

Adapt or Die: The Cultural Foundations of Military Performance in the Sierra Leonean Civil War

by

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Since the end of the Second World War, mercenary groups have played significant roles in wars throughout the developing world. However, despite being consistently outnumbered by their opponents, these groups have a highly uneven record of military performance. Indeed, some modern mercenary groups have managed to defeat far larger state and insurgent militaries while similar sized groups of private soldiers have experienced crushing defeats at the hands of numerically superior adversaries. Taking this into account, how can we explain the military performance of modern mercenary groups in asymmetric conflicts?¹

Scarce literature exists on the performance of mercenary groups and that which does exist consists largely of descriptive case studies offering an overview of specific groups or the private military industry. In brief, most of the leading works on mercenary forces are long on empirical data and narrative but short on theory and explanation.² This paper seeks to redress this failing by evaluating my own normative theory of military performance against the empirical record of one of the best-known conflicts involving mercenaries: a twenty-one month period of the Sierra Leonean Civil War, from May 1995 to January 1997. The theory hypothesizes that a military force's cultural norms influence its tactical behaviour (its military effectiveness), which, in turn, influences its battlefield military performance. However, given that warfare is an interactive activity, the theory reasons that the battlefield military performance of opposing military forces is primarily the result of the interplay of their relative military effectiveness. In other words, the theory argues that the interactive clash of combatants' norm-influenced tactical behaviour is the primary determinant of victory or defeat on the battlefield.

¹ Military performance, the dependent variable in this paper, is specifically concerned with winning and losing battles. It is the outcome of battle; it is not what a military does in battle. Military performance is not a characteristic of an organization but rather the result of an organization's activity. This concept does not equate with military effectiveness, another major variable in this paper referring to the range of military behaviours that a military force is capable of undertaking. Armed forces may be highly effective yet still be defeated. For example, the German Army was arguably the most effective fighting force during both the First and Second World Wars yet it ultimately lost numerous battles and both conflicts. Indeed, the German army is often cited as an example of extraordinary military effectiveness because it fought so well even when faced with more numerous and better armed foes. Therefore, while military effectiveness and military performance are related concepts, it is important to recognize that they are quite different; military effectiveness is only one possible determinant of military performance. Martin Van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939-1945* (London, UK: Arms and Armour Press, 1983); Allan Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," *International Security* 11, no. 1 (Summer 1986).

² Indeed, only two major works of international relations theory directly examine mercenaries: Deborah D. Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

The core logic of the theory is that a grossly outnumbered force must be highly flexible and adaptable if it is to perform the range of military tasks required to defeat materially superior opponents. Norms encouraging the pursuit of a wider range of tactical behaviour, such as personal initiative, should, therefore, increase military effectiveness, which, in turn, should increase a group's prospects for military success. If the theory is correct, a military force's performance should be conditioned by the degree to which the members of the force have been indoctrinated into norms that encourage them to be militarily effective. Specifically, the theory reasons that military forces that strongly emphasize norms encouraging creative thinking, decentralized authority, personal initiative, technical proficiency, and group loyalty, should exhibit greater military effectiveness than forces that deemphasize these norms.³ Moreover, it reasons that military forces exhibiting greater military effectiveness should experience greater battlefield military performance than less effective groups, all else equal.

Taking this into account, the theory predicts that the materially weaker party in an asymmetric conflict, which the mercenaries were in this case, should only be able to defeat its materially stronger opponent if the weaker party emphasizes behavioural norms that encourage it to perform a wide range of tactical behaviour – that is, be very militarily effective – and the stronger party does not emphasize these norms because this should allow the weaker party to exploit the weaknesses and counter the strengths of the stronger party and, through this, defeat it. With this in mind, the theory correctly predicted that the mercenary firm, Executive Outcomes (EO), should have defeated its materially superior opponent, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, during the Sierra Leonean Civil War.

Ultimately, the results of this analysis suggest that the collection of behavioural norms, or military cultures, maintained by the combatants in this conflict played a decisive role in deciding the outcomes of the war and the major battles that took place within it. Taking this into account, the normative theory of military performance offers a convincing explanation of military performance in this asymmetric conflict.

