

Under Attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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If you know the enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.

—Sun Tzu



All photographs provided by author, who was pilot in command for the mission described in this article

On 30 August 2013, the Uruguayan Air Force (FAU), while serving on a United Nations (UN) mission, was under the sights of anti-aircraft artillery from an armed group in African territory. The aircraft was not hit this time, due to the expertise of the crew, the inexperience of the attackers, or just pure luck. This event taught important lessons, not only for the crew but doctrinaires as well. The purpose of this article is to offer readers an account of what took place, analyze the events as they unfolded, and provide possible lessons learned.

History

There is enough material to write hundreds of books regarding the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—not only limited “wars” (1996 to 1997 and 1998 to 2003) but also multiple internal conflicts with rebel groups of various origins, some of them supranational. In particular, a rebellion arose in 2012 where hundreds of Congolese armed forces (FARDC) soldiers rebelled when they found out that an agreement signed years earlier between the DRC government and the National Congress for Public Defense (CNDP) was not being followed. From that point on, they called themselves M-23, in reference to the date the agreement was signed, 23 March 2009. There is proof, recorded in the reports from the UN Group of Experts,¹ that neighboring countries were backing the group, both logistically and with human resources.

The rebel organization’s two leaders, ex-members of FARDC, were Bosco “The Terminator” Ntaganda and Sultani Makenga. The military capability of M-23 was demonstrated on 20 November 2012, when rebels occupied the city of Goma (capital of the province of North Kivu), with neither the FARDC nor the UN being able to stop the invasion. However, in December, this group left Goma to go to Kampala (capital of Uganda), to sit at the negotiating table, without giving a second thought that they would someday return—only much more aggressively.



The FAU has participated in UN missions for almost three decades, in countries such as Cambodia and Mozambique, as well as with Military Observers (MILOB) in Georgia, the Sahara, East Timor, and Sierra Leone, among other places. At the beginning of this century, the FAU formed

contingents in Ethiopia-Eritrea (2003–2009) with its own helicopters, formed a contingent in Haiti (2008–2011)² and is currently in the DRC. In the DRC, it has been part of the Stabilization Mission of the United Nations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) since 2003. Uruguay not only has two FAU contingents and helicopters but also proudly serves with contingents from our uruguayan army and navy.

The units from the FAU are the following:

- Uruguayan Airfield Support Unit (URUASU), whose mission is to provide support and services for passengers, cargo, and weather, as well as flight monitoring, among other tasks, for all UN aircraft in the Kavumu airport, province of South Kivu.
- Uruguayan Aviation Unit (URUAVU), which operates three Bell 212 helicopters conducting air operations reconnaissance, search and rescue missions assigned by MONUSCO, including Casualty Evacuation (CASEVAC), Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC), cargo and passenger transport, among others; and is based at the perimeter of the Kavumu airport. This unit is uniquely qualified to carry out night flights (with night vision devices, NVG), which allows it to conduct dozens of nighttime air evacuations.

Attack by M-23

On Congolese soil, the UN acts under Chapter VII of its Charter,³ which establishes that military power is justified by international legal ordinances in articles 39 and 42, and in legitimate defense of International Law, Article 51. The decision authority on these matters falls under the responsibility of the Security Council (UNSC), which understood that these legal ordinances were being challenged by M-23 and other rebel groups, with clear intentions of increasing rebel operations and carrying out destabilization activities by means of violence, especially against civilians. Thus, the UNSC, in session 6943 on 28 March 2013, ratified Resolution 2098,⁴ which energetically condemned the presence of M-23 around Goma and its attempts to establish an illegitimate parallel administration in the province of North Kivu. As a consequence, an intervention brigade (FIB) was created within the framework of MONUSCO, with the responsibility to neutralize the armed groups, especially M-23. The FIB was composed of three infantry battalions, one artillery battalion, a reconnaissance company, and special forces, mainly some 3,000 troops from Tanzania, Malawi, and South Africa. This unit was based in Goma in order to operate unilaterally or in conjunction with FARDC and always under strict compliance with international law and human rights. From thereon, there was a gray area of interoperability where thousands of troops that did not belong to the FIB were also indirectly operating and supporting the same mandate.

