A Plane Crash, Rescue, and Recovery

A Close Call in Africa

Richard L. Holm

In September 1964, I reported to CIA Headquarters following a two-year tour as a Directorate of Operations (DO) officer involved in paramilitary work in Laos and Thailand. I was assigned to a country desk in the DO's Africa Division, and I signed up for part-time French language training in preparation for my next assignment. Through my language training, I came into contact with one of the division's most senior officers, who had served in Leopoldville in the Republic of the Congo. We talked a lot about the rebellion going on in the Congo and the fact that our senior officer in Stanleyville and his two communications officers were prisoners of the Simba rebels.

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Background: Political Turmoil

After it gained independence from Belgium in 1960, the Congo became the scene of intense political intrigue that led quickly to rebellion and conflict. Given its abundant resources and its "strategic location," the United States and the USSR and their camps had been watching carefully as the Congo tried to set its course as an independent nation. Both tried to influence events to strengthen their interests, but neither side seemed to realize that there was a dynamic to this particular tribal conflict that resisted influence from outside sources.

The Simbas, a ragtag bunch of illiterate dissidents, certainly were not Communists, but they posed a threat to the pro-Western government in Leopoldville led by Moise Tshombe. Thus, they gained the support of the Soviet Union, China, and their client states, thereby prompting determination from the United States and its allies to provide all support possible to Tshombe and his government. It was just that simple, and it was a scenario played out elsewhere in the world repeatedly during the first decades of the Cold War.

The author and a Hmong resistance fighter in Laos in mid-1962. Photo courtesy of the author.

A New Assignment

One morning in mid-October, I was called to the division chief's office. After noting that US policymakers were extremely concerned about the threat the Simbas posed to the central government, he disclosed that US planes would be transporting Belgian paratroopers to Stanleyville in the next month to liberate

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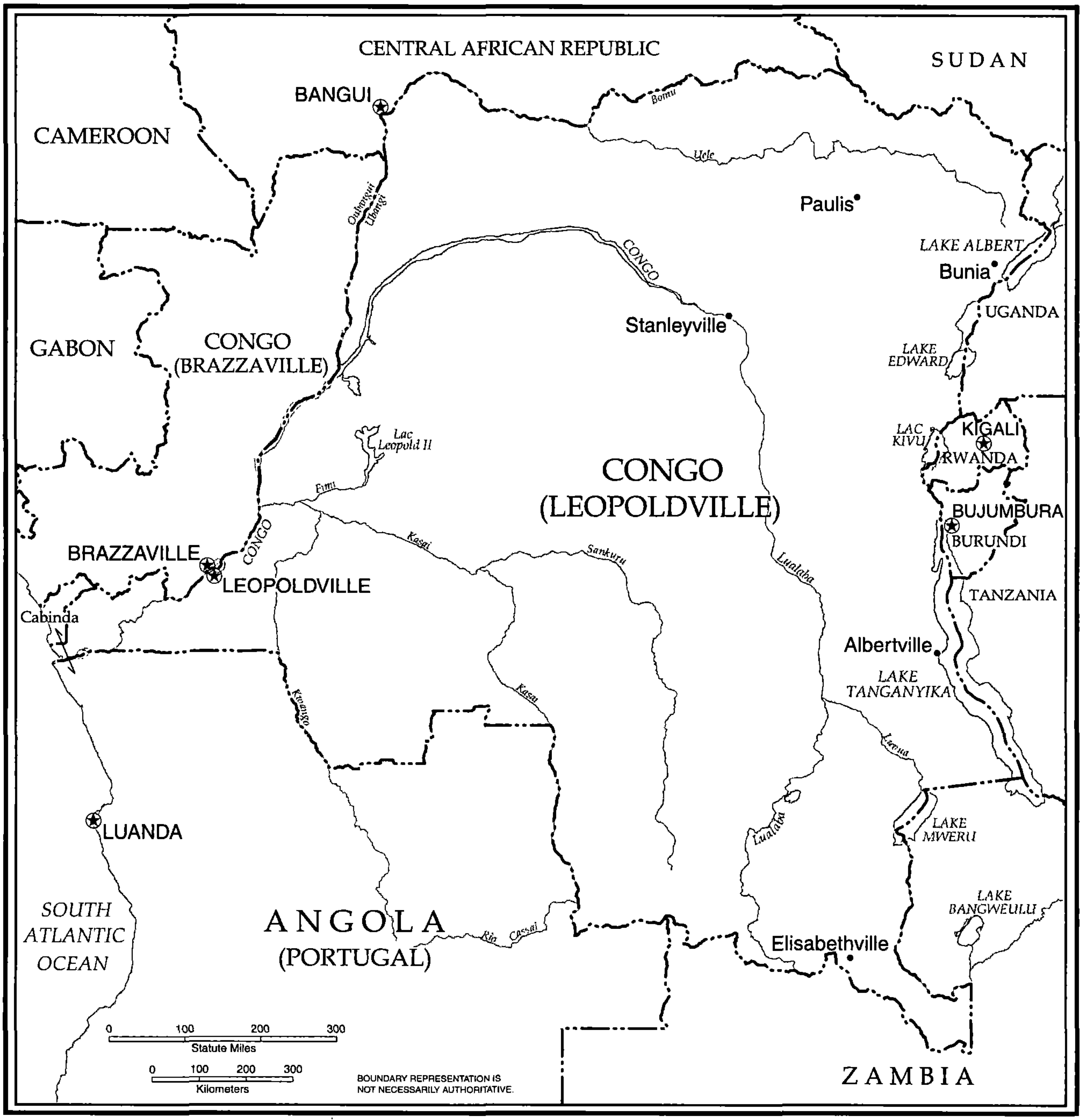
Richard L. Holm served in the Directorate of Operations.

