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the battle in bangui

the untold inside story

HELMOED HEITMAN

THE BATTLE IN BANGUI: THE UNTOLD INSIDE STORY

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By Helmoed Römer Heitman

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Helmoed worked with the non-statutory forces and political parties in the run up to the 1996 Defence White paper, and worked on the 1998 Defence Review. He has since worked with the SA Army Vision 2020 team, advised the Navy on the potential of large multi-role vessels and developed a new wing structure for the Air Force. He served on the Resource Group of the Defence Review Committee from 2011 to 2013. Helmoed holds Economics and Public Administration degrees from the University of Cape Town, an MA in War Studies from King's College, University of London and Management Diplomas from Stellenbosch University's Graduate School of Business, and passed the junior staff course of the SA Army College. He has written six books and three minor titles on defence matters, drawn up more than 120 papers and studies, presented papers at more than sixty defence conferences and published more than 500 articles on defence matters in defence journals, other periodicals and newspapers in South Africa and in other countries.

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Contents

A hard fight.....	6
What were South African soldiers doing in the CAR?.....	8
Zuma’s choice	12
Should South Africa have sent a stronger force?	17
The Deployment.....	21
Battle is joined	25
Lessons Learned.....	36

CHAPTER ONE

A hard fight

From just after 16:00 on Friday 22 March until about 21:00 on Sunday 24 March, about 200 South African soldiers fought a series of running battles outside Bangui in the Central African Republic (CAR) against a well-armed Seleka force of several thousand, that has since been estimated at between 4 000 and 7 000. And they did so while the CAR Army (*Forces armées centrafricaines* or FACA) evaporated around them and the peacekeeping forces of Multinational Force of Central Africa (FOMAC) disappeared from the scene.

In the process the soldiers fired off more than 12 000 rounds of 12.7 mm machinegun ammunition¹, more than 60 rockets from 107 mm rocket launchers² and 200 bombs from 81 mm mortars³, and thousands of rounds from 7.62 mm machineguns and 5.56 mm rifles. In all, they would appear to have used some ten tons of assorted munitions.

In all, the fight cost 13 killed and 27 wounded. But the force retained its cohesion throughout and was able to fall back from two separate engagement areas to its base and to hold it until their attackers gave up trying to overrun them, offering, instead, a ceasefire and disengagement. By then they had suffered as many as 800 killed, according to the estimates of officers with considerable operational experience and by some NGOs in the country. Later reports say several hundred more may have died of wounds due to a lack of medical support.

It helps to put those figures in perspective: the British Army's 3rd Parachute Battalion regards its deployment in Afghanistan's Helmand province for six months in 2006 as a hard fought deployment. Over that time, its battle group of 1 200 soldiers, lost 15 killed and 46 wounded, and fired 479 000 rounds of ammunition, all the while supported by light tanks, artillery, attack helicopters, Hercules gunships and fighters.

¹ Fired by the 12.7 mm calibre heavy machinegun, which has a range of 1 800 m. Can destroy light vehicles and penetrate light cover, such as a lightly-built structure.

² Lightweight, multi-barrel launcher that fires 18.8 kg rockets to a range of 8 000 m; can be used in a direct fire role in an emergency. These are Chinese weapons originally captured in Angola and kept in service, mainly with the Special Forces.

³ The South African 81 mm M8 mortar fires various bombs to a range of 7 000 m. It is a high-angle weapon designed to engage targets behind cover.

This was one of the hardest-fought actions that the South African military have ever experienced, and the soldiers fought well, even outstandingly. That is not only reflected in the fact that this small force retained cohesion to the end of the action, but also in the casualties that it inflicted on its opponents. Their valour was underlined by the French force at Bangui airport when it held a formal parade to bid farewell to those who had fallen.

South Africa has since withdrawn its small force in the CAR following the fall of its government. The South African government had wanted to relieve the troops and deploy a stronger force to stabilise the situation pending a decision by the African Union, but the French commander at Bangui airport, the only viable airport for such a force rotation, had no mandate to permit the deployment of new South African forces through the airport.

This description of the events leading up to the fighting on 22 and 23 March and of the actual combat is based on the information to hand in the days immediately after those events. It presents what we believe is a generally accurate picture as experienced and reported by the South African force in the CAR, but does not pretend to be the final analysis of those events. That must await a full debrief of the personnel involved and, preferably, also of the opposing forces and neutral observers. This initial analysis is an effort to provide some insight beyond what has become available in the general press, and to provide a basis for further discussion and later analysis.



The parade for the fallen paratroopers being flown back to South Africa, South African troops on the right. SOURCE: SANDF

CHAPTER TWO

What were South African soldiers doing in the CAR?

The formal basis for deploying an SANDF contingent to the CAR in January 2013, was a defence co-operation agreement signed on 11 February 2007, which provided for “co-operation on peace and stability and the training and capacity building of military personnel through the exchange of trainees, instructors and observers”. While this MoU preceded it, it was in line with the 2007 decision of the African Union’s Peace and Security Council that African states should assist the CAR in “the consolidation of peace and security”.

The first time the Defence Force heard of the mooted defence cooperation agreement was two months before, in December 2006, when the Chief of the Defence Force called in several officers of the Joint Operations to inform them that President Mbeki had been approached at an African Union meeting by President Bozize of the CAR, who had asked that South Africa help reduce his country’s dependence on France. Apparently Bozize wanted both military assistance and business investment in his country. Mbeki tasked the Defence Ministry to investigate what could be done, and a team of officers was sent to Bangui for discussions with the CAR’s government. There they were presented with a list of the defence assistance Bozize was seeking, but it was well in excess of what South Africa could provide. Bozize also stressed that he wanted South African business involvement to help develop his country, arguing that the French were treating the CAR as a colony and only interested in control over its mineral assets.

Matters then dragged on for a time, with the Defence Force not keen on involvement in the CAR, and its leadership arguing that it was itself under-funded and in no position to assist others. The Secretary for Defence, however, pressed the Defence Force to get on with things as this was a decision by the President and an instruction from the Ministry. Meanwhile, efforts to draw in the Department of Trade and Industry and other government departments proved largely unsuccessful, with none showing much interest in either the CAR or in using it as a ‘launch pad’ into the economic community of central African states, known as CEMAC (in French) or ECCAS (in English), as proposed by Bozize.

What finally resulted from the extended discussions was a decision to provide a close protection team for President Bozize until a local team could be trained (which had been done by 2008), to provide some training in the CAR and in South Africa, and to provide some surplus equipment. This would be donated from Defence Force reserve stocks, but the CAR would fund the refurbishment and the transport to the CAR. Despite the agreement, this never happened, however, and no major items were ever transferred, other than one or two Ratel-90s⁴ (minus some equipment) that were used for local training purposes.

The training in the CAR centred on a training team in Bangui and another at Bouar, a former French colonial officer training centre that was refurbished for the purpose. It focussed on training junior leaders to combat team level and on training soldiers in a range of specialities from chef to mechanic. The programme, however, was plagued by poor administration on the CAR side, and only trained some 1 300 FACA soldiers.

There has been much discussion around the reason for this agreement being entered into at all, with allegations of political business interests. But whatever dealings there might have been on the side, they were not visible to the officers who were tasked with exploring what assistance could be offered, planning its delivery, and then running the training programme. Insofar as some of them may have had doubts, they also had to admit that there was a good strategic rationale for building contacts in a country bordering on the DRC, and the more so one in which there seemed to be long term economic potential for South Africa. The military is, after, all just one tool of state.

*

The CAR has been plagued by internal and cross-border conflict since independence. Its first democratically elected president, Angé-Felix Patassé was elected in 1993, but lost popularity and, after several mutinies and attempted *coups d'état*, was overthrown by then General Francois Bozize who had the explicit backing of Chad and Sudan and the implicit support of France. Bozize went on to win an election in 2005 and again in 2011, although there were doubts about the veracity of that election. But Bozize could not bring the country to prosperity, nor quell the unrest and banditry in the north and east of the country.

