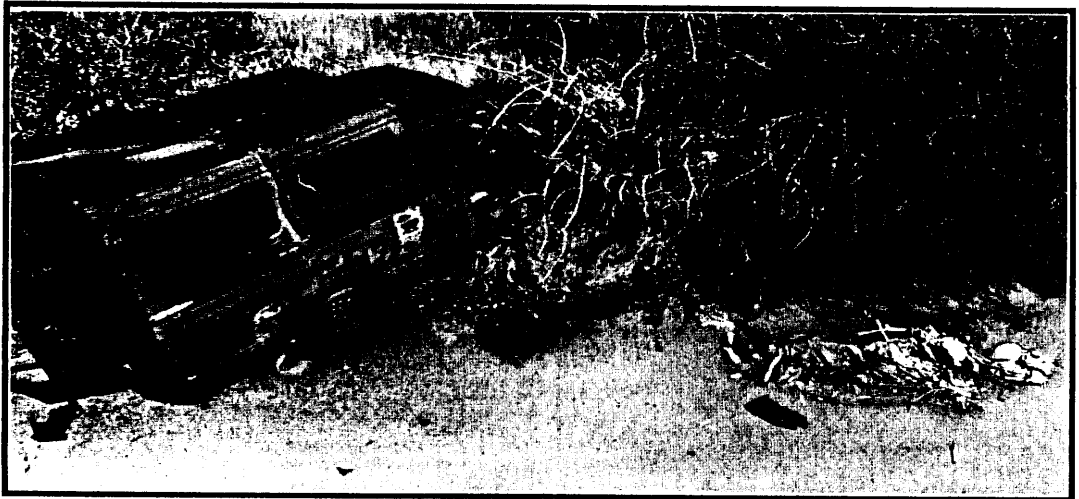


AFRICA

The skeleton the spirits protect



Bizarre legend ... A powerful spell is believed to have forced Renamo bandits to keep their hands off this victim's money

Photos: BLAKE OWENS

Not even Renamo dares rob her

THE skeleton of a young woman which sprawls alongside the carcasses of burnt-out trucks on the little-used road to Ressano Garcia still wears a pair of black canvas shoes and clutches a bag stuffed with money to her chest.

The bizarre tale that surrounds this bundle of bones in the scorched veld of southern Mozambique is one of the mysteries which confound anyone trying to understand why this is the site of Africa's most unrelenting war. And the men who tell it to us are another of Mozambique's many enigmas.

Meet Rocky and Billy, a hardened pair of war veterans and explosives experts who honed their fighting skills while serving in a crack unit of the South African Defence Force.

It's a blistering Monday morning and today they are on patrol with some unusual companions: a contingent from a special unit of the Mozambican army that has been trained by the British SAS. Together their job is to protect the powerlines which bring electricity into Maputo from South Africa.

Rocky, who drives the troop carrier we are travelling in, pulls up to the scene of the ambush and lets Billy do the explaining: "This young lady told the bandits, Renamo, who last year ambushed the van she was in, that if they were to kill her, then they should leave her body and her money alone because she wanted to rest in peace on that spot."

Legend has it that the young woman was protected by a spell so powerful that it forced the band of brutal men, who have earned a reputation for being the most rapacious guerrillas in the world, to obey her dying wish. "Now not one of them — not the soldiers, not the bandits, not the citizens who are stupid enough to travel in these parts — will go near her."

For the past nine months the pair of veterans has been travelling this road that traverses one of Mozambique's hottest war zones.

After resigning from the SADF, they were employed by Minerva, a private South African security firm which has a contract from Mozambique's electricity supply company to defuse mines and explosives planted around

WEEKLY MAIL SPECIAL REPORT

Reporter **EDDIE KOCH** and photographer **BLAKE OWENS** risk land mines and Renamo ambushes to join a strange mission through the heart of Mozambique's most brutal war zone.

the pylons that carry South African electricity from the frontier town Ressano Garcia to Maputo.