This paper is composed of four main parts: it first provides a brief overview of the Sierra Leonean Civil War. Second, it outlines the military cultures maintained by the primary combatants in this case. Third, it tests the normative theory of military performance against the evidence of this case. Finally, it concludes with a summary of the findings of this analysis.

Historical Background on the Sierra Leonean Civil War

The Sierra Leonean Civil War began in May 1991 when Foday Sankoh, a former corporal in the Sierra Leone Army (SLA), led his Revolutionary United Front rebels in an invasion from Liberia.⁴ With the backing of Liberia's Charles Taylor, who sought to destabilize

³ The author wishes to acknowledge Kenneth Pollack's scholarship on Arab military forces for helping to inspire the development of this theory.

⁴ Ibrahim Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2 (June 1998): 207-208; Ibrahim Abdullah and Patrick Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front: A Revolt of the Lumpenproletariat," in *African Guerrillas*, ed. Christopher Clapham (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 177; Michael Cheng, "Sierra Leone: The State that Came Back from the Dead," *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 149; Anthony Clayton, *Frontiersmen: Warfare in Africa Since 1950* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 195-196; James R. Davis, *Fortune's Warriors: Private Armies and the New World Order* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, Ltd., 2000), 133; Andrew Dorman, "The British Experience of Low-Intensity Conflict in Sierra Leone," *Defense & Security Analysis* 23, no. 2 (June 2007): 186; Danny Hoffman, "Disagreement: Dissent Politics and the War in Sierra Leone," *Africa Today* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 5; J. Anyu Ndumbe, "Diamonds, Ethnicity, and Power: The Case of Sierra

Joseph Mohmoh's regime in retribution for its support for anti-Taylor elements in Liberia, the RUF quickly forced the unskilled SLA to relinquish large parts of Sierra Leone, including numerous civilian settlements and diamond-producing areas.⁵ These actions reflected Sankoh's ultimate goals of becoming the president of Sierra Leone and enriching himself through the illegal diamond trade.⁶

Fearing imminent defeat, a group of SLA officers, led by Captain Valentine Strasser, staged a coup in May 1992.⁷ Though it successfully ousted Mohmoh's ineffectual government, the coup failed to alter the course of the war. Consequently, in January 1995, Strasser chose to hire a force of 58 Gurkha mercenaries commanded by Robert MacKenzie, an American soldier of fortune with extensive experience in African conflicts.⁸ Although originally contracted to train an elite commando unit for the SLA, the Gurkhas were quickly pressed into combat against the RUF. The force achieved some initial successes but, on February 24, it walked into an RUF ambush and MacKenzie was killed. Leaderless, the mercenaries promptly quit the conflict.

Not dissuaded by this experience, and facing certain annihilation at the hands of the 4,000-strong RUF, Strasser turned to Executive Outcomes to defeat the rebels on behalf of his government.⁹ The South African mercenary firm had already developed a formidable reputation during its successful campaigns in Angola against the materially superior União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola and its owners were keen to pursue new business opportunities.¹⁰ It deployed an initial force of approximately 80 soldiers in May 1995, which expanded to

Leone," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 94-95; Sarah Percy, *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm of International Relations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210; Alfred B. Zack-Williams, "The Political Economy of Civil War, 1991-1998," *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (February 1999): 147.

⁵ Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction," 207-208; Cheng, "Sierra Leone," 149; Dorman, "The British Experience of Low-Intensity Conflict in Sierra Leone," 186; Jimmy D. Kandeh, "What Does the 'Militariat' Do When it Rules? Military Regimes: The Gambia, Sierra Leone and Liberia," *Review of African Political Economy* 23, no. 69 (September 1996): 390; Ndumbe, "Diamonds, Ethnicity, and Power," 94-95; Zack-Williams, "The Political Economy of Civil War," 147.

⁶ Clayton, *Frontiersmen*, 195-196; Hoffman, "Disagreement," 5; Ndumbe, "Diamonds, Ethnicity, and Power," 94-95; Percy, *Mercenaries*, 210; Adam Roberts, *The Wonga Coup* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2006), 12; A. Zack-Williams and Stephen Riley, "Sierra Leone: The Coup and Its Consequences," *Review of African Political Economy* 56 (March 1993): 93-94.

