

# Treatment of the bodies of those killed in French mercenary operations between 1960 and 1989

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## Abstract

Mercenaries are fighters who operate under special conditions. Their presence, as shadow combatants, often tends to exacerbate the violence of their enemies. That's why the analysis focuses on the singularity of the relationship to death and 'procedures' concerning the corpses of their fallen comrades. As a fighter identified and engaged in landlocked areas, the mercenary's corpse is treated according to material constraints pertaining in the 1960s. After violence on their body, and evolution towards the secret war, mercenaries favour the repatriation of the body or its disappearance. These new, painful conditions for comrades and families give birth to a collective memory fostered by commemorations.

**Key words:** mercenaries, violence, treatment of corpses, Africa, secret war

As of 1960, a widespread process of decolonisation began on the African continent. The increased numbers of attempts at secession and intrastate conflicts can be explained, in part, by the ineptitude of the new states. These confrontations often involved quite unsophisticated military means, which nonetheless resulted in a relatively high level of violence. The injuries suffered by fighters and civilians were sometimes extreme (rape, dismemberment, etc.). In this context, the former colonial powers, including France, were considering a new geostrategy. They hoped to maintain a strong influence in their African sphere of 'privileged interests.'<sup>1</sup> Their approach was part of the broader Cold War context. To a greater or lesser extent, many conflicts within the African states therefore had a dimension of proxy warfare between East and West. This was apparent in the long Congolese crisis from 1960 to 1967, or in the Angolan civil war that broke out in 1975. As indirect instruments not only of the neo-colonial approach but also of the Western Bloc proxy war, mercenaries made a noticeable reappearance in theatres of conflict – particularly, but not solely, in Africa – between 1960 and the end of the Cold War. These irregular combatants operated under special conditions, due to their status under international law, but above all due to the political, military and financial conditions under which they were sent. Recruited on attractive financial grounds, they often faced intense war violence in isolated regions, and continued to fight without the promised sums

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being regularly paid. The mission commanders expected their participation to be sufficiently discreet to avoid being the subject of debate in Western public opinion. The neo-colonial character of their presence tended to intensify the violence exerted by their enemies. Their deployment and participation in the fighting thus depended on very specific means and dynamics, leading to a rather particular attitude towards death in comparison with other Western players involved in conflicts at the same time. Undoubted proof of their deployment was brought to the fore when the enemies took a prisoner or a dead mercenary as a 'trophy', and their – often unofficial – presence was exploited politically by local players or by the Eastern Bloc. Considering the specificities and constraints, it is worth asking why mercenaries accepted the deadly risk and the financial conditions that were far removed from the promises made when signing the contract. It is also necessary to question the specific attitude that the mercenaries developed both to the dangers associated with war and to their death during their mission. Based on numerous situations, the aim is to question the choices made when handling and treating the remains of a mercenary who often did not benefit from the same logistics that usually made it possible to repatriate a regular European soldier. The attitude towards death and initial handling can be analysed based on the degree of violence that led mercenaries to establish certain routines in how they treated their fallen men. However, the degree of confidentiality concerning their presence in a theatre of operation also influenced how they were treated and how things changed between the 1960s and 1980s. Their irregular status and the specific way of treating their remains also led leaders to establish, both among other mercenaries and among the families of the deceased, dialogue and explanation mechanisms on what would become of their dead.

### **Violence in intrastate conflicts and means for handling the remains of a mercenary**

The first presence of mercenaries in African conflicts at the time of decolonisation was in Congo-Leopoldville (Kinshasa) in 1960. In the same month of July 1960, when independence was declared, the rich mining province of Katanga seceded. As the leader of Katanga, Moïse Tshombe recruited mercenaries (Belgian and French, but also from southern Africa) in order to quickly assemble a military force able to resist the forces sent by Leopoldville.<sup>2</sup> The secession therefore resisted in Leopoldville until January 1963. After several decades with no significant drafting of paid European soldiers, mercenary activity experienced a sudden revival. Immediately sent into action, the 'Affreux' found themselves facing important losses in a context that evolved rapidly throughout the decade.

### **The 1960s: combat in coordination with regular armies providing 'classic' treatment of dead bodies . . .**

As of autumn 1960, close to 500 Europeans, including roughly 200 mercenaries, were supervising the Katanga forces. In turn, they fought the Congolese Army (ANC) and United Nations forces until January 1963. Dozens of mercenaries

were killed, their deaths occurring as part of regular combat against Congolese or international forces. In this respect, if they were killed, there was no major political consequence concerning their remains. A subject of protest by the Central State, the presence of the mercenaries was too obvious to be concealed. It was a reoccurring phenomenon that gained significant press coverage without necessarily leading to any contemporaneous scrutiny. As a lever of influence for the former colonial powers, the men felt sufficiently legitimate to appear in broad daylight. The outcome of the fighting, generally in favour of the ANC, especially once the United Nations (UN) forces came to support it, was deadly for them. However, there was no point in exploiting their corpses because no party involved (Katanga, Belgium, France) denied their presence.

