

RWANDA 1994

IT WAS THE DRONE and hiss that first alerted me. The flies were not only loud and in their thousands: there was something uncommon and alarming about the intensity and agitation of their buzzing. These were flies in full riot. Something, their frenzy said, was very, very wrong. I walked ever nearer, towards the seething swarm, steeled for the worst, or so I thought.

This insect tornado was spiralling on a round hole in the ground. It could once have been a well or a pit-latrine. Taking a last deep breath, I leaned over the edge and looked down. It was a scene of total horror. Fifteen feet below me was a tangle of purple-black swollen limbs and faces, a rotting human mush, bristling with flies. The half dozen bodies that I could see, squeezed together, appeared to be embracing, as though these poor souls had been trying to cling on to some humanity as indignity and death overcame them. A swollen dark blue bottom was jutting upwards, bent over a body below, pants pulled down. From under that, the bloated face of a man, eyes shut, lids blank and bulging, and mouth wide open was turned towards me. For all I knew there may well have been many more bodies below these. I did my best to describe the scene into my cassette recorder. Listeners to the *Today* programme had to excuse my gagging and retching.

Everywhere in Mayange village was the gamey aroma of death and putrefaction. The first time one catches it, without

realising what it is, the smell is not unpleasant and – to be truthful – rich and mildly exotic. Only when one has learned to recognise it for what it is does the scent of death acquire an appalling message.

I came across a little bar. The door was open. Everything inside was smashed and overturned. A thick dark brown trail of dried blood was smeared across a cement veranda and over the red dirt beyond, leading into some long grass. In the scrub a man was lying on his back. He had a terrible wound to the side of his head, a crusty black split, crawling with dizzy flies. Again their hum was heavy and constant. The man's abdomen was lifting gently. I jumped. He was alive! But what the hell could I do for him out here? I stepped closer. There was, I saw then, nothing anyone could do for him. Plump white maggots were tumbling from beneath his shirt.

WE WERE NOT supposed to be in Rwanda, my dear friend Geoff Spink and I. The job which *Today* had asked us to do we had completed in neighbouring Burundi in a couple of days, leaving us the best part of a week to amuse ourselves in Bujumbura. The Burundian capital was tense but quiet. Once we had sent our despatches back to London, reporting that the Rwandan horrors were unlikely – for a variety of reasons – to spill over the border there was little for us to do except to sit around the bar of the Novotel and keep the promise we had made to everyone back in London that we would not, under any circumstances, cross into Rwanda.

Geoff had been, until recently, the editor of *From Our Own Correspondent*. During his time, he had always welcomed pieces from me, given generous encouragement and, with his assistant, Lucy Wade, run the FOOC office like a youth club. If I'd just flown in from Haiti, or some obscure African police state, I'd head to the FOOC office as soon as I could. There I'd meet up with other BBC correspondents, sharp and engaging characters like Misha Glenny, Alan Little, Bob Simpson and Malcolm Brabant. In the early 1990s, they were often just back from an assignment in the Yugoslav war or among the fragments of the shattered Soviet Union. Once our number reached

critical mass, Geoff and Lucy would cart us all round to the pub for a session that would become, with the reporters' tales from their trips, a jolly in-person, uncensored edition of *FOOC*. With beer.

Then Geoff had to go and spoil it all by getting himself transferred to a producer's job on *Today*.

On the night of 6 April 1994, I was sitting at the bar of my girlfriend's restaurant in Crouch End. All the customers and other staff members had left. Juliette was cashing up and I was flicking through the news headlines on the teletext of the television up on the wall. I spotted a story that a plane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi had been shot down near the airport in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, killing both heads of state. 'This means big trouble,' I remarked to Juliette.

For the previous year or so, I'd been noting the worrying escalation of atrocities in Rwanda. I phoned Geoff the following morning and repeated my assessment. Already, he told me, sketchy reports were coming through from Kigali that something very serious was going down: barricades on the streets, vigilantes, killings.

