

For Peace

COLONEL ANDRÉS LEAL, URUGUAYAN AIR FORCE



Involved in a long-standing conflict operating at the service of the United Nations (UN) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), collaborating with an international intervention brigade combating rebel groups, the small but efficient contingent of Bell 212¹ aircraft from the Uruguayan Air Force (FAU) encountered an unusual situation in response to the protection of human life. Attacked from the ground by rebel forces, they were able to resolve the difficulties and managed to escape. In this article, the Commander of the aircraft involved describes professional and human lessons learned, as well as the ambiguous feelings of a risky and vocational profession.

Our country has a great diplomatic tradition, always respectful and defensive of international rights, the free determination of the local populations, and the peaceful solution of conflicts. Thus, in the fortunate absence of regional war conflicts, fruit of a great and fraternal neighborhood and with the exception of internal conflicts in the past years, on rare occasions have our forces experienced the deadly situations of an armed international conflict or attacks on our members or materiel by enemy forces. However, to maintain preparedness for the defense of the nation's interests and the protection of our population, we train and are committed to achieve maximum advantage of our capabilities. The majority of us

military aviators spend our careers without having experienced the disgraceful events of an armed conflict and its consequences.

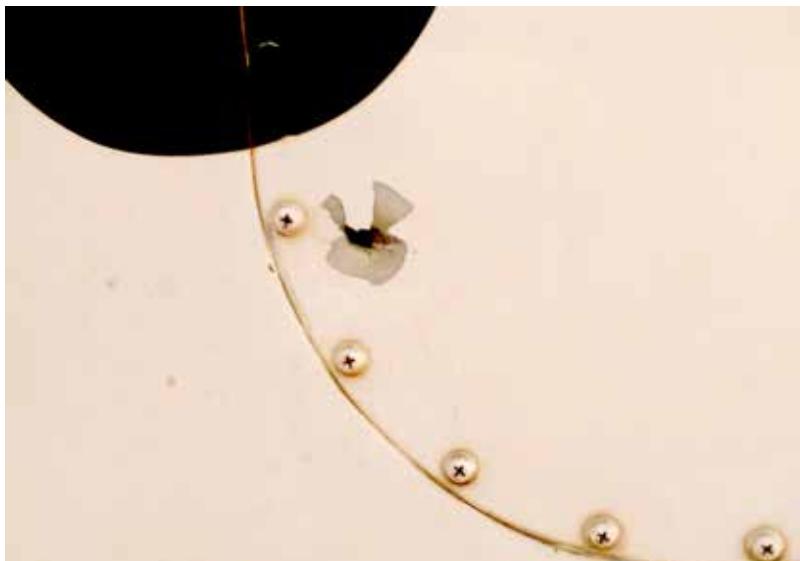


Figure 1. Chopper fuselage shot

Source: Author

In this global environment and as an additional tool of our foreign policy, we collaborate in support of UN's international commitment to maintain peace in regions where the lack of peace makes intervention necessary, while incorporating the directives issued by our regulations and State mandates. Recognized in the international community as strong, efficient and effective defenders of civilian population, many of our military personnel have deployed in the most dangerous areas of the world and have protected human lives, even at the risk of their own—the greatest sacrifice.

Our military has demonstrated an international example of commitment, generosity and professionalism in support of multiple missions. These have included protecting villages, medical support, armed escorts, oversight of national elections, infinite medical and airborne medical evacuations, the protection of civilian and military personnel, diplomats and officials of varied organizations/nationalities and so forth. This has been achieved by a varying number of assets, at the battalion or smaller air or naval contingent levels, using the equipment our Armed Forces our country operates, in the most varied climates, with 24/7 availability and great deployment capability. So, are we really prepared to take on the risks implicated in

this commitment to world peace? Are we clear about what that risk implies, individually and collectively?

What are we doing there?

