



SOF ADVENTURE

MR. DELLA CASA, I PRESUME?

**SOF Editor
Rescues English
Journalist from
“Free
Mozambique”**

**Text & Photos
by Robert MacKenzie**



RENAMO President Afonso Dhlakama with bearded English journalist Nicholas della Casa, just prior to his release.



SOLDIER'S SOLDIER

Robert MacKenzie has been involved with the military most of his adult life.

He served with the 101st Airborne in Vietnam until an NVA bullet tore him up, resulting in discharge with a 70-percent medical disability. Undaunted,

Author with German-made MG-34. RENAMO fights with what it's got — including machine guns manufactured in 1934.

he headed for Rhodesia in 1970, joined C Squadron, Special Air Service, and rose from trooper to squadron commander, becoming the most highly decorated American to serve in the Rhodesian forces, winning the Bronze and Silver crosses for valor, along with the coveted SAS Wings on Chest.

When Rhodesia fell in 1980, he trekked south with most of the Rhodesian SAS contingent, and served 1½ years as a major with the South African Defence Force. He then went across to the Transkei Defence Force, serving in its special forces for another 3½ years.

Upon his return to the United States, MacKenzie became actively involved as a political consultant on southern African affairs, and has made numerous trips back to Africa in that capacity.

He has written a number of articles for SOF, and is one of our contributing editors for unconventional operations.

It was 06:30. Robert MacKenzie, executive director of Freedom, Inc., and contributing editor to *Soldier of Fortune*, was sound asleep. Of course, the phone had to ring. And it was an interesting way to start 7 November 1988.

The call was from the mother of Nicholas della Casa, an English journalist who had gone to Mozambique in June 1987 to do a story on the war for CBS, and who was still there, a captive of the RENAMO anti-communist guerrillas. Mrs. della Casa's story was not a complete surprise to MacKenzie since he had received a mysterious communication from Paris a few weeks earlier seeking information or assistance in the matter of Nicholas. After that call he had familiarized himself with the situation, but more out of interest than in the expectation of future involvement.

Mrs. della Casa's desperate plea changed that expectation. She related how she had given up hope of any official or even unofficial attempt by the British government or the International Red Cross to find and re-

lease her son. Trips to Africa by her future son-in-law and by other individuals had failed to produce any indication of Nick's whereabouts or possible release. Letters to a part-time RENAMO representative in Washington, D.C., Professor Louis Scarpino, had gone unanswered. Finally, she managed to contact a missionary who was one of a group escorted from the Mozambican war zone in August 1987 by MacKenzie (see "Mission Mozambique," *SOF*, Jan. '88). The missionary suggested that perhaps MacKenzie could arrange the release of her son and provided an out-of-date phone number. Mrs. della Casa soon had a current one.

That first conversation was a little strained. Both parties had good reason to believe that Nicholas was alive — in fact, RENAMO had been delivering mail to him during his captivity. Further, a group of major media journalists who had been flown into RENAMO headquarters in July 1988 had been allowed to visit Nick, and to make a video of him to take back to his family. (The cost of the charter flight into Mozam-



Author notes that RENAMO guerrillas are some of the most disciplined bush fighters in Africa, not only in terms of military tactics, but in their treatment of civilians as well.

SITREP

While visiting Free Mozambique to arrange the release of Nicholas della Casa, I naturally took the opportunity to observe the military situation. The anti-communist guerrillas are winning, albeit slowly, and the communist regime continues to be supported by the U.S. State Department. Morale of the guerrillas is very high, they move freely throughout the countryside at will, and they are rarely challenged by government forces or the 20,000 foreign troops helping the communists stay in power.

A recent development of considerable significance is the withdrawal of the 8,000-man Tanzanian contingent. Frustrated by the Mozambican government's inability to conclude the war either by force of arms or by negotiation, and beset by severe economic problems of their own, the Tanzanians have concluded that they can no longer support their socialist neighbors. Tanzanian troops had garrisoned many Mozambican towns, thereby releasing local soldiers to fight the insurgents. The removal of these garrisons has meant that RENAMO (Mozambique National Resistance) in many instances has been able to walk in and take over.