⁷ Guy Arnold, *Mercenaries: The Scourge of the Third World* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 132; Clayton, *Frontiersmen*, 195-196; Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 134; Hoffman, "Disagreement," 5; David Isenberg, "Combat for Sale: The New, Post-Cold War Mercenaries," *USA Today* March 2000, 14; Kandeh, "What Does the 'Militariat' Do When it Rules?," 390; Percy, *Mercenaries*, 210; Zack-Williams and Riley, "Sierra Leone: The Coup and Its Consequences," 91.

⁸ Clayton, *Frontiersmen*, 197; David J. Francis, "Mercenary Intervention in Sierra Leone: Providing National Security or International Exploitation?," *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (April 1999): 326; Percy, *Mercenaries*, 210; Peter W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 112; Alex Vines, "Gurkhas and the Private Security Business in Africa," in *Peace, Profit or Plunder?: The Privatisation of Security in War-torn African Societies*, ed. Jakkie Cilliers and Peggy Mason (Johannesburg, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies, 2000), 130.

⁹ Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction," 226; Eeben Barlow, *Executive Outcomes: Against All Odds* (Alberton, SA: Galago Publishing, 2007), 388; Clayton, *Frontiersmen*, 197; Globalsecurity.org, *Revolutionary United Front (RUF)*, Globalsecurity.org; (Available from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ruf.htm>), 3; Herbert Howe, "Private Security Forces and African Stability: The Case of Executive Outcomes," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 2 (June 1998): 313; Isenberg, "Combat for Sale," 14; Percy, *Mercenaries*, 210; Paul Richards, "War as Smoke and Mirrors: Sierra Leone 1991-2, 1994-5, 1995-6," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 22 (Spring 2005): 395; Ken Silverstein, *Private Warriors* (New York, NY: Verso, 2000), 164-165.

¹⁰ Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, 78.

approximately 250 personnel at the height of the conflict in 1996.¹¹ From the outset of its deployment, the firm went on the offensive, forcing the RUF away from Freetown, the Kono diamond areas, and virtually all of the territory it had captured since the war began.¹² In November 1996, with the RUF reeling from numerous defeats at the hands of EO's personnel, Sankoh opted to sign a peace treaty with the government, which ended this stage of the Sierra Leonean Civil War.¹³

The Combatants' Military Cultures

The military cultures maintained by the combatants in this conflict placed varying degrees of emphasis on five norms of military effectiveness.

Creative Thinking

Executive Outcomes placed strong emphasis on creative thinking.¹⁴ Indeed, Cobus Claassens, a commander of EO's airmobile Fire Force of light infantry in Sierra Leone, argued plainly that all of the mercenaries recognized the value of thinking creatively about the tactical situations confronting them in order to adapt their plans and behaviour to best suit the requirements of these situations. As he put it,

The South African way of thinking was to state (identify) a problem and then to go through an appreciation, a military appreciation that will provide you with several solutions to solve the problem, and then you are left on your own (to implement your preferred solution). South African military training pretty much unconsciously found a way to engender creativity... Once you have appreciated all the factors – enemy, own forces, terrain, the weather – you've considered every single factor that there could be... in your plan, then you often get to the best solution for the problem.¹⁵

From this it is clear that creative thinking formed one of what Duncan Rykaart, who served as the firm's first senior commander in Sierra Leone, called the "interlocking principles" that guided all EO operations.¹⁶

In contrast to the military culture of EO's force in Sierra Leone, the RUF actively discouraged creative thinking among their troops. In both emphasis and technique, the RUF are

¹¹ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 388; Scott Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens," (George, SA: August 22, 2007).

¹² Silverstein, *Private Warriors*, 164-165.

¹³ Roberts, *The Wonga Coup*, 12.

