

HOLY GHOST IN AFRICA

The story of Fr John Kingston

Samuel Kingston



The bullets peppered the van. Beside him, his colleague slumped over, killed instantly. Suddenly he felt the searing pain as the bullets ripped his flesh. While they continued to hail down, he jumped from the van. He was still alive. This is the miraculous story of my uncle, Fr John Kingston.¹

The year is 1985, the location a country road, in the war-torn southwest African country of Angola. The missionaries were travelling between villages in order to keep a promise to the locals that they would return to say Mass on Pentecost Sunday. The priests had been forced to leave their outpost in late April as the civil war between government forces and the opposing rebels descended on the area.

Since independence from Portugal in 1975, Angola had been governed by the MPLA,² a Marxist organisation supported by Russia and Cuba. Year by year resistance to the governing party had increased and by the late 1970s full-blown civil war had broken out between the governing MPLA and the UNITA³ rebels led by the flamboyant Jonas Savimbi and supported by the USA, South Africa and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Each faction was fighting to control Angola's mineral wealth. In effect, for many years the

civil war was a surrogate for the Cold War. Initially the war raged solely in the south of the country. For a while, UNITA became the second-largest recipient of US covert aid, after the Afghan Mujahideen.⁴ By the early 1980s, UNITA's presence was starting to be felt in the northern province of Malanje. Angola was not a safe place for the son of a West Cork farmer.

Born in Clonakilty in 1948, John grew up in Clogheen House, a mile outside the town. He was fourth in a family of nine siblings. He loved horses from a young age and competed and won at many gymkhanas. It was his father's dream that he would join the Irish army and become a member of their equestrian team; yet his adventurous spirit and his admiration for his uncle, Fr Jim Barrett – a missionary for the Holy Ghost Fathers – influenced John's decision to move in a different direction. John also joined the Holy Ghost Fathers who are now known as the Spiritans. He was ordained a priest in 1976. Little did John realise the adventures that lay ahead.



Fig 1: John Kingston with his uncle Fr Jim Barrett, c. 1960 (Photo: courtesy of the Kingston family).

John was sent to Angola in 1977 as part of the Holy Ghost Fathers mission; the Portuguese Holy Ghost Fathers were no longer safe in the country given the anti-imperialist feeling in the aftermath of achieving independence. Instead, an international group was sent to replace them. As well as John, this group was made up of two Frenchmen, Bernard Duchene and Bernard Ducrot, and one Scottish, James Flynn.

John, a young and idealistic Catholic missionary priest quickly established himself in the provincial community of Malanje, some 400km east of the capital Luanda. In 1983 John, along with Angolan Fr Joao Kuvalela, was appointed to the quiet rural parish of Kiwaba Nzoji, 100km from the city of Malanje.⁵ They were joined a year later by French Spiritan Fr Jean-Étienne Wozniak. The priests had little in their small house: no electricity or running water. The villagers were poor, uneducated and many were very superstitious. Life was simple in the village. The next village seemed a different world away. The priests encouraged modernity in farming techniques, hygiene and child welfare; they wanted to educate the people.



Fig 2: Fr John Kingston with villagers shortly after his arrival in Angola in the late 1970s (Photo: from Fr J. Kingston's personal photo collection).

In April 1985, the three priests were forced to abandon their mission and seek refuge along with their parishioners in the city of Malanje as the civil war crept ever further north and the raids of the UNITA guerrillas came closer and closer to their isolated village. As they left Kiwaba Nzoji, Jean-Étienne promised locals who refused to leave that he would return to say Pentecost Mass.

At 6.30am on Pentecost Sunday, 26 May 1985, John and Jean-Étienne set out on the two-hour journey from Malanje to Kiwaba Nzoji. They travelled in their trusty and well-known Land Rover. Moving from village to village, they stopped at a small hamlet, just before a 7km stretch of isolated forest road, to give a local man, Manuel, a lift. He warned that UNITA had been in a nearby village the previous night but, conscious of their promise, Jean-Étienne agreed from the passenger seat that they should press on through the forest. According to Jean-Étienne ‘... a missionary who is not prepared to risk his life is not a real missionary’.⁶