The conflicts in the DRC date back over a long period, with different causes, protagonists, and solutions. Under the mandate of the UN, our forces have been present for many years to guarantee the peace is kept and the civilians protected in that country, with simultaneous deployment of various units. One that remains in service after 10 years is the Uruguayan Aviation Unit (Uruavu), which deployed a small contingent to the city of Bukavu, in the northeast of this enormous country, in the province of South Kivu and the area of the Great Lakes, together with two Bell 212 helicopters in March of 2010. Those small but indefatigable helicopters have achieved what better and more modern aircraft may not have accomplished: a continuity and multiplicity of operations and great recognition of the actions that, together with their crews, have accomplished in support of the international, civilian and military organizations that operate in the zone—with such humility that many times went undetected. Since 2003, they have participated in the Mission of the UN Organization in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE)², and have been present in the disputed border zone. There they provided protection and emergency health medical evacuation of UN members who found themselves exposed while deployed in the temporary security zone imposed by the parties and custodians of the ceasefire. The experience and great professionalism of the crews, technicians and support personnel, as well as the reliability and security of the aircraft made the UN ask them to return to perform similar tasks in the DRC.

Thus, the characteristic sound of the Bell 212 returned to African soil in support of peacekeeping in one of the most dangerous areas of the world. A land destroyed by wars, earthquakes, active volcanos and illnesses, but with beauty, in its people and landscapes, and rarely encountered traditions and mysticism. A population that, while suffering and sacrificing, was always prepared to collaborate with whomever offers help to save their country from abandonment, poverty and social vulnerability. All types of missions were flown: medical evacuations (MEDEVACS)³, casualties (CASEVACS),⁴ transport of troops, munitions, food supplies, medicines, Very Important People (VIP) to include Electoral Committee personnel, national election votes, as well as observation and recognizance, flying experts over active volcanos to detect risk of eruption, providing armed escort for civilian aircraft. These missions included working with international organizations such as Doctors without Borders and the International Red Cross, among others.

At War

If the Congo's conflict has anything, it is the dynamism of the large diversity of the warring groups: March 23 Movement (M23), Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS), Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Resistance Army of the Lord (LRA), MaiMaiGedeon, Kata-Katanga, and many other groups. Add to dynamism the variability of its climate and territory, political and social instability, and the serious socio-economic weakness of the majority of the population. All this and more necessitated a constant change in the strategies implemented by those who tried to maintain an absence of conflict and protection of the civilian population.

Thus, in 2013, the UN needed to create and deploy an Intervention Brigade⁵ (FIB) in order to, among other mandates, neutralize and disarm groups considered a threat to the security of the State and its inhabitants. Another unit, from countries of the African Union, (South Africa, Malawi, Tanzania, etc.), in collaboration with and in support of the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC),⁶ was created with the objective of initiating a radical change cutting off the cycles of violence in the eastern zone of the country. It began operating in the area of Goma, capital of the province of North Kivu and bordering Rwanda, successfully confronting the armed group M23, which they were able to disarm and disperse, battling principally in the area of the Virunga National Park, the area of the Nyiragongo active volcano, north of Lake Kivú and south of Lake Edward.

While M23 dispersed, the FIB confronted another enemy that operated in the area north of Lake Edward, on the border with Uganda: the ADF, which protected and exploited mines for their own financing and arming, supposedly with the help of international terrorists, operating in a dense forest crossed by the dangerous raging river Semiliki, the local population's life source. Based at the airport of Mavivi, Beni, but with a large territorial deployment of thousands of members, the FIB set up a theater of operations in the zone, a triangle of variable limits every day, based on the rebels' aggressions. These aggressions took place daily and it was soon understood how dangerous this group's actions were: its bloody power, its disrespect for human life and its overt influence in the small communities in the area, all the while collaborating with groups providing them with intelligence and varied logistical support.⁷ Thus, they were able to carry out fatal attacks on members of the Brigade, in direct attacks or employing guerrilla tactics, including placement of explosives in communications installations. In clear execution of asymmetrical warfare, using children soldiers, recruiting people familiar with the area, deserters from the FARDC, and even fundamentalist foreigners, they were able to create a climate of terror, with casualties among the ci-

vilians and military. This included an attack on the Mission of Stabilization by the UN Organization in the DRC's *Company Operating Base*, on *Semiliki Bridge*, leaving 14 dead Tanzanian military personnel, 5 FARDC, and more than 50 wounded; while also leaving weak or ill women and children delaying their deployments, abandoned in the jungle.⁸

In this environment, the UN committed its blue helmet forces to support the tasks of the Brigade in the area, providing security at the airport and in the cities near the target of operations (TO). Thus, MONUSCO's air power was brought into the conflict and temporarily deployed South African and Ukrainian attack helicopters, (AH-2 Rooivalk⁹ and MI-24¹⁰ respectively), based in Goma, to provide direct air support to ground operations, as well as logistical support and troop transport provided by utilitarian helicopters (Oryx¹¹ y MI-8) of these same nationalities.