Whatever the conditions in which they died (fighting in isolated, forest regions, urban combat, etc.), they were treated like the regular soldiers they were fighting. The Katanga logistics chain was no doubt highly insufficient, but not necessarily much more so than that of the ANC. In fact, the only real difficulty was the inhospitable climate, which made it impossible to preserve the bodies. Depending on how easy it was to access the combat site, they were quickly buried on site or taken to a Katanga town to be buried. In both cases, their burial was very straightforward. More often than not, the body was rolled in sheeting, sometimes placed in a coffin (in towns), then buried in a simple grave. The identity of the deceased appeared on a cross on the grave.<sup>3</sup> The cross was essentially a cultural reflex to identify the deceased, rather than for any religious purpose. As with all European societies, attitudes towards the deaths of the mercenaries and the importance of religion varied from one man to another.

From 1964, mercenaries were again deployed in their hundreds, this time serving the Congolese central authority. After his exile following the fall of Katanga, the secessionist president Moïse Tshombe returned to Congo in 1964 and became leader of a government coalition in Leopoldville. Indeed, the state was faced with a new threat. After breaking out in the eastern part of Congo in 1961, the Simba rebellion had been gaining momentum since January 1964.<sup>4</sup> With the support of military advisors from the Eastern Bloc, the resistance covered two-thirds of Congolese territory.<sup>5</sup> As the ANC was unable to stop the phenomenon, Tshombe resumed contact with the mercenaries he had previously hired in Katanga. They played an important role in crushing the uprising in 1964–65, alongside Belgian military assistance, then in regaining control of the entire territory until 1967.

The mercenaries were consequently at the heart of vast military operations using modern arms. This was also the case in the Yemen operation in 1963–64. Between the end of the Katanga secession and Tshombe's recalling them to the Congo to face the Simba rebels, a team of French mercenaries served as military advisors to the Houthis royalist forces in Yemen. Following the death of Shiite King Imam Ahmad ben Yahya on 18 September 1962, his eldest son, al-Badr ascended to the throne. However, he was overthrown in a coup organised by young Nasserian officers, which gave birth to the Yemen Arab Republic (also known as North Yemen). Confronted with these republican forces supported by Nasser's Egypt, the Zaydi royalists (Shiite)

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were supported by Saudi Arabia and the British secret services. London sent military advisors, including some thirty French mercenaries led by Tony de Saint-Paul and Bob Denard. The mercenaries trained and supervised the combatants in the asymmetric war that they waged from the mountainous zones in the north of the country against the republican army.

Once again, their presence did not raise any issues in terms of exploitation, as this theatre of war was rarely visited by journalists and, in case of deaths, the men were brought back behind the front lines and buried in areas that were firmly held by those whom they were serving. In such counter-insurrection battles, in regions that were mainly mountainous, or equatorial forest in the case of Congo, the combat units' isolation was often broken only by aerial logistics from the nearby towns. Handling the body of a mercenary killed in combat was therefore minimal. Alluding to the death of one of his brothers in arms in his memoirs, Pierre Chassin states: 'A simple pile of earth on top of which was a wooden cross, and the bareness was made even more poignant by the weeds around it [. . .]. It is sweet and beautiful to die for your country, said Horace, but it is sad and stupid to die for Congo.'<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the available logistics made evacuation possible. On 8 April 1965, in a skirmish near to the village of Nekalaga, a convoy came under fire from Simba fighters. Ari Van Malderen was shot in the back. A helicopter came to get the wounded man, but he died while being transported.<sup>7</sup> In fact, when the mercenaries were deployed alongside Belgian Technical Military Assistance and worked in full cooperation with them, they benefited from the means provided to support the regular army.

In this case, the remains were brought back with the injured to a 'treatment base' which also had a morgue. Henri Clément, a former member of 1st Choc under the orders of Bob Denard, explained: 'Although at room temperature, it meant bodies could be preserved while organising the official burial: it was a large, slightly inclined concrete slab, roughly one metre above ground, surrounded by a gutter by which humours and waste water from washing the bodies flowed into a cesspool.'<sup>8</sup> A burial ceremony was then organised: 'If possible, we could find a coffin and bury it in the official local cemetery, following a religious ceremony depending on the priest available (regardless of the mercenary's religious faith). We didn't really have the opportunity or sufficient staff to do the honours.'<sup>9</sup> The case of Jean-Pierre Vibert, who was killed on 4 July 1965 near to Doulia, illustrates the procedure in a photograph. His body was repatriated to Buta, then to Stanleyville.<sup>10</sup> Under the orders of Bob Denard, accompanied by two other mercenaries standing to attention, two men can be seen carrying the coffin covered in the Congolese flag and wreaths of flowers, to place it in a vehicle, probably to take it to the nearest cemetery.<sup>11</sup> Pierre Chassin described a procedure, then a similar ceremony in Bukavu. It concerned a mercenary, Van Host, killed tens of kilometres away in Kivu. His account confirms the sometimes-hasty treatment of the body. During the ceremony, for which 'the coffin [was] placed on two chairs', Chassin noticed, 'in amazement, a dark patch slowly getting bigger under the coffin. Blood was dripping from a corner of the coffin and I was struck by the incongruity of the scene.'<sup>12</sup>