¹⁴ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 184; Jan Breytenbach, *The Buffalo Soldiers: The Story of South Africa's 32 Battalion, 1975-1993* (Alberton, SA: Galago Publishing, 2002), 198 and 211; Scott Fitzsimmons, "First Interview with Des Burman," (Cape Town, SA: August 24, 2007); Scott Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Johann Anderson," (Cape Town, SA: August 23, 2007); Herbert Howe, *Ambiguous Order: Military Forces in African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 197; Peter McAleese, *No Mean Soldier: The Story of the Ultimate Professional Soldier in the SAS and Other Forces* (London, UK: Cassell, 2003), 204 and 211; Piet Nortje, *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit* (Cape Town, SA: Zebra Press, 2004), 74; Robert Young Pelton, *Licensed to Kill: Hired Guns in the War on Terror* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2006), 255; Peter Stiff, *The Covert War: Koevoet Operations Namibia 1979-1989* (Alberton, SA: Galago Publishing, 1999), 59; Al J. Venter, *War Dog: Fighting Other People's Wars* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2006), 361.

¹⁵ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

¹⁶ Venter, *War Dog*, 390.

broadly similar to the Simba rebels, who fought on the losing side of the Simba Rebellion in the Congo in 1964-1965, because both forces stifled creative thinking by socializing their personnel into believing that magic, not tactics, would allow them to prevail over any enemy.¹⁷ In particular, both forces socialized their troops to believe that magical powers had been conferred on them, drawn from *dawa* in the case of the Simbas and voodoo in the case of the RUF, which would make them immune to bullets. RUF troops were specifically told that they had been made “invisible” to bullets, meaning their enemies’ bullets would either miss them or flow harmlessly off their skin, like water.¹⁸ Captured RUF troops spoke freely about these beliefs. As one mercenary put it, “They’d go into battle actually believing that we couldn’t see them. It didn’t matter that the rest of their buddies, similarly ‘sanctified,’ were dying in clusters each time they connected with us. They go on fighting believing irrationally that they had the ‘protection’ of their forefathers.”¹⁹ Kamajor hunters, who were very familiar with RUF beliefs and firm believers in voodoo themselves, confirmed this assessment.²⁰

Decentralized Authority

Executive Outcomes’ force in Sierra Leone also placed strong emphasis on decentralized authority.²¹ Indeed, as had been the norm in the South African security units that contributed personnel to EO, the firm’s junior officers and enlisted men were encouraged and expected to make command decisions on their own, rather than seek authorization from their superiors.²² As Claassens recalled, “in our war in Namibia... you would find that a platoon commander... would be given a piece of land half the size of England to patrol and dominate with his 30 men. And he had to figure out, after being given a block on a map and enough ammunition to sustain his men... how to do this. This is how I grew up.”²³ Claassens argued that this same emphasis on decentralized authority was present in EO. For example, he recalled that the firm’s Fire Force was “a pretty self-contained, self-functioning unit. We didn’t need (very much) input (from his superior officers). We needed a mission and the means to do it, and we were left to figure it out.”²⁴ He went on to state that, “Our command element... left it (decisions) to the guys on the ground. We lived in the forest, in the jungle, and formed our little groupings to get on with it.”²⁵ Claassens considered this feature of the force’s military culture to be a key factor contributing to its success in Sierra Leone.

¹⁷ George H. Dodenhoff, "The Congo: A Case Study of Mercenary Employment," *Naval War College Review* 21 (April 1969): 46; Piero Gleijeses, "'Flee! The White Giants Are Coming!': The United States, the Mercenaries, and the Congo, 1964-65," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 210-211; Mike Hoare, *Congo Mercenary* (London, UK: Robert Hale, 1982), 20; Benoit Verhaegen, "La Premiere Republique (1960-1965)," in *Du Congo au Zaire, 1960-1980*, ed. Jacques Vanderlinden (Brussels, Belgium Centre de Recherche et D'information Socio-politiques, 1984), 126.

¹⁸ Jim Hooper, *Bloodsong: An Account of Executive Outcomes in Angola* (London, UK: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 239; Richards, "War as Smoke and Mirrors," 387.

¹⁹ Venter, *War Dog*, 500.

²⁰ Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, 113; Venter, *War Dog*, 519.

²¹ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 189; Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 138; Fitzsimmons, "First Interview with Des Burman.," Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 43; Venter, *War Dog*, 392.

²² Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 138.

