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**OPERATION DRAGON ROUGE** 11.23.14

## 'Argo' in the Congo: The Ghosts of the Stanleyville Hostage Crisis

Fifty years ago, African mercenaries, American pilots, Belgian paratroopers, and Cuban CIA contractors converged in the deep jungle to attempt one of the largest hostage rescue missions in history.

**KISANGANI (formerly Stanleyville), Congo —**

### THE PILOT

Captain Mack Secord surveyed the thick jungle from his cockpit window and steered the Lockheed C-130 transport plane along a smooth cut made by the snaking Congo River. Dawn was rising on November 24, 1964, and there was a slight fog but otherwise clear visibility. From the height of 700 feet, a lush uniform green obscured the destruction unfolding below him.

Eight days earlier, Secord—a 32-year-old father from Birmingham, Alabama—had traveled from France to Belgium to Spain to an isolated island in the Atlantic, about 1,000 miles off the coast of Africa. He'd been told this was an exercise to bring warm clothes overseas, but along the way he and the pilots of 12 other planes had been instructed to pick up hundreds of commandos, weapons and ammunition, and a fleet of vehicles. Then they'd flown to an abandoned Belgian air base in the Congo.

Now Secord was aiming for Stanleyville, a once glamorous colonial city of 150,000 that spilled into the jungle on both sides of the river. As dawn spread, hundreds of mercenaries, along with an elite team of Belgian paratroopers, Cuban pilots contracted by the CIA, and Secord's fleet of U.S. Air Force planes would converge to attempt one of the largest hostage rescue operations in history.

For four months, nearly 2,000 Americans and Europeans had been held prisoner deep in the Congolese jungle by the Simba, a rebel army named after the Swahili word for “lion.” Among them were the American and Belgian consulate staffs, CIA agents, missionaries, businessmen, and permanent residents of Stanleyville. Their captors wore palm leaves, leopard skins, and magical relics to make themselves immune to bullets. They practiced ceremonial cannibalism, believing the hearts of their victims would imbue them with power.

Below Secord, at precisely 6 a.m., 545 Belgian commandos parachuted into the airport. His was the last plane in. He offloaded a group of paratroopers and armored Jeeps, and taxied near the terminal, waiting for the commandos to return with the hostages. According to the mission plan, they were due back in 30 minutes—but no one showed up. Secord called into the field and was told to sit tight. Another half-hour passed, and he called again. And again. Pops of gunfire pierced the city. Secord began to grow concerned.



*AP*

## **GALLERY: HISTORIC IMAGES FROM THE STANLEYVILLE HOSTAGE RESCUE**

### **THE CITY**

The history of the Congo can be traced in Stanleyville’s scars. To understand this, they must be reopened.

As Mack Secord idled on the runway, a chain of events had been set in motion that would shake the relative peace of this central African city for the next 50 years. Photos of hysterical hostages would be splashed across the pages of every major newspaper, magazine, and news program around the globe, and Stanleyville would trade its glamorous veneer for a reputation of epic violence.

Once the city was known as the Congo's crown jewel. Now it would earn a new nickname: the City of Martyrs.

In 1883, the Welsh explorer Henry Morton Stanley followed the Congo River for 1,300 miles and set up a trading post here, at the farthest navigable point before the river splits into tributaries. The Belgian King Leopold read about Stanley's exploits and followed suit. He renamed the place Stanleyville in the explorer's honor and turned it into a commercial capital. Soon his coffers were overflowing with revenue from rubber, palm oil, and ivory.

A few years later, a young steamboat captain named Joseph Conrad was horrified by the brutality he saw as he made his way up the same river. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad placed the raving Kurtz's Inner Station deep in the jungle outside Stanleyville. When Belgium took control of Leopold's bloody colony, Stanleyville flourished as a European destination, where visitors could play a round of golf and race speedboats down the river.

