

## The ill-fated voyage of UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld's voyage to The Congo in 1961 (Clovis Mwamba, 17 September 2020)

*Clovis Mwamba was born in the Congo, in the mineral-rich province of Katanga. He was fourteen in 1960 when the Congo became independent and was thrown into chaos by the mercenaries, western mining companies and foreign governments manipulating and supporting Katanga's secession. The Democratic Republic of Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, was executed in the province of Katanga; a few months later UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld was killed as he was flying to Katanga to mediate the conflict.*

Much has been said about the 'ill fated voyage to the Congo' by the man we called 'Mr H'. There are theories about his death, and the cause of the crash is an ongoing matter. As a Congolese Elder and African Muntu in Melbourne, that shocking tragedy in 1961 continues to occupy my mind.

The airplane crash happened 200 kms from Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) where I lived, in the Katanga region. At the time we had Swedish and Irish UN troops in Katanga. Among them was Conor Cruise-O'Brien, the Special Representative of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld.

On the day Dag Hammarskjöld landed in Leopoldville, O'Brien launched his Operation Rum Punch against the mercenaries. He had got the green light to do so, and a warrant to arrest five of the main Katanga secession leaders. He thus begged the Secretary-General to cancel his scheduled meeting with Moïse Tshombe, the President of Katanga Province.

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor”  
(Desmond Tutu)



We, as “bantú”, have a culture of numbers, we live and breathe them, they are in our DNA; they have their own character and they speak to us. For instance, as a male my number is 3, and my wife's is 4, and together as a married couple we share the number 7 (3+4).

When digging up facts about the hectic days following the Congo's independence, I gained much insight, including from fruitful encounters with key politicians, high ranking army officers and intelligence officers and Western diplomats in my country. My father-in-law was Deputy-Chief of Staff of the Congolese Army at that time and Chief of Staff then when Mobutu staged his coup d'état. Later he became Chief of Staff of the Katangese secession army, and so kept dealing with the UN as he had in Leopoldville (Kinshasa). Through him I came across a string of 'numbers', especially a few worn by Congolese agents deeply involved in the events that turned my country into a 'boiling Cold War casserole'.



CLOVIS MWAMBA

OKAPI, a symbol of peace in the Congo



These agents were breathing their codes like cows grazing on their owners' land. Brain-washed or colonised by Belgians became informers against their compatriots and, after 30 June 1960, the local agents of the CIA.

For example, the 'liberal and far right' Joseph Mobutu and the 'communist' Antoine Gizenga played critical roles as close collaborators with Patrice Lumumba, the independence leader. But then they stabbed him in the back, igniting the so-called Congolese Political Crisis of 1960 that caused havoc in the world and claimed the lives—in 1961—of Prime Minister Lumumba and the UN Secretary-General.

Dates, like numbers, matter in my culture, and equate to facts. Two dates, the 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> September 1961, like twin brothers, have something to say about the Secretary-General's fatal aeroplane crash.

There are four days between 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> September 1961 between when Dag Hammarskjöld landed in Leopoldville (on the 13<sup>th</sup>) and the day of the plane crash (on the 17<sup>th</sup>). This parallels the four days between 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> January 1961 between when Prime Minister Lumumba was kidnapped (on the 13<sup>th</sup>) and when he was executed (on the 17<sup>th</sup>). Most of those pictured in photos of Dag Hammarskjöld's arrival in Leopoldville are the same as those who visited Lumumba in the military barracks in Katanga after he was kidnapped. I don't like to raise my finger in accusation against anyone in Congo, Belgium, or anywhere else, who might have been involved in the event in which the UN Secretary-General lost his life. But I do want to point out that his death has much in common with the assassination of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo.

Many Congolese from other parts of Congo who lived in Katanga in 1960 as internally displaced persons, and who were protected by the UN blue helmets owe their lives to Dag Hammarskjöld and the memories of him are still in their hearts. Being one of them, I remember how deeply we felt his death, but we were prevented from mourning in public and expressing our grief. It is very sad that in Congo there have never been any commemorations, or ceremonies, or memorial sites celebrating his life and contributions to the people of the Congo. He was one of my heroes, as he was for so many Congolese, particularly of my generation.

Being asked to speak of Dag at this event inspired me to initiate some form of memorial for him in Congo. This would fulfil the wishes of our first Prime Minister, Lumumba, who always said the Congolese must write their own history. And when we do, Dag Hammarskjöld will be recognised as a true hero of the Congolese liberation from neo-colonialism.

I wish the West Papuans success in their struggle for what was Dag Hammarskjöld's vision – an independent West Papua, free of neo-colonial interference





Lubumbashi (capital of Katanga province)

Province of Katanga (DRC)

ZAMBIA

DEMOCRATIC  
REPUBLIC OF  
CONGO

Zambia-Congo  
Border

Dag Hammarskjöld  
Crash Site Memorial

Dag Hammarskjöld  
Crash Site Memorial

23 min  
18.7 km

Ndola Airport

Ndola Airport