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# STRANGE BEDFELLOWS IN MERCENARY WARS

> Fm—Regional Cmdr North (Makeni)
> To—Overall RUF S/L (Brigadier Issa Sesay)
> Subject—Report dated today 20 June 2000
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> **Sir, Our delegates were attacked today while on the way for UCOWAS meeting in Lunsar. This attack was done by the heli-gunship twelve (12) miles fm this location. Ten (10) KIA, five (5) seriously wounded including radio operator Sheku Compass with one hand cut off. Radio set battered beyond repairs (c/s 072 Kovine). Immediate admin request. Medical help for the brothers and immediate replacement of this operator. Accept info for ack.**
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> Rebel message: Cockerill Barracks, June 20, 2000

About halfway through my stay in Sierra Leone, a signal was intercepted at Army headquarters following Nellis' ambush of a rebel convoy on the road between Lunsar and Makeni. The strike had killed and wounded some of the key players in Foday Sankoh's rebel command. Ironically, the Nigerian commanding general in charge of UN operations in this troubled West African state ended up losing his job because of it.

The entire affair dripped duplicity, and it had a direct effect on the course of the war. It surprised no one to learn afterward that once the people involved in this double-cross were identified, Nellis used his own initiative to bring the matter to a rapid conclusion. He ended it in an opportunistic raid by relying more on gut instinct than military intelligence.

The incident has all the features for an outstanding Hollywood thriller: secret night meetings between the military leaders of opposing forces, deals to subvert government authority, radio intercepts, phone taps involving the British High Commission and its staff, and so forth.

The mercenary component added another dimension. Avarice, betrayal and deceit compounded the treachery. The trouble was that none of it was fiction pouring from a screenwriter's pen, and the survival of a nation hung in the balance. Some of the players—the Nigerians in particular—were interested only in how much loot, payable in diamonds, they could reap from the sorry episode. Their dubious commitment to Sierra Leone had always been about money, so there was nothing shocking about that.

After this sad little chapter, apart from getting a new boss, UN operations in this embattled West African state were restructured from the top down. Significantly, orders implementing these changes came directly from the office of the Secretary General, Kofi Annan. Ultimately, Whitehall was obliged to play a more forceful role, both in Freetown's internal politics and in the war itself, which was just as well because it was the large British military contingent in Sierra Leone that eventually forced the insurgency first to falter, and then fail altogether. But that took a while. In between, there was even more conspiracy, murder and pillaging.

Nellis' outline of the events that led up to this attack set the scene for what followed:

> A few days before June 19, we intercepted a radio message from the regional rebel headquarters in Makeni. This indicated that they'd been in contact with Nigerian General Garba, that irascible and totally unpredictable second-in-command of the UN here. Sankoh's people obviously weren't aware that we were monitoring his calls and we only did so because we'd had intelligence that he was dealing directly with the rebels. They were enemy, dammit!
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> The message we'd got indicated that the rebels had been given Garba's satellite phone number and that a meeting was to be scheduled for the following week. The nub of it was that Garba had apparently suggested to the rebel command that New York wanted to deal, which, of course, was nonsense. But he went ahead anyway and said that it was his job to explore the possibility of all the parties involved in the war returning to the Lome Peace Accord.
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> What he didn't tell the RUF was that the Freetown government had nothing to do with it. In fact, they didn't even know he was talking to the enemy, never mind the meeting

he'd arranged. Essentially, this was treason.

There were no specifics about any kind of time and place, but Garba suggested in one of the secret calls that the conference take place possibly in Makeni. It was to be between the rebel command, with representatives of several African countries present (again, under supposed UN auspices—for which you can read instead General Garba since it was to be his show). We got the impression fairly early on that the Nigerian general was determined to be present, if only for the rewards that he imagined this tidy bit of sedition would eventually bring.

By now, the government was aware of what Garba was up to but details were restricted to only a handful at the top and that included the President: this was one time they didn't want any leaks.

On Saturday, June 17, Army Intelligence determined a tentative date for Garba's little get-together. It was on for the following Monday, just two days ahead.

At that stage, everything pointed to it taking place at Lunsar although we couldn't be certain. It made good sense, though. The town was close enough for both sides to get to without too many problems and Garba could get there easily enough in one of the UN choppers. Also, Lunsar was relatively isolated and whatever took place there wouldn't draw attention, especially from the government or media. The probable time was set for about 1000 hours.

On the face of it then, it seemed that Garba had brokered an arrangement convenient to both himself and the rebels, Nellis told me with a grin that was as insouciant as it was wicked.

Nellis spoke to Colonel Tom Carew, his Chief of Defense Staff about the matter, confirming that the government was not a party to any meetings between the UN and the rebels. The reply inferred that the show was solely Garba's doing. Carew was emphatic when he and Nellis discussed the matter—as the CDS did occasionally with Nellis when he needed to get something off his chest that President Kabbah's government would never sanction anything like that, especially "if it were to take place in isolation of any ongoing efforts by Freetown to achieve a lasting political and military solution to the war."

Nellis could visualize how the meeting would go down. "We were

aware that if it were to happen at all, the (bogus) UN delegation would most likely get there by UN helicopter," he explained. "Being second in charge of UNAMSIL, Garba could commandeer one at will without questions being asked and they'd take her in at a disused airfield near the RUF headquarters adjacent to Lunsar's old iron ore mine. My intention was to get airborne about fifteen or twenty minutes before they left and hope to hell that the rebels on the ground waiting for the delegates would believe that my rotors were those bringing the Nigerian and his entourage." Nellis continued: "Obviously, I was also counting on them all to be gathered together in one area. I'd surprise them in the open, though I'd have to get in and out before the UN contingent arrived." The intention was that the UN helicopter would be greeted by a bunch of very freshly dead rebel bodies.

Nellis armed the Hind's Gatling and two pods of 57mm rockets, "courtesy of the United Nations." Ironically, these were the same munitions returned to Cockerill Barracks at General Jetley's behest only days earlier. By a curious twist, it was Garba who had signed the release.

Rather than use the other Mi-24 with its larger 80mm rocket pods (which make for a bigger killing radius) Nellis reckoned that the smaller projectiles would be the better option if he came in low and fast. That way, he'd be able to launch at the last moment and ensure sharper accuracy. It wasn't always possible to do that with 80mm projectiles, explained the South African. "They had a greater radius of impact and with them I'd have to stand off a bit. If we didn't fire from a reasonable distance with 80mm rockets, there was a chance that we'd take hits from our own shrapnel if we came in on a very low profile, which, under the circumstances, was essential."

On the day of the planned ambush, Nellis met for an early breakfast with his Deputy Minister of Defense, Chief Hinga Norman.[1] The pilot explained the situation in some detail. Nellis was well aware that almost nothing affecting the course of the war or those involved in it escaped Chief Norman's notice. The chief was also the same man who had been fingered as having been a secret RUF supporter during an earlier phase of hostilities, but had been pardoned after the Lome Accord had brought the war temporarily to a halt. Things had changed a lot since then, and Nellis sensed that the chief, in his new cabinet position, was now firmly on the right side.

Nellis outlined his plan of attack. He wanted his boss' opinion on

the political implications if he were to take out an RUF convoy on its way to supposed "peace talks." If he were successful, he knew, there would be some very loud noises made afterward in the world media. And if his luck held, he would end up killing some top RUF men, including front-line commanders. Chief Hinga smiled at the news, sat back in his chair, and told Nellis not to worry himself with such things. That was his bailiwick, he added. "It's not us they're making peace with! You do what you have to do."

What Nellis actually wanted Chief Norman to do was officially sanction the strike. It was one thing to act on innuendo, and altogether something else to receive a direct order. A wily old battler and well into his sixties, the chief understood military procedures quite well, largely because he had served in the British Army when he was young. Before Nellis left the chief's office—and probably because the issue was so sensitive—the minister phoned UN Commander General Jetley. In the pilot's presence the defense minister asked him, almost in as many words, whether he was aware of any meetings with the rebels. The question put to Jetley was whether he was aware of any UN operation in the Lunsar area that day. The Chief explained that he wanted to task the Hind on a recce in that sector and was not able to guarantee the safety of anybody else that might be there.