Hollywood, too, became enraptured by the exotic abyss of Stanleyville. In 1951, director John Huston brought Katharine Hepburn, Humphrey Bogart, and Lauren Bacall here to film *The African Queen*. They stayed at the luxurious Hotel Pourquoi Pas? where Hepburn chose a ground-level suite with a view across the coffee-colored Congo River. A few years later, Audrey Hepburn came to town to shoot *The Nun's Story*.



*"The African Queen' turned Stanleyville into a Hollywood darling. "Actually filmed in the splendor and dangers of the Belgian Congo!" the movie poster boasts. (Handout)*

By 1960, change was on the horizon. The Congolese population had suffered decades of exploitation under foreign rule, and a local politician named Patrice Lumumba was about to lead the country to freedom. Spirits in Stanleyville were high, and a local 19-year-old was emboldened by independence fever.

One winter night, Posho Wembore sneaked into the exclusive whites-only club of the Hotel Pourquoi Pas? and spun and dipped a white woman—even though, as a Congolese man, he wasn't supposed to be downtown without written permission after 6 p.m., much less talking to her. And yet his attitude that night was reflected in the hotel's name: "Why not?" When the song ended, Wembore anticipated a fight and took off, pleased with the subversion of his dance.

The Belgian Congo transformed into the independent Republic of the Congo six

months later, and Lumumba became its first democratically elected prime minister. But celebrations—and sovereignty—were short-lived. A Cold War proxy struggle was emerging: Lumumba had asked the communist Soviet bloc for assistance, and in return, the West supported his opponents. Lumumba was assassinated after a year in office, and a Western-backed leader was placed in power. As foreign powers battled for the bull's-eye of central Africa, Stanleyville spiraled into turbulence and decline.

In 1964, Wembore watched as his city fell to Simba rebels seeking to avenge Lumumba's death and take back control the country. Middle-class Congolese like himself, called "évolué," or "evolved," were hunted down for having ties with the Europeans. Their homes were raided and they were brought to the public square to be tortured. So many people were killed, graveyards ran out of space and the dead were dumped into the Congo River. Europeans and Americans were rounded up and imprisoned. Wembore ran from the city.



*The glamour is gone at Hotel Pourquoi Pas?, where Katharine Hepburn once occupied a suite.  
(Nina Storchlic/The Daily Beast)*

Fifty years later, in the cavernous basement of Hotel Pourquoi Pas? Wembore holds his arms out in salsa dancing form, as if clutching the hand and waist of the woman he once danced with, and twirls to a rumba song that played in this now-silent nightclub. He's a hulking man of 72, with a plaid shirt draped over his belly, but once he was a playboy. Only a rounded bar and three rotting bathtubs remain in the decrepit club.

Wembore owns the hotel now, though it has been stripped bare after years of wartime looting and occupation. On a recent October evening, a few girls dance to Justin Bieber on the dark back patio and patrons battle the heat with a cool Simba beer, swatting away mosquitoes rising off the water.

Wembore calls life under Belgians "très bon," despite the segregation, and many of Stanleyville's residents agree. "I look at the river, I used to see speedboats; now I see wooden boats," he says, gesturing to the long, roughly carved canoes on the Congo River filled with traders. "This is poverty."

"This town was the most beautiful girl in the Congo," laments a friend sitting nearby.

Stanleyville was rebaptized as Kisangani in 1965. Today the train station that once sped exports to all corners of the country runs one train a week. At the

central port, cranes dangle in disuse and buildings open to the sky. Broad boulevards are lined with peeling and gutted colonial buildings plastered with ads for cellphone companies and diamond traders. Small wooden shacks filled with canned goods and phone cards clutter the sidewalks. Motorcycles roar and swerve around women who balance soaring bundles confidently on their heads. Near the banks of the Congo River, families cook and hang laundry on the porch of the former Belgian king's mansion, a bleak gray structure. Wild grass and leafy trees threaten to consume Kisangani.

For 50 years, this city that once graced postcards has been a battlefield.



*Ornate Belgian mansions rot on the shores of the Congo River, where traders offer their wares in long canoes. (Nina Storchlic/The Daily Beast)*

## **THE MISSIONARY, 1964**

While the commandos were pulling their chutes and dropping into Stanleyville, missionary Chuck Davis was waiting to be rescued in a room one mile away.