Here begins our participation in the war conflict, the subject of this story, since two of our unit's Bell 212 helicopters from our base in Bukavu were deployed to provide support. By fate, in 2014, it fell to me to participate in those first movements during my third deployment to the area. Our main mission was to provide the FIB with small aircraft, equipped and trained in rescues and MEDEVACS that could operate in nighttime conditions. At that moment, we were the only ones who had the ability to provide rapid response to the large number of deployed troops, with minimal crew¹² and without ground support personnel. Initially based at Beni's (province of North Kivú) Mavivi airport, operating out of Napal's facilities (which was in charge of the airport and other strategic points of the city and its surroundings), multiple and varied planned MEDEVACS and CASEVACS were carried out near the airport, and Goma (crossing Lake Edward from north to south), an hour and a half away.

Operating in open areas in the middle of the jungle, separated from Uganda by the majestic Rwenzori mountain, under the snowy peaks of Mount Margherita towering more than 5,000 meters (the third highest peak in Africa), our helicopter flew all kinds of humanitarian missions and provided backup for crews and personnel deployed at small bases in the TO. Occasionally, due to the requirements of the mission in other areas, it became the only transport for troops, armaments, food supplies, medicines, MEDEVACS, and CASEVACS for friendly forces. From the early morning hours, framed by the mountains and with thick fog still covering the jungle, until the evenings' storms which threatened to flood the rivers in the valleys; our crews, already familiar with the landscape, avoided all obstacles to bring security and give confidence to deployed assets—gaining the respect of FIB commanders. Little by little they were trusting us and our small aircraft, so different from the robust machines they were accustomed to working

with, to complete the mission with security and professionalism —which was our greatest aspiration. They always assigned us to missions of varied risks within and outside the combat zone.

In August of 2016, during my fourth deployment to the area, operations continued and we found ourselves in one of the most fiery and violent time periods. With many casualties among friendly troops and increased deployment of ground troops, our aircraft encountered a peak of activity in flight hours and maintenance. Without the possibility to relieve the crews on the regular basis that we preferred, our stay in the TO went beyond two weeks. Thus arrived the opportunity to transport the Force Commander (FC)¹³ of the MONUSCO Mission, a unique episode in the history of our Air Force, mission which ended in a confirmed direct attack, with damages.¹⁴

The arrival of FC in those first days of August, on a visit to the deployed troops, briefly altered our routine. As always, the versatility of our machines and crews allowed us to configure the aircraft, from transport of munitions and food supplies, MEDEVACS or CASEVACS to a configuration that, given the hierarchy of our passenger, required VIP treatment. The official liaison to the FIB commander, a Tanzanian Captain, assigned the operational order and directives for the mission, would consist of transferring the FC together with his security force and the FIB commander. The escort consisted of five elite troops of the South African Army, whom we were to transport to various ground points in two days.

The first destination, Oicha, was a few minutes from the airport, and after a wait of almost two hours, we took off toward Atokaka, destination point for the group and near one of the apexes of our triangle of operations (outside that considered medium risk due to enemy activity). A complex unleveled terrain, to the west side of a forested mountain, with few ways to approach and escape, and which, the attempt to construct a *helipad* consisted of tree trunks from the forest, which protruded up by several centimeters. However, we had the advantage of having operated there on more than one occasion to deliver food supplies for the deployed troops, since the larger helicopters were too big. We approached the point and, angling the Bell 212 with several degrees lateral inclination and lightly on the *skids*,¹⁵ in order to evade any damage that the trunks could cause, we left debarked our passengers. From there, they visited the troops and later, on foot through the forest, they would move toward Abialose, about two miles from vertex of the operations triangle, and where they would stay overnight; where we would pick them up the next day and proceed to other drop points. Abialose was an elevated place, utilized by FIB artillery and FARDC personnel, with little vegetation and very unlevel, and with wind conditions characteristic of mountainous zones. It was considered medium-high risk due to enemy activity and with few possible landing

