

Peacekeepers answer the call of the

Congo in 60s

In the early 1960s, news reports of atrocities being committed in the Congo reached the eyes and ears of the world. The struggle for independence in the mid-sized West African state had erupted into harsh violence as military and labor uprisings threw the citizenry into upheaval.

At the same time, the role of Canada's military was experiencing a significant shift toward peacekeeping. Belleville Police Inspector Hugh Brennan is proud to be one of Canada's early peacekeepers.

His first tour of duty was in the Congo. Older Quinte residents may recall members of Canada's Congo contingent at CFB Trenton.

Brennan served from August, 1963 to February, 1964 with the Royal Canadian Army Services Core, which was attached to the #57 Canadian Signal Unit.

The Signals Unit provided essential communications support for Indian and Danish contingencies busy in the African state's hot spots.

"Without our communications support they would have been at a loss," Brennan says.

Although he served in an administrative unit in the more stable capital, Leopoldville, he was told never to go out in public alone.

"If you were going down to the marketplace, you got off the sidewalk when you met a resident coming along. The residents resented the intrusion of the white peacekeepers," Brennan recalls.

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"I accepted it and I understood how they felt."

Being white in the Congo was certainly a change from Eastern Ontario.

"I learned a lifelong appreciation of what it's like to be a visible minority. We would never do anything over there to try and force our beliefs on the people of Leopoldville. When I see news reports now, I know how people feel when they say they are discriminated against."

Stopping to watch a card game at the marketplace led to trouble for Brennan and a friend.

"At the time, the Congolese Army was acting as police. We were there probably to assist the army...Another fellow and I were arrested at gunpoint in the marketplace for watching a guy deal Three Card Monte. He switches the card around and you have to guess where the red queen is.

"All of a sudden, along came a truck full of soldiers. (The dealer) was arrested, we were herded into the back of the truck. We were questioned at length. (The dealer) was booted unceremoniously off the back of the truck and beaten with rifle butts.

"We were taken to a building and questioned (in French) for a couple of hours as to what our involvement with the dealer was. It was quite an unnerving experience. We had visions of never seeing our families again. When you are 22

years old and are thrown into the back of a truck of Congolese soldiers, you think the worse."

Throughout the interrogation, Brennan thought constantly of his wife and their newborn child.

"It was a harrowing experience, but we got through it all right," Brennan remembers.

Now a police inspector himself, Brennan remembers being surprised at the way the Congo army acted. "It was a whole new experience for us, from the rather sheltered environment we grew up in, to see soldiers acting in a police role rather ruthlessly at times. Maybe it was necessary."

One day, on their way downtown, Brennan and a friend saw a crowd gathering near a tree. Curious, they went for a closer look.

"It was strange to see a group of people standing around a tree in a park, to drive a little closer and see they're hanging somebody," he says.

The hanging wasn't organized. It was a rebel-incited spontaneous act, Brennan thinks.

While in Leopoldville, Brennan was billeted in an apartment building which was abandoned by Europeans who had fled for safety. Despite the hostilities, not all his memories are negative.

"It was a beautiful city with wide avenues, a lovely university, lovely stores. A lot of the stores were closed," Brennan recalls. The shops were frequented by Europeans and the few wealthy Congolese.

On Christmas Eve, Canadian soldiers were given a gift of music by the Congolese Salvation Army band.

"They came and played carols for us. In a strange atmosphere and a strange land, it was a touch of home. All we missed was the snow. I've always had a real admiration for (the Salvation Army) ever since."

In February, 1964 when Brennan prepared to go home, he recalls the temperature was 120 F at the airport. "When we arrived in Trenton it was freezing. It was quite a shock."

The weather wasn't uppermost in Brennan's mind, however.

"You went away...hoping your very small part had helped to accomplish something for the good of humanity. I was very fortunate to have been a member of a peacekeeping operation."

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Photo courtesy of Hugh Brennan

Brennan received his United Nations medal in Feb. '64 from Colonel Green, Officer Commanding the 57 Canadian Signal Unit, in front of their offices.