CONGO (LEOPOLDVILLE), LATE 1964 TO EARLY 1965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SUDAN
BANGUI
CAMEROON
Bomu
Uele
Paulis
Oubangui
Ubangi
LAKE ALBERT
Bunia
CONGO
UGANDA
Stanleyville
GABON
CONGO
(BRAZZAVILLE)
LAKE
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the city and to free the Simbas' hostages.

After that, the Agency would need someone on the ground in Stanleyville to provide intelligence. The division chief surprised me by saying that, probably in December, he wanted me to take on that assignment on a temporary basis. I accepted and began preparing by reading relevant operational files as well as a couple of books about tribal conflicts in Central Africa. I also continued my French language training.

Getting Started

At dawn on 24 November 1964, the Belgian paratroop operation Red Dragon was launched, and the entire city of Stanleyville was liberated in a few hours with minimal losses. The three CIA officers were unharmed. Dave, the senior officer, soon returned to Headquarters, where he helped prepare me for the job ahead. As it turned out, he persuaded the powers that be to let him accompany me to help get me off to a running start. On 26 December, we left for Brussels, where we would consult briefly with CIA officers.

Our next stop was Leopoldville, and we immediately began making arrangements for a flight to Stanleyville. At that point, Headquarters switched signals and advised that Dave would not be permitted to return to Stanleyville. He did not like this directive, but there was nothing he could do.

When I arrived in Stanleyville, I found a deserted city. Virtually every European had been evacuated, and almost none had returned. The vast majority was still in Leopoldville or in Europe. Moreover, many of the Congolese population, especially the rich and the educated, had fled to the bush during the Simba occupation and were not yet convinced it was safe to return. The population, normally estimated at 150,000, was nowhere near that now.

As the Simba threat receded, I began trying to recontact some of our agents, but with no success. I moved back and forth between Leopoldville and Stanleyville during January 1965. In early February, Headquarters relented and allowed Dave to make one visit to Stanleyville with me, in the hope that this would help facilitate recontacting agents.

We discovered, however, that it was too soon to expect to meet with either our former agents or with many of Dave's other contacts in Stanleyville. Time after time, we came up empty trying to locate someone; usually, the agent's house or apartment was unoccupied. Sometimes, someone was there, but not the individual we sought. Our northeastern Congo network was still a shambles. Our goal remained to collect whatever intelligence we could from our agents about the presence, activities, and supply lines of the Simba units.

After the trip to Stanleyville in early February, we discussed the possibility of expanding my area of operations. Specifically, I proposed a short visit to Bunia, on the Congo's eastern border with Uganda. We had a couple of agents who were originally from Bunia and still had family there. One had been one of our best assets. When fear drove them from Stanleyville, I reasoned, perhaps they had retreated to either Bunia or Uganda. And perhaps I could make contact with them in Bunia. In addition, I might be able to collect information from people in the area to satisfy some of the requirements levied on us by the policymakers. Dave concurred, and Headquarters approved my proposal. I left Leopoldville for Bunia circa 12 February 1965.

Arriving in Bunia

Bunia lies on a high plateau in the far northeastern portion of the Congo. (The Congo was known as Zaire from 1971 to 1997.) Bunia is near the border with Uganda, about an hour's drive over rough terrain, from Lake Albert. It had been liberated by a mercenary column on 30 November 1964, six days after the Belgian paratroopers liberated Stanleyville. When I arrived, most large towns in the northeast were in government hands and safe, but an unknown number of armed Simbas roaming the countryside often wreaked havoc. The mercenaries hired by Tshombe's government simply did not have the manpower or resources to chase down the Simba units. The northeast Congo was in great turmoil.

Bunia's airport is a few kilometers southeast of the town. The C-46 in which I had arrived unloaded some supplies for our small group of men stationed in Bunia, which included a couple of Cuban pilots, two mechanics, a radio operator, and a logistics officer.

The town was largely deserted and seemed likely to remain so until the northeast had been completely cleansed of Simba presence and influence. Our group worked, ate, and slept in the only local hotel. We all felt the strangeness of being in a ghost town.

The Simbas were out there, but we knew nothing about their real strength or intentions. Indeed, that was one of the priorities of my visit—to find out where they were and what they were going to do.

