

The 1975 Killing of Police Mobile Unit's Sergeant Felix Kgari: A Forgotten National Hero in Botswana

*Kwapeng Modikwe**

About eight weeks ago, this paper carried an impressive article about the killing of Reni Les in the Pandamatenga area in 1975. Reni Les, a citizen of Belgium was killed for the murder of a Botswana Police Mobile Unit (PMU) sergeant and for wounding a police constable. The story was written by Richard Moleofe, a Botswana Defence Force (BDF) veteran. I had it in my list of stories I planned to write. So, Richard Moleofe pipped me to the post. However, I have decided to write on the Reni Les's saga because my approach will completely differ from Moleofe's, and I will present additional or detailed information. To begin with, the sergeant who was killed by Les was called Felix Kgari not Phillip as reported in Moleofe's account. I have no doubt about that because he was a distant relative of mine. The western corner of my grandparents' homestead in Mochudi is just 100 metres away from that of his parents' eastern corner. He was older than me, but we played together. He used to send us out to the top of the nearby hills to harvest *marekhu* (wild acacia tree gum) from the trees. We had Tswanaised his first name by calling him 'Fila'. We were both members of the local Mochudi Rovers Football Club.

The last time I saw him was in 1970 in Francistown. At that time, I was a Form II student at Molefi Secondary School in Mochudi. I had been released from school activities by the headmaster, David Maine, to join the South-Central Zonal Soccer team for the inter-zonal competitions. The games were held at the PMU grounds. That is where I last saw Felix Kgari. He was generous to our team during the games as he bought the team oranges at half-time and at the end of each game. He also provided us with water. For me, he even extended his hospitality to include bathing at his house every morning and evening. When the South-Central team won the competition and lifted the cup, he was overjoyed. He celebrated with the team carrying me shoulder high. I had scored a fantastic opener in the final game.

Richard Moleofe's article quotes the 1975 annual report by the commissioner of the Botswana Police Service stating that 'in October near Pandamatenga a PMU 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'. Moleofe explains in his story that the police commissioner's report is not detailed and, therefore, he had to rely on information provided to him by eyewitnesses. I attended Sergeant Felix Kgari's funeral at Mosanta graveyard in Mochudi and, therefore, I am better placed to provide the reader with additional information. I was a cub reporter for the government-owned *Botswana Daily News* during that time. However, a more senior reporter was assigned from Gaborone to cover that funeral. Nevertheless, I reported it on Radio Botswana's '*Tatediso ya Dikgang*' evening programme.

Simon Hirschfeld, the commissioner of police, spoke at that funeral as well as the Minister of Home Affairs, Bakwena Kgari, who described the deceased as a 'promising young man'. In his speech Hirschfeld said that their intention was not to kill Reni Les. They had planned to capture him so that he could reveal his actions to the police. After shooting and killing Felix Kgari and wounding Constable Ephraim Mokokwe, Reni Les stole their vehicle and drove it for 240km from the crime scene towards Maun. He then abandoned the vehicle and walked about 16km along the Makalamabedi cordon fence. The airborne search team spotted him and the vehicle which he had parked in the bush and covered with tree branches to hide it from people. The airborne search team then alerted the ground one that they had spotted

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the vehicle. The PMU officers waited for the Belgian fugitive in the vehicle. Indeed, Reni Les returned to the vehicle at night where the police ambushed him. According to the PMU reports, he was carrying a rifle and a sub-machine gun that he had taken from the police officers. Furthermore, he was carrying his own sub-machine gun which was the third firearm in his possession. A *Daily News* story of 4 November 1975 states that 'The police challenged him and after satisfying themselves that he was still dangerous and had no intention of surrendering they opened fire and killed him'. In military terms, they say 'shoot before the enemy shoots'. This may mean that if you don't shoot first, you may never have the chance of ever shooting. Simply put, you may be dead. The *Daily News* story further notes that 'the police then discovered that he had 100 rounds of ammunition and that both the rifle and the sub-machine guns were fully loaded. His own sub-machine gun was also loaded with 20 rounds of ammunition and was cocked ready to fire'. It seemed Reni Les did not carry a diary with him. Or if he had one, he did not make entry in it showing his motive.