Over the next couple of weeks, although the reporting of what was happening was patchy to say the least, a picture was emerging of mass slaughter of civilians by their own government, its army and militias, and – most shockingly – by other civilians with the encouragement of those agencies. Few in the outside world, even those normally well-informed of African matters, had a real grasp of why. It was also clear that a rebel movement of English-speaking Rwandan exiles from Uganda, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), had remobilised and, recruiting from those sympathetic to its cause within Rwanda, was moving fast across the country to stop the slaughter and to overthrow the genocidal regime.

In the years since the genocide, I have often been asked why I was sent to Rwanda by the BBC. I wasn't. I was sent to do the reports from Burundi. And I was picked to do that job because at the time Geoff Spink was my ally and a producer on *Today*. He had made it known to the programme's editors that I had knowledge of the conflict next door in Rwanda and, in any case,

the attention of the majority of established correspondents and old Africa hands was, in the spring of 1994, on South Africa, the recent post-apartheid election there and Mandela's imminent inauguration as president on 10 May.

It is also undeniable that the Rwanda slaughter did not get the coverage its victims deserved because many foreign correspondents were too frightened to set foot in the country. It was considered to be – correctly – completely out of control, a situation of unprecedented obscenity, madness, ferocity, horror and unpredictability. Journalists were regarded by the government troops, the drunken militias and the gangs of murderous civilians to be an interference and legitimate targets. So, coverage of the butchery in central Africa fell, in part, to your man from Radio 1.

'THESE ARE YOUR TICKETS. Bujumbura via Brussels,' said a veteran *Today* editor, handing an envelope to me. 'Good luck, old man. And do take care.' Had we been in a 1940s black-and-white British thriller, he'd have been played by Wilfred Hyde-White.

In the Novotel, quite a party of anxiety-racked foreign correspondents began to accumulate, among them a team from CNN, another from Channel 4 News. The talk was only of what might be really going on over the border. Another crew rolled in, French I think, who had just escaped from Rwanda's *interahamwe* death squads. They were sheet-white, very badly shaken and understandably thirsty when they reached the safety of our hotel bar.

It was at this bar one night that I was approached by a small softly-spoken African. He asked if Geoff and I were journalists. I told him we were, for BBC radio news.

'My name is Jean-Marie Viamey,' he said. 'I am the Bujumbura representative of the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Would you be interested in crossing into Rwanda?'

I explained that Rwanda itself was not our mission and that I thought it would be too dangerous, even in the company of the good guys, my new friend's pals in the RPF.

A persuasive bugger, Jean-Marie. He assured me that if we

crossed into southern Rwanda at a certain place on Burundi's northern frontier, we would find ourselves in RPF-held territory, which would be quite safe. The rebels, he said, would be happy to host us and look after us well. Furthermore, Jean-Marie would radio ahead to tell the RPF lads to expect us. Everything would be fine. Even without offering 'unbeatable group deals', complimentary cocktails on arrival and *kids-go-free*, he was beginning to make it sound like a most tempting package. Geoff and I went into a huddle.

'Okay, thanks, Jean-Marie. Yes, we'll go.'

Nosiness had won again. And I figured if we could see the reality of Rwanda with the protection of the RPF, who already seemed to be an exemplary bunch, the much diminished risk was worth it. Even at this stage, I felt Rwanda was not being adequately reported.

From somewhere Geoff rented a Mitsubishi 4x4. Its wheels were from a different vehicle, far too small and they lent to it the handling qualities of a blancmange. Still, in these circumstances, it was the best that was available.

We set off on the drive north a couple of days later, with instructions from Jean-Marie to present ourselves at a hospital in a small town in northern Burundi and to ask for a certain doctor. This we did. Geoff was taken into an operating theatre where the doctor, a surgeon and an RPF activist, was in the middle of an operation. He broke off from slicing open his patient to fire up a radio set and contacted his comrades inside Rwanda. He also scribbled for us a note of introduction and accreditation which he said we should present to RPF fighters.

