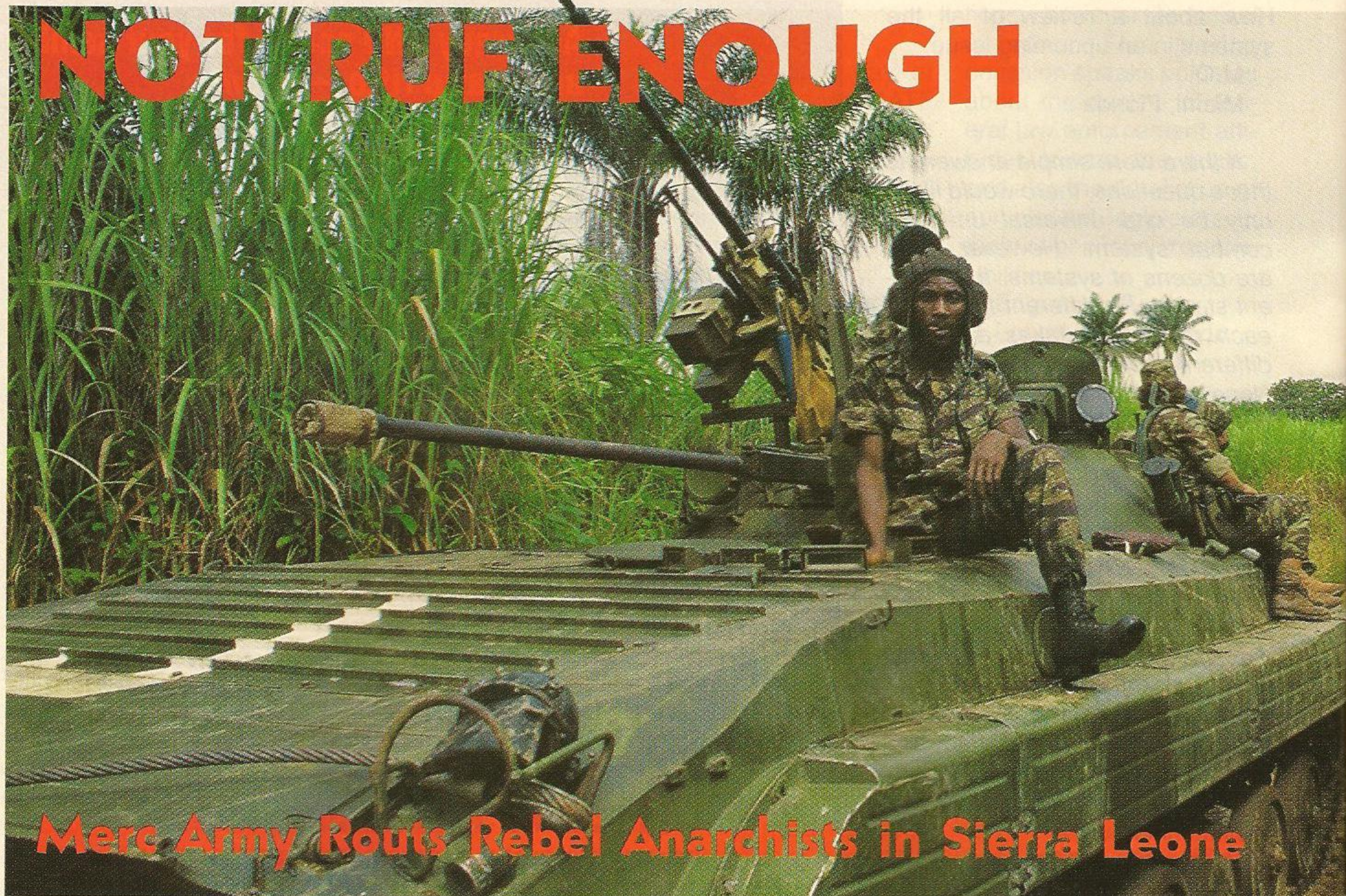


# NOT RUF ENOUGH



## Merc Army Routs Rebel Anarchists in Sierra Leone

**I had come to Sierra Leone** on the west coast of Africa to bring home the remains of Colonel Bob MacKenzie (see "Death Of A Warrior, July '95). That was the intention, but it didn't happen like that.

Instead, I found myself immersed in the same bandit insurgency in

which he was killed, with a group of South African mercenaries, many of them former Recce Commando veterans of the war in Angola. They worked under the auspices of a South African contractor called Executive Outcomes (EO).

Colonel Robert MacKenzie had

been killed in a firefight in the Sierra Leone bush on the afternoon of February 23, 1995. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels who killed him comprised a few thousand ill-disciplined bandits, mostly disaffected former soldiers and deserters from Sierra Leone military forces, supported by Liberia and augmented by large numbers of local men press-ganged into service on pain of death. Bad as the rebels were, they were at least motivated by the prospect of taking over the country and its rich diamond mines.