On 22 August 2013, UN troops initiated deliberate attacks on rebel positions, and it became readily apparent that MONUSCO was enforcing Resolution 2098. However, the situation in Kavumu seemed to remain mostly normal, like being in another world, where the only peculiarity was seeing the MI-24 Hind attack helicopters of the FARDC leave every now and then, totally armed, and return hours later, empty. On 23 August, the URUASU received information that the UN's Ukrainian MI-24s had begun to "engage" rebel targets and had taken on fire. On the 28th, the first incidence of a blue helmet casualty occurred, when a FIB (South African) soldier was wounded. In the early hours, the brunt of the casualties was suffered by members of the FARDC, with dozens of wounded among their troops. On that same day, an officer from Tanzania was shot, resulting in the first FIB combat death. Hours later, M-23 began indiscriminately firing on the city and its civilian population using 73mm SPG recoilless guns. The escalation of violence increased dramatically, with not only military but also civilians wounded and dead.

On the morning of 29 August, the UN Headquarters in Kinshasa required, via issuance of an operations order, the immediate deployment of an Uruguayan Bell 212 helicopter with NVG

capability to position itself in Goma (mainly to carry out nocturnal observation tasks), at the same time that a second URUAVU Bell 212 was needed to maintain “stand-by” status at its southern base for SAR missions.

The crews quickly carried out a detailed briefing while technical personnel prepared the machine. Additionally, the intelligence officer (A2) briefed that rebels were some 15 km from Goma, in the general area of Kibati. There was even information from open sources from this zone that M-23 had fired on a Rwandan village called Mudu Vudu de Gisenyi, causing at least two fatalities, and UN MI-24 helicopters counterattacked by firing rockets and 12.7mm rounds on rebel positions.



In the meantime, the cohesion existing in the URUAVU was reflected in each of its members, who voluntarily and committedly carried out their individual tasks so that, only one hour after the arrival of the deployment order, the Bell 212 UN-852 took off toward Goma. The helicopter arrived at the Goma airport at 1330 hours where, once on the ground, explosions could be heard in the distance. Operations carried out by the military contingents at the airport were arduous while at that the same moment HAL Chetak helicopters from India were seen departing for reconnaissance flights.

Without a doubt, airpower in this type of conflict is of great importance, since the beginning it was known that MONUSCO was short on helicopters for its mandate in the DRC. This lack of resources, in terms of quantity, could make it very difficult to achieve a sweeping effect on the enemy's system. In my mind, I was questioning if a detailed study had been performed to deter-

mine at least one decisive center of gravity and if everything had been planned in detail. Even though I was certain that my task did not involve direct involvement in these battles as per our letter of assist (LOA) and that the actors in this “war” were not nation-states, I also could not stop thinking in that grey area . . . in which we all wore blue helmets, with white helicopters, in order to defend the civilian population. This thought, which I hadn’t had before, ran through my mind as I walked from the flight line to operations, perhaps 500 meters, and remained a recurring thought.

We were in an air-conditioned container used as a crew room, and since there were no orders, we decided to research among the main news agencies the latest information regarding what was happening in this zone. Also, in the best human intelligence style, we cordially made inquiries to the civilian cleaning crew, in order to learn firsthand what they were thinking. Incredibly (similar to what would also take place in a deployment a year later), not all thought that the rebels were totally wrong; rather, they supported the philosophy of M-23. Without a doubt, this irregular conflict was winning hearts and minds among the almost illiterate population, who did not feel represented by their government and, thus, even supported the atrocities of M-23. Lamentably, they didn’t follow the most-logical sequence of events that would follow if M-23 hypothetically won, that the UN would leave and they would lose their jobs, along with major repercussions to social order and who knew what else.

The local news talked about how opposing forces were very numerous and aggressive, armed with sophisticated armaments and well equipped. They moved in small groups, which made identifying them difficult, and wore the same uniforms (those that did) as the FARDC.