At the last Burundian police post on our designated dirt road, the officers gave us permission to cross and wished us well. 'Just keep going down this track,' one policeman advised. 'After two kilometres, you will find the RPF. Or they will find you.'

'How will I know it's them?' I asked, anxious for confirmation that we would not encounter the Rwandan army or the *interahamwe*.

'Only RPF now, down there,' he said.

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THIS WAS OUR SECOND ATTEMPT to enter Rwanda. We had been through the same emigration procedure the night before but all the Mitsubishi's lights failed as we left the police post. I tried hanging out of the window, shining my torch ahead of us, while driving. It wasn't enough. We turned round, found a guest house just back inside Burundi and embarked on our successful infiltration the following morning.

We rounded a bend in the road, deep red earth with tall grasses on both sides. Up ahead, I saw a scattering of youths. Some were wearing scraps of olive green military attire. Most were shod in wellingtons, others flip-flops or training shoes. A few sported berets. One wore a Michael Jackson T-shirt. All had AK47s. They eyed us calmly. I pulled up a few yards from them and got out, smiling manically and swinging my BBC box with the logo prominent.

'Good morning!' I shouted, walking forward with bogus confidence and extending my hand. It crossed my mind that if we or our RPF contacts in Burundi had made some miscalculation and these lads were not the RPF, I had seconds to live. One of the taller, and I assumed more senior, teenage guerrillas, pointed at my box and smiled.

'BBC?' he asked. The majority of the RPF, having grown up in Uganda, spoke perfect English. I noticed a couple of his comrades were holding small short-wave radios to their ears.

'Yes,' I said. 'My name's Andy.'

Suddenly, it was all handshakes and matey grins. This was, thank heavens, the RPF. It was Tuesday 17 May 1994.

'We listen all the time to the BBC World Service,' said the platoon's leader, a young captain called Innocent Kabandana. 'It is how we learn what is going on here. Do you know Catherine Bond? Lindsey Hilsum?'

Both women had, showing immense courage, and in the absence of others, reported heroically since the start of the genocide just a month before.

A middle-aged officer arrived in a pick-up. Also a jovial cove, he read the note from the surgeon, welcomed us warmly and instructed Innocent and his lads to take good care of 'our distinguished BBC guests'.

We would move off, on operations, explained Innocent, with a truck of RPF soldiers in the lead, our vehicle in the middle, a couple of rebels joining Geoff on the back seat, and another RPF vehicle bringing up the rear.

The first hint of the nightmare to come was a jolly splash of colour in the road ahead, just before Mayange. It was a heap of clothing and shoes, like the aftermath of a jumble sale, much of it brown with dried blood. The colours had attracted a crowd of butterflies which danced over these rancid scatterings. There were smart blouses and high heel shoes. Someone had once been proud of these items and had stepped out with dignity in them.

Standing over these remains, it struck me for the first time just how empty Rwanda was. Apart from our RPF companions, we had not seen anyone in twenty or thirty miles. Neither was there any sound of human activity – only birdsong, which was ubiquitous and incongruously cheery. Just a few weeks before, this had been the second most densely-populated country on earth. Everyone who hadn't run from the killers fast enough over the borders into Burundi, Tanzania or the safety of expanding RPF territory, was now dead. Left behind in the empty villages, bewildered goats and cows wandered among the corpses and the sad belongings dropped by terrified, fleeing families.

We had still not passed a living soul by the time we reached Nyamata. Another trail of clothing there led us to the village church, where again the jumble was piled up. This time, mixed in with it were dried yellow bones and skulls. But there were far fewer skeletal remains than clothes. Someone, or something, had removed most of the bodies.

Explosions had taken place here. The face of a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary by the altar had been part blown away. Dots of bright daylight speckled the ceiling, punched there by shrapnel. The impacts of fragmentation, probably grenades, had gouged fresh wood from the pews.