Out of nowhere, just a few miles out from their destination, as they approached a fork in the road, the first bullet pierced the jeep. Suddenly the bullets came raining in on them. Jean-Étienne took a bullet in the chest that came in through the front of the jeep. John got hit four times on the left lower back as he slouched over to protect himself. As the bullets continued to tear through the jeep, John ducked, accelerated and jumped out the door, shouting ‘*Somos Padres!*’ (‘We are priests!’). Shot four times, he lay bleeding on the dirt road but still alive. Manuel, the local man, was also injured. The rebels soon realised what they had done. They were not happy with the situation. With John expecting to be killed, the tension was palpable. The rebels informed him that they had fired a warning shot and when he did not stop they continued firing. Still they did not execute him. In the propaganda war against MPLA, killing priests would not look good. Instead, John would become their hostage. The rebels decided to burn the Land Rover but John asked that they first remove Jean-Étienne. He was removed and after some brief prayers were said, he was buried in a shallow grave just a few yards from the ambush site; he was just twenty-nine years old. Leaving Jean-Étienne’s body in the grave at the side of the road, the small brigade of ambushers marched John and Manuel into the cover of the forest.



Fig. 3: The priests’ burnt-out Land Rover after the ambush, May 1985
(Photo: from Fr J. Kingston’s personal photo collection).

The group’s medic cut the bullets from John’s back and side, and plugged the wounds with cotton wool. As he stitched the holes with a needle, he explained to John and Manuel that they could not be released because government soldiers might kill them and blame UNITA. By afternoon, with John and Manuel in toe, the group of 152 moved off in single file through the jungle.

For the next eleven days, the anguish of the ambush hurt John more than the physical injuries he suffered. For these gruelling days, he was forced to build a relationship with his captors being marched under a searing sun through the jungle, wading through swamps and across rivers, setting up camp each night. Given a radio, he listened for news from the outside world. Between bouts of fever and weakness, he tried negotiating with the group’s leader but he stood powerless as the rebels raided villages for supplies. He even argued with his

captors that Manuel be given the stretcher instead of him. John managed to say Mass on a makeshift altar in a clearing in the jungle. Many of the women captured by the rebels to work as slaves regretted that they had missed the service. Later, he was informed that the time he said this mass was exactly the same time as the funeral mass in Malanje for Jean-Étienne. His body had been found on the day of the ambush and was brought back to Malanje Cathedral, where a large crowd came to mourn his killing. His parents in France were told of his death by his colleague Bernard Ducrot who was on holidays in France at the time. Years later, John would hold a Mass in Jean-Étienne's seminary in Allex, France, to celebrate the life of his departed friend.

On the eleventh day there was a commotion in the UNITA camp. John, barely able to walk and unsure of what was happening, felt mixed emotions – fear, relief and anxiety. Either they were to die or be released. The following is John's own personal account of his release:

On Wednesday morning June 5th we walked to a village called Mola where, after a meal a ceremony with a speech and some songs, I was handed over to the local people with instructions to help me get back to my mission. Manuel was not released and later I heard that UNITA killed him that afternoon.

That afternoon I walked faster than usual and eventually ended up riding a bicycle accompanied by a villager. The road being a sandy, grassy little used track, I got more and more tired and used to lie now and then to recover. Eventually night fell and I could no longer keep up. Miguel the man with me rode into Kiwaba Nzoji without me. When he came back I told him to get help. He came back with a crowd who carried me into the little town. There, amidst great celebration I was fed and slept. I did not feel well, physically. Next morning I went to see the Cuban military who looked after me, fed me, gave me a razor to shave and took me on a dangerous journey to Lutau, 18km away where I was put on a helicopter and flown to Malanje airport.

After landing in Malanje airport I was escorted by military to the Cathedral mission. The bishop had just arrived there and he and the SPIRITANS and other missionaries who were there were amazed and

delighted to see me. It was a moment I will never forget. Many people in Malanje City celebrated that night. When it was realised how weak, tired and unwell I was they moved me to the mission of St. Joseph of Cluny sisters. I almost died of weakness that night.

