

FLYING RANGER PATROLS CONGO'S GARAMBA PARK

It all started at Nairobi's Wilson airport one morning, when I was getting my Cessna 206 ready to fly up to northern Kenya. I ran into a French pilot who seemed to have trouble making himself understood in English. He needed some technical document translating, and even though I was pressed for time and French, I gave him a few minutes.

And what a surprise this document was: it was about importing a microlite aircraft, a Tetras, to the DRC via Kenya. Bingo! All at once and from then on Stéphane, the pilot, has been my friend.

"So what are you doing with a microlite in the Congo?" I asked. You would have too. Why take such a tiny but beautiful and powerful little piece of machinery into one of the world's hot spots?

"I've been based in Garamba for three years. We need a microlite for aerial surveillance and we are also looking for a Cessna 206 because our Cessna 182 was damaged on landing," he replied.

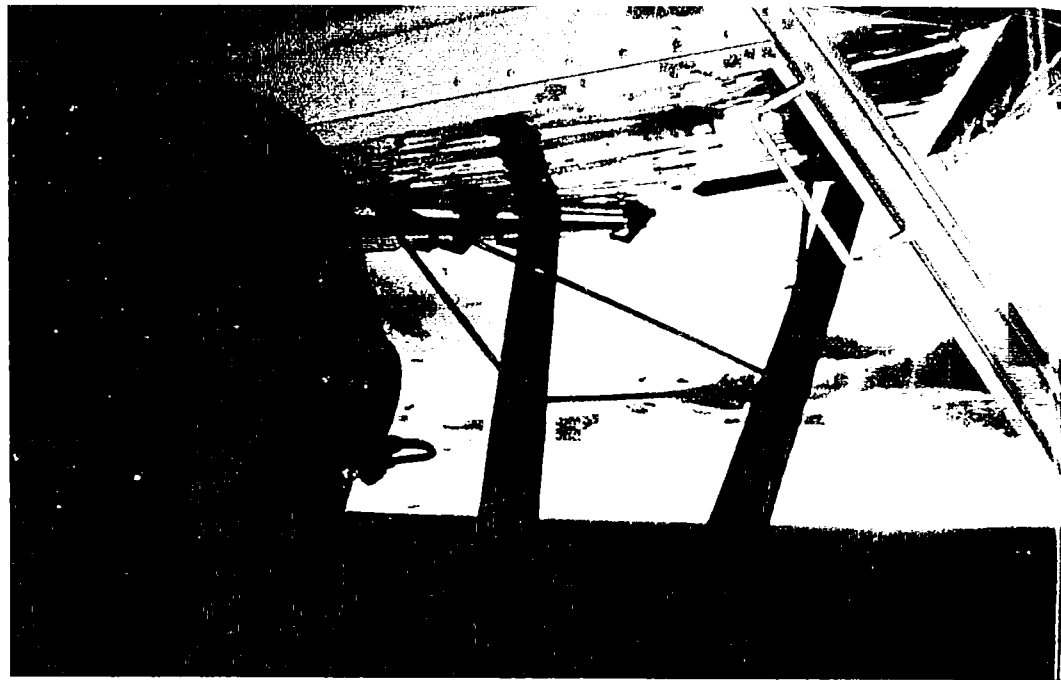
So we swapped addresses, certain that we would meet again.

A few months later Stéphane got in touch. He needed a stand-in pilot after a non-stop stay in the bush for more than a year. And to find, at a stroke, a French-speaking pilot who knew microlites and the Cessna 206 was no everyday occurrence in this part of the world. I was on my way.

Garamba has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1980. It's known by all those who care about habitat and wildlife. But where is it exactly?

I got out the map. It's in the northeast corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo on the border with Sudan. It's a fabulous National Park surrounded by three so-called "hunting areas" – Azande in the west, Gangala na Bodio in the south and Mondo Missa to the East. The land surface is 12,427 Km², comprising 4,900 Km² of park. It was established in 1938 by Belgian Royal decree and was one of Africa's first National Parks. As early as 1920 Gangala na Bodio was one of the first places where elephants were domesticated. Yes, that's right. It's not just in Asia that elephants were trained and used by humans. There were about 200 of them. Up until 1990 four of them were still used in the tourism trade. Today one called Kekyo is the sole survivor of that era.

The unique feature of this great ecosystem is the fact that the south-



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ern part of the park is one immense savannah with grasses up to three metres high, a fragile balance maintained by the presence of elephant and regular enormous bush fires during the dry season. It contrasts sharply with the forest gallery along the river Dongo. The sublime Garamba river crosses the savannah plains creating mosaics of forested areas, and marshes populated by a wealth of birds.

Further north several rebel groups or unscrupulous bandit bands have taken refuge for several years. They have decimated the elephant population – amongst other species – breaking the fragile fire-rain-elephant cycle. This region is covered now with a mixture of trees both dryland and marshy. It withstands the presence of herbivores easily but is a perfect hide-away for poachers and rebels. Since 2005 the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony, whose trademark is the abduction and press-ganging of children into bloody insurgent activity, has been living there. The LRA is by far the worst of all the threats to Garamba. All of this contrasts sharply to the so-called "hunting areas" which are covered in thick forest and bush.