Across the way we found a makeshift hospital in a school building. Inside, a doctor, an RPF sympathiser from Kenya, was amputating at the wrist the hand of a girl. A machete had hacked it down the middle, irreparably. A Rwandan exile, the doctor had abandoned a good job in Nairobi to return to help the cause.

Waiting next for his attentions was a girl of about fourteen, horrifically injured – a machete again – but sitting calmly on a low wall outside. The heavy blade had cleaved away the crown of her skull, as one might slice off the top of a pineapple. She was smiling at me, weakly. Through the wound, remarkably bloodless, I could see her brain.

The scale and the speed of the carnage in Rwanda, almost a million killed in a hundred days, was achievable only by mass mobilization of a collective madness and a slaughter conducted with neighbour-on-neighbour efficiency. It was far from spontaneous. A clique of hard-line Hutus within the government had been planning it for years. Lists of victims had been drawn up, *interahamwe* ('those who work together') organised and trained. It was also done on the cheap. Guns and bullets were an unnecessary extravagance. In the year before the operation began, the Rwandan government ordered 600,000 machetes from China.

Driving east, we came to a bridge over the Nyaborongo river, about seven miles south of Kigali. It was being guarded by another RPF platoon. The officer in command was standing at its centre. I joined him to lean over the rail and look down into the swirling water, the colour of stewed tea. The area around the bridge, like the territory upstream, had been captured only recently by the remarkable rebels.

'The killing is slowing down,' muttered Lieutenant Henry Nsengiyumva. 'A week ago we were getting nine hundred bodies a day in the river. Now it is down to about three hundred.'

As he spoke, the rigid corpse of a boy, around eight years old, still wearing blue soccer shorts, twirled by, his mouth wide open. A woman was next, floating face down in a floral dress. Her hands were tied behind her back, her pants pulled down around her thighs. 'Sometimes they are shot or hacked to death first,' said the Lieutenant, 'but often they just tie their hands and throw them in alive.'

In the ten minutes we spent with the RPF unit guarding the bridge, nine swollen and stinking corpses passed underneath us.

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The aftermath of the massacre at the church, Nyamata, Rwanda, 17 May 1994. Around 10,000 people were butchered here on, or soon after, 7 April 1994.
Geoff Spink

THE RPF'S PRIORITY was to stop the slaughter which the rest of the world had chosen largely to disregard and made no attempt to understand.

As the savagery ripped across the country, the United Nations, while maintaining a nominal presence in Kigali, abandoned shamefully in the capital, and failed properly to supply, its heroic and principled force commander, Lt General Roméo Dallaire and his overwhelmed colleagues. (Years later, I met Dallaire in London, by then almost fully recovered from a post-Rwanda breakdown. I cannot recommend enough Dallaire's account of his Rwanda experience. Once you have read *Shake Hands With The Devil*, you may wish to fling violently your copy at the next politician who propagates the soothing myth of 'the international community').

Only the French maintained their full involvement in Rwanda. A robust ally of the regime which planned the extermination of the country's Tutsi population and moderates of the Hutu community, France had armed and trained those now carrying out the massacres, both army and *interahamwe* militias. And as the

RPF pushed the killers westwards, French special forces stepped in again, not to save the innocent but, under Operation Turquoise, to protect and evacuate the guilty behind a cordon in the south-west of the country.

Thousands of others, women as well as men, who had hacked and hammered to death their neighbours and, in some cases, members of their own families, ran from the RPF advance into eastern Zaire. There they were greeted sympathetically by the same aid agencies who had been conspicuously absent in Rwanda where and when they had been really needed. The killers were also received in the black volcanic wilderness of Mobutu's empire by the dimwit reporters and satellite dishes of gormless international television news channels. These had failed, similarly, to alert the world's attention to the real suffering and to hold to account the criminals they now presented to the world as pitiable refugees, deserving of a huge international relief effort. From these camps in Zaire, the *genocidaires* would reorganise to infiltrate and torment Rwanda for years to come and trigger what became known as Africa's World War, which erased the lives of five million people.