"No," Jetley answered, his tone indicating annoyance. There was nothing happening, of that he was certain, he declared.

Chief Norman warned the Indian General that the Air Wing would be conducting an armed reconnaissance around Lunsar and that his government couldn't be held responsible for any attacks on unauthorized UN patrols operating in that area. Jetley accepted that position and didn't argue any of its finer details.

The conversation was enlightening, thought Nellis. If the Indian had been in any way a party to this conspiracy, he would almost surely have asked more questions or possibly he would have acted differently. There was nothing defensive about his responses. "Instead he seemed straight up and down. His immediate reactions—direct and to the point—told us pretty conclusively that he'd nothing to hide," explained Nellis. It was also significant that the deputy minister did not bother to call Jetley's Nigerian deputy, General Garba; everybody who mattered at Cockerill already knew of the Nigerian's involvement in the plot.

"Based on the Jetley response, Chief Norman gave me the clearance I sought," Nellis said. "I was to carry out an armed patrol of the

road between Lunsar and Makeni. Being the wily politician, he never instructed me deliberately to seek and destroy any rebel convoy, but instead, stated that he had been given assurances by Jetley that nothing was expected so I should go ahead and do my job, which I did." Norman added one more thing. "He told me to use my discretion if any target presented itself," continued Nellis. "Those were his last words before I left his office."

The planning discussions at Cockerill had also helped clarify something that had been worrying everyone for some time: a deep-rooted animosity existed between Jetley and Garba. It was apparently a rift of long standing. The events that followed would eventually result in both men being relieved of their commands

Nellis' plan had a second phase. If nothing was happening at Lunsar by the time he got there, he would follow the Makeni road and see if there was anything or anybody moving along it. Cockerill was aware that if Garba got cold feet and decided to cancel, he would not be able to get a message through to the RUF command in time to stop the convoy.

As far as Nellis was concerned, it was a fine time for war. The visibility was perfect. It was one of those bright sunny West African days when a target can be seen for miles. Unfortunately, the clear weather cuts both ways: the rebels would be able to spot his chopper from a long distance.

The Air Wing actually planned for a late take-off, because time means nothing in Africa. "Pitching up for an appointment an hour late is normal," Nellis explained.

"Once over Lunsar, we saw nothing. There were no vehicles in the area, nor any groups of people either in town or in the surrounding area. It didn't make sense. What was immediately clear was that the RUF delegation was late. So, accepting the second option, down the road we flew. We clipped along less than fifty feet above the ground, staying low so that if anything was ahead, we'd surprise them. They'd be certain to have Triple-A mounted on their vehicles."

Nellis liked the odds. "The way I saw it, I was pretty certain that we'd have the advantage of surprise because the last thing the rebels would have been expecting was us hitting them from the air. After all, they did have Garba's word on it, and since he was the second most powerful military man in the country, the rebel command must have been confident that he would see to it that nothing was allowed to happen. In their minds, it was probably a given that he would ensure

their safe passage. The meeting had been the UN's idea and that must have been a guarantee of sorts."

Shortly after passing over the village of Macut, about eight miles from the town of Makeni, the gunship breasted a low hill. At that moment Nellis spotted a four-vehicle convoy heading his way. In the lead was a Toyota Landcruiser escorted by a pair of motorcycles. A pick-up with a Dshka mounted on the back followed a couple of hundred yards behind the three lead vehicles with a five or six-man gun crew crowded around it.

Nellis' immediate instinct was to go right in. With the first bike in his sights, he delivered a burst with the Gatling. The target disintegrated and hurled what was left of the driver and bike in a crumpled heap into the bush. The second motorcycle wobbled perilously for a moment and then ran headlong into a ditch. Nellis locked the Landcruiser in his sights and shattered its windscreen. A split-second later its fuel tank exploded.

The driver of the rear pickup jumped on his brakes but Nellis was able to get in a short burst, most of which went wide. The entire attack had lasted only seconds.

Throwing the Hind hard to port, the pilot banked and came in again. Hassan shouted through the mike that the rebels were bombshelling from the last three vehicles which, Nellis anticipated, probably carried the main delegation. He recalled later, foliage and cover was the only option left to them. Another whoop from Hassan and the two side-gunners joined in. Both he and Lieutenant Schenks set about picking off targets with their GPMGs.

The next time Nellis brought the helicopter around, he used his rockets. A couple of rebels who had remained with the pickup were trying to swing the gun around, but they were struggling with what seemed to be a jam. A salvo of sixteen rockets went into the pickup, eight from each pod. "Thus were a few more gooks sacrificed for the cause," was how the South African later put it. Another low altitude turn and more rockets raked thickets where Hassan had spotted some of the rebels taking cover.

"After that strike there was no more resistance. We were able to concentrate on eliminating the other vehicles, and the individual members of the delegation who were still trying to escape. Because the bush wasn't as thick as elsewhere, Hassan spotted some of them trying to crawl along a gulley. He asked me to bank to starboard, and then set about doing the necessary," explained Nellis. "I knew that we would

never be able to account for every single member of the party, but it was not for want of trying. Anyway, by then I'd had a stoppage on the Gatling and that ended the exercise. Also, we were out of rockets, so I decided to call it a day."

The flow of radio intercepts at Cockerill didn't stop for the rest of the day. They poured in from all over Sierra Leone—Makeni, Kono, everywhere. Some originated from Liberia, inquiring as to the whereabouts of a General Sesay. The rebel command was clearly rattled by the crippling strike. Intercepts the following day confirmed that Nellis had knocked out the convoy's communications on his first pass, removing the radio operator's hand in the process. As a result, no one at either Lunsar or Makeni had any idea of what had taken place, or even that there had been an attack. Only after dark—and then tentatively, for fear of a night strike—did another convoy set off from Makeni. Their orders were to find out what had happened to the RUF interim leader. With Foday Sankoh in jail by this time, Sesay had recently been appointed head of the rebel junta. Sesay was lucky: he had only been lightly hurt in the attack. Ten others were killed outright, including several senior regional commanders. Early reports suggested that Brigadier General Maurice Kallon, the head of the northern axis of the RUF war effort, was dead, but this later proved false. Another battlefield commander, Dennis Mingo, alias "Superman," was wounded in the attack. In fact, just about everybody in the convoy took some kind of hit, with several very badly wounded.

More damaging, especially to future United Nations/RUF relations, was that Garba and his entourage never showed up at Lunsar. Had his group of "negotiators" at least made the attempt to do so, they might have had a case to argue. Neither did they indicate to anyone that they weren't going to make it. Garba and several others with him could have easily used their satellite phone to cancel, but they did not. The rebels, therefore, had good reason to believe they had been betrayed. And, of course, they had been. In their own words, "The Nigerian betrayed us." The consensus at Cockerill Barracks was that Garba was intimidated by Chief Hinga's questions to his boss. Nellis surmised that Jetley spoke to his Nigerian deputy about the call and the Fulani officer probably sensed a catastrophe about to erupt.

Once the strike was announced, Garba resorted to invective. He immediately launched a campaign of words against several British officers seconded to the Sierra Leone Army, accusing them of bugging his satellite phone and intercepting his messages. He followed that up

with a bitter attack on Whitehall and Britain generally, claiming that Africa's cause had been betrayed. "They tried to undermine my command!" he told his deputy, spitting out the words in a characteristic display of unrestrained tribal fury.

Several choice comments were reserved for Colonel Mike Dent, the CDS's opposite number with the British military advisory contingent. Sitting across the table from him at the next staff meeting, Garba traded more insults. Undeterred, Dent apparently told the man to fuck himself.

Garba's troubles had only just begun. The rebels condemned him in their propaganda broadcasts for playing a double game. They had been led into a trap, they cried, and he would pay for the murders. At Cockerill the mood was upbeat, even though no one was fully aware of the details about how the rebel itinerary and dates had been leaked, or why the gunship was on the Makeni road when it was. Gradually aspects of the ambush filtered into town and the event was portrayed as "a great victory for President Kabbah."

