

Excerpts from *The Last Bature*, by K C Ryeland
A policeman's tale set in 1960s post-colonial West Africa

Chapter VII: Blood and Guts

....The police Land-Rover approached the military checkpoint on the way out of Mokuba Township and Mike Stevens slowed the vehicle. Normally, the military would simply wave police vehicles through without them having to stop, but on this occasion the soldier on duty held up his hand in a clear signal to stop.

“What the hell is wrong with this bloke?” said Mike, to no one in particular.

“He is just a boy, sir,” said Bello. “It is probably his first time on roadblock duty.”

Mike brought the Land-Rover to a halt and the soldier walked to the driver's side with a smile plastered all over his face. However, when he saw that a white man was sitting in the driver's seat, his lips fell apart and he emitted two sharp sounds from his mouth.

“Ah! Ah! You go be policeman, sa,” cried the young soldier, staring at Mike's tunic top.

Mike, now quite used to such reactions from young Nibanans, unaccustomed to seeing white men in police uniform, simply said, “Why have you stopped us, Private? You can see we are police officers on official business.”

“Sorry, sa, I never sabby¹ master him dey for motor. I tink say na Nibana man him dey for motor,” said the soldier, in his quaint pidgin English.

“Yes, I dare say you weren't expecting to see a white man in a police uniform. You were expecting there to be only Nibanan policemen inside, weren't you? But what plans had you in mind if I had not been here, I wonder?” said Mike, brusquely.

It is probable that the soldier only understood a quarter of what Mike said because he looked blankly at Inspector Akure sitting in the passenger seat and said, “I never sabby what dissy master him go talk me.”

Bello, well aware of what the soldier was up to, replied in the Usmar language, “Then you had better let us go pretty quickly before this *bature* calls your barracks on our radio and reports you for harassing the police.”

The soldier became quite agitated and said, “OK, sa, make you go now, now, sa. Bye-bye, tank you, sa.”

“Bye-bye,” said Mike, mimicking the soldier, as he let the clutch out and roared off as fast as he could.

“Bloody little bastard, he was after dash² or cigarettes, wasn't he?” said Mike as he slowed the vehicle to a more comfortable pace.

“Yes, something like that,” said Bello, resignedly. “Since the army took control of the country these soldiers have become bolder and bolder by the month. They would never have dared to stop us three months ago, sir. It was only because you were in the vehicle that he let us go without asking for something, despite me being an inspector.”

“Yes, and it's going to get worse,” said Mike, with a sigh. “Though it's a good job he didn't realise that our radio is only tuned to police frequencies, eh, Bello.”

“Oh, yes, I had forgotten that you speak Usmar, sir, It is just as well I did not say anything derogatory about you, sir,” the smile on Bello's face indicating the joke.

¹ Understand/know.

² A bribe, but it can also mean a gratuity.

Mike Stevens laughed and said, "Yes, Bello you have to be careful what you say in that lingo of yours when I'm around. Though, as you know, my Usmar is of the kitchen variety. Good only for greetings, farewells and ordering beer and food."

"Yes, sir," said Bello, still smiling broadly.

They made good progress despite the terrible road conditions and just as Mike Stevens was assuring himself they would arrive at Yula well before dark, he spotted a problem in the distance.

The long straight section of road enabled Mike to see quite a way ahead, but what he saw did not inspire him. It looked as though vehicles were blocking the carriageway, or rather the debris of vehicles; large trucks or mammy-wagons by the look of things. As they drew closer the three police officers realised they were going to face further delay.

There had been a head-on collision between two trucks, but there was also a mammy-wagon involved and the carnage was enormous. Apart from the distorted remains of the steel cabs and chassis, and the smashed remnants of the ubiquitous wooden bodies that were fitted to all indigenously operated trucks and buses in Nibana, the road was littered with market produce and personal belongings. There was something else littering the road too; human bodies, dozens of them, lying in grotesque forms, many covered in blood. Some of the bodies were so badly mutilated they were beyond recognition; others were simply lying there as though sleeping. There were other people who had escaped injury altogether and they occupied themselves in trying to comfort the more seriously injured, but with no medical knowledge or equipment they could do little to help.

