

Kolwezi, Zaire

19-20 May 1978

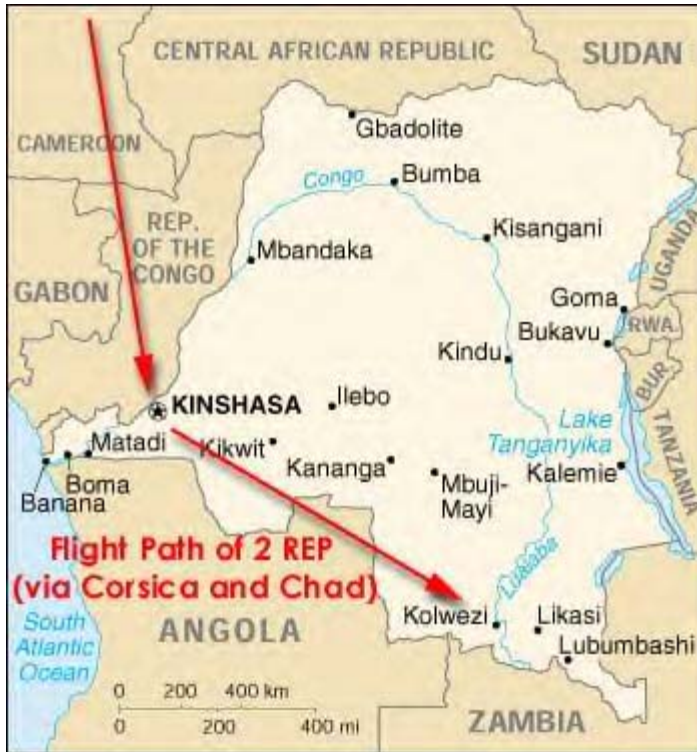
The 2nd French Foreign Legion Parachute Regiment (2 REP) is an elite unit par excellence, combining as it does the qualities of two elite corps: Foreign Legionnaires and paratroopers. As such, it was well equipped to deal with the crisis that occurred in Shaba Province in south Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of Congo) in May 1978.

The city of Kolwezi is on the Benguela Railway which links it to the port of Lobito, Angola, near Benguela. Kolwezi is the center of a major copper- and cobalt-mining area; uranium, radium, oxide ores, and lime deposits also occur. In the city are plants in which copper and cobalt ores are concentrated; the ores are then shipped by rail to Likasi, to the east, for processing. Kolwezi is also the trade center for the surrounding agricultural area.

Shaba Province, under the name of Katanga, had attempted to break away from the newly independent Congo in 1960. Though the breakaway movement had been defeated, relations between the province and the central government remained poor, and sporadic fighting continued. In 1978, the province was invaded by separatist rebels who took over the town of Kolwezi. Kolwezi was inhabited by over 3,000 Europeans, mainly mining experts and their families, who were regarded as potential hostages by Major Mufu and his 4,000 separatist 'Tigers'.

A drop of Zairean paratroopers into the town on 16 May was a fiasco. The Zairean leader, President Mobutu, had discussed the affair with his French counterpart to arrange foreign intervention if necessary; it was now very necessary.

Colonel Philippe Erulin's 2 REP was put on standby. The first elements to leave were 1, 2 and 3 Companies, and part of the HQ Company, in five DC-8 aircraft on the night of 17/18 May. The Support and 4 Company would follow later. Flying to Kinshasa, the Legionnaires were packed into four C-130s and one Transall aircraft for the drop: 500 paras in very cramped conditions.



Map of the flight

route taken by the first wave of 2 REP paras.

It was broad daylight when the paras landed near Kolwezi, but fortunately the Tigers were caught off guard. A command post was quickly established and the men began to regroup. Even before all the paras had landed, the first groups fanned out and advanced to their objectives. Although the Tigers outnumbered the paras, their discipline and morale had crumbled. Resistance did stiffen, but nothing could halt the ruthless momentum of the attack. As Legionnaires cleared large parts of the town, white settlers began to emerge from cover, most of them hungry, thirsty, and suffering from shock. Tragically, those held in the Impala Hotel were killed before the Legionnaires reached them.

Within two hours of the initial jump, the Legionnaires were in almost complete control of the town. A second wave of aircraft carrying 4 Company, Support Company and the rest of HQ Company was ordered by Colonel Erulin to fly on to Lubumbashi to avoid a night drop. Meanwhile on the ground the Legionnaires continued to patrol and engage the enemy, killing many Tigers and suffering only six casualties.

The second wave dropped in during the early hours of 20 May, but there was little overall fighting until the afternoon, when 4 Company ran into heavy resistance near Metal Shaba. The Tigers mounted an attack, but were stopped by Support Company's 81mm mortars and 89mm anti-tank rockets. The Tigers fled, leaving 80 dead. This was the last major action at Kolwezi, the paras then conducted mopping-up

operations. For the men of 2 REP, the operation confirmed their status as elite soldiers.

(Much of the information above was derived from Peter Darman's book 'Surprise Attack')