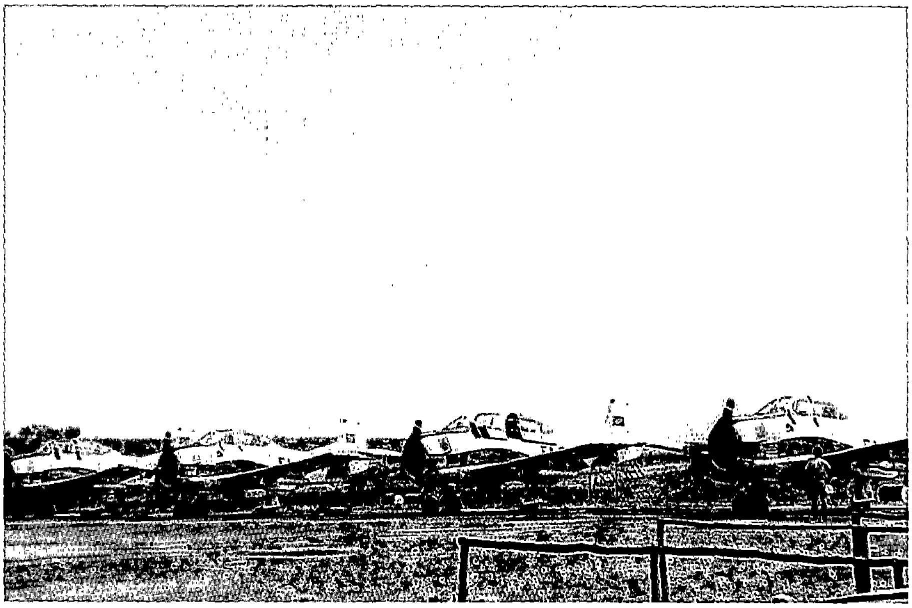
The two T-28 aircraft, which were staged from Bunia, would have been reason enough for the Simbas to be hostile, but so far nothing had happened. There were neither mercenary nor Congolese Army elements in Bunia, but some were nearby. Although we had some handguns and a few Uzi automatics, if a Simba group had attacked us, things would have been difficult.

Meanwhile, I still hoped to re-establish contact with a couple of agents who possibly were in Bunia. I had what passed for addresses—house numbers on ill-defined streets—and I set about trying to check them out.

Within a day or two, I was able to recontact one agent, who had fled Stanleyville as the Simba forces arrived. He was planning to return to Stanleyville within the week, and we arranged to meet there later in the month. I was reassured to hear him say that the area around Bunia was safe and that Simba control in general was falling apart. Based on my debriefing of him, I wrote three reports the next morning and sent them to Leopoldville.

An Aerial Survey

A few days later, my communications officer drove me out to the airport. The chief of the air unit had agreed that this would be a good time for me to get a look at the terrain, road network, and level of activity visible from the air in the area north of Bunia along the border with Sudan. We suspected some arms and ammo for the Simbas were being infiltrated via that border. The two T-28s made daily flights out of Bunia looking for "military targets"—almost anything that moved on the roads. That day, they had been scheduled to cover the area I was interested in.



T-28s in Bunia. Photo courtesy of the author.

The T-28 has two seats, one behind the other, under the same canopy. It has a range of about 300 miles—150 out and 150 back. Because the northeast quarter of the Congo is the size of France, their range was insufficient to cover all of that region from Bunia. But they were able to cover areas north, west, and south of Bunia. They did not fly in Uganda.

I had done a lot of this type of flying in Laos, and was confident that I would get a good idea of what, if anything, was going on along the Sudanese border. Security was an issue, but as far as we knew the Simbas did not have weaponry that would bring down a plane. That was not the case in Laos, where we had lost aircraft to ground fire.

The Cubans, Juan Peron and Juan Tunon, were young but experienced, and both were good pilots. I went over maps with them and explained which areas I wanted to cover, if possible. My tasking was second priority; military targets, if we found any, would come first. I was to fly on the T-28 piloted by Juan Peron, sitting behind him.

Peron had learned to fly light planes while in his teens, and he became a cropduster for a small rice-growing company in Cuba. In March 1960, about a year after Castro overthrew Batista, Peron was sent to Miami to pick up a new plane. Foreseeing what Castro's rule would mean for Cuba, Peron's father instructed him to stay in the United States, and Peron did so. In 1963, he accepted employment with an air proprietary company organized by the Agency and was sent to the Congo after receiving training in the World War II-vintage T-6 fighter. After arriving in the Congo in November 1963, he trained in the T-28 and the C-46.

As planned, we headed north along the Sudanese border. After about half an hour, Peron spotted three trucks near a junction of two unpaved roads. They had evidently heard the planes and were pulling in under some trees. Peron decided to attack and destroy the trucks.

> **“My eyelids were singed shut, and I could not open them. I could hear and smell fire, and I knew I had to get out of the plane.”**

He also spotted what he thought was a power plant—to be destroyed as well. It was right at the intersection, and the trucks were about 100 yards from it. It was not clear to me that these were military targets, but it did not matter. We circled around and started a strafing run with machineguns, our only weaponry.