Many who might be misled by the constant media campaign against RENAMO should realize that these freedom fighters are among the best-disciplined guerrillas in Africa. Penalties for actions against civilians are extremely harsh, and every foreign observer who has been to Free Mozambique has noted the good relationship between the civilians and the insurgents. Even the International Red Cross admits that no one is starving in guerrilla-controlled



areas, while people subject to the socialist policies of the government live in a perpetual state of famine. Allegations of widespread abuse of the civilian populace, or of guerrilla atrocities, are the result of a well-orchestrated propaganda campaign.

Perhaps one of RENAMO's greatest strengths is that they are not reliant on American aid. The contras were, and look what is happening to them. Jonas Savimbi in Angola allowed himself to become too dependent on U.S. supplies,

Sitting in captured Soviet 14.5mm anti-aircraft gun, RENAMO has scored successes against enemy air power, forcing pilots to fly high — and ineffectively — during sorties.

and now the United States has made a deal with the Cubans without even inviting him to the talks.

Sometimes it appears that American aid is the "kiss of death" for our ideological allies in the fight against communist domination.



RENAMO has been accused by the Marxist FRELIMO government of massing hundreds of "uniformed" troops to "massacre" Mozambican civilians. As this photo shows, uniforms of any kind are in short supply; the author, based on his many trips inside Mozambique, has noted that RENAMO severely punishes any of its members who mistreat the locals.

bique was underwritten by Sir Harry Schultz, a co-founder of Freedom, Inc.) MacKenzie's own inquiries had confirmed that the captive was well, but that he was being held as a spy — not as an errant pressman. Mrs della Casa said that she had a sense of impending misfortune concerning her son, and could MacKenzie help get him out of guerrilla hands? Of necessity, the reply was noncommittal, as permission had to be sought from the chairman of Freedom, Inc., Larry Abraham.

Withing a very few hours Abraham had considered and consented to FI's involvement.

MacKenzie takes up the story himself:

As soon as Larry gave the green light, I contacted Tom Schaaf of the Mozambique Research Center in Washington, D.C. Of all the many people in the United States who purport to speak for or of RENAMO, Tom is the only one who can do so with authority and legitimacy. It was at his instigation that I got involved with the missionary release in 1987, and I had been to Mozambique with him in 1986 to visit the freedom fighters. Knowing his contacts were the best available, I asked him to forward a message to RENAMO headquarters, asking for the release of Mr. della Casa.

Nine days later I had a reply that his release was under consideration, but that

Guerrillas rarely have access to state-of-the-art firepower. With RENAMO, if it shoots, it works, as evidenced by this Soviet PPS43 produced during World War II.

message also listed several conditions, not all of which were practicable. One of them, for instance, was that della Casa could only be flown out of guerrilla territory. Cost notwithstanding (an "irregular" charter can go as high as \$30,000) there are a few other problems associated with finding the sort of pilots who will fly into a war zone through unauthorized airspace. Other conditions were very valid, such as a requirement that Nick not be allowed to travel through any place held by government forces. This both for RENAMO's protection and Nick's, as the Mozambique government is not noted for its kindly treatment of people with divergent views, and could possibly extract information of tactical value in their war against the guerrillas. On at least one occasion, claims RENAMO, a foreigner in their keeping who was released to the government was murdered. RENAMO got the blame for the murder and will therefore no longer entrust captives to the hands of the Marxist regime.

I immediately sent off another message, discussing the concerns of the first and sug-

gesting some possible alternatives, and started making plans to actually go to Mozambique. Knowing that a reply would be at least another nine days, I had time to enlist the help of Senator Jesse Helms in the form of a letter from him to the president of RENAMO, Afonso Dhlakama. Dhlakama considers Senator Helms, along with Senator Steve Symms and Representative Dan Burton, to be part of a very small group of American politicians with open minds on Mozambique, and I thought such a letter would be a strong card to play in winning della Casa's freedom. Senator Steve Symms offered to provide a similar letter.

