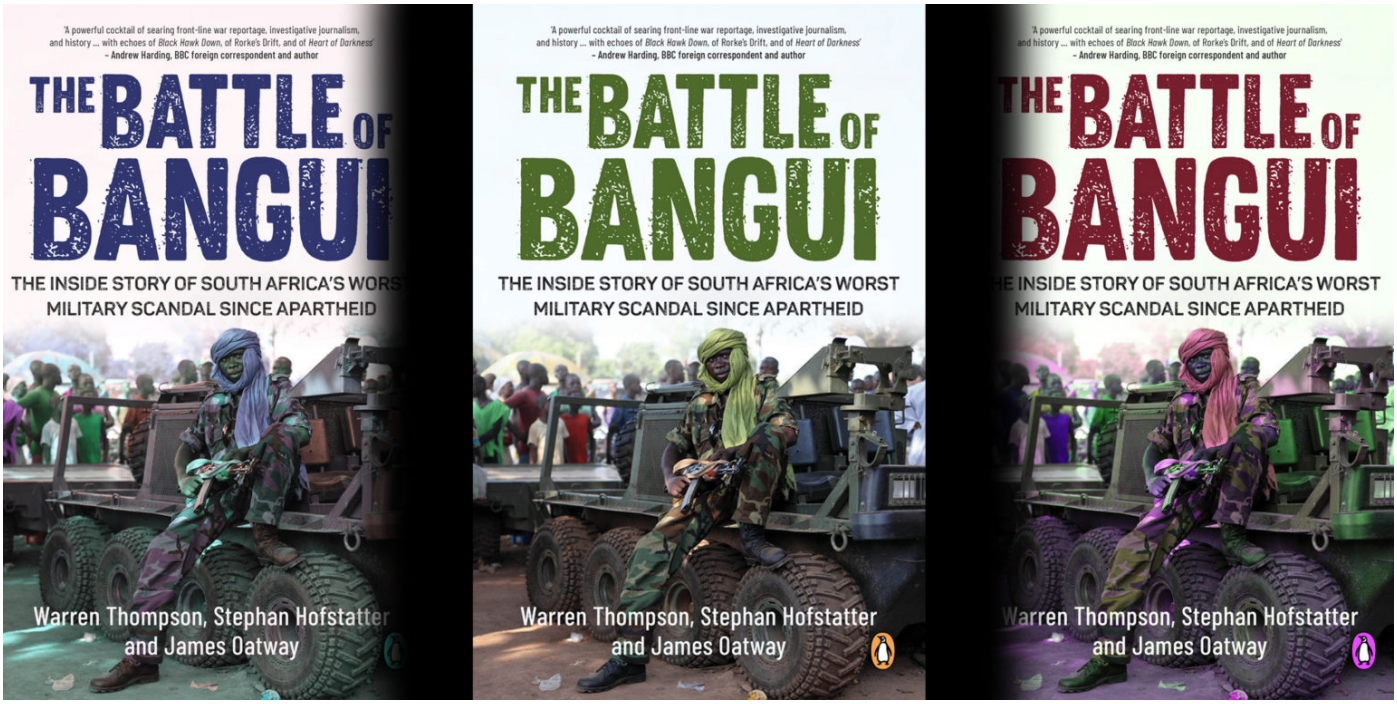
BOOK EXTRACT

The Battle of Bangui: South Africa's blunder into battle with its eyes closed

By Warren Thomson, Stephan Hofstatter and James Oatway • 21 February 2021



In March 2013, SA suffered its worst military defeat since the end of apartheid. After a two day battle, 200 crack troops who engaged 7,000 rebels in the CAR were forced to negotiate a ceasefire at their base. Thirteen South African soldiers died in the battle, with two more later succumbing to their wounds. Their mission was shrouded in mystery. The deployment and the diplomatic machinations that led to it were kept secret from the SA public and Parliament. So, too, were an assortment of shadowy commercial interests held by businessmen, some with close ties to the ANC.

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The bodies of 13 fallen South African soldiers were laid out in a row in the improvised mortuary set up by Lieutenant Colonel Bucibe and Captain Mahlo at the French base. On Sunday night, most of Charlie Company slept soundly in their sleeping bags in the hangar they had been allocated. But the medics were woken by their hosts. The bodies, which had lain in the tropical sun all day, were beginning to putrefy. One of the sub-standard body bags was leaking. “Now we must transfer it to another bag because they don’t want all these fluids leaking onto the floor. We had to deal with that – me and her,” Bucibe said, referring to Mahlo. “We were undertakers.”

On the morning of Monday, 25 March 2013, Colonel Dixon held a roll call. Everyone, including all members of Colonel Dhlamini’s training team, was accounted for – except Lance Corporal Tats. No one had seen or heard from him since he had parted company with Mulaudzi and Memwana on Saturday night. Bucibe’s sweep at the Y-junction had yielded nothing, the locals didn’t know of any South African bodies that hadn’t been recovered and the Séléka said they had released all their captives. Tats seemed to have vanished off the face of the Earth.