In 2004, there had been an attack on Birao, the capital of the Vakaga province in the north-east of the country, and instability there and along parts of the border with Chad has been a problem since then. In November 2006 the *Union des Forces Democratiques Pour le Rassemblement* (UFDR) launched a major rebellion in the Vakaga province, also seizing several towns to its west and south, with the situation further complicated by a cross-border raid into the CAR by Chad forces.

⁴ The Ratel-90 is the fire support variant of the SA Army's infantry combat vehicle developed in the 1970s. Armed with a 90 mm gun useful against bunkers, light armoured vehicles and troops in buildings or in the open.

This rebellion was brought to a close after French forces stationed in the CAR and in Chad intervened, carrying out an air attack on the UFDR's headquarters in Birao and an air assault operation to recapture the airfield and the town. The UFDR then signed a peace agreement with the government on 1 April 2007. This provided for its recognition as a political party and the integration of its fighters into the army. Another rebel group, the Democratic Front of the Central African People (FDPC), had signed a similar agreement on 2 February and the People's Army for the Restoration of Democracy (APRD) signed a peace agreement on 9 May 2008. In spite of this, other groups remained in rebellion and the Vakaga province remained unstable, partly because it was being used as an infiltration route by Chadian guerrillas moving from Sudan into Chad.

These separate peace agreements were combined into a single agreement after talks in Gabon, which resulted in the Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed on 21 June 2008. Some lower-level conflict continued, however, including clashes between the UFDR and the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP) over control of diamond fields in the west of the country. After an initial agreement between those two groups, the CPJP finally acceded to the Libreville agreement a few months later. But the hoped for peace did not last: on 15 September 2008 a dissident faction of the CPJP – the 'Fundamental CPJP' – claimed responsibility for brief attacks on Sibut, Damara and Dekoa, and several more attacks followed in November.

*

The rebel offensive in the CAR in December 2012 caught most observers off guard. Not so much the fact of rebel activity – the CAR has long been unstable and has also served as a transit route for other's guerrillas – and so one more round of rebellion was no surprise. What did surprise was the determination and speed with which the offensive was carried out, which far surpassed anything they had been capable of in the past. With little warning, Seleka, the rebel group formed around the UFDR, took Ndele, Quadda and Sam Ouadja on 10 December. This was no more than the UFDR had achieved in November of 2006, but this time they thrust west at a very respectable pace: Banmingui on the 15th, Bria on the 18th, Kabo on the 19th, Batangafo and Ippy on the 21st, Bambari on the 23rd, Kaga-Bandoro on the 25th and Sidut on the 29th; two forces each covering some 500 km over very poor roads taking effective control of two-thirds of the CAR in just 19 days. On 5 January they took Kouango on the Congo River, blocking the RN8 from the south, and Alindao, a river crossing on the RN2/9, blocking movement from the south-east.

One interesting aspect of the advance is that Seleka took Kabo on the 19th, the day after Chad announced that it had deployed troops to support the CAR government, and Batangafo on the 21st, apparently to block movement from Chad along the RN4 and RN8. But those two successes present a puzzle: unless those towns were taken by local forces, the Seleka force involved must have used the same route supposedly being used at the same time by the Chad

Army contingent that was being deployed to support – or so it was claimed – the CAR government.

The speed of their advance and the thought behind the operation both suggest that the guerrillas' capabilities had improved greatly. That raises the question of who has been training them. A good first guess would be Sudan, which has supported both CAR and Chad rebels for many years, and which then had troops deployed in the CAR's north-eastern Vakaga province, ostensibly to hunt down the Lord's Resistance Army, actually another long-time client force of Khartoum.

Meanwhile FACA, admittedly very small and poorly equipped, seems to have simply withdrawn ahead of the rebels after only the briefest of fighting, and sometimes even before rebel forces arrived. The peacekeeping force – MICOPAX⁵ – deployed under the auspices of the Economic Community of Central African States, also failed to stop or even slow down the rebels, although one must be fair and accept that it had a very small military footprint in the CAR with only around 400 soldiers.

⁵ Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in the Central African Republic. It is led by the Economic Community of West African States, and established on 12 July 2008 after the signing of the peace agreement in June.

CHAPTER THREE

Zuma's choice

By 25 December the South African intelligence services warned that there might be a danger to the 28-strong training team in the CAR, which was divided between bases at Bangui and at Bouar, 370 km to the north-west. The warning was general, however, and accompanied by an assessment that the threat was probably low – the rebels were believed to number between 1 000 and 1 200 and were considered to be poorly armed and trained; the assessment was that they were unlikely to reach Bangui. While there was the example of the past poor performance of rebels in the CAR, this assessment does seem to have been over-optimistic in the face of the rebel advance over the previous two weeks.

Whatever the merits of the assessment, the warning led to a discussion of options at the Joint Operations headquarters outside Pretoria. Based solely on tactical considerations, the preferred option that emerged was to withdraw the team. There was, however, the matter of several tons of weapons, ammunition and other equipment that had been moved to the CAR for training FACA, which the SANDF was very reluctant to allow to fall into the hands of the rebels. Much of this materiel was stored in the presidential palace in Bangui, however, to which South Africans did not have free access, so it could not be retrieved quickly.

At a strategic level, thought also had to be given to the effect of a withdrawal at the first sign of danger on South Africa's current and future missions in Africa. Such a withdrawal could undermine South Africa's standing as a credible and reliable security partner on the continent. Worse, it could suggest to other rebel or terrorist groups that it might pay to threaten or attack South African contingents in the expectation that they would then promptly be withdrawn; withdrawing under threat might invite further threats and attacks wherever South African soldiers were stationed.

When the rebel forces were clearly approaching Bangui towards the end of December 2012, President Bozize appealed to South Africa for help, invoking the MoU signed in 2007. He also made the point that promised weapons had never been delivered, and argued that this was partly the reason for the failure of FACA. That request placed President Zuma in something of a quandary:

South Africa had a military assistance agreement with the CAR and, while this might not have included mutual aid, many would interpret it as providing for exactly that. Declining to help Bozize would look like South Africa reneging on a formal agreement at the first sign of trouble – hardly the image South Africa wanted going around at a time when it had recently campaigned for the chair of the African Union Commission and is presenting itself as being the natural choice for a future permanent African seat in the United Nations Security Council.

Having won the chair of the African Union Commission, South Africa would be hard put to explain its refusal to help the recognised government of the CAR fend off rebels intent on seizing power when it has – or appears to have – the military capacity to do so. After all, the AU that South Africa helped establish has very specifically stated that it will not accept the outcome of a *coup d'état* or similar seizure of power.

Apart from those essentially foreign policy concerns, there were also strategic issues at stake:

The rebel group Seleka is hardly a homogenous body, and was likely to fracture shortly after seizing power, which would result in the country being even less stable than before.

The CAR has a 1 577 km long border with the DRC, and a collapse of security in the CAR would almost certainly spill over to the fragile northern region of its neighbour. The DRC is also a member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), an organisation whose charter provides for mutual security obligations.

Worse, a CAR controlled by Sudan, long a supporter of rebels in the CAR and elsewhere, would enable it to again support Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) guerrillas seeking to attack Uganda from the DRC. That could trigger cross-border operations by Uganda, potentially leading to the unravelling of the north-east of the DRC, something that would put SANDF troops in neighbouring North Kivu at increased risk.

Similarly, South Africa strongly supported newly independent South Sudan, which Khartoum would dearly like to destabilise, and the 990 km CAR / South Sudan border runs through rugged terrain well suited to infiltration.

More generally, instability in the CAR would also impact on Chad, Cameroon and the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) as it had in the past.

Finally, there was the matter of the training team, along with its equipment and munitions: while evacuating the team would not present any real challenge – apart from the

political cost – it would not be easy to get several tons of equipment and munitions out of the palace and out of the country. This was particularly so if one wanted to avoid causing alarm that might precipitate the crisis.