Near the end of November I received a message stating that President Dhlakama would discuss the release of Mr. della Casa with me in person at a meeting to be arranged. No assurances were given, but I felt that I would not be asked to come unless Dhlakama intended to grant the request. By this time I was in Washington and replied that I was on my way. Leaving on 30 November, Sibyl Cline of the U.S. Global Strategy Council and I went first to London to meet with Mrs. della Casa, and then on to southern Africa. We arrived in the region on 3 December — still time to deliver a Christmas present to an anxious mother if all went well. Things rarely go well in Africa, however.

Our first destination was a city in one of



the most functional and friendly countries in Africa. Here final preparations would be made, including communication with the guerrillas to confirm meeting arrangements. Contacting a friend who would help with logistics, I learned that Tom Schaaf would also be arriving in a few days and that we should wait for him before continuing. Although I regretted the delay, I welcomed the prospect of Tom's company. When he arrived, though, he had an English journalist with him and the news that several other people would also be joining us over the next couple of days. This I viewed with some alarm, because while it is possible to keep a low profile with two or even three people, seven or eight makes it rather difficult. And in our case a low profile was essential. The larger our group became, the less likelihood there would be a successful clandestine infiltration into Mozambique.

The Mozambique government denies access to the guerrillas even for such humanitarian efforts as arranging the release of missionaries or journalists. The country we were now in, one of the most pragmatic and pro-West of any African country, is under tremendous pressure from its more powerful communist neighbor to prevent anyone from crossing its borders into what RENAMO calls "Free Mozambique." Further, like any sovereign country, this one, as friendly and hospitable as it is, takes a very dim view of people illegally entering or leaving its borders. All of which meant that our preparations had to be done covertly. The border with Mozambique, though, is so long and runs through such difficult terrain that it is impossible to police completely, and I was confident that we could get across somewhere. Eventually the group was assembled and we made our first attempt.

We would make a normal surreptitious border crossing on foot, after having traveled into the general area by four-wheel drive vehicle. Due to our increased numbers, and the less than athletic abilities of some members, our guide arranged to drive all the way into Mozambique and straight to the rendezvous, a mere five hours down dirt roads and across the bush. Error crept in when we arrived at 0100 and found no sign of the guerrillas who should have been there. We did find some villagers who understandably wondered what we were doing and insisted that they accompany us to the police for an explanation. They were not quite insistent enough though, and we drove away after a brief discussion. We aborted attempt number one.

Number two took place the next night after we had once again contacted the guerrillas and ensured that all would go according to plan. It didn't. Arriving at the now clearly defined meeting place at 2300, we still found no one to meet. By 0200 nobody had arrived, so we left. Five bloody hours back to our base before we could grab a quick nap. So much for the second attempt.

A very apologetic message from the guerrillas arrived that day saying that they had



RENAMO guerrillas with Soviet-supplied hardware captured from FRELIMO military forces. Note AGS-17 grenade launcher in foreground.

seen our headlights and waited for us to arrive but left when we failed to do so. Not to worry, though: they had an infallible system in place if we would come back that night. Very tired by now, but still determined, back we went for our nightly drive. Again, five hours down the road and through the bush, we were driving down the designated track when a log across it became visible in the vehicle's headlights. Thinking that could be the infallible system, we did a quick scan but could see no one emerging from the bush to greet us. Since logs across the road have traditionally been used for less than friendly purposes, the driver took the precaution of turning the Land-Rover around.