Reconnaissance Mission

As part of the contract with the UN, the FAU, in its LOA, required a day—and then a night-time training run to be accomplished in order to maintain a specific night-time route (with NVG) operational. Thus, facing the eventuality of having to get to one of the FIB operations bases, called SAKE, a flight was prepared at the end of the day so that the 212 could carry out the day-time flight, followed by a night-time flight with the onset of darkness, in order to be operationally ready that same day. The briefing for the mission began after 1600 hours with a USAF officer who had on his uniform a distinctive badge composed of a globe, with branches on each side, and a key: the unmistakable sign that he belonged to the intelligence community. In addition there were Ukrainian Hind pilots present, who had already experienced combat. They briefed us on the updated locations (or that was what we thought) of the M-23 positions. At the end of the meeting, I mentioned that according to our LOA at least one of the briefers must fly with us: at least one observer for a reconnaissance flight. After requesting orders from his command, the American officer joined the crew. We headed to our machine and implemented the required security measures, which included putting our personal bulletproof vests under the seats, since the Bell, being a civilian helicopter, was not armored.

After giving a short briefing in the cabin, I shared my plan with the crew in detail. The most important factor to take into account was that M-23 had rocket-propelled grenades and that those had an effective range of nearly 1,000 meters. Since the turning radius of the Bell at 90 knots was 0.5 nautical miles (NM), I took an extra margin by planning the turn 2NM from the position on the map, almost rounding on the southeast side the active Nyragongo volcano, a mountain of more than 11,000 ft, with its characteristic sulfur plume.

We took off around 1700 hours and began to ascend in a vertical spiral above the airport and cruising 4,000 ft above the ground, we headed to Kibati. The copilot and I together identified the triple tower (a place where M-23 was located, but without heavy arms), and began according to the plan, to turn at 2 NM from the spot. Meanwhile, we continued to ascend to about 8,000 ft. When we were on a general easterly path, totally away from the hostile zone and at more than

9,200 ft and in constant ascent, the unthinkable happened. It should be noted that my crew, aside from my copilot, consisted of two flight engineers, called “Pato” and “Gomito.” Each monitored their respective side, with Gomito on my right and Pato on my left. When I began to turn left, I did not realize that Pato momentarily moved to the right side to take a quick photo from the right window. At that moment, just when he was about to depress the button on the camera, he began to see tracers rising to our position. This made him shout through the intercom: “They are shooting at us!!!” Since I do not have eyes in the back of my head, my first reaction was to turn to the right and abruptly stop the ascent. At that time the copilot, who had a clearer view of the situation, told me to turn left, and a fraction of a second later, I looked back fleetingly and saw the two engineers on the right side, who had assumed that we were turning toward the anti-aircraft artillery. Everything happened rapidly and unpleasantly. At that moment we began to see the projectiles coming to us on both sides, rising rapidly and surpassing our flight level, which was a little over 9,200 ft. Frankly, I just turned left and pushed the nose downward . . . and the sound of the helicopter began to indicate that it was gaining velocity. Together with the copilot, we did not lose situational awareness (SA), as we rapidly remembered the calculations made and knew that for the weight and altitude of the mission, we should never exceed 105 knots; so, I corrected to a milder rate of descent and, at the same time, began to veer in a gentle zigzag. Flight response was sloppy, as the joystick had to be pushed hard in order to obtain any response, the result of the altitude and heat. What I had practiced so many times in one of my old units, such as the Advanced Flight Squadron, and which consisted of evasive maneuvers in face of attack, was now a reality, with the important difference that this time it wasn’t the maneuverable Pilatus PC-7U. Instead, it was at much slower speeds than 200 knots, in a helicopter, and a real predicament. My copilot scanned his side and radioed our base 90 km away, which we knew was within range at that altitude. The cabin was almost silent. “Olimpo, Olimpo, this is 852, we are being attacked by enemy artillery.” In reality, I do not recall what the response was to the report, but there surely was one, since later they told us that’s how they found out what happened. We continued to descend and found ourselves already nearly above Goma; the tracers had ceased, and we finished with another turn toward the airport. There was adrenaline in the air; I sensed the taste of metal oxide in my mouth, and we were not sure how much time had passed between the shots and the landing. I think it was no more than four or five minutes. We landed, shut engines down, and got out when the blades were stopped by the manual braking system. We all looked in the direction of where they had shot at us. There was the majestic Nyragongo, and on the east of it, we could see tracers still being spat. However, this time they were completely horizontal against a ground position. I got the cellphone out and recorded the situation, which I still save as a memento. When I turned, I spoke with the extra observer, and it was then that I was surprised when he said to me: “Lucky that we were armored.”

