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The General

By Andrew Rice

AUGUST 20, 2003

KAMPALA, Uganda—On the morning of April 24, 2001, Yusuf Gowon was walking along a dirt road in Ntinda, a suburb of the Ugandan capital of Kampala, when a Toyota sedan pulled up alongside him. The passenger side door opened, and a young man bounded out of the car. Gowon stuck out his hand in greeting. The young man clasped it with two hands, a traditional gesture of respect to a *mzee*, or elder, and shook vigorously.

The young man addressed Gowon in one of the languages of West Nile, the northwestern province where Gowon had been born more than 60 years before. He said his name was Brian Tibo. He worked as a private investigator. They had met a few years before through a mutual friend.

Gowon apologized for not recognizing him.

"Where are you going?" Tibo asked.

Gowon said he was walking to town.

"Mind if I give you a lift?"

Gowon didn't mind. It had been a long time since he had owned a car. It was one of those ironies of African politics that, back when he was young and vigorous, Gowon had never had to tax his feet. He commanded a whole fleet of vehicles: Land Rovers, Mercedes Benzes. Little Ugandan flags fluttered from their fenders. In those days, he was Major General Gowon, chief of staff of the Ugandan army, which made him the second-most powerful man in the country, after President Idi Amin.

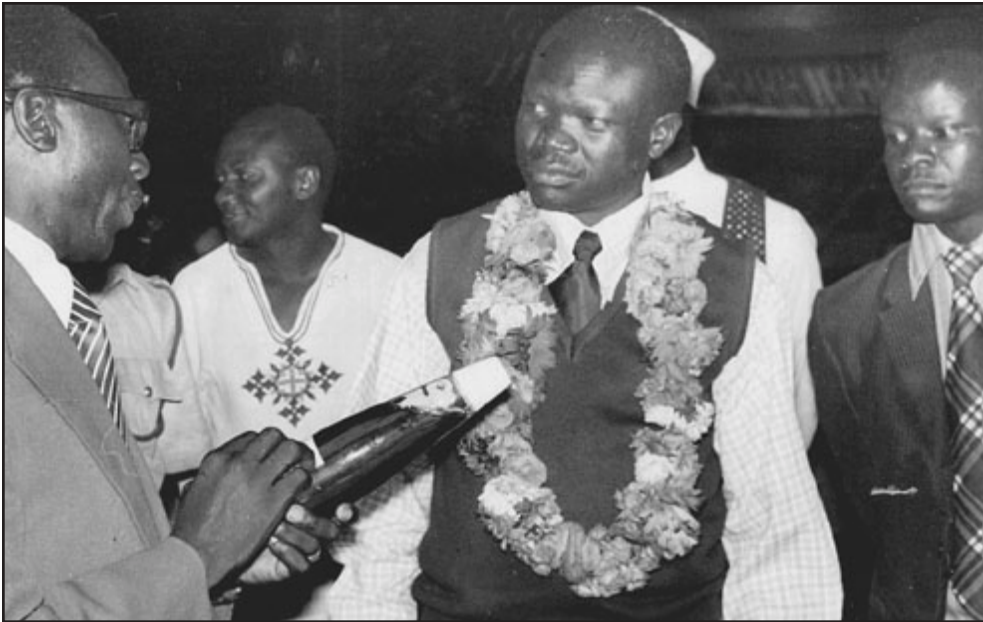
Twenty years later, Gowon was a private citizen, and he had to hoof it everywhere. Men who knew him in his majestic days snickered at the old general's deflated circumstances. Even his former boss poked fun from Saudi Arabia, where he lived in comfortable exile until his death in August of this year. "I hear Gowon, a whole major general, walks from his house in Ntinda to town and has no car," Amin chortled to a Ugandan interviewer.

Gowon didn't let the jibes bother him. Cheerful by disposition, he told his friends he liked the exercise. He needed to lose some weight: With age, his belly had expanded to spill out far over his belt.

But he wasn't one to pass up a free ride, so when the polite young man offered one, Gowon thanked him and hopped in. The Toyota took off.

Before long, Gowon noticed that the car wasn't heading toward his destination, a nearby market. He thought that a bit strange. But he assumed his new

Editor's note: *This is the third in an occasional series of articles about the disappearance of Eliphaz Laki, the men accused of killing him, and the murder's reverberations through Uganda's history and present day politics.*



By a brutal process of elimination, Yusuf Gowon was drawn into the narrow inner circle around Idi Amin. Here, he presides at a ceremony in the late 1970s, when he was the chief of staff of the Ugandan army. (Photo courtesy of Afsa Gowon)

friend must have some errand to run. Tibo was whispering into his cell phone.

Gowon didn't make a stink about it. At his age, he was seldom in any great hurry.

The car pulled up before a one-story yellow building, not far from Uganda's parliament. Gowon didn't know where he was. "Why are you taking me here?" he asked.

In fact, the building was a police station. Tibo explained that the cops wanted to talk to him.

"You are a big man," Tibo recalls telling him. "You have a lot of wisdom."

Still confused, Gowon followed Tibo into the building. The private investigator led him to the office of a police detective. There were several other men in the office: a couple of officers, and a lawyer named Duncan Muhumuza. The detective said he and Gowon needed to talk alone, and ushered Tibo and everyone else out.

Gowon assumed that the police wanted to discuss Alternatives to Violence, a nonprofit organization he had founded to train former rebels in useful occupations. But after some initial pleasantries, the policeman began asking Gowon odd questions. He wanted to know about his army days. About a rebel attack on the military barracks in Mbarara, a western town, back in 1972. About a county chief named Eliphaz Laki.

Laki had disappeared shortly after the invasion, along with his car, the detective told Gowon. Two men had recently been arrested for his murder. They had confessed. The man who ordered Laki killed, they claimed,

was the second-in-command of the Mbarara barracks at the time of the attack, one Major Gowon.

