

Congo "Irish UN Troops"

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On 8th November 1960 a Platoon of Irish UN Troops set out on what should have been a normal Patrol, nine of them died at the hands of the Balubas.

No more graphic a description of the ambush can be given than to quote in full, the interview which Private Fitzpatrick give when in hospital in Albertville. In the same ward in the bed beside Fitzpatrick lay the other survivor Thomas Kenny.

"We were on a routine patrol. It was normal to go down the road leading south from Niemba and find a roadblock that had to be cleared. Balubas were always doing this and we used to curse them almost good-naturedly while, in the hot sun, pulling down their handiwork - usually heavy logs piled across the road. But this time they had done a more thorough job. They had pulled to pieces a wooden bridge across a small river, and it was taking us a lot more time than usual to put it right. We had noticed lately that the parties of Balubas we met were getting more sullen and hostile. We never had more trouble than an odd arrow shot our way and we had always managed to bring about a peaceful end to our meetings with them. So we were not at all expecting what happened this time.

There we were, working away at that bridge with our Platoon Commander, Lt. Kevin Gleeson, and Sergt. Gaynor supervising, when someone called out there were Balubas coming down the road behind us. I looked up and there were about a hundred of them carrying bows and arrows, spears, panga knives and clubs. Lt. Gleeson told us to stop working and be on alert with our weapons. Even then we did not expect trouble. We thought it would be another parley and then they would go away.

Lt. Gleeson walked towards them alone, holding up his right arm in sign of peace. They called out "Jambo" which is an African word meaning "I greet you in peace"

I looked away for just a moment for some reason or other and heard a shout from the lads. Then I saw Lt. Gleeson staggering with an arrow in his shoulder. I heard him yell, "Take cover, lads get behind the trees.

We did just that and withdrew into the trees on each side of the road. Most of the boys took cover on the opposite side of the road that I did - that is really how my life was saved, because the major Balubas attack went that way.

The air was suddenly black with a shower of arrows, and the Balubas let out blood-curdling yells that sounded like a war cry and rushed down the road like madmen, jumping in the air and waving their weapons.

I don't know who give the order to shoot, but we seemed suddenly all to be shooting. I saw Lt. Gleeson killed. He didn't really get off the road. He fired into the Balubas with his sub-machine gun, covering us, looking quickly back over his shoulder to make sure we had taken cover. Then he turned and ran for the trees himself.

But they overtook him and ran him down.

Some had outflanked him and cut off his attempt to get to cover. A lot of them reached him at the same time and they were howling like animals.

Our Officer went down under a hail of blows from knives and clubs.

I don't know what I was thinking at the time but I have plenty of time to think since and that sight was the most awful memory of it all. Lt. Gleeson was a wonderful man and we loved him- we all loved him.

From that moment it all became very confused. The fight spread out among the trees. I could not see most of it. But there was a terrible noise, shouts, shooting and screaming. The Balubas seemed to be everywhere, crushing through the bushes and giving their sort of high pitched battle-cry.

I heard our lads yelling, too. I heard one of them swearing. I remember I recognised his voice and I called out his name.

I heard another Irish voice say! Oh my God! and it ended in a sort of sob.

I saw about 12 Balubas in a hand-to-hand fight with one of our lads, who was using his rifle like a club. I feared to shoot for hitting him. Then I realised he was going to be killed anyway if I did not shoot and I fired two long bursts and saw three Balubas fall.

The rest of the Balubas ran away and I went to the lad who was my friend. He was still alive but could not answer when I spoke to him. He had three arrows in his body and was terribly cut with knives or spear wounds.

I tried gently to pull the arrows out of him but they would not come away because they were barbed. I stayed with him till he died ten minutes later.

I could still hear the Balubas about me but there was no more shooting.

I started to move through the bush, knowing that if they found me they would kill me. Suddenly there was a crashing to my right. I threw myself on the ground, rolled under a bush so that I was covered.

I heard Baluba voices almost right above me- I think they were so close I could have touched the speakers.

For one terrible moment I waited for the spear-thrust I felt sure must come. But then they moved away. They had not seen me.

I lay there without moving for three hours till it became dark. Ants and other insects crawled over me.

After it was dark I got up and moved towards the road but in such a way that I would miss the scene of the fight. I found the road and moved along it, keeping close to the trees. I felt ice cold and my teeth were chattering although I knew the night was sticky and warm. I wondered if I had malaria or fever, or something.

I walked cautiously with my gun at the ready. The night was pitch black and I could just see the pale blur of the road. I began to tremble violently.

I was jumping at every sound. I began to feel that I was being watched and followed. I stepped on a dry twig, which snapped, and my heart jumped at the sound. Suddenly I heard a distant singing. I came to a native village at the roadside where there was singing and shouting and I saw fires burning. They sounded terribly drunk. I felt certain that it was the people who had attacked us.

For a moment I had a wild impulse to creep up on them and let them have it with every bullet left in my gun. Instead I moved back into the jungle on the opposite side of the road. I was getting terribly exhausted and several times fell over roots and things and collided with tree branches in the dark.

I could hear frightening sounds and rustlings of animals about me, but I was past caring. I stumbled and put my hand on the branch of a tree to steady myself and yelled out aloud in pain and fright. The branch seemed alive with crawling insects. Something had stung my hand.

I staggered a few more yards and sank to the ground. I felt dazed and my thoughts began to wander. I thought of my mother, and the coolness of Ireland, of the rain in the streets of Dublin and how peaceful it was there.

I wished so much that I could get out of this God-forsaken country of filth, sweat and heat and savages. I think I prayed it might be so. I think I dozed or fell into a stupor or something then because suddenly it was getting light.

Pulling myself to my feet I wandered slowly through the jungle again. Suddenly I heard the sound of a truck and heard Irish voices. I shouted and ran towards the lovely sound of it. I fell but got up and kept on going and came out on the road. It was a truck full of some of the boys from Albertville.

I fell into their arms"

A Patrol that later went out to search found all the missing bodies with the exception of Trooper Anthony Browne. An intensive search proved fruitless and he was officially posted "missing", presumed dead". It was not until a year later almost to the date