So there were strong political and strategic reasons for staying in the CAR and, if that proved necessary, perhaps also going directly to the aid of the Bozize government. But against all of this was the fact that the Defence Force, weakened by two decades of under-funding, already committed to two peacekeeping missions (Darfur and the DRC), and recently tasked with border protection (again), would be hard-put to deal with yet another mission, let alone one in a country 3 500 km away. The Army was already over-committed, and the Air Force lacked the strategic lift to deploy a force, let alone to conduct a ‘hot extraction’ if things went wrong. That challenge had just recently surfaced when the M23 rebels in the DRC had moved into Goma, where parts of a South African battalion and some other elements serving with MONUSCO were stationed. Had the rebels chosen to attack the airport where the contingent had its base, there would have been nothing South Africa could have done to support them or to extract them. The lesson of that crisis was missed, however, because someone in the Department of Defence wrongly advised the minister that there was no danger, claiming that that the troops could ‘easily’ be pulled out if necessary.

The Defence Force briefed Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula on 28 December on the situation, setting out the practicable options. Two days later a senior Defence Force team accompanied the minister to Nkandla to brief the President, with the minister telling him that the Defence Force lacked the resources – particularly financial – to take on another mission, and had, in fact, just been warned by the Treasury to expect a further cut to its budget.

After the briefing, President Zuma decided that South Africa must see things through, and could not be seen to ‘run away’ or to simply sacrifice the political investment made since 2007. He went further to say that Africa could not afford yet another round of coups and rebellions such as it experienced in the 1960s and 1970s – “first Mali and now this; it must stop here” – reminding those present of the basic principle of the AU that the illegal seizure of power was not acceptable. If the opposition felt strong enough, he said, they should contest coming elections. It was on this basis that he decided that the training team would remain in the CAR. This would reinforce the point that South Africa remained committed, and that it would resume its work once the situation had been stabilised. It was also decided that a force would be deployed to protect the training team. Accordingly, Defence Minister flew to Bangui on 31 December, with a Special Forces close protection team, to update the MoU with the CAR and establish the facts on the ground, a final decision to follow onto her report.

The immediate question now was to define the mission of the protection force. The mission directive to the force commander was, as declared in the press release at the time, as being to protect South Africa’s interests, and, specifically, to: protect the training team already in the CAR; gain control of the weapons, munitions and equipment already in the CAR for purposes of training, and prevent them falling into rebel hands; and protect any South African citizens who found themselves in danger.

The force commander was also instructed that, should the rebels attack, he should use his force to stiffen the FACA forces to enable them to fight off the rebels.

Since the goal was to bring about a negotiated settlement, the force commander was instructed to keep his troops inside a 15 km radius around Bangui in order to avoid any inadvertent contact with or provocation of the Seleka forces. Seleka were at that time thought to be concentrated in the area of Sibut, 95 km northeast of Damara, where FOMAC had deployed some 450 troops and had declared this position to be a 'red line', saying that any attempt to cross it would be fought off.

Given the mission, the SANDF force had to be deployed promptly and quickly, and it had to have the punch to protect the training team and, if necessary, fight its way out of trouble and evacuate the team and itself – whether through Bangui airport or by crossing to a neighbouring country.

The available intelligence – which may have been correct at one point but which proved to be grossly flawed later – suggested that a small force would be sufficient to deter or deal with the rebels should they behave aggressively towards the South African force. It was decided, therefore, to send a force composed of: a company of paratroopers of 1 Parachute Battalion⁶, with a composite weapons platoon with four 12.7 mm heavy machineguns and four 81 mm mortars, and with seven Gecko⁷ vehicles to transport the heavy weapons and ammunition; a detachment of 5 Special Forces Regiment, with two of its specialised Hornet vehicles⁸ with 12.7 mm machineguns and 107 mm multiple rocket launchers and four Land Cruisers armed with 7.62 mm PKM machineguns; a tactical intelligence team, an electronic intelligence team, some engineers and some signallers; and two Casspir⁹ armoured ambulances and two ordinary ambulances.

The force also acquired five ordinary Land Cruisers and a single 5-ton truck from the South African training team, and provision was made to deploy the remainder of 1 Parachute Battalion if necessary.

This force was considered to be strong enough and well enough armed to protect the training and assistance teams, to carry out an opposed withdrawal of the teams if that became necessary, or to provide a secure foot on the ground to allow the insertion of a stronger force if that became necessary. At the same time it was not so large a force as to appear to be a firm

⁶ 1 Parachute Battalion is the operational unit of 44 Parachute Regiment, essentially an infantry unit made up of some 800 soldiers, trained to be deployed by parachute and to operate independently for a short time until stronger forces can relieve it. Traditionally paratroopers are more intensively trained than other infantry.

⁷ The Gecko is a light eight-wheeled vehicle that can be dropped by parachute and which is intended to move heavy weapons, ammunition and stores off the drop zone and to evacuate casualties to the field dressing station.

⁸ The Hornet is a light 4x4 vehicle with a bullet-proof windscreen and protected engine. Developed for the Special Forces to be delivered by parachute, light transport aircraft or landing craft, and able to be armed with various weapons when used as a weapons carrier.

⁹ The Casspir is a mine-protected armoured personnel carrier used in several variants, including an armoured ambulance for evacuation from the battle area.

commitment to protect the Bozize government come what may or to present an extraction problem if that became necessary.

The thinking seems to have included the idea that even that very small South African force deployed to Bangui, taken together with the 2 000 FACA troops in the Bangui area, the 760 troops from the Central African countries deployed as the FOMAC force to protect Bangui, and the 600 French troops protecting the airport, would suffice to deter the rebels simply driving into Bangui to seize power. And, perhaps to the surprise of some, that is what actually happened: having driven a distance of 500 km over bad roads in 19 days and fought a few, albeit mostly minor, engagements with the FACA, the rebel force stopped north of Damara, and its leaders agreed to enter into negotiations with the Bozize government.

So far so good and, to use a redolent phrase, mission accomplished: to all intents and purposes this was a good example of the carefully tuned use of military power to achieve a political end – an elegant sufficiency of force, one might say.

It may, of course, be that the rebels were not in fact deterred by the prospect of a fight but would have stopped anyway, if only to rest and replenish. But the fact remained that they had stopped and had agreed to talk, and the mission could be chalked up as a success.

CHAPTER FOUR

Should South Africa have sent a stronger force?

Given the events of 22 – 24 March, it is fair to ask not just whether South Africa should have been in the CAR, but, if we had to be there, whether we should not have deployed a stronger force?

In fact, the force commander did request more equipment and firepower, asking for a number of light armoured vehicles – Mamba armoured personnel carriers¹⁰ – to give some manoeuvre capability, and at least a Cessna Caravan¹¹ with day/night cameras to give a basic reconnaissance capability. He also asked for Oryx helicopters¹² for casualty evacuation and some Rooivalk attack helicopters¹³. None of this was forthcoming, with various reasons being proffered for not doing so, from a lack of airlift to fear of escalation.

While hindsight, that perfect analysis tool, suggests that it would have been better to give him what he requested, it's important to take the surrounding circumstances into account.

The available intelligence at the time the decision was taken did not suggest that the rebel forces had any real combat power; nor did their past performance, which, unlike the operations of guerrillas in Chad, had always been pedestrian.

Deploying a stronger or larger force would have implied undertaking to protect the Bozize government regardless, which President Zuma does not seem to have wanted to do.

Looking beyond this, thought, there were – and are – some very real constraints on what the Defence Force can actually do.

¹⁰ The Mamba is a lightly armoured (rifle fire) and mine-protected patrol vehicle that can seat ten.

¹¹ The Caravan is a light utility transport, some of which have been fitted with a day/night camera turret, mainly for border patrol and similar missions. Not really intended for a combat zone, it would still have been an invaluable aid to the force commander.

¹² The Oryx is the standard medium helicopter of the SA Air Force, developed from the Anglo-French Puma to give better performance in hot climates and higher altitudes.

¹³ The Rooivalk is the SA Air Force's attack helicopter. It is armoured against light fire and is armed with a 20 mm cannon and rockets. In the future it will also carry the 10 000 m range Mokopa missile.

The Army would not have been able to provide a stronger force for anything but a very short-duration mission. Indeed, it is already three battalions short of what it needs to meet current commitments.

