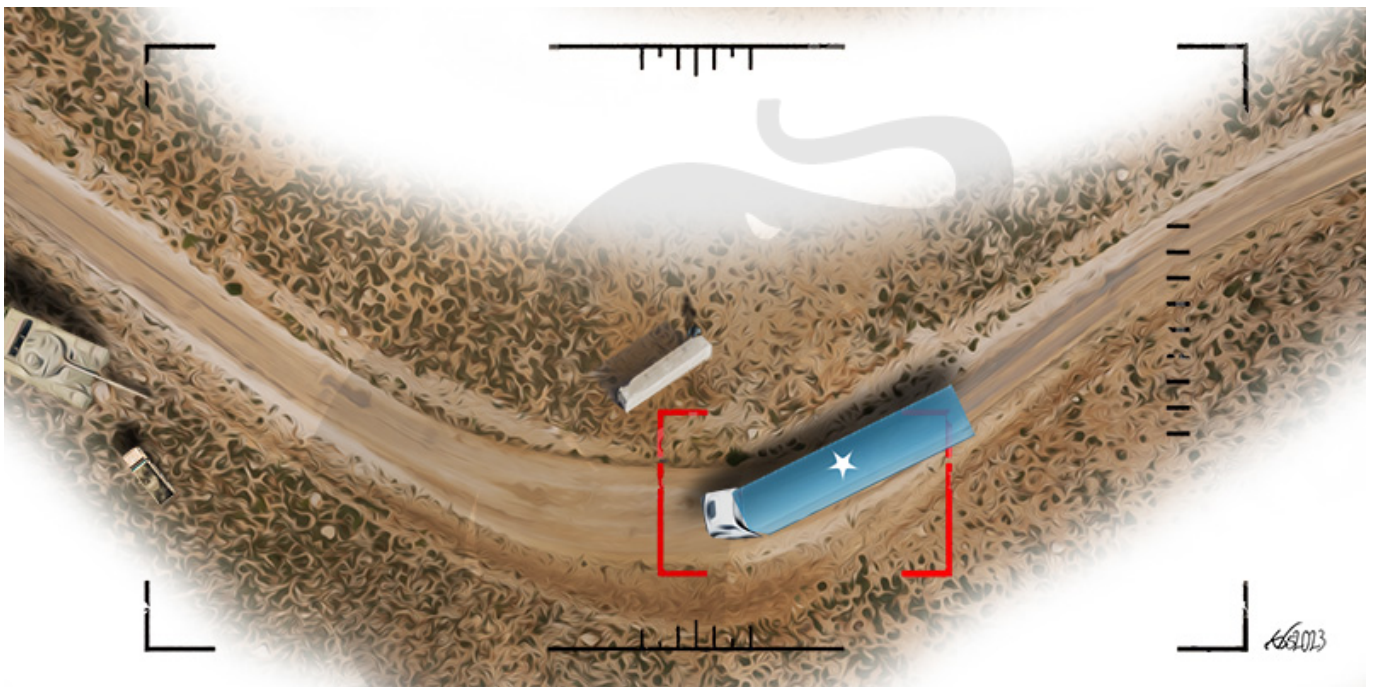




# Pattern of Life and Death: Camp Simba and the US War on Terror

By Margot Kiser



Though it claimed the lives of three Americans, not 2,403, some liken the January 2020 al-Shabaab attack at Manda Bay, Kenya, to Pearl Harbour. The US would go on to unleash massive airstrikes against al-Shabaab in Somalia.

“We Americans hate being caught out,” a spy-plane pilot and contractor recently told me. “We should have killed them before they even planned it.”

Both the Manda Bay and Pearl Harbour attacks revealed the vulnerability of US personnel and forces. One brought the US into the Second World War. The other has brought Kenya into the global-and seemingly endless-War on Terror.

Months before launching the assault, members of the Al Qaeda-linked faction bivouacked in mangrove swamp and scrubland along this stretch of the northeast Kenyan coast. Unseen, they observed the base and Magagoni airfield. The airfield was poorly secured to begin with. They managed not to trip the sensors and made their way past the guard towers and the “kill zone” without being noticed.

