

Chilubi Incident, March 1959

By Neil Morris, Version 24th May 2013

"Dear George, sorry to disturb your Sunday, but..."
So began a letter from junior District Officer George Cockburn to his District Commissioner (himself called George Walsh) one weekend in March 1959. It was also the headline of a tongue-in-cheek article in the Johannesburg Star that week, relating the misfortunes of the "Sanders-of-the-River type cadet" in trying to arrest a political agitator in Luwingu district in the depths of the North Rhodesian (now Zambian) bush.

Chilubi is an island in the middle of Lake Bangweulu in the north of the Republic of Zambia in central Africa. The lake varies from 3,000 to 15,000sq km according to the season and feeds into the Luapula river which itself becomes the Congo river some 1200km further downstream. Together with the swamps and the floodplain, which cover an area larger than the lake itself, Bangweulu is one of the world's major wetland systems. The Chambeshi River which feeds into the lake from the east is generally agreed to be the source of the Congo, Africa's second longest river.

Under the colonial administration the lake was divided between two districts: Samfya on the west and Luwingu to the north and east, Chilubi being in Luwingu district. To reach the island from Luwingu boma (the district administrative centre literally "fort"), took at least 4 – 5 hours: some 40 miles of bush "road" to the lakeside and two hours by outboard motorboat across the lake. In the 1950's Chilubi was less crowded than now and above all undeveloped, with fishing villages around the shore and a White Fathers' mission at Santa Maria in the centre of the island. (The population now approaches 30,000 and Chilubi has become the Boma of its own district.)

After World War II, sometime in the middle 50s, it was thought sensible to create a sub-boma at Mucinshi village on the island. This consisted of a bungalow for the visiting District Officer and a bunkhouse for the district messengers – the local

(unarmed) rural police. A line of mango trees led down to the inlet where the boma launch would be moored beside several dugout canoes including a large one, much treasured by the administration, christened Chanda Mucinshi. George Cockburn, newly appointed District Officer, arrived on posting in Luwingu in August 1958. By then it was the custom for an officer from Luwingu boma to spend a month every so often "being a presence" on Chilubi. As he recalls: "I was sent off there in Oct/Nov '58, with few instructions and no idea what I was supposed to do. So I spent my time birdwatching, canoeing round the swamps, fishing, making friendly gestures, painting the boma launch, being a welcome visitor to the White Fathers' Santa Maria Mission, a rather splendid and long-established place, occasionally paying out mine remittances, chatting with the Native Authority (who were mostly ex ANC people exiled from the Copperbelt after the '50s strikes and as much ignored by the populace as was the Colonial Administration). All this taught me a lot about how the locals lived and gave me a good grounding in Chibemba, the local language. That visit was entirely peaceful, if a bit boring and very hot."

(ANC, the N.R. African National Congress, was the country's first African political party. It had been set up in 1948 and Harry Nkumbula had been its president since 1951. In 1953 its General Secretary, one Kenneth Kaunda, broke away from the NRANC, set up the more radical Zambia ANC, instituted a campaign of civil disobedience and was jailed. He was not released until January 1960 when he was promptly elected President of the United National Independence party (UNIP) which resoundingly won the country's first general elections in 1964.)

In March 1959 George Cockburn was sent off by his District Commissioner for another month on Chilubi, and on this occasion his wife Barbara, a graduate biochemist with a grounding in first aid who had arrived in Luwingu at Christmas,

accompanied him. At that time almost the whole of Africa was in a ferment of anti-colonialist fervour, stirred up principally by the Non-Aligned bloc of countries at the U.N. Pro-independence movements were being repressed to varying degrees in colonies both French and British; and the following year France would launch no fewer than fourteen of her dependent African territories to independent statehood.

What happened then in Northern Rhodesia was that the colonial Governor, Sir Arthur Benson, decided to ban the ZANC. Legislative Council elections with limited suffrage were due to be held on 20th March. The ZANC announced that it had decided not only to boycott the election but also to prevent voters from casting their ballots by all possible methods, including violence. On 12th March the Governor therefore issued a decree banning ZANC and declaring illegal the whole organisation and its activities. The decree also placed under house arrest all the leaders of the party's numerous branches, with the aim of preventing the trouble planned for Election Day. In a broadcast speech at this time he spoke of "the forces of darkness and death" – which was certainly inflammatory in the context and can only have added to the political tensions in the country. In accordance with another of the Governor's policies, most of the rural areas, including Chilubi Island, were without a permanent police presence. George and his wife were called back to Luwingu boma, a full day's journey, to be briefed about the decree; they also heard the broadcast at that time. In these circumstances the D.C's instruction to George, to return to Chilubi and implement the Governor's decree with one vintage rifle and three District Messengers, seems with hindsight to be irresponsible in the extreme.