Mike pulled to the side of the road and instructed Bello to get on the radio to the local police post and ask them to arrange for the nearest hospital to send ambulances, doctors and equipment. He and Constable Rufai then approached the scene with trepidation.

Almost immediately, the people who had escaped injury began wailing and screaming at the two policemen, imploring them to do something about the seriously injured people lying in the road. With no equipment other than the first-aid box carried by all police vehicles, Mike decided that the best he could do was to assure the hapless survivors that he had requested help from the nearest police post. This seemed to calm them somewhat and Mike began the grim task of determining how many of the victims were actually alive. He began to examine the bodies lying in the road and, after a few moments, instructed the constable to do the same.

The majority of the passengers in the mammy-wagon had been women and children, and it sickened Mike Stevens to see the extent of the slaughter around him. Some were lying still and some were moaning, others were screaming in pain. Clearly, when the medics turned up, these were the people needing attention first. As Mike tried to sort some kind of priority list by writing numbers on pages torn from his notebook and placing them on the victim's bodies where the medics would see them, the uninjured passengers began protesting at some of Mike's decisions. The constant panicky chatter from these people began to irritate him and Mike ordered them to sit at the side of the road and be quiet. He was more than aware that he may be making wrong decisions, but he felt he had to do something so not to waste the medic's time.

Mike had counted fifty-four people at the scene. The two truck drivers were dead in their cabs along with six others who had obviously been passengers in both trucks, their mangled bodies hanging in grotesque poses amongst the distorted metal and therefore Mike wasted no further time on them.

From the way in which the vehicles had ended up in the road, it was clear the mammy-wagon had tried to overtake one of the trucks, but couldn't make it before the other truck, approaching from the opposite direction, hit both the mammy-wagon and the truck it was

overtaking. It was the old, old story, Mike had seen the result of reckless overtaking many times before, and he shook his head in sadness at the waste of life and the stupidity of it all....

Chapter XVI: Dirty Tricks

....The British high commissioner sat at his desk in the High Commission building in Laguna waiting for the first secretary commercial to come to his office. When, at last, the man appeared, the high commissioner stood up and said, "Where the hell is your bloody agent, Charles? He should have been in contact by now."

The first secretary commercial looked at his shoes before mumbling something quite incomprehensible to the high commissioner.

"What did you say?" cried the high commissioner, sorely irritated by whole situation.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I've heard nothing from Mohammed Bouari since we decided he should recruit that white policeman from the north to assist him recover the weapon," replied the first secretary.

"When did you say these damn Yubas are going to launch their coup? Tonight? You do realise that our plan could backfire on us if the Yubas are successful in their attempt to take over Nibana. That dining room steward you so carefully nurtured, and who now has possession of the device, is a Yuba. What are you going to do, Charles, if he decides to hand it over to the Yuba military after the coup? Worse still, what if he gives it to the French or actually hands it back to the Russians and the North Koreans? We'll never get our hands on the technology then, Charles. That's assuming we need the technology. I've yet to hear from those damn fools in London," said the high commissioner, despondently.

"Well, sir, I could send more agents out there, but I don't want them tripping over each other. I'm confident that Bouari and Stevens, that's the white policeman, sir, will come through for us," said the first secretary, in a hopeful tone.

"Can we really trust that Bouari fellow, Charles? After all, he is a Lebanese national and he's a Muslim too. How long have you known him?" queried the high commissioner.

"Sir, I can vouch for him. He has served us loyally for a long time. I have no reason to think he would double-cross us now, sir."

"Very well, Charles. I shall leave it with you, but God help you if this goes sour."

With that, the high commissioner dismissed his first secretary commercial with a slight wave of the hand.

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Nissi Offiong paced his office in utter frustration and continually cursed Major Etuk for not getting in touch, as specifically instructed, just as soon as he'd completed his mission to plant the nuclear device at the Western Police College in Ndabi.

Despite being in a foul temper, Nissi suddenly had a brilliant idea and reached for the handset of the red telephone on his desk. Thirty minutes later, he called for his ADC and barked a string of orders at the frightened man.