We made two more runs; I could not tell if we had hit anything. After we leveled off and resumed cruising, it was clear immediately that the weather had changed. Heavy clouds and rain were moving toward us. Juan said we should return to Bunia.

Approaching Disaster

At that time, flying in the middle of Africa presented many challenges. Weather forecasting help was almost nonexistent. You knew there was a storm coming when you saw one. Navigational aids were few and far between.

We managed to skirt the storm, but Peron told me that we had been knocked off course. We flew on. Neither pilot saw anything familiar, and soon Peron said, “We have to go down. We don’t know where we are, and fuel is getting low. I’d rather take it in while I can choose a clearing. And it will be dark soon.” Juan Tunon decided to stay up a while longer, however, and the two pilots wished each other luck.

Juan Peron picked out a clearing. He made his last turn, and we started losing altitude. “You have a weapon?” he asked, as we glided in just short of stalling out. I felt the Walther 9mm in my pocket and responded, “Yes, and I’ll keep it with me.” His question highlighted the fact that we were going down in what was likely to be Simba-controlled territory. I was confident that we would land and lose ourselves in the bush and make our way to safety, however long it might take. I worried that I did not have an escape-and-evasion kit with a radio. Juan opened the canopy and there was a rush of air. To get a better look at the clearing, I reached up and raised the sunvisor on my flight helmet.

We were going too fast, but there was nothing Juan could do. Our first touch caused us to bounce. We touched again and started skidding along the rough clearing. Juan saw flames under the left wing. I was hunched over, seatbelt and harness as tight as they would go, bracing myself for the end of our slide. The slide, probably several hundred yards, seemed to last a long time. Suddenly, we came to an abrupt stop.

The impact caused me to lurch forward and then back, and my head jerked up. At the same instant, a splash of flaming aviation fuel was thrown across the rear cockpit from the left wing. I caught it in the face, left front mostly, left shoulder, and both hands as well as a bit on the tops of both legs. The splash missed the front cockpit and Juan was unhurt. Not immediately realizing what had happened to me and eager to get out of the T-28 now burning on its left side, Juan leaped out of the cockpit, jumped off the wing, and ran.

I was stunned and in considerable pain. My eyelids had been singed shut, and I could not open them. I could hear and smell fire, and knew I had to get out of the plane. I heard Juan shouting at me to get out. My seat harness remained snugly fastened. My hands hurt a lot, and I could not use either one. Somehow, I managed to push open the release with one of my elbows and, with a lot of effort, I started to climb out—hindered severely by the fact that I really could not use my hands and I still had the parachute hanging behind me.

The fire was a great motivator. I half climbed, half stumbled out of the cockpit, and I fell off the wing on the right rear side. Instinctively, I had moved away from the fire. Juan helped me move away from the burning plane as it exploded.

In Dire Straits

We needed to get as far away from the plane as possible before dark in case any Simbas came to check things out. I could barely walk, however, and I was extremely weak. Juan could not carry me very far. We stopped, and I tried to think. Bad burns meant infection, dehydration, and swelling. I was wearing contact lenses, and I asked Juan to help remove them because my hands would not work. Impossible. I could not get my eyes open. They would have to stay shut until we could find help.

It started raining. After staggering for only 30 minutes or so, we stopped under some trees next to a small stream. It rained most of the night, and we just sat there. Fearing an adverse impact on my circulation, Juan made me move about periodically. The pain got worse, and I passed out for short intervals. We neither saw nor heard any sign of patrols moving in the area. We had absolutely no idea where we were.

When daylight finally came, I could at least discern that much. Juan used his knife to cut charred skin hanging from several of my fingers. There were already bugs on some of my burns. We decided that Juan should leave me by the stream (so I could drink water regularly) and try to find help. We both knew that our chances were far greater if Juan, moving on his own, could find help and then get back to me. By the time he left, I was in great pain, which took me in and out of consciousness. He took my Walther with him.

In ever-increasing circles, Juan started to explore the area around the crash site, looking for anything that would help us start to locate ourselves. Sometime around midday, Juan saw some natives and tried to approach them, but they fled. Juan walked in the direction they had gone and came upon a cluster of about 15 huts. For the northeastern Congo, that qualified as a village. There were people there, mostly women and children. No one spoke French, English, or Spanish, and Juan was having trouble making himself understood. The women were wary.

Suddenly, a group of unarmed men appeared and came toward Juan cautiously. Juan addressed them in English, and he was relieved to receive a response, also in English. Juan learned that the village chief, named Faustino, had been educated by British missionaries, who taught him English. These people were Azande, a tribal group scattered across central Africa in the Congo, the Sudan, and the Central African Republic. They had no real use for governments or borders. They knew little and probably cared less about Tshombe and his government. The Simbas, however, had killed Faustino's brother, who was a paramount leader of the Azande tribe, and Faustino hated the rebels. What a stroke of good luck for us.

Faustino. Photo courtesy of the author.

Cuban pilot Juan Tunon. Photo courtesy of the author.

Juan explained our situation, and Faustino agreed to help us get to safety. According to Faustino, the nearest government post was Paulis, more than 280 kilometers away.