When the beam from the headlights swept across the track behind us it illuminated a rapidly growing mob of tribesmen outraged at our intrusion. Armed with bows



Far from being a desperate group of "bandits," RENAMO operates numerous medical clinics for civilians in the areas it controls.

and arrows, spears, machetes, and clubs, they were moving to block our retreat. These obviously excited people were not the ones we were hoping to meet and with considerable trepidation we drove slowly toward them. By the time we got close, we could count about 20 on or next to the road and about another 30 in the shadows a dozen yards away. There were no firearms in evidence (we had none either) so we slowed down as if we were going to stop, then accelerated once we were amongst them. The mob scattered, then gave chase as we bounced down the track. From all around us in the night came the sound of African women ululating — a terrific din, designed to spur their men into greater frenzies of action. It also served to spur our driver to a higher speed than was prudent on the rough ground, but luck was with the Christians and we pulled away from the sprinting warriors now howling in pursuit. The third attempt to get to the guerrillas had very nearly ended in disaster.

Five hours back to our staging area before we could get a few hours sleep and then try to find out what had gone wrong that time. It transpired that our RENAMO reception party, unarmed as always when traveling outside Mozambique, had, on their way to the rendezvous, met the same band of hostile natives. Since even stone-age weapons are better than none, the natives prevailed and drove off our guides a couple of hours before we appeared. Clearly an alternate plan was now necessary.

The new plan required the guerrillas to move some 40 miles away to another area where we could get within walking distance of the border. Even given their ability to cover ground at a rapid rate, the rebels couldn't make it by that night, so we could at least get a good long sleep before the next attempt. Ten hours a night bouncing around in a Land Rover is not my favorite way to pass the time. I'd almost rather be filling out

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SOF RESCUE

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my tax return

Attempt number four started on time, and as if to make up for the previous ones, everything went according to plan. We got to the right place at the right time, and so did RENAMO's representatives. Leaving our driver with appropriate instructions regarding our pickup, we set off on foot, arriving several hours later at a hastily constructed insurgent camp. On arrival we were offered coffee and told that the president of RENAMO, Afonso Dhlakama, was also in the camp and would see us in the morning. A pole-and-thatch hut had already been built for conferences, and two tents erected for us to sleep in. The tents included mattresses with sheets and blankets, and since it was now 0300 we wasted little time before putting them to proper use.

Having had considerable experience dealing with President Dhlakama in the past, I was not surprised a few hours later at the smoothness of the negotiations for della Casa's release. The discussion that we had could hardly even be classified as a "negotiation," since nothing was demanded in return for the captive's freedom. I was surprised when Dhlakama said that Nicholas was in camp a few hundred yards away and that I could take him whenever I wanted. It seems that President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya had also asked for Nick's release and that when Dhlakama had agreed to meet me to discuss the issue he had also arranged for his unwilling guest to start moving the hundreds of miles to our meeting place. After a couple more hours discussion on the military and political situation in Mozambique, I met della Casa. Advising him that his mother wanted him home, we chatted for a while until evening, and then started out of Free Mozambique.

All that remained now was to get Mr. della Casa home to his family. We delivered Nicholas della Casa to his mother at London's Heathrow Airport on 19 December and then returned to the United States. Even though he had been in captivity for 18 months, he was very favorably inclined toward the guerrillas and their cause. As has every other foreigner who has spent time in Free Mozambique, he reports that the insurgents enjoy widespread popular support, and that no one is starving in guerrilla-held areas.

For myself, I won't say that it was all just another day-in-the-life -- I don't make my living running off to foreign lands like the proverbial knight rescuing unwary souls from misfortune. But after a couple of decades of first-hand experience I do know

southern Africa better than most, and I try to help when I can.

And, if the call goes out again... well, maybe there's a bit of that knight in me after all.

What's now known as the Reagan Doctrine — U.S. support for anti-communist freedom fighters around the world — has proved successful, especially in Afghanistan and Angola. Yet RENAMO, staunchly anti-communist and pro-Western, has been at best ignored and generally vilified by policy makers in the United States and other Western governments.

Why?

Upcoming in Soldier of Fortune, we'll take a hard look at RENAMO — the forgotten freedom fighters. Watch for it. ✂

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