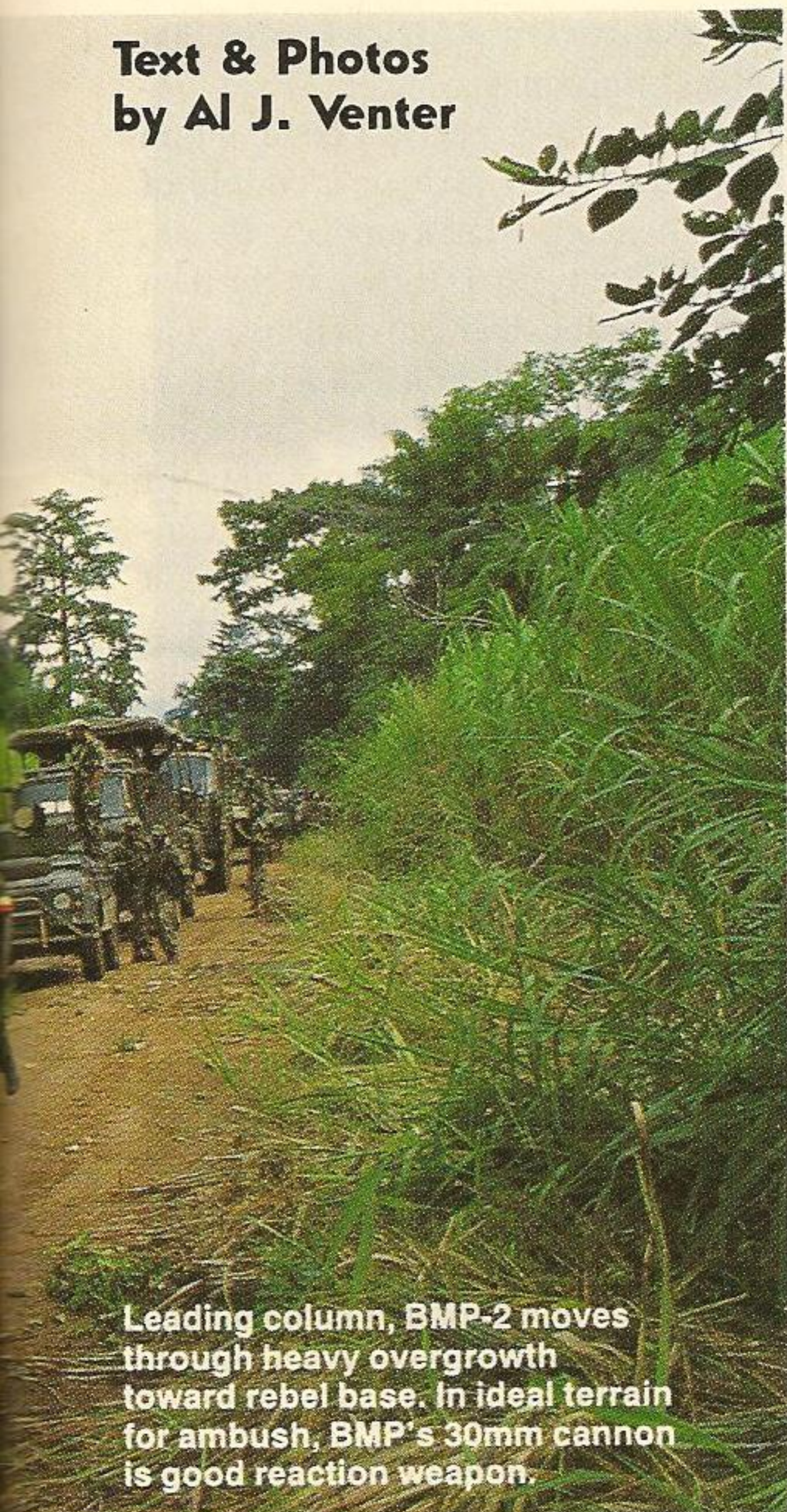
Government troops, in contrast, were at that point soldiers in name only. The force MacKenzie newly commanded at Charlie Camp on the main road to Bo — the second-largest town in Sierra Leone — was a poorly trained lot, permanently stupefied with wacky-backy and local rum. Their assigned mission had been to overrun a rebel strong point in the Malal Hills 120 klicks east of Freetown.