For the D.O. this meant that "our idyll – or idle time – on Chilubi was interrupted by instructions from my DC in Luwingu to go and close down the ZANC office on the island, confiscate any incriminating material which might justify the Governor's announcement that Kaunda was equivalent to Kenyatta and ZANC to Mau-Mau. I was not to try to arrest anyone but I was to tell

them that they were banned. This, I innocently did, full of authority, leading my small posse along the coast to the fishing village where the ZANC Office was located. But they did not like it and became very hostile. So we prudently withdrew and cycled off to the White Fathers' mission at Santa Maria, some eight miles away. But on the way my messengers arrested a bloke they said was a ringleader of the hostile group. I foolishly acquiesced and we took him back to the sub-boma. When the locals learned what had happened, they marched en masse that evening to the bungalow, demanding the release of the prisoner. In fact, I had given him a beer, and Barbara and I were being very sociable with him."

Barbara remembers that evening: "the Messengers were terrified. The angry crowd/mob wanted the ZANC man set free. They also objected more and more violently to him staying so long in the bungalow with us – they banged on the windows and doors, shouted, milled about outside, as one does. The ZANC man meanwhile, as I recall, was quite enjoying himself and wanted to have an interminable 'discussion' with George." But the situation outside got nastier and nastier and it seemed only sensible to agree to release their "prisoner" – which they did. "We then went peaceably to bed."

The incident might have ended there, had not George (quite correctly) sent off a situation report to his DC the next morning, a Sunday, stating what had happened. When the boatman set out with George's letter, a rumour started to circulate through the villages that the army was to be called in, which further inflamed an already unstable situation on the island. The reaction of the DC was to assemble all his dozen or so District Messengers and John Sharp the District Assistant (a sort of Warrant officer to Cockburn's 2nd lieutenantancy), arm them with whatever weapons he could put his hands on, and descend on Chilubi that same day in the launch. Most of the Messengers had shotguns or game rifles; the boma possessed nothing more than three old .303 rifles of dubious reliability, one of which was already on the island under George's control. At dawn the next morning, the DC ordered

George to remain at the sub-boma with Barbara and their Alsatian dog, while he led his motley force on an expedition to restore order. The launch followed them along the coast, so as to be on hand to bring them all back to the sub-boma with their prisoners.

The DC found a large, noisy crowd in and around the ZANC office, some armed with sticks and spears. Disconcerted at this unexpected demonstration of hostility and heavily outnumbered, he attempted briefly to parley with some apparent ringleaders, but this only made matters worse and the crowd began to advance threateningly on the official party. Their withdrawal quickly became a headlong retreat down the bush path back to the sub-boma and its bungalow, four miles away. Shots were fired on both sides (??) and the DC suffered a minor wound.

As George Cockburn put it succinctly: "Unfortunately, the DC was even less welcome than I had been. The locals, now very roused, became extremely threatening. Warning shots were fired, the DC received a superficial spear wound and it was decided to retreat back to the bungalow on foot and in haste. The boatman, on hearing the uproar, decided to retreat safely across the lake back to the Luwingu shore and report to the Boma some 40 miles further on." (He must have known that this was quite pointless as all the boma's senior staff and messengers were now on the island. In fact he did not go very far; he was on hand the following morning and played a useful rôle in the aftermath of the "battle".) "So the DC and his party reappeared at the bungalow, hotly pursued by a large and angry mob of several hundred, quite a few of them with spears and sticks."

The wounded DC, the situation seemingly quite beyond him, appeared first, supported by a Messenger, a long way ahead of Sharp and the other Messengers. The withdrawal had become a shambles and any prisoners they may have taken earlier had by then evaporated into the bush.

The official party had few weapons and no means of escape, but George tried to form a defensive line in front of the buildings at the water's edge.

The crowd advanced slowly and some of them moved round behind the bungalow to attack from the side. One of these threw a spear which struck the D.A. in the left lung, causing a serious wound. Sharp fell to the ground, his attackers moved in with murderous intent and the DC, who was unarmed, shouted to George, who had his .303 rifle, to fire. George fired several times, killing one and perhaps a second villager; the messengers also fired their various weapons into the crowd in a ragged volley, causing more injuries, some fatal. Sharp was now seen to have a gaping wound in his right shoulder. It is a matter of discussion whether this was caused by further spear thrusts (as affirmed by George Cockburn and by his wife Barbara) or – as Sharp later maintained – by a softnosed bullet from a weapon fired by one of the boma group further down the hill, nearer to the shore. If this were the case, it must have been fired from a game rifle brought down from the boma by the DC's party the day before, for which alone such rounds were available. At this late date it is not even possible to determine whether any game rifles were on site; it is however a fact that softnosed bullets for military rifles (such as the boma's three .303's) had by then been outlawed internationally for more than fifty years and would not have been available in Luwingu. Furthermore, Sharp wrote to the Cockburns some months later to thank them for having between them saved his life. None of the information that I have obtained relating to firearms used and casualties caused makes reference to the very different type of wound which a softnosed bullet would have made.

