AN RACT PERSPECTIVE OF RWANDA

In late 1994 I was contacted by my Career Advisor and asked if I would consider going to Rwanda as the Adjutant with the second contingent. To be honest after twelve years of training, toil and service my blood began running at the very thought. But like approximately 300 other people from all around Australia - Army, Navy, Air Force, both regular and reservist, many were heading home to talk this important decision over with there spouses and families. In my case my wife had recently given birth to our first child some three months previous, however I could not have hoped for any more support than what I received from her, and so the scene was set for a hectic, very interesting, and at times, somewhat saddening experience. Obviously my experiences are not uniquely RACT, but rather more broad due to my position and the contingent nature of my responsibilities.

The history books will always record Australia's involvement in Rwanda with exact dates in country for both the contingents that served. However, this fails to do justice to the many people that worked extremely long hours and backed up day after day preparing all the administrative paperwork, and carrying out exhaustive equipment checks to help those off us actually conduct our mission in Rwanda. They will probably never receive any recognition, but as Adjutant and as a RACT member I was closely involved in this pre-deployment process and as any RACT member would comment, whether it be Rwanda or Rockampton administration and logistic planning and support is crucial to the success of any operation.

The Rwanda that we arrived in was a result of an old tribal system ruthlessly exploited by the former German and Belgian colonial rulers. This had led to enormous divisions between the two racial groups the Tutsis and Hutus and had directly caused the terrible slaughter of 1994. When one considers Hitler's systematic killing of approximately 1 million Jews over 5 years, the Rwandan people managed a similar figure inside 5 months! It was in this environment that Australia and many other countries arrived and began to pick up the pieces after the worst genocide the world had ever witnessed in living memory.

Rwanda itself was a beautiful country. The temperature never dropped below about 10 degrees and rarely got over 30 degrees. The landscape was undulating with stunning greenery about it. Indeed, Rwanda would have had to have had the most banana trees I have ever seen. Much of the land was farmed, with many hills being tilled almost to their peaks. Seasonally the weather went from one extreme to the other, either the Long Wet to the Short Dry. Of course when it was wet it was really wet and when it was dry – well you can figure that out. One thing Rwanda was renown for was the very famous "Gorillas in the Mist" made famous by the Sigourney Weaver/Bryan Brown movie of the same name. I mention it here, because many of us had the rare opportunity of travelling to the north west corner of Rwanda and climbing close to the border with Zaire and Uganda and seeing these marvelous creatures first hand in their natural environment. Words cannot truly describe the experience and it is something that I and many others on the mission will remember for the rest of our lives.

Other experiences are remembered, but not for the same reasons. Many in the Contingent, including myself, visited a small town south west Kigali to pay our respects to a memorial that had been left to remember those killed in the genocide. During the genocide many Tutsis took refuge in churches around the country in the vain hope that they would provide some sort of sanctuary from the rampant killers. Nothing could be further from the truth. Thousands of Tutsis, men, women and children were slaughtered in cold blood with machetes, axes, gender sticks and rocks. The results left in this one church for the world to see forever are absolutely shocking. At least one thousand bodies piled on top of one another both inside and outside the church complex, savagely exterminated where they stood or wept in fear. When we arrived flesh was petrifying on the bones and the stench of death was still overpowering. I can only imagine the fear, certainly not understand it.

The Australian Contingents primary function was to operate the United Nations Hospital, and as such we were located in the capital – Kigali. However, medical duties and the Contingents proactive stance saw its members travel to all corners of the country supporting humanitarian missions like that of Care Australia in Buture, to assisting other United Nations contingents throughout the country. However, home for the majority of the Contingent was either the UN Hospital or the old Military Academy buildings. Considering that we lived ate, slept, exercised and literally spent 90% of our mission time inside this 400 square meter compound, this barb wired surrounded "home" sometimes felt more like a prison. Females (regardless of rank), Officers and Senior Non Commissioned Officers (SNCO) were accommodated on separate floors in the medium density block. The high-density block accommodated all male soldiers. Much to the disgust of some members the Contingent witnessed a number of romances and two actual weddings.

The hospital had a 35-bed capacity and was the Contingents primary focus. Apart from caring for all UN personnel that hospital operated on and cared for many local people and undertook a very intensive program of training indigenous doctors and nurses. I would regularly tour the hospital and talk to all staff in my capacity as Welfare Officer. I would often witness normal people doing wonderful things for others. I will never forget witnessing an operation where a young pregnant Rwandan mother of two was bought into the operating theatre. She had stood on a mine and it had basically removed her right leg, with serious damage to her other leg and left hand. I watched engrossed, as the surgeons, ably assisted by nursing officers, amputated her right leg above the knee joint and saved her other leg and her small finger on her left hand. I visited this woman a few days later and through an interpreter she told me how thankful she was and how happy she was to be alive. I couldn't help but wonder what sort of life she would lead in the future in such a brutal country, one in which comparisons with Australia can and should not be made.