locations since we had to approach from outside the triangle, which also made this *helipad* risky and complicated. We landed on schedule, with an MI-24 from Ukraine as an escort, which remained flying over the area in order to detect and counter possible enemies on the ground while we loaded the passengers. We already knew the Ukrainian crews and their aircraft and of course, as customary with all missions, we had held corresponding mission briefings before departure.

We were surprised when only the FIB commander boarded, but after being assured everything was in order, we proceeded towards the airport, taking off safely and fulfilling the mission as assigned. Upon disembarking we learned that the FC and his escort, together with deployed elements, had proceeded down a path through the jungle towards another encampment located in the hot zone. Our mission, in principle, had been accomplished and his return would be planned for a later time. However, that same afternoon, we were notified that they had been ambushed and were engaging with elements of the ADF in a part of the jungle known as Garlick, and that the FIB A-3 (Operations Officer) wanted to see us and the Air Ops Section of MONUSCO in Beni.

The intent was to plan and execute an evacuation mission for the FC and his escort, from the hot zone to the airport at Mavivi. Our mission charter included tasks such as this, which we had carried out in countless search and rescue operations within the TO. However, our charter excluded us from entering areas where knowledge of enemy engagement/combat operations were underway, since amongst other reasons, our aircraft had no armor nor systems to absorb impacts in fuel cells—which we pointed out and was confirmed by Air Ops. Thus, at first, we were not going to be considered for the evacuation—possibly a South African Oryx based in Goma would be deployed. It is worth noting that at those moments we were the only utility helicopter in the area and together with the MI24 Section, the only military helicopters that were deployed there. The situation seemed to worsen and get more complicated as time went by, as the possibility for the deployment of the South African aircraft dwindled for reasons unknown to us—with no other options available until the next day. Being knowledgeable of the area, we suggested the FC and escort move to a nearby point called Camp Jericho, with local forces, who were not under fire at the time. We would then more securely evacuate them since, even though we knew the general area where they were at that moment, we did not know if there was a safe place for us to be able to land, and since we had already operated in Jericho transporting food supplies, MEDEVACS and CASEVACS. Nonetheless, they informed us there was no possibility of moving and that they were preparing a landing zone while under fire.

The situation was critical, and the A-3 official and senior FIB command personnel present were worried and uncertain about the chances the troops may have,

since, as we were informed, there were at least four wounded. Considering the situation and facing the risk of losing human lives, and being the only means capable of carrying out the mission at that moment, I felt the need to suggest to our crew the possible courses of action. If our response were negative, our charter under the Letter of Agreement (LOA),¹⁶ would exempt us from of any responsibility. However, for us military personnel and rotary wing crews, there are many more obligations and pressures. The greatest pressure was self-imposed in face of the wounded combatants in the field, since our main mission was to save lives. Therefore, I made the decision to fly, escorted by the MI-24s, and assess the situation. If there was a secure landing area, we would do the evacuation, if they were able to provide us ground cover. The faces of those present changed immediately and you could see the hope they placed on us.

To complicate matters further, we were to carry only the necessary minimum of fuel for the return, with a small margin for remaining on the ground, since the situation required agility and sufficient power to operate securely in elevations and confined spaces. Upon takeoff together with the Ukrainian attack section, our thoughts went from the safety of not being attacked due to having UN emblems, to the worry that in the case of survival from an emergency landing, an incident or accident in the middle of the jungle, our chances of success would be even more difficult. The ability of our crew and the assurance that each one of us had, product of our shared training and experiences, and our will to support our comrades at risk ensured our decision never wavered as we neared the tactical flight to the area.