These troops are not ready for this kind of action, Bob radioed defense headquarters in Freetown when he

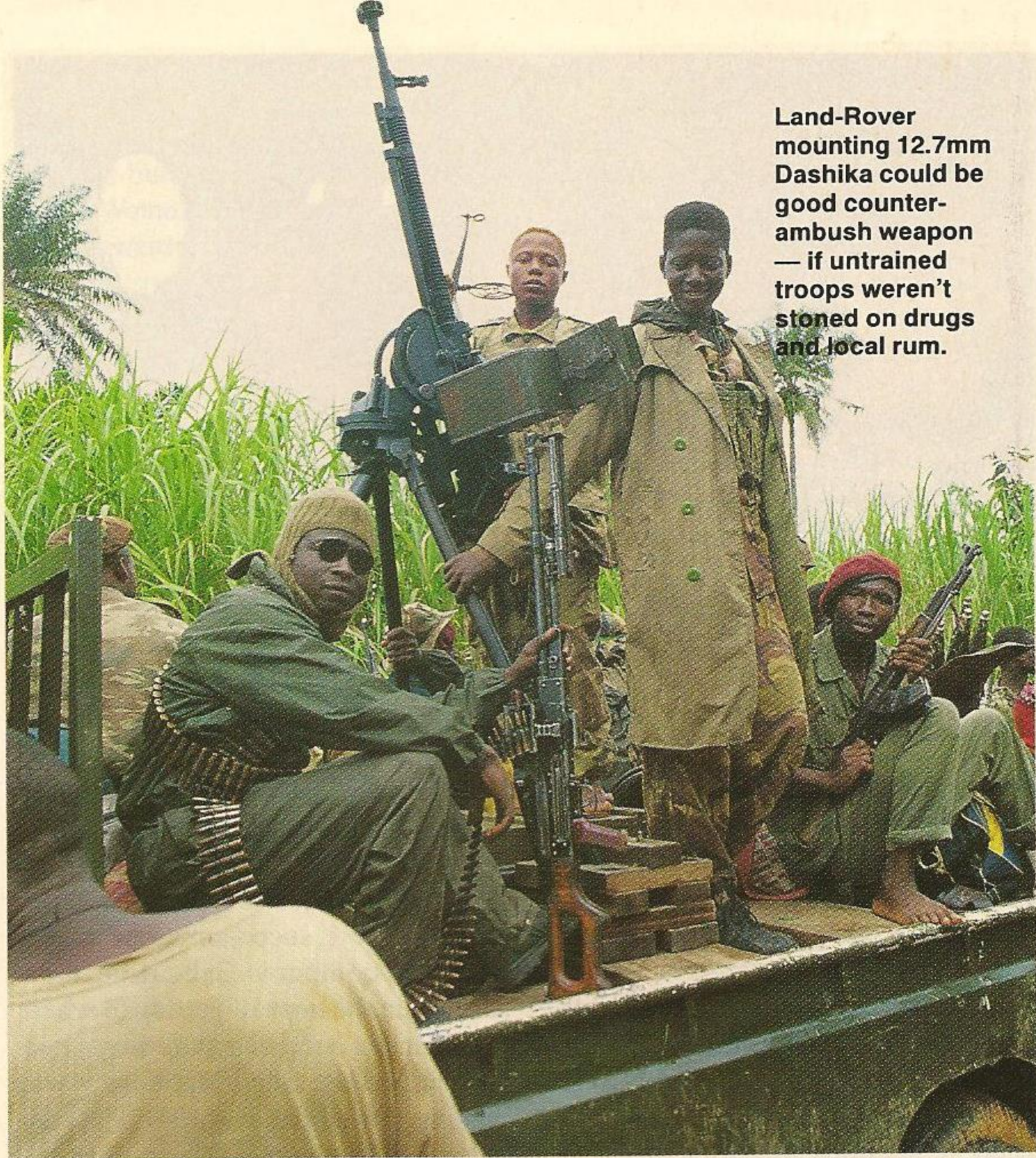


Merc force takes Baiama town, and settles in to "establish a presence" in the area.

**Text & Photos  
by Al J. Venter**



Leading column, BMP-2 moves through heavy overgrowth toward rebel base. In ideal terrain for ambush, BMP's 30mm cannon is good reaction weapon.



Land-Rover mounting 12.7mm Dashika could be good counter-ambush weapon — if untrained troops weren't stoned on drugs and local rum.

first received the order. They do not even know how to fire their weapons properly, he warned.

"No matter," was the reply. "We need a show of force." The loyal MacKenzie paid for his commander's stupidity with his life.

Two other officers were also killed in the first volley of an RUF ambush. The indigenous Sierra Leonian contingent threw down their weapons and, in terror, fled helter-skelter down the hill. Many had already doffed their uniforms by the time they reached the road.