Dixon was still awaiting the reinforcements he had been promised on Saturday. The operational planners back home had arranged to send another company of paratroopers from 44 Parachute Regiment, along with armoured combat support vehicles and enough rations to sustain them. Dixon was ready to go back into battle when they arrived, but at that moment Joint Ops was scrambling around trying to charter a military transport aircraft large enough to carry everything.

Dixon told Dhlamini he wanted to open a base within the airport perimeter to accommodate the new arrivals, much like the FOMAC (Force Multinationale de l’Afrique Centrale) force had done. Colonel Nagel, whom Dhlamini met that morning for the first time, seemed particularly energised by the idea of taking the brawl back to the enemy.

But by then Dhlamini wanted nothing more to do with the whole mess. Many members of his training team, probably himself included, were deeply traumatised and just wanted to go home. Some of the younger paratroopers he spoke to, especially those who had been captured by the rebels, felt the same way. But mostly, Dhlamini felt that any counteroffensive launched now was bound to fail. When the shit hit the fan on Saturday, he had begged Pretoria to send reinforcements, including Rooivalk attack helicopters. But now it was too late.

“To me, the plan will not work,” Dhlamini told us. “All the rebels were overpowering us in large numbers. I think it was going to be a massacre. I was no longer interested to fight there.” He pointed out that any foreign military action in the CAR would effectively be controlled by France. Paris was unlikely to allow South Africa to commit any acts of aggression, especially not from the territory it controlled. “What is the aim of staying there? Your weapons are taken. How are you going to fight?” he asked. “You are sort of a prisoner of war. You have no freedom. Everything you do, it has to be done per agreement with the French.”

> *In front of the South African formation, one man stood alone. Colonel William Dixon didn't flinch as his fallen were loaded, one by one, into the belly of the Hercules. He stood there, grim-faced at attention, saluting, until the last man was in. Then the rain stopped and the sun began to shine, bathing the glistening runway in sunlight. It was a moment no one would forget.*

Dhlamini was subsequently criticised for his "cowardice" in wanting to flee at the first whiff of cordite. The ill-feeling this engendered was compounded by seeing him walk around the base with his ranks stripped off. But as subsequent events would show, he was right about France. French commander Colonel Bruno Paravisini and his officers treated the SANDF soldiers with professional courtesy and respect, even complimenting Dixon on the "unbelievable discipline and motivation" of his soldiers. But according to one source, the politicians in Paris soon made it known they were not prepared to tolerate a belligerent SANDF force on their military base for much longer.

That morning, Bucibe and Mahlo prepared the decomposing bodies to "look presentable" when they were loaded onto the military transport. Bucibe decided it would be best to carry them on stretchers rather than risk a grisly mishap. "I said: 'This is going to be an embarrassment. You carry those bodies with those bags, leaking and everything?'" he told us, shaking his head.

The C-130 sent to collect the dead landed at around 11 on Monday morning. Colonel Paravisini wanted to give the fallen South African soldiers a fitting send-off. After conferring with Dixon and Silva, it was decided to form a guard of honour on the runway leading up to the gaping rear cargo door of the Hercules.

Dark clouds gathered ominously overhead as the South African and French soldiers lined up in formation on either side of the runway, facing one another. One or two drops of rain fell. Then there was silence. The entire base came to a standstill as Colonel Nagel and Major Silva raised a South African flag. Dhlamini stood a few metres away. This was no ordinary flag. It had once flown proudly on one of the special forces vehicles racing up the Boali road to confront the rebels. Now it was in tatters, shredded by Séléka bullets.

A procession of paratroopers carried their fallen comrades in bright red, blue and yellow body bags on stretchers to the plane. As they began to move, all of the soldiers, including the French commander and his officers, stood to attention and saluted the dead. A lone French bagpiper began to play "Amazing Grace". Then the rain started coming down hard. The ancestors were welcoming home their sons.

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The French, too, were moved. "I remember Major Silva holding the South African flag torn apart by all the bullet holes, and the fallen soldiers moving slowly towards the aircraft between the guard of honour formed by the two countries," Paravisini told us. "Even for us it was very emotional, and we understood the significance of the moment."

Much to the chagrin of the other commanders, Colonel Dhlamini insisted on being on this flight too, claiming he had to brief the president. When asked about this, Dhlamini said he saw no point in staying. He wanted to ask President Jacob Zuma why he had failed to authorise the relief mission on time.

“These young men were fighting without reinforcements, and ammunition was short,” he said. “Even the Geckoes, they have no protection, nothing. You fire an AK, you kill everybody there. I was really so angry.”

In the end, he did not get his audience with the president. Instead he was whisked straight to 1 Military Hospital with the others, even though he was not injured. “That also angered me,” he said.

That afternoon, an Antonov transport with its tail numbers painted over landed at the airport to evacuate some of the Séléka wounded or dead. About 50 stretcher cases were loaded onto the aircraft, which only stayed on the ground for two hours. Later that day, a C-130 landed to evacuate the Séléka walking wounded. According to witness accounts of French and South African military officials, both were official military planes from Sudan, confirming foreign involvement in the coup.

The Séléka, Chad and Sudan were on one side of history, while South Africa and Bozizé were on the other. South Africa had clearly blundered into a regional conflagration with its eyes closed. **DM**

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