

“ The Rouge Scarf ”

By Thomas O'Hare

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Synopsis:

*This timeline provides an accurate account of the events when the African Simba Rebels, supported by Russia and China, descended from the Congolese hills to reclaim their homeland. The resulting brutality called for the most extensive international civilian rescue since WWII. ‘**Operation Dragon Rouge**’ was born. The operation assembled an armada of US aircraft, Belgian Para-Commandos, mercenaries, ANC soldiers, and CIA assets. Destinies of strangers intertwine during seventy-two hours of confrontation, heartbreak, and salvation.*

The names and events depicted closely match the actual individuals and timeline. The dialogue is entirely fictitious. Timestamps are placed as accurately as possible. The manuscript is a non-fiction account of triumph and tragedy that occurred on the African continent in 1964. It remained a classified C.I.A. operation for 50 years until 2014.

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Chapter 1 – Congo Bound

[1964-11-22T03:00z] – Inbound

The pitch black sky, illuminated only by cloud-to-cloud lightning, conceals a lone aircraft approaching. The low-pitch whine of the aircraft's four turbo-prop engines increases as it navigates between rising thunderheads. The aircraft's silhouette briefly appears in the darkness during lightning flashes as it proceeds toward its secret rendezvous.

Inside, a battle-hardened veteran named *Rip Robertson* sits close to the cockpit wearing olive drab fatigues void of emblems. He has fought in numerous conflicts scattered across the globe for over twenty years. He sits separate from the group of seventeen heavily armed Cuban exiles. Several years prior, he had led these men onto the beaches of Cuba. As he stares into the distance, his head fills with visions of when he and *Grayston Lynch* led their failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs. In April of 1961, fifteen hundred expatriates stormed the Cuban beaches. Their sole purpose was to topple the Castro regime that had brutally taken power two years prior. U.S. authorities' denial of promised air and naval support doomed the operation to failure. Grayston and Rip lost too many good men because of that betrayal. The guilt he feels from that broken promise still eats away at his soul. They were dedicated patriots whose country had abandoned them. They begged for assistance from the sands they swore to liberate, only to be unmercifully slaughtered by Castro's forces.

His mind fixates on the current world situation and what could have been if not denied the promised support. The simple chain of events rolls through his mind like an endless old black-and-white newsreel. It was a straightforward operation that would have

changed the global political landscape for decades. It failed solely because of the newly installed, inept, and treacherous American political leadership at that time.

The tragic chain of events keeps spinning around inside his head:

“January 1, 1959—Castro’s revolutionaries take over Cuba from Batista—Communism gains a foothold in the Americas.”

“April 17, 1961—CIA trains and supports fifteen hundred Cuban exiles for an invasion of Cuba at the *‘Bay of Pigs’*. The last-minute withdrawal of critical air and naval support led to its failure. The result: one hundred eighteen Cuban exiles died. Four American pilots lay dead on Cuban soil. The Cuban authorities capture and hold the 1,022 survivors for twenty months.

“August 13, 1961—Construction of the wall that would divide Berlin, Germany, into Soviet East and Allied West sectors commences. The *‘Berlin Wall’* would split the city into two zones for twenty-eight years.”

“October 16, 1962—As a direct result of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the Soviet Union installed nuclear missiles in Cuba to ensure Castro and Communism remained. The *‘Cuban Missile Crisis’* lasted two weeks and became the closest the United States has ever come to nuclear war.”

“November 22, 1963—*President John F. Kennedy* is assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn in as the 36th President of the United States.”

“February 28, 1964—Thousands of Simba tribesmen, backed by the Soviet Union and Chinese Communists, descend from the hills to fight the *Congolese National Army (ANC)*. The *‘Simba Rebellion’* is underway in the Congo. Communism is gaining a foothold on the African continent.”

“August 5, 1964—The Simba Rebels capture *Michael Hoyt*, the U.S. Consul in Stanleyville, and four of his staff members, two of whom are secret CIA assets. Stanleyville has fallen to the Simba Rebels. Rebels take up to two thousand European, Canadian, and American citizens as hostages. Many of those hostages soon face execution.”

“November 22, 1964—A lone unmarked aircraft will land in the Congo with an eighteen-man CIA rescue team designated as *‘Operation Low Beam’*. Their Sole

Mission: ‘*Rescue five American consulate diplomats held hostage by African Simba rebels*’.