Looking back, Nellis is not so certain his mission on the Makeni road was as successful as some made it out to be. The strike had indeed boosted the sagging morale of both the government and the army. The newspapers could not get enough of the story, though without the behind-the-scenes details. As more details emerged about the UN's—and, in particular, Garba's—duplicity, a visible rift appeared between the Nigerian and Indian factions in West Africa. Ultimately this divide led to New Delhi pulling its troops out of the UN force altogether, followed shortly afterward by Annan's declaration that the Jordanian contingent would leave as well. The moves depleted the UN "peacekeeping" strength in Sierra Leone by about a quarter, and obliged Britain to take on a more obtrusive security role. In spite of protests from the Tory opposition, by the end of that year the British government had a Royal Navy and Royal Marine strike force stationed semipermanently off the coast of West Africa. Also, the Nigerian Army in Sierra Leone was forced to temper its dealings with the RUF. Had these been allowed to continue, Kabbah's government would have been pushed further into isolation.

There were several results that troubled Nellis. First, both Jetley and Garba were aware that they had been duped; from then on, both refused to provide the Air Wing with any more help. Until the strike, the Hinds had been fueled at UN depots at both Lungi and Hastings Airports. Jetley saw to it that those facilities were put off-limits to the

two Mi-24s. The same applied to ammunition, which led to some serious shortages a month or so later. Whitehall had to schedule several emergency arms deliveries by air and these too, were questioned in Westminster.

In the past, a grudging pact had existed between the Air Wing and the UN force, but relations hadn't been good since the first phase of the UN operation. There had been several fractious encounters in months past, and a deep suspicion between the two parties developed as a consequence. Jetley, who usually played the role of the panderer, treated Nellis and his crowd like adversaries. This was a very different situation compared to their previous relationship.

The consequence of Jetley's actions became more apparent a few weeks later, when Nellis' helicopter was ordered to attack a rebel target about two weeks after the ambush strike on the Makeni road. The South African accompanied Colonel Carew to Garba's office with requests for ammunition and spare parts. The moment the two men stepped inside the door the Nigerian became belligerent. "He refused us everything we'd asked for, saying that he wasn't prepared to give us any assistance whatever," recalled Nellis. He also accused the Air Wing of destroying his efforts in trying to secure a peace process.

"It didn't help that despite the CDS being present, he was being his usual insidious self and I wasn't in a position to say anything. Perhaps I should have congratulated him for being candid. At least we knew where we stood with each other," Nellis concluded.

It took the British military aid contingent and the Sierra Leone Army several months of fence-building before anything resembling a working relationship was put in place. Although the situation improved with time, the relationship never reverted to what it had been before the Makeni road strike.

The ongoing war and its daily rebel atrocities did not allow the impasse to go on indefinitely. Nellis' ambush might have scored some points, but the retaliating rebels intensified their barbarism in all the towns and villages under their control. Fortunately most of the civilian population had already fled.

Six weeks after the incident, the UN asked Nellis to take the Hind and attack a village in the eastern part of the country. Under Operation Kukri, the area had come under strong Indian Air Force Mi-24 fire during the rescue of a batch of UN soldiers being held hostage by RUF rebels. The Indian gunships razed the place. Nellis was told that there were still some rebel targets intact, including a

radio center. "The idea was that I should hit the village the day after Op Kukri. Out of nowhere, Garba—all charm and snake oil—gives me a clearance to eliminate any infrastructures that were still intact and, as he said, I was to kill anyone found there. So, to me, it starts to smell bad."

Nellis was good at sniffing out rats, and to him this operation had all the hallmarks of a typical underhanded Nigerian move. By this time even the UN higher-ups in New York were aware that Garba was up to no good. His motive became clear soon enough. Garba's intent was to transfer blame for the destruction by UN gunships onto Nellis and the Air Wing. This, in turn, would allow the Nigerian general to tell the rebels that his people had never been involved in any attack. "I wasn't prepared to become Garba's scapegoat for any UN whitewash," Nellis said. "We had a fairly good measure of these people by then."

Stretching the limits of his own credibility, Nellis reported to the UN office at the Mammy Yoko Hotel later that same day that neither of his aircraft was serviceable, adding that it would be impossible to carry out any strikes for a day or two. The South African was convinced that had he gone ahead and made the attack as Garba suggested, pressure would have been placed on Kabbah's government to restrict all operational flights involving the Air Wing's Hinds. He and the rest of the crew might even have been expelled from Sierra Leone.

An incident that had taken place a short time earlier only served to compound Nellis' problems. Headquarters at Cockerill Barracks received information that the RUF was rebuilding several boats at Manowa Junction in order to transport captured ECOMOG and UN vehicles and equipment to Liberia. Nellis was given the job of knocking out all enemy assets associated with this venture, which he promptly did. After that attack, the rebels refused to continue negotiating with Jetley's staff for the release of Indian troops being held in Kailahun, a small town near the Guinea frontier that was also the focus of rebel communications.

This placed the UN Command in something of a quandary since the hostage situation in Kailahun had suddenly become desperate. A couple of hundred Indian and other nationals—all of them serving UN personnel—were being kept prisoner under dreadful conditions. They had minimal food and no medical supplies worthy of the name; many had come down with malaria. Although none of them had died, it was only a matter of time before the situation worsened. The Indian gen-

eral was now in an untenable position, and for once he had no option but to do something. The operation that followed also involved elements of the RAF.

Nellis provided for me the background to some of these events, which clearly demonstrated the UN's predilection for prevarication and, not to put too fine a point on it, Jetley's chronic indecision. "With Operation Kukri, you need to remember that it was largely a case of Indian forces rescuing their Indian counterparts, with little involvement from the other units. The British made available their choppers together with Special Forces for reconnaissance and the rescue of MILOBS (military observers)," explained Nellis. "And then only because there was a British officer among the prisoners."

The operation was supposed to be a coordinated affair with the RAF and Indian Air Force choppers. Nellis continued: "They would go in together in what was planned as a surprise raid. However, there was a thick mist over the target early on the morning in question and Jetley insisted on a delay. He told the RAF that he wanted to allow for the viz to improve. The British refused and went in anyway." As Nellis tells it, "The Indian gunships followed hours later and by that time most of the RUF had fled the area. As it happened, the Chinooks did the job on their own. They performed like heroes, taking out all the hostages without loss."

Magnificent action photos of the operation snapped by British freelance photographer Patrick Allen showed these graceful giants hovering a few feet above the jungle while putting down suppressing fire and shooting off strings of anti-missile flares. It was an impressive display with the twin-rotor helos, each with two six-barrel Gatlings (one to port and the other to starboard), together with a GPMG on lowered ramps to the rear. Since all the guns onboard were 7.62mm NATO, the firepower was awesome.

In general, Nellis recalled afterward, "The perception was that Op Kukri didn't have too much of an effect because there was no follow-up. There was no attempt to dominate and hold ground taken in the attack. Consequently, the rebels reoccupied their original areas immediately afterward." But, as he remembers, "that it happened at all was remarkable. Until then, the UN General had been typically Indian in his behavior, the ultimate equivocator."

Yet not all Indian forces in Sierra Leone followed the example of their commanding general. Kashmir had long ago proved that the Indian Army could fight, and damn well too, if there was need.

Among Jetley's units in West Africa were two battalions that had been on active service in Kashmir. They had performed outstandingly against Pakistani-supported Hizbollah guerrillas in the mountainous enclave that included some of the most difficult fighting terrain in the world.

During my interview with General Jetley for *Jane's Defence Weekly*, he explained that bringing these men to Africa had been "something of a reward" for time spent in Kashmir. He was poker faced about it since, he said, the matter centered solely on economics. While serving on the Indian subcontinent, he explained, these men were paid only a fraction of what they got when they donned blue "peacekeeping" uniforms. With the UN, he declared, the basic salary was roughly $1,000 a month. "Money talks the same language wherever you are," said this effete little man who had a mental sail so rigged as to be swelled by the slightest puffery.

An interesting sidelight to Nellis' attack on the RUF convoy near Makeni involved a little socializing afterward with Lt-Col. Rob Symonds, the British Military Liaison Officer. Prior to the Makeni road attack (but only after he'd read the intercept that Garba's meeting was to take place) Nellis had casually questioned Symonds one evening as to whether he'd heard anything about a meeting between the rebels and the UN.

No, said the British officer, feigning indifference. Had Nellis heard anything? Negative. There were some rumors about, replied Nellis, but nothing concrete. Anyway, scuttlebutt on such issues was a feature of the Freetown scene.