It was true, Gowon said—he had been second-in-command in Mbarara. But he had never heard of anyone named Laki.

"He had forgotten," says Muhumuza, Laki's son, who talked to Gowon that day, and who is convinced of the general's guilt. "It's like if someone asked you about an article you wrote [years ago]. Not even a story, a paragraph."

Gowon admitted nothing. The detective told him he was under arrest.

Gowon couldn't believe what was happening. Though he had been one of the highest-ranking henchmen of one of the world's most brutal dictators—during Amin's eight-year reign, an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 people were killed—Gowon had until that morning fully expected to live out his days in quiet, if somewhat impoverished, obscurity. The government had invited him to return from exile in 1994, with an implicit promise to let bygones be bygones. It wasn't much interested in exhuming the atrocities of the past.

Gowon thought of himself as a good man. Even in Mbarara, the scene of horrific massacres in 1972, many residents remembered him as a relatively reasonable and humane army officer: the best of a bad lot. People there told stories of being harassed by soldiers, in some cases threatened with death, only to be freed after an audience with Gowon.

"Let no one deceive you," one of Eliphaz Laki's friends said. "Gowon saved a lot of lives."

Gowon had been a tractor driver before he joined the army, and associates inevitably described him as a "simple man." He possessed a natural warmth and a jolly laugh that put people at ease. He made friends everywhere he went. ("Even you," he would later tell me, smiling widely. "If you live with me, you will like me.") He had 28 children by four different wives, and 22 grandchildren.

But however much he and his government may have wanted to forget what happened in Uganda under Idi Amin, Gowon had not escaped his history.

A foggily-remembered crime had suddenly, miracu-

lously, been solved, 30 years after the fact. Gowon faced trial for murder. If convicted, he could be sentenced to death by hanging.

The day he was arrested, the police took Gowon to another room at the police station, where he was asked to give a statement. Gowon reiterated his claims of ignorance. If the two soldiers who confessed to the murder had indeed killed Laki, he told investigators, “they did it on their own, and they should stand [trial] for it, unless they prove I instructed them to kill the deceased.”

At the bottom of the statement, Gowon added a postscript in his own loopy handwriting: “I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT THE MURDER OF ELIPHAZ LAKI.”

* * *

Luzira Prison, located southeast of Kampala, consists of a complex of buildings running up a hill that overlooks Lake Victoria’s Murchison Bay. At the very top of the hill, up a potholed road, is a massive crenellated fortress known as the Upper Prison. The British constructed the Upper Prison in 1928, to hold their colony’s most dangerous prisoners. Today, it serves as the Ugandan prison

system’s maximum-security penitentiary. As such, it is home to the country’s condemned: a motley collection of genocidal generals, scoundrel politicians, Islamic fundamentalists and run-of-the-mill murderers, locked behind two massive red wooden doors.

Yusuf Gowon has lived behind those doors since last July, when a judge ruled that state prosecutors had enough evidence to try him on murder charges and revoked his bail.

I first visited Gowon at the prison one day in late October 2002. His trial was just a few weeks from starting, and his defense attorney, Caleb Alaka, had agreed to let me tag along as he prepared his client’s defense.

The two of us walked down a dank corridor. Peeling posters exhorting rehabilitation and warning against tuberculosis were taped to its water-stained turquoise walls. Red-bereted guards stopped us, frisked us, and confiscated the contents of our pockets. They led us to a narrow visiting room, where we sat on short wooden stools, facing an iron-barred window, waiting to meet Gowon.

I was interested to know how Gowon planned to answer the charges against him. But more than that, I wanted to know what had made Gowon in the first place—how an amiable tractor driver had, in the space of just ten years, risen from nowhere to become chief of staff of the Ugandan army.

Some men will themselves to power. Gowon, it seemed, had just happened into it.

He wasn’t driven by some overwhelming ambition. Gowon never even *wanted* to be a soldier. Childhood friends couldn’t recall him showing much interest in a military life. He was a prankster; he entertained them by telling ribald jokes and singing local songs. He thought about clothes, not guns. He was such a sharp dresser that they nicknamed him “Goan”—all the best tailors in the area were Indians from the city of Goa. Gowon liked the moniker so much he adopted it as his last name, with a slight change of spelling. (His given name is Yusuf Mogi.)

He didn’t possess any great military aptitude. “He was a good administrator,” said Major General Isaac Lumago, Gowon’s predecessor as chief of staff. “In strategy, just medium.” Lumago was being polite:



The truth is that most of Gowon's fellow officers regarded him as an uneducated rube raised far above his station. When he was tested by war, against Tanzania in 1979, he bungled it so badly that his own soldiers tried to kill him.

What propelled Gowon's rise, I would come to learn, was not any personal quality at all. Rather, he was the creation of historical forces larger than himself, the very ones that for 20 years turned Uganda into a killing field: the legacy of colonialism, the bonds of tribe and religion, the triumph of militarism over democracy, the personal rivalry between a Ugandan president and his top general, the whims of intrigue and chance.

Or, more simply put: politics.

Alaka and I waited for a few minutes. Then a portly figure shuffled to the window. If Idi Amin was the very stereotype of a brutal African general—a hulking former heavyweight boxing champion, with a booming baritone voice—Gowon seemed entirely miscast, at least in physical appearance. He was short and bald, and he wore a blue golf shirt, blue slacks and flip-flops. He looked tired and worried; his eyes were bloodshot. In the dim light, I could barely make out a series of diagonal scars running across Gowon's cheeks, the marks of a traditional rite of his Kakwa tribe.

Alaka introduced me to his client as an American journalist interested in writing about his case. Gowon's haggard face broke into a wide smile, and he put his palm to the window.

"Hello," he said.