**But war violence that affects the mercenaries' attitude to their death**

The 1960s brought about a niggling concern among the mercenaries. Indeed, the violence carried out by the enemy heightened their anxiety as to what would happen to their bodies, should they be killed. The torture witnessed while winning back eastern Congo had made an impact on the men, despite their being accustomed to irregular warfare after serving in Indochina or Algeria. René Biaunie recalls the Tutsi bodies impaled by the Simbas: 'Their mouths wide open still howling their slow agony. Their bodies bore countless wounds. Their feet had been cut above the ankle [. . .]. Before killing them, they shortened them and tried to get them to run.'<sup>13</sup> The revolt in eastern Congo manifested itself in the extreme abuse against the white population. A priori, the main victims were the civilians left behind. The Belgian mercenary drafted the list of the whites in question: 'Missionaries whose chapels had been destroyed, settlers whose plantations had been devastated. Women and children escaped this terrible nightmare, the dance with death, the rape and torture by the Simbas.'<sup>14</sup>

Before the liberation of Stanleyville by Belgian troops and mercenaries in November 1964, some sixty Europeans were massacred, and Congolese corpses were strewn here and there around the town. Everyone concerned (Belgians, mercenaries, Congolese National Army and international observers) could do nothing more than handle emergencies. Chief of the *Ommegang* (convoy with a mix of mercenaries and Belgian Technical Assistance), Colonel Vandewalle, bears witness: 'Bodies were flowing down the river. They got caught up in the jetties. Unattended prisoners pushed them back into the current using poles. Dead that nobody had counted were decomposing in the town. Other captives undertook to remove them and take them to mass graves. For a time, a UN representative, probably from the WHO [World Health Organization], led this slow, demoralising operation.'<sup>15</sup>

Soldiers and mercenaries found skulls and skeletons as they walked around, or drove over others every time they used the town's access roads.<sup>16</sup> Thus, far from Kinshasa, the soldiers of fortune were immersed in an atmosphere of extreme violence in which the sight of fighters whose remains had not been respected was very frequent, even the local norm. It is therefore easy to imagine how they would project these images onto their own, bodies should they be killed. Having arrived from Europe a few weeks earlier, Pierre Chassin was given the command of a unit responsible for collecting corpses from the main streets of Buta, where the mercenaries had taken up residence. Strongly affected by this recollection, he dedicated almost two pages of his memoirs to describing the gagging that overcame him as he approached the lorry where the first to be collected were piled up, and his uneasiness before the 'limp, soft bodies' that 'were no longer men but the remains of wild animals', and, at the same time, the sense of brotherhood that he felt before such a sight ('life and a smile would make them brothers').<sup>17</sup> Comparing himself to an old-time sailor giving orders to throw a dead seaman overboard, he felt 'like he had aged twenty years'.<sup>18</sup>

In Yemen, the question of geographical isolation poses the same problem when a deadly attack leads to great losses. The Yemeni were buried there, but the question

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remained for the Europeans, who were few and far between. Instinctively, the mercenary leaders considered repatriating their dead soldiers to Europe. However, the lack of logistics with Saudi Arabia and the question of preserving the bodies meant that, ultimately, the remains stayed on site. One of the pioneering figures of the French mercenary movement, Tony de Saint-Paul, was killed during an air raid in December 1963. He was a charismatic character and his case set a precedent. He received a tribute from his comrades in arms, who watched over him in the 'presence of Emir Abdullah and his warriors'.<sup>19</sup> He was then buried under his real identity alongside other victims of the air attack, as his body could not be evacuated from the country and repatriated to Europe.