Once Nellis ambushed the rebel column, he admitted to Symonds that same night that he'd actually known about Garba's actions all along. He hadn't wanted to mention it, he disclosed, because he feared that London might put the word out for him not to go ahead. Ironically, that was Symonds' position as well. The British Colonel was candid enough to admit to Nellis that he had also been aware of Garba's contacts with the RUF, but had stayed mum about it because he too feared that if he said anything, the people in charge might call the whole thing off. There must have been some pretty sophisticated monitoring devices installed at the High Commission in Freetown.

Flying combat in Africa can result in rich rewards. There are few restrictions, the money is usually good, nobody worries about dress codes, and the beaches are empty because tourists don't like being put

at risk. Further, safety rules can be bent and there are almost none of the governances that might be encountered while flying over European or American airspace.

"The problem with crossing parts of West Africa in aircraft," explains Nellis, "is that there are people on the ground who sometimes like to shoot at you." He remembered one occasion when the rebels approached Freetown for the third or fourth time and Nellis had to use the Hind to haul in 1960s--vintage 105mm shell cases, charges, fuses, ammunition and food, as well as drums of diesel and petrol—all in the same load.

"This was the sort of stuff required by government units coming under rebel attack in the deep interior. We'd sometimes get there and the troops would be down to their last eight or ten cartridges per man," recalled the pilot. "Then, the moment we started making our approach, the fun would start. And sometimes we'd be subjected to a lot of ground fire." He reckons that a single tracer through his Hind could have set the lot off. Other times, as we saw before, gun-toting and often terrified soldiers would mob the crew as soon as they touched down. Blinded by fear, this was exactly the effect the rebels had been trying all along to cultivate. As the axiom goes, a fearful soldier doesn't always do what he's told.

This happened several times at Lunsar. Nellis would bring the chopper in and before they could even open the hatches, squads of soldiers would run up to the Hind and demand to be extradited. "Since the helicopter was their last option, it was pointless to talk about weight and space limitations, or that wounded were a priority," said Hassan.

"It didn't matter that we were armed—we had two or three AKs among us, together with the bigger stuff. Those making demands on us had a lot more firepower."

The last time something like this happened and it began getting out of hand, Hassan had a hard time trying to stop some of these crazies from running into the spinning tail rotor. It wasn't so much that he minded anybody's brains being splattered halfway across Africa. His concern was a more practical one: the Hind might not be able to get off the ground again after sending human bone and debris flying. Someone would then have to fly in a spare—if there was one—together with the technicians needed to replace it.

At Lunsar that evening, it was the third time that day that Nellis had taken the machine into action. It was also the day before the

rebels would again overrun Lunsar. Nellis' chief concern was delivering the half-ton of ammunition he had on board. When his wheels touched ground, instead of helping off-load the ammo, the troops just stood about and watched while the crew did it themselves. "We simply had to," recalled Hassan. "Time was against us because it was already late. Also, if we didn't pull finger, we'd still be there."

Lieutenant Schenks was mad about the lack of assistance. "It didn't matter that we had brought them ammunition when they needed it most, not one of those bastards would help."

"It was a lot different when we started to wind the machine up again before lift-off," continued Hassan, who returned to Cockerill with scuffed knuckles. "Then they'd all come crowding around, some of them ugly. The only officer in the place was a Sierra Leone Army captain, and he had to warn his men off with a machine pistol. He had big balls, that guy. One man on his own in the middle of the jungle with a mutiny on his hands . . . you don't often see it that bad," the Shi'ite gunner recollected. It was a pretty close call. A few more seconds and the Hind might have been overrun with armed and angry troops. Even Hassan, veteran gunner that he was, was shaken by the time they got back to Cockerill.

After that incident Nellis refused to take calls to fly to Lunsar unless there was a responsible British officer on the ground, which was just as well because the rebels were massing in numbers on the outskirts of the place. Worse, they had already destroyed the Rolat road bridge between there and Rogberi, to their rear, which meant there was no avenue for a withdrawal from Lunsar. To Nellis, this indicated that there was at least someone involved with the rebels who knew something about planning, since it was way ahead of how the Sierra Leone Army—or for that matter, the rebels—had been used to operating in the past.

Judging solely from tactics used and the way the battle subsequently evolved, it was Nellis' view that someone else was pulling strings that day, and it wasn't rebels. "Some of the moves these people made were more than familiar—not RUF at all, which, like the SLA, does just about everything by the book, if they're sober, of course." The aviator was of the opinion that it was likely that South African mercenaries had trained his adversaries since several were known to be in the employ of the RUF. He probably even knew some of the men involved. We found out later this was indeed the case, and it annoyed us all.

Another time, a couple of years before, and shortly after the series of Makeni rescue incidents with the Nigerian ECOMOG force, Nellis and his crew had been tasked to go to Moyamba with "Bokkie," the Mi-17. The idea was to uplift as many of the Kamajors bush fighters as they could fit into the machine and take them to Freetown. With Makeni lost to the government, the rebels were again on the march toward the capital. The intention was to deploy these tough, aggressive veterans in the defense of the approaches to the city. But, as Nellis recounted, it did not work out as planned.

"We'd earlier lost one rear door and meantime, I'd had the other one removed as well. The result was that we were flying with the back of the aircraft wide open: not a good idea. We simply had no control over who might or might not have been trying to get onboard, especially when conditions were chaotic, which they often were. Also, we were sharply aware that Executive Outcomes had lost one of their helicopters through ill-disciplined soldiers running away from battle. That incident had almost got two crews killed. So when we finally did land at Moyamba, we had these Kamajors storming us, but for a different reason. Unlike the idiots at Lunsar, these guys actually wanted to fight and we'd been sent by their jungle gods to take them to war."

Nellis explained that it felt as though an entire company of Kamajors had squeezed in. Worse, not one of them would get off. When the crew was eventually able to do a head count, they found ninety-one of them onboard. Considered by one and all in Sierra Leone as mean bastards, their philosophy ran along the lines that whoever opposed their will was to be regarded as the enemy and killed.

'We were in something of a Catch-22 situation, and there was nothing we could do but sit it out," rationalized Nellis. "Since this mob refused to budge and there was no way I could take off, we'd reached a stalemate." He continued: "Basically, the LZ was a small football field surrounded by dozens of hundred-foot-high trees. Also, the outside air temperature was over a hundred, which didn't help either. And while 'Bokkie' wasn't underpowered, the Mi-17 definitely didn't have enough power to get out of a relatively confined area with that kind of load. It was well over twice the factory-recommended limit."

For a while the crew tried to entice some of the men to leave, but neither threats nor cajoling worked. Besides, it was dangerous to take too tough a line on these primitive tribesmen. "Our guys couldn't get

even one of them to stay. Also, they had been taking something powerful, which meant that they were about as spaced out as it can get," recalled the aviator. According to Nellis, the Kamajors weren't into dope or narcotics as we in the Western world understand drugs. Before each battle they would en masse go through a ritual of their own that involved drinking an extremely potent concoction that made them goofy. He thought it was probably something with a jungle methamphetamine base, though nobody was certain.

"These guys really were on cloud nine, and they were making a helluva din of it behind me. They could probably be heard singing and shouting a mile away," explained Nellis, who decided to try something else. "I realized then that the only way to get some of them back on the ground was to switch off and try to talk some sense to their leaders. We went through the motions, but that didn't work either."

By this time it was mid-afternoon, and the heat had been escalating, as it does in the tropics. Nellis knew it was like an oven in the rear, with all those people stuffed into a confined and airless compartment. They were jammed against each other like being stuffed into an overcrowded elevator. Perhaps nature would take care of the problem, he told Hassan.

"After an hour or so the racket began to ease. Some of the soldiers climbed out, all of them wet with sweat. Some went looking for water. Obviously there were quite a few who had dehydrated, which probably helped in the end," admitted the pilot. "Then it wasn't long before we managed to get a bit of order out of a situation that had been almost riotous. I promised their leader that we would take as many as we could in the first run and return immediately afterward to uplift the balance. That way we were able to select who was going to war and who wasn't, which was a complete reversal of our earlier experiences."