Four months earlier, Davis, his wife, and their two young children had arrived in a small town 40 miles north of Stanleyville, eager to begin their first mission in the Congo. The roars of lions and the trumpeting of elephants could be heard echoing over the 100-foot trees that surrounded their remote jungle outpost—it was a world away from Davis's hometown of Boston. Apart from the tarantulas and 4-inch forest cockroaches, they were infatuated by what he dubbed "Tarzan's home."

It may have looked like paradise, but a rebellion was brewing around the Davises. On August 5, 1964, a week after the Davises moved in, the Simbas seized Stanleyville, declaring it and more than half the country the independent "Popular Republic of the Congo." The slaughter of Congolese "traitors" began swiftly, and soon the rebels announced that all Americans, and later all Europeans, would be held as prisoners.

The Simbas took the Davises from their home in the backseat of a blue, open-top Opal and drove them into Stanleyville's army base, where a hundred soldiers were waving guns and fighting over the spoils of a recent session of looting. Suddenly a man was thrown against the back of the car holding the Davises, and five rebels opened fire with automatic weapons, tearing him to shreds. "Daddy, they killed that man," said Davis's 5-year-old son, Stephen, who stood on the seat, watching.

The rebels then turned their guns on the family huddled in the Opal. Davis always turned to prayer in uncertain moments. And now he thought of Psalm 21:11: “For they intended evil against you: they imagined a mischievous device, which they are not able to perform.”

In what he saw as divine intervention, a gap opened in the crowd and the car gunned through it. “It was just like the Lord opened the Red Sea for the children of Israel,” he recalls.

For the next month, Davis was detained at the Central Prison in Stanleyville, where he shared a cell with the five captured members of the U.S. Consulate, including Consul Mike Hoyt. Frequently, prisoners around them were taken out to be shot or speared to death, but Davis and the consulate staffers remained confident that the American government was plotting to intervene for their freedom.



*Chuck Davis and family. (Courtesy of the Davis Family)*

## **WASHINGTON, D.C., 1964**

It was a month after the hostages had been taken, and there was still no plan to rescue them. At the White House, concern was mounting, not just over the 30 Americans being held but also the threat posed by the unexpectedly successful communist-backed Simba rebellion.

The agents in the CIA’s Africa Division had hoped diplomacy would halt the crisis, but that route quickly hit a dead end. A State Department and Department of Defense task force was assembled and pieced together a solution: A joint U.S.-Belgian mission called Dragon Rouge would drop in paratroopers, grab the prisoners, and fly out. Simultaneously, a brigade of mercenaries and Congolese soldiers would seal off the city and expel the guerrillas.

The Simbas had little training or heavily artillery and would be no match for foreign forces. But if word of the mission reached the city, there was a risk that the hostages would be executed en masse. Even if the operation was successful, other Westerners were being held in nearby towns, and the mission could set off reprisals against them. Already, Radio Stanleyville had been screaming threats of burning the prisoners alive and eating them, while urging “all

brother Lumumbists” to pick up machetes if the Americans attempted a rescue.

As the operation neared, deliberations grew heated. Without intelligence on the city, there was no way even to know where the hostages were being kept. “It’ll be dangerous if the paradrop is carried out, but it’ll be dangerous if it isn’t, and under the circumstances, the danger of carrying it out is less than the danger of not carrying it out,” Defense Secretary Robert McNamara told President Lyndon B. Johnson on the phone a week before the proposed mission date.

“Well now you’ve got this feedback all over town,” Johnson said. “Oh hell, the secretary came in and from [Ambassador-at-Large W. Averell] Harriman down to the bottom one...everybody thought it was terrible.”

Soon it seemed a paratrooper mission was the only option. Johnson feared both that the Congo would fall into leftist hands and that the United States would find itself dragged into a ground war in a country of no strategic importance. On November 23, from his ranch in Texas, Johnson spoke on the phone with acting Secretary of State George Ball.