The Ukrainian crew members, some with recent experience in the conflict with Russia, encouraged us from their cabins with their thumbs up, giving us the confidence and assurance of the necessary mutual support. They also knew the zone, having attacked enemy positions near the point of contact in the morning, which we could confirm as we approached by the trees destroyed by the shelling. Near the location we established radio contact with the ground troops and the attack planes proceeded to fly over in order to clear the zone, detect possible enemies and, if necessary, neutralize their activities in order for us to be able to approach safely. On hearing that we could enter the area, since they had also had visual contact with the troops, we began our final stretch, flying just above the thick trees of the forest. Having located the landing zone they had been able to find, we saw that it was a very small space and that in addition the ground was covered with plastic tarpaulins that the locals utilized in drying cassava in some clearings of the forest. Unable to approach, we asked that the tarpaulins be removed, while we held a holding pattern and then reattempt to land if the dimensions of the location allowed.

The moment we turned towards the point and ascended, just before seeing the landing spot due to the heavy cover of the forest, we felt the burst of machine gun fire, simultaneously with the wind that entered through the bubble of *plexiglass* under my feet, due to it cracking, and the recognizable odor of gunpowder. The immediate reaction was to level the aircraft, add power in order to escape and then ask if anyone had been wounded. The helicopter seemed to be flying in a normal fashion, no one had been injured, although we did have lights illuminated on the faults panel. We communicated the situation by radio and began to resolve what had happened. *Master Caution* and fault lights attracted our primary attention and performed the required steps according to our checklists, with the nose already headed at the airport and gaining altitude in the eventuality that the shots had provoked a loss of fuel, since, as mentioned earlier, we had only little available to execute the mission. The attack helicopters requested the position of the enemy forces, but it was impossible for us to know where the shots came from, since the density of the jungle blocked our vision, our position had moved away from the area, and the proximity to the friendly forces impeded our determination of general zones for executing an attack.



Figure 2. Chopper windshield shot

Source: Author

Therefore, we returned to the airport, after resolving the faults and in complete silence, observing the holes that the impacts caused in the bubble only a few

centimeters from my feet. Upon landing, waiting for us were both the FIB commanders as well as the those from MONUSCO *Air Ops* after being alerted by the radio warnings, and after a moment letting the pulse return to almost normal rhythm, we verified the damage to the aircraft and considered the steps to take, since the mission had not been successfully culminated. For this reason and the lateness in the day, it was not possible to return to the location; the electrical faults did not allow us to use night vision glasses (NVG) and the zone was not adequate for operating safely, thus our efforts and resolution were destroyed by reality and the combatants were again relying on their training and luck.



Figure 3. Equipment damage

Source: Author

We later found out that the attacks had stopped after our appearance. We never knew if it was the presence of the airplanes, night falling or due to an arbitrary decision by the combatants. The feeling was ambiguous: on one side the fortune to be able to return without further major damage, and on the other the bitter sensation of not being able to fulfill the mission—as we had the confidence, the will and the hope that we could have done it.

Always Learning

As mentioned before, not all crews nor all military personnel experience the action of a conflict, nor do they intervene in one, nor suffer acts of this magnitude,

not even in countries that have frequently participated in armed conflicts due to their geopolitical situation. It is also clear and present that beyond the spectacular attack/damage our aircraft suffered, this was not what's most important—it was a product of the situation and the situation and is, ultimately, our chosen line of work. It did not require heroic action, nor was it resolved thanks to the expert skills of the crew; rather it was the fruit of the training and knowledge acquired by study and experiences in the Air Force. However, I am sure that this type of living on the edge has consequences in our professional lives and of course on our personal development and, I say this without any form of vanity, belonging to a crew that survived a direct armed attack is not usual in our Air Force. After the adrenaline drained away and the heartbeats quieted, there surged, normally I suppose, questions about “What would have happened if...?”

What would have happened if instead of a machine gun it had been a Rocket Propelled Grenade?¹⁷ What would have happened if the shots had hit the pilots? What would have happened if they had hit the fuel cells or flight controls? And many more questions that motivated my writing of this article.

On the professional side, the FAU later undertook the task of finding solutions to mitigate the risk to its crews. The use of floor armor for our helicopter was evaluated. Armored seats were installed, updates were made to procedures and knowledge and awareness of the use of armaments for self-defense. There were reviews of the literature, manuals, and methods derived from similar experiences, everything that institutionally and personally would be useful, such as survival manuals, or the renovation of the bulletproof jackets for the crews. Also envisioned was the real possibility of suffering damage, light or serious, and even the loss of crews during hostile activities, a possibility that before was considered far-fetched.