The RPF liberators, meanwhile, were regarded by many in the wider world as the bad guys, despite all evidence available to anyone who bothered to look, simply because they were guerrillas of an invading army. But ignorance and laziness were a couple of the genocide's best international allies. In one of my BBC despatches I said, 'A total and swift RPF victory is Rwanda's only hope as the increasingly desperate killer government rushes to complete its final solution. Children are being hacked to pieces right now and the world dithers. Only the RPF is capable of stopping the slaughter.' I was right. And the rest of the world actually did all within its power to hold up that deliverance.

THE GENOCIDE WAS NOT a tribal conflict, although it was routinely presented as such in the international news media. Just as the victims of the genocide were not exclusively Tutsi, neither was the membership of the RPF. Three of my seven immediate RPF guards were Hutus. The bogus ethnic distinction had been

institutionalised by the Belgians, Rwanda's former colonial masters, and exploited by Rwanda's Hutu-dominated government to justify and encourage the eradication of the Tutsi population. Equally, the RPF campaign was not a tribal war. They were fighting, they said, for all Rwandans. When we reached the east of the country, the first region to be captured and secured by the RPF, survivors and former refugees had already returned to work in their fields.

Major General Paul Kagame, the RPF's brilliant leader and master tactician, had already overthrown one brutal dictatorship. He had been one of only six original guerrillas who had helped Yoweri Museveni to topple Milton Obote in Uganda in 1986. The son of refugees who had fled massacres of the Tutsis in Rwanda in the early 1960s, Kagame had grown up in neighbouring Uganda. After dealing with the murderous regime in Rwanda – he avoided taking Kigali until 4 July 1994 – and later becoming President Kagame, he then masterminded the removal of Zaire's President Mobutu in 1997. To achieve the latter, against all predictions, Kagame's lads walked from Kigali to Kinshasa, a distance equivalent to half the width of Europe. Within weeks of Kagame's victory in Rwanda, his imaginative strategy was being studied and admired at West Point in the United States.

The RPF fighters I met were certainly impressive, highly disciplined and keenly motivated. The majority also happened to be very young. Innocent, the leader of our escort, was no more than seventeen. The smallest among our bodyguards was Derek, a boy whose AK47, when he stood it on its stock, was only a fraction shorter than he. Always wearing a beret – bright yellow or black – he had the most angelic little face. Derek is still in my thoughts whenever I hear of well-meaning campaigns in the western media against 'child soldiers'. This junior guerrilla claimed to be sixteen. I would be amazed if he were older than twelve. It is an inescapable truth that I owe my life to child soldiers – Little Derek and his adolescent comrades. And many more than 800,000 Rwandans would have been killed had it not been for the courage and selflessness of the RPF's kiddie combatants. They showed they had the mettle

of their leader shortly after we left the bridge over the Nyaborongo.

AS WE ROUNDED a bend on a narrow red dirt track, along the rim of a valley which fell away to our left, we came up behind another RPF convoy of three trucks. It was stopped. I got out of the 4x4 and, to find out what was going on, walked diagonally across the road in front of our vehicle to the head of the column. The leading truck was on its side. In the road was the crater left by the explosion of a big mine. One guerrilla, who I took to be the driver, was sitting on the grass, stunned and bleeding a little from his mouth. I asked the commander of this patrol what we should do. After consulting Innocent, he told me to go back to our car and wait. There would have to be some shunting of the vehicles ahead of ours before we could drive on. I walked back to the Mitsubishi, again crossing the road in front of it. Absurd though it seems now, Geoff and I carried on with a bit of work on the back seat, editing some of our recordings, as we waited for the commander's instructions. So, I wasn't paying much attention to the truck ten yards ahead, except to be aware that it had begun to reverse towards us.