Think what an emergency landing in such an area might be like.

Stéphane, a solo pilot without equal, living far from everything for three years or more, has lived some incredible adventures. Unforgettable stuff. I hope he writes a book soon. To become an old pilot in this sort of terrain means, more than anywhere else in the world, being meticulous and strict just to survive.

To stand in for him for two months looked no easy task. Especially in the rainy season. Luckily we had a handover of a few days to exchange tips. When I left him at Aru for his departure, I felt really alone. The Congo's road network is, well, catastrophic. Pilots have a key role. For logistics and supplies they use the Cessna. For patrolling the park and general security they use the Zenair 701 microlite. Aircraft have to be used to bring in fresh supplies to maintain the morale of park staff. This does not include the 25kg bags of dried fish with knife-edge dorsal fins and a nauseating smell. They don't do much for the good humour of the pilots.

African Parks has the difficult job of managing Garamba since November 15, 2005, with its government partner, the Congo Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN). Luis, a Spaniard, is the on-site manager.

He does not waste his time with pointless words. He is a microlite pilot and never contests or negotiates a decision to ban or suspend flights because of security concerns, as often happens, above all because of the violent weather over a virgin forest of several thousand square kilometers. It's something I really appreciated. One other big problem is the proximity of the LRA, making flights in the north of the park extremely risky. Maybe one day Stéphane will write the story of how he and his plane were "set on line of fire." That's not my story to tell.

The rangers on the ground – the people out of the limelight – take the biggest risks living for weeks at a time in difficult conditions. I raise my hat to them. A flying machine is of great importance to them. A few minutes airborne can be worth days in the middle of the rain forest. They risk their lives in "contacts" with poachers and rebels alike.

African Parks last September organised a meeting between the ICCN and their colleagues from southern Sudan at Nagero. It was a first. The aim was cross-border cooperation to improve security over the whole area and dislodging the LRA.

In the first of many hairy flights for me, there was one day, returning from Bunia, when I lost countless hours battling administrative red tape such as how to pay departure taxes or fighting off nine people who wanted to board a six-seater plane. On the way back I saw the foreground full of thunder clouds. It was the same behind too. Huge black clouds. The only solution was to carry on to Nagero, at least there are no hills there and as long as you don't drop below 3,000 feet you can't run into anything. The stroboscope, which locates lightning, was lit up like a discotheque on a Saturday night. Flying was a nightmare. It was too high to fly over the storm. Too violent to fly through it. And underneath it was a black curtain of rain even more dense than the virgin forest. Zero visibility. Rain splattered the windscreen in constellations. The only thing to do was to check right and left. I saw a blue patch to my left between two towers of black. I told my passengers to tighten their seat belts, visualised my route, and took a deep breath repeating to myself "relax, relax, relax."

The great cloudy jaws were closer now and seemed to close on me. We felt like we were in a washing machine. The vertical speed indicator was going up and down like a yo-yo. (My heart was tight like a fist.)



And then, so suddenly it was a shock, it went calm. There was a deep grey cotton wool outside. And it started to snow – inside the plane! I glanced round at my passengers who were disastrously quiet. The snowflakes were coming in through the air vents. I was scared

of icing the aircraft's leading hedge. And then there was a strong bump, we went quickly into free fall and there it was, blue sky. We were out of it.

Garamba was best known for its rhinos. One of the main missions of aerial surveillance is to see if any of this endangered species have survived. Pessimists – and there are many – say there are none left. But given the sheer size of the park, the plant cover and ability of the rhino to adapt to their habitat, I was convinced there were still some survivors out there. But for two years there had been no sightings. So I spent a lot of time looking for them, not a bad way of spending the time if, like me, you like flying with a capital "F". Low altitude, slow flying, windows open over a breathtaking landscape and all this in the best hours of the day.

Aerial surveillance also allows us to check up on community projects African Parks set up. It's one of the main plans of the management and protection of park management. For example, the 23Km of what remains of the road between Nagero and Faraje are being rebuilt by using and training local people. This also allows us to build close relationships and exchange information, especially concerning the movement of rhinos and, in time, to develop tourism. This park has so much potential to offer.

The management of the park is visionary, the construction of a 10-bed lodge is under way as well as the repair of landing strips and access roads into the park: to fly over such environmental wealth is a real privilege. Even the management of ICCN is working on an immigration model that will make the tourists' lives easier. But a recent attack by the LRA, which exacted a heavy toll in lives and equipment, including the two microlites, has forced a temporary re-think of management plans. Once again aircraft will play a key role. The park management adapted very quickly to the new circumstances and have drawn up a list of priorities. Stéphane has gone back to Europe to buy a new Zenair ultralight.

So Stéphane, while waiting for your new wings, please pick up a pen and write us your stories. ☺

– Alexis Pottier