The combined effect of the gunfire and the barking of the Cockburn's Alsatian was that the crowd, brought up short by the noise and shocked by the sight of the dead and injured, gave up the attack and retreated to the top of the slope, at what they thought was a safe distance. Sharp could now be brought down to the sub-boma where Barbara Cockburn skilfully bound up his wounds and those, less serious, of several others in the party. It was fortunate that she was present and had the knowledge and sang-froid to bind him up efficiently in dangerous circumstances. (She was

understandably proud that at Samfya the medics decided Sharp was so well bandaged up that there was no need for further dressing and they sent him straight on to hospital in the capital Lusaka by air ambulance.)

A stalemate then developed. The mob held off, the wounded Sharp was in a bad way and there was no obvious means of escape. Fortunately, some of the messengers knew that Luke Mumba's boat would pass nearby before long. Luke was a Jehova's Witness and his rickety boat was a ferry which served the swamps area out of Samfya. When it miraculously appeared on schedule, the Boma clerk canoed out to intercept it, got him to stop and explained the situation. The entire official party was able to board without interference from the crowd and the ferry headed off to Samfya, a journey of some three hours. Meanwhile the sub-boma and outbuildings were now burning. A government flight Cessna by chance passed overhead and observed this but did not see the party nor realise what was happening.

A little later the White Fathers of the Santa Maria mission learned what had happened 10 miles away, when several of the wounded arrived at the Sisters' dispensary, accompanied by a noisy crowd.

When Father Boumier learned that the battle had caused a number of casualties, he took the holy oil and a first-aid box and left for Mucinshi on his motorcycle. On his way he passed through villages that were completely deserted, for those from the crowd had fled the island or were hiding in the thick bush. He arrived at Mucinshi village in mid-morning and without hesitation rode straight into the crowd, many of whom were excited and in a mood to commit further exactions. Now follows the tale as he told it, of the events he was involved in that day: "I found there four corpses lying on corrugated iron roofing sheets under a mango tree, and a crowd in ferment busy burning the government buildings, the compound and the locally-owned co-operative stores which were full of foodstuffs. I cannot say that I was well received. One leader said: look what you have done. Is this good? And the whole crowd went even further in expressing their pain & anger. I wasn't very proud,

and I told them that I had not come to talk (about the events) but to help the dying and succour their wounded. The dead were still warm so I gave the last unction to the one Christian and conditional baptism to the three pagans. Then a Christian said to me: "the police are going to come and we shall all die. Give us a general absolution as they do in wartime." I was a little embarrassed but the moment was critical: I could not go to the confessional and hear the confessions of several hundred penitents. I therefore told the Christians who wanted absolution to group together and kneel down. I exhorted them to contrition and pronounced over them the formula of absolution.

Things were beginning to calm down but the rump was still determined to finish burning all the boma buildings and destroy all their plantations of trees, and then to go & kill the local chief of the island, before returning to the landing point to await the police and die to the last man defending themselves.

I then suggested that they should all gather round their dead to pray for them. Many of them – especially the men – knelt down and together we said about ten rosaries. Then I said to them: "Are you really all ready to die and present yourselves before God for your life to be judged? And even if you are ready, what will your death achieve? What good will it do your country? Can I not help you? I am ready to go & find the D.C. and tell him that you will give yourselves up and that you are even prepared to hand over the Zambia party leaders, if the government promises not to do any harm to those who are innocent." The crowd was transformed and everyone agreed. Then I added: "but I want 2 or 3 elders with me who will hear everything I shall say to the government officer, to whom I shall speak in your language."

Immediately, three old men came forward and we went together down to the shore to look for some means of rejoining the Europeans' boat. The government motor-boat was sitting offshore under guard of the Messengers; this was just what we needed to get there quickly. Boarding a dug-out canoe, the three elders and I set off towards the motor-boat. But when we came close, the motor-

boat moved off, fearing an attack. When the occupants of the boat saw the signs I was making to them and recognised a White Father in the dugout, they let us approach. The guards told me that they had enough fuel to reach Samfya; I asked them to take us there straightway, which they agreed to do, having understood the purpose of our mission. On the way, an aeroplane flying very low let fall a message which said: Police & doctor are on their way. We carried on for three hours and then we met a large motor-boat which was heading for Chilubi and contained 16 police of the mobile unit and their European captain. I transferred to this other boat and returned to Chilubi with them, having explained to them the situation, the circumstances and the purpose of my actions. Orders were given to ensure a peaceful disembarkation. We arrived at Mucinshi without incident and the police were able to land in good order. As I was getting ready to return to the mission, the people said to me: "Please stay with us Father, otherwise they will kill us all." I reassured them and returned to the mission at about 7 p.m. having eaten nothing since the morning. Everyone was awaiting me in a state of great anxiety, because rumours of all sorts had been spread about my fate."