Rip suddenly composes himself and looks around the aircraft cargo bay. Seventeen Cuban exiles, two International Harvester 80s (IH-80s), and one Chevy pickup truck, each with a small utility trailer, make up his rescue force. They are all combat veterans ready for a fight who understand the difficulty ahead. This time, they have the full support of the powerful individuals in Washington.

The lone aircraft slowly fades into the distance while dodging thunderheads. The sounds from the storm echo while the low-pitch whine of turbo props slowly fades.

Once again, their adventurous exploits will become inscribed on the pages of history...

Chapter 2 – Wheels Down

[1964-11-22T06:00z] – Touchdown

As the African sun rises, the lone C-130 approaches a desolate airfield. Near the landing strip, two men in civilian clothes stand next to a car, and the rest of the terrain is vacant as the aircraft approaches the runway.

The aircraft lands and taxis to where two men wait. It parks with its engines at idle as the rear cargo ramp slowly opens as the sun begins to rise.

Rip Robertson (aka ‘*Carlos*’) appears in view on the aircraft ramp with a rifle slung over his shoulder and a sidearm on his hip. Dressed in rumpled fatigues devoid of markings, he scans the African landscape. He looks back inside the aircraft and shouts, “Welcome to the Congo ‘*chicos*’ (boys)!”

Rip leads the entire ensemble of seventeen heavily armed Cuban exiles, also dressed in fatigues, several yards off the ramp. The complement comprises the secret CIA ‘*Operation Low Beam*’ team. Rip signals for three men to drop their equipment and run back up the ramp. The load master supervises as two IH-80s and a Chevy pickup truck, each with trailers, exit the aircraft. All three vehicles are void of any markings. Weapons, food, and ammunition take up every available space. Both the passenger dashboard of the IH-80 and the bed of the pickup truck display a distinctive thirty-caliber heavy machine gun. The group makes their way halfway to where the two men in civilian

clothes are standing. As they walk, they lock and load their weapons to prepare for any trouble.

The aircraft closes its ramp, throttles the engines, and taxis for takeoff. While the craft makes its way to the runway, the team inspects its equipment.

As the cargo aircraft launches back into the morning sky, Rip leaves the team and walks toward the two men standing next to the car. He keeps one hand on the rifle slung over his shoulder and the other resting on his sidearm. One of the civilians makes his way to the parked car and sits in the driver's seat. The other civilian stands in place and observes Rip approaching.

In a pleasant tone, the well-dressed man announces, "Rip, I'm Larry."

Rip responds, "Good to meet you, Larry."

They both smile while extending their arms and shaking hands. He continues, "I've been in a few kinds of transports flying halfway around the world for the last three days; any changes?"

Larry answers, "Sorry to be the one to tell you this, but the playing field has changed."

With a puzzled look, Rip replies, "How's that? This is supposed to be a simple in-and-out, snatch-and-grab operation."

"Unless you want to chopper directly into a hornet's nest, we need a new plan. The entire Simba tribe has chosen to set up camp adjacent to the building where your packages should be kept." Larry replies.

Rip's face turns grim as he questions, "What now?"

In a low tone, Larry broadens his stance and explains, "You need to meet with the mercenary commander and coordinate with him. He's an Irishman referred to as '*Mad Mike*'. *Major Mike Hoare* has a mercenary unit comprised of three hundred men. They received the designation '*5-Commando ANC*'. He was a serving British major during WWII in Burma, running commando raids against the Japanese. His unit is rogue, and the major was hired by *Prime Minister Tshopo*."

"What kind of Merc unit does he command?" inquires Rip.

Larry stares bluntly and begins, “A bunch of murderous thieves. Mainly South African, Rhodesian, and Western European. On the other hand, despite his moniker, Mike is an officer and a gentleman.”

Rip looks down at the ground with concern and pauses. As he lifts his head, he says, “I’ll keep my crew separate and give the Mercs a wide berth.”

“Good idea; these are hardcore mercenaries. They will successfully complete the task. They will also ransack and loot anything not tied down. Don’t turn your back on them, not even for a second.” Larry explains.

Rip counters, “Will do.”

They both turn and survey the area while absorbing what has just transpired. This gives them time to comprehend the conversation and consider their options.

After a few moments, Larry looks at Rip with a determined look and continues, “One more item I need to mention. ‘*Che Guevara*’ is leading a hundred Cuban fighters here in the Congo. Be careful; other Spanish-speaking characters are also around, including some of Castro’s pilots. Remember, we have our own Cuban-exile pilots plus some ground troops in the country, so be careful what you shoot at.”

