

Part One

Zambézia

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Morrumbala Mountain stands at the crux of the long, languid Y that Mozambique describes along the southeast coast of Africa. The mountain rises nearly 4,000 feet from the broad plains on the left bank of the Zambezi, perhaps 125 miles from the great river's mouth. In the course of two months that I spent traveling around Mozambique in 1988, Morrumbala Mountain became for me a sort of lodestar, a persistent mirage at the heart of the country. I kept seeing it from different angles—first from the west, later from the north, still later from due south. In retrospect, it seemed appropriate that I never actually reached the mountain itself, that I always had to content myself with regarding it from a distance.

The first time I saw Morrumbala Mountain, I was sitting in the remains of a tiny, octagonal waiting room—its brick walls had been reduced by bazooka fire to bench height—alongside a grass airstrip near the southwestern border of the north-central province of Zambézia. It was late afternoon, and the clouds in the west had lifted, revealing the mountain's outline. Along with a couple of hundred other people, I was waiting for a plane. All around us was rolling miombo woodland, lush with acacia, cashew, and mango trees and punctuated here and there by sheer rock outcroppings that burst out of the ground like the bluffs in Chinese ink paintings. A light rain began to fall, and a little girl standing beside me whispered, "Calamidades." She was looking at the sky to the southeast. I looked. I saw nothing.

Then other children began pointing in the same direction, all murmuring, "Calamidades." The little girl glanced at me, then looked away. Around her neck, I noticed, she wore a scrap of red felt on a string. Otherwise, she wore only a faded, shapeless piece of burlap. She was a beautiful child, but desperately thin, and she shivered in the cool rain.

"Calamidades" was Mozambican shorthand for the government's ponderously titled Department for the Prevention and Combat of Natural Calamities. The term had come to refer not only to the department itself but to the food and clothes it distributed, which were undoubtedly what those children at the airstrip were thinking of when, their senses sharpened by hunger, they spotted, or heard, the approaching plane. It was, in fact, bringing food. The natural calamities that had befallen Mozambique since the country won its independence from Portugal in 1975 included floods, cyclones, and, in the early 1980s, a prolonged drought that led to a famine in which an estimated 100,000 people starved. The list of not-so-natural calamities had to include Portuguese colonialism itself, which was of a peculiarly oppressive type, and also, paradoxically, the flight of nearly all the Portuguese colonists at independence, an abrupt decampment that left the country with a crippling shortage of skilled workers. The greatest calamity, however, and the primary cause of the extraordinary, countrywide suffering that people in Mozambique by then called simply "the emergency," was unquestionably the war being waged against the government by the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana, or Renamo.

The government and many Mozambicans called Renamo *bandidos armados*, "armed bandits," but any suggestion that Renamo's operations were mere uncoordinated banditry would have been misplaced. The war, which started in 1976 and intensified drastically after 1981, had destroyed the national economy, most of the country's transportation and communications systems, and much of rural society. A United Nations report released in October 1989 estimated that 900,000 Mozambicans had died as a result of the war.¹ As of late 1990, more than 3,000,000 had been driven from their homes, and more than 8,000,000 faced starvation or severe food shortages. Mozambique's total population, meanwhile, was estimated to be 16,300,000.² In 1988, a senior U.S. State Department official ac-

cused Renamo of perpetrating “one of the most brutal holocausts against ordinary human beings since World War Two.”³ Foreign news reports tended to refer to the conflict as a civil war, but the Mozambican government insisted that it was a case of external aggression, that South Africa, its powerful, white-ruled neighbor, was using Renamo as a proxy force.

Whatever it was called, it was a hard war to report on. Although people were dying in all of Mozambique’s ten provinces, there was no front, and there were few pitched battles. The government released information sporadically, usually long after the events described, and the only telephone number for Renamo with which I’d ever had any success was in Washington, D.C. The only way to develop a real picture of the war, therefore, was by getting out close to it and asking questions. The collapse of the national transportation system made even that difficult. Mozambique is twice the size of California; Portugal would fit inside the province of Niassa with room to spare. Most railway lines and highways were either destroyed or frequently attacked, leaving huge parts of the country accessible only by air.

In Zambézia—the most populous province, with an estimated 3,000,000 residents—land travel was impossible except in the immediate vicinity of Quelimane, the provincial capital, and there were no intraprovincial commercial flights. Quelimane is a port city; and on my first afternoon there, I tried to talk my way onto a coastal tramp that was loading grain at the docks, but the captain refused to tell me where he was bound, or even to confirm that he was the captain. I later learned that cargo boats in that area traveled in fear of a Renamo ambush in the narrow coastal estuaries, and that I had failed to convince the captain that I was not an enemy agent.