Air raids, occasionally, and much more frequently mortar fire, regularly caused many deaths among the European-led troops in these conventional battles. However, in addition to the heat, in Congo the numerous troops did not have suitable logistics for evacuating large numbers. In such conditions, those killed, whether Africans or Western mercenaries, were sometimes too numerous to be buried. This could be observed in the occasionally violent battles of the previously mentioned phase to win back eastern Congo in 1964–65. Usually, everyone took care of their own dead, and they were handled differently depending on the kind of fighter. Henri Clément explains: 'When it was not possible to evacuate the bodies to the back, they were buried on site, marking the area with a cross. For the Katangese, they dealt with it themselves and I cannot give any details.<sup>20</sup> As for the Simbas, they were thrown in the river following the local method that they had initiated.<sup>21</sup> During the Biafran War (1967–70) the accumulation of corpses was much more frequent and had a psychological impact on the fighters. In his memoirs, Armand Ianarelli used many morbid descriptions, and especially remembers the smell of the battlefield: 'The enemy is opposite [. . .]. In the middle, a few smouldering ruins and corpses. Thousands of corpses. Some are still fresh, smeared with red blood and liquid, others are older, half-eaten by scavengers that fly around in large circles above us. Then there is the smell. Everywhere in Biafra, there was the smell of death.'<sup>22</sup>

In this conflict, being outnumbered by an enemy that was indifferent to death (in this case, the Nigerian Federal Army, with the advantage of numerical superiority) further increased this fear: 'The Nigerians were obviously under the influence of hemp [. . .]. They left behind roughly a battalion per kilometre. It was a massacre [. . .]. Our means of defence were ridiculous. Our losses were heavy too.'<sup>23</sup> Easily identifiable due to their skin colour, the mercenaries knew that they were prime targets, as Armand Ianarelli reported: 'Whites are easy to spot. And it is so tempting!'<sup>24</sup>

### Violence that includes dead bodies

Even the dead could be victims of great violence in these internal theatres of war. Thus, belief in magic practices could lead their African enemies to acts that both shocked and upset the Europeans. The memory of their brothers in arms was coupled with compassion for their *post-mortem* fate.<sup>25</sup> For example, Pierre Chassin

reported that he returned to the region of Aketi in Congo-Kinshasa in 1965, on a trail alongside which two of his comrades, Vounx and Nagy, had been buried a few days earlier. The Simba rebels from the east, convinced that they would gain supernatural strength, had unearthed the remains, cut off their legs and eaten their testicles. Despite the difficulty due to the deteriorated state of the bodies, the mercenaries 'loaded Vounx and Nagy's remains onto the lorry despite the repulsive smell'.<sup>26</sup> Another practice was to throw the wounded or dead enemy body to the crocodiles. This avoided leaving bodies in the open air, with the hygiene issues that this could cause. Initially, throwing bodies into the river was a local practice for treating corpses in the case of confrontation.<sup>27</sup>

This had an impact on the enemy's morale. In Buta, in 1965, Pierre Chassin tried to reassure himself before the bodies were thrown into the water by telling himself that the crocodiles 'must be full'.<sup>28</sup> In Paulis, the Simbas staged the executions of their hostages. Some were lined up at the top of the water-retention dam and then pushed over the edge. The bodies disappeared into the reservoir below. The first mention of a living man being restrained and thrown 'to the crocodiles' by the rebels seems to date back to the end of 1964 in Buta.<sup>29</sup> Mercenaries knew that their companions' remains, and potentially their own, could end up shredded to pieces. Max Vigoureux de Kermovan thus stated that in Biafra 'a mercenary captured by the Nigerian forces had his arms and legs broken before being thrown into the river'.<sup>30</sup> Another, Michel Loiseau, known as Bosco, recounts how he almost experienced this himself, only escaping the river by taking advantage of the drunken state of the Nigerians.<sup>31</sup> In any case, the first accounts of bodies being thrown to the crocodiles were told orally among the mercenaries from the time of the fight against the Simbas (1965–67). Although it is not always possible to check the truth behind each of these accounts, an episode of this type is told in most of the memoirs that concern Congo and Biafra. What was no doubt initially a matter of hygiene became a means of psychological warfare, further emphasised by word of mouth.

The mercenaries therefore knew that this practice was used to play on morale, and this goal was now achieved. As far as possible, including for a man who had been killed, they tried to bring the body back to dry land for a quick burial behind the front lines. Journalist Michel Honorin thus immortalised this 1968 Biafra scene for *Jeune Afrique*. In the photos illustrating his article are the remains of Belgian Marc Goossens, who had been killed by a salvo of machine-gun fire, being carried in the river by five of his soldiers, in the water up to their chests, to bring him back to the Biafra camp.<sup>32</sup> Thus, combat conditions in the 1960s made the mercenaries aware that their remains might be subject to an unenviable fate, despite efforts to meet usual standards (a grave either on site or in a town to which bodies were repatriated). Another factor guided the change in methods. During the operation in Yemen in 1963–64 the teams of English and French mercenaries deployed in the service of the Houthis were involved as part of the British undercover operation, with the financial backing of MI6. This position as an unofficial agent of a power then became more widespread.