Lessons

The resolution was being enforced, and although we were not directly involved, this reaffirmed that for the rebels in their disadvantageous situation, any blue helmet and white vehicle was surely their enemy. Therefore, all planning had to be taken seriously and without leaving any subjects untouched. Since the incident occurred, continuing for more than six months as Operations Chief, and together with directives issued by the contingent commander, procedures regarding acceptance of operational risks and missions were reassessed. One of these was to demand detailed and actualized situational intelligence information. Even though this was supposedly already being done, it was precisely the lack of timely information that resulted in a bad experience for an entire crew. Thus, anything less than this would be sufficient cause to not accept the mission. The rules of engagement were broken down even further and all possible scenarios discussed, with the involvement of the entire crew, to include non-flying members.

Away from the African continent, our fellow compatriot helicopter crews updated the training lessons performed in Uruguay to account for these types of eventualities. Without a doubt unintentionally, information flow through the bureaucratic system of the UN, with its multiple procedural steps as it passes through civilian and military channels, ends up with nothing taking less than several hours or days to process. Thus, a second important development was the start of an extraofficial channel to the UN chain of command via a retired senior officer from the National Army and member of the Joint Mission Analysis Center. This allowed us to make a call in Spanish, minutes before a flight, and obtain actualized intelligence situation from an analyst, knowledgeable in our operations, capabilities, and idiosyncrasies, thus making obsolete the poor and outdated information we usually received, which perhaps served an administrative purpose but not for an air unit like ours. No less important, we were an active source of data collection and used this same channel to provide excellent information to our A-2 cell, helping us all formulate better ideas and resulting in much more deliberate decision making. This also brought us in better alignment with the operational cycle our doctrine emphasizes so much, providing for a familiar framework even though we didn't have a Joint Air Operations Center.⁵ Consequently, officers' trust in their technical personnel was reinforced, involving them much more and listening, as good leaders, to suggestions and concerns they may have had in facing the situation on Congolese soil; although never forgetting that it is always the commanding pilot who makes the final decision. It was not easy for us to be in a theater of operations with decision makers who did not understand the tactical aerial capabilities of our unit. Therefore, these changes in our deployed unit's way of thinking allowed us to demand certain guidelines be followed and to not take for things for granted. I personally think this served to renew our efforts, always with the ultimate goal of not putting our crews in danger.

There were several more deployments, with nuanced reminders of our prior mission, which made very clear that, professionalism and will, always go hand in hand and should never be separated. M-23 was eventually defeated, even after they had obtained better armaments, uniforms, and resources, literally crushed by the superiority of the blue helmets and the decisive action of the FARDC.

The 29th of August also imparted important doctrinal lessons for the FAU. Several subsequent missions were rejected, with the support of our country's FAU General Staff, when there were doubts regarding the proper use of our units' capabilities, such as requests for the Bell to serve as a giant unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). More than once our Command had to give common sense explanations through our diplomatic channels in New York regarding the refusal to undertake an assigned mission. The decisions of our Aircraft Commanders were upheld, not only by the unit's chain of command, but also by the Uruguayan Air Force 9,000 km away via our country's foreign policy. What was most important was to make the UN understand that a mission prepared by someone behind a desk, without an understanding of aerial operations, could lead to a one-way mission with no return.

The presence of Uruguayan troops in international peacekeeping operations is fundamental for our country to continue to fulfill its national strategy, which includes contributing to the strengthening of the UN, according to Uruguayan foreign policy and in accordance with the Law for National Defense Framework.⁶ When someone decides to wear the military uniform with the Uruguayan flag on the arm, they should understand that personal and religious beliefs are set aside, and they are obligated to respect a common set of values and beliefs—that their "Bible" is now the UN Constitution and Charter.