Now the question is, was Reni Les a lone gunman or was there an accomplice somewhere? To date no answer has been provided to this question. The little that is known of him is that he had been employed as a paymaster by an American company contracted for the construction of the Kazungula road to gravel standard. The only document in his possession which could shed some light was his travel documents. Ellias Kgari and Roney Molefi of Mochudi were stationed in Maun as police officers at that time. Rodney Molefi was part of the Reni Les search team. He recalls that Mompoti Merafhe, deputy police commissioner, was in the aerial search team. That was before the establishment of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) which he would lead as commander upon its establishment in 1977. The PMU was the country's para-military force. Sergeant Felix Kgari was 29 when he was killed on 29 October 1975.

Though a paramilitary force, the PMU had to content with a very strong and well-armed military force in the neighbouring Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). At the time of Sergeant Felix Kgari's killing, his Francistown station had long been dealing with the Rhodesian forces. There had been several incursions into Botswana by the Rhodesians. For instance, on 11 October 1975 shells were fired towards a PMU camp near Kazungula from the Rhodesian direction. Seventy shots were fired from automatic rifles and three flares from a pistol during the attack. A PMU patrol was sent out to search the surroundings area but found nothing. Again, on 16 October 1975 a PMU team returned fire at Kazungula after they had been fired at. Still during the month of October in 1975, 25 Rhodesian soldiers opened fire at village of Matsiloje. In that shooting, which lasted for 30 minutes, six shots hit the village clinic, 12 hit the toilet and 32 hit a dairy facility. Unfortunately, upon arrival the PMU group found Rhodesians already gone.

The PMU was not called an army, but it carried out the activities of an army in defence of the country. Anything else is semantic. Felix Kgari was a 'soldier' and died in action. He was the first Botswana or PMU 'soldier' to die at the hands of an enemy. His blood is in the Pantamatenga area while his remains are at the Mosanta graveyard in Mochudi. Therefore, it would have been proper for the government of Botswana to have erected a landmark or monument of some sort at the spot where he was killed. A plaque reading along the lines: 'This is where Sergeant Felix Kgari of the PMU was killed by a Belgian terrorist called Reni Less on 29 October 1975', would be a good honour to this fallen son of the soil who died defending the country. Alternatively, the government can honour him by naming one of BDF camps in Francistown after him especially the one the BDF inherited from the PMU. At the level of sergeant, he was still too junior, but he became the first victim of a terrorist's bullet. Even naming a street in Francistown after him will be something. Every year on 16 June South Africans call out the name Hector Petersen so loud as if he would answer. They have erected a monument for him as the first victim of apartheid police shooting of protesting students on that fateful day in Soweto in 1976. This has been done even though he was not necessarily a high-ranking member of the community.

In Zimbabwe, the authorities have called their great hospital in central Harare Samuel Parirenyatwa

Hospital. It was named after the country's first black Zimbabwean to qualify as a medical doctor and liberation struggle icon. When I was studying mass communication at the Institute of Mass Communication in Harare, the name Dr Samuel Parirenyatwa was often mentioned by one of our lecturers during discussions on the Zimbabwean liberation struggle. He and other lecturers respected him greatly since he was an inspiration to them. It was clear that the first black doctor was and still is the pride of Zimbabwe.

The intensity of Rhodesian military incursion into Botswana started in 1975 with several kidnappings of refugees from that country in Francistown. There were occasions when the Rhodesian forces kidnapped wrong targets such as what happened on 25 March of the same year. This account of events can be found in Peter Stiff's book with the title *Selous Scouts War*.

Acknowledgement

This piece first appeared in *Sunday Standard*, 7 June 2021