

Collection of articles by John Manzongo

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1. Dicing with death

What started as a normal day for Dzinon Sibanda of Gwaivhi village in Chikombedzi ended with him almost knocking on heaven's doors after he stepped on a landmine 14 years ago. Sibanda had gone to look for his lost cattle in a nearby forest but the search changed his life forever when he stepped on a landmine and lost his right leg.

Despite the accident occurring on one hot afternoon in 1998, memories of that day still haunt him and his anger piles.

Sibanda does not mince his words when it comes to the issue of landmines. He is full of condemnation for Rhodesian forces for ever laying landmines in the area.

Fourteen years down the line, his wish is to know the people responsible for the landmines so that he can claim compensation.

He narrates his ordeal to The Herald.

"I had gone to the forest to look for my cattle and I suddenly heard a thundering and shattering sound. Out of shock I ran for about 50 metres.

"By then I thought I had escaped my attacker but was surprised that I was in fact lying down and my right leg was missing," Sibanda recalls.

A few minutes later he felt some sort of wetness and excruciating pain below his waist then realised that something was wrong.

"I screamed because what I saw terrified me. I realised that I had lost my leg to a landmine. I started crying and shouting for help a few minutes after coming out of my confusion and asking myself lots of questions

"I crawled to a nearby bush where I managed to remove tree leaves and barks, which I used to tie my leg to stop the bleeding," he said.

By midnight Sibanda was still lying on the same spot and used leaves and tree branches to cover his injured leg and body from the vagaries of the night.

Only the exhaustion made him sleep.

"When I woke up the next morning I saw a human skeleton which was clutching a rifle lying next to me. Fear gripped me but I was in so much pain and had lost a lot of blood that I could not move. I think that I was just hallucinating.

"Around mid-morning I started to feel weak, thirsty and tired when I heard faint voices from a distance.

"I started shouting again at the top of my voice, but it was faint according to the search party.

"After what looked like an eternity I started hearing the voices getting closer.

"I knew they could only get to a certain distance for fear of being blown off.

"I summoned the little power I had, pulled myself out of the bush and started shouting and waving.

"It is then that one of them heard me. I called again and they saw where I was," he added.

The search party told him to crawl towards them since they were also afraid of the landmines.

Sibanda crawled for a distance of about 15 metres to where the rescue team was and fainted.

Still unconscious, he was carried to the hospital using a scotch cart where his leg was amputated and treated. After a week, the wound started going bad so doctors had to cut it again. He was to stay at Chikombedzi Hospital for three months.

Sibanda said upon his return from hospital his life took a different turn. He was now walking on an artificial limb and clutches and was no longer able to do the chores or play games with his friends.

Such is the life of many Zimbabwean landmine victims who are among the majority of the people calling for an increase in demining campaigns.

Areas along the country's borders are littered with landmines, which have restricted movement, farming and grazing.

Major Innocent Taguta, the officer commanding Gwaivhi mine clearance squadron operating the Gonarezhou Transfrontier Park said demining was a task that demanded an individual soldier to be totally focused, brave and dedicated.

"Each day has new challenges when dealing with landmines no matter how experienced you are. It is critical to remind each other of the safety precautions before we start work.

"I personally talk to my men to judge their emotional preparedness, how excited or afraid they will be to conduct the exercise daily. If I realize that my sapper is not emotionally prepared or is stressed he is automatically excused from entering the minefield," he said.

He said safety was paramount at all times during their operations.

"I make sure an ambulance is nearby, an evacuation aircraft is also ready in Harare to come and airlift an injured deminer for special treatment in the capital city on a daily basis," Maj Taguta said.

He added: "Each deminer is then kitted with his safety clothing and equipment that include safety boots, groin protector, face shield, chest and leg protector which work like an overall."

Currently, the deminers day starts at 5am and ends by 11am because the areas they are working on are very hot and heat usually causes discomfort and drowsiness increasing their risk of being injured.

They work in groups of two so that they can comfort, advice and help each other as they carry out their risky task.

Each team is equipped with a landmine detector, a trowel, and a soft brush and safety marker to guide their route.

"Our day's work has started again comrade, and it promises to be very hot. Did you call

your girlfriend Grace before we came here? I have phoned mine, Portia, and cut our conversation short when she started begging me to quit this dangerous job today," said the deminers as they headed for work and successfully removed an anti-personnel landmine in Gonarezhou.

The minefield they are working on is unmarked and there are no maps to show where the minefield starts and ends. Under the circumstances even seasoned military deminers usually think twice before venturing on such a mission.

Unfortunately duty calls for these young men and the nation is waiting and looking forward to them to ridding Zimbabwe of these lethal metal vipers.

Maj Taguta said that after a deminer is injured the whole squadron immediately stops work.

They carry the injured to the airstrip by an ambulance and have the patient evacuated to Harare by air. The squadron will retrain trying to learn from the mistake that got their colleague to get injured and return to the minefield after two days.

Since 2006, five ZNA deminers have suffered serious injuries which range from facial, hands and legs, some deminers have had their legs amputated.

Corporal Munyaradzi Mapako Makoni who is part of the Crooks Corner land minefield clearance squadron now in its second consecutive year gave his first experience.