Rip tilts his head slightly as a grin slowly appears and states, “My *chicos* would love nothing more than to run into Castro’s bunch.”

Larry, his expression as icy as granite, inquires, “What about your crew? What do you have?”

Rip straightens and looks his counterpart straight in the eye. “I’ve got a top-notch crew of seventeen Bay of Pigs veterans. Some of whom spent twenty months in Fidel’s not-so-glamorous ‘*hotel*’. By the way, I’m not here; ‘*Carlos*’ is. None of the seventeen are US citizens or hold US passports—plausible deniability on US involvement. These guys absolutely despise Communists.”

“How reliable are your team members?” Larry questions.

Rip proudly throws back his shoulders, stating, “All volunteers were hand-picked. I helped train them, fought with them, and watched as their comrades died in front of them. They’re an exceptional lot.”

They both take a few seconds and survey the group of seventeen gathered not far away.

Larry looks straight at Rip and informs him, “I’ll keep this short. *Colonel Frederic Vandewalle* is in overall command of the entire ANC column and all ground operations. He calls his column ‘*L’Ommengang*’ after the annual Mardi Gras-type parade in Brussels, Belgium. Major Hoare oversees all 5-Commando ANC units and serves under Colonel Vandewalle.”

“Is the Colonel Belgian?” Rip quizzes.

“The Colonel is Belgian but technically a mercenary. He’s tight with the Belgian government and, unofficially, represents them. It’s better for everyone if a mercenary leads the ground column rather than a serving Belgian officer.”

Rip, with a grim look, utters, “Sounds familiar.”

After a short pause, Larry continues, “Tomorrow is the twenty-third; that’s when the push to Stanleyville starts. The plan calls for three hundred twenty Belgian para-commandos to parachute from five US Air Force C-130s. They jump at *zero-six-hundred hours* local time on the twenty-fourth. The LZ (Landing Zone) is a grass strip parallel to the paved runway. As the Belgians jump on the northwest side of Stanleyville, Vandewalle’s column encircles the city from the southeast with a thousand Congolese troops. 5-Commando will spearhead that column. The idea is to hit both sides simultaneously, keeping the Rebels off balance.”

“What about us?”

Larry straightens up and instructs, “You belong to 5-Commando; maintain your proximity to the Major. He has assigned you the designation ‘*5-8-Commando*’. When they reach their destination, you detach and perform your mission. From then on, you’re on your own. Keep everyone updated on your intentions and whereabouts.”

Rip looks at Larry directly and replies, “Got it.” He jots down the essential information, then asks, “Anything else we should know?”

Larry clarifies, “On the *twenty-fourth*, two B-26 aircraft will arrive low at the airport for a comprehensive inspection. They will communicate to the jump aircraft whether the operation is approved or rejected. Vandewalle is supposed to wait for the commandos to parachute in. If there is no drop, his orders are to stand down. This operation depends on surprise and coordinated attacks from two sides.”

Tilting his head slightly to one side, Rip quizzically inquires, “The term ‘*supposed to*’ sounds a little fishy. Care to elaborate?”

“The Colonel firmly believes we need to surround the city, then begin rescue operations —with or without the Belgian airborne,” Larry beams with confidence. “The noble Colonel is determined to take Stanleyville no matter what.”

“What’s the Rebel’s status?”

With an austere look, Larry answers, “An undetermined number of Simba Rebels are in and around the city. It could easily be as many as several thousand. The good news is they’re not a true fighting force. They are just a bundle of African tribesmen with guns and spears. The Belgians will total *five hundred fifty* after the aircraft land and unload the rest of their force. ANC is around *one thousand* not-so-dependable troops. 5-Commando is *three hundred* trained mercenaries.”

Rip directs his gaze directly at Larry and questions, “What’s your honest, no-BS assessment, Larry? Don’t hold back.”

Larry’s response, “I’m all for clearing Stanleyville. Eventually, we must take action. The real question is hostages. Will the Rebels run, or will they begin slaughtering them? The hostages include civilian men, women, and children of all ages.”

In a sincere tone, Rip asks, “There are supposed to be hundreds of hostages scattered throughout the city. How are we going to be able to expedite an evacuation?”

Larry’s eyes shift toward the ground. In a halfhearted tone, “More like upwards of two thousand. Once the airport’s secured, more C-130s will land. They’ll deploy four armored jeeps and three-wheeled motorized munitions carriers. As soon as they unload those aircraft, they will reload them with hostages and evacuate them.”

In a sheepish tone, Rip explains, “I like the plan, but timing is a little ‘*iffy*’. That’s a lot of ground to cover in total darkness.”

Larry shakes his head in a low tone; he mutters, “I don’t like it one bit. The column will be driving in pitch-black darkness all night. But that’s the only way to arrive at Stanleyville by *zero-six-hundred* on the *twenty-fourth*.”

“When and where do we actually link up with the column?”

Larry's reply: "The Colonel is leading a convoy of *one hundred* vehicles. It's going to be a massive move. We're talking *fifteen hundred hours*. We have scheduled our meeting for tomorrow, the twenty-third. Try linking up with them by twelve hundred hours so they can prepare an organized battle order. You will have until then to coordinate with Major Hoare and the 5-Commando. They're presently about three hundred kilometers south of Stanleyville. You need to get moving."

Rip and Larry have a parting handshake and exchange final words. "We have everything we need, and we're ready to roll, Larry."

"Good enough, Rip," Larry replies. "Get with Major Hoare A-S-A-P. I'll contact you when I hear more. Until then, be careful. *Simba*, translated from Swahili, means '*lion*'. They're savage killers. Good luck."

Rip observes Larry walking briskly to his vehicle and seating himself in the backseat. The car starts up and then speeds off as he turns and strides towards his team. Their mood has become more acceptable now that they're finally at their destination.

He makes his way over to where Juan is standing and confronts him. Juan is the only dark-skinned Cuban exile in the group; the rest are light-skinned. This scenario poses a severe dilemma for Rip, and he needs to engage it immediately. Lighthearted humor seems the best course of action to handle this situation.

Nonchalantly, Rip strikes up a small conversation: "Juan, on the flight over here, it occurred to me you're the only '*Negro Cubano*' (Black Cuban) in the crew. It also occurred to me that all Simba Rebels are of a similar tone. Nothing personal, as you know; I only have the highest respect for you."

Juan replies with a broad smile, "No offense taken. I will add that your observational skills are of the highest caliber today. What is the purpose of this conversation?"

Rip sheepishly starts, "Dark-skinned Simba Rebels will try to kill us every chance they get. I don't think anyone will inquire whether you're a *Negro Cubano* or a Simba Rebel before they take action."

Juan, wearing a broad smile, relishes the opportunity to have some fun with Rip. He fully utilizes the opportunity, enjoying himself. "'*Si Senor*' (Yes Sir)! I have taken this subject matter, of which you speak, very seriously. Since it could lead to my early demise, it has become the focus of my attention."

In a lighthearted reply, Rip asks, “So, if I may, have you come up with an amicable solution to defuse this dilemma?”

Juan beams with delight. “My dear ‘*camarada*’ (comrade), I have indeed done so!” He pulls a sizable *red scarf* from his inside pocket, tying it firmly around his neck. The scarf is big and colorful enough to be noticeable from a distance. While smiling, he looks directly at Rip to gauge his reaction.

Sarcastically, Rip says, “I’ve seen Red-throated Loons back in the States. I’ve also witnessed Red-throated wild turkeys. But a Red-throated ‘*Cubano*’ is a completely new species to me.”

“As long as that fine species does not become extinct, that’s all that matters to me.” Juan chuckles.

The entire team breaks out in laughter while trading looks with each other. The camaraderie and morale of the group are obviously high.

Rip turns to address the rest of his men. In a booming voice, “OK *chicos*. Let’s find a place to billet and get a guard posted. Then it’s equipment check; let’s go! We have a very tough few days ahead of us. Get some sleep, as you may not get another chance for quite a while.”

Andres, who is in a celebratory mood, announces, “Let us get a photo of the ‘*loca Cubanas*’ (crazy Cubans) before we deal with Fidel’s ‘*cerdos*’ (pigs)!”

Rip responds in agreement, “Go ahead and take a snapshot. You guys need something to show your grand-kids one day.”

Jorge grinned and chuckled, “Wait a minute, I must mark this special day.” He runs to one of the IH-80s, reaches into the back, and pulls out an umbrella. He then runs back to the group and opens it.

Jorge playfully shouts, “‘*Amigos*’ (friends)! What is today’s date?”

Jose shouts out, “*November 22nd, 1964!*”

The team roars in laughter. One of the men takes the picture with the black umbrella fully open. This one photo will stir controversy for years to come.

End of Preview: The Rouge Scarf

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