I proposed an attempt to recover Bob's remains to Primo Corvaro, head of the International

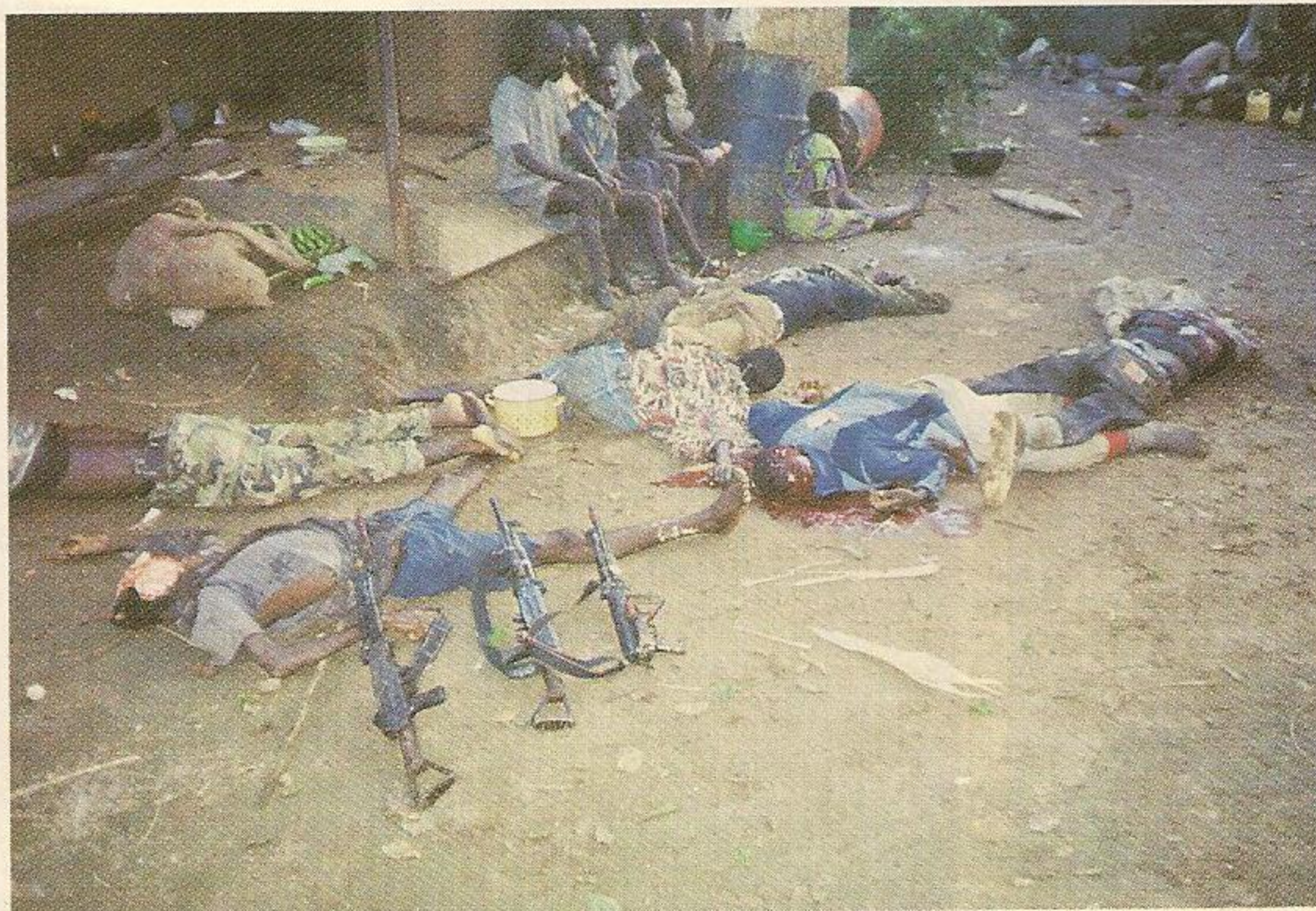
Committee of the Red Cross in Freetown. He warned me against taking the matter further: "You do so at the risk of your own life. Anyone who goes near the place will be killed. First, the Malal Hills are still in rebel hands. The RUF are there

in force, and they command the whole region.

"Secondly, mercenaries, as such, have no standing in international law. Even my talking to you about MacKenzie is against our fundamental principles. We are opposed to their presence in Sierra Leone."

"Even though the country is tottering toward the kind of anarchy that now prevails in Liberia?" I asked (it was well known that the RUF rebels had come from Liberia when they started the war in 1992). "Mercenaries are unacceptable for any reason," he insisted.

"Lastly, anyone even making inquiries about these mercenaries will be hunted down and killed." He had been given that piece of information during his last meet-



RUF rebels killed after committing atrocities on villagers, too ghastly to print, received their own rough treatment at hands of locals. Payback in West Africa is not kind.



**Executive Outcomes** South African troops prepare for airlifting to eastern sector.

ing with the rebel leader, Foday Sankoh, in a meeting at his base in the south of the country a few weeks before.

It was clear that the sentiments of the local representative of the ICRC were unequivocal; it became even more so shortly afterward when he declined the offer to airlift rice in South African helicopters to starving civilians displaced by the rebels. His approach just did not make sense, but it is no secret that each time Foday Sankoh has a statement to make, he does so through

the good offices of the ICRC.

