

Kazungula Bridge is a Shrine to the Botswana Defence Force

*Richard Moleofe**

The opening of the Kazungula Bridge on 10 May 2021 was a major milestone in the development of infrastructure for Botswana and Zambia and this also goes a long way to benefit the whole Southern African region. This bridge has in fact become a gateway to Central Africa. This has been a world class project (Figure 1) and thanks to the funders and the constructors.

Figure 1: The Kazungula Bridge after completion.¹



The moment I arrived at the confluence of the Chobe and Zambezi Rivers in 1987 for the first time, I was captivated by the scenery and I could immediately imagine a bridge joining Botswana and Zambia. I arrived there in the month of May and amazingly the flood waters from upstream in Angola and Zambia were already going past the point of the bridge heading for the Victoria Falls.

At the time when I stood by the river and watched the pontoon shuttling to and fro between Botswana and Zambia, two soldiers of Botswana Defence Force (BDF) stood at a distance each holding a different type of weapon. One was carrying an AK47 while the other carried a 7.62mm Fabrique National rifle. They were clearly from two different units. In a moment I came close to the two unknown soldiers and we struck a conversation. After speaking to the two soldiers for about twenty minutes, I came to learn that the Pontoon Point, as it was called, was a major military operational area for the four countries that have their borders at this site; Botswana, Zambia, Namibia and Zimbabwe. This was just three years before the Namibian independence from South African occupation and the liberation war in Namibia had escalated.

As the soldiers were talking to me and giving me all the attention I did not expect, they asked that we move away from the river. We retreated back to some cover and from that point I could no longer see the South African Defence Force forward tower on the closest island to the confluence point. The soldiers told me that they were getting away from the view of the enemy forces to avoid possible sniper fire. The

* Richard Moleofe, former member of Botswana Defence Force, Gaborone. Email: moleofe@hotmail.com

1 Source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/zambia-botswana-inaugurate-260m-joint-bridge/2236002> accessed on 12 October 2021.

most senior of the two soldiers was a sergeant and he seemed more informed than his subordinate private soldier. I was taken around in what I can now term as a free tour. The sergeant was so informed and briefed me about past and present operations with such eloquence and as well as pumping a barrage of military terms which I could not comprehend at the time.

The fellow pointed at a site on the left of the current bridge and brought to my attention a piece of rusty steel protruding from the water. This was a piece of an old pontoon that was torpedoed by the South African Defence Force years earlier. The destruction of this pontoon brought about the loudest explosion in the Chobe ever. For years before the building of this bridge, the metal parts of the old pontoon stood in the water with a little piece protruding in silence. It was like the relic was raising a hand trying to catch someone's attention from its forgotten grave. Little is known about this incident. Even for me with a vast number of military contacts, I can hardly get reasonable information about this disaster that happened on the confluence of the Chobe and Zambezi Rivers. This is the only point in the whole wide world where four countries converge at the same place. It is Zambia in the north, Botswana in the south, Zimbabwe in the east and Namibia in the west. It is with much irony that these four countries achieved their independence in the same order.

To the east of the bridge lies a lonely piece of rusty metal that protrudes in the tall grass. It's a piece of railway metal and this item marks the point where Zimbabwe meets the three other countries. Just below this piece of metal lies an old bunker where the Rhodesian soldiers used for their protection. This is where Lance Corporal Mmatli of BDF died in 1978. He was sent to crawl into the bunker and investigate its operation. He was killed instantly by a sentry who was acting more out of shock than military drills. This came after a long skirmish between the BDF and the Rhodesian forces. This bunker was a thorn in the flesh for both Botswana troops and their Zambian counterparts. There was an agreed means of communication between the Zambian army and BDF. A Land Rover would flash its lights facing the direction of Zambia signalling that the Rhodesian Forces were present in the bunker. Then a barrage of artillery and mortar fire would follow in a moment. At times the bunker, also known as strong point, stood still and its foundations were never moved. After the death of Lance Corporal Mmatli, the BDF troops were so humiliated as they marched unarmed through the Kazungula Road Border where they collected the corpse of their comrade. On that day the best Rhodesian soldiers were picked. The tall and hairy ones were preferred for this exercise and they were dressed in shorts as it was one of their battle dresses. BDF troops had to walk through their formation.

The BDF had attacked the Rhodesian position with a company of three platoons. It was an all-out war for the day. When the Rhodesians returned fire, the three BDF platoons were scattered in three directions in their withdrawal from enemy fire. I was glad to serve with men who were present in this particular operation. Warrant Officer II Godwin Marumo, who was present during this skirmish, tells the story like it happened yesterday. These are the national heroes who deserve to be honoured. Another hero from this era was Private Chombo, a man who later retired as a lieutenant. He is a seasoned para-trooper who run his business in his home town of Maun.

The Rhodesians were backed by the South Africans who occupied Namibia then. After the Zimbabwean independence in 1980, trouble immersed from the west. The South Africans continued from where the Rhodesians left off. A tower and a maze of tunnels were constructed on the Namibian island and these items of military infrastructure denied BDF peace for a very long time.

Acknowledgement

This article first appeared in *Sunday Standard*, 16-22 May 2021.