At 5.20 a.m. on 5 January, pilots and contractors for L3Harris Technologies, which conducts airborne intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) for the Pentagon, were about to take off

from the airfield in a Beechcraft King Air b350. The twin engine plane was laden with sensors, cameras, and other high tech video equipment. [Seeing thermal images of what they thought were hyenas scurrying across the runway, the pilots eased back on the engines.](#) By the time they realized that a force of committed, disciplined and well-armed al-Shabaab fighters had breached Magagoni's perimeter, past the guard towers, it was too late.

Simultaneously, a mile away, other al-Shabaab fighters attacked Camp Simba, an annex to Manda Bay where US forces and contractors are housed. Al-Shabaab fired into the camp to distract personnel and delay the US response to the targeted attack at the airfield.

Back at the Magagoni airfield, al-Shabaab fighters launched a rocket-propelled grenade at the King Air. "They took it right in the schnauzer," an aircraft mechanic at Camp Simba who survived the attack recently recalled to me. Hit in the nose, the plane burst into flames. Pilots Bruce Triplett, 64, and Dustin Harrison, 47, both contractors employed by L3Harris, died instantly. The L3Harris contractor working the surveillance and reconnaissance equipment aft managed to crawl out, badly burned. US Army Specialist Henry J Mayfield, 23, who was in a truck clearing the tarmac, was also killed.

The attack on Camp Simba was not the first al-Shabaab action carried out in Kenya. But it was the first in the country to target US personnel. And it was wildly successful.

AFRICOM initially [reported](#) that six contractor-operated civilian aircraft had been damaged. However, drone footage released by al-Shabaab's media wing showed that within a few minutes, the fighters had destroyed six surveillance aircraft, medical evacuation helicopters on the ground, several vehicles, and a fuel storage area. US and Kenyan forces engaged al-Shabaab for "several hours".

Included in the destroyed aircraft was a [secretive](#) US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) military de Havilland Dash-8 twin-engine turboprop configured for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions. A [report](#) released by United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in March 2022 acknowledges that the attackers "achieved a degree of success in their plan."

Teams working for another air-surveillance company survived the attack because their aircraft were in the air, preparing to land at Magagoni. Seeing what was happening on the ground, the crew diverted to Mombasa and subsequently to Entebbe, Uganda, where they stayed for months while Manda Bay underwent measures for force protection.

I had the chance to meet some of the contractors from that ISR flight. Occasionally, these guys—some call themselves paramilitary contractors—escape Camp Simba to hang out at various watering holes in and around Lamu, the coastal town where I live. On one recent afternoon, they commandeered a bar's sound system, replacing Kenyan easy listening with boisterous Southern rock from the States.

*Sweet home Alabama!*

An ISR operator and I struck up an acquaintance. Black-eyed, thickly built, he's also a self-confessed borderline sociopath. My own guess would be more an on-the-spectrum disorder. Formerly an operator with Delta Force, he was a "door kicker" and would often—in counter-terror parlance—"fix and finish" terror suspects. Abundant ink on his solid arms immortalizes scenes of battle from Iraq and Afghanistan. In his fifties, with a puffy white beard, he's now an ISR contractor, an "eye in the sky". His workday is spent "finding and fixing" targets for the Pentagon.

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He tells me about his missions—ten hours in a [King Air](#), most of that time above Somalia, draped over cameras and video equipment. He gathers sensitive data for “pattern of life” analysis. He tells me that on the morning of the attack he was in the King Air about to land at the Magagoni airstrip.

We talked about a lot of things but when I probed him about “pattern of life” intel, the ISR operator told me not a lot except that al-Shabaab had been observing Camp Simba and the airstrip for a pattern of life study.

What I could learn online is that a pattern of life study is the documentation of the habits of an individual subject or of the population of an area. Generally done without the consent of the subject, it is carried out for purposes including security, profit, scientific research, regular censuses, and traffic analysis. So, pattern-of-life analysis is a fancy term for spying on people en masse. Seemingly boring.