I did not leave it at that. I went to MacKenzie's successors, the South African company Executive Outcomes, in the hope of getting to where MacKenzie had been shot. I was persistent because Sibyl MacKenzie was having difficulties with Bob's life insurance company: There was no "proof" of his death.

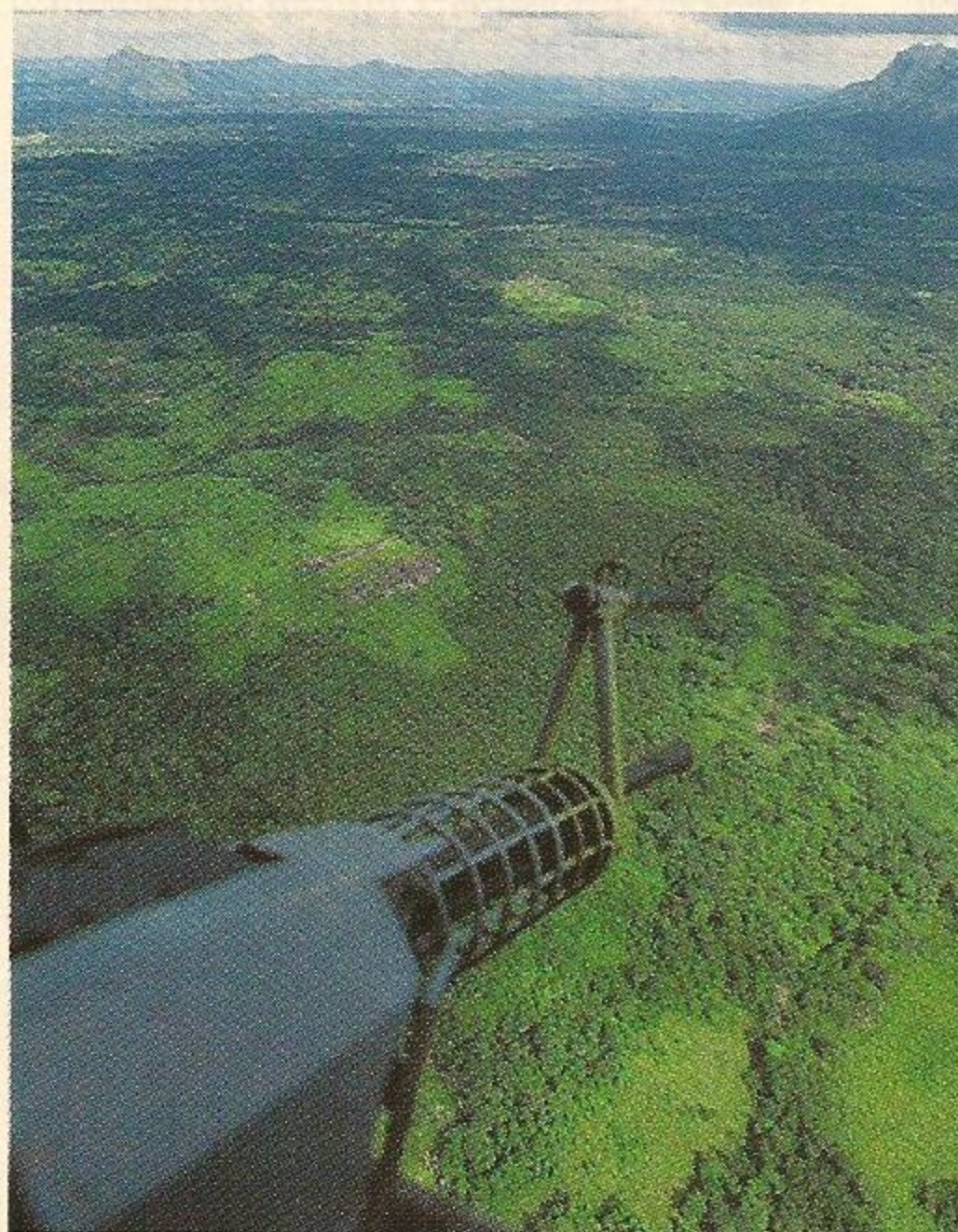
### Executive Outcomes

EO is a South African organization that employs former members of the South African special forces to

train and stiffen African armies that are fighting insurgencies. They reversed the war in Sierra Leone within a month of their arrival, a couple of months after MacKenzie's death. They arrived just in time, as by then Foday Sankoh had pursued his conquest to within 20 miles of Freetown.

On my second day at military headquarters I watched a squad of Sierra Leonian troops prepare for convoy duty from Freetown to Bo, about 220 km through mostly bush country. By 1100 hours the entire squad was smashed. By the time they left three hours later they were ready to invade America. The column was hit hard about two hours before dark and the whole lot fled. Not one of them tried to take counter-action until they were well out of range of the attackers.