The Army does not have any easily air-transportable combat vehicles that would have given the force a real edge over 'technical'¹⁴ armed with 14.5 mm machine-guns¹⁵ or 23 mm cannon¹⁶, so even a larger force would have faced something akin to a 'fair fight', which is anathema to most commanders and soldiers and which would have exposed more troops to risks because they would have been more difficult to support or extract.

The Air Force has no heavy lift/long range transport aircraft, and could not have transported heavier equipment, forcing even greater reliance on charter aircraft. Nor does it have any aircraft that can transport a Rooivalk or Oryx helicopter in an operational state. When these are loaded into transport planes, the gearbox must be taken out and reinstalled in the deployment area. This means that another aircraft must fly in the gantry needed and also means a 24 hour delay between the arrival of the helicopter and its deployment in the field.¹⁷

The Air Force has an outstanding fighter in the Gripen and a useable ground-attack aircraft in the Hawk, but has no tanker aircraft. Deploying either type to support an operation in the CAR would have meant landing in another country to refuel.

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The decision to deploy a small protection force to the CAR carried some real risks, as do all military operations. Three of those risks did eventuate, exposing weaknesses in South Africa's regional capabilities:

Taking an 'elegant sufficiency' approach is always a bet that carries some risk if the opposing force is not impressed. Seleka were not, whether because they saw the South African force as too weak to be a problem or they believed it would step aside as did FOMAC, is not clear. But the bottom line is they called South Africa's bluff and South Africa was found wanting, unable to reinforce the troops on the ground.

¹⁴ 'Technical' is a term used to describe pick-up *bakkies*, 4x4s and trucks that are armed with machineguns, anti-aircraft cannon (for use as a ground weapon) and sometimes rocket launchers. They are generally used by irregular forces but also by some bandit groups.

¹⁵ The Russian 14.5 mm heavy machinegun has an effective range of 3 000 m. Originally an anti-aircraft weapon, it is extensively used in the ground role and can penetrate the armour of most light- and many medium-armoured vehicles. There are single, twin and four-barrelled versions.

¹⁶ The Russian ZU-23-2 is a twin-barrel 23 mm anti-aircraft gun that has proved lethal to troops and to light vehicles when used in a ground role, and to helicopters. It fires a high-explosive round and has a maximum range of 2 500 m.

¹⁷ The problem here is that the Hercules cargo compartment is simply too low to accommodate these helicopters. The SA Air Force previously used the C-160 Transall for this purpose, which required less work, allowing the helicopter to fly within four hours of delivery. The Transalls were discarded in the 1990s in the belief that South Africa would not be operating in Africa and therefore would not need many transport aircraft.

Another risk lay in the questionable competence and loyalty of FACA, which in the event was found wanting on both counts: FACA troops did nothing to slow the Seleka advance, and many seem to have changed sides rather promptly.

It was risky to assume that the FOMAC force was deployed to the CAR to protect the Bozize government. That should have been confirmed on a country by country basis beforehand. As it was, FOMAC either had orders to stand aside and let Bozize fall or proved singularly incompetent. The decision, quite openly announced by Paris some time previously that the French forces would not protect Bozize, should at the very least have caused questions to be asked how France's allies in this region would be likely to act.

Finally, there does not seem to have been sufficient communication with France to establish their intentions in the CAR.

None of these risks seemed to be very significant at the time the decision to deploy was taken, and the small size of the force made it relatively simple to withdraw if the risk profile changed. But there now appears to have been a clear intelligence failure that resulted in the force being left on the ground when the threat had changed from 1 000 or so armed rabble to a force of 4 000 or even 8 000 irregular troops, many of whom were well trained, armed and equipped, and when the forces it might have expected to support it, evaporated or stood aside.

There were also other risks that are now moot but deserve mention:

The MoU was extended for five years. Did that mean a commitment to deploy troops for that long? If so, in what numbers? The SANDF was already over-stretched and adding another battalion-strength commitment without substantial additional funding would have broken the Army. Was this clear to the minister and the president? This is no longer relevant in relation to the mission in the CAR, but it remains a key question for the future: government must have a clear idea of what the military capabilities of the country are; delusions of grandeur will be costly.

Any extended and expanded deployment should also only have been considered in the context of what is a very complex situation: the CAR does not only present the challenge of government versus rebels, but the additional challenges of other guerrilla groups; Chad-based guerrilla groups (some supported by Sudan) that venture into the CAR as the whim takes them; on-going activities of the LRA; and the operations of Ugandan and other African forces, together with US Special Forces, in the eastern part of the country where they are hunting the LRA. It is not clear whether any of this was considered

before instructing the Defence Force to deploy. Again, perhaps moot now, but a point to bear in mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Deployment

The decisions having been taken, the small South African task group deployed to the CAR on 2 January, with the force commander and some Special Forces the first on the ground. That was a commendably swift response. Embarrassing, however, was that even such a small force could only be deployed by chartering aircraft – hardly what one would expect of a country that presents itself as a regional leader.

On arrival the protection force was allocated a former police training centre on the northern outskirts of Bangui as its base. This was immediately prepared for defence should it become necessary. It was, however, singularly unsuited for defence, being overlooked by high ground to its east, with heavy bush along its western perimeter, and civilian houses to the west and south. There were no clear fields of fire, ample cover for attackers and the risk of inflicting civilian casualties. The force commander also immediately initiated a programme of foot and vehicle patrols to a radius of 15 km around the base to develop a picture of the surroundings and to make contact with the people of the area. Those patrols, it is worth mentioning, were well received by the local residents, because they were perceived to be providing them with more security than they had enjoyed for some time, so the South Africans also quickly established a good rapport with the people. This was to help later, when they were provided with information and also after the battle, when civilians brought in the bodies of some of the fallen paratroopers.

Additional patrols were deployed to establish contact with the FACA and FOMAC forces at Damara to the north, and to Bouar in the west. Developing contingency plans, the commander reconnoitred a number of outlying delaying and defensive positions that would enable him to wear down any attacking force before it could attack the base. He also placed tactical intelligence teams on both the roads leading into Bangui from the north and the west to give him at least some additional early warning.

His concept of operations should fighting break out, was to delay the enemy on two lines – black and green, respectively 28 km and 20 km north of the base – and then to hold at the blue line about 4.5 km north of the base. The base itself was designated the white line, but because of its vulnerabilities, it was not intended as a defensive position. Should it come to the worst, there

was a final defensive position – designated yellow – near the airport. These plans assumed that the FOMAC and FACA forces at Damara, should they fail to hold Seleka there, would be falling back onto these positions where they could fight alongside the South Africans. The western approach, the road from Bossembele, was considered a lesser risk and was to be defended by a FACA battalion. Various evacuation routes were also studied to allow a swift evacuation should that be ordered.

The small training and assistance team at Bouar was withdrawn, to avoid having to protect two bases in towns some 370 km apart. The personnel and most of their equipment were collected by Hercules transports, while some equipment was brought to Bangui by road. The officer commanding the main training team in Bangui decided not to move his personnel and equipment to the base, remaining, instead, in the city. Most of the training team's ammunition, stored in the presidential palace, was, however, moved to the police base being used by the protection force.

While doing all this, the force commander also found himself spread very thin having to deal with tactical and operational details, liaising with FACA, FOMAC and the French, and liaising directly with President Bozize. This was far from ideal, and one lesson to be drawn from this operation is the need for another senior officer or, preferably, a diplomat to handle liaison with the local government, freeing the force commander to focus on his mission. There was also no combined multinational headquarters, which made coordination extremely difficult and was later to prove a major problem as it became impossible to establish who was doing what or what their intentions were.

The rebel reaction to the deployment of the small South African force, whom they denounced as 'mercenaries', was immediate and vituperative; their withdrawal was demanded before any settlement could be reached. It was a response that could be taken as a back-handed compliment to the South Africans, suggesting that the rebels saw them as the only real obstacle in their path. But President Bozize refused to send the South Africans home, pointing out that the rebel statement had referred to foreign forces and that the evidence suggested that many of their own troops were foreign. The South Africans – and FOMAC – would therefore remain unless the rebels shed their foreign personnel. The South African government agreed.