Less so as applied to the forever war on terror. The operator pointed out the irony of how the mile or so of scrubland between the base and the Indian Ocean coastline had been crawling with militant spies in the months preceding the attack at Camp Simba. Typically, the ISR specialist says, his job is to find an al-Shabaab suspect and study his daily behaviours—his “pattern of life.”

### **ISR and Pattern of Life are inextricably linked**

King Airs perform specialized missions; the planes are equipped with cameras and communications equipment suitable for military surveillance. Radar systems gaze through foliage, rain, darkness, dust storms or atmospheric haze to provide real time, high quality tactical ground imagery anytime it is needed, day or night. What my operator acquaintance collects goes to the Pentagon where it is analysed to determine whether anything observed is “actionable”. In many instances, action that proceeds includes airstrikes. But as a [private military contractor](#) ISR operator cannot “pull the trigger”.

In the six weeks following the attack at Magagoni and Camp Simba, AFRICOM launched 13 airstrikes against al-Shabaab’s network. That was a high share of the total of 42 carried out in 2020.

Airstrikes spiked under the [Trump administration](#), totalling more than 275 reported, compared with 60 over the eight years of the Barack Obama administration. It is no great mystery that the Manda Bay-Magagoni attack occurred during Trump’s time in office.

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Several al-Shabaab leaders behind the attack are believed to have been [killed](#) in such airstrikes. The US first launched airstrikes against al-Shabab in Somalia in 2007 and increased them in 2016, according to data collected and analysed by UK-based non-profit Airwars.

Controversy arises from the fact that, as precise as these strikes are thought to be, there are always civilian casualties.

“The US uses pattern of life, in part, to identify ways to reduce the risk of innocent civilian casualties

(CIVCAS) (when/where are targets by themselves or with family) whereas obviously Shabaab does not distinguish as such and uses it for different purposes," a Department of Defense official familiar with the matter of drone operations told me.

The Biden administration resumed airstrikes in Somalia in August 2021. AFRICOM claimed it [killed 13 al-Shabaab](#) militants and that no civilians were killed.

According to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, Mustaf 'Ato is a senior Amniyat official responsible for coordinating and conducting al-Shabaab attacks in Somalia and Kenya and has helped plan attacks on Kenyan targets and US military compounds in Kenya. It is not clear, however, if this target has been fixed and killed.

A few days after the second anniversary of the Manda Bay attack, the US [offered a US\\$10 million bounty](#).

The American public know very little about private military contractors. Yet the US has become addicted to contractors mainly because they provide "plausible deniability". "Americans don't care about contractors coming home in body bags," says [Sean McFate](#), a defense and national security analyst.

These airstrikes, targeted with the help of the operators and pilots in the King Airs flying out of Magagoni, would furnish a strong motive for al-Shabaab's move on 5 January 2020.

The Pentagon carried out 15 air strikes in 2022 on the al-Qaeda-linked group, according to the Long War Journal tracker. Africom said the strikes killed at least 107 al-Shabaab fighters. There are no armed drones as such based at Camp Simba but armed gray-coloured single-engine Pilatus aircraft called [Draco](#) (Latin for "Dragon") are sometimes used to kill targets in Somalia, a well-placed source told me.

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The contractor I got to know somewhat brushes off the why of the attack. It is all too contextual for public consumption, and probably part of army indoctrination not to encourage meaningful discussion. He had, however, made the dry observation about the al-Shabaab affiliates out in the bush near the airfield, doing "pattern of life" reconnaissance.

The strike on Magagoni was closely timed and fully coordinated. And it appears that the primary aim was to take out ISR planes and their crews. It was private contractors, not US soldiers, in those planes. I pointed out to the operator that those targets would serve al-Shabaab's aims both of vengeance and deterrence or prevention. His response: "Who cares why they attacked us? Al-Shabaab are booger-eaters."

With that he cranks up the sound, singing along off-key:

*And this bird, you cannot change*

*Lord help me, I can't change....*

*Won't you fly high, free bird, yeah.*

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