That evening the bishop Eugenio Salessu, came and sat on the bed and told me about the nightmare it had been for him and the other missionaries as it dawned on them on Pentecost Sunday that we had in fact been attacked. Then the struggle to reach the scene, finding Jean Etienne's body, looking for mine. Due to an unfounded rumour about three bodies on the road, news of my death had been sent to Luanda and to my family in Ireland. On June 6th when I arrived in Malanje, word was sent very quickly to my family that I was alive and not so badly injured.⁷

Yes, the Kingston family back in Clonakilty had initially received the news that John had been killed. The family went into mourning but this quickly turned into relief as word came through of John's capture yet each day brought anguish as they waited for news from a distant country with poor communication links.⁸ UNITA for their part tried to implicate John and Jean-Étienne as being part of a Cuban convoy, thus attempting to absolve themselves from responsibility for the ambush. Thoughts grew wild as people became anxious. One such plan involved sending Irish troops into Angola to rescue John but this suggestion was unrealistic. John's situation was debated in the Dáil and attracted the attention of the media around the globe.⁹ John's family would simply have to wait to see how things panned out.¹⁰ Joining the Kingston family was one of John's original colleagues in Angola, Fr James Flynn. He had been on holiday in Co. Clare and immediately came to Clonakilty. He offered his support to the family and noted in his diary:

On Monday the 27th May I went to Ireland. Tom [James' brother] picked me up at Shannon. We were watching the 9 pm news, when it showed a map of Angola with Malanje pinpointed, and the news-reader said that two priests had been ambushed in Malanje province: one a Frenchman and the other Irish, Fr. John Kingston. They said

that the first reports were that they were both dead, but later reports said that their car was found burned out on the road (in the woods not far from Kiwaba Nzoje) but no bodies were found. I phoned the Irish provincial, Fr. McCarthy, and then the Kingstons in Clonakilty. The family were in anguish. I tried to reassure them.

I carried on to Clonakilty. I arrived at 11 am. Everyone was delighted to see me. I explained the situation. In the evening we celebrated a Mass in the house (for Jean-Étienne and for John's wellbeing). About 70 people took part, between family and neighbours. I explained the situation in Angola, and in the homily said that it would be strange in a country where thousands were dying in attacks, landmines, ambushes etc if no missionary ever died. I tried to give meaning to death. And I encouraged them to hope for John's safety, saying I personally was convinced he was alive, otherwise they would have found his body. This cheered the family up.

In the morning Mrs. Bridie Kingston [John's mother] was pessimistic, because on waking up at 6 am she heard crows cawing, and when she went outside she saw two great crows sitting on either side of the gate in the yard. It was a "pishogue", a premonition. She [said] John was dead. We talked quite a bit in the family about these premonitions. Betty (John's sister-in-law) said that Dick (John's brother) felt that John was safe. Iris [John's sister] said she had dreamed of the sea a week before the attack, and whenever she dreams of the sea there is a death in the family, but she felt John was not dead, because the dream turned out happily.¹¹

Meanwhile, John battled malaria and hepatitis B for two months in hospital in Malanje before he was finally well enough to return home to his family in Clonakilty. John returned to Cork Airport on 8 August to a hero's welcome.

While convalescing at his family home in Clonakilty, John struggled to accept his survival. He asked God why he was spared. And what about those he had left behind? Yet the story does not end there. After only two months at home, John broke the news to his family that he would return to Angola and continue his missionary work. He made this decision knowing that between



Fig. 4: Fr John Kingston recovering with gunshot wounds in his back shortly after his release by UNITA captors, June 1985 (Photo: from Fr J. Kingston's personal photo collection).

1976 and 1985, five Holy Ghost priests had been killed or had disappeared in Angola as well as more than fifty missionary workers.¹² Against his parents' and friends' wishes, John bravely returned to Angola in February 1986. Although distraught to see his return to a war zone, his family were not surprised by his decision. For the next six years, as neither a friend to the governing MPLA nor UNITA, John battled the civil war in Angola in solidarity with the

communities in which he was based: building wells, schools and churches, as well as providing education.



Fig. 5: Fr John Kingston driving a tractor in Angola, c. 1990
(Photo: from Fr J. Kingston's personal photo collection).