By now it had become clear that one of the senior officers among the rebels was a former Chad Army officer – General Mahamat Nouri – who had defected and formed the Sudan-based Union of Forces for Democracy and Development, and who was the chief planner of the attacks on Ndjamena in 2006 and 2008. That helped to explain Seleka's new-found competence, and, in particular, its ability to conduct so swift an advance. It also meant that Seleka were quite clearly not going to shed their foreign personnel.

Nevertheless, the general situation appeared to be quiet and, by CAR standards, stable: a FOMAC company had deployed some 10 km north of Damara with the task – according to FOMAC commander, Gabonese General Jean Felix Akaga – of stopping or at least delaying any rebel advance, and was backed-up by additional FOMAC and FACA forces deployed around

Damara itself. To the west, a FACA battalion¹⁸ had been deployed to protect the bridge on the road from Bossembele to Bangui, and then there were 2 000 FACA troops – reputedly Bozize’s most loyal fighters – in Bangui itself.

Bangui airport was protected by a French force, which had, however, been run down from 600 to about 250 troops. That presented the French commander with something of a challenge: 250 troops may have been enough to protect an airport, but the force was not large enough to protect French assets in the city and to protect or evacuate more than 1 000 French citizens living there. Nevertheless, it did mean that the airport was secure, although the French commander made it clear that his mandate – and, for that matter, his limited force – did not allow him to offer any support to the South Africans.

While the forces deployed, progress was being made in the negotiations in Gabon which, by 11 January, had produced what seemed to be a workable solution to the political issues facing the country, suggesting that the level of threat had declined appreciably. Accordingly, the South African government decided to leave the training team in the CAR, to resume training the FACA, and to help with the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process as per its original mission. Given that there was still some risk, however, the protection force remained in country.

Some time later, however, President Bozize apparently warned South African officials that he suspected that both France and Chad had decided that his time had come, and that they would side with Seleka or, at best, would stand aside in the event of a Seleka offensive. South African officers already had doubts about Chad’s intentions, having noted that the rebel forces who took Kabo and Batangafo must have moved on the same roads that the Chadian army was using to deploy into the CAR, ostensibly in support of the CAR government.

The Joint Operations headquarters at Pretoria began to consider a force rotation, but a number of minor incidents, together with Seleka complaints that Bozize was not holding to the Libreville agreement, caused concern. This motivated a decision to leave the Special Forces and Paratroopers in place, not least because they were familiar with the area and the situation. Some thought was also given in Pretoria to deploying Gripens with reconnaissance pods to establish what was going on north of Damara, but that would be costly and might also have proved to be provocative, so the plan was shelved.

Meanwhile a rumour of Seleka moving forces west towards Bossembele led the force commander to reconfirm with FACA that they would protect that approach to Bangui. There was also a warning from FACA, which could not be confirmed, that FOMAC vehicles were smuggling Seleka rebels down the road from Damara into Bangui. There were, however, no overt signs of impending trouble.

That, then, was how things stood on 12 March, when Seleka forces broke the cease-fire by attacking and occupying the southern towns of Gambo and Bangassou. On 18 March the five Seleka members of the CAR cabinet, appointed in terms of the 11 January power-sharing

¹⁸ Smaller than an SA Army battalion; probably about 300 to 500 troops.

agreement, failed to return to Bangui after discussions with the rebels' military leadership in Sibut. Seleka demanded the release of prisoners and reiterated their demand for the withdrawal of the South Africans, giving a 72-hour deadline for these demands to be met.

On 22 March, Seleka forces moved out, quickly capturing Damara and Bossangoa on the RN1 from the Chad border via Bossembele to Bangui.

CHAPTER SIX

Battle is joined

With no aerial reconnaissance capability and intelligence limited to what his troops could gather locally, the mission commander's first warning of trouble to come, was a report by the Chad Army company deployed 10 km north of Damara that it had been 'overrun' – albeit without any casualties! There was no word from the remainder of the FOMAC force supposedly holding what its commander had termed 'the red line' that the rebels would not cross. A little while later, the FACA force deployed around Damara reported coming under fire.

The force commander had previously deployed one of his senior officers with a small team to move to the 'black line', to monitor the situation there. They found little to report other than that there was very little traffic by either FACA or FOMAC. On 22 March, they had just returned to the base to replenish, when those reports came in. Suspecting this was another of the many false alarms used by FACA in an effort to draw the South Africans forward to Damara, the force commander decided to treat this as a training opportunity. Telling his troops that this was 'not a rehearsal', he ordered the Special Forces group to move out to the 'black line', 27 km north of the base (35 km by road), as a screening force, accompanying it with his tactical headquarters – a single Land Cruiser accompanied by one of the force's Casspir ambulances. The parachute company was ordered to deploy one of its platoons in the four ex-FACA Land Cruisers to the 'green line' as a delaying force, and to prepare to move the main force to the 'blue line' into defensive positions.



General area: black line, green line and blue line. SOURCE: Google Maps

By 15:00 all was quiet at the 'black line' and no information was forthcoming from FACA or FOMAC in Bangui. He now ordered the Special Forces to reconnoitre towards Damara to establish contact with the FACA commander there and to establish the actual position.

The patrol passed a FACA checkpoint 15 km from Damara, where they were told that all was quiet. About 5 km further on, it encountered some soldiers whom they believed to be FACA (FACA wore various uniforms, making it difficult to identify them positively), who declined a lift but also said that all was quiet.

Just a little further on, the patrol suddenly found itself in the middle of a 300 m long L-ambush¹⁹ by an estimated 200 enemy, with the horizontal stroke of the L behind them, drawing fire from the bush just 10 m from the road and suffering two wounded in the first seconds of the contact, and one soldier suffering the indignity of falling off a vehicle as it swung around to carry out their counter-ambush drills. Lying on the ground with a dislocated shoulder, he saw several of the ambushers among the trees next to the road, shooting two of them before getting back onto the vehicle.

The troops meanwhile had to unhitch the trailers of their vehicles under close fire before they could turn around completely on the narrow road, with the enemy so close that they could throw hand grenades to drive them off. After a 15 minute fire-fight they had suppressed the ambush force and they were able to fight their way clear.

¹⁹ An 'L-ambush' involves the main ambush force in positions parallel to the expected movement of the enemy forces, with a smaller force in positions more or less at 90° to the main line, forming the short stroke of the L. This can be placed to hit the lead elements of the enemy or to block their escape to the rear.

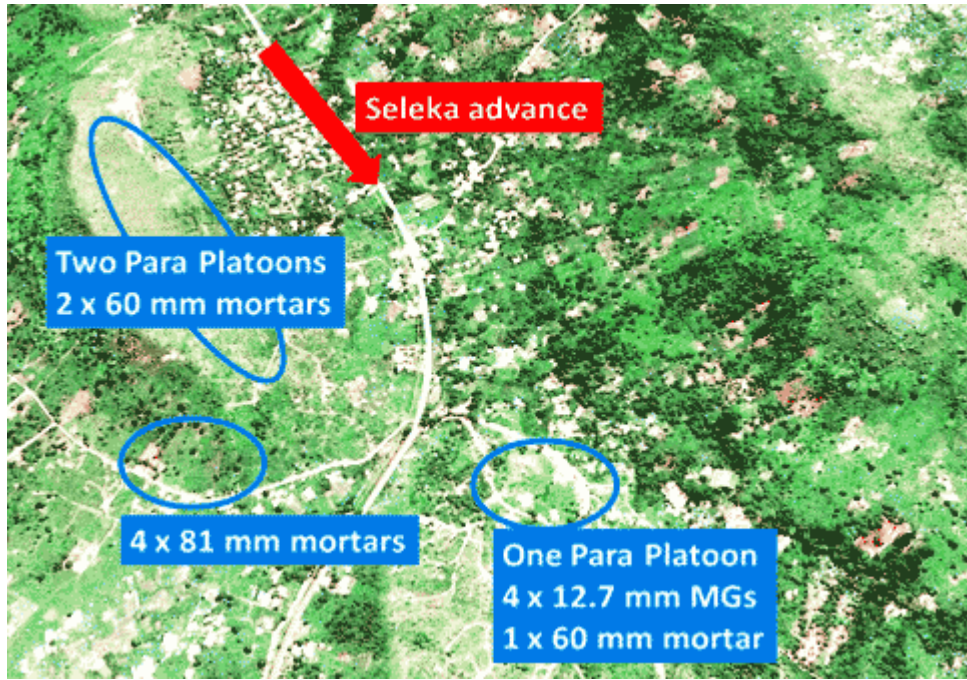
The commander of the Special Forces team reported back that he suspected the FACA checkpoint had warned the ambush force of his approach. He also reported that most of the ambushers seemed to have been well equipped and heavily armed. The patrol meanwhile returned to the base to bring the wounded to the medical aid post and replenish ammunition. The wounded were later evacuated by a contracted medical evacuation aircraft, and were admitted to 1 Military Hospital by 01:00 on Saturday morning.