Alaka wanted some privacy to discuss their defense strategy. So he asked the guards to take us someplace more secluded. The three of us were ushered into a private office. Alaka and I sat on wooden chair opposite Gowon, and I watched as he and his attorney discussed the case.

"No notes," a guard barked at me. I put away my notebook.

Gowon unfolded a small bundle of tattered newspaper clippings: a story from a local paper about Duncan Muhumuza's 30-year search for his father's killers; an article President Yoweri Museveni had written for the state newspaper to commemorate a recent anniversary of the Mbarara attack. Gowon had underlined and annotated passages he thought might help exonerate

him. He showed them to Alaka, hopefully.

I picked up my pen and tried to discreetly jot down a word or two.

"You—out!" the guard ordered.

A few minutes later, I found myself standing outside the prison's forbidding red gates, stewing. Alaka was still inside with Gowon. There was nothing to do but take a look around. I walked to one end of the parking lot, where the hill dropped off in a steep slope. I gazed down at the lake. The setting sun glinted off its surface, illuminating it in a long, rippled gold ribbon. Canoes bobbed across the surface as the fishermen cast their nets. It was a scene of mesmerizing beauty—one Gowon might never see again, if he lost this case.

After a while, Alaka reappeared and told me the problem with the guard was all just a big misunderstanding. Gowon desperately wanted to talk to me. "He thought it was such a good opportunity," the attorney would later say.

Alaka and I returned to Luzira the next day, and Gowon and I began a conversation that would stretch over nine months. Our relationship, naturally, was hemmed by circumstance. Sometimes the guards kept a close eye on us. Other times, they took us to a private room, leaving Gowon free to talk for hours about his old life in Amin's army and the trial he faces now. I have attended most of that trial. The many breaks, recesses and delays in it have afforded us opportunities for numerous shorter chats, through the bars of a holding cell, or sitting beside one another on hard courtroom benches



Gowon in a quiet moment at court in December 2002. The former general thought he would enjoy a peaceful retirement in Uganda. Now he is on trial for the murder of Eliphaz Laki. If convicted of the crime, he could be hanged.

as his guards look on.

He talked to me because he feels lonely and powerless, and at the mercy of an unreliable justice system. He hoped that by telling his story, he will bring attention and sympathy to his plight. And he believed that somehow, that may help him avoid the gallows.

“So now,” he told me at the end of one of our interviews, shaking my hand and staring intently into my eyes, “my life is in your hands.”

* * *

“I didn’t want to be a soldier,” Gowon told me one day as we sat in the courtroom. “I was a farmer.” But as was almost inevitable, born in the time he was, in the place he was, he one day joined the army.

West Nile is arid, hardscrabble country, with great stretches of flatness punctuated by occasional outcroppings of rocky hills. In 1936, the year Yusuf Gowon was born, it was one of the outermost outposts of Britain’s colonial empire, bordered to the north by Sudan and to the west by what was then the Belgian Congo. The people there were extremely poor. In Gowon’s day, a man could earn a decent living three ways: cut sugarcane on the plantations of southeastern Uganda; take a job as a policeman or prison guard; or join the military. Nearly everyone he grew up with had a father or uncle or brother who had served at one time in the King African Rifles, the colonial army.

This military affinity was no accident of history or culture, but a product of British design. When the British arrived in Uganda toward the end of the 19th Century, a slave trade still thrived in northern Uganda. Arab slavers raided the villages of West Nile, as well as the neighboring Congo and southern Sudan, pressing their captives into servitude and converting them to Islam.

The British fought the trade. Many slaves they recaptured resettled in West Nile. They came from far-flung villages in different colonies, belonged to disparate tribes and spoke a variety of unrelated tongues. So they invented a language to communicate, Nubian, which mixed corrupted Arabic and Swahili. They intermarried with local tribes: the Lugbaras, the Alur, the Kakwas.

Nubians, as the tribes of West Nile came to be collectively called, were more kin to their neighbors across the artificial colonial borders than to the Bantu-speaking



Major Ratib Mududu and his wife, outside their home in Arua in July 2003. Mududu grew up with Gowon in West Nile, where all the boys wanted to be soldiers when they grew up. Mududu later became Idi Amin’s driver.

peoples of Uganda’s south. That made them useful to the British, who needed to pacify the colony’s restive southerners. They recruited Nubians into the newly-formed colonial army. Later, white anthropologists studied the situation British policy had created, and decided that the people of West Nile were fierce warriors by nature.

Gowon’s father was not a fighter but a farmer, and a clan chieftain of their tribe, the Kakwa. Gowon spent his childhood working in the fields, looking after goats and cows and swimming in one of the muddy streams that ran through the area. The family had only enough money to educate one of the chief’s many offspring. Gowon was the one his father picked. He was sent to school in Arua, the provincial capital.

Arua was a military town. Because they were—and often still are—regarded as outsiders by the other Ugandan tribes, the people of West Nile had seized on the British warrior stereotype and made it their own. “The people in this area are very brave,” said Major Ratib Mududu, a childhood friend of Gowon’s. “Brave, brave soldiers. And highly disciplined.”

Gowon’s schoolboy friends used to idolize army men. When the men of the King African Rifles came into town, the kids would gawk at the soldiers as they walked the streets, watching the way they wore their uniforms, the way they walked with such purpose.

There was one soldier in particular who caught their eye, a strapping young sergeant major named Idi Amin.

“He was very handsome,” Mududu recalled. Amin was a man of the people; he would joke and play with the starry-eyed children.

Soon after graduating primary school, many of Gowon’s friends would join the army. Gowon, however, went on to attend junior high school, and then an agricultural college. He learned to drive a tractor. He tried working his own land for a little while, but there was just no money in it. So in 1964, he joined the prisons service, and went to work on a prison farm.