²³ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

EO's command structure in Sierra Leone reflected the firm's emphasis on decentralized authority.²⁶ As in Angola, the force was divided into three main groups: a Fire Force of light infantry that operated from helicopters and in unarmoured Land Rovers, a Mobile Force of mechanized infantry and BMP-2 armoured infantry fighting vehicles, and an Air Force of Mi-17 and Mi-24 helicopters.²⁷ Moreover, each of these forces was further subdivided into smaller units. For example, the Fire Force was divided into three teams of approximately a dozen soldiers, each led by a lieutenant; these, in turn, were divided into two "sticks" or "sections" of approximately six soldiers, which were led by a sergeant.²⁸ Finally, an independent mortar team rotated back and forth between the Fire and Mobile Forces, offering indirect fire support on demand.²⁹ Within this structure, the firm's senior commanders, in consultation with the commanders of the Fire and Mobile Forces, developed "loose plans," which were then left to the Fire and Mobile Force commanders to modify and implement as they saw fit.³⁰ The commanders of the individual subunits that made up the Fire and Mobile Forces were assigned tactical objectives and roles, and while their activities were coordinated by Claassens and his counterpart in the Mobile Force, Jos Grobler, they retained considerable freedom to determine how to accomplish their assigned tasks and adapt to the tactical conditions confronting them.³¹

In contrast to the mercenaries, the RUF did not emphasize decentralized authority. Indeed, Sankoh, who was called "Papay" ("father") by his subordinates, personally determined the activities of every unit in the RUF, handing down his orders via radio to his senior officers, who then relayed them, unchanged, to their subordinates.³² RUF officers were neither authorized nor encouraged to make decisions on their own. Rather, if Sankoh failed to communicate precise orders to them, they were expected to stop what they were doing and consult him for further instructions, in person if necessary. As one RUF soldier put it, Sankoh "communicates commands to us by radio message, regularly. If a week goes by without getting radio messages, then our commanders go to visit Sankoh."³³ Sankoh made it clear to his subordinates that he would not accept any deviation from his orders once they were issued. Indeed, he had anyone who questioned his orders executed, often immediately and in public. For example, when a fresh recruit questioned why the RUF had been ordered to kill and maim civilians and steal their property, Sankoh ordered him shot on the spot. According to one witness of the event, "no one... uttered a word again."³⁴ Timothy Sherry, a member of the RUF, confirmed that, "it is not possible for anyone to disobey his (Sankoh's) command."³⁵

²⁶ Howe, "Private Security Forces and African Stability," 308.

²⁷ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens.," Venter, *War Dog*, 463.

²⁸ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 326; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

³² Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* (London, UK: Hurst & Company, 2005), 62; Richards, "War as Smoke and Mirrors," 388-389.

³³ Krijn Peters and Paul Richards, "Why We Fight: Voices of Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 68, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 204.

³⁴ Quoted in Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 61-62.

³⁵ Quoted in Ibid.

Personal Initiative

Executive Outcomes' force in Sierra Leone also strongly emphasized personal initiative.³⁶ For instance, Claassens argued that the elite South African security units that contributed personnel to EO shared a belief in George S. Patton's maxim that, "a good plan executed now is better than a perfect plan next week."³⁷ As Claassens put it, "you should make a plan until you think it can work and then go for it. Stop niggling the details. Stop trying to make a perfect plan because you will never get to the end of it," and head out to implement it by engaging the enemy at the earliest opportunity.³⁸ He recalled that, by the time the Sierra Leone operation began, in May 1995, the members of the force were already socialized into taking initiative: "We were well-motivated. It was a question of 'do the job or get killed.' The self-motivation got you out of bed every morning... because that made us what we were."³⁹ This last statement suggests the mercenaries considered taking initiative to one of the most important elements of their military culture.

Other member of the force clearly shared this belief in the importance of taking initiative. For example, Neill Ellis, one of the firm's Mi-17 pilots during the war, was observed telling a fellow pilot his approach to warfare: "Smack 'em! Smack 'em again and then hit the fuckers once more, just to be sure.... that's the only way to do it!"⁴⁰ Referring to the RUF, Bert Sachse, the firm's senior commander in Sierra Leone, reportedly told his subordinates to "Go and get them!" and encouraged his men to "maintain the initiative and don't even give them (the RUF) time to think," during every briefing.⁴¹ Beyond this, Nic van den Bergh and Duncan Rykaart, two of the firm's other senior officers, reportedly shared, and publicly expressed their strong belief in the importance of taking personal initiative.⁴²