“Is this in any way going to involve us in getting us in there and getting us tied down there?” the president asked.

“Well, we’re very conscious of that and of course these are not our troops that are being—”

“I understand that. I understand that,” Johnson interjected.

“And we’re all sensitive to the idea that we get out just as fast as we can, that this is not a commitment to get into a land fight in the middle of Africa.”

Around noon, the order was given to execute the mission the next day.

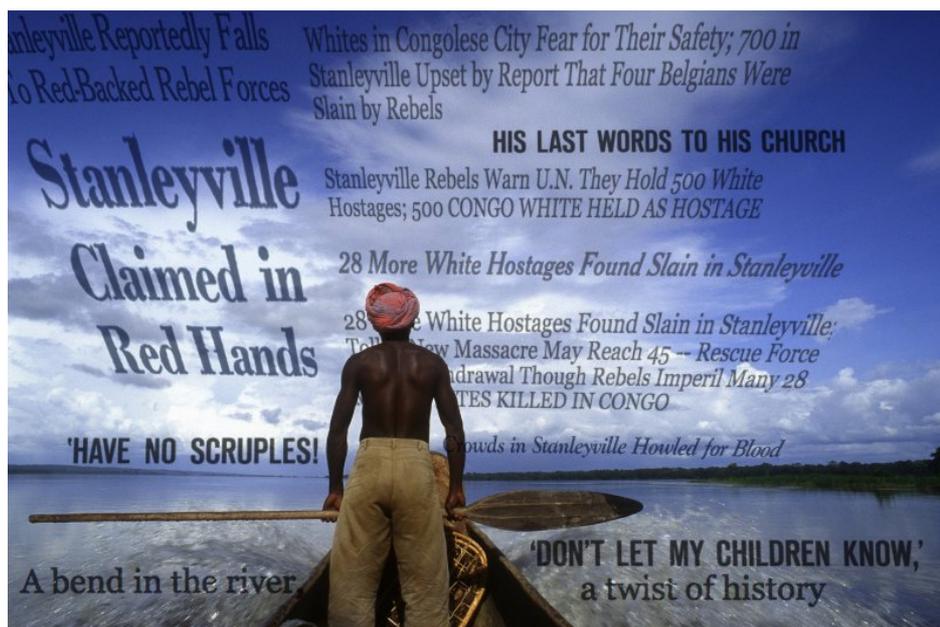


Photo Illustration by Emil Lendof/The Daily Beast

## THE RESCUE, 1964

Teams of commandos fanned out over Stanleyville. As they neared the intersection by the stately Residence Victoria hotel, they spotted hundreds of hostages sitting in a cluster near grand Belgian plantation-style homes that lined the wide boulevard.

A month earlier, Chuck Davis had been moved from the central prison and into the much more comfortable second floor of the Residence Victoria with 230

other hostages. That morning, he sat in the windowsill and began his day like every other: reading the Bible passage that coincided with the date. It was November 24, so he was reading Proverbs 24—“Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles”—when a roar shook his window. An airplane had flown so close that he could see its machine guns and rockets.

The Simbas rushed the hallways, banging on doors and demanding that the prisoners go outside. Davis was one of the last ones out and hurried to follow the other hostages, who were being marched down the thoroughfare. The radios that morning blared with urgency: “Kill them all! Have no scruples! Men, women, children, kill them all!” The hostages were told to sit and wait as the rebels debated their fate.

A burst of machine-gun fire blew off the wall of a nearby building—the commandos were approaching. A Simba commander yelled the order and anxious rebels began ricocheting bullets into the fleeing group. Davis jumped over a 4-foot porch wall and ran into a house, where he and others crammed themselves into a linen closet.