The Contingent as a whole also supported three Orphanages throughout Rwanda. One in the south west of the country at Buture (a Care Australia Orphanage), another in the north west at Ruhengeri (the famous Madam Carr Orphanage from the movie "Gorillas in the Mist") and the final one in Kigali itself. We carried mosquito irradiation, vaccination

programs, repair tasks and generally raised as much money as we could. Having had the chance to visit one of the Orphanages I can say that it was a truly rewarding and fulfilling experience, and I think I speak for everyone who visited an Orphanage.

Of course my day to day role was roles were far more common place and reflected that of a modern Contingent on operational service in the 1990's. One task that took up a considerable amount of time was that of managing all welfare matters for the Contingent. Considering that all members of the Contingent volunteered for service it is amasing when I list the welfare issues I administered during our six months in Rwanda. I was involved with four marriage break ups, three deaths of family members at home, three medial repatriations back to Australia (two for depression), another four stress related repatriations, three wives miscarried their unborn children, two mothers and one wife developed life threatening cancer, one theft related incident, one suicide attempt, six grandparents died and twelve babies were born whilst on operations. Because of the time difference with Australia many of the administrative duties involved with processing the above issues were undertaken by my very loyal staff and myself during the wee hours of the morning. Infact my saddest duty on this operation was to wake up a young soldier in the middle of the night and inform him that his three month old baby daughter had died of SIDS (she had been born whilst we had been in pre-deployment training in Townsville). Needless to say it had to be done, but it was far from pleasant.

They say an Army marches on its stomach. Well in the main we consumed fresh rations. Once every month the kitchen would close for maintenance and we braved French, German or British ration packs. To say they were different would be an understatement. Indeed, at one point in time the British ration packs were found to be out of date (they certainly tasted like it). They were recalled and tipped in a large heap and set alight. No sooner had the fire begun than local Rwandans ran into the fire attempting to retrieve these food items. Eventually the officer in charge had to post a number of armed guards to stop this practice.

Fresh, drinkable water was always at a premium. The local water supply was extremely unreliable, functioning only 50% of the time, and could not be consumed without fear of infection and disease. The UN provided a 20,000 liter water tanker and the Transport Section basically ran the wheels off this machine. Showing and flushing of toilets was generally done from a bucket. Of course no one likes a cold shower, so small immersion heaters became very popular to heat the water in your bucket and could be purchased for the equivalent of Aus $10.00 from the local markets. The Engineers came to the party and constructed a large tent covered shower facility that we rostered for communal showers twice a week. It was powered by one of the loudest engines I have ever heard, but no one ever complained if a decent shower was on offer.

One of the things we tried very hard to do was to make life as normal as possible. Along these lines Monday morning was set aside for compulsory weapons training. It was always imperative to conduct this out of the watchful eye of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA). After all this was their country and we were visitors, guest if you like helping to reconstruct a broken country and we did not want to be seen to be overly aggressive

towards our hosts. Physical training and exercise was something I had a very close involvement with. The Physical Training Instructor (PTI) SGT Kym Bohun reported to me and with Kym's invaluable assistance we were able to put together a regular exercise schedule that contained variety and special events that gave all contingent members a chance to break away from the "grind" of day to day peacekeeping.

This physical training variety included truck runs of Tuesday and Thursdays, weight/gym circuits on Wednesday and Friday and minor team games on Saturday. Truck runs involved a 6am departure, then a drive to a more isolated road network. Everyone would then hope out, leave their weapons in the truck and commence running to the front of the truck. They would have to loop back if they got any further than 100 meters to the front of the vehicle, thus ensuring that we remained close to our weapons at all times. We conducted Basic Fitness Assessments (BFA) during our stay. Due to security concerns we had no option but to conduct these assessments on the barracks. This meant running around a couple of buildings about 24 times in order to complete the 5 km distance. You must also remember we were at altitude (approximately 2500 meters above sea level) so running was a little more taxing than in Australia.