Hawkeye, the former American Special Forces veteran, had a stock of war stories of his own. Rampaging troops was nothing new to him. They had mobbed him several times. Working with International Charter Inc. of Oregon (ICI), the crew often took the Mi-8 to a distant military post on the edge of nowhere with the jungle a backdrop on all four sides. On touchdown, it was not unusual for the helicopter to be rushed by troops who, at gunpoint, would demand to be taken home. One time it was a bunch of government troops who boarded illegally the moment the helicopter landed. "That time, they simply

refused to move," reported Hawkeye. "They pointed their muzzles at us and said that if we didn't get them out of there we'd die." It was a tough call, admitted the American. "Most times, though, we seemed to deal with it."

Hawkeye recalls landing near a contingent alongside the Rokel River, about thirty minutes north of Freetown (the same river that was later used as a base by the infamous West Side Boys). We knew that government forces had been taking a pasting from the rebels there and were falling back, almost all of them in disarray. Some of the younger men were discarding their uniforms and slipping back into the jungle. Others just fled as they were.

"We had come in to this position to take out some of their casualties," remembered the American freelancer. "Had that not been the reason, I wouldn't have considered getting near that hellhole. The trouble was, back at base they don't always go into any kind of detail about what we're likely to find there. So you get over the camp and look down and it all appears fine, but then you get on the ground and you find yourself in a disaster area! But a job's a fuckin' job," explained Hawkeye with a hollow laugh that echoed. Those who've been in a tight spot with him say that his guffaws get louder as the tension grows, a trait that tends to unsettle those who don't know him well. He continued: "Once we were firmly down, they really started to mob us. We just had to beat them back with our rifle butts, which was the only way we were able to stop them from swamping us. I broke a few bones that day."

Nor was that the end of it, since they still had to get out of there. As soon as the wounded had been uploaded Hawkeye turned toward the Russian pilot to signal to him get away pronto. Then the unthinkable happened. "One of those assholes grabbed Loneman, our rear-door gunner, and physically hauled him off the chopper." Only I wasn't to know it until later." Hawkeye explained that in the heat and kerfuffle of boarding, Loneman had somehow become separated from the rest and had taken up a position at the rear door. M-16 in hand, like the rest of the crew, he was trying to keep illegals away.

"I didn't actually see it happening. One moment the man was there and the next he's gone!" Hawkeye recalled. He explained that Loneman was one big, strong fellow and knew how to look after himself. Also, it wasn't the first time he'd had to use force to restrain a horde." "He was certainly a strange cat. On operations, he never had much to say and preferred to keep it like that, usually concentrating

on the immediate task at hand. So we got on well and made a good team, which is what it's all about if you're going to survive in that crap."

Loneman had come to West Africa after volunteering for a tour of duty with ICI. Before that, he'd spent a while in the French Foreign Legion, one of the few Americans who could handle the pace there. Afterward he returned to the States and joined the 101st Air Assault Division. As experienced as Loneman was, Hawkeye knew the situation was critical. "At that moment, I had a big time problem on my hands: Loneman was missing and we were already into the hover. I turned to the pilot, but before I could catch his attention an M-16 flew through the back door and clattered against the bulkhead."

Confused, Hawkeye moved to the rear and peered over the edge to find Loneman hanging onto the chopper with one hand while desperately using the other to pry loose a couple of dozen fingers of other potential escapees who were gripping his legs. "There were three of them altogether, which gives you some idea of his strength," explained Hawkeye.

At about fifteen feet, the man at the bottom decided that this wasn't going to work and he let go. A few seconds later the number two guy slipped his grip and fell headlong to the ground. That left one more, "and he just wasn't going to let this opportunity go by in a hurry. By then we'd gained some height, perhaps forty or fifty feet. What I'd liked to have done was give our guy a hand, but then things were happening so fast."

"Obviously it couldn't last, so something had to happen, especially since the pilot still had no idea of the drama being played out behind him," continued Hawkeye. "The former Legionnaire shook the remaining man loose a second or two later, which was just as well because by then the Hip started topping trees at about ninety feet and there was a lot of incoming fire."

Like the athlete that he was, Loneman swung himself back onboard. "Only when we got back to base did he discover that his watch was gone and one of his ribs had been smashed," remembered his buddy. "That had happened when the soldiers pushed him over backwards. And that's when we knew damn well that the rebels really were coming for Freetown and that our people were losing the war.

"We never did tell our bosses what happened," admitted the American mercenary. "The guys in the States wouldn't have understood, and anyway, it was just too much of a close call. Medically I

knew there was nothing to be done for Loneman's broken rib. I flew for him for a while until he'd healed enough to start operating again . . . doped him up enough to stand the pain, but still keep his wits."

The pilot later apologized to both of them. He knew it was a mess and reckoned that had circumstances been otherwise, it could have been avoided. What he didn't say was that if they had left Loneman behind, they would almost certainly have lost him.

Every helicopter team that has worked Sierra Leone has had similar experiences. During the course of Sierra Leone's four rebel invasions, there were probably enough close squeaks for somebody to publish a compendium of West African horror stories.

For instance, another time Hawkeye and crew reached a medevac site to find three truckloads of healthy soldiers, all of them desperate to get back to Freetown and beer. "This was a really terrified bunch of soldiers, we could see that even before we put our wheels down. But that wasn't our deal." Hawkeye remembered them "yelling like hell-hounds, demanding a place on the chopper, but we ignored them while their buddies loaded the worst of the casualties onboard, some of whom would die on us before it was over. That done, almost the entire group piled onboard, some sixty or seventy of them."

There was no explaining or reasoning with this belligerent bunch. "What these assholes couldn't understand was that, in an ultra-extreme situation, a Russian Hip can take sixty men, which is about thirty over the limit. But then you're pushing your luck and you have additional factors like heat and humidity and getting into the hover. Still, they just kept coming. Soon they were three deep in the rear. We couldn't have lifted off had we tried."

There were other problems. First, the helicopter was low on fuel—really low. It was also getting dark. In the tropics, recalls Hawkeye, one minute there's light and the next there isn't. If the chopper was going to get out of there and make it back to base, the crew had only minutes to leave because there was no night vision equipment onboard. "I didn't even have to think about it before I threw off the man nearest me. Then I tackled the one next to him. I'd pushed off two more when a handful of them grabbed me by both arms and hurled me out the door!" Hawkeye was lucky in one regard: he still had his carbine. The problem was that everybody else was armed. Some soldiers were angry enough to turn their guns on him.

"I'd just picked myself up off the ground when the first man I'd ousted came at me, carbine in hand. He was bleeding from taking a

hit when he'd exited, but I cuffed him with my butt and he went down again. Then his officer decided to rush me. With his muzzle at my chest, he said he was going to execute me." From that moment, recalled Hawkeye, everything moved at breakneck speed. Backing up toward the fuselage, he told the man that if he opened fire, he'd hit the chopper's fuel tanks and they'd all go up. For a moment that seemed to calm things.

The American decided to push his luck. "Look, Lieutenant. If we keep on arguing like this, nobody's going to get out because we can't fly in the fucking dark! You got me?" Hawkeye was shouting in his face. Those who could hear him over the roar of the rotors didn't argue. They couldn't.

Confident that he had their attention, he sketched a hasty plan. "Listen to me! We'll take thirty of your people out and that includes the wounded. Only thirty! No more! The worst of the casualties and you, Lieutenant. Then we'll come back for the others," he lied. Hawkeye knew he'd won when everybody stopped pushing. "It surprised us all that they acquiesced the way they did. A minute later we were airborne."

Fighting in remote regions also makes for strange bedfellows. Sometimes there would be a journalist or two asking for a ride to the front, and though Nellis liked to help—usually in the interests of creating what he termed "a more realistic image of what we're doing"—it wasn't always possible. Other times he had to use whatever help was available, particularly in the early days.

One of those who came along for the ride was George Yazid, a gangling, confident young man with long-boned walker's shanks. Though born in Sierra Leone, he had grown up with one foot in Ireland and the other in Africa. Jesuit educated in Ireland and trained in electronics in Canada, Yazid was a useful man to have around when some of the persnickety things that could go wrong with a helicopter did. He had a military background of sorts in, of all places, the Ghanaian Army, but what Nellis and the boys were doing was new to him. He told us all one jolly fine evening at Nellis' place that he thought he could learn something if he could attach himself to the Air Wing.