While waiting for Juan, I can remember stumbling into and out of the stream several times. I had to drink lots of water, and lying in the stream gave some relief from the bees that seemed to be all over me. Juan says he was shocked when they found me. I was lying about 20 meters from the stream. "You were covered with bees, and you looked like a monster," Juan said. In pain and barely conscious, I did not realize at first that he had come back. It had been almost 24 hours since we crash-landed. The villagers and Juan fashioned a crude stretcher from tree limbs and began the walk back to the village—a painful journey for me.

The Other T-28

A villager had reported another plane down nearby, and Juan Peron and Faustino had checked out the site on the way to get me. Juan Tunon was nowhere to be found. The plane had not burned, and Juan Peron was able to retrieve some maps. Without knowing our present location, however, the maps were not of much use. Tunon had taken his weapon.

Based on its location and the condition of the plane, and the fact that there had been no fire, Juan believed that Tunon stalled out on his final approach. Without air speed the T-28 dropped like a rock. The trees, some over 100 feet tall, served to cushion the plane's drop.

Tunon was never seen again. Months later, missionary reports confirmed that he had been captured, killed, and eaten by the Simbas, who believed that if you eat the flesh and vital organs of your enemy you gain strength. Tunon had had jungle warfare and escape and evasion training before coming to the Congo; many thought he would have had a good chance of getting out.

In a Friendly Village

We had crashed in the late afternoon on 17 February. Juan made contact with Faustino's village on the 18th, and it was late afternoon on that day when I was carried into the village. The trip there had been awful. Each movement of the crude stretcher caused me pain as whatever scabbing had taken place broke open again.

When we got to the village, it was obvious that I would need help. The village had no doctor and no medicines. The village men had a meeting, and Faustino proposed the plan that was ultimately adopted. While they would help, they had to protect themselves as well. Accordingly, I would be hidden in the bush outside the village, and someone from the village would stay with me at all times. Faustino and two others would guide Juan to Paulis to seek help and return for me. I seem to remember trying to make clear that if the villagers helped us, my government would help and protect them.

I was carried into the bush away from the village and taken to a crude hut that would protect me from rain. A small fire seemed to keep out bugs. No one wanted a Simba patrol to discover me anywhere near the village. All would suffer if that happened.

Someone came to care for my burns. I remember being washed with warm water and someone cleaning my burns with a knife. The bees were gone, but smaller worm-like bugs had gotten into my burns just after the crash while I lay on the ground awaiting Juan's return. Except for my hands, they were easily dealt with. Whoever it was systematically dug out every bug he could see. The effort had predictable results on the extensor tendons of my fingers. Many were cut and no longer function. (I am not complaining. I still have fingers that work, and I can still play tennis, so I will always be grateful to that individual.)

When my wounds had been thoroughly cleaned, someone applied a grease or salve-like substance onto all of my burns. It turned bluish black, hardened, and became a sort of protective coating over my burns. Essentially, it prevented both infection and dehydration—the greatest dangers for someone who has suffered severe burns. There is little question that this treatment saved my life. I was determined to hang on until Juan got to Paulis and returned with help. But I was to be tested—severely and soon.

Seeking Help

Juan, Faustino, and two other men, Balde and Christie, took off the morning of 19 February. Juan left my parachute with the villagers and told them to spread it out on the ground when a helicopter came for me. Juan knew nothing about the area, so he deferred to Faustino's judgment. Faustino was intelligent and resourceful and, in the end, we would both owe our lives to him.

During the trip, some of which was on bicycles, the sharp-eyed Balde went ahead. He was responsible for spotting any danger, avoiding it, and warning the others. He periodically left "safety" signals on the trail or road. Christie followed behind, making sure that nothing could come on them from the rear. Juan and Faustino rode tandem or walked in the middle. Juan had given Faustino my Walther 9mm, while Juan carried a .45 automatic. Neither Balde nor Christie was armed. When the situation required a decision, Faustino made it.

In Bunia, meanwhile, the chief of the air unit, "Big Bill" Wyrozemski, sounded the alert when we did not return on the 17th. Early on 18 February, planes were out looking for us. Juan remembers seeing search planes on 18 and 19 February and a couple of times after that. Without a survival kit and a radio, however, he could not make any contact or signal his position. He did have a flare, but, each time he heard the planes overhead, his group was traveling in heavily wooded areas that precluded any attempt to send up the flare.

Bill knew the areas we had hoped to survey, but he knew nothing about the storm that had blown us off course. The search continued for several days. Needle in a haystack. Hope dimmed.

As far as Juan could determine, the crash site and the village were 15 or 20 miles from the Sudanese border. Each day, Juan and company moved for as long as they could. Twice, they were able to use canoes to cover substantial distances with minimal physical effort. Bicycles loaded on the back, they floated or paddled easily for hours at a time. Juan said he felt more vulnerable on the rivers because they would have little warning of possible danger.

A few times, they rode through huge, deserted plantations where it was easy to find food and water without much fear

Cuban pilot Juan Peron (on left) and "Big Bill" Wyrozemski. Photo courtesy of the author.

for their safety. The few remaining natives hated and feared the Simbas and were willing to help. They usually slept in the bush, although there were a few times they found empty huts that they were able to use. The Simbas were inactive at night or in the rain, when they thought their "magic" would not work.

