

In Congo, a war for Africa's elephants

February 16 2016, by Tristan McConnell



Elephants stand in tall grass in the Garamba National Park in north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, on February 7, 2016

André Migifuloyo and Djuma Uweko lived together, worked together and last October died together fighting to protect Congo's elephants from voracious ivory-seeking poachers.

In the continental war to protect Africa's elephants, the rangers of

Garamba National Park in north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo are manning the frontline.

The two men grew up in the same small town of Dungu and joined the park service in their early twenties, a good job that pays a decent monthly wage of around \$200 (180 euros).

Migifuloyo became a ranger in 2011 and two years later Uweko followed. Both were quick to make friends with others and lived with their young families in Nagero, the park village by the Dungu River with its little red brick church and thatched homes.

In his spare time Migifuloyo, 26, enjoyed war films. Uweko, 27, liked a beer. Both earned reputations for discipline and courage in the field.

On a sweltering Monday afternoon in early October they were part of a 10-man patrol that ran into a large gang of poachers in the north of the park.

Almost as soon as the firefight began Uweko, armed with an AK-47, was shot. Migifuloyo was fatally hit moments after firing off a rocket-propelled grenade.



A scout stands next to elephant tusks confiscated from poachers at Garamba National Park

Rhinos slaughtered

Uweko dragged himself into the thick elephant grass where he lay bleeding until the poachers found him, and shot him dead. Two others also died: one in the initial exchange of fire while the other, like Uweko, was wounded then executed.

Dieudonné Komorewa, 33 and a ranger for nearly eight years, was Migifuloyo's close friend and second cousin.

"I could tell he was a disciplined person, and brave, from the start," Komorewa said. "He was fun to be around."

The day before his friend was killed they had gone shopping together for baby clothes for Migifuloyo's unborn child. Most days Komorewa takes up his dead friend's toddler son to play with his own children.



A park ranger stands in elephant grass during an anti-poaching operation in Garamba National Park in north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

"I love that kid so much," he said.

Komorewa remains a determined ranger. "The enemy is the enemy and everything we do here is against them. We mustn't be scared of them, we must always be ready," he said.

Who the enemy is varies.

Sometimes it is members of the ragtag yet brutally effective rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), more often it is armed groups from South Sudan or pastoralist-poachers from Sudan or Central African Republic, or occasionally unknown shooters in helicopters who kill the elephants with a bullet in the top of the skull.



In the past three years alone in the Democratic Republic of Congo more than 100,000 African elephants have been killed for their tusks

'If they see us they shoot'

Every year more than 30,000 elephants are poached in Africa, according to conservationists, leaving around 450,000 in the wild while the illegal ivory trade their tusks supply is estimated to be worth \$3 billion (2.7

billion euros) a year.

The poachers are killers, so African Parks, the South Africa-based, European Union-backed conservation organisation that manages Garamba, has brought in military trainers and a helicopter to help level the battlefield.

The 120 park rangers — a quarter of what's needed to patrol the 12,400 square kilometre (4,800 square mile) park, about half the size of Wales—are looking more and more like the paramilitary force they must be to win the ivory war.

In 2015 there were 28 firefights with poachers. Four rangers were killed and 114 elephants shot — almost one in 10 of those left in Garamba — but just 40 years ago there were 23,000 elephants here, plus close to 500 northern white rhinos. Poachers killed Garamba's last rhino a decade ago and the rangers are fighting to stop Garamba's [elephants](#) meeting the same end.



A young female elephant is fitted with a GPS collar on February 3, 2016 at the Garamba National Park

At the 50-metre (yard) firing range cut out of the thick bush, military trainers from Pretoria-based security company Noctuum are working on the rangers' marksmanship.

A year ago rangers would shoot from the hip or, sometimes, over their heads holding the gun sideways like in a gangsta movie. Now they steady themselves in a low crouch, aim, exhale and squeeze the trigger. Lack of bullets means each ranger gets just five practice shots before each deployment.

'Bush justice'

The adjacent obstacle course is made out of rough branches and tree trunks. The teaching happens at the camp but the real learning is in the field, said one of the trainers who did not want to be identified. "Here you can only tell them what to do. In the bush you show them," he said.

Garamba's security advisor Peter Philippot, a 45-year old French former soldier, says weapons and ammunition are his priority. The armoury is mostly filled with battered and ageing AK-47 rifles with an effective range of 100 metres, but in the park's thick, tall grass and forests most firefights begin at frighteningly short range.

"In the bush you can't see nothing after 20 metres and most fights start at 10 metres. We need shotguns," said Philippot.

A \$2 million (1.8 million euros) Squirrel helicopter donated by Howard Buffett, the philanthropist son of a billionaire businessman, helps even the odds, said the 60-year old South African pilot Frank Molteno.

His aircraft was hit by gunfire and nearly shot down as he rescued the surviving rangers during October's battle.

"If they see us they shoot at us, so we shoot at them. It's bush justice," he said.

The war is merciless. The poachers who killed Migifuloyo, Uweko and the two others stripped their bodies, looted their gear and left their corpses strewn in the baking sun. It took four days for the rangers to find, retrieve and bury their colleagues.

Komorewa visits his friend's grave a couple of times a month, clearing the dead leaves that gather on the concrete, but despite the loss he has never considered giving up. "I could be killed riding my motorbike, not just in the bush," he said. "Death is everywhere."

© 2016 AFP

Citation: In Congo, a war for Africa's elephants (2016, February 16) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-02-congo-war-africa-elephants.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.