"When I first came here, I barely slept that night because I could not believe that I was going to make it in the minefield the next day.

"During our training we were always told that if you work carelessly or with a half heart you would face your reward in the minefield.

"At the minefield we were briefed on the safety precautions and given our safety clothes and kit. I almost opted out after our commander asked if there was anyone who did not want to go into the minefield. I only threw away the idea after I observed Private Peter's hand was down. He used to be a coward during training," Corporal Makoni said.

He added: "As I held the detector, I knew our lives depended on me. Suddenly I heard continuous whistling sound and realised we had encountered a landmine.

"I carefully placed the detector down and armed myself with a trowel and soft brush. Slowly I started cautiously cutting the edges slowly, my hands were already sweating.

"When I saw its head emerging my heart skipped a bit, I was still contemplating my next move when my colleague shouted Comrade zvatoita, just remove that soil and hand me the mine.

"I gathered the little strength remaining in me and reached for the landmine, I could hear my heavy heartbeat.

"I handed it over to my friend and I sighed. I felt a breath of fresh air and happy that I had done it, my first proper demining activity," remembers corporal Makoni.

On that day alone the team reaped 120 mines and from that day onwards the job has been easy for corporal Makoni.

Unlike our workdays that start at 8am and end at 5:30 pm, theirs begin at five in the morning ends at 11am when they trade demining equipment for sporting activities.

The activities include soccer, darts, chess and watching favourite European soccer league teams on their Digital Satellite television, which is powered by a generator.

Cases of people injured by landmines may decrease, thanks to the Zimbabwe National Army who decided to reclaim the land for the people.

2. Five injured in de-mining activity in Gonarezhou Transfrontier Park

Five Zimbabwe National Army mine clearers have sustained serious injuries in the last six years while de-mining the Gonarezhou Transfrontier Park. Speaking on the sidelines of de-mining operations under way in Gonarezhou on Monday, Officer Commanding Gwaivhi National Mine Clearance Squadron Major Innocent Taguta said the de-mining operation was dangerous and needed brave and dedicated men.

"Since 2006 when we started de-mining this area which borders Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique, we suffered five serious casualties which range from facial, hand and leg injuries," said Major Taguta.

"Some of the de-miners have been amputated.

"The injured are, however, well taken care of by the army as they are rehabilitated at Tsanga Lodge in Nyanga where they are also given new life skills such as carpentry, welding or even pursue degrees under the sponsorship of the army.

"This minefield is unmarked and that makes our task very difficult. We first have to establish the minefield pattern and that is the most dangerous part."

Major Taguta said lack of de-mining equipment and weather effects were slowing the speedy removal of landmines in the area.

"My squadron has only 30 landmine detectors instead of 48. So far we have cleared 21 kilometres of this 54 kilometre double-stretch minefield," he said.

"We have cleared from the basins of Limpopo to Mwenezi rivers.

"On a good day, we can remove 100 or more landmines.

"Some landmines were planted as early as 1976 and since then a lot of things have happened, making the minefield pattern change.

"Animals have also destroyed the pattern.

"We are discovering anti-personnel, surface to surface and anti-tank landmines which were reinforced together.

"We are also discovering skeletons of armed liberation fighters and animals in the minefield and we have since forwarded the information to the local chief for proper reburial."

Major Taguta said after an injury of one de-miner, they immediately stop operations to evacuate the injured by air to Harare.

They return to the field after two days.

Chief Willie Sengwe said Government and local companies must fully capacitate the de-miners for the nation to benefit from cultural tourism of the Shangani people.

"Army de-miners are doing a great job here, but they do not have enough equipment, they always take turns to go into the minefield, yet when there is sufficient equipment all the 100 and more engineers will go into the field at once, meaning they cover a bigger area," he said.

"Shangani people have a rich culture which remains to be adored by the nation and the world.

"We boast of our variety of dances, housing structures, traditional beer, and initiation of boys and girls into adulthood."

3. The making of a commando

The Zambezi Escarpment of Zimbabwe, near the border with Zambia is a terribly hostile area for human beings not only because of its inhospitable climate and rugged terrain but also because it is a place where animals of the wild roam free, and dangerous.

It is in this crucible at the "Wafa Wafa" where Zimbabwe's commandos, the special forces of the national army, are hardened. Whoever goes there does so voluntarily and, as depicted by the name, some die and some are seriously injured during the training. Wild animals add an extra threat.

The place is not habitable to human beings; it is only a wildlife jungle and no crop survives there as it is rocky. Only drought-resistant plants such as the cactus thrive there.

As you arrive at the entrance to the Wafa Wafa training area you are welcomed by a signpost in bold green and white letters: WELCOME TO WAFWA WAFWA, HOME OF THE COMMANDOS, NO MISSION IS IMPOSSIBLE UNTIL ONE DROPS DEAD.

It means once you are in a battle you will never surrender, retreat or run away from the enemy, you have to fight on with everything at your disposal until you drop dead.

Not many of us if any will dare join such a group of individuals who sacrifice their life for the defence of their motherland not just ordinarily but serving with the best force on earth.