A Simba soldier passed twice in front of the glass door and left, failing to spot the stowaways. Then an unfamiliar voice pierced the stifled silence: “I know they’re in here.” The closet swung open and 14 people tumbled out. A burly Belgian, strapped with grenades and ammunition, towered above them. He was “the biggest Rambo I’ve ever seen in my life,” Davis remembers. The commandos hustled the survivors outside, where 30 hostages lay dead on the ground, and escorted them to the airport on foot, pausing only to exchange fire with rebels hidden along the route.

“You’re an American?” a colonel asked Davis when they got to the runway. “Yes, sir, I’m American,” he replied. He was placed on a plane with a guard—but his wife and kids were still being held with 25 others five miles out of town.



*A victim of the rebel massacre (Charles Bonnay/Getty)*

When paratroopers declined to make the dangerous trip, Davis and the other rescued missionaries found a group of Cubans who agreed to undertake the rescue. They later discovered the men were not mercenaries but veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion who had been hired by the CIA to retrieve the U.S. Consulate staff.

Heavily armed Simbas had already arrived at the missionary house and were lining up families in the backyard for execution. But instead of opening fire, they went through the rooms, grabbing any remaining valuables. Then, without warning, they shot into the group, grazing two teenage boys with bullets. Outside, they killed Hector McMillan, a Canadian missionary, before joining the ranks of the fleeing rebels.

The Cubans pulled up to the outpost and crammed the survivors into an open-body jeep and a pickup truck. Mothers pushed their children's heads down and they sped through town, leaving a trail of machine-gun shells in their wake.

The freed hostages streamed into the airport, their white polo shirts and pleated dresses stained with blood. Some were silent from shock, others giddy and smiling as they boarded the U.S. Air Force C-130s. Mack Secord had waited in the pilot's seat for two hours and was relieved to see them. He piled 125 people into the back of his plane and lifted off. As they passed the runway, bullets shot up from the tall grass, puncturing a fuel tank. This is it, Secord thought, but the aircraft pulled through. The hostages' 111-day captivity was over.

A few hours later, the planes landed in Leopoldville, and 1,650 survivors were handed over to nurses armed with stacks of intake forms, diplomats offering feverish handshakes, and Boy Scouts handing out hot rolls and orangeade.



A newsreel from the rescue operation.

## **THE MERCENARY, 1964**

As the prisoners were evacuated, a 1,090-strong column of mercenaries, Congolese soldiers, and gendarmes swarmed into Stanleyville. At the head of this five-mile convoy was Ivan Smith, a 22-year-old Rhodesian. A few months earlier, he'd spotted a newspaper ad soliciting young men for an exciting job. Smith was told he would make his normal yearly salary in a month, so he joined the ranks of the 5 Commando ANC, led by the infamous "Mad Mike" Hoare, a swashbuckling commander-for-hire who would later become inspiration for Richard Burton's character in *Wild Geese*.

The mercenaries were tasked with backing up the paratroopers and pushing

out the remaining Simbas, but they had been delayed by skirmishes with rebels hiding along the jungle route. When they arrived, Stanleyville was deadly still. The pavement was littered with blood and shoes. Cars were wrecked against the trees and buildings they'd been crashed into. Houses were evacuated and stripped bare, and civilians vanished at the sight of a truck.

“When we first went into action, we were trying to work as soldiers, but in the end we just had machine guns mounted on Jeeps and we'd scream along the road,” Smith recalls. “If anyone approached us, we'd just open fire.”

Smith's unit was dispatched to retrieve a forgotten group of missionaries on the other side of Stanleyville, across the Congo River. A gruesome sight greeted them: the bodies of 28 murdered and mutilated hostages, including Spanish nuns and Dutch priests. As they waited for a boat to bring the corpses across the river, some of Smith's fellow soldiers grew so bored that they commandeered a train from the station and drove it into the river.



*Mercenaries come under fire from Simba rebels outside Stanleyville. (Priya Ramrakha/Getty)*

Meanwhile, over at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, the Africa Division was celebrating the successful mission. Among those extracted were two of their own men; the agency had been getting increasingly agitated as Washington drew out deliberations.

