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A self-proclaimed Colonel and fifty adventurers claiming to be a beer-drinking club set out to depose a left-leaning African government in the name of civilisation as we know it... It sounds like comic opera, or the 18th century. Not really, the attempt on the Seychelles, setting out from South Africa, was in 1981. (And was not the end of its era; in 2004 a similar planeload proceeded from a similar quarter to try the same trick in Equatorial Guinea, and also ended in jail.)

Mad Mike's men

*What is it that gets a conventional beer-drinking braaivleising suburban husband and father to find himself “running around in the bush and shooting out windows” in an effort to overthrow someone else’s government? **Daryl Balfour**, who turned down a seat on the Seychelles trip, takes an insider’s look at what makes the mercenaries tick.*

Mad Mike Hoare, mercenary soldier, legendary colonel of the Congo bush war of the mid Sixties, is The Boss. He’s the man they’ll follow to hell and back . . . and when he puts out the word that “trouble is flying” his wild geese step smartly into line, puff out their chests, and pull in the paunches. Of Irish descent, Thomas Michael Hoare is a mercenary with a difference, a man-o-war with a reputation born of his own glory, the archetypal soldier of fortune and professional adventurer to whom all of the creed show respect.

To the casual acquaintance though, indeed most who meet the man, he’s just a kindly old chap, author, chartered accountant, Hilton Road home ... the kind of old-timer a young girl can trust and confide in.

But Hoare is history, and his exploits with the famous flying column of the

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Congo war against Simba rebels, Five Commando – the Wild Geese – are popular legend. Which is why his involvement with the Seychelles caper – and the debacle it turned out to be – has caused raised eyebrows and a few puzzled frowns among the men who know, or knew, the shrewd military tactician. And along with this has come the observation that the mercenary of today is a soldier living in the past, surviving on borrowed time.

Fifteen years ago the old colonel may have been right when he said that 50 well-trained mercenaries could topple any black government in Africa.

Fifteen years ago though the merc was a breed of his own, and the “enemy” inexperienced, untrained and undisciplined. Tough, hard-bitten professional soldiers of fortune with nought to lose but their lives and reputations, willing to stake their existence for a few thousand dollars. Their small, tight, units ran rings around the raw recruits who comprised most of the armies of Africa.

Today, the mercs themselves are the first to admit that things have changed. There is a new breed of professional soldier. There is also a new breed in the armies of Africa.

Mostly the new mercenaries are men with something to lose – wives, children, farms, businesses – and they see the mercenary outfit as the last line of defence, and offence. For most who caught that Air Swazi flight in their Froth Blowers T-shirts, the money they stood to make – R10 000 to R40 000 depending on rank – was secondary. Their main motivation was their concern to keep the world looking as familiar as possible. Some would say the way they try to do it is insane. Some would say their cause is lost. Some would say they are psychopaths. All of those may be right, in varying degrees, but no-one can deny that the major factor is commitment to a cause.

“We’ve seen the West sell out everywhere in Africa, stand by and idly watch as people who have lived and slaved for years are uprooted and booted about by Marxist regimes. We’ve seen Western apathy as communist mercenary soldiers overthrow legitimate governments, pro-western government, and install puppets of Moscow in their place and we’re sick of it,” one senior mercenary said.

“Now we’re up against the wall. Unlike the mercs of old who became mercenaries because they had nothing to lose, we fight because we have lots to lose,” says a married man with several kids and a participant in the aborted

Seychelles coup.

“You could say we are idealists, that the reality escapes us. I’ll admit it. I’m an idealist and most of the guys I know are, too. But we’re prepared to make a stand for our ideals,” he said.

Politically right-wing, most mercenaries will readily admit to being conservative and anti-communist, but hotly deny they are anti-black. Indeed, many of today’s mercs are fighting men from former Rhodesian units where they fought side by side with black comrades. To most of the mercs blacks are wholly acceptable as allies in the bush, but not as holders of the reins of power – mainly because black government is assumed to be the stepping-stone to communism.

“I’ll admit I’m right wing, I’d vote Nationalist but that has nothing to do with our motivation. We see the mercenary, hired army as the most effective way of maintaining the status quo in Africa while the West merely stands and looks on,” a family man and small-time farmer says.

