

Bravery. In our series NRA Kadogos/child soldiers, we explore the experience of Frank Kiconco who was rescued by the rebels aged five. He later became Prince Mutebi's escort during his visit to the war area and command for the Uganda Airlines hijacked plane at the age of nine. Kiconco is currently a logistics officer at the motorised headquarters in Nakasongola a position he has held since 2008. *Saturday Monitor's* Henry Lubega brings us Kiconco's experience of the NRA Bush War.

I was born in 1977 in Ngoma Sub-county now Nakaseke District. My father Richard Butoto and mother Kobusingweza, were pastoralists. My early childhood, like other children in the area, involved grazing cattle. At the age of five in 1982 as the war intensified in Ngoma, my father took me to my grandmother to help look after her cows.

As the war moved closer to our home, the name John Martin Ogole, a notorious UNLF commander, was on everyone's lips. People started hiding in bushes, in fear of government soldiers. I'm told it was in April 1982 when the UNLF found us hiding.

Six women, including my grandmother and three children (I was among the three). It was day time; they started beating the older people and the women and told them to carry their loot. After walking for some time we got tired, grandmother suddenly fell down. One of the soldiers started beating her. I cried while slapping the soldier and asking him to stop.

The soldier in anger turned, slapped me hard and hit me with a gun butt and I fell down. My grandmother stood up and slapped that soldier back.

The soldier reacted by shooting her and the other five adults, in the process one of the three children was also shot. For unknown reasons, he spared me and another young boy called Mukye. The soldiers moved on and left us there. Being children, we didn't know what to do. I cried, leaning on the body of my now dead grandmother.

The rescue

We stayed there crying not knowing what to do. After what seemed like eternity, we saw a group of other men poorly dressed, some armed coming towards us.

They asked us in Runyankore what had happened and we explained to them. One of them was asking teasing questions, like, have you seen the soldier who killed your grandmother; if we get them will you be able to identify him? I said yes. He asked me what I would do to the man who killed my grandmother if he is found.

I said I would do what he has done to my grandmother, and I asked to go and we look for the man. They dug two graves and buried the dead and we followed them to their barracks.

In the camp, they gave us milk which was food to us. After we drank milk they asked: "are you ready to become soldiers?" I said no, me I want to go and look after cows. As lackness approached they disappeared, leaving us with the other children we had found there. We found eight other children who told us that they have gone for patrols and operations. The following day we were to shift camps, as children's just followed, nobody knew us. There was someone called Rwakagira (RIP), he was a very caring man, he looked after us. He would

sing for us, tell us stories and bring children who knew some parade drills to perform for us which made me forget about my grandmother's death for a while.

There came a time when some older boys among the group were picked to go for training. I and a few others about three were left behind. We were given a banana fiber ball and spent our time playing football, within the camp. One of the senior soldiers Mugerwa told us that he will give us a ball to go to the UNLA base. He said 'as you play, watch how they have placed their guns and how the guns look like.'

Spying mission

A few days later, Mukye and I were taken by Mugerwa and he showed us smoke at a distance about 2km away. He told us to go where the smoke was, and start playing football as we watch what is there. It was a dangerous mission. Inside the detach, as we played around one soldier called us, he was a Mukiga trying to speak Runyankore but we could understand him.

His other two colleagues were talking in Swahili. He asked where our homes were, and what we were doing. We told him we were grazing cows but they have wandered away as we played football and we were looking for them.

They said do you see any cows here? They gave us five strokes each and chased us out of their camp. We went crying, leaving the ball behind. Back at our camp, we were taken to the command post, as the boss came in including now Lt Gen (Rtd) Henry Tumukunde and others. He was seeing me for the first time but he knew my father.

He asked me son of so and so what are doing here? I told him I had been there for almost two weeks. I explained everything and how I came to the camp. After explaining what we had seen at the UNLA base, Tumukunde ordered me to stay with him, as others including Mukye left.

Housing was *mama yingia pole*, food was not constant. To, we would sleep on the floor. Tumukunde gave me what to wear. He had soldiers cooking for him, so I ate with him.

After a short while, UNLF soldiers started hitting us. Tumukunde was shot in a 3km long ambush. He handed me his gun, it was a Uzi gun, very light. He had taught me how to operate it, cock and opening the safe. Armed with his gun, I ordered his fleeing bodyguards to carry him out of the ambush. Back to our RV I was always by his side bringing him water or food whenever he wanted it and it was available, I also lay his bed.

Some of the young ones were not allowed to go for operations. As a result we did not have access to guns whereas I was eager to have one.

Whoever went on the operation stood a chance of getting a gun or something to put on after charging the dead or wounded enemies. One day as others were going for an

NRA rebels picked me



Frank Kiconco, a former NRA kadogo, now a logistics officer at Nakasongola army headquarters. PHOTO BY HENRY LUBEGA

ambush, at around 6pm I sneaked behind them without being noticed.

Not even Tumukunde knew I had escaped. I kept a distance of about 100m from the main group. I watched as they took positions for the ambush. After waiting for hours I witnessed the enemy being killed. Thereafter they started charging. I came out of the hiding. The group leader was Kanabi, he was shocked to see me and asked why I had followed them. I told him I wanted to know if the man who had killed my grandmother had died. When we went back, Tumukunde asked who picked me to go for the operation. I said nobody. He harshly told me, "you should never go back". As they distributed the goods from the ambush he said, "this man also participated give him a shirt." I was given a very big shirt. It became my shirt, mattress, a bed sheet and blanket.