“The military operation at Stanleyville and the follow-up at Paulis [an evacuation the next day] were both so smoothly executed that, in terms of interest, it is almost anticlimatic [sic] compared to the decision-making period,” a then-classified Department of Defense report noted.

Richard Holm, a 29-year-old paramilitary operative fresh off running teams into Viet Cong territory from Laos, had spent a month eagerly preparing for his next assignment: Stanleyville. Now that the hostage crisis was over, he could start rebuilding the region's intelligence network and investigating how the Chinese and Soviets were supplying the Simbas, in order to—as the CIA believed—turn the Congo into a communist satellite.

“Congo was clearly just a pawn in the global chessboard of West vs. East,” Holm says. Soviet leaders had already decried the rescue mission as an act of imperialist aggression. In response, American embassies across the world were stoned, and in Cairo, the new John F. Kennedy Library was burned to the ground. China publicly announced support for the rebels. Fidel Castro

dispatched Che Guevara from Cuba to the United Nations, where he denounced American actions and six months later arrived in the Congo with 100 troops to take up arms for the Simba rebellion.

The CIA installed a Western-backed Congolese commander named Joseph Mobutu (later known as Mobutu Sese Seko), who claimed the presidency one year after the hostage crisis and stayed in power for the next 32. “Nobody sent us over there to be sure it was a nice guy,” Holm says. “In the end, it was in our national interest that Congo be oriented toward the West, and that’s how it turned out.”

One month after the operation, Holm arrived in a ghostly Stanleyville posing as a State Department representative. Simbas still lurked on the city’s edge, and often they would march into town to test their luck before retreating to the jungle. Holm searched for intelligence assets, but they’d all fled or been killed, and there was little communist support in evidence. He wired a few reports back to headquarters and departed soon after.

“More bloodbaths may be expected before the agony of the Congo is ended,” a dramatic newsreel announced at the end of its segment on the Stanleyville rescue. Some 100,000 Congolese were killed across the country during this period of fighting, and in the years to come Stanleyville would be continuously ripped apart by foreign invasions, mercenaries, and guerrilla rebellions—a bloodbath that continues to this day.



*A formerly busy train station now runs one train once a week. (Nina Storchlic/The Daily Beast)*

## **THE CIVILIANS, 1964**

It wasn’t until many months after the hostage rescue operation that Stanleyville’s residents began emerging from the forest.

Civilians had first celebrated the Simbas’ arrival, but that sentiment quickly shifted. Rebels went house to house, dragging potential dissidents to Lumumba Square and killing them grotesquely under the monument to the fallen leader. One rebel cut out the liver and kidneys of the city’s former mayor and ate them as he died. Victims were put into sacks, speared, and thrown into the Congo River. Before the hostage situation attracted the world’s full attention, untold thousands of Congolese had died at the Simbas’ hands.

Louise Buamba, a young mother, followed an exodus of civilians who took

shelter in the thick jungle outside the city. Rebels pursued them and killed many others, but Buamba evaded them. She walked for two days before settling into a makeshift camp. For more than a year she survived off scavenged food.

As plans were set for a rescue mission, the State and Defense departments suggested evacuating up to 200 native Congolese, as well. “Does it take out some Congolese also in order not to just be a ‘white man’s rescue?’” a memo asked.

When the rescuers arrived, civilians tried to distinguish themselves from the rebels by donning white headbands, but the troops didn’t often make the differentiation. “[M]any a headband was soon stained red,” noted a *TIME* cover story from 1964. Then the magazine made a prediction that would play out over the next half-century: “In their rapid push to save white lives, the Congolese army left big rebel pockets behind. Many pessimists talk of a ‘Hundred Years War.’” Three years later, when clashes erupted again, the United States deployed one of its C-130s to rescue Congolese civilians but only managed to extract nine people.

Since then, Kisangani has been the epicenter of nearly every rebellion in the Congo. In 1997, two old adversaries—Laurent Kabila and Mobutu—faced off in the city’s streets. In 1964, Kabila had been a Simba leader, and Mobutu had commanded the Congolese army. More than 30 years later, the long-exiled Kabila decided to use Kisangani as his base to overthrow the dictator, perhaps remembering an old dictum in these parts: “If you take Kisangani, you take the Congo.”