Regarding the Seychelles debacle, some of the returned adventurers insist that the mission was aborted in an attempt to minimise the danger to civilians aboard the Air India Boeing 707 that landed in the middle of the battle for the international airfield outside Victoria.

“That’s not the action of hired killers, gun-crazy soldiers prepared to go to any lengths for victory – and a healthy cash bonus to boot. In fact the money angle is not that important to today’s hired soldier. The cash offered for the Seychelles affair was peanuts to a lot of these guys. I estimate that perhaps 40 percent of the mercs on this last trip were in it for the money, the rest were there because they really believed in what they were doing,” said one.

According to Colonel Hoare, it is this belief in what they are doing, coupled with the fact that all the mercenaries are there because they want to be there, not because they have been drafted, that makes the merc unit into an effective force. Hoare is fond of quoting the old saying that one volunteer is worth 10 draftees, particularly in soldiering.

“In a good mercenary outfit they’re all there because they want to be. The motive may be the high money they earn, but they all want to do it. And the fact that they’re all volunteers means you can train and motivate them at tremendous speed,” he says.

MAD MIKE'S MEN

The events at Victoria shattered this illusion somewhat, although as yet nobody really knows the true sequence of events and the real reasons for failure. Several of those involved claim that the unexpected arrival of the Air India passenger plane threw a spanner in the works, that up to that stage the mercs were holding their own in a strong position to counter-attack at dawn.

“We had secured the airport and had good defensive positions all round. The Tanzanian armour had been neutralised and at daybreak I feel we would have had little real opposition in taking the barracks and the armoury and then sweeping through the town.

“When the Air India plane came in though, despite our asking it not to land because of the situation on the ground, the whole situation changed. It was felt that we had to protect the plane and its passengers, and we had to give up some of our positions to pull back closer to the aircraft,” one mercenary said.

Others felt however that the arrival of the Boeing was a turning point in that it gave the mercenaries an out – a way to retreat once their cover had been blown in the customs hall.

“It gave us a backdoor that we had not had up to that stage. Once that plane was there and ready to fly out again it gave an easy way for us to get out.

“I feel if we had not left when we did the coup would still have had a high chance of succeeding, although we probably would have suffered heavy losses too. But we could have gone on and overthrown the opposition if we'd been fighting with our backs to the wall – if we had no option but to go forward,” one of the returned adventurers said.

The world of the mercenary is a rough and deadly one – despite the air of joviality lent by the antics of the Ancient Order of Froth Blowers. To survive as a merc you must know your business – you either train before you go or you go and die learning. And that is where observers have pointed fingers at Mad Mike Hoare and his Seychelles crew. In fact Hoare's was an army of trained soldiers led by semi-retired old adventurers, out of condition and certainly out of touch. The old boys from the Congo days, responding to the call from The Boss.

“There were a few of the older guys involved but certainly most were younger chaps, either still active or recently out of military service. But don't forget that some of the old boys were along in an administrative capacity - their

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task was mainly to have been in dealing with things after the coup had succeeded. Only when things went off the rails slightly at the airport did they suddenly find themselves in the role of active soldier,” I was told.

“The majority were all real professionals. Soldiers from crack units of the Rhodesian bush war or with experience in top South African units like the Recces (Reconnaissance Commandos). Even the older guys knew what they were doing, there was nobody who was totally inexperienced, as far as I was aware,” one mercenary said.

Be that as it may, the failure of yet another mercenary mission – this time in as small a place as the Seychelles – has dealt the swashbuckling outlaw image of the soldiers of fortune another body blow. Today’s new breed of mercenary does not have the reputation for success that the Five Commando of the Sixties gained, and perhaps this is a symptom of the very cause for which the men claim to be fighting.

Today, in southern Africa at least, they are no longer real mercenaries at all. They’re men who see themselves as having their backs to the wall, fighting for ideals shared by very few of the realists in the world outside.

For the true mercenary there is no shortage of job opportunities, not so much in large-scale battle ops but in less conspicuous covert jobs, particularly in South America. They however are not the men we’re dealing with here. South Africa’s “mercenary” soldiers are fighting for a lifestyle they see disappearing all round them.

Whichever cause is the more honourable is debatable, although the odds for success weigh heavily in favour of the former.