In the end, I got around Zambézia by hitching rides in a vintage twin-engine Dakota DC-3 that was hauling food to isolated areas as part of an emergency airlift. Millions of Mozambicans were surviving only by the enervating grace of international relief. The airlift in Zambézia was being financed that month by the Swedish government. The next month, it was hoped, the Italian government would pick up the tab.

The charter company that owned and operated the Dakota was a good indication itself of the desperation of the Mozambican government. The company, which was leasing its services

to the national airlines, called itself Inter-Ocean Airways; I was told it was based in Guernsey, but it was clearly South African. The pilots were Afrikaners who lived, they told me, “in the only place *to live*”—South Africa. Their names were Hennie and Ferdie, and they looked and talked like cartoon truck drivers: unshaven, overweight, profane. Hennie, who was in his thirties, flew in swim trunks, sandals, and a filthy T-shirt. Ferdie, who was older, wore aviator glasses and long sideburns. They both made no bones about their contempt for Mozambique or about their motives for working there. “We’re here for the money,” each of them told me. They got paid according to the amount of time they spent in the air, so they flew their old plane hard, working from dawn to dusk, seven days a week, rarely stopping for more than the few minutes it took a ground crew to heave three tons of cargo aboard or throw it out on the ground.

Hennie and Ferdie didn’t care where they flew. When I turned up at the airport in Quelimane with papers from the local authorities giving me permission to fly on the *cargueiro*, they happily rearranged their schedules for the following days so that they would go in the morning to a place that interested me and return there to fetch me on the day’s last flight. My being white may have had something to do with their helpfulness. I was traveling with two black Mozambicans, an interpreter and a young man from the local Calamidades office; but Hennie and Ferdie, who were quite talkative with me, never spoke a word to either of my companions. The man from Calamidades, whose name was Ismail, took to cowering around them and timidly bumming cigarettes. The interpreter, who had come up with me from Maputo, the national capital, just took their measure and laughed. His name was Boaventura das Dividas. He worked with CARE International, an aid organization that helped Calamidades distribute relief supplies, so he had seen a lot of white people in action. Dividas looked about twenty-five, but he was in his mid-thirties and was a man of wide experience. He had served in two armies; spoke at least eight languages, including excellent English, which he had learned as a refugee in Ethiopia; and owned a physical elegance that could not have contrasted more sharply with the grossness of our pilots.

Hennie and Ferdie were unreceptive to ordinary Mozambicans’ pleas for passage. Because of all the uprooting, there

were tens of thousands of people in Zambézia who had been separated from their families; and because land travel had become impossible, many of them collected at airstrips. The worst scene I witnessed occurred at a place that had not been reached by road for over a year. Several peasants had crowded into the back of the Dakota after it unloaded. Hennie spotted them just as he was about to take off for Quelimane. He stormed out of the cockpit and ordered the people off his plane. When they hesitated, he started picking up their bundles and throwing them out the open door. Everybody scuttled off except a rail-thin young man on crutches. He shrank back, but seemed unable to move. Hennie yelled, "Every minute we're on the ground is costing me four dollars and twenty-five cents!" Finally, Hennie grabbed the young man's crutches away from him and hurled them out the door. The young man, whose legs were withered, fell to the floor. While Hennie jogged back toward the cockpit, the young man crawled to the door, where a dozen hands reached over the threshold and lifted him from the plane.

Hennie and Ferdie were, in fact, not allowed to carry passengers without government permission, and they did carry wounded soldiers when they found them, even without permission. Still, when we got back to Quelimane that evening, Hennie seemed to feel a need to justify himself. He blamed the government for not allowing him to carry hardship cases. "There's nothing wrong with the *people* in this country," he said. "It's the *management*." Hennie and Ferdie said they esteemed the Tanzanians who worked in the control tower at the Quelimane airport more than they did Mozambicans. "At least they speak the language," Ferdie said, meaning English. I wondered what Dividas, who was standing with us, made of that remark, but he just caught my eye, smiled wryly, and made no comment. Although both pilots had apparently been working for years in Mozambique, where the official language is Portuguese, neither seemed to speak more than a few words of it.