There was a tremendous bang and a yellow flash. The flat-bed flipped over like a beer mat. I looked up to see it twirling through the air. Even through our windscreen, which amazingly remained intact, I felt the heat of the blast on my face. Wreckage and rocks poured down, crashing on our roof. When the smoke and dust cleared, the deep crater of another anti-tank mine blast had opened up precisely at the point where I had twice crossed the road. The truck, likewise, had driven over the device once without setting it off. Notoriously unreliable devices that they are, the mine had then exploded when the flat-bed was inching back over it in reverse.

The shooting from across the narrow valley began immediately. I heard a zup-zup-zup all around us. It was a sound I'd never experienced before but instinctively I knew what it was. The broad leaves of banana trees on the edge of the road to our right were thrashing around as the bullets smacked through

them, a split second before we heard the gunfire from the opposite side of the ravine. It was a textbook ambush.

‘Get in the ditch!’ I yelled at Geoff, yanking him after me from the back seat.

It is astonishing how rational and calculating we were under fire. At this previously untested level of fear, a weird composure and serenity came over me. For ten minutes or so in the ditch we worked out our chances. It was an awful choice. We could try to escape by retracing our steps. But the Rwandan army or *interahamwe*, said Innocent, were most likely now behind us. Our other option was to carry on down a road that was clearly full of mines to an RPF base some miles away. Taking our 4x4 was, I decided, out of the question. The little knowledge I had of land-mines at the time, demonstrated dramatically a few minutes before, told me that the weight of a person was unlikely to detonate the anti-tank variety. The weight of our vehicle surely would.

Meanwhile, our RPF lads were on their feet, Innocent and Little Derek Yellow Beret standing on the road, in full view of our attackers, blazing and popping away with return fire, incoming bullets whizzing all about them. Every now and then Innocent looked down to reassure us in the ditch.

‘Don’t mind. Don’t mind, Andy, don’t mind,’ he boomed in a rich, slow voice, his face expressionless, before turning back to blast off a few more rounds.

Geoff and I were resolved to escaping on foot, taking our chances by walking further down the road until the safety of the distant RPF base. I began to work this out. All of our kit and our recordings were still in the back of the 4x4. I was wearing a white T-shirt. It was early evening. The light was starting to fade. I needed something darker, less conspicuous. It was hot and muggy. We’d need some liquid. Also in the Mitsubishi was a crate of tonic waters.

I slithered out of the ditch and reached the back of the car on my belly. I bobbed up for no more than five seconds to open the back door and pull everything out onto the road. Back down on the ground, among our bags, I dragged the lot into the ditch. We

cracked open and drank a few tonics as the skirmish rattled away above us. In the top of my rucksack, I found a denim shirt, dirty but dark blue, and I changed into it from my easy target of the white T-shirt. During a pause in the shooting, I told Innocent what we intended to do. He agreed walking was safer. We pulled on our rucksacks, I picked up my BBC box and, on Innocent's signal, with another lull in the firing, we climbed back up onto the road and began to walk. All the RPF lads of our little group stuck with us. We left a £16,000 Mitsubishi on the hillside. Geoff would later have to make a very awkward and apologetic call to the owner in Bujumbura.

It had crossed my mind before we left the ditch that those who'd planted the anti-tank mines had probably laid anti-personnels too. They had. Within fifty yards of stepping out, I saw two. Barely visible, in the grass at the edge of the road, I noticed the metal prongs of what I would later come to recognise as Valmara 69 bounding mines. Brushing a prong causes an initial detonation which fires vertically a package of ball-bearings with more explosive at its core. At chest height, that too detonates, blasting the steel balls to a radius of thirty yards. These shred and kill anything in their path.