The result was that 21 of 70-odd vehicles were knocked out and 15 civilians were killed, many stabbed to death because the RUF hadn't enough ammunition to shoot them. While there were about 120 men supposed to be protecting the convoy, they were attacked by only about 40 rebels — of whom only half were armed. Not one of eight or nine RPG rockets fired at the convoy in the ambush found its target; every round exploded harmlessly in the bush. They, too, seem to have had their rations of rum and jamba. Even a modest stand would have driven off the attackers



Sierra Leone appears peaceful, looking down the barrel of flexible 7.62mm door gun at the lush, forbidding, awesome West African jungle.



EO-trained troops wait to board Mi-17 on chopper pad overlooking Kuido, diamond town in the east, and EO's HQ for the area. Mi-17s have proved good transporters and ad hoc gunships for jungle terrain.

yards square. The West Africans with EO support went on the offensive, which was probably the last thing the rebels expected. It had never happened here before; in the east, yes, but not at the coast.

"After two days of fairly heavy fighting, there were about 50 rebels dead. One of our men was wounded," Brown recounted.

"It was really the first big battle of the war in which the government had achieved any real results. They were mightily pleased," said Brown. After that the rebels split, some of them heading for bases in the interior. At this writing, Foday Sankoh maintains about 20 operational units throughout the country.

"Those that remained we tracked after dark with night vision equipment. We would see their concentrations and the Ruskies would go in with the 24s and spray them with their Gatlings." The Mi-24 in Sierra Leone is fitted with four-barrelled Gatling guns as well as automatic grenade launchers, which provide awesome firepower. "Once that had been done the army would leapfrog ahead using heliborne infantry, very much as we did in the old days in the Angolan war," said the former SADF colonel.

According to Brown, many of the tactics that EO was teaching RSLMF soldiers were, as far as they were concerned, quite different to anything seen in West Africa in the past. "But what we showed them produced results. They liked that, and more important, they learned quickly."

The next phase of the military operation involved freeing the diamond fields in the east from rebel control. Earlier intelligence reports had indicated that one of the reasons why the Liberians had backed Foday in the first place was to

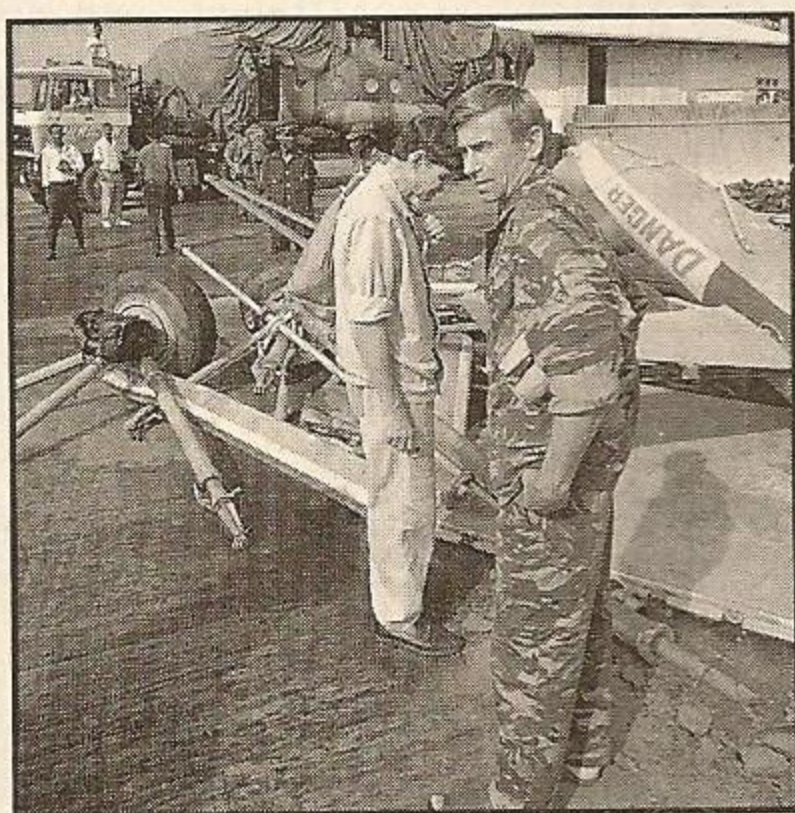
supplement their own coffers with diamonds.

### Winning Hearts And Mines

Since the war started, Kuido, the main diamond town, had been captured twice by the RUF; once in 1992 shortly after war started (it was retaken nine months later with the help of Guinean troops) and again in April this year. The loss was a serious one for the government; a major proportion of its revenues come from the precious stones mined in the Kono region.