This also motivated, with the passing of time, consideration of the actions and decisions taken during the attack and their consequences, and the need to share these experiences with junior personnel, to spread the experience and affirmatively answer the initial question of whether or not we are prepared and ready to run this risk.

Furthermore, during these times, who can say this won't happen in our own countries. There is the possibility exist that something similar could happen to us, contradicting the opinions and train of thought that sometimes question the existence of the Armed Forces in the world and especially in our region.¹⁸ These opinions assume that the absence of the Armed Forces is synonymous with the absence of conflict and in my humble opinion, it doesn't work that way. In addition to the defense of the sovereignty of our countries and being part of the internal balance of powers, the exponential growth of international crime, globalized

terrorism and narcotraffic, among others, make the borders permeable and causes them to cease to exist, and we find ourselves confronting risks and threats that not so long ago would have been unthinkable. Our forces are involved in the protection of fellow citizens and the region from the point of view of national security, support and protection in natural disasters, and global pandemics—providing our help at any moment in any place.

Today the enemy is invisible, and it does not distinguish uniforms, means, borders, nor economic realities. Thus, efforts must be global, international cooperation reinforced, contacts and exchanges more fluid, and collaborative spirit must be constantly manifested; all actions needed for the wellbeing of populations, peace and consistent with UN. There we find the military, as guarantors of the peace. However, to quote our José Enrique Rodó,¹⁹ we do not want peace simply for the “the incapability for war”. We desire the peace to “understand it as beautiful and bountiful”. Therefore, we must have the “aptitude for war”, since peace does not stop being that marvelous ideal and nearly unreachable. Without apologizing for war—let’s not forget that military personnel are the ones that must fight them—we do need to understand that the experience acquired by our women and men in the fulfillment of UN peace missions, their commitment and dedication, effort, possible loss of life, and vocation for peace, is part of that aptitude and attitude for war—or so it should be. We should focus our efforts on the new generations who train, prepare and face the risks of the military profession every day with pride, along with professional and human development for the benefit of the most vulnerable. □

Notes

1. Utilitarian helicopter, dual motor, of North American production by Bell factory.
2. United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea.
3. Medical evacuations.
4. Casualty Evacuations.
5. Resolution of the General Assembly General № 2098/28 March 2013.
6. Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.
7. <https://www.refworld.org.es/pdfid/54be50f24.pdf>.
8. Found by Monusco and moved to Beni or Goma. The Uruauv carried out some of these operations.
9. South African anti-tank helicopter manufactured by the South African company Denel Aerospace Systems.
10. Attack helicopter of Russian origin and used by a hundred countries, fabricated by Mil.
11. The Atlas Oryx is a medium-sized utilitarian helicopter fabricated by Atlas Aircraft Corporation (now Denel Aviation) of South Africa.

12. Pilot, copilot, flight mechanic, rescuer/artilleryman.
13. Commander of the military forces deployed in the mission.
14. <https://www.elpais.com.uy/informacion/helicoptero-fau-alcanzado-fuego-hostil-congo.html>.
15. Skids barely supported on the ground, helicopter with low power applied.
16. Letter of agreement.
17. Grenade launcher RPG-7 of Soviet origin and armament of the rebel forces in the Congo.
18. Armed Forces.
19. Rodó, José Enrique 1871-1917, Uruguayan writer and politician.



Colonel Andrés Leal, Uruguayan Air Force

Currently serves as Commander of the Uruavu Contingent deployed in the DRC. Graduated from the Military Aeronautical School in 1996, he is also an Officer of the Air Force Staff and completed the Defense Advance Course of the Command and Air Staff College. With 3,400 flight hours, of which 3,000 are with helicopters, and around 1,600 hours in African skies, he is the Commanding Pilot of various fixed and rotary wing aircraft. He has seven deployments in UN Peacekeeping missions in Eritrea, Ethiopia and the DRC, accumulating 60 months in the mission area as crew member of the Bell 212 aircraft.