Our chances of getting through this I knew were slender. My knees now felt they would not support my own body weight, never mind with full kit on my back. This was fear so intense my motor neurone mechanisms were shutting down under overload. I was mentally ordering my legs to move. It was with some willpower that I got them to obey. Not to walk meant certain death. Innocent was vague about the number of miles to the RPF base. I suspected he didn't wish to demoralise us. And by now it was getting dark.

While the nightfall gave us some cover from the snipers, we could not switch on a torch to look for evidence of land-mines, if there had been any. (Few have the visible prongs of Valmaras.) To do so would have been to create a shooting gallery for those across the valley. All we could do was walk in the tracks of vehicles and hope.

We passed through a couple of empty villages. I could smell the corpses in the blackened and shattered houses from two hundred

yards away. As we approached these little settlements, the RPF boys clicked off their safety catches. From the north we heard the boom of the big guns around Kigali and caught their flash against the clouds. Every step towards safety was hell. Every one, I knew, could be my last. We could only walk and wait for the bang.

After about three hours of this torment, at the top of a steep hill I saw blasted gable ends in the headlights of an assembly of trucks. The sounds of human activity from there had a quality that suggested friends and security. Innocent was now laughing at our ordeal but still murmuring, ‘Don’t mind.’

In the glare of the lights, all I could see were silhouettes of many rebels and more trucks. These RPF fighters seemed very pleased to see Innocent and his boys and they gathered to shake hands with us too. I fell on my knees before the carcass of what had been some kind of shop. Fucking hell, we were alive and safe. From my rucksack I worked free a bottle of single malt and a plastic Thunderbirds mug. I filled it to the brim, took a deep slug and passed it to Geoff.

Within minutes, the RPF had organised our evacuation in a



My friend and BBC *Today* programme radio producer in Rwanda, Geoff Spink, joshing with Rwandan Patriotic Front rebels – the good guys. On the right of the picture is Little Derek. May 1994. AK

pick-up. Huddled in the back, we tore along a dark but surfaced road at high speed, the branches of overhanging trees rushing above us. At an abandoned hospital, now a major RPF base, somewhere in the east of the country, Innocent and his unit fed us a hot stew and made up beds for us, thin mattresses on the floor of a former children's ward. There were pictures of teddy bears and other comforting nursery characters on the walls. Despite the whisky, I couldn't sleep. My mind was whizzing over the details of the ambush. I reached up to a shelf of books next to my mattress and took the first volume that came to hand. It was a scruffy old hardback copy of Enid Blyton's *Five Go Adventuring Again*.

SEVEN YEARS ON, in 2001, Geoff was working and living in Kigali, teaching the mysteries of radio to the Rwandans. 'Come down,' he said to me on the phone in London. 'I've found Innocent.'

I knew that at some stage I would have to go back. It would be wonderful to see Innocent again but, that reunion aside, I wanted to see the country at peace and in some state of normality. And I needed to travel down that bloody road once more, this time driving, and in safety.

In Geoff's car we quickly found the small town that had been the RPF base and our sanctuary. From there we picked up the red dirt track and I zeroed the mileometer before trundling off in the reverse direction of our hellish march. At the site of the ambush we stopped and got out for a while. It was perfectly still, beautiful and silent. Rwanda had reclaimed one of the most remarkable landscapes in Africa. Bits of the blown-up truck were still in the long grass. I checked the distance from the village on the instrument panel. We had walked that night down a mined road for eleven miles.

In the southern town of Butare we had an emotional reunion and a lengthy lunch with Innocent, now a major in the new Rwandan army. He brought along Sonya, his delightful fiancée. We all roared laughing when, with my encouragement, Innocent encored a few 'Don't minds'.

'Innocent,' I asked eventually, 'what happened to all the other

lads in your platoon? Did they all get through the war?' His broad, rounded face seemed to flatten and fall.

'Not all, no. You remember Derek, the little kid with the beret?' he asked.

'Of course I do,' I said.

'Well, I'm afraid he was killed in battle. Shot, two days after you were with us.'