## Increased secrecy in the context of underground operations and more significant repatriation strategies

At the dawn of the 1970s, mercenary operations took on a more pronounced Cold War dimension. The presence of journalists and/or communication from the different camps increased. Secrecy concerning operations involving the 'Affreux' was increasingly necessary, accentuating the problem regarding the remains of those killed in combat.

### Honouring the remains of a brother in arms, the need for secrecy and changes in how the dead are handled

From 1975 on, attention was focused on the Angolan civil war as it mobilised a powerful Cuban expeditionary force, substantial Soviet means (at least materially) and, on the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) side, discreet yet substantial support from South Africa, Mobutu's Congo and the West. With funding from the US Central Intelligence Agency, two new teams of French mercenaries were deployed, in Cabinda and especially in the Lobito region (January 1976). These men did not achieve their goal, which was to secure the front. Caught in the UNITA troop withdrawal, they drifted south. By trying to reach what they thought was the closest border, they became caught up in a skirmish and one of them, Henry Alain, was killed. In hostile territory where they were not intending to stay, the initial instinct for these isolated men was to take the body with them. They loaded their comrade's body 'into a VW camper'. However, they got lost and had to abandon their vehicle. Due to the hot climate, it was no longer possible to repatriate Henry Alain's remains: 'Hughes [De Chivre] warned me that we wouldn't be able to keep Alain's body very long. We organised his burial. I made the cross [ . . . ]. The blacks sang a beautiful yet sad tune; we lowered him in strong sheeting. He died as a soldier; he has the grave of a soldier.'<sup>33</sup> Thus, Henry Alain was buried as the commandos retreated to the Namibian border.

The aborted 16 January 1977 coup against Mathieu Kérékou's regime in Benin brought about new problems. The coup de force relied on an airborne operation. A troop of some eighty men landed in Cotonou to try to take control of the capital, but the mercenaries encountered North Korean divisions that they had not anticipated. After a few hours of combat they returned to their plane. But they had left behind two dead, a European and a prisoner (Guinean). The white mercenary had been wounded in the thigh during the retreat to the airport. The recollection of previous operations and the fate that he could expect led him to immediately shoot himself in the head: the man preferred to kill himself rather than fall prey to the Beninese alive.<sup>34</sup> This decision was perhaps also influenced by the fear of being tortured in order to reveal information about his comrades in arms and their mission commanders.

However, supporting declarations made by Mathieu Kérékou's regime, the photograph of his remains provides irrefutable proof that the coup did not solely involve Africans. The account by the Guinean who was taken prisoner at the airport (as well as documents left behind by the mercenaries as they retreated) would later confirm



this theory. The Benin representative, Mr Boya, accused the West at the UN General Assembly in December 1977. The body of the mercenary became an element of proof brandished before the international community in order to point the finger, particularly at Paris. The French representative, Mr Leprette, tried, unconvincingly, to defend France's position: 'The French delegation [...] has strongly condemned all forms of mercenary activity [...]. It reaffirms in the clearest manner, as it did before the Security Council on 7 April 1977, that it declines any responsibility on the part of the French government or French services of any kind, in the preparation and execution of the raid against Cotonou on 16 January.'<sup>35</sup>

When the mercenaries buried Henry Alain's body in Angola, they intended to come back to retrieve it a few months later, in keeping with a practice initiated by Tony de Saint-Paul in Yemen. However, the spirit in which repatriation was envisaged was not comparable. They were no longer returning to retrieve the remains of an emblematic mercenary, but those of a comrade in arms whose 'profession' could not accept that the body would be subject to the violence associated with intensive civil war as had been the case in Congo ten years earlier. Furthermore, it helped to spare the family, particularly as Henry Alain was the son of a general. In fact, when Bob Denard's men returned to the zone where he had been killed, they could not find the grave.<sup>36</sup> The mercenaries had no doubt misjudged their geographical position in the flight that followed the final clash with the forces of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and Henry Alain's body was not found. However, during this period of occasional, undercover operations, carried out by small numbers, the idea of more systematic repatriation of those killed in combat came about.

As of 1978, the French mercenaries established themselves in the Comoros and founded the Presidential Guard. Their leader, Bob Denard, enjoyed informal yet important political power in the archipelago, to the extent that people spoke of the Comoros' 'white sultan'. This strong influence made their external interventions even more sensitive. In 1982 a small team from within the Presidential Guard was nonetheless sent to Chad to support Hissène Habré at the head of the Armed Forces of the North (FAN). One of the mercenaries, Jean-Baptiste Pouye, was killed during fighting in the Oum Hadjer region. Again, it was possible that his remains would be used to prove the presence of Bob Denard's men alongside those of Hissène Habré. However, this unit had not been deployed under direct approval from France. It could potentially complicate relations between France and the Comoros. Above all, it could easily pave the way for stricter African anti-mercenary legislation under the leadership of Libya and other countries close to the Eastern Bloc. Indeed, having a position of strength in the Angolan civil war, the MPLA had organised the trial of mercenaries in Luanda in 1976. As Benin would do before the UN in the following year, the MPLA denounced the Western powers for providing mercenaries.