Contacts with local villagers along their way were limited almost exclusively to other Azande. Faustino would speak with elders or chiefs, and food was provided and safe areas for sleeping were pointed out.

Only a few times did Balde warn them of traffic, which they then avoided by hiding in the bush alongside the road or trail. Juan felt that they had been covering 35 to 40 kilometers each day. They had not yet seen any sign of the Simbas. By the end of the fifth day, Juan began to believe they would make it to Paulis.

Making Contact

Late in the afternoon on 24 February, Juan's group came upon an outpost manned by Belgians and mercenaries, about 20 miles east of Paulis. As soon as the men at the outpost understood who the four visitors were, they became excited. By then, hope of our survival was faint. They knew about our crash and would certainly help, but they could do nothing until morning.

The next morning Juan, Faustino, and their two companions made a one-hour truck ride into Paulis. They went directly to the airfield, where there was a small contingent similar to the one at Bunia. Several planes were positioned at Paulis, and the support crews and pilots were living there. There were also a couple of Agency air operations officers there who had direct radio communications with Leopoldville. They immediately began firing questions at Juan about my condition and whereabouts, and Juan explained everything that had happened. He praised Faustino, Balde, and Christie, who were standing off to one side.

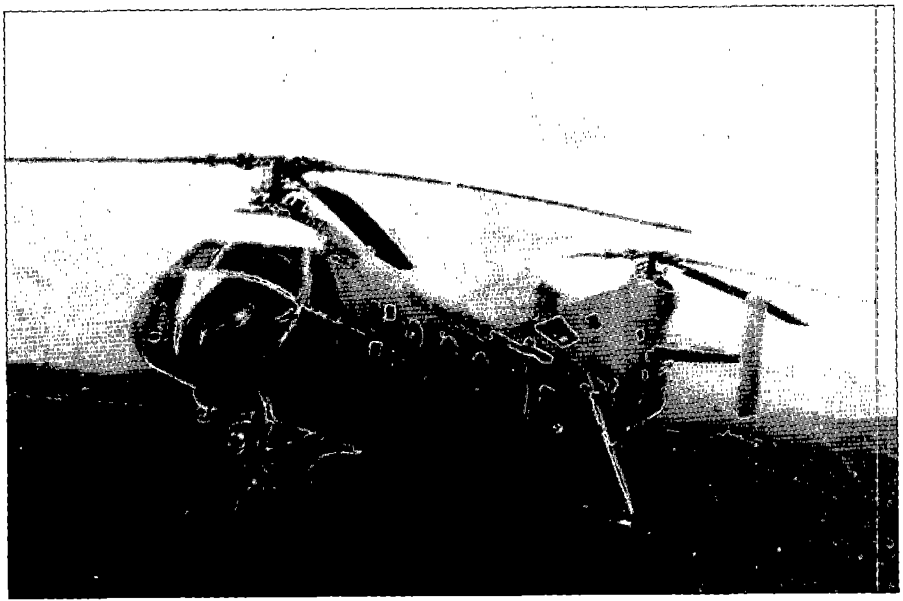
One of the air officers went over to personally thank all three. We will be helping you as well, he told them. Juan emphasized that my condition was poor and urged that a helicopter take off at once to return to the village to pick me up.

The only helicopters at Paulis were Belgian, so there was a flurry of cables back and forth to Leopoldville to get permission to use them. The Belgian air command quickly gave approval. Washington was informed that I was alive but badly hurt.

To the Rescue

Within two hours, preparations for the chopper rescue mission were under way. Faustino, Balde, and Christie would fly in the helicopter, and Juan would fly in the back of an accompanying T-28. The original plan also had Juan in the chopper, but the Cuban pilots persuaded him to fly in a T-28; none of them had any confidence in the Belgians' flying "banana." Juan's description of my condition so concerned the air ops chief in Paulis that he requested a C-130 be sent immediately from Leopoldville to be standing by when I was brought into Paulis. With all preparations made and approvals from Leopoldville in hand, the two aircraft took off just before noon on the 25th—eight days after we had crashed.

Heading east and north, the two aircraft flew for 45 minutes with Juan and



Belgian rescue helicopter. Photo courtesy of the author.

Faustino straining to pick up some landmark that would put them on course. They flew over small towns that they had passed while riding their bicycles and knew they were headed in the right direction. Faustino finally saw a village, an intersection of two roads, a river bridge, and familiar sights, even from the air, that led him to their village. Overhead, Juan was cheering and shouting into his headset. They could see a parachute being spread out on the ground, but the clearing looked small and the chopper pilot was hesitant. There was no way to signal the villagers to change it and nothing that much better in sight. The pilot decided to land.

Moments later, Juan was shocked as he watched the helicopter crash on landing. One of the rotor blades had struck a heavy tree limb and the craft rolled over. No one was hurt, but the chopper was badly damaged. The pilot used his emergency radio to communicate with the T-28 flying overhead. He reported the accident and asked that a second chopper be sent in to pick us all up. All were frustrated and disappointed. Juan and the pilot of his T-28 headed back to Paulis.