In contrast to the members of Executive Outcomes, the RUF did not emphasize personal initiative. In fact, Sankoh went out of his way to stifle personal initiative among his subordinates. For instance, as discussed above, he neither allowed nor encouraged his subordinates to develop orders on their own, even to the point of requiring them to leave their positions in the field and visit him to obtain new orders.⁴³ Consequently, his officers would likely not feel comfortable launching new operations on their own initiative. Moreover, his propensity to execute anyone who even questioned his orders almost certainly stifled any willingness among his subordinates to show initiative because the risk associated with displeasing their supreme commander, by deviating from his stated plans, was likely too great for most members of the forces to contemplate.⁴⁴ Ultimately, as one RUF official put it, Sankoh sought to cultivate "mindless" personnel, who would not take initiative, but rather "do exactly what you ask" of them and nothing more.⁴⁵

³⁶ Fitzsimmons, "First Interview with Des Burman."; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Johann Anderson."; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 8 and 152; Venter, *War Dog*, 390 and 392.

³⁷ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Venter, *War Dog*, 58.

⁴¹ Ibid., 513.

⁴² Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 331.

⁴³ Peters and Richards, "Why We Fight," 204.

⁴⁴ Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 61-62.

⁴⁵ Venter, *War Dog*, 458.

Technical Proficiency

Executive Outcomes' personnel in Sierra Leone strongly emphasized technical proficiency.⁴⁶ This involved constant training and retraining with the weapons and vehicles they used during the conflict, which included AK-47 and -74 assault rifles, heavy machine guns, mortars, grenades, artillery, antitank weapons, BMP-2 armoured vehicles, and two kinds of helicopters.⁴⁷ For example, although the firm's South African pilots had extensive experience flying Western helicopters during their careers with the South African Defence Force (SADF) and Soviet-made Mi-17 "Hips" during the firm's operations in Angola, they chose to spend several weeks familiarizing themselves with the Soviet-made Mi-24 "Hind" gunship that they needed to operate in Sierra Leone.⁴⁸ Moreover, Claassens recalled that, whenever EO's ground troops captured an unfamiliar weapon from the RUF, they "would do some cross training," including target practice, to learn how to use it effectively.⁴⁹ He stressed that he did not have to order his men to do this because they already recognized the value of becoming proficient with the weapons they would need to use during the conflict.

In contrast to the mercenaries, the RUF did not emphasize technical proficiency and did not conduct technical training to enhance the capabilities of their personnel. Multiple first-hand observers confirm that RUF recruits received virtually no technical training.⁵⁰ Rather, although new recruits went through an indoctrination process that they called "basic training," this did not involve encouraging the recruits to learn how to use their weapons effectively.⁵¹ On the contrary, the process forced recruits to observe and take part in deprivations against civilians, including beatings, rape, mutilations, torture, and murder.⁵² In effect, the RUF's training process sought to transform recruits into sadistic "killers" rather than trained "soldiers."⁵³ Moreover, recruits were taught to believe that pouring a libation of alcohol on a weapon, to "give it accuracy," was a suitable substitute for target practice.⁵⁴

Group Loyalty

Finally, Executive Outcomes' force in Sierra Leone strongly emphasized group loyalty among its personnel.⁵⁵ Claassens argued that the firm's emphasis on group loyalty, whether instilled through direct statements about its importance by senior commander or organized sporting events between various mercenaries, was "hugely" present within the force.⁵⁶ Barlow,

⁴⁶ Fitzsimmons, "First Interview with Des Burman."; Scott Fitzsimmons, "Second Interview with Des Burman," (Cape Town, SA: August 27, 2007).

⁴⁷ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 358, 364-365, 384-385; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 224-225, 228, 231-232, 246, and 248-250; Venter, *War Dog*, 521 and 545-547.

⁴⁸ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 329; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 222; Venter, *War Dog*, 491.

⁴⁹ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

⁵⁰ Cheng, "Sierra Leone," 149; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Venter, *War Dog*, 27, 449-450, and 467.

⁵¹ Peters and Richards, "Why We Fight," 204.

⁵² Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction," 207-208; Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 190; Peters and Richards, "Why We Fight," 186-187; Venter, *War Dog*, 500-501.