*

Having ordered the Special Forces group back to the base to replenish ammunition, the force commander moved back to the 'green line', joining the paratroop platoon delaying force there, and ordered the main body of the parachute company to take up positions at the 'blue line'. This they did, using the four available Land Cruisers and their Geckos to move up their heavy weapons and ammunition. The night was, in the words of the force commander, 'too quiet', with no vehicle movement at all along the road.

With nothing to report by 08:00 the next morning, the commander drove to the French Embassy, to reassure himself that the French would secure the airport and allow him to take any casualties there. That assurance was provided, but the French commander reiterated his warning that he would not be able to provide any casualty evacuation transport.

On the way, the commander had dropped off the platoon from the 'green line' and its ambulance at the 'blue line', where the full company was now deployed on high ground to either side of the road, with two 12.7 mm machineguns. One platoon covered the road from high ground that allowed them to shoot down its length, and the other two on the high ground to the west with the road in front of and below them.



SOURCE: Google Maps

When the force commander came out of the French embassy, his signaller reported that the parachute company had reported sounds of fighting to their north and then, at 09:30, reported that they were taking mortar fire.

The force commander immediately drove to the 'blue line' where, by 10:30, the situation had developed into a full-scale attack, supported by mortar fire, heavy machineguns and RPGs²⁰. The two platoons on the western high ground had been forced back to the road, but the other on the eastern feature was holding and still covering the road. One of the Special Forces officers took command of the rocket launchers and mortars and used them to suppress the enemy on the western feature, after which the paratroops were able to retake that position.

The force commander now wanted to use his mobile Special Forces group to drive the enemy further back, but found that the FACA element at the position had parked a bulldozer on the bridge to block it. It took some time to find the driver and move the vehicle, but then the Special Forces began to patrol north to clear the area in front of the position. The force's only 5-ton truck meanwhile brought up ammunition, and a FACA element also arrived, with a single Ratel-90²¹, a BMP²² and some Land Cruisers. They did not, however, stick around for very long.

²⁰ The RPG-7 is a launcher for rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades with an effective range of 200 m. It is also used against personnel and other targets.

²¹ The Ratel-90 is the fire support variant of the Ratel infantry combat vehicle developed for the SA Army in the early 1970s. Two had been supplied to FACA as part of an equipment package, but the remainder had never been delivered. The Ratel-90 is armed with a 90 mm gun useful against bunkers, vehicles and other targets.

²² The BMP is a Russian tracked infantry combat vehicle armed with a 76 mm gun.

At this point, about 14:00, the tactical intelligence team watching the Mpoko River bridge reported that the FACA battalion had decamped and that a major rebel force was moving up to the bridge. The force commander immediately recalled the Special Forces group – his only mobile asset – and moved off with it to deal with the new threat, leaving the parachute company to hold its position, which it did until about 16:00, when the next attack occurred.

*

While moving towards the bridge with the intention of demolishing it in order to prevent rebel forces advancing along this axis, the force commander attempted – without success – to persuade FACA, FOMAC or the French to come to his support. Then, some 2 km short of the bridge, they encountered ‘several hundred’ rebels advancing on foot, supported by at least 15 ‘technicals’ armed with heavy machineguns.

He established a stop line with the 107 mm rocket launchers, the mortar section and his own command Land Cruiser, some 2.5 km behind the lead Special Forces vehicles, and they engaged the enemy. A FACA Mi-25²³ attack helicopter arrived on the scene, but circled at high altitude, fired a few single rockets ineffectually and left.

Fortunately another Special Forces group with four Hornets had just been delivered by an Illyushin-76²⁴ bringing in ammunition, and drove directly from the airport to join up, but only after some chaotic moments at the airport clearing other cargo off the aircraft to enable the Hornets to be driven out. Two more Hornets arrived a little later aboard an SA Air Force Hercules.²⁵

Even this combined force was, however, too small to hold the bridge for long, the Hornets being forced back onto the stop line, and the force repeatedly being outflanked and surrounded. Even ripples of 107 mm rockets fired directly into the advancing enemy did not stop their advance, the massive casualties caused by each of the ripples simply being replaced by more troops coming out of the bush and forming up on the road to continue the attack. Short of troops, the force commander found himself loading a 107 mm, which was, by then, firing directly into the advancing enemy.

When the force ran out of 107 mm ammunition, the commander brought forward two of the 81 mm mortars supporting the parachute company on the Damara road, where the situation had quietened. The mortar section performed ‘brilliantly’ putting effective fire on the enemy at very close ranges. By now a FACA Ratel-90 joined the fight for a time, albeit ineffectually, but the force was still being bypassed on the sides and the fighting was soon down to 50 m range.

²³ Mi-25 is a Russian attack helicopter designed for close support of ground forces; armed with cannon, rockets and guided missiles.

²⁴ The Illyushin-76 is a Russian heavy (42-ton) transport. Several were chartered to fly vehicles and supplies to Bangui.

²⁵ The C-130 Hercules is the standard medium (18-ton) transport of the SA Air Force. Acquired in the early 1960s, they are now distinctly elderly and cannot transport combat vehicles or the Air Force’s helicopters.

Forced to move back every time they were outflanked or surrounded, by 16:30 the Special Forces were fighting in the outskirts of Bangui. Here, however, the use of their heavy weapons carried too much risk of causing civilian casualties. The force commander ordered them to carry out a last fire belt action – a brief burst of maximum firepower at every known and likely enemy around them – and then to break contact and return to the base. By then the fighting was as close as 10 m and they had suffered twelve wounded, including their commander, and many of the Hornets were running on rims, their tyres having long since shot flat.

Realising that, with the Special Forces falling back, the critical Y-junction, where the roads from Bossembele and Damara met, and through which all forces had to pass, would soon be compromised, cutting off the paratroopers, he sent his chief of staff to join up with the parachute company where it was still holding on the 'blue line', although they had again been pushed off the western feature, and move them back towards the base.

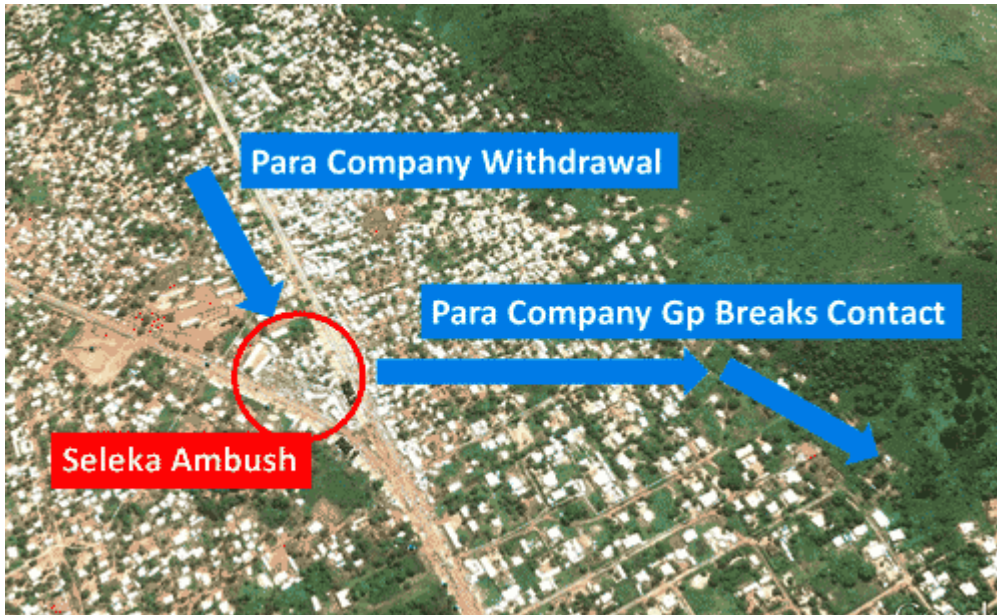
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Having successfully broken contact and moved back to the base, the force commander decided to send the Special Forces group – once it had replenished its ammunition – to help the paratroopers break contact. The Special Forces commander, holding his own drip in one hand and rifle in the other while being bandaged, agreed, but pointed out that he had no more ammunition for his heavy weapons. His troops meanwhile were repairing and reloading their vehicles.