Meanwhile, my condition had been steadily deteriorating. I had only fleeting moments of consciousness, and each seemed more painful than the last. I had learned the Swahili word for water, *mai*, and that was all I could think of. Certainly, I was given water so that proves someone was there. I could not eat, and what I did manage to get down came up almost immediately. I had strange, even bizarre, delusions. I imagined myself on a giant rollercoaster careening up and down its track. Going down was awful because there were intense flames, and the pain would be excruciating until the rollercoaster came back out of the flames and up again. A tall, menacing African stood by the tracks and jabbed at me with his spear each time I passed. This would go on and on and on.

I was fighting to save my life, although I did not know it at the time. Periods of any sort of consciousness were diminishing. Days passed in a fog. I did not know about the arrival and crash of the Belgian helicopter.

The Belgian air command immediately authorized a second flight to pick up their pilots and me early on the 26th. A C-130 had arrived from Leopoldville with a doctor. It would be standing by. With the location of the village now known and with an experienced and unhurt Belgian pilot on the ground, all were confident that the next effort would succeed, and it did. The second helicopter, also with armed personnel aboard and accompanied by a T-28 fighter, landed at the village to pick up the crew of the first chopper and me. Whatever it was that the village "doctor" had put on my burns had hardened enough to form a coating over my burns. That was good, although no one there at the time realized it. The bluish-black color looked ominous.

I was put into the chopper, and we left for Paulis, where I was immediately transferred from the helicopter into the C-130 for the long flight to Leopoldville and a hospital.

A Debt of Gratitude

I fear that the rushed departure and concern for my precarious state precluded adequate thanks to Faustino and the villagers for what they had done. Despite what I owe them, I have never had the chance to meet with or thank those who did so much to save my life. The Agency, however, arranged to airdrop a planeload of medicines, tools, and clothing for the village. It was well received and understood to be, as intended, a gesture of our thanks for what they did for me.

I learned later that Faustino gained much prestige from his adventure. He returned several times to Paulis, where he was given weapons and ammunition for the defense of his village. He soon joined a group of Spanish mercenaries operating in the area of the village and received training, a weapon, and a uniform. Juan has a picture of Faustino in his uniform, and he looks like a fighter whom one would want to avoid.[1]

There was one tragic postscript to the rescue effort. Several months after the February crash, "Big Bill" was transferred to Albertville on the Congo's eastern border. Shortly after his arrival, he was concerned about a possible rebel force moving toward Albertville from the west, and Bill got approval from Leopoldville to make a short reconnaissance of the area. He had been instructed not to go alone, but no one else was readily available. Returning to Albertville, he was killed when his Land Rover was hit head on by a Congolese Army truck speeding on the wrong side of the narrow road. Juan piloted the transport plane that brought Bill's body back to Leopoldville.[2]

High-Level Support

When news reached Headquarters of my rescue and arrival at Paulis, Dick Helms, then the Deputy Director for Plans (DDP, now the DO), went straight to DCI John McCone and told him that the only hope of saving my life would be to get me to the National Burn Center in San Antonio, Texas. McCone called Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who immediately authorized the use of a US Air Force 707 jetliner for this mission. It would carry a "burn team" composed of a doctor, nurses, and corpsmen to care for me.

> **“ I had burns covering 35 percent of my body, and my weight had dropped from 165 pounds to 98. The initial odds on my survival were about 30-70 percent ... Gradually the odds began to shift in my favor. ”**

Meanwhile, doctors at Louvainium Hospital in Leopoldville were taking stock of my condition. An American doctor took one look, saw no hope, and left the room. He reported his conclusion to a senior Embassy officer who was standing outside my room. A second doctor approached. He was an older Belgian doctor with much experience in the Congo. He realized that after 11 days in the bush without care I needed immediate treatment. He put IVs into both my ankles and then "flooded" me with antibiotics and nutrients. It was a jolt I sorely needed, and it helped prepare me for the long flight to the National Burn Center.

Less than 24 hours later, the Air Force 707 arrived to take me to Texas. The team took all my vital signs and carefully assessed my condition. We were crossing the Atlantic headed for the northeast tip of Brazil for refueling. About midway across, according to the pilot who related this to my father, my condition and vital signs improved slightly. No one knew why. I believe it was the result of all that the Belgian doctor had pumped into me during my short stay in Leopoldville. He is another individual to whom I would like one day to say "thanks." The changes caused the prognosis for me to shift from "really lousy" to "he might just make it." The doctor reported the changes to the pilot, who decided to fly straight through to Texas, and we arrived in San Antonio late on a Saturday evening.

The Very Best Care

As soon as I arrived, I was examined by a young Army plastic surgeon assigned to the US Army's Surgical Research Unit (SRU). The SRU was the heart of the National Burn Center at Brooke Army Hospital. The center was considered the best burn treatment facility in the United States, if not the whole world.