A month after the Battle of Freetown, the South Africans set out once more with a large number of Sierra Leonian soldiers, now trained for serious military action. It was a two-phased operation. The Sierra Leonian top brass had budgeted 10

days for its completion: It was accomplished in two. The strike force was augmented by two BMP-2s, the APCs taking up position at the front and rear of



These Sierra Leone Air Wing Mi-24 Hinds at Lungi airport were out of the running, due to a lack of spares, but it was not the fault of Russian/Ukrainian technicians (inset) who took this Mi-17 wreck and made it fly again.

the convoy which comprised about 20 vehicles.

Colonel Brown explained EO training concepts: "We work within a set of parameters that are quite novel to West African conditions. In the past the RUF would choose a specific kind of site for an ambush — a cutting in

the road or a hill overlooking the route where we would have been confined if we were caught short. But the rebels would make the mistake of 'broadcasting' their intentions," he said.

"Consequently, whenever we approached a position where an ambush could happen, we would stop the vehicles and leave the engines running. Then the Sierra Leonians, backed by our men, would go forward on foot and surprise the enemy where they were lying in wait for us. The shock was often so great that they could not shoot back." The RUF suffered huge losses, the colonel maintained.

"Other times government forces would mortar likely emplacements and later, when we moved forward, we could see where they had positioned themselves."

Until EO arrived, said Brown, the war in Sierra Leone had a pattern: "The two sides would encounter each other in the bush or along a road, fire a volley or two and then withdraw. There was never a question of following up an attack. And that's one of the things we quickly taught them."

The man who runs EO affairs in

eastern Sierra Leone and works closely with his RSLMF counterparts is Col. Roelf, a gruff, almost patriarchal figure that could easily be mistaken for a Boer veteran. His headquarters building itself had one of its walls blown

**Continued on page 74**

## SIERRA LEONE

*Continued from page 37*

out in a mortar attack.

Later this year Roelf plans to attack Foday Sankoh headquarters at Joi Koi, a strongly held camp in an almost unassailable position between the Moa River and the Kambui Forest Reserve. Significantly, it's only a day's march from the Liberian border.

"We've flown over the place, but they usually reply with everything they have," said Alberts. "They used RPG-7s by the dozen, coming up at us all the time we were there."

By the time I arrived in mid-August of this year Sierra Leone was fairly stable once more. There were still ambushes on some of the roads in the south, but on the whole, Freetown was secure and the diamond fields were once more in production. EO had by then trained three large groups of soldiers.

For Executive Outcomes the main objective has always been to get the Sierra Leonian army up to scratch, which meant radical retraining. "Everything that they had ever learned in the past, or tried to learn, we threw out the window and began again from the ground up. *Everything!*" said Brown.

"There was no intelligence service. I had to create one. The problems of elementary supply, communications and transport had to be solved." He had to provide such fundamental instruction as how to use a rifle.

Booze and drugs — previously items of issue — were prohibited. The troops protested loudly, but after their first sober ambush on the Bo Road drove off their attackers, they began to see reason. It was even better a few weeks later after Brown was able to put them on the offensive in a counterattack near Mile 91, one of the hot spots of the war.

Will EO be able to retrain the entire army? They are hopeful, even though three-quarters of the 4 million inhabitants of Sierra Leone are illiterate. EO's cadre are professional trainers and most of their black soldiers are from southern Africa. They were trained and blooded in the Angola war. You won't find better soldiers.

In several of the actions in which

I took part (two ambushes in one day to the east of Kuido, convoy duties and an attack on an enemy camp on top of a hill), it was the black soldiers of EO with a select Sierra Leone detachment each time who led the column.

The pay scale is, of course, according to rank, but nobody in EO earns less than U.S. \$1,500 a month. Senior officers get three or four times that. The men get two weeks off every two months on full pay and they have to take it. Leave cannot be accumulated. The same applies to EO men in Angola, where fighting has been fierce and the company has suffered casualties.

The essential function of EO in the endless succession of African wars is instruction, protection and organization. They also take part in operations with their charges. When they get shot at they reply with vigor. They are happy to carry out preemptive strikes if it means it will save lives.

Relations between EO and the Sierra Leone armed forces appear to be good. All EO radio communications are exclusively in Afrikaans, not so much from tribal patriotism as to prevent the enemy from understanding clear transmission. Much of the radio traffic is in code anyway; EO uses the same frequency-hopping transmitters that the South African army deployed in Angola during the '70s and '80s.

#### Butcher Brothers

Sankoh makes much in his publicity handouts and broadcasts of "freeing my fellow citizens from the abuses and corruption of the country's military leaders." He has a case. It is backed by many years of misrule, corruption and injustice. Nepotism within government is rife. The military fat cats on top of the pile in Freetown all have foreign bank accounts. Some regularly take a cut from illegal diamond exports from Lebanese merchants who have systematically exploited the national resources.

