

The 1975 Killing of Reni Les in Pandamatenga and Establishment of Botswana Defence Force

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‘In October [1975] near Pandamatenga a PMU [Police Mobile Unit] patrol was investigating the activities of a Belgian National when he opened fire without warning, killing a sergeant and wounding a constable. An automatic sub-machine gun was used. After an extensive air and land search over a wide area of remote countryside he was traced to Nxai Pan area, and killed during the ensuing engagement’. This is an extract from a 1975 Annual Report by the Commissioner of the Botswana Police Service in relation to an operation that ultimately achieved the capture and killing of a Belgian fugitive known as Reni Les. (However, other sources may have a different spelling of his names). Information is still very scanty and scattered regarding the true identity of this man. Unfortunately, the report does not reveal much on this incident and most of the information published here has largely been collected from eyewitness accounts of civilians and soldiers involved in the operation. But it seems Reni Les had been a Lieutenant in the Belgian army.

Why do I say soldiers when I am making reference to a 1975 incident in the security of our country when we did not have an army until 1977 when the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) was formed? Few understand that at the time Botswana had men who received full military training. These were men belonging to the Para Military Unit which was later turned to Police Mobile Unit. A man known as Major (Retired) Peter Mojapelo who was involved in this operation has provided a wealth of information that has enabled me to write this story. According to him, he was in the thick of things on that fateful October day in 1975. In that year the government of Botswana, which was only nine years into independence since 1966, had contracted an American company known as Groovy International to improve the road between Nata and Kazungula from being a sand road to gravel grade. According to civilians who worked for the company, Reni Les worked there for a while as a paymaster.

The company bought several Land Rover vehicles and the Belgian fugitive allotted himself one of the vehicles without authorisation from the company bosses. It is claimed that at some point, he left the company but decided to keep its new short-wheel base Land Rover and continued to access fuel from the company’s fuel depot without permission. Reni Les at the time was fraternising with one African woman in the village of Pandamatenga where Groovy International had its base. The affair resulted in the birth of a son who ironically ended up joining the BDF in his later life but died shortly after serving for a few years.

After his unceremonious departure from Groovy International, Reni Les turned to poaching and occasionally harassed villagers in Pandamatenga. The man who was an ex-officer from the Belgian military overstepped his authority when he engaged in an unusual target. He fired on the patrol base of the PMU and fled from the scene. A patrol led by Sergeant Philip Kgari was dispatched in a single white Land Rover to trace the whereabouts of Lieutenant Rene Les. This was a full military operation because the fugitive was known to be armed with an automatic machine gun. After an extensive land and air search, he was traced to Nxai Pan where there was abundance of wildlife.

Upon be found after a few days of running the operation, Lieutenant Rene Les was captured by the search party. Unfortunately, no one in the detail could drive his relatively new vehicle because of certain modifications he had made to it. Therefore, the fugitive was allowed to drive his own vehicle to the village of Pandamatenga with the patrol detail following. Somewhere, along the sandy track they traversed, Rene Les accelerated further and the older PMU Land Rover, which was fully loaded with men, could not keep up with his newer model of the same brand and he disappeared out of sight. Within minutes he reappeared from a bend on the sandy road. His accelerated approach meant one thing; the man was coming to fight.

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Those at the back of the vehicle fled in all directions as it slowed down and Reni Les had a clean sweep on the driver and the front seat passenger at close range. Sergeant Kgari was killed instantly while Constable Mokokwe sustained near fatal injuries on the spine but survived. The fugitive took their weapons and their ammunition with him and fled. Another search party was dispatched to find Reni Les and they were led by Sergeant Tau. After an extended search, the man was traced to his hideout camp in the middle of the bush. He was accosted by the patrol and killed on site. His body was transported to Makalamabedi where it was taken up by another team to Francistown.

The team that went after him following the killing and maiming of the two paramilitary operatives was initially trained by Percy Turner Wild. He was a British Army officer who was employed on contract to train a paramilitary wing (PMU) of the police in Botswana. The PMU was transformed into a fully-fledged army, the BDF, in 1977. Wild was based in Francistown and he was responsible for inducting into military operatives young police recruits who had just graduated from Police College. He taught them the basic military tactics and field survival skills. From as far back as 1973, Wild emphasized to President Sir Seretse Khama that it was high time the country established its military independent of the police. Upon his arrival in Francistown after he was transferred from Gaborone, Wild interacted closely with Philip Matante, a parliamentarian for Francistown, and convinced him to request the parliament of Botswana to enact laws to establish an army. It is said that the president was annoyed by this approach and ensured that Wild's contract was not renewed in 1976. Nonetheless, according to Special Branch files, Wild was accused of passing critical security information to the Rhodesian security intelligence about Botswana. Apparently, the man had his children attending boarding school in Bulawayo and his frequent visits to that country was used as a scapegoat for not renewing his contract.

The truth behind the delay for formation of an army was that Seretse's son, Ian Khama who was in the PMU, was not yet ready to run a military organisation which Wild had been proposing for a number of years. However, Wild's proposal was implemented just a year after his departure in April of 1977 when the BDF was established through an Act of parliament.