Just four years later, at the age of 32, Gowon left the prisons service and enlisted in the army as a private. Why he chose to do so, despite his tepid attitude about soldiering, is intimately tied to Ugandan politics in the years immediately after the colony gained independence from Britain in 1962, and to the power and charisma of one soldier from West Nile, Amin.

When they left Uganda, the British installed a prime minister, a northerner named Milton Obote. He took a



Yusuf Gowon in an undated photograph, taken when he was still a young army officer. (Photo courtesy of Afsa Gowon.)

shine to Amin. Obote promoted him through the ranks, eventually making him commander of Uganda’s army.

The political leaders may have been black, not white, but Amin’s job—controlling the southerners—was much the same as it had been under the British. In 1966, Obote ordered his general to attack the palace of the *kabaka*, the king of the southern Baganda tribe and the country’s figurehead president. The *kabaka* fled into exile, and Obote was named the new president.

Having teamed up to conquer the southerners, however, Amin and Obote began to turn on each other.

Because the southerners were furious with him, Obote desperately needed the army’s loyalty. He launched a massive army-recruitment drive. Officers loyal to the president rushed to enlist soldiers from the president’s home region of Lango and the neighboring province of Acholi. Soldiers from the Acholi and Langi

tribes were swiftly promoted through the ranks.

Though northerners, Obote’s tribesmen were from the area east of the Nile and shared no kinship with Amin. That made them suspect to the general. The more power Obote’s loyalists gained within the army, the more tenuous Amin’s control of it became.

Amin mounted his own counter-recruitment, focused on the people of West Nile. All over the province, parents told their children to join the army, and “serve Amin.” Their tribesman needed them to outmaneuver Obote.

Gowon responded to the call. After enlisting, he was sent to a boot camp just north of Kampala, where Amin was training a new elite unit made up mostly of Nubians. Obote, threatened, ordered the unit disbanded, claiming that a large number of the recruits were actually mercenaries from the Sudan and Congo.

Amin complied with the president’s order, dispersing the troops to other units. Gowon was trained as a paratrooper, and then sent to Greece for a course in commando tactics. The crisis subsided.

The tension between the president and his top general had not disappeared, however. Strange incidents kept happening. Someone tried to assassinate Obote, shooting him through the cheek. Amin was never implicated, but people couldn’t help being suspicious: When soldiers came to inform Amin that the president was still alive, the general jumped his back fence and fled to a Nubian-dominated enclave north of Kampala. Shortly after that, the army’s second-in-command, an Acholi, was murdered in his home, along with his wife.

By late January, 1971, Kampala was rife with wild rumors of plots, planned arrests and assassinations. Obote, for some reason, chose this moment to attend a conference in Singapore. He left instructions that Amin was to be arrested before his return.

At the *kabaka*’s old palace, which had been turned into a military barracks, the president’s tribal kin mobilized. According to those who participated in the coup, on the afternoon of Sunday, January 24, Nubian soldiers noticed a group of Obote’s tribesmen putting on their uniforms and picking up guns. A rumor spread that they were going to Amin’s home to arrest or kill him, that Nubian soldiers were to be massacred.

A fire alarm sounded. The soldiers were told to gather in the mess hall. The battalion’s commanding officer, a lieutenant colonel and Obote loyalist, stood before the assembled men and began ranting about unnamed elements in the army that were planning a bloodbath.

The Nubian officers knew their commander was talking about them. Fearing arrest, they seized the moment



All over Uganda, people poured into the streets to celebrate Idi Amin's 1971 takeover. (Photo courtesy of The New Vision)

to attack. They started throwing bottles at the lieutenant colonel, then rushed and beat him. He was badly hurt, but his allies managed to get him out of the barracks.

Meanwhile, a group of Nubian enlisted men hotwired an armored personnel carrier. They rammed it through the locked doors of the barracks' armory. Amin's men armed themselves. With an efficiency that suggested long preparation, they fanned out to key points all over town: the radio station, parliament, and the main roads into the city.

In the hours that followed, the Nubians slaughtered scores of Acholi and Langi soldiers. The Kampala battalion's commanding officer, the injured lieutenant colonel, was tracked down and killed.

On January 25, 1971, after a long night of gunfire, a soldier read an announcement over the radio: Idi Amin was the new leader of Uganda.

* * *

Later that year, Gowon returned from his training in Greece. In his absence, the political situation in Uganda had changed entirely, and in his favor. Since the coup, Amin had been filling the upper ranks of the military—which had been decimated by the disappearances of so many Obote loyalists—with members of the various

Nubian tribes. The low-ranking soldier who had rammed the armored personnel carrier into the armory, turning the coup's tide for Amin, was immediately made a lieutenant colonel, replacing the murdered Obote man as the elite unit's commander. Others won similarly dizzying promotions.

Gowon was promoted to the rank of major, and assigned to Mbarara, in western Uganda, as the second-in-command of the barracks there. "That was a very, very big jump," said Major General Emilio Mondo, 65, who would serve as a defense minister in Amin's regime. "He was not prepared for commissioned officer status in any way."

But Gowon had the qualifications that mattered most in Amin's army. He and the new president were of the same tribe, the Kakwa, and the same religion, Islam. If Amin had calculated that Nubians would be loyal, he trusted his own Kakwa tribesmen most of all. Gowon "was specially favored and specially selected for prominent service in the military," Mondo said. As a Kakwa, Gowon would likely have exercised an enormous amount of power within the battalion, perhaps more than even Simba's commanding officer. According to one soldier who served under him, Gowon routinely referred to Amin as his "uncle" in those days, a word that, in this sense, would mean a tribal patron.

The unit in Mbarara where Gowon was assigned was

known as Simba Battalion, after the Swahili word for “lion.” Painted on the barracks’ outside wall, facing the road with Kampala, was a ferocious-looking big cat.