Due to the Benin precedent, for which Bob Denard was pursued by the French justice system, the other members of the unit deployed in Chad decided to burn Jean-Baptiste Pouye's body. They gathered his ashes in a grenade case.<sup>37</sup> With the increasing implication of the Cold War in their operations and the secrecy of their presence in one theatre or another, the mercenaries began disposing of their members' remains. Incinerating a body was not an everyday occurrence: it was not

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particularly commonplace in France at the beginning of the 1980s, and therefore raised two new issues. The first concerned the way in which the other mercenaries reacted to how their comrades had been treated. More specifically, how they managed their emotions, as members of the Comoros Presidential Guard who were not present, but who could be called to similar operations.<sup>38</sup> The second consisted in urgent communication with the family of the deceased. In fact, as for all who die in combat far from home, information concerning the circumstances surrounding the death, the place and the way the body has been treated, including a possible return, are all part of the family's expectations.

### **Announcements by leaders, intended for mercenary personnel and their families**

The first discussions concerned financial considerations. The risk of dying in hostile territory, far from any urban area (and therefore from a cemetery) and far from home is one of the inherent risks of being a mercenary. This is why, even if the wages announced were not necessarily paid in reality, a mercenary's contract was very attractive with regard to the conditions in the event of death in combat. With the revival of mercenary activity in the 1960s, financial allowances were provided to compensate for the difficult conditions, particularly psychologically, that those close to the deceased often experienced (frequently, nowhere to pay their respects). In the middle of the 1960s in Congo, the family would generally receive one million Belgian francs<sup>39</sup> and an additional 100,000 francs per child.<sup>40</sup> This amount was quite considerable, as it represented roughly eight years and four months of pay for a mercenary, four years and one month for a sub-lieutenant and close to twelve and a half years of the average Belgian wage at the time. On the other hand, the contracts did not seem to provide clear compensation in the case of injury.

Whenever possible, the leaders took care to pay the strongest possible tribute to the fallen. In fact, in an attempt to retain their qualified workforce, the goal was to reduce mercenaries' concerns about the potential fate of their dead body as much as possible. In other words, it was essential for the mercenary leaders to maintain a pool of qualified personnel that had already served in the regular army or had an initial paid experience and could be called upon for the next operation. Indeed, each of them needed to be able to form their own unit as quickly as possible so as to respond to any request. They therefore needed to maintain close ties with their men between operations. This explains why more thorough care was taken by officers to communicate following the death of a fighter than was the case in the conventional army.

The general idea was to make it clear that the leaders did all they could to repatriate the bodies of the dead. The case of Tony de Saint-Paul was both pioneering and symbolic. Indeed, he was one of the pioneers in the revival of mercenary activity and appeared as an idealist fighter who served the general image of the soldier of fortune and was used as a means of 'communication' by the mercenary leaders. He was killed in Yemen in December 1963 and his body remained there for almost a year. However, when the conflict subsided, the body, broken in two, was retrieved by his former comrades, placed in a trunk and carried on camel back to the airport. It

was then taken back to France.<sup>41</sup> Following the failure in Congo, and hoping to send a unit to Biafra, Bob Denard gathered together Belgian and French mercenaries in the north of France. Before mentioning the potential contracts to come, the leader began by paying tribute to those who had died in previous operations.<sup>42</sup> As within a traditional army, referring to the dead was intended to unite the group, to create a bond, all the more important as the mercenaries' nationality could be a source of neo-colonial rivalry. Continued reference to the dead plays a unifying role in the leader's rhetoric.

From the 1960s, at a time when many soldiers of fortune were mobilised and there was a shortage of relatively skilled labour, this concern was shared by the Africans commissioning the mercenaries. The case of René Wauthier, former colonel of the Belgian Technical Assistance, is interesting. Indeed, he led a mercenary and Katangese revolt against Mobutu in July 1966. He was killed when the attempted uprising was crushed. However, due to his rank and by covering up the circumstances surrounding his death, the regime organised a funeral with full honours in Kinshasa. 'The Congolese officials came in large numbers and pronounced speeches.'<sup>43</sup>

First the mercenaries addressed the families to tell them the news. The efforts to achieve repatriation were also to be balanced with how important the bereaved family was. As such, mercenaries from wealthy families seemed to be given more consideration. In the case of Vibert mentioned above, the origin of his family might explain his helicopter evacuation. According to mercenary René Biaunie, Denard obtained air transport because 'his body needs to be sent to France. Vibert was a pseudonym. He was General X's son.'<sup>44</sup> Having experienced many deaths in the 1960s, Bob Denard now paid particular attention to passing on the information to the families. At the very least, the deceased's belongings were passed on to the family. This situation existed for all fighters during the First and Second World Wars; it occurred again, more occasionally, during decolonisation conflicts. Since then, it had disappeared and had become a risk that clearly distinguished the soldiers of fortune from their regular army counterparts in the 1970s and 1980s.