But John again found himself in trouble. He was now stationed in Huambo. He spent nights hiding behind pillars as bombs screeched nearby, fearful that the next bomb would land too close for comfort. In 1992, Jonas Savimbi would reject the general election result and ordered UNITA to return to war. He went on to capture the city of Huambo and almost succeeded in overthrowing the MPLA government. Gradually, the tide turned against UNITA and a second peace agreement, the Lusaka Protocol, in late 1994, prevailed but not for long.¹³

In 1992, back in Ireland, John was appointed to the role of Director of Novices for the Holy Ghost Order (Spiritans). The war in Angola would rage for years until MPLA finally achieved victory in 2002, but by this time more than eight-hundred thousand people had been killed and approximately four



Fig. 6: Fr John Kingston meeting Pope John Paul II at Huambo Airport, Angola, in 1992
(Photo: from Fr J. Kingston's personal photo collection).

million had been displaced.¹⁴ The war devastated Angola's infrastructure and dealt severe damage to the nation's public administration, economic enterprises and religious institutions, leaving deep rifts in Angolan society.

Fr John is now based in Mozambique, helping the people of the Chimoio district in the western province of Manica. His parish is half the size of Munster and once again, over thirty years later, he finds himself in a tense situation. Mozambique is a country that is one spark away from reigniting the fuse of civil war as the government forces FRELIMO¹⁵ and the opposition party, RENAMO,¹⁶ compete for control. His community is inundated with internal refugees fleeing conflict.

Each Christmas morning, the hardy swimmers of Clonakilty take the plunge in Inchydoney's icy waters to raise much-needed funds for John and

his missionary work. This event, which started in 1981, has become a key social event in Clonakilty's Christmas calendar. In recent years, the funds raised have helped John enormously with his projects in Mozambique. Fr John is always aware of how fortunate he is. His story is far from over.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Most of this article is based on interviews with Fr John Kingston from August 2017. I am currently developing a feature-length documentary film to tell John's story.
- 2 MPLA: *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola).
- 3 UNITA: *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola).
- 4 Vines, A. 2016. 'Continuity and change in Angola: Insights from modern history'. *International Affairs* vol. 92, issue 5, pp. 1229-37, at p. 1232.
- 5 Kuvalela, J. 1985. *A Little Journal of Kiwaba Nzoji Mission*. Malanje, Angola.
- 6 Stated by Jean-Étienne Wozniak to Fr John Kingston, April 1985.
- 7 Kingston, J. 1992. 'Missionaries as victims of violence'. *Agents of Evangelisation*.
- 8 *Cork Examiner* 28 May 1985, 29 May 1985 and 11 June 1985; *Sunday Tribune*, 21 Nov. 1985.
- 9 In *Dáil Éireann*, TD Proinsias De Rossa raised his concern for the priest's well-being with then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Peter Barry. De Rossa suggested that the government contact South African authorities given their involvement in funding and arming UNITA forces but the minister did not embrace this suggestion, see 'Private notice question: Disappearance of Irish priest', *Dáil Debates*, 29 May 1985, available to view at <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie> [accessed 12 Sep. 2017]. For international coverage of John's release see, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 June 1985.
- 10 This picture of what the Kingston family experienced during the days after receiving the news regarding the ambush was constructed from interviews with the following members of the Kingston family in July 2015: Vincent Kingston, Anne Keane (née Kingston), Iris Walsh (née Kingston) and Bridie Kingston.
- 11 Flynn, J. 1985. *The Diary of Fr. James Flynn C.S.Sp.* Unpublished.
- 12 *Associated Press*, 29 May 1985.
- 13 Vines, 'Continuity and change in Angola', p. 1232.
- 14 PERI. 'Modern conflicts: Conflict profile: Angola (1975 - 2002)', pp. 1-2, at p. 1, <http://www.peri.umass.edu/fileadmin/pdf/Angola.pdf> [accessed 20 Oct. 2017].
- 15 FRELIMO: *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (Mozambique Liberation Front).
- 16 RENAMO: *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana* (Mozambican National Resistance).

THE BATTLE OF JUTLAND AND THE LOSSES FROM WEST CORK

Tony McCarthy



So here, while the mad guns curse overhead,
And tired men sigh with mud for couch and floor,
Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead,
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor,
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed,
And for the secret Scripture of the poor.¹

Introduction

The verse above is from a poem called 'To My Daughter Betty, the Gift of God' written by Irish poet and nationalist politician Tom Kettle, a couple of days before he died on a French battlefield, just three months after the Battle of Jutland. The poem was dedicated to his three-year-old daughter Elizabeth. While it was written from a soldier's perspective fighting in the trenches during the First World War, it also accurately describes the circumstances that sailors found themselves in during the Battle of Jutland. The 'mad guns'