Later that evening, Lieutenant Memeka stood to attention in the governor's private sitting room, having rushed to Ugune from the mine on receiving the urgent summons from the governor's ADC.

"Lieutenant, I understand you work closely with Major Etuk, not so?" began the governor in a relaxed, casual tone.

“Yes, sir, I work very closely with the major, but I have not seen him for a day or two. Is he here in Ugune, sir?” replied the lieutenant, nervously.

“Do not question me, Lieutenant, or you will be severely punished. You are here to answer my questions. Do you understand? Now listen carefully. When was the last time you saw the major? Think before you answer, Lieutenant,” said the governor in a menacing tone.

The lieutenant began to panic as he tried to remember when he had last seen the major.

“Sorry, sir, but I think I last saw him two days ago when I drove him from the mine to see you here in Ugune, sir. When he had finished here, I drove him back to the rest house in Yula where he dismissed me and I have not seen him since, sir.”

Memeka noticed the suspicious look on the governor’s face and he decided to add more to his story in a desperate attempt at appeasement.

“I think he spoke to one of the Koreans at the rest house, sir, because I saw the two men leave in the Land-Rover half an hour later, sir.”

The governor continued to stare menacingly at the lieutenant and Memeka became frightened again and added yet further information to his report in the hope that it would somehow please the governor.

“Sir, I think they may have gone to the mine, sir, because I watched them leave and I noticed that they took the mine track. I could see the headlights heading in that direction for quite a while, sir. I have not seen the major or the scientist since then, sir. I swear on the life of my mother, sir,” pleaded the lieutenant.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” said the governor, smiling. “I want you to find the major for me, but first you must swear allegiance to me personally. Do you understand?”

The lieutenant longed to be somewhere else, but smiled back at the governor saying, “Yes, sir, of course, sir. I am a loyal officer, sir. I will swear to you my absolute allegiance and obedience, sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant, you are very wise. Now then, when you eventually find Major Etuk, you will kill him and retrieve the property that he has stolen from me,” said the governor as he motioned for Memeka to sit down.

The governor’s previous telephone enquiries had led him to believe that Etuk was in Laguna rather than Ndabi, where he should have been. The red telephone connected directly to his close friend, the commander of the Arakan Barracks in Laguna, and he’d confirmed that Etuk had dropped off an army Land-Rover there, changed into civilian clothes and proceeded on foot to a taxi rank, struggling with a large suitcase. Suspicious of Etuk’s strange behaviour, the commander had had him followed. When the commander’s ADC, the man detailed to follow Etuk, confirmed that the major had checked into a cheap township hotel, the commander naturally assumed the major was there to meet with a girlfriend. At that point, he called off the tail and thought no more of it until the military governor had made specific enquiries.

The governor told Memeka the name of the hotel in Laguna where he could expect to find the major. He then reiterated that Memeka should kill the officer immediately, retrieve a large suitcase, contact him and await orders. The governor emphasised that Memeka should not open the suitcase under any circumstances; suggesting forcefully that the penalty for doing so would be extreme. However, not wishing to frighten his new man completely out of his wits, the governor went on to confirm that Memeka’s reward for success would be immunity from prosecution, promotion to captain and a lifetime appointment to the governor’s personal staff at Government House in Ugune.

Lieutenant Memeka smiled and said, “Yes, sir, I understand perfectly. I will leave for Laguna right away.”

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The military attaché at the Soviet Embassy paced the floor of his office smoking one cigarette after another, thinking anxiously about the North Korean nuclear weapon. He didn’t hear the gentle knock on his door the first time, but when it was repeated a little louder some seconds later, he called for his security advisor to enter.

“Comrade, you persuaded me that your plan would work, but now we have lost contact with that steward from the British High Commission whom you nurtured and moulded for many months. Just what is going on, Comrade, are you in control of your operative or not?” growled the attaché.

“Yes, Comrade Military Attaché, I am in full control. Please do not concern yourself over this stupid steward. He has simply misunderstood my very clear and concise instructions, Comrade Military Attaché. My best agent is about to make contact with him this evening, Comrade,” replied the security advisor, nervously.

The military attaché looked at his security advisor for a moment and then said very quietly, “Very well, Comrade, but if you fail us on this, you can look forward to no less than thirty years in a corrective labour camp.”