To go back to the example of Jean-Baptiste Pouye, whose body had been burned on site in 1982, the leader in Bob Denard insisted that Riot, the unit commander deployed on site, should immediately write a long letter to Jean-Baptiste's mother. Also at Bob Denard's request, Hissène Habré, who had become president of the Republic of Chad, then met his mother. It was a matter of expressing respect for the value of a lost son and offering his condolences.<sup>45</sup> Hissène Habré's political importance and the heroic character that he conferred on the man who had been killed were meant to alleviate the pain of not being able to bury the deceased. Collected in a grenade case, the mercenary's ashes were passed on to Bob Denard in August 1982. He then personally took them to his family, so that they were at least in possession of what remained of the young man. It should be noted that this act by the highest official authorities (Denard as the young man's 'boss', and the Chadian president) towards the family of those killed in combat was not performed by the military institutions and therefore set apart the world of French soldiers of fortune.

Already set apart from official institutions, this was accentuated after their fall in the Comoros. In 1989, under pressure from France and South Africa, the fate of the mercenaries belonging to the Presidential Guard was called into question by President Abdallah. The latter was killed in his office, in circumstances that are still partially unclear, by someone close to Bob Denard. After an intervention by the French army, Bob Denard went into exile in Africa, while some of his comrades tried, more or less successfully, to settle back into French society. For the men who abandoned their armed careers, their memories are the centre of their meetings. To explain why he decided to write his memoirs, Bob Denard writes, in conclusion: 'Tony de Saint-Paul, Karl Coucke,<sup>46</sup> Marc Gossens, Henry Alain, Bruno Emery,<sup>47</sup> Jean-Baptiste Pouye . . . all those who one day fell along the way, are with me: I often think of them. Especially at night. They went all the way. I saw them as the future [. . .]. I want to build, found something that will outlive us.'<sup>48</sup> This commemorative effort continued after Bob Denard's death in 2007.

Similar to regimental associations, the Orbs Patria Nostra association was founded by former mercenaries in 2008 in order to keep his memory alive. Rapidly, the association expanded its activity to include information on the different operations involving French soldiers of fortune. The tribute to the men who fell during these battles is an important part of the association's goals. On their website an 'In memoriam' page briefly outlines the careers not only of those killed in operations but also of personalities in the field who have died more recently.<sup>49</sup> In a ceremony that resembles that of French military and/or civil authorities (11 November, for example), an annual tribute to all mercenaries killed has been paid on Denard's grave on the second weekend of October since 2007 and includes the Last Post, songs, flags and veterans in uniform.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, how mercenaries handled their dead was a response to several specificities that became apparent from the first operations they led in the 1960s. The very hot, isolated regions (Congo or Yemen, for example) in which they were deployed, explain that they rarely had the means to repatriate bodies behind the front lines, let alone to Europe. The bodies were generally hurriedly buried on site. The violence that characterised the conflicts in the 1960s led to violence not only towards the living, but also to remains. It raised genuine concern among the mercenaries operating in environments where death was omnipresent (unburied corpses, smells, etc.) and was complicated for their leaders trying to cultivate loyalty. This is why, despite the difficult conditions, every effort was made to pay tribute to those killed. A further restriction came about due to the increasing need for secrecy concerning their presence in theatres of war, particularly from the 1970s onwards. Indeed, both in the international arena and in public opinion, accusations concerning their role intensified. On the other hand, the number of men sent for an operation was limited. The combination of both aspects led to new practices, as illustrated by the cremation of Jean-Baptiste Pouye in Chad and his repatriation, combined with efforts to communicate with the families. The attitude towards death and the way it was handled was similar, in part, to regular soldiers, but tended to differ considerably between the 1960s and the 1980s, depending on the different missions carried out by the mercenaries. Nonetheless, these men maintained a strong military identity in the regular

commemoration of their dead. Like traditional veterans, first under Bob Denard's initiative, then by means of an association, they continue to pay tribute to their comrades killed in operations where little space was left for the rudimentary treatment of their remains.

## Notes

Translated from French by Tracy Reed.