I had burns covering about 35 percent of my body, and my weight had dropped from 165 pounds to 98 pounds. The initial odds on my survival were 30-70, and I was sent straight to intensive care.

Gradually, the odds began to shift in my favor. Early on, the doctors decided that my left eye had to be removed, and it eventually was. (The cornea of my other eye had been scarred, but a subsequent corneal transplant would enable me to regain my vision.) Once my charred skin had been removed, I was ready for the first in a long series of skin transplants.

The hospital played host to a steady stream of visiting doctors and other medical personnel interested in learning about the treatments used there. Many of the visitors came from abroad. An Ethiopian doctor observed that the black substance used on my burns look like an age-old tribal remedy used in rural areas of Africa. He had heard that one of its ingredients was boiled snake. Several months later, two Air Force doctors were sent to Africa to investigate the substance. They evidently found that it did include snake oil, plus tree bark and herbs. Some of the herbs could not be identified.

Visitors—and a Transfer

During the more than two months I spent at Brooke, I had numerous visitors in addition to members of my family. The Agency gave at least one person per week roundtrip air tickets to San Antonio to visit me. That gave me a welcome link to reality. One of my Agency visitors was Dave, who brought me up to date on events in the Congo. By the spring of 1965, the Simba rebellion was all but crushed.

My time at the burn center served to stabilize my condition and to accomplish the initial skin grafts. My next stop would be Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC.

When I arrived at Walter Reed, I was surprised to learn that I had been put in a private room in the VIP ward normally reserved for senior military officers. This was to be the start of what, in medical terms, is called the reconstruction period.

The Long Road

Walter Reed has state-of-the-art care in virtually every field of medicine. My doctor, a young lieutenant colonel, reputedly was the best plastic surgeon at the hospital. He was particularly adept at hand surgery, one of my greatest needs. We were to become close friends.

My biggest frustration was time itself. I wanted to complete my recovery as soon as possible. My general goal was to make some progress each day so that I would be that much closer to going back to work.

> **“The Agency gave at least one person per week roundtrip air tickets to San Antonio to visit me. That gave me a welcome link to reality.”**

With that goal in mind, after my first operation I began physical therapy. My prescribed routine included pushing and pulling on my fingers and working on straightening my bent left elbow. The sessions lasted an hour. For my elbow, it took six months and one operation to give me the almost 100-percent flexibility I have today. The therapists carefully explained what they were doing and why. During my time with them, I learned a lot about my hands. Despite their best effort, however, my manual dexterity remains limited, and I lost my jump shot.

Waiting To See Again

One reason Walter Reed had been selected for me was the strength and reputation of its eye clinic. My doctor was one of the nation's leading surgeons for corneal transplants. Recognizing the importance of the operation, however, the Agency had insisted that it be performed by the best surgeon in the United States. That was Dr. Harry King, and he lived in Washington; he operated on my eye.

During the year while I waited for my eye to recover to the point where it could undergo surgery, I was visited by a steady stream of family members, friends, and Agency colleagues. Many of them would read to me from newspapers and magazines. In December 1965, Dick Helms—who had moved up to be the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence—visited me. He asked about my condition and what I wanted to do when I could go back to work. Many other senior Agency officials also visited me. One encouraged me to sign on with China Operations in the Far East Division. When I decided to do so, he quickly made arrangements for a Chinese instructor to visit me twice a week to start teaching me Mandarin Chinese.

Following my transplant surgery, it took several months until my vision reached the 20/40 level. I would not make it back to 20/20, but my vision was pretty normal. There were some drawbacks, however. One was that now I could see how I looked. There was nothing I or the doctors could do about that, so I decided I would not worry about it.

All's Well That Ends Well

In the spring of 1967, after a recovery period of 28 months, I was able to report to China Operations. The division chief welcomed me back by taking me to lunch with the DCI and several of the Agency's senior officers.

One final observation. The Congo episode and its aftermath served to reinforce my belief that the CIA in general, and the DO—my own directorate—in particular, is made up of bright, sensitive, and wonderful people. I was lucky to be a part of it.

NOTES

1. Juan Peron rested for a while in Leopoldville and then resumed flying until the operation was terminated several months later. Many thought he would hang it up after his narrow escape, but Juan never considered stopping. With a zest for flying, over the next three decades he flew for companies in the Canary Islands, Puerto Rico, Aruba, and Miami.

2. Bill Wyrozemski was a Polish Army officer when World War II began, and he soon realized that defeat was imminent. Determined not to end up in a German concentration camp, he shed his uniform and made his way to Istanbul. Once there, he signed onto a ship headed to England, where he reported to the Polish Embassy in London. Fiercely loyal to Poland, he wanted to fight against the Germans. Bill claimed he had been a pilot in the Polish Air Force. (He apparently had flown a small plane in younger days.) He joined other Poles and flew a Spitfire in the Battle of Britain. After the war, Bill made his way to the United States and gained employment with CIA, where he was involved with the U-2 program. After 18 years as a contract officer in Agency air operations, Bill's eyesight weakened and he could no longer fly. There was a need for air ops officers on the ground in the Congo, however, and soon he was in Africa.