I was interested in exactly how long Hennie and Ferdie had been working in Mozambique, but their answers to my questions were vague. I was interested because I had heard it suggested that they might once have flown these same planes into the country illegally from South Africa, bringing supplies to Renamo. I never saw or heard any evidence of that myself, but the

South African Air Force, according to Renamo defectors, had often used Dakotas for supplying the rebels, and Hennie and Ferdie certainly seemed at home flying in a war zone. They liked to fly either very low, skimming the trees in order to surprise and thus foil potential snipers, or above five thousand feet, out of the range of small-arms fire. They hadn't figured out what to do about surface-to-air missiles, however, because the missiles' range was greater and, as Hennie explained to me, "they're heat-seeking, and these pipes"—he indicated the Dakota's exhaust pipes—"are hot. We really should put guards on them."

The Mozambican Army—usually known simply as Frelimo, for *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, the country's ruling party—had surface-to-air missiles, and the only two civilian aircraft shot down in the war had both been shot down by Frelimo.⁴ Both of those incidents had been publicly regretted by the government, and stricter anti-aircraft guidelines had been issued afterward. But Renamo, too, had surface-to-air missiles—I had seen a news photograph of a Renamo fighter wielding one⁵—so I was banking on the assessment of a British military journalist, who reported that they apparently didn't know how to use them.⁶

In any case, Hennie and Ferdie didn't know or care who was shooting at them. "You know what they say," Hennie told me. "Frelimo by day, Renamo by night." This little aperçu meant "They're all the same, anyway" and "The government blames everything on Renamo—including its own army's depredations," and it was, in fact, a common saying among some of the expatriates working in Mozambique.

The Dakota was a big, ponderous prewar plane that canted upward severely while on the ground. "Little Annie" was painted under the pilot's window, and Hennie and Ferdie didn't bother with a door—too much trouble to open and close. Inside, it felt like an old railroad locomotive. There were no seats outside the cockpit—just a big, filthy tarp on the floor. There was an axe, painted blue, on the back wall. My companions and I rode on fifty-kilogram sacks of yellow corn and pinto beans stamped with the message, in English, "Furnished by the People of the United States." Sometimes the sacks, which were made of rough white plastic fiber, were covered with bugs, and we would get covered with bugs, too. Hennie and Ferdie said that bullets from

the ground would go through one sack but not two—they had found bullets lodged in the second sack of a pile—so we rode on top of at least two sacks whenever we could. Hennie and Ferdie put steel plates under their seats for the same purpose. Ferdie showed me where they had taken two bullets just a month before I flew with them. One had severed a brake cable, causing them to land awkwardly; the other had missed a fuel tank by three inches. Those shots had been fired near Ile, in northern Zambézia. I flew to Ile with Hennie and Ferdie, and we came in high, then made a steep descent, trying to limit our time as a target. It was their first trip into Ile since getting shot there, but Hennie reckoned that it was fairly safe now. “I’ve had these boys on a diet,” he said, meaning that Ile had received no food deliveries for a month. “They want to see a few loads get on the ground.”

In flight, the Dakota seemed to swim through the air, swerving from side to side like a rudderless barge. A warm wind roared through the open door; the green countryside of Zambézia rambled past below. Zambézia is Mozambique’s most fertile province, as well as its most populous. In peacetime, it was a cash-crop cornucopia of rice, maize, coconuts, cashews, cotton, and, in the northern hills, tea; more than half of Mozambique’s exports came from Zambézia. But roughly half the people in Zambézia had fled their homes since 1981, and most of the land we flew over looked deserted. Fields were overgrown, and swiftly reverting to bush. There were no herds of cattle—a stunning absence anywhere in southern Africa—and no herds of game.⁷ And yet flying over Zambézia was a constant all-points assault of intense visual beauty, with Maxfield Parrish thunderheads rising around the plane like immense, glowing marble pillars and, beneath us, glinting rivers running dark-green threads through a landscape out of Isak Dinesen. It was, in its wildness, ideal country for a guerrilla army. And yet it was scarcely thinkable that a Renamo operated in such scenery.

Hennie and Ferdie banked in for landings at terrifying angles, practically clipping the treetops with the plane’s lower wing. When we came to a stop, one of them would jump out, run around to the front of the plane, and stand guard there, to prevent people from running into the propellers. The danger of someone’s doing so became extreme whenever a sack of food

burst during unloading. I saw crowds at airstrips go wild when even a small amount of corn spilled from a sack. Children, their hunger-bright eyes rolling, would scabble madly after it, stuffing handfuls of dried grass and turf into blackened tin cans along with the kernels. Hennie and Ferdie had had close calls—they had seen miraculous broken-field running between the props by both children and adults. “It’s my nightmare that someone will run into a prop someday,” Ferdie told me. “We really should just turn off the engines, but it takes too long to cool them down and restart them, and time for us is money.”