Mobutu lined the city’s perimeter with mercenaries and soldiers, but within two weeks it fell, to little international fanfare. Humanitarian organizations had already pulled out, and French troops rushed in to extract the 15 foreigners left in the city. Meanwhile, thousands of refugees were pushed into Kisangani by the advancing rebels.

Two months later, Kabila declared himself president and changed the country’s name from Zaire, which Mobutu had chosen, to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Within a year, Kabila had broken promises to the countries that had backed his coup, and Rwandan and Ugandan forces invaded the Congo.



*Louise and Bibi Buamba have watched 50 years of fighting destroy Kisangani. The stairs behind them are still charred from bombs that fell on their house. (Nina Strohlic/The Daily Beast)*

“It was looking like a mysterious day,” Bibi Buamba, Louise’s 37-year-old daughter, recalls of June 5, 2000. There had been rumors of an attack, but no one believed the city would come under fire again. When gunshots burst out, she ran to retrieve her child from school and returned to her house just as a bomb hit next door. Louise, who was then around 60, didn’t want to return to the forest as she had when the Simbas attacked—but the family had no choice.

“This will be a battlefield,” a Ugandan soldier told them. “If you want to die, you can stay.” Bibi was pregnant, and Louise delivered her baby, a boy named Christian, the same day in the jungle. Then they continued walking, covering 10 miles over the next two days.

The Congo hosts the world’s largest and most expensive United Nations force, but there was no move toward an international intervention. “The only thing the U.N. peacekeepers did was send out bulletins to the world,” the Red Cross chief of Kisangani told the *Chicago Tribune* at the time. “As it turned out, the world couldn’t care less about our obituaries.”

More than a thousand residents of Kisangani died in the fighting. When Louise and Bibi returned to their home, they found it strewn with ammunition and pockmarked with mortar craters. “We tried to do our best with the little we have,” Bibi says. “The damage of war was too big. We lost many things, including legal documents for the house. We are lower than before.” Fourteen years on, the wooden stairs and ceiling are still charred, and the walls are studded with clusters of bullet holes.

That period would be dubbed “Africa’s Great War,” and an estimated 5.4 million Congolese died over 10 years. Kisangani saw familiar brutality: Civilians were tortured, massacred, and dumped in the Congo River. “In this country we are praying to God because we don’t know where [war] comes from and why,” Louise says. “We only need to pray so God can change things, but I don’t see how.”



*The entrance of Residence Victoria, where 230 European and American hostages were kept, is crammed with shops and a nightclub. (Nina Strohlic/The Daily Beast)*

## **KISANGANI, PRESENT DAY**

The airport where Operation Dragon Rouge landed is a graveyard of rusting planes, and a new international one operates a few miles away. In Kisangani’s center, the Residence Victoria has been renamed the Hotel Zambeke, but it

never served as a hotel again after the hostage rescue. Its four stories are crammed with satellite dishes and laundry lines, signs of life from the 450 people who live there, high above shops and the “Night Club Mandarin.” Outside, a lone traffic policeman directs a steady stream of motorbikes.

When hostages were kept in the hotel, the Simbas would allow Dr. Alexandre Barlovatz to bring food and medical treatment to them. Although he was a Belgian citizen, Barlovatz and his piano-playing wife were highly respected in the city and spared by the rebels. Their son, Jean Bamanisa, was born a few months before the occupation, and two years ago he was elected as the province’s governor, with ambitious plans to transform Kisangani into the commercial and tourism hub it had once been. By many accounts he’s just as beloved as his father.

Many in Kisangani survive on \$400 a year and still long for the old days, when three meals a day and steady employment were the norm. But since Bamanisa’s appointment, electricity has begun to turn on regularly—an almost impossible feat in the Congo. The roads are already much smoother than they were last year, residents say, and scaffolding covers large buildings downtown, with promising images of modern hotels and amenities. Kisangani’s scars are healing.