- 1 J. P. Bat, *Le syndrome Foccart: la politique française en Afrique de 1959 à nos jours* (Paris, Gallimard, 2012).
- 2 W. Bruyère-Ostells, 'L'influence française dans la sécession katangaise: naissance d'un système mercenaire', *Relations internationales*, 162 (2015), 167–72.
- 3 Interview with Jacques Duchemin, French journalist who became Minister of Katanga, in Paris, 14 May 2013.
- 4 This rebellion was called Simba, as the fighters had been convinced by their shamans that they were immune to bullets and changed into lions (simba in Swahili). Initially commanded by Antoine Gizenga and Pierre Mulele, it was also known as the Mulele rebellion.
- 5 The advisors were mainly Chinese, but the most famous was Che Guevara (his memoirs on this have been published under the title *Journal du Congo* (Paris, Fayard, 2009)).
- 6 P. Chassin, *Baroud pour une autre vie* (Paris, Picollec, 2000), p. 288.
- 7 H. Clément, *Commentaires autour du journal de marche du 1er Choc sous le commandement de Robert Denard* (Paris, Orbs Patria Nostra, 2016), p. 28.
- 8 Statement written on 29 September 2018 by Henri Clément, mercenary officer with 1st Choc in 1964–65.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Clément, *Commentaires*, photograph 35, p. 74.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 12 Chassin, *Baroud pour une autre vie*, p. 298.
- 13 M. Desgranges, *Les trois mercenaires* (Paris, Grasset, 1979), p. 233.
- 14 J. Schramme, *Le bataillon Léopard* (Paris, Robert Laffont, 1969), p. 163.
- 15 F. Vandewalle (colonel), *L'Ommegang: odyssee et reconquête de Stanleyville 1964* (Bruxelles, Librairie générale de sciences humaines–Le livre africain, 1970), p. 373.
- 16 Documentary by Rai (Italian TV): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ndf8\\_sIL3c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ndf8_sIL3c). Accessed 12 September 2018.
- 17 Chassin, *Baroud pour une autre vie*, pp. 237–8.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 19 P. Lunel, *Bob Denard, le roi de fortune* (Paris, Editions n° 1, 1991), p. 250.
- 20 Suggesting different methods.
- 21 Statement written on 29 September 2018 by Henri Clément, mercenary officer with 1st Choc in 1964–65.
- 22 Captain Armand, *Biafra vaincra* (Paris, Editions France-empire, 1969), p. 75.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

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- 25 On magical practices, as well as the hemp consumed by the Simbas, mentioned by Jean Schramme, see V. Verhaegen's article 'Les rébellions populaires au Congo en 1964', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 26 (1967), 345–59.
- 26 Chassin, *Baroud pour une autre vie*, p. 258.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Statement written on 29 September 2018 by Henri Clément, mercenary officer with 1st Choc in 1964–65.
- 30 Interview with former mercenary Vigoureux de Kermovan, Aix-en-Provence, 20 October 2012.
- 31 M. Loiseau, 'Mémoires inédits de Bosco', typescript memoirs, p. 392 kept in Bob Denard's private archives.
- 32 *Jeune Afrique*, December 1968.
- 33 Loiseau, 'Mémoires', p. 85.
- 34 Interview with JP D., known as Jean-Philippe, former mercenary, Aix-en-Provence, 20 October 2012.
- 35 Excerpts from the minutes of the 2047th session held at UN headquarters on Tuesday 22 November 1977 pertaining to the Benin affair, Bob Denard's private archives, box 44.
- 36 Loiseau, 'Mémoires', p. 42.
- 37 Letter from Riot written in N'Djamena, 30 December 1982, Bob Denard's private archives, box 28.
- 38 Lunel, *Bob Denard, le roi de fortune*, p. 579.
- 39 Roughly €20,000 today.
- 40 Diplomatic telegram from the embassy in Leopoldville on 9 February 1961, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Africa-Levant, Congo, box 47.
- 41 Interview with Villeneuve, former mercenary in Comoros and son of a member of the unit deployed in Yemen, 12 October 2013.
- 42 Loiseau, 'Mémoires', p. 278.
- 43 Statement written on 29 September 2018 by Henri Clément, mercenary officer with 1st Choc in 1964–65.
- 44 Desgranges, *Les trois mercenaires*, p. 152.
- 45 Letter from Riot written in N'Djamena, 30 December 1982, Bob Denard's private archives, box 28.
- 46 A mercenary close to Bob Denard, born in Congo in 1942, he was killed in combat during the mercenaries' revolt against Mobutu in 1967.
- 47 Bruno Emery Passerat de La Chapelle, known as Riot, member of the Presidential Guard of Comoros, was mortally wounded in 1985 by one of his comrades while training.
- 48 Lunel, *Bob Denard, le roi de fortune*, p. 649.
- 49 [www.orbspatrianostra.com/in-memoriam.html](http://www.orbspatrianostra.com/in-memoriam.html). Accessed 27 September 2018.
- 50 Participant observation by the author in 2013 and 2017.