Everyone at the mission stayed calm throughout this day. An observation plane flew over the island & the mission three times during the day, flying at about twenty metres above the trees. The people were deeply impressed by it: at first they were terrified, then afraid, and finally a feeling of security. The White Sisters treated several people with injuries in their dispensary.

Tuesday 17th March. In the morning, the mission church was full for the Mass. Police reinforcements arrived on the island, and the plane continued its observation flights. In the afternoon, equipment for telegraphic communication with Fort Rosebery and Kasama was installed at the mission harbour. During the night, five police officers with their men arrived at the mission, having carried out a patrol round the island. In general the population reacted favourably; a few groups of houses where the people were still obviously hostile were burned.

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday: the police patrolled round the island and occupied a few small areas not yet pacified; no incidents. Arrests of those responsible multiplied, reaching a total of 103.

Saturday 21 March: the Europeans and the police came back to Mucinshi and the D.C. came to the mission in the name of the Provincial Commissioner, to thank the White Fathers for their courageous attitude and their efficient help during the days of the disturbances.

It was a great relief to the missionaries to see that their Christians of the mission – all or almost all of them – had remained on the side of their Fathers. Even in that tragic moment after the battle, they had very quickly recovered their calm in the light of the missionary's words, showing themselves ready to do everything that he asked of them. Some Watch-Towers (*bacitawala*) (Jehovah's Witnesses) later told the catholic teachers of Mucinshi school: "You are really much better than us. We didn't do anything to help our countrymen, but your Fathers came at once to help us and intervene on our behalf. On Palm Sunday there was a big crowd at the church service."

The History of the Northern Rhodesia Police carries a laconic report of the incident: "the DC's party with thirty messengers arrived on the island late on 15 March. Next morning twenty one persons were arrested for various offences but were released in a brief confrontation with hundreds of tribesmen at Muchinchi sub-boma in which the DC received a spear wound and his assistant was so seriously wounded that he had to be flown to hospital in Lusaka. Four villagers were killed and ten wounded. A police Mobile Unit arrived the same day and quickly restored order. More than 100 adult males were arrested: some 50 were tried and convicted on the spot for minor thefts etc. Others were remanded for trial at Kasama where 32 were convicted of offences from riot to attempted murder receiving sentences of from five to ten years."

The police had a well-nurtured reputation as a non-sense law enforcement agency. Fr Boumier had found several villages deserted by their inhabitants and the rioting crowd was convinced that they

would all die when the police came to the island. The "mopping-up" was carried out quickly and efficiently, with minimal resistance. For the unit, this was a minor incident, but for the population of the island it was a traumatic experience which has marked the folklore of the struggle for independence.

Apart from the article in the Johannesburg Star, the incident received almost no publicity within the

Postscript:

The N.R. Government Gazette of 4th December 1959 notified for public information that Her Majesty the Queen had been graciously pleased to approve the immediate award of the George Medal to the Rev. Father Augustin Boumier of the Santa Maria Mission, Chilubi Island.



His Excellency The Governor of N. Rhodesia, Sir Arthur Benson, made a three-day journey to the far north of the country in order to officiate personally at the medal presentation ceremony on

country. According to Sharp's daughter, her father reckoned that the affair had been hushed up because not only would it not have looked good if it were known that one colonial officer had shot and wounded another, especially in the atmosphere of pre-independence tension then prevailing, but also because the D.C. came out of the affair rather badly.

14th January 1960. "He arrived by government launch from Samfya and found all the school-children, neatly dressed, lined up between the harbour and the mission. After a few minutes for putting on his official full dress uniform, His Excellency took the Royal Salute and inspected the Guard of Honour formed by the Police Mobile Unit. The citation was read and the medal was presented. Besides the Governor there were present: two Provincial Commissioners, two D.C.'s and several other Provincial Administration officials. The White Fathers of the Kasama diocese were of course present in number, including "His Lordship of Kasama and Monsignor Pailleux" and Fr Boumier's brother, himself a White Father at the Lubwe mission in Luwingu district. A congratulatory letter was received from the Secretary of State for the Colonies." Fr Boumier left the province soon afterwards, for a holiday in France.

John Sharp spent most of the next five years in Lusaka undergoing a long series of treatments for his severely injured right arm. He was frequently in severe pain and the use of his arm was not restored for some five years. He was invalided out of the N.R. government service in 1963 and later served for ten years in the South Pacific Commission, in Fiji. He died in April 2013, aged 89.

Governor Benson left N.R. in April 1960, aged 52, after 25 years' service.

George and Barbara Cockburn returned to the U.K. in 1968; he was offered a job at the University of Lancaster and in due course rose to become Secretary of the university.