“Yes, for sure the town will prosper again,” says Clement Mangubu Lotika, the city’s resident historian. “Now, with the new governor, we’re seeing a kind of renaissance, a new economic revolution.”

A decade ago, President Joseph Kabila, son of the Simba leader Laurent, visited Kisangani and proclaimed a new nickname for “The City of Martyrs”: “The City of Hope.” Since then, conflict has continued to pummel much of the eastern part of the Congo, but Kisangani has remained relatively calm.

The city was described by V.S. Naipaul in his 1979 novel *A Bend in the River* as “a place where the future has come and gone.” But after a half-century with modernity in the rearview mirror, there’s optimism in the heart of the Congo. As Kisangani outgrows its ruinous European influence, residents imagine its long-dormant allure can be revived with a renaissance, rather than a resistance—and that one day, tourists, not rebels, will again come to admire the jewel of the Congo River.



*A mosque on the outskirts of town was built by early Afro-Arab traders from Zanzibar. (Nina Strohlic/The Daily Beast)*

## **POSTSCRIPT, 2014**

Last year, Captain Mack Secord picked up the phone in his Atlanta home, and a voice asked if he had flown the first C-130 transport of Operation Dragon Rouge out of Stanleyville. “You were my pilot!” said Marilyn Wendler, who was 11 years old when her family was rescued from the mission outpost alongside Chuck Davis’s wife and kids. Wendler’s reflection on her time as a hostage is bittersweet. “They’ve suffered unbelievably and survived,” she says of the Congolese. “We get to leave, come back to the States, and they have to stay.”

The missionaries have organized two reunions with the Air Force pilots and Cuban contractors who extracted them. “There was one good thing about it,” Chuck Davis says about his time in captivity. “Everything after that was up. When you’ve been shot at and beaten and seen friends killed right around you, it can’t get any worse than that.”

After a six-month tour in the Congo, Ivan Smith had made only a fraction of the salary he expected, and looting didn’t make up the difference. He left, but many other mercenaries stayed, and two years later they were executed or expelled after a mutiny in Stanleyville. Today Smith enjoys a quiet retirement in a small town nestled in the South African mountains and recently penned *Mad Dog Killers: The Story of a Congo Mercenary*. “How can you regret?” he says of his role. “I killed people, you know, for money, and I didn’t even get it...At least I don’t have to worry about dying young anymore.”

Shortly after leaving Stanleyville, Richard Holm and a Cuban pilot went down in a fiery plane crash. They both survived, but Holm was badly burned and endured a harrowing 11 days in the jungle before Belgian helicopters rescued him. He’d go on to spend 30 more years in the service of the CIA. “It is, I think, almost as bad today as the day I crashed,” Holm says of the Congo. “There’s corruption, lack of education, and poverty. We, the West, send tons of money

down there, and in my view a lot of it ends up in a Swiss bank. And people in Africa are still suffering.”

There are few Europeans left today in Kisangani—maybe two or three, according to Jean Marie Bergesio, a French businessman and hotel owner. Over the course of the wars, he lost his house, five cars, and the hearing in his right ear; spent six months in jail; and received 17 bullets in his front door. “You are a prophet and you are the bad man,” he says of his skin color. As he describes why he plans to spend the rest of his days in Kisangani, a pet parrot gnaws on his Rolex. “I need some stimulation in my blood,” Bergesio says, “and here you have confrontation.”

Posho Wembore has seen the best and worst days of his city. He continues to search for a loan to renovate his beloved Hotel Pourquoi Pas? but says banks won’t give him one because there’s still confusion over land deeds of former Belgian properties. Sitting in the bare nightclub building that serves as his office, Wembore pulls out a stack of black-and-white photos of Stanleyville before independence and shakes his head at a remark about the city’s beauty.

“No, no, no,” he objects. “It *was* beautiful.”



*A hospital on the banks of the Congo River. (Nina Stochlic/The Daily Beast)*

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Document.extrait.de.ce.site.:

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