Yazid had mentioned to Nellis earlier that if he were ever stuck for help, he'd fly with him. Nellis liked hearing that because at that stage the South African really was short-handed. Juba, his co-pilot, had

gone to Europe, ostensibly to buy another helicopter. That meant Nellis, single-handed, was flying the only Mi-17 that was still operational.

Yazid's offer came at an opportune time, not so much to assist with the piloting, since Yazid cannot fly helicopters, but rather, to have a Sierra Leone national onboard who could be trusted. He was also required to negotiate with soldiers on the ground when things became dicey. Since Yazid could speak the local lingo, he was well placed to cool things at critical moments.

On their first sortie together, Nellis and Yazid flew to Daru at the far end of the helicopter's fuel limitation envelope. The place was close enough to the Liberian border to mean trouble: the only people there were some Nigerian soldiers and a squad or two of Sierra Leone Army troops who were so doped, he recalled, that they didn't know day from night.

"We'd barely got down after coming in and we joined some of the guys on the ground cooking their daily rice ration. That's when the shooting started," began Nellis. Shots were coming in from everywhere and some of it was getting too close for comfort, he recalled. Nellis suggested to his crew that they move out of there—fast. Yazid, meanwhile, was seated in the co-pilot seat viewing the scene with a kind of detachment better suited to a Sunday drive back home. Surprised at his demeanor, Nellis leaned across and asked, "You aware that we're being shot at?"

"Yeah. Reckon so," was Yazid's laconic retort. "But what's there to do about it?" Point taken. His equanimity impressed the South African, and with that, the Air Wing had an additional member of its crew.

Just then, however, eager to get the out of there, Nellis upped the revs. He was lifting off, indicating as much to the men outside by raising his hands in the usual way and it got their attention. With that, a Sierra Leone Army sergeant major moved forward and brusquely ordered a Nigerian soldier out of the engineer's seat. "Get up. I'm sitting there!" he barked before promptly sitting down between Yazid and Nellis. He was a big fellow, Nellis recalled. Anyway, there was no time to argue.

Nellis said, "Soon after take-off, we flew over some rebel lines and, of course, they revved us. One round hit the helicopter and passed through the floor, into the seat where the sergeant major was perched. The bullet went right up his ass. He ended up on the floor

screaming like a stuffed pig, crying for God's protection, his mother, his wife and for anyone who cared to listen.

"Fred told him to shut up and carried on shooting. The corporal who'd been ousted from his seat up front by his senior was on the floor next to the wounded doubled up with laughter. Moral of the story—don't throw people out of their seats when there are people shooting at you."

"Fucker had it coming," exclaimed Yazid when he related the story. "Better him than me. But the bullet that hit him could just as easily have struck either Nellis or me, so it must have been close!"

George Yazid flew a lot with Nellis after that. He proved to be a useful acquisition, though the Air Wing never had any money to pay him. The two men saw good action and the newcomer used his new-found experiences to get a good job with another American organization that remains active in Sierra Leone today, Pacific Architects & Engineering (PAE) as their radio boffin.

Like the Oregon company, PAE's ties to Washington are indefinable and it didn't get you anywhere to ask about them. Interestingly, PAE got a contract to work in Afghanistan after the 2001 Coalition invasion, and recruited quite a number of former Executive Outcomes vets to work for them. Simon Witherspoon, a former member of the South African Reconnaissance Regiment of Angola fame, joined the company in Kabul. After that, Simon—one of the best operators in the business—got himself involved in the debacle of trying to unseat the Equatorial Guinea president and, with almost seventy others, found himself in a cell in Harare's hell-hole of a prison at Chikurubi.

One of the worst experiences Nellis and his people lived to tell about took place in January 1999. That was when the rebels were making a concerted push toward Freetown. They had already reached Waterloo, barely ten miles from Hastings, Freetown's other airport. If they achieved a breakthrough there, their chances of reaching the city proper were much improved. Clearly there would have been very little standing in their way because the regular army—such as it was—was already overextended.

It was touch and go for several days. The extent of the fighting can be gauged from the fact that the Guinea contingent attached to the multi-national ECOMOG force had deployed a squadron of Russian-built T-55 tanks and they were almost overrun. From the start it was a hard fight to keep the place, and both sides took heavy casualties.

Nellis was called upon to haul an ammunition re-supply to a battalion from the Guinea Republic and though fighting was heavy, there was no arguing. What it meant was taking the Hind into a dicey situation about which no one could tell him much of anything. Added to that, Nellis could speak no French and the Guineans couldn't, or possibly wouldn't, comprehend any English. Looking back, he agrees that it was a recipe for disaster.

"I asked for a sitrep[2] on their status and what the rebels were doing. Headquarters came back on the radio and said that all was 'Charlie Charlie'—in other words, cool and calm." At this point Nellis laughed nervously and continued: "My experience over previous weeks was that when anybody reported cool and calm it meant that their faces were cool from the wind while running away from battle. Calm came when whoever was doing the reporting got to an area where there was no fighting!"

Normally "Bokkie"—the Mi-17—had a Guinean liaison officer named Benson who flew onboard whenever the Air Wing re-supplied positions held by Conakry's soldiers. On that day though, when Nellis suggested that he should go with them, he suddenly found a dozen excuses for not flying, including having to see his dentist. "I smelt a rat," Nellis recalled.

"So we took off, anyway, the Hip loaded to the max with ammunition and a nagging suspicion that there was something not quite right. Still, we couldn't ignore that they'd said it was fine and who knows, perhaps it was."

Nellis knew that fairly often government or ECOMOG troops working in the interior were not always as forthright as they might have been while under attack. "They would be cagey about the real situation, which might give them a better chance of getting what they had asked for," explained the South African pilot. "Fred suggested that that was possibly to be expected."

Nellis was more circumspect. In his view they were exposed to real danger on just about every flight, and it wasn't necessary to compound issues by lying. In this case, though, it was a short hop across the hills and anyway, he had been into that particular LZ before without problems. He hoped they'd be in and out before anybody knew they'd arrived. The problem with Waterloo was that it lay between a succession of hills, so there was only one route in and out of the place, and that was directly over the town itself. If the rebels were in the area—as we expected them to be—there would be a tough reception.

An interesting sidelight to the sortie was that a short while before, the crew had to fork out their own money to buy new flying helmets, which was fine because they were state-of-the-art Gentex and had come from ICI in a barter deal. In contrast, if it had been government money, they would probably have gotten cheaper models. Nellis found that while the new helmets were the best things that had happened since the invention of the hamburger, they tended to deaden external noise, especially the crack of bullets passing close by.

"The sound of a near-miss is quite distinctive," he said, describing it as being a bit like a room full of typists madly banging away at their machines.

"This time, on short finals, I heard the sound of firing, but I wasn't too sure because Gentex helmets are super efficient. I asked Fred if the rebels were shooting at us. In reply to what was obviously a very stupid question—we could see the bastards running around all over the place with their AK's pointing at us—Fred's answer was, 'No Nellis, it's the radio crackling.'

"At least someone had a sense of humor. There was no going back, especially with three tons of ammo on board. So it was a question of ignoring incoming and concentrating on getting the old girl's wheels onto the ground."

As the South African tells it, the surface of the LZ had been churned into a fine powder by Guinean tanks, which wasn't helped by a helicopter coming into the hover. The rotors kicked up a brownout, which was both good and bad: Nellis couldn't see a thing, but neither could the enemy. Once down, nobody showed up to help the crew unload. Everybody around them was in the throes of a fierce exchange and, as with Makeni, none of the troops would leave their trenches to help.

"After a while a couple of soldiers did come up and they gave Fred and Mohammed a hand, but it was tense," continued Nellis. "Again, one of my fears was that we'd be hit by an RPG. So I kept the rotors going and anyway, dust was what we needed just then to obscure our goings-on from the people who were firing at us. In any other circumstance, we'd have made a damn good target."

Getting the load away took longer than the crew would have liked. As he recalled, "Everybody onboard was blinded by the fine dust that the rotors whipped up. We were worried too that somebody would walk into our tail rotor. If that happened we wouldn't have been able to fly out, not with damaged tail rotor blades." Once that

task was finished, Nellis again had to pass once through a curtain of small arms fire to get clear. Fred, meanwhile, kept on doing his own thing, including dropping a rebel armed with an RPG pointed at the helicopter.