It was during one of the truck runs that we came across a young boy of no more than 5 years old lying on the side of the road with a large crowd gathered around him. I remember immediately pulling up and bending over him and feeling for a pulse on his neck. One of our Reservist Surgeons them bent over and felt for a fetal pulse. I could see that the boy had sustained a wound to the left side of his head (probably from a glancing blow from a passing truck) and there was blood running from his mouth. Unfortunately he had died probably minutes before we came along. There must have been at least 50 people standing there, including his older brother who was wailing very loudly, but no one had done anything. More to the point no one had the knowledge or the skills to do anything. Rwanda had no ambulance or police service and due to the holocaust many of those who possessed any skills had been systematically slaughtered. Faced with this I ordered the group to continue the run. When we drove past on the way back, the boy was still lying on the road and his brother was still wailing loudly. We had done all we could.

We also helped to organise a UN Sports Day at a local athletics center in Kigali. To say that it was a multi- cultural event was an understatement. The nationalities included Nigerians, Zambians, Indians, Canadians, and Ethiopians just to mention a few. We competed in events like Soccer, Athletics, Tennis, Squash, Swimming, Volleyball and Basketball. I'm proud to say Australia won the overall medal count in this mini Olympics. Once again organising such an event was not easy, especially in such an environment. It was interesting to note that we received very little assistance from any other Contingent and at the meeting at UN Headquarters it was blatantly obvious that no one else had the skills to pull this event off or was interested in organising it. Of course they all wanted to attend, but the hard work and the professionalism to bring it all together was left very squarely on Australian shoulders.

Kym and I also organised the Kigali City to Surf Run. This was in many ways similar to the famous Sydney City to Surf run. The only difference was that I had to orgainse to have to armed personnel every two kilometers of the run. It was also another chance to invite all the nationalities to compete, including the RPA. I should explain that this was somewhat ground breaking, as the RPA and Rwandan government resented UN involvement in the country. As such they sometimes could make life a little difficult for the UN. They also ruthlessly dished out some very harsh punishments to any suspected Hutu killers. But one should never loose sight of the fact of what occurred to their people, and I wonder what you and I might do if we found every member of our family brutally murdered by machete? Regardless of that fact, the fun run was a resounding success with money made from the sale of T-Shirts going to purchase sporting equipment for a local youth club.

We also amused ourselves with bets and other contests. Many will remember that 1995 was the infamous split between the establishment and Super League. Suddenly QLD was decimated with the withdrawal of Super League players. Paul "Fatty" Vautin's Queenslanders were given no chance. With this as a background I placed a bet with the Company Sargent Major (CSM) of the Operational Support Company that if QLD won the series I would shave his head in front of the Contingent and vis versa. It still brings a grin to my face as I remember the two escorts marching the CSM out and sitting him in the chair for his close shave.

For most part it was a hard, if not a somewhat boring day in day out grind. The Kibeho incident stands in stark contrast to this. To explain the situation one has to put it into context. By April 1995 the process of moving internally displaced persons (DPs) from the last of the large DP camps – Kibeho had stalled. The RPA, frustrated by this lack of progress, attempted a forcible camp closure by surrounding Kibeho with two Infantry battalions on 18 April 1995. Because some 100,000 displaced persons were facing starvation and almost certain death, the decision was taken to deploy an Australian Casualty Collection Post (CCP). An Infantry Platoon and logistic support functions, including RACT members also played a vital supporting role.

The camp conditions were appalling. There was no food, water, shelter or sanitation. During the 22 and 23 April, events deteriorated rapidly resulting in the wholesale slaughter of thousands of people. Our soldiers were under severe pressure as the massacre continued and they were repeatedly exposed to small arms fire and machete wielding fanatics. Throughout the slaughter everyone from medics, and infantry men to drivers collected and treated hundreds of wounded and arranged for the evacuation of countless others. So as we honoured the ANZAC spirit on 25 April 1995 there was a small number of their descendents dodging bullets, picking up bodies that had been ripped apart, tirelessly walking through human excrement and trying to save the lives of another race and people they didn't even know.

Yes these are just some of the memories of an RACT member on Operational service. I can only imagine that it is very different to the experiences of those members that served during the World Wars, Korea, Malaysia or Vietnam. We had no enemy as such, we

were peacekeepers, and for those of you who have worked as peacekeepers you will know of the frustrations I talk about. Governments that do not appreciate your presence, to a covertly hostile local military force, interfacing with the incompetence of the United Nations itself and many other post civil war dangers that you constantly face.

I was mentally and physically prepared for every challenge that I had to face. That some of this came from my individual makeup is undoubtedly true, however much of it came from the thorough and exhaustive training and opportunities that I was given throughout my career in the RACT. Our Corps instills in its members a can do attitude and backs this up with some of the best logistical and operational training in the business. I now have a successful private sector career, but I am yet to be challenged to the level that I was during my career with the Royal Australian Corps of Transport. “Equal to the task” – I think so.

Brad Saw
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