As an officer, Gowon won the respect of many in Mbarara. “He was one of the best,” said Boniface Byanyima, a local politician. “He was more polite and liberal than the others.” Admittedly, this is not saying much. Simba’s commander was Lieutenant Colonel Ali Fadhul, an Amin confidante and notorious brute. In the months after the coup, Fadhul presided over horrific massacres at Simba. According to the brutal political calculus of the time, Obote’s tribesmen within the army had to be eliminated. So scores of Acholi and Langi soldiers were beaten to death in the barracks, while hundreds more were herded into camps near the Tanzanian border, where they were killed off more gradually.

When, in mid-1971, a pair of Americans, a journalist and a college professor, showed up at Simba asking nettlesome questions about the rumored massacres, another top Simba officer ordered the two men killed. Their bodies were burned and dumped in a river, and their car was pushed into a ravine.

(Gowon claims that he doesn’t know much about the massacres, or the killings of the Americans, which he contends occurred before he arrived in Mbarara.)

What was going on inside the barracks was no great

secret. But most Ugandans didn’t much care about Amin’s dark side—they figured that the killing would remain confined to the barracks, and to Obote’s tribesmen. Amin was wildly popular. There had been dancing in the streets when he overthrew the hated Obote.

Amin loved coming to Mbarara, flying in on his helicopter to visit Simba Battalion. And the local populace loved him back. Entrepreneurs would wait until Amin’s helicopter took off again, and then would dig up clods of turf from the landing site. People bought them, thinking Amin’s dirt would bring them good luck.

* * *

Back in Tanzania, Milton Obote was misreading the situation: He thought Amin’s grip on power was so tenuous that a small push would topple him. In camps near the Ugandan border, with the support of the Tanzanian government, he was training a small army of exiles. The plan was to invade Uganda with a little more than a thousand men, spark a popular uprising, and march on Kampala. A young Marxist rebel named Yoweri Museveni was smuggling arms into western Uganda in anticipation of an attack.

“In reality,” Museveni writes in his autobiography, the invasion turned out to be “an encounter between two



President Amin inspects weapons captured from the rebels after the abortive invasion from Tanzania in 1972. The invasion set off a wave of killings across Uganda. Eliphaz Laki was one of those who disappeared. (Photo courtesy of The New Vision.)

groups of fools: Amin's group on one hand, and ours on the other."

At around 7 a.m. on September 17, 1972, approximately 350 rebels, including Museveni, crossed the border into Uganda in a convoy of nine trucks. They headed north toward Mbarara.

A little earlier that morning, Simba Battalion's commander, Ali Fadhul, had heard a report of fighting at another border crossing to the southeast. (This was the second prong of the attack, which consisted of about 1,000 men, and was headed toward another western town.) Fadhul jumped in a Peugeot sedan and headed toward the Tanzanian border.

Speeding down the dirt road, Fadhul saw the rebel convoy coming in the other direction. Presented with a sterling chance to kill an enemy commander, Museveni's men fumbled with their guns. Fadhul sped on down the road in search of a phone. He called to warn the barracks. Then he disappeared. He would only turn up again days later, when the fighting was finished.

That left Major Gowon in command of Simba Battalion. At the time, he was a living in a house in town. A messenger came and roused him from bed around 9 a.m. (It was a Sunday, and Gowon had been sleeping in.) Nine trucks were coming up the road, the messenger reported, packed with men wearing red scarves.

Gowon hustled to the barracks on foot, still wearing his civilian clothes. The sound of heavy gunfire filled the air. The rebels had advanced to Simba's gates; several had been shot trying the scale the outside fence. Gowon ducked the bullets and got inside the barracks. From there, he mustered a counterattack.

At the first sign of resistance, the disorganized rebels scattered. Museveni and some of his men scampered to a nearby forest, where they decided to retreat back to Tanzania. The rebels, now down to just three trucks, stopped for gas on their way out of town. They filled their tank and fled south, just ahead of Gowon's counterattacking soldiers, who, finding the invaders were gone, killed the station attendant instead.

By any account, the battle was a total victory for Gowon. According to Museveni's count, of the approximately 350 men who had set off for Mbarara that morning, only 46 made it back to Tanzania. Far from rising up against Amin, the local populace turned on the invaders. Suspected rebels were turned in or lynched. "At this time, the people were really cooperative," Gowon told me. "Guerrillas would come and stay at their house, and they would come and report it."

But there were many more casualties to come.

Amin deduced, correctly, that some Ugandans had
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been collaborating with the rebels. So the president ordered another round of massacres. "It was a matter of policy, naturally," Mondo said. "The net had been widened, and so many people started getting picked [up]."

At first, it had been Obote's tribesmen within the army who were targeted. Now, anyone who *might* have had anything to do with the invasion had to be eliminated. Amin's men thought they had no choice. If the dissidents lived, the rebels would surely come back. It was kill or be killed.

Around the country, soldiers and secret policemen rounded up anyone associated with Obote's regime. In western Uganda, men in unmarked cars traveled the countryside, whisking away suspected enemies. In the end, almost the entire local leadership of Obote's political party—as well as many people who simply belonged to the wrong tribe, had the wrong enemies, or were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time—disappeared. Some victims were horribly tortured first. Most were buried secretly, so their families could never find their bodies.

Nasur Gille, a former intelligence officer who is a co-defendant of Gowon's, has claimed that it was his former boss who directed the killing spree. In a taped confession—which he has since renounced as coerced—Gille told investigators that a few days after the invasion, Gowon called a meeting at a local hotel in Mbarara.

"They said rebels had entered with their collaborators," Gille said. Gowon, he claimed, "gave orders to the intelligence officers, saying we should go out into the field. They gave us a long list of names."

One of the names, he said, belonged to a local county chief: Eliphaz Laki.