Another of this war's multiple paradoxes: Minerva is headed by a man called Garth Barrett, who led many a raid by South Africa's reconnaissance commandos into Mozambique in the 1970s, including one against African National Congress houses in Maputo during which one of his men wearing a Nazi emblem on his helmet was killed.

Zambezi River) to South Africa," says Rocky.

"We only lift explosives and do not carry weapons. The soldiers are with us for defensive purposes only. We work for a private concern and are strictly neutral about this war."

This may be so, but it is a role for which Renamo has little respect.

Vito Anselmo is the movement's chief political representative in Maputo during peace talks with the Mozambican government.

Three days before Rocky and Billy took us on their patrol, Anselmo bluntly told *The Weekly Mail*: "I think we should kill some of those South Africans to show the world that the SADF supports Frelimo, not Renamo."

His guerrillas clearly intend to carry out that threat. Minerva's troop carriers are often ambushed by Renamo guerrillas and one of Rocky's colleagues has a hole made by an AK-47 bullet through his foot to prove it.

"A big group hit us about 10km out of Ressano last week. But these guys hammered them hard and they might be a bit nervous this week," he says, gesturing to the half-dozen troops in the back of the armoured vehicle.

A few kilometres away a plume of black smoke rises into the scorching sky. We stop at Moamba, a fortified village surrounded by a ring of landmines about midway along the line, and soldiers report it is the diesel fuel from a train that is burning after being sabotaged and plundered that morning by a group of rebels. Later we learn that 11 people died in the attack.

This is another of the anomalies in the strange war that rages around the road to Ressano. Renamo and the Mozambican government are engaged in protracted peace talks that Anselmo believes may produce a ceasefire by

the end of the month.

The optimistic prediction produces gestures of disbelief from the soldiers in the armoured vehicle, who point to the black cloud as proof that while Renamo talks peace, it is busy intensifying its war, especially in the southern provinces of Mozambique.

"That's what happens in any war," says Billy. "As the different sides talk peace, they make more war to increase their bargaining power."

Relief workers dealing with war fugitives who make their way over the border into the Transvaal report increasing levels of brutality in these attacks. "It's commonplace to hear women explain how they were forced to slit the throats of their husbands after a Renamo raid," says Sally McKibben, who runs a refugee centre on the South African side of the border not far from Ressano Garcia.

In one of these massacres, the insurgents chopped off the heads of their victims and placed severed penises in their mouths.

Recently there has been an even more ominous turn of events in the war zone we are travelling through.

A Renamo deserter called Vittorino Fernandes told reporters in February that a group of some 50 rebels arrived at his base in Matchitche, about 30km north of Maputo, and showed him gas masks, oxygen supplies and poison pellets they said were supplied to them while being trained at a camp near Phalaborwa in the Transvaal.

Intelligence sources in the Mozambican military told *The Weekly Mail* that they believe Renamo, backed by rightwing groups in the South African military, intends using the chemicals in the suburbs of Maputo to spread panic and despair among the urban populace.

If Renamo ever carries out its threat to kill Billy and Rocky, it will produce yet another irony in this enigmatic war: the bullets may well have been supplied by former colleagues in the SADF.

But as we drive into the safety of Ressano Garcia, Billy explains why he doesn't believe the SADF still supports Renamo. Pointing to the fields of shrivelled melies on the outskirts of the town, he says: "The rebels have no food. That's why they attack anything that moves on this road. There is no longer anything between Maputo and Ressano." Which is an apt way of describing the terrain through which we have just travelled.



Unusual companion ... this member of the special unit calls himself 'Lucky Dube'

But today the South African soldiers and their Mozambican colleagues carry out their task with dedication, evidenced by the fact that Maputo has never been without lights during the time they have worked the line.

"We do not get involved in the fight between the rival armies. We have to be very strict about this. Here we work with Frelimo soldiers but up in the north our company has the job of protecting the lines that run from Cahora Bassa (a large hydroelectric dam on the