⁵³ A. B. Zack-Williams, "Child Soldiers in the Civil War in Sierra Leone," *Review of African Political Economy* 28, no. 87 (March 2001): 80.

⁵⁴ Venter, *War Dog*, 449-450.

⁵⁵ Zoe Daniel, "Mercenary Town," (United Kingdom: Journeyman Pictures, 2005); Fitzsimmons, "First Interview with Des Burman."; Howe, *Ambiguous Order*, 197; Al J. Venter, "Privatizing War," (London, UK: 2000), 13; Venter, *War Dog*, 390.

⁵⁶ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

likewise, recalled that EO's force in Sierra Leone attempted to bolster a strong sense of group loyalty by proudly displayed the firm's unofficial motto: "Fit In or Fuck Off."⁵⁷ Claassens felt that these efforts paid off from the outset because, when he arrived for duty, he witnessed "a different situation between the white and the black guys than anything I had dealt with before," in the SADF.⁵⁸ Specifically, he recalled that the firm's white and black employees, who had been segregated in most units in the SADF, embraced each other and got along very well.⁵⁹ He noted that these attitudes seemed in no way false; rather, mercenaries of all races were genuine friends with each other. He went on to say that he "saw that right through our operations" in Sierra Leone.⁶⁰

In contrast to the mercenaries, the RUF deemphasized group loyalty. Members of the force were made aware of this from the moment they joined the force, since almost all were conscripted against their will during rebel raids on civilian settlements.⁶¹ During these raids, any potential recruit who offered concerted resistance would be executed in front of the rest to demonstrate that there was no possibility of escape. This also informed the new recruits that their new commanders felt they were expendable and would murder them on a whim.⁶² Anyone who subsequently tried to leave the force was also immediately and publicly executed, without discussion or attempts at reconciliation, as a warning to the others. In addition to these threats, the RUF compelled their disloyal personnel to remain with the force by constructing a kind of social prison that few recruits felt they could escape from. For example, many conscripts were forced to kill their own friends and families before being taken away to an RUF base camp.⁶³ Moreover, upon arrival at a camp, new recruits were often tattooed and/or branded with RUF words or symbols because these markings would forever identify them as rebels and, therefore, make them worthy of summary execution should they attempt to desert the force and reenter normal society.⁶⁴ As Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier who escaped an attempt to recruit him into the RUF, recalled,

⁵⁷ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 324.

⁵⁸ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 188; Cheng, "Sierra Leone," 149; Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 139; Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 65; Globalsecurity.org, *Revolutionary United Front (RUF)*, 3; Steve Riley, Max Sesay, and Max A. Sesay, "Sierra Leone: The Coming Anarchy?," *Review of African Political Economy* 22, no. 63 (March 1995): 122; Ian Stewart, *Ambushed: A War Reporter's Life on the Line* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2002), 49.

⁶² Zack-Williams, "The Political Economy of Civil War," 154.

⁶³ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 363; Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 2007), 24; Martin Boas, "Liberia and Sierra Leone: Dead Ringers? The Logic of Neopatrimonial Rule," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 5 (October 2001): 714; Cheng, "Sierra Leone," 149; Clayton, *Frontiersmen*, 197; Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 139; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Globalsecurity.org, *Revolutionary United Front (RUF)*, 3; William P. Murphy, "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientalism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars," *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (September 2003): 64; Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), 5; Paul Richards, "Forced Labour & Civil War: Agrarian Underpinnings of the Sierra Leone Conflict," in *Violence, Political Culture & Development in Africa*, ed. Preben Kaarsholm (Oxford, UK: James Currey, 2006), 190; Stewart, *Ambushed*, 49; Venter, *War Dog*, 458; Zack-Williams, "Child Soldiers in the Civil War in Sierra Leone," 73-74 and 79; Zack-Williams, "The Political Economy of Civil War," 154.

⁶⁴ Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 180; Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, 24; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; David Keen, *Conflict & Collusion in Sierra Leone* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2005), 42-43.

Young boys were immediately recruited, and the initials RUF were carved wherever it pleased the rebels, with a hot bayonet. This not only meant that you were scarred for life but that you could never escape from them, because escaping with the carving of the rebels' initials was asking for death, as soldiers would kill you without any questions and militant civilians would do the same.⁶⁵

How well did the Normative Theory of