"We were flying through transition and moving relatively slowly," remembered Nellis. "He slotted the bastard just as he was about to pull the trigger." It must have been close, he admits.

There were several issues that continued to disturb those countries willing to provide the wherewithal to the Sierra Leone Army in its efforts to fight the rebels.

One of the immediate concerns of British officers seconded to the Sierra Leone Army was that nobody really knew how many of the enemy there were. Nor could Freetown's government answer questions about its own strength, except that by the time British units arrived it was budgeting for four thousand bags of rice a month to feed the force. One bag of rice feeds three soldiers for one month. It was widely accepted that the total was inflated by about a third, with senior officers pocketing the excess.

The same applied to ammunition. Nobody at Army headquarters took the trouble to plan for future needs. The British couldn't do it because it wasn't their war. Anyway, they were assigned to training, not operations. I would sit in the ops center and listen every other day to Nellis rail about the shortage of rockets and 12.7mm cartridges. As a result, much of our activity was dictated by what was left in the headquarters' magazines below the main building. It got so bad toward the end of my trip that in the latter phase, Air Wing's stocks had to be carefully monitored if the Hinds were to fly at all.

Three or four operational missions a day, at 64 rockets a sortie, gobbled up a lot of what was there. And it was almost a full-time job preparing new batches between flights. As Nellis started using up his supplies of 57mm projectiles, he was obliged to revert to the Air Wing's second Hind with its 80mm pods.

Six weeks after the start of the rebel offensive in 2000, things started to get serious. One letter would follow another to the CDS's office upstairs warning about shortages that were becoming imminent. Resupply, Nellis warned, wasn't something that could be done at short notice. Tenders had to be sought from arms dealers as well as governments abroad, and these needed to be weighed and tested. Only then could decisions be made on the basis of price, quality, availability, reli-

ability of delivery and so on. When a source was eventually awarded a contract, there would be more haggling. The process was inevitably slowed because someone involved usually tried for a kickback or two. In addition, the stuff had to be freighted. The process could take months.

The result was that, twice following the May 2000 rebel incursions, the army didn't have enough ammunition to re-supply some of its garrisons in the interior. Several strategic strongpoints were lost because troops had to be pulled out when they were unable to counter rebel firepower. There were also times, largely at the urging of senior military staff attached to the British High Commission, that emergency stocks had to be rushed to Lungi by air from Britain.

It says something for those in London who recognized Sierra Leone's plight. They had no need to do so. Starving millions in Kenya were just as much a priority as the kinds of problems being experienced by this small but beleaguered West African state. At the end of it though, it was possibly the combined roles of Libya's Gadhaffi and Charles Taylor, the Liberian war lord, that forced London' hand—that and an incipient threat that indicated an al-Qaeda presence among some of those who were dealing in diamonds in Sierra Leone.

The bottom line was that the worst threat came from those abroad who were supplying the rebels with weapons and ammunition, and in this regard, the presidents of Libya and Liberia were well to the fore. By then the West was aware that if Gadhaffi and Taylor were allowed to get away with what they had stage-managed in Sierra Leone, there was no guessing where they would next try to ferment trouble. As it stood, parts of Guinea (which fringes on both Sierra Leone and Liberia) devolved into anarchy by early 2001. The Ivory Coast followed soon afterward.

Nellis' Air Wing faced many technical problems during the short while that I was there. As time passed, and with no money coming in, it gradually became more difficult to keep both Hinds airborne. As it was, there were some parts that Sindaba and his team cannibalized from another Hind in order to get Nellis' machine into the air. There were also problems with some of the Mi-24's weapons systems. They constantly acted up. There was barely a flight when the Gatling didn't jam, and even though I had been briefed how to get it going again from my seat under the gunner's bubble, this didn't always work. Because of this, the multi-barrelled 12.7mm needed much more attention than might have been accorded most heavy weapons. After each

flight, every one of its parts had to be dismantled and washed down with aviation fuel and oiled. Before that could be done, its breeches had to be cleared and carefully checked.

The ground crew also needed to be certain that there wasn't something up the spout. But it didn't always happen the way the instruction book said it should. Once it was established that there was a round jammed in the breech, the entire barrel assembly had to be taken to the armory and mechanically cleared.

Twice while at Cockerill, the walls of the ops room were rattled by accidental discharges. The second time, a 12.7mm round went all the way through the concrete wall of the armory. Luckily there were no casualties in an area where there were usually soldiers loitering. We had no idea what its trajectory might have been, except that it must have missed the second Hind by a coat of paint. We searched an hour for holes in the fuselage and found none. Lucky!

While the 12.7mm Gatling installed in the Hind had a service life of about ten thousand rounds—when the service manual said it was supposed to be removed and destroyed—"Ours already had double that number of rounds through them. Consequently I didn't always shoot as straight as I would have liked," commented the South African.

Flying in the nose of the Mi-24 gunship can become addictive. Once Fred Marafano had gone to London on leave, I moved into the front bubble and remained there on the Air Wing's missions until the end of my stay. Nellis relented only when Tom Carew, the CDS, ordered a strike on Makeni and after I'd argued that whatever articles I was going to produce needed pictures.

The move to the chopper's nose was an entirely different experience from before, but at least I felt more secure there than at the back. Where the Mi-24 had an advantage was that its cockpit is enclosed in a titanium armor-plated capsule. Though a large caliber AP might pass right through it (and you), the armor did give some comfort of mind, even though we were aware that there was a sprinkling of large-caliber guns among the rebels. It was easy to spot them: quad-barreled ZPU 14.7 triple-A muzzles emit brilliant Christmas tree-shaped flames, sometimes ten or twelve feet long that you could see for miles. That's scary when somebody is aiming these things at you.

What we tended to look for were not only the distinctive signatures of tracers—green, in the case of former Eastern Bloc AK fire and

red with 14.7 tracers—but also telltale muzzle-blasts on the ground. The pink, two-meter-long pencil-thin sheet of flame emitted by the 14.5, for instance, was unmistakable, even during daylight hours.

The first time Nellis mentioned these specifics was after somebody had hurled something heavy at us in Bendugu, one of the towns we strafed. He recognized it immediately.

"Twelve-seven," he shouted harshly. "To port, eleven o'clock."

I asked him afterward how he could be so certain that it was a Dshka. "What do you think, Venter? Those bastards have used them against me often enough!" He softened the retort by adding that with the experience he'd gained over the years, he could recognize them well enough.

About the time that I arrived in Freetown in the summer of 2000, there had been a spate of intelligence reports about the rebels deploying what the boffins called "operational" SAMs, or, in officialese, Manpads. Everybody was aware that there were Strelas (SAM-7s) in the region, the majority of which had been acquired illegally from the Ukraine. The word was that few had been completely assembled to include the most vital component of all: their trigger actions. Without them, obviously, these systems wouldn't work.

The missile customarily operates in a predetermined manner. Each SAM-7 is powered by its own battery that is linked to the trigger mechanism and is customarily kept separate from the missile. The weapon is only assembled when the operator intends to use it. Once the launcher has been switched on, you either use it or discard it. There is no going back. Later, more advanced Manpad versions have overcome this and other hurdles.

Essentially, it works like this: once an aircraft or a helicopter comes into view, the operator "locks on" to his target. He knows that this is achieved when the device emits a distinctive growling sound. Only then can he fire. The difficulty is that there are several stages to the process. The rigmarole involved can take a little while, and is one of the reasons why it's so difficult to use SAMs in areas with no clear field of vision. These missiles are almost useless in regions overgrown with trees or foliage, a category that includes almost all of Sierra Leone. This is why Nellis almost always flew low, practically scraping the treetops of the jungle.

Like everybody else in ops, I followed rebel radio intercepts with interest. This one came in after the Makeni raid:

Fm—c/s Pompay (Sparrow)
To—c/s Mike Mike (Daru)
Subject—Emphasy dated today 10/6/00

Ref my message this 1830 hrs to be relayed to c/s Satellite (Emperor). You are to ensure that they get the message today and to immediately dispatch the required items very fast. Otherwise let them be prepared to receive us at their point (Koidu Town). And let them also find experts for the trigger.