Assignments

Life continued. I and others were assigned to fetch water and firewood with my age-mates, but with escorts, make beds for the big men, and serve them. The older ones did the cooking. But even then, food availability was not constant. Groups were sent out to look for food and returned empty-handed, sometimes they would come back with Kainja. When we left Lukola and entered Luwero we started eating *Mpengerere* (hardcorns) courtesy of well-wishers.

There was a ceasefire as we entered 1983 to allow the Tanzanians to withdraw. During that time, we also reorganised and had some training. The training was in different places including Kaseje. We were about 30 Kadogos who trained separately from the adults. Former UNLA soldiers Cpt Kibira and Cpt Kafereka were our trainers.



Frank Kiconco (M) on arrival at Mbarara Kadogo School in 1987. COURTESY PHOTO

up at 5 years



Frank Kiconco (L) during military drills at the Mbarara Kadogo School. COURTESY PHOTO

After training, I left Tumukunde and moved to what was called a brigade but smaller than a real brigade. This group of only Kadogos was in charge of the Chief of High Command (CHC)'s security. I was almost seven years.

It was a big privilege to be close to Museveni, the CHC. One day while with CHC, one of the senior people in the group we used to call Libyans sneaked a question to me. I raised my hand and asked the CHC whether he will allow us the young ones to go back to school if he succeeds in capturing power. He responded by asking all the Kadogos around how many wanted to go back to school to raise their hands. Almost all did. He assured us that once the war was over we all go back to school.

For the time I was with the CHC, after meals in case there was food, he would sit with us the young ones and tell us stories of Uganda's history, challenges he has encountered in his life. If he was to move he was always in the middle, there was a group that went ahead, those walk-

ing besides him and another behind. War intensified in early 1983 when Oyite Ojok increased his operations, by deploying in the entire Ngoma Sub-county, surrounding us and cutting off all our escape routes. All the five different points were sealed off. By doing so, he pushed our forces together. Ojok knew what he was doing; he was very good at deploying. The day he did the CHC met us three times. The question during the three meetings was how do we get out. We had been totally surrounded with big guns being fired from all points, though ground troops had not started advancing at attack us. Museveni was also there. People were asking him what we should do as the enemy was advancing towards us. But he kept on assuring us the *Chama tuna panga* (the leaders were planning). Earlier at 1pm a military helicopter came and we were told it was carrying the army chief-of-staff patrolling. It came back an hour later. This happened two other times but the last time around 4pm it came and

tried to shot at it using his AK47 but it was far. We didn't have big guns there. We saw it disappear towards Kasubi hill where it crashed. We heard a loud bang.

Since all the entry points had been blocked, our spying team could not get out to find out what had happened. But the senior people had small radios from which they listened to news. Around 8pm the news broke that the chief of staff had died in a plane crash. As rebels we jubilated, immediately the next morning the spying teams went out and found that the enemies who had surrounded us had withdrawn. Small units were formed and given different tasks. That's when I was taken away from the 'brigade' guarding the CHC and deployed in the Black Bomber BB commanded by Matayo Kyagamba.

We were three young children in a group of 20, one of the commanders Sam Byaruhanga who later died in Rwanda picked me to be his bodyguard. With this appointment I was given my first gun, a very light Uzi gun. This was late 1983 and I stayed with this gun until 1987. I started going for ambushes as well. He taught me a lot in the battle manoeuvres.

War in Luwero

We moved from Ngoma into Luwero and started cutting off sections of Kampala Gulu Highway. The Black Bomber was a crackdown unit. The day all units assembled on the orders of the CHC to tell us of Lule's death was when I saw the first white journalist to penetrate our lines, called William Pike. He came with Catherine Watson.

From that meeting I was picked by another commander, this was a chief bodyguard to the late Fred Rwigyema called Capt Kalaveri. He told me that Rwigyema wants me. I joined his security team. Under Rwigyema, I was involved in the attack on the Masindi barracks under the command of Saim Saleh, then Hoima, under Rwigyema, we went ahead and prepared for Safari 50 the second Kabamba attack under Rwigyema. This attack aborted the first time because; when we reached Malembo, our guide lost the way because the UNLA had switched off electricity in the barracks.

The guide could only locate the direction of Kabamba by seeing the lights of the barracks. The UNLA had detected our movement; their spring plane saw us as we entered Mubende. Gen Saleh decided we go back to Luwero. We later found another guide who knew the place by day and night.

Around September 1984, all the units were called to assemble apart from the Black Bomber which was supposed to block the Gulu Highway.

They wanted to open a western front, and Rwigyema's group was tasked to do so. I went with him as part of his bodyguards. It took us a month and a half to walk from Luwero to get up to Rwenzori Mountains. We would walk from 6pm through the night, till 6am. We would enter the thickets to sleep and cook.

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The UNLA had mounted all their heavy weaponry waiting for us. Our guide did not know any other route. We lost many soldiers there. They had more four 14.5 barrel guns stationed in one place all firing at us, we had no heavy weapon to counter them. It took us about six hours to go past them.

At the mountains, two companies A and B were formed, and we started recruiting. During the recruitment, Rwigyema assigned me to instruct the new recruits in military drills. That's where he left me as he went to the battle front at Kasunganyia.

As I was training, the National Political Commissar now Col (Rtd) Amanyamushaga used to come and address the new recruits and teach them the political history of the country. He admired my vibrancy and he decided that I should become his chief bodyguard. He assured me that he had talked to Rwigyema who had given his approval. The NPC had four other bodyguards who were older than me but junior in the bush. I was more senior in the bush.

We attacked Rubona, this was a big battle, and entering Kaseje, we did not find any resistance. It was Mbarara where there was a bit of resistance. All the fighters who had passed out were amassed on the Kaseje-Mbarara-Masaka road up to Katonga blocking the enemy not to advance to our territory.

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