Since Stalin’s death in 1953, senior Soviet political and military figures no longer used the common and well-understood term for the harsh system of political prisoner re-education in the Soviet Union: The Gulag.

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The French military attaché stood looking out of his office window in the French Embassy on Laguna Island, almost across the street from the British High Commission and the Soviet Embassy.

“Do you think this offer is genuine or is it just a joke?” said the French ambassador as he paced the office nervously.

“Well, sir, if it is genuine we shall have the micro-nuclear technology that no other Western power possesses. If it is a joke, as you put it, well, no one will know that some Nibanan took us for fools. I can assure you of that, sir. My agent is well aware of his orders,” said the military attaché, without turning away from the window to face his ambassador.

“Very well, Pierre. Continue with your plan and deploy your agent, but do not tell me any more details about this steward from the British High Commission. I want to be able to look the British high commissioner in the eye at diplomatic parties and deny everything without feeling guilty. Just be sure to report that you have been successful when we meet for breakfast in the morning,” said the ambassador as he opened the military attaché’s door and quickly departed....

Chapter XXI: Homeward Bound

Mike Stevens and the others on the police launch watched in silence as the Israeli submarine slowly slipped below the waves leaving a trail of turbulence, bubbles and foam for dozens of yards. When the disturbance on the surface of the sea had subsided, it was as though the submarine had never been there.

“Well, sir, what do we do now?” said Bello, breaking the silence that had enveloped everyone on the launch.

“We go home, Bello, that’s what we do,” said Mike, resignedly.

“Am I imagining things or did Chief Superintendent Bouari steal that device from us, sir?” queried Bello.

“Yes, he did Bello. I can’t condone what he did, but at least it’s gone to a nation with some sense of morality, whose people understand the meaning of suffering and oppression. This, I hope, means they will use the technology to prevent war rather than encourage it. Perhaps Israel’s acquisition of nuclear weapons will stop the surrounding Arab nations from constantly attacking them. Who knows, it may actually lead to peace in the Middle East. Wouldn’t that be something, Bello?” replied Mike Stevens, hoping Bello would understand his stance on the matter.

“Yes sir, that would be a wonderful thing, but I do not think it will happen,” said Bello, quietly.

Mike realised that Bello, a Muslim, found it difficult to see the Israeli point of view and so he changed the subject entirely.

“OK, let’s make straight for the coast, turn left and follow it along until we reach Laguna. We must return this launch and explain what has happened,” said Mike, addressing everyone.

Mike worked out a course and the constable, now quite a proficient helmsman, volunteered to steer the launch.

Within twenty minutes, they could see a thin black line on the northern horizon, indicating that the coast of Nibana was about two and a half miles away.

Only when a klaxon sounded did the occupants of the launch realise there was a US guided missile frigate closing on them from behind. Five minutes later a loud whooping sound drew their eyes to the left side of the launch where a Royal Navy destroyer was running alongside at a distance of about two hundred yards.

“What the hell is going on here? I should have detailed someone to watch the damn radar screen,” said Mike, more to himself than to anyone else. “Bello, we had better stop and see what these chaps want. Though I suspect they are looking for the device.”

Bello instructed the constable to close the throttles and they waited for the frigate and the destroyer to stop and send crewmen in outboard-powered inflatables.

The American inflatable arrived first with an officer and four armed marines. Minutes later, the Royal Navy inflatable turned up with an officer and two armed sailors.

“I am Lieutenant Ford from the USS *England* and I demand to search this launch, stand aside while we board.”

“I am Lieutenant Jackson from HMS *Cavalier*; we would like to question you regarding a certain device. May we come aboard?”

The inflatables had approached the launch from either side and were now lying alongside bobbing on the waves with the two officers trying to assert themselves, but in very different ways.

“Now just hold on a moment, sailor-boys. This is a Nibana police launch and I am SDPO Mike Stevens, a senior Nibana police officer. We are heading back to Laguna in the course of our duty and, if I am not mistaken, we are now well within Nibanan territorial waters. You have no right to board or question us without my express permission. Now then, how do you want to play this one, gentlemen? Sensibly or strictly by the book?” said Mike, smiling at the two lieutenants in turn as he waved his warrant card at them.

