

Kwibohora25: Three key sites in the liberation struggle as told by liberators

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Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) during the liberation struggle. File.

There are many sites and places that shaped the 1990-94 Liberation struggle. But three stand out. They are Gabiro, Ruhengeri and Mulindi.

This writer was yesterday part of a liberation tour organised by the Office of the Government Spokesperson to the three sites.

Gabiro

The area is home to Gabiro Combat Training. However, the Rwandan military's association with the area is not recent. It was one of the first sites captured by Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) when the liberation struggle began in 1990.

It's also in pursuit of capturing the area that RPA endured some of its hardest times, learnt lessons, and made tactical mistakes, but it's also there that they began getting back on their feet.

The liberation efforts took shape on October 1,

1990 with about 400 men and women largely ill equipped while some had no military training.



The Liberation Monument at Parliament depicts former RPA fighters during the liberation struggle. Emmanuel Kwizera.

A day later, the first RPA commander Major General Fred Rwigema was shot and killed by the enemy leaving the troops with no leader, no clear plan and room for tactical errors.

Major General (rtd) Sam Kaka Kanyemera said that the errors were, among other things, a consequence of moving from a guerrilla warfare to conventional warfare which left them exposed and led them to come under fire from the then government forces who understood the terrain better.

Most errors and mistakes would be understandable considering that context at the time; young soldiers, some inexperienced, poorly equipped, exci-

tement over triumphs against the enemy as well as challenges of discipline.

“At the time, there was also some excitement by most who were coming home, a majority of arms were light arms and it was hard to know who exactly had military training or experience. Abandoning guerrilla warfare to conventional tactics was also a costly mistake,” Kaka explained.

It was during efforts to capture Mutara that RPA also lost two other top commanders Major Peter Bayingana and Major Chris Bunyenyezi who both died on October 23 in Ryabega, in Nyagatare.

However, after three battles the RPA captured Gabisiro despite the government forces being supported by forces from neighbouring Zaire.

At this point, President Paul Kagame was yet to join the struggle.

Ruhengeri

Months later, Kagame joined as the head of RPA and many of the challenges were addressed. Discipline was addressed, soldiers were motivated now that there was ‘a man with a plan.’

The troops went out to capture Ruhengeri in Muzanze with Col (Rtd) Dodo Twahirwa as the operation commander.

With Kagame in charge, RPA had a clear strategy on maintaining hit-and-run strategy.

This time, they were better prepared and had taken into context their previous experiences and were not about to repeat previous mistakes.

Their choice of Ruhengeri, according to Gen Fred Ibingira, was informed by a number of things; Ruhengeri was the second major city after Kigali and a foothold of the then government.

A large number of then top military officers of the then regime hailed from there.

By attacking the area, which was among the most secure, it was proof of might and ability and was proof that anything was possible.

“This was a good place to prove to the enemy that we were not fearful and nothing was impossible. We used the element of surprise and guerrilla warfare to overrun them,” Ibingira said. This was January 23, 1991.

In Ruhengeri, the RPA rescued political prisoners, captured arms and set sights on bigger victories.

With high morale, Maj Gen Martin Nzaramba said, they moved on to expand their operational area which overstretched the then government forces capacity making them easy to overrun.

Mulindi

Mulindi was the final major base in the liberation struggle where major strategic decisions were made and where the liberators matured in their approach. It is also where popular football club APR FC was born.

During their free time before the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, especially during negotiations in Arusha, the RPA would play football, basketball and volleyball. They occasionally entertained other teams including the PSD football club.

Amidst the tea farms in Mulindi is where the RPA had their base which also doubled up as the political headquarters for the Rwanda Patriotic Front.

The site was a culmination of their resilience over the years, struggle, mistakes and triumphs.

It is in Mulindi, from a tiny living room and an adjacent bunker that Kagame met his commanders to plan operations. It was also in Mulindi that RPA troops, including Kagame, were watching a football match, African Cup of Nations when they were informed that the presidential jet had been shot down on April 6, 1994.

To Gen Kabarebe’s recollection, there was a match where Nigeria was playing when they overheard that the plane had been shot down.

“I walked over to where he was watching a match with other soldiers to inform him. He asked me to confirm and I did and reported back to him. Shortly, it was announced on RTL (hate radio). It is then that he sent out for all commanders of the various bases and convened a meeting that night,” he said.

The meeting, which was probably one of the most crucial in the liberation of Rwanda and stopping the 1994 Genocide, was held in a tiny room where Kagame resided.

On the agenda of the meeting included asking forces to be on standby and on alert in the event

that killings would take place (as they later did).

It was also from Mulindi, according to Kabarebe, that Kagame sent out a message to Romeo Dallaire calling him to stop the Genocide or else he would do it himself.

It was also from the same location that he sent out a message to then government forces asking them to live up to the true calling of soldiers and not be involvement in the Genocide and Interahamwe activities or else they would face the consequences. They did not heed the call.

The RPA subsequently marched across the country and stopped the killings in July 1994.

Over a million people lost their lives during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi that lasted 100 days.

The country will mark the 25th liberation anniversary tomorrow, July 4.