* * *

After his victory in Mbarara, Gowon's ascent through the army ranks accelerated. Later in 1972, he was given a job in Kampala, redistributing properties confiscated from the estimated 40,000 Indian businessmen Amin had ordered deported earlier that year. It was a lucrative position, and it gave Gowon a chance to make a lot of friends. Over the next few years, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel, then to colonel, then to brigadier general, and finally to major general.

Meanwhile, Amin's terror was becoming ever more widespread and indiscriminate. At first, it had been Obote's tribesmen in the army who were targeted. Then, immediately after the attacks, it was Obote's civilian supporters. Soon, however, any political rationale for the killing disappeared. People were killed wholesale. Before long, even Amin's men would turn against one another.

In 1973, a group of Christian officers from Amin's own tribe, the Kakwa, attempted a coup. It very nearly

succeeded. Afterwards, Amin mercilessly purged the army. Even Gowon came under suspicion. Someone—in these situations, it was never clear who—told Amin that he was not truly a Muslim, but secretly Christian.

“They denied me,” Gowon said. “They said I had converted.”

Gowon was placed under house arrest. He feared he might be killed at any moment. But then General Mustapha Adrisi, the vice president and chief of staff of the army, intervened on his behalf. A well-timed stomach ailment sent Gowon to Libya for treatment. When he returned, the worst of the purges had passed.

Instead of being killed, Gowon was promoted and placed in command of a unit in eastern Uganda.

These sorts of capricious changes of fortune were part of life in Amin’s army. Favored soldiers were boosted to positions far beyond their capabilities. Out of favor soldiers were kicked out, or killed. Sometimes, Amin would call his generals late at night and accuse them of treason, just to shake them up a bit. “It would happen quite often,” Major General Mondo said. “He would pick on one person, then another.”

The vexation suited Amin’s purposes: It kept his generals off balance. Internationally, Amin was regarded as a crude buffoon. He lionized Hitler and made outrageous remarks about the Queen of England. But his courtiers knew he was a canny master of intrigue. Within the army, there were cliques upon cliques, usually based on tribal or religious bonds. Amin played these factions off against one another. As long as the generals were hatching plots against each other, they weren’t coming after Amin.

One day, the secret police came and arrested Gowon. Another general had whispered to Amin that Gowon was sending messages to rebels in Tanzania. Gowon and Adrisi, his protector, were brought to the president’s office in Kampala, where Amin confronted them with the report. “I was told you were collaborating with Charles Arube,” the leader of the 1973 coup attempt, “and you

were defended by Mustapha Adrisi,” Gowon recalls Amin saying to him. “Today I got the same report. So, Mustapha, I have nothing to talk about.”

Amin ordered Gowon out of his sight. The secret police led him out of the president’s office. Gowon was certain he was going to die. But inside, the vice president was once again trying to save him.

“Amin refused three times,” Gowon said. Finally, “Mustapha creeps on his knees to Amin. He says, ‘Amin, I must leave my work. I may die like Gowon is going to die. These Nubians are deceiving you.’”

Amin softened. He had Gowon brought back in his office, and told an orderly to bring everyone tea. “Amin said, ‘You go, but when I get more information of similar [nature], you will not see me again.’”

Many of Amin’s officers were not as lucky as Gowon. Over time, Amin’s circle of confidantes became smaller and smaller, as he eliminated anyone within the army who might be a threat to him. Some generals were dismissed. Some were appointed as ambassadors to faraway countries. Some simply disappeared.

General Moses Ali, the popular finance minister, was sacked amid accusations that he had embezzled huge amounts of money from the Bank of Uganda. Shortly afterwards, a group of armed men attacked his house. Ali fought them off. Gowon was rumored to have engineered Ali’s down-



General Mustapha Adrisi (right), pictured here with Gowon, was Amin’s vice president and one of the most powerful men in the Ugandan army. On several occasions, Adrisi protected Gowon from being killed. Then, after Adrisi was injured in a mysterious car accident, Gowon was promoted to be the new chief of staff. (Photo courtesy of Afsa Gowon)

fall, and to have ordered the assassination attempt.

In early 1978, Mustapha Adrisi, who had amassed power within the army that rivaled Amin's, was nearly killed in a car accident. Most people assumed it was no accident at all. Adrisi's successor as chief of staff served a short time, and then decided that, all things considered, he would much rather spend his time building his house near Arua.

Amin named Gowon to replace him. After all the purges and disappearances, Amin's inner circle had now narrowed to just a handful of officers from his own tribe, along with a few trusted mercenaries from the Sudan and Congo. Gowon was among the last generals standing.

He was thought to be loyal to Amin. At the same time, he was not a threat. Gowon didn't have a power base within the army, and he didn't command the fierce respect of his men: Behind his back, they snickeringly called him "the tractor driver."

Gowon's appointment, however, would prove to be a disastrous miscalculation for Amin. He had picked Gowon because he was his tribesman, because he seemed loyal, and because he seemed to lack the imagination to engineer a coup. None of these qualities would help him much in a real war, against a real army. And, as luck would have it, one was about to begin.

* * *

People tell many conflicting stories to explain why Amin made his ill-fated move on Tanzania in 1978. There is the simple explanation: Amin had long been making irredentist claims on northern Tanzania; at the same time, Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere was quietly tolerating the presence of Ugandan rebels along the border. Something had to give.

There is the conspiracy theory: Amin needed to distract an increasingly mutinous army, so he turned it against an external enemy, in the hope that the promise of plunder would distract the troops. "Amin, towards the end, he was desperate," said Colonel Bernard Rwehururu, an officer at the time who has written a book about his experiences called *Cross to the Gun*. "I think he could see he was isolated by his own men."

Then there is the explanation many of Amin's men offered, which is ... well, it's complicated. Something about cattle rustling along the border, tensions among the local tribes, and a fight between a Tanzanian woman and a Ugandan woman in a market, which somehow escalated into pitched warfare. "You know, women can fight," one former army officer told me. "It is very easy."