By 18:00, however, the base itself was under attack by some 1 500 rebels with mortars, heavy machineguns and RPGs, and the Special Forces group had to be kept in the base to help the 40 or so support personnel protect it. One problem here was that the force commander had never intended to hold the base because it was effectively indefensible, but could now not fall back to the 'yellow line' while the paratroopers were still north of the Y-junction. This fighting around the base lasted until about 21:00 before quietening down.

The paratroopers, meanwhile, had found themselves engaging a force estimated to be ten times their strength, and found it difficult to break contact cleanly. That lost valuable time, with the result that it was dark before they could move back. Just 100 m short of the Y-junction they made contact with a strong rebel force, drawing such heavy fire that it 'sounded like hail on a tin roof', including fire from 14.5 mm heavy machineguns, RPG-7s, AGS-17²⁶ 30 mm automatic grenade launchers and mortars, losing several vehicles in the process.

²⁶ A Russian automatic grenade launcher with an effective range of 1 700 m, firing at up to 400 rounds per minute.



SOURCE: Google Maps

Caught in an impossible position, they left the vehicles and fought themselves clear of the ambush – some in hand-to-hand fighting – broke contact, and moved in groups to the east and then south towards some high ground opposite the base. Evading groups of rebels they made their way back into the base, one large group making their final dash while a cloud covered the $\frac{3}{4}$ moon that had made their movement so vulnerable.

At about 22:00 a major from the South African training team made his way through the chaos of the city into the base, reporting that the enemy general had called him and asked to speak to the force commander. He duly dialled the mobile telephone number the major gave him and found himself indeed speaking to a general who said he commanded the Seleka forces, wished to discuss terms to stop the fighting, and was willing to come to the base to meet face to face. He did not, however, follow up, although the fighting died down.

One complicating factor now was that a small FACA force stopped outside the base and began firing towards the Y-junction before being persuaded to stop because they were also endangering the paratroopers still fighting there. After a while they moved off and the situation quietened down to some desultory firing.

By first light, the South Africans had suffered 23 wounded and 20 of the paratroopers were still unaccounted for, having not yet managed to return to the base. A Military Health Service surgical team that had flown on the Saturday supply flight, some of whom had very little military training and no combat experience, had worked through the night in the base while it was being mortared and attacked, treating the wounded and keeping two with serious stomach wounds alive to be evacuated safely to South Africa.

At 08:00 that morning the base was again attacked and the force commander, with ammunition now critically short, ordered the troops back to the inner perimeter of the base,

intending to force the enemy to silhouette themselves by climbing the outer walls, thereby presenting good targets.

After about twenty minutes of ineffective enemy fire, that died down and someone shouted 'come here' from the vicinity of the gate. Then a Seleka officer jumped over the gate and walked towards the South Africans calling 'we are no longer fighting', to which the force commander replied 'we are no longer fighting'. While the force commander and this Seleka officer were talking, some Seleka troops jumped over the wall and began looting general items they found in the outer part of the base. A short while later, a group of five 'generals' and two 'colonels' arrived, chased those Seleka troops away, and there was more talking, although there was still some general firing in the area.

Some time later another Seleka general arrived and introduced himself as the officer in command of the Seleka forces around the city. He was courteous and friendly, and reiterated that 'we did not come to fight you', saying that it was poor discipline on the part of some of his troops that had triggered the fighting, and that he understood that the South Africans 'had to return the fire'. He would be happy to break off the engagement, he said, as long as the South Africans did not fire on his forces as they moved into the city. He also remarked that he had been an officer of the CAR Presidential Guard. "By the way", he remarked, "I was trained by you", apparently having been among the officers trained early in the programme that began in 2007, before defecting to the rebels.

His staff officers, mostly speaking in Arabic and French, were hostile, but did not influence the situation.

The general then offered to demonstrate his good will by producing a wounded paratrooper whom they had captured, as well as some bodies of paratroopers killed in the fighting. But he requested the use of a vehicle to do so, all of his apparently being out of commission. After some thought the force commander gave him a vehicle, and shortly thereafter it returned with the wounded paratrooper, who had received medical treatment and was brought back complete with his rifle and all of his kit. Two hours later the vehicle returned with the bodies of several paratroopers killed during the night withdrawal after their group had broken up in the dark.

While the returned paratrooper was being checked by a medical orderly, he reported that he had seen more enemy forces between Bangui and Damara – where his Seleka captors had taken him – than had been engaged with the parachute company along the green and blue lines.

The Seleka general now mentioned that he had actually been wounded himself, and the Military Health Service orderly checked and treated his wound. Bizarrely, the orderly and an aide of general recognised each other from a previous encounter in Darfur.

By now it was, in any event, clear that the attacking force was far different from the 'rag tag' rebel force originally reported, with a fair proportion in standard uniforms with proper webbing and with flak jackets, new AK-47s and heavy weapons that included 23 mm cannon. It

was also clear that many were not from the CAR, since some spoke with Chadian accents and others having distinctly Arabic features.

Almost out of ammunition, and with FACA having evaporated or changed sides and FOMAC nowhere to be seen, the force commander decided there was no purpose to be served by further fighting, and the two sides disengaged. Before moving on, the Seleka commander undertook that the South Africans would have complete freedom of movement to take their wounded to the airport and to recover any missing soldiers. At that point the South African force had suffered ten killed, 25 wounded, while another ten soldiers were still missing.

After the general moved on, however, the situation deteriorated for a while, the Seleka officers in the area clearly unable or unwilling to control the troops at the rear of their force, many of whom being little more than 'riff raff'. The city itself had meanwhile become unstable, with FACA having issued weapons to loyal citizens, leading to continuous shooting around the base with no clarity as to who was shooting at whom. Happily, one of the FOMAC companies appeared, offering to provide trucks to help move the wounded to the airport – the force had only two Casspir ambulances – from where they were quickly evacuated by a Hercules that had been pre-positioned at Entebbe in Uganda.

That night the force was divided, with about half at the airport helping to care for their wounded and half still in the base, so the commander also decided to move the entire force to the airport, where it would be concentrated and where he would have a secure supply line. He cleared the base of equipment and stores with the aid of the FOMAC company's vehicles.

By 21:00 on Sunday night the troops were at the airport resting and cleaning equipment. The training team had meanwhile also moved to the airport, but had been forced to leave most of their equipment behind in their base in the city.

With the situation in the city increasingly unstable, the French commander began to improve the defences at the airport, and the South Africans assisted, providing their back-hoe to help with earth works and undertaking to defend a sector if required.

The fallen South Africans were flown back to South Africa in a Hercules on the night of 25 March, after a formal parade with the French forces, while the bulk of the force was flown home on 27 March. A small detachment was left behind with the bulk of the equipment, but this too was ordered back to South Africa on 4 April after President Zuma decided to terminate the South African engagement in the CAR for the time being, despite requests by some CEMAC countries that the South Africans should remain in place.



*The fallen paratroopers being carried to the Hercules;
French honour guard in the foreground. SOURCE: SANDF*

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Amidst all the fighting there were individual soldiers caught in unique situations. The tactical intelligence team manning the observation post monitoring the road from Bossembele, for example, found itself on the wrong side of 1 000 or more rebels. After clearing it with the force commander, they buried their heavy equipment and then spent a night dodging rebels and making their way to the airport through some 16 km of bush, to the airport, where the French force took them in.