For easy reference, the radio room italicized the origins of the various call signs. Also, the intercept had been given a daytime reference number by air operations staff. This one had come in at 1948 hours on June 10, and we deduced that it referred to SAMs. That was the good news, a source at the High Commission explained. While the rebels had deployed ground-to-air missiles, their trigger mechanisms hadn't been part of the package. A crucial tactical element had been revealed by this intercept, and it pleased Nellis.

More worrying were other intelligence reports—coupled to what came in with more than a single defector—that mentioned missile triggers. Most claimed they were either already in the hands of "experts" or that they would be, in short order. It seemed that the main body of the launcher and its trigger, either by design or by accident, were never in the same place at the same time.

Issuing the weapon without being able to fire it didn't make sense. Some of the British officers felt that while some SAMs—particularly in and around the diamond fields—were possibly armed, Sankoh's rebels were holding most of them in reserve for the anticipated government push on Kono. If that happened, they said, they would definitely be used offensively. Also, the Kono region was fairly open country, and thus optimum for Strelas.

In any event, explained Nellis, the Kono region just then was nowhere near our area of operations. Koidu town, he intimated, was well prepared for an air strike and he wasn't prepared to try his luck, though he apparently did shortly after I left Freetown—three times, in fact, he told me afterward. Meanwhile, there were a lot of other things that demanded his attention.

Of prime importance to the head of the Air Wing, was whether the Hind faced the older Strela versions of the ground-to-air missile or the newer, more sophisticated SAM-14/16, or Gremlins. Later versions were fitted with more sophisticated homing devices that included

proximity fuses. Unlike the SAM-7, they weren't solely dependent on infrared.

"I know I can cope with sevens," Nellis confidently told me when discussing the threat. But he wasn't at all confident about some of the later versions, or what was coming out of China. The British military advisory team at Cockerill shared his view. Thus, in mid-July, when RAF Chinooks burst onto Kailahun to rescue the more than two hundred United Nations peacekeepers who had been held for ten weeks by the RUF, they and their Indian Air Force Hind counterparts fired anti-missile flares like a 4th of July fireworks display.

Apart from daily search and destroy sorties against known enemy positions, Neall Ellis targeted regional rebel headquarters in half-a-dozen locations. Our strike on the regional capital in Makeni that day, however, was different. Normally, with me sitting in the gunner's seat in the nose, that should have been my job. But I remained the neutral observer for the duration.

Having returned to London afterward, one of the first questions I was asked by Clifford Beal, editor of *Jane' Defence Weekly*, was whether I had, as he phrased it, "crossed the line."

Obviously I hadn't, for the simple reason that military correspondents simply cannot do so. One has to remain aloof, and anyway it is not considered ethical. Should a correspondent identify with hostilities —one side or the other—he becomes a participant, though to be fair there are times when the distinction between right and wrong in a conflict becomes so smudged as to be irrelevant. Sierra Leone's bitter, brutal conflict wasn't one of them.[3]

So it went. Nellis or one of the gunners would spot something on the ground and we'd bank and go in, usually firing rockets the first time round. His accuracy was unerring. Interestingly, though both Mi-24s had less than 100 hours on the clock since their last overhauls, there was also an older, third Hind waiting for an overhaul at Lungi. But the government had no money for that craft. So it sat out the war gathering dust while Nellis' "Bokkie"—the veteran Mi-17—was used by he and Hassan to haul almost a thousand refugees out of Freetown across the bay to safety.

Something of a more personal nature bothered me for some of the time that I was flying up front: leg cramps, or to be more precise, muscle seizures that could practically make a grown man cry. For the duration of any flight we sat cooped up under the bubble, sometimes for two or more hours at a stretch. Strapped down in that confined space,

we were never able to relax. In fact, it was such a close fit that it was hardly possible to move your butt, never mind stretch a leg.

Three days after arriving in Sierra Leone I ate something bad, which was hardly unusual in a society where health controls went out the window with the last elected government in the 1970s. It was serious enough to put me out of action for a day or two, and one of the immediate side effects was cramps. These powerful, constricting pains caused me to double up in agony. It didn't occur often, but when it did, everybody would know about it.

When I finally did fly again, it wasn't until I was strapped in and Nellis had started to wind her up that I remembered my dilemma. With horror, I realized that I wouldn't be able to move my legs if it happened. But I was spared that drama and things got better with time. Nellis had warned earlier that I'd have to live with it. "I can't have you unstrapping in the middle of a sortie," he warned. "I might have to take evasive action. Or the chopper could buck and you could fall on the stick," he said seriously. Traveling at treetop height meant that any maneuver had to be immediate. "There' no time for error," he added grimly.

Nellis and I were almost killed on one of my last nights in Freetown, ironically on the ground. It was a close call and the cause, as with most things in wartime, was communications—or rather the lack thereof. It's also a truism that the majority of people who are shot at military checkpoints are not intentionally killed.

We were stopped at a roadblock manned by Nigerian troops after having had a farewell dinner with Hassan and his friends in another part of town. It was a long trek home before the curfew came into effect, and it irked us that we had to wait in line for almost half an hour. Obviously, there was something up. The Nigerians manning the barriers were edgy and, as we had all discovered a long time before, Nigerians can be dangerously dysfunctional. This is especially true after dark when there's liquor and drugs about, which, in West Africa, was often.

These troops moved along our line of cars in varying states of agitation, some of them aggressively brandishing firearms and shouting orders in barely comprehensible English. What was also worrying was that they made a lot of people get out of their cars and some of them were subjected to body searches. It was probably weapons they were after, we concluded. Or maybe they had earlier caught someone with

a pile of them, which would have explained their edginess.

That night, though, the majority of these troops—half-stoned and glassy-eyed—were more than their usual abrasive selves. In uniform, these West African soldiers can be as cocky as hell, and even more so when armed. I lived for almost a year at Apapa, a Lagos suburb, and was able to view the country and its people from up close, so this was nothing new. These days, however, I prefer to give Nigeria a miss.

In any event, it took a while before our turn came. Nellis, thinking the officer had recognized him and waved him on—he does the trip twice a day and has a nodding acquaintance with most of the security people in the city—put his car into gear and started to move ahead. Just then another Nigerian soldier hurled himself out of a grove of bushes lining the road. "Halt!" he called out hoarsely. "You stop!" he screamed, raising his FN.

"Didn't you hear your officer?" Nellis said quietly to the man. It's difficult to rattle that aviator, even in a tight situation. "He said we could go." I could see that even while this discussion continued, the momentum of our rig was carrying us forward.

Annoyed at having a white man disregard his orders, and perhaps a little confused by Nellis' defiance, the soldier jumped in front of us, his knees almost touching our bumper. With that, he put his weapon to his shoulder and leveled it at the driver's head. I was sitting in the back seat and I would probably have been directly in line had he fired. Nellis by now had fortunately put his foot on the brake, more in fear of running over the soldier than in any act of compliance. But we still hadn't come to a complete stop.

One hand out the window, the South African pilot remonstrated. "I've been told by your officer that I can go." He neither acquiesced nor was he disrespectful. It was a statement of fact.

A moment of indecision on the other man's part probably saved our lives. In his befuddled mind—we saw as we pulled away that he was unsteady on his feet—he'd perceived that we were trying to avoid the search. If he had pulled the trigger, he'd probably have gotten away with it. Seconds later, he stepped back and ran to a sandbagged position about twenty yards ahead. There he turned, his gun still pointing in our direction.

Nellis swung around in his seat to look at me but said nothing. There was no reason for any of it, but he wasn't going to do something stupid: not at that time of night and certainly not on the streets of Freetown.

It took a while for it all to be resolved. The police arrived, and since there wasn't one of them who didn't immediately recognize the only helicopter gunship pilot in the country, they didn't even glance at his military pass that allowed us to have weapons on board. We had Nellis' 9mm pistol, the minuscule Czech submachine gun that he normally took flying with him, and an AK-47 he routinely kept in his car. After speaking to the checkpoint commander, the police told us we could go.

It was then, after five weeks of flying with the Air Wing, that I finally felt that perhaps it was time to head home. Sierra Leone was starting to get to me.