Whatever the reason, in late October 1978, skirmishes began along the border between Uganda and Tanzania. The Ugandans met only token resistance from a small garrison of Tanzanian troops. Then, on the morning of



Colonel Bernard Rwehururu was a frontline commander during the Ugandan invasion of Tanzania. Recently, he wrote a book about his experiences that lays much of the blame for Uganda's defeat at Gowon's feet.

October 30, 1978, approximately 3,000 Ugandan soldiers crossed the border in trucks. They swiftly occupied a 700-square-mile swath of northern Tanzania. They looted a local sugar factory, captured thousands of cows, gang-raped the local women and killed with abandon. An estimated 1,500 Tanzanian civilians perished.

Gowon was in command of the troops, and according to contemporary witnesses, gleefully joined the plunder. He picked up tons of sugar. When one captain failed to give up a tractor he fancied, Gowon is said to have summarily demoted him. (Gowon admits that there was a tractor, but says the captain didn't know how to drive it, and that was why he commandeered it.)

The Ugandans blew up a bridge over a river which separated the captured area from the rest of Tanzania and declared victory. Amin announced the annexation of the occupied area. "Gowon came back very pleased," Mondo said. "He didn't see how the Tanzanian army could cross [the river]. ... He thought, 'That's it. I've finished the war.'"

The Tanzanians duly threw a pontoon bridge over the river, and counterattacked. The Ugandans turned tail and fled back across the border, taking some 2,000 Tanzanian women and children with them as hostages, along with the captured cattle.

Amin called for an end to the fighting, and challenged Nyerere to a boxing match to settle their differences. "Mohammed Ali would be an ideal referee for the bout," he suggested.

Tanzania's president declined the invitation.

Instead, his army launched a vicious artillery barrage on Ugandan positions just across the border. The Ugandan men had never seen anything like it, and began to ascribe magical powers to the enemy's Russian-made rockets, which they called *saba-saba*. Bernard Rwehururu, who was in command of some of these forward troops, sent desperate messages to his superiors.

The Tanzanians were preparing to invade.

Gowon came to Rwehururu's headquarters to assess the situation. The officer pulled out a map to show the likely course of the Tanzanian attack. Gowon just scoffed, Rwehururu recalled. "He said, 'What's wrong with you? You are always thinking of maps. Do you fight with maps?'"

Rwehururu and others pleaded for heavy weaponry to counter the *saba-saba*. Gowon dawdled. At a crucial meeting of the army high command, according to people who were there, another general harangued him into calling Amin to ask for money to buy artillery. Once asked, the president readily agreed. Amin sent one of Uganda's ambassadors several million dollars for an arms-buying spree. But instead of going shopping, the ambassador just pocketed the money, Rwehururu says.

The Tanzanians invaded, and the Ugandans retreated north. When the promised heavy weapons failed to materialize, Gowon's troops became dispirited. Amin, furious about the way the war was going, sent his top general to the front. This did nothing to boost morale. For some reason, whenever Gowon visited a unit, a *saba-saba* barrage seemed to follow. The men started calling him *bisirani*, or "bad omen."

Gowon caught wind that Amin was not happy. One

day, he claims, a Libyan officer—Muammar Gaddafi, one of Amin's last friends in the world, had sent some troops to help defend Uganda—came to Gowon's field headquarters. He told Gowon that Imin had fired him. Then, according to Gowon, the Libyan mounted a tank and gave a speech to the Ugandan soldiers, accusing their commander of betraying Uganda to the invaders.

Gowon took the hint. He fled to Kampala, hopped on a motorcycle, and drove north.

To the soldiers, it appeared that their general had deserted. "Our recent chief of staff, Major General Gowon, has disappeared," an anonymous soldier wrote the African magazine *Drum*. "Only hell knows where he is."

He was back in West Nile, safe from the *saba-saba*, but not from his own soldiers. When Gowon came into town on his motorcycle, a group of them arrested their former commander. "All my things were taken," Gowon recalled. "I was only about to die. They said they had got information that I was collaborating with the Tanzanians."

Once again, luck was with him. Mustapha Adrisi, recuperated from the injuries suffered in his mysterious car wreck and back in Uganda, happened to fly into town in his helicopter. He ordered the soldiers to free Gowon. Then he ad-



On October 30, 1978, approximately 3,000 Ugandan troops poured across the Tanzanian border, setting off the war that would eventually lead to Idi Amin's downfall. This photograph, dated October 30, was taken near the northern Tanzanian town of Kyaka. (Photo courtesy of The New Vision.)



Gowon, then chief of staff of the army, being briefed by his frontline commanders in November 1978. When the war started going badly, the soldiers blamed Gowon, whom they nicknamed bisirani, or "bad omen."

vised Gowon to leave the country as soon as possible.

Gowon hopped back on his motorcycle. But he still couldn't decide where to go. "I didn't know Zaire, I didn't know Sudan," he said. He rode north, to a place where the border was marked only by a dirt road: the eastern side of the road was Uganda, and the western side Zaire. Sudan was just a few miles up the road. But he had heard that most of Amin's men—the ones who wanted to kill him—were planning to head for Sudan.

The general turned his motorcycle west, into Zaire, and rode on.

* * *

On the other side of the border, some kindly Catholic missionaries took in Gowon. He befriended a pliant customs officer who allowed him to smuggle some trucks out of Uganda. Once a general, now a refugee, Gowon began building a new life for himself.

Meanwhile, back in Uganda, the war was ending fast. Amin's soldiers made a headlong retreat back to West Nile. Kampala fell. Amin fled the city in a special truck equipped with a radio transmitter. He broadcast messages vowing to fight to the death, and imploring his men to do the same. Then he hopped on a plane and flew away.