Over on the north-eastern side of the town, one paratrooper found himself totally cut off from his comrades during Saturday night. Unsure of the situation, he walked clear of the immediate fighting, acquired civilian clothes and a cell phone, and then called the only number that seemed to make sense to him – that of 44 Parachute Regiment in Bloemfontein – to report that he was well and ask if someone could please collect him. The call was passed through to the force commander at Bangui airport, and a French patrol went out to collect him, the last of the mission soldiers to be brought in. Another paratrooper meanwhile worked his way through the mobs and reported at the airport.

The training team that had remained in its base in the city rather than joining the main protection force, found itself in the middle of the chaos in Bangui after the government had issued weapons to civilians and some rebels had already entered the town. The colonel

commanding the team moved to the airport and the other members did the same – bar the major who had reported to the base and a female soldier who demonstrated singular presence of mind. She found herself alone in the training team’s offices, among the radio equipment, rifles and other items that had not been moved to the protection force’s base. She could neither carry all of that stuff nor destroy it, but she did decide that the rebels were not going to get their hands on the money in the office safe. This she bundled into a suitcase, changed into civilian clothes and walked out into the chaos. On the street she hitched a lift to near the airport with a group of Seleka rebels and then walked in and reported to the force commander with the cash.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lessons Learned

It is far too early to distil detailed lessons from this engagement, but some are already clear.

Intelligence: while the original intelligence about the rebels and their capabilities was probably correct, it was wildly out of date by the time the fighting started and there seems to have been a lack of liaison and coordination with the intelligence services of other countries who might have had relevant information or intelligence.

Reconnaissance: the deployed force had no aerial reconnaissance means. Unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) systems ('drones') such as the Seeker²⁷ or the lighter Kiewit²⁸ would have been invaluable. Without any aerial reconnaissance, the force commander had no idea of what was happening around him beyond what his troops could glean from local civilians and what FACA, FOMAC and the French were prepared to tell him, and no idea of what was coming their way.

Coordination: at no stage was there any combined headquarters to coordinate the actions of the various forces in the CAR, although the deputy commander of the FOMAC force was a seconded French colonel. That made effective defence virtually impossible.

Mobility: the force had too few vehicles to manoeuvre – the paratroopers had only seven Geckos to move their mortars and heavy machineguns, and the force had no armoured vehicles at all, other than two Casspir ambulances. While it is unlikely that greater mobility or even protected mobility would have done very much to alter the eventual outcome, some mobility would have made the commander's task easier. But the SA Army does not have many vehicles that it could deploy by air.

Force composition: the force was too light and too lightly armed for a sustained combat role, having been deployed as a protection unit expecting to face lightly armed rebels. But even had there been better intelligence, the SA Army does not have air-transportable combat vehicles or artillery, either or both of which might have made a major difference, and may even have

²⁷ A medium-weight 200 km radius unmanned aerial vehicle with 9 hours endurance, developed by Denel. Intended mainly for reconnaissance tasks, it was operated by the SA Air Force for a time, but taken out of service as a result of budget cuts.

²⁸ A light, hand-launched, battery-powered UAV developed by ATE intended for short-distance 'over the hill' reconnaissance by combat troops.

dissuaded Seleka from attacking them at all. Even had there been such vehicles, the Air Force does not have the transport aircraft to move any but very light vehicles and then in very small numbers.

Air support: a few Rooivalk attack helicopters, or even Oryx with a side-firing 20 mm cannon could have made a crucial difference. But the Rooivalk is only just becoming operational and the Air Force has no transport aircraft that can accommodate either type without major disassembly that requires gantries and 24 hours to be reversed – hardly the stuff of rapid deployment. Similarly, while the Air Force has an outstanding fighter in its Gripen and a useful ground attack type in its Hawk, it has no tanker aircraft to allow them to support deployment over such distances.

Air transport: the SANDF does not have the strategic airlift capacity to quickly fly in reinforcements, deploy combat vehicles, or to deploy helicopters for a hot extraction. This is a factor of both the number of aircraft available and the type.

There is also a major political lesson to be learned from the events in the CAR quite independently of the military lessons: all governments employ their armed forces to further and protect their country's political and economic interests. That has been so since the days of kings and has not somehow magically changed with the spread of democratic governments.

Sometimes this can be odious – one can think here of Britain's Opium Wars to force the Chinese to allow the sale of opium in order to reduce Britain's trade deficit with its colonies – but much of the time it is pragmatic. Here one can think of Japan, despite avowed pacifism, deploying warships to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden because much of its trade passes through there and its oil comes from the adjacent Persian Gulf, and of China reportedly deploying 'armed police' in Sudan and in Ethiopia's Ogaden to protect Chinese-owned oil installations. At lower levels there is the sale of military equipment at 'friendship prices', as practised by China and other major powers, and military assistance agreements such as that between South Africa and the CAR.

The fine line to be walked here is to be sure that there is a clear separation of national interests from those of individuals or ruling parties. Inevitably, some businesses will be the beneficiaries of such arrangements, but whatever benefits are derived (and to whom) must visibly be a result of protecting national interests, and not the purpose of the arrangement. It is probably unfair, however, to assume that the mere fact that someone benefitted from the deployment of troops that are protecting his or her interests was the sole reason for that deployment. This aspect of the agreement with the CAR has very clearly not been properly handled. Against the background of the many allegations against the ruling party, additional care should have been taken to ensure transparency and to explain the rationale for the deployment.

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South Africa has now had more than adequate warning that its defence capabilities are not up to the responsibilities of a regional power:

In October 2012 irregular forces armed with 23 mm cannon and 82 mm mortars ambushed a South African detachment in north Darfur. Equipped with lightly armoured Mamba armoured personnel carriers that are easily penetrated by 23 mm fire, unarmoured vehicles and only light weapons, the detachment lost one killed and three wounded. It was only the tactical skill and quick reactions of the commander and the soldiers that allowed them to escape the ambush.

In November 2012, M23 rebels occupied Goma, where an equally lightly-armed and equipped South African force based at the airport could do nothing to block them, and from where it would have been almost impossible to extract the South Africans had the rebels pressed their attack.

And now in March 2013 a small South African force of paratroopers and Special Forces is attacked by massively larger forces at Bangui, where it was impossible to support them.

Do not blame the soldiers and junior leaders: they are doing their best and their best is often quite outstanding. The fighting around Bangui was a particular demonstration of that. Do not blame the generals for deploying small or under-armed forces: they can only 'do the best with what they have' as a former chief of the Defence Force used to say in another time. And 'what they have' in terms of the number of soldiers, the type of equipment and the support capabilities is simply inadequate for the role that South Africa's government wishes to play.

If there is blame it must go to the politicians who starve the Defence Force financially and then expect it to work miracles. Soldiers of all countries do that all the time, but sooner or later they are expected to do the impossible, and that will take a little longer or prove rather more costly than expected. South Africa must decide whether it is going to undertake regional missions or not. If we are going to do that, we must provide our troops with the equipment needed for such operations, which must as a matter of urgency include transport aircraft to fly in light armoured vehicles and Rooivalk and Oryx helicopters, and tanker aircraft to enable the Gripen and Hawk to be deployed quickly if necessary.

There is no such thing as military operations on the cheap: what is saved in cash will be paid for in blood.

In Memoriam

Corporal Mokgadi Darius Seakamela

Corporal Ntebaleng Andrew Mogorosi

Lance Corporal Daniel Sello Molara

Lance Corporal Lukas Mohapi Tsheke

Rifleman Lesego Maxwell Hertzog Lebatlang

Rifleman Zamani Jim Mxhosana

Rifleman Xolani Dlamini

Rifleman Vusumuzi Joseph Ngaleka

Rifleman Karabo Edwin Matsheka

Rifleman Khomotso Paul Msenga

Rifleman Maleisane Samuel Thulo

Rifleman Motsamai William Bojane

Rifleman Thabiso Anthon Phirimana

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