The world over they are known as the green family or commandos. Those who know their mettle accord them great respect wherever they go. It all starts off with a month-long selection period where volunteers' physical and mental stamina are tested to the extreme.

Briefing Colonel Steven Gwekwerere, who is the colonel responsible for general staff at Army Headquarters at the passout of 44 commandos at Wafa Wafa Training Camp, the officer commanding the training unit, Major Vengai Musanga, said commando training builds character, courage and a positive attitude in a soldier.

"The training kicks off with a four-week selection phase where volunteers are subjected to fitness tests and battle marches with weights. The phase is so demanding and stretches to 24 hours non-stop action. Fatigue and sleepless nights are the order of the day. In this phase many volunteers fall by the wayside as they fail to catch up with the daunting task," he said.

The selection phase once complete will culminate into the endurance phase which is regarded as the ultimate test of physical and mental stamina designed to separate men from boys.

In this exercise students navigate through the rugged Zambezi Valley terrain for a distance of 120 kilometres while carrying 20 kilogrammes packs on their backs.

This phase is supposed to be completed in 48 hours and marks the end of the selection phase. In this phase volunteers are subjected to severe dehydration and body fatigue, situations they will face in real battles.

Volunteer commandos then graduate to a more demanding skills phase meant to mould them into proficient, multi-talented and fully fledged troops who are highly reliable.

In the skills phase the trainees are taught map reading. They navigate through a series of checkpoints for 82 kilometres day and night.

The trainees also undergo a three-week watermanship training where they swim while firing their rifles, rubbing shoulders with crocodiles which are plenty in Lake Kariba.

It is spine-chilling just to know there is a crocodile at a certain water point but the commandos get into the water while the crocodiles are wagging their tongues by their side.

The commandos are also taught combat skills which include water procurement from plants, traditional fire making, silent signalling techniques and food procurement from wild plants. In case of injuries they use tree barks and traditional medicines to treat snake bites and stomach problems.

They are also taught urban warfare, covert operations, long-range reconnaissance patrols, tracking down the enemy using its spoor, use of explosives, sniping, anti-hijacking, hostage rescue, voice procedure, water assaults, abseiling from helicopters and mountains.

In an interview recently after a passout of 44 commandos at Wafa Wafa, Major Fanuel Muzerengwa, who is the second in command of Commando Regiment, said the unit is not for the faint-hearted but is the home of the brave.

"The training a commando receives here will never be found anywhere else. If you survive this place you will survive anywhere on this earth.

"The most challenging phase when I trained here years back is the dry and hot terrain. There is no water and one needs to have water discipline to survive.

"All the big five animals except the rhino are found here. We had one encounter where a trainee was trampled on by a buffalo. Another group was attacked by a lion. The area is very dangerous," he said.

Commanding officer of the regiment Lieutenant Colonel Hwami Vengesai, whose son Reuters also graduated at the recent passout, said the training hardens commandos and makes them lethal weapons even if they are not armed.

"The next time you see a soldier with a coveted dagger and wearing a Green Beret accord him or her great respect. They are the cream of the Zimbabwe National Army," he said.

"The training is aimed at creating battle-hardened soldiers who will survive under any battle weather and condition. This training proved valuable to commandos and the ZNA during our tour of duty in the Democratic Republic of Congo."

4. Teachers desert 'haunted' house

Recently in MUDZI most children grow up hearing tales of haunted houses, spooks that live under their beds and witches that eat little tots.

Often, the terror of these stories fade early and people live through their lives without a second thought about the horrors that the supernatural can be.

Not so for the community around Nya-matowa Primary School in Mudzi, where people are convinced supernatural terrors stalk them.

Over the past eight years, eight teachers have died in what the community says are mysterious circumstances after occupying a staff house that they say is haunted.

And all the deaths are said to have occurred around March.

The Ides of March, perhaps?

The school headmaster, Mr Teveraishe Tugamba, revealed this while narrating the school's housing situation to the Zimbabwe National Army's 2 Brigade public relations officer, Lieutenant Godfrey Gweje, on Monday.

"The school has an acute shortage of teacher's accommodation, some teachers are sharing houses a situation which is not very healthy as some of them are married and have children.

"There is however, one house which is vacant after we discovered that it is haunted by evil spirits.

"Legend has it that years ago, the house was occupied by an aged headmistress who was not married and had no male companion until she retired.

"Every year a teacher would occupy the house, spend almost a year and around this month (March) the teacher in this house would mysteriously die after a short illness.

"When I took over as headmaster four years ago, four teachers had died and during my tenure the same number of teachers passed away in similar circumstances, making them eight in total," he said.

Mr Tugamba said efforts to exorcise the house were not sufficient to convince any teacher to move in.

Apparently no one wanted to be the "guinea pig" that would test the veracity of the exorcism.

"One day I was surprised when a teacher who was my close colleague and was staying in that house started acting strange while in my office.

"We later realised that he had really gone mad and it was such a scary and sad event for me and the entire school.

"The school authorities and the school development committee finally agreed that we should just destroy the house to spare our dwindling staff."

Teachers and pupils refused to discuss the house when asked by this writer and no one dares go near it.