Conclusions

Lessons learned at the professional level, studied and practiced in an appropriate environment such as the Air Command and Staff (ECEMA) school in Uruguay, can be very useful. This

is one of the educational institutions for doctrine in our country, which teaches officers at the senior level the essence of what we must believe in. The basic aerospace doctrine of the FAU established the framework in which the institution must act, as a component of the nation's military power. Doctrine serves as a definitive guide and is accepted by all, both in peace as well as war, and expresses guidelines to carry out different aerospace operations, the most important being that doctrine is not static. Our doctrine evolves in response to experience, new technologies, and a multitude of other factors. Doctrine must be continually revalidated and never considered as dogma. As an inspirational element, it is nourished by history, theory, strategy, and experience. The FAU enjoys a rich history supported by 105 years of existence. Concepts of the Joint Force Air Component Command, among others, are taught to young officers as they are promoted through the ranks. Centralized control and decentralized execution are key principles of command and control, written in stone and practiced by example, providing airmen with the capability to take advantage of the principles of aerospace power such as speed, flexibility and versatility.

Our most valuable resource, personnel, continually gains skills, not only in country but also by participation in international exercises through the System of Cooperation of American Air Forces (SICOFAA), which exercises the employment of means and personnel to provide humanitarian aid, and CRUZEX, which exercises operational missions under a doctrine identical to that of NATO. In these two exercises alone, the FAU has participated and continues to participate beyond our borders with aircraft and personnel alongside countries considered as first class. There is no doubt that we must be proactive in learning. This is the strategy that command seeks, in order to set an example in the American arena, small and in accordance with the capabilities of our country but without ceasing to be a professional force.

The importance of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) is proven, employed in Uruguay through aerospace remote sensors and being further reinvigorated lately by a new aerial reconnaissance unit that is being created. The UN has adopted ISR implementation in the years after this incident. It has also acquired UAVs to use against other rebel elements such as The Allied Democratic Forces/National Liberation of Uganda, which has yielded excellent results studying the routes and patterns of behaviors used by rebel groups, and has introduced MONUSCO to a new era of SA.

As for the experience . . . the question has rolled around my head several times: what would have happened if they had shot us down? I am more than fortunate in my work, but I do not deny the consequences and dangers that exist in my profession. I am a firm proponent that more women and men are needed in the air force who can evaluate and analyze situations clearly, in order to obtain the information they need.

In our country we carry out continuous combat search and rescue (CSAR) training via our Operations and Rescue Training section. Rescuing personnel is an intrinsic part of our philosophy. Incidents such as the one described in this article serve to reaffirm the concept that something can happen at any time just by the simple act of taking off from the ground. It may be that when our superiors are from other military service components, they do not immediately understand the importance of a CSAR mission as we air personnel do. However, it is true throughout the world that air forces will do everything possible to save their crews. We don't know if something had happened that 30th of August if either URUAVU Command or its subordinate commands had the authority to send any rescue (but that is another topic).

URUAVU has changed its procedures so that today even lateral gunners attend mission briefings and know in detail the use of Global Positioning System map navigation. No one knows when they may be the only ones trained to take on a leadership role of evasion in hostile territory. This was only theory before . . . now, it is a reality, a practice undertaken on a daily basis. A true leader has to promote communication among crew members, create a comfortable environment, and listen to those lower in rank. Perhaps, this didn't happen before; times change. The conflict taking place

in the Congo will ultimately be a victory when the Congolese achieve it. Thus, it is the main function of the international community and that of the UN not to win the fight but rather guide and empower Congolese society so that it obtains the ability to succeed on its own. □

Wars may be fought with weapons, but they are won by men.

—General George S. Patton

Notes

1. Final report of the Group of Experts regarding the Democratic Republic of Congo, 2014. <https://undocs.org/es/S/2014/42>.
2. Also with FAU transport aircraft.
3. United Nations Charter, 26 June 1945. <http://www.un.org/es/charter-united-nations/index.html>.
4. Security Council of the UN, Resolution 2098, 28 March 2013. [http://www.undocs.org/s/res/2098\(2013\)](http://www.undocs.org/s/res/2098(2013)).
5. Lt Col Paul J. Maykish, “Increase in importance of C2: Historical view of our critical advantage” http://www.airuniversity.af.mil/Portals/10/ASPJ_Spanish/Journals/Volume-28_Issue-1/2016_1_08_Maykish_s.pdf
6. National Defense Framework Law, 18650, promulgated 19/2/2010. <http://www.impco.com.uy/bases/leyes/18650-2010>.



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