Left to fend for themselves, Amin's soldiers streamed into Zaire and Sudan. Zaire's military dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, flew east to inspect the situation. Wearing his trademark leopard skin cap, Mobutu welcomed Amin's men to his country. "You are our brothers," Gowon recalls Mobutu telling the exiles.

The defeated soldiers could hardly believe the ease

with which the Tanzanians had won the war. In exile, they circulated elaborate rumors of betrayal. Gowon was said to have sold a copy of the Ugandan war plan to the Tanzanians in return for a stack of American dollars which later turned out to be counterfeit.

Gowon says the story is absurd. "How could I sell Uganda?" he asked me, plaintively. But many believed the rumors, and that was enough to make Gowon *persona non grata* among the other Amin exiles. When the defeated soldiers formed rebel armies to try to overthrow Uganda's new government, which was once again headed by Milton Obote, they left Gowon out of their plans.

Gowon was just as happy to be excluded. He wanted a quiet life. He built a house in a town near the

Ugandan border. He made money renting out his trucks, and conducted other kinds of private business, the exact nature of which he prefers to leave vague. "My wife could make these kind of samosas, chapatti," Gowon recalled one day in prison, smiling at the memory of a decent meal.

Years passed. Amin's men's revanchist rebellions eventually petered out, and it was another guerrilla leader, Yoweri Museveni, who overthrew the government in 1986. After Museveni came to power, he declared his desire to see Uganda break its cycle of terror and reprisal. He asked Amin's men to lay down their arms and come home.

The exiles were offered amnesty, though only for their misdeeds as rebels, not for any atrocities committed while they were in power. However, the government made it clear that it wasn't going to waste much time investigating the thousands of disappearances that occurred under Amin, either. There were isolated prosecutions: Kassim Obura, the head of one of Amin's murder squads, was hanged in 1990; Ali Fadhul, Gowon's commanding officer at Mbarara, was convicted of ordering a politician bayoneted to death. (He remains on death row.) But for the most part, the understanding was: don't ask, don't tell.

Gowon returned to Uganda in 1994, accompanied by a delegation of fellow officers and hundreds of their dependants. Museveni himself presided over a ceremony welcoming Gowon home. The two men laughingly reminisced about the battle they fought against one another back in 1972. In Mbarara, the town where he served at the time of Laki's murder, Gowon's local admirers threw a huge party in his honor.

The government rented Gowon a house. Gowon,

grateful, traveled the country making speeches for Museveni's presidential election campaign in 1996.

He was enjoying a perfectly pleasant retirement until that day in 2001, when the polite young man asked him if he needed a lift.

* * *

There is no such thing as one-man rule. Every dictator, no matter how bloodthirsty and maniacal, possesses scores of loyal henchmen. "All of us—people in big positions—we were Amin's men," said Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Abdallah Nasur, a military governor under Amin who himself spent time in prison for murder. "Let us accept. Let us not deny."

African politics killed Eliphaz Laki. They transformed Yusuf Gowon from a tractor driver to a general, and drew him into a dictator's inner circle. However well-meaning he may believe himself to be, the fact remains Gowon was pleased to live in Amin's maw, happy with the immense power he wielded as a general. But attaining that power required moral compromises. Gowon served a wicked man, enthusiastically and without evident remorse.

Yet Gowon is not charged with complicity in a criminal regime. He is accused of a specific crime, the murder of Eliphaz Laki. Did he really send two soldiers to Laki's office, with orders shoot the chief and to leave his body to rot?

For nearly a year, the question has hung over a courtroom in Kampala, where the events of September 22, 1972 have once again been played out, this time before a judge. For Gowon, the stakes are stark: freedom and redemption, or Luzira and the gallows.

Gowon affects an air of sunny nonchalance about it all. Each day of his trial, the old general enters the courtroom and jovially works the gallery, shaking hands and sharing jokes. There are always dozens of his relatives in the audience, the women dressed in the lay-

ered, color-splashed garments of his native West Nile.

Each evening, he returns to Luzira. He is getting used to the place. On days he doesn't have to go to court, he wiles away the hours ambling around the prison's muddy exercise yard, chatting. A few of his old army buddies are imprisoned there. He's making new friends too, like a minister from Obote's second government, who is due to be executed for his own ghastly crimes. He and Gowon used to be enemies. Now they are bonded by the threat of execution.

In the afternoons, the inmates often play soccer. At night, Gowon returns to his cell, which is roughly the size of a broom closet, and falls asleep on a hard foam mattress. He has lost more than 30 pounds.

Gowon is genuinely perplexed by the plight he now finds himself in, and he has constructed byzantine conspiracy theories to explain why the authorities have singled him out for persecution. He seems certain of his own innocence. If he has ever had a moment's doubt or guilt about what happened to Laki, he has never betrayed it to me.

"I really told them I did not know anything about it," he said at the close of one of our first interviews, so vehemently he was almost shouting. "These people were civilians. They could not have been killed. This is what I know." □



Yusuf Gowon (seated next to the soldier in camouflage) at a rally held for him in Mbarara after his return from exile. Many people in Mbarara remember Gowon not as a killer, but as a relatively reasonable and humane army officer: the best of a bad lot. (Photo courtesy of: Afsa Gowon.)

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Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **EAST ASIA**

A Yale graduate (History) with a Master's in China Studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex also worked as a French-language instructor with the Rassias Foundation at Dartmouth College, studied at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and served as a Yale-China teaching fellow at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. Against the backdrops of China's recent accession to the World Trade Organization and the anointing of the new leadership in Beijing, Alex will examine how Chinese are adapting to economic and cultural globalization, both inside and far from the capital.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew is spending two years in east-central Africa, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Rudolph (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

When work toward a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations is finished, Matthew will begin two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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