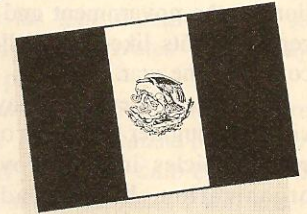
But by destroying villages and brutally murdering their inhabitants, the RUF has greatly weakened any hope for its own "cause." No one appears to have told Sankoh about the fundamental principle taught by Mao of swimming like fish in the water of

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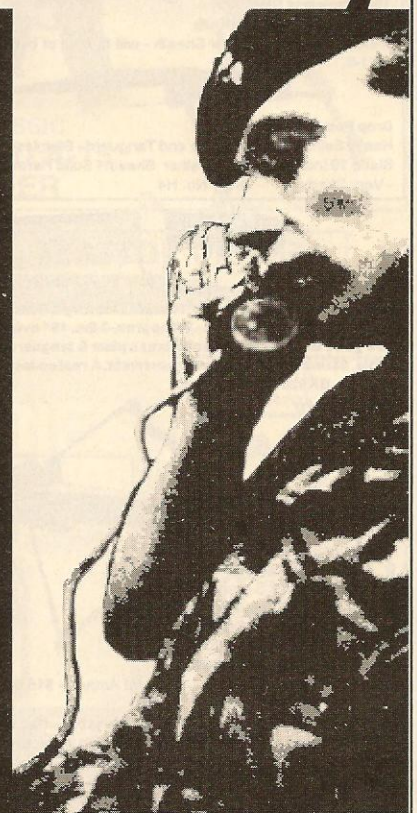
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the population. Again, the mind-numbing atrocities by RUF's mentors in Liberia across the border have done nothing to help him. He launched his war from there. It is an open secret that Sankoh and the Butcher, as Charles Taylor is called in most West African news reports, are brothers-in-arms.

For that reason alone Sankoh and his followers will lose their war. Already their resources are largely exhausted. But it will still need much effort and a high degree of dedication by the government and by mercenary outfits like EO to dictate the course of the war.

At present the RUF may burn a village, slaughter innocents or destroy some vehicles in a convoy, but its organization has already been marginalised by its own excesses. The sad thing is that the RUF onslaught in Sierra Leone has shown how easy it is to start a guerrilla war in Africa. It requires only a handful of disaffected troops, a few crates of AKs and perhaps a little support from outside. With men like Khadaffi to turn to, rebels and ban-

ditions need never lack the means.

It may be that the trouble in Sierra Leone will not be the last African war that black and white South African soldiers will have a hand in. Back in Freetown, I put the charge that the company was using mercenaries to EO officer Lafras Luitingh. He was candid: "Call them what you like — mercenaries, profiteers, soldiers of fortune, or simply soldiers — Executive Outcomes is a very professional organization. It was through our efforts in Angola that Jonas Savimbi was forced to seek an end to hostilities.

"As a consequence of that, there is now peace, or rather, relative peace in Angola. Even the Angolan government will attest to that. The same here in Sierra Leone. Had we not gone in when we did and pushed the rebels out of the suburbs of Freetown, you would have the same situation here that you have in Liberia. Does anyone really want that? Do the people need such anarchy? And does it matter who or what was used to prevent that scenario from becoming a reality?

"There is only so much that we, as a training organization, can do. We also know that we are not going to be there forever. Nor do we want to be. So that's why we spend so much time and effort to train local armies to do the job they need to do, and, frankly, we seem to have been quite good at it. Anyhow, that's what we're paid for ... we teach the secrets."

I asked who was picking up the EO tab in Sierra Leone, as I had heard that the oil companies had financed the Angolan operation. "Is De Beers involved?" I asked. After all, they have just been granted a big alluvial diamond concession on one of the rivers near the coast and they must have done something to have earned their spurs.

"Nothing like that at all. In fact, we've been disavowed by De Beers. They are quite hostile to us in Freetown even though it's their bacon that we've saved as well."

"Is EO actually taking part in military operations when yours is really a training role?" I asked. Luitingh looked at me carefully before answering.

"We don't look to involve our-

selves in battle. Things can go wrong. That can become expensive. We help others prepare for it. But if I and my commanders feel that our men are likely to be placed in situations where they are threatened and where some of them can be killed, or injured, I will take whatever preemptive measures that I consider necessary to counter that threat. All my men are professionals with much experience in combat. None of them take unnecessary chances.”

Then I asked the obvious: “Are there other wars in which EO is likely to be involved?”

“Of course there are many small wars in the world today ... too many people ... too much conflict. We’ve even had an offer to go into Bosnia, but that’s a piece of history we’ve declined. We’re not stupid.

“At present the company is negotiating to help in military training programs on two other continents. And when it happens, I promise you, you will be astonished,” he said.

*Al Venter has written dozens of articles as contributing editor for Africa. ✍*