The two naval officers looked at each other across the width of the launch and shrugged before nodding their heads in agreement.

“Welcome aboard, Lieutenants, how can I help you?” said Mike, smiling again.

After scrambling aboard the police launch, the naval officers told Mike they had already intercepted the *Kruger*, albeit individually, and found nothing. However, when Captain De Jager told each of them the device had been stolen by some 'pirates' in a large launch, adding that the pirates had also kidnapped the bulk of his African crew, the Americans and the British, consulting on their ship's radios, decided to join forces in an attempt to search out the miscreants.

Mike began to explain what had actually happened aboard the *Kruger*, asking the naval officers whether the crewmen from the freighter looked and behaved as though they had been the victims of a kidnapping. When the two officers conceded there had been no kidnap attempt, Mike went on to explain that Bouari had hijacked the weapon and boarded an Israeli submarine. As soon as they heard this piece of news, the naval officers became very agitated, demanding to know when and where this had occurred, and which direction the submarine had taken.

Mike gave them his best estimate of the time that had elapsed since Bouari took off and showed them the rendezvous position Bouari had marked on the chart, but he could not enlighten them regarding the direction the submarine had taken.

"It just submerged. It could have gone anywhere once it was under the water, but don't you chaps have submarine detection devices on your ships?" said Mike, expecting a positive reply.

Both naval officers nodded, but confirmed that making contact could be difficult in a large area of ocean such as the Bight of Laguna.

"We could grid-search this area for weeks and never detect the sub, so I must get back to my ship and report to my captain," said the American.

"I would put my money on the Israelis taking the short way home via Gibraltar," began the Royal Navy officer. "They could go the long way around the Cape and then through the Suez Canal, of course. The canal has no lock gates and is forty-six feet deep, so an ex-British 'S' class sub, which is what the Israelis have, in theory, could pass through submerged, but it would be very difficult for them with all the surface traffic. Furthermore, the Egyptians manage the canal and so the Israelis would have no chance of getting through legitimately or by stealth in my view. The only thing I can do is report back to my captain and he may ask the Admiralty what they want us to do."

"Sorry I can't be more helpful, gentlemen," said Mike, apologetically.

"That's fine, sir, but I have one last request. Do you mind if we search the launch? We have to be sure, you understand," said the American.

The Royal Navy officer nodded agreement with his American counterpart and Mike, realising they had their duties to perform, relented and said, "OK, but don't break anything, it's not my launch."

When they came upon the gun-locker, the British officer asked Mike for the key to the padlock. Mike informed him that Bouari had taken it, and the officer indicated it would be necessary to force the lock. Mike shrugged his shoulders and the British officer called to one of his sailors in the inflatable. Seconds later the sailor produced a bayonet and handed it to the officer.

Five minutes later, with the lock duly prised open and the locker emptied of its contents, the naval officers thanked Mike and his colleagues, made absolutely no comment regarding the array of Sten guns, rifles and revolvers lying on the deck, saluted smartly and re-boarded their inflatables. Within minutes, the naval visitors had reached their respective ships and the police launch resumed its journey to Laguna.

It took quite while to find the creek that would lead them to the first secretary's house where they had originally collected the launch some twelve hours ago. It was beginning to get dark and Mike was relieved when he recognised the landing stage and, as they came closer, the outline of the large, white bungalow where the first secretary lived. Having to locate the landing stage in the pitch black of night would have required the use of one of the several spot lamps attached to the top of the cabin. Naturally, Mike would have been reluctant to do this because of the curfew, still in force until sun-up in twelve hour's time.

The nightwatchman helped to secure the launch and Mike went up to the house to speak with the first secretary, whilst the rest of the group waited patiently on the landing stage.

The first secretary nearly had a seizure when Mike told him that Bouari had been a Mossad agent all along and had hijacked the device for Israel before making his getaway in an Israeli submarine.

The demoralised man simply sat at his kitchen table staring out of the window at the shadowy outline of the launch, now moored securely at the jetty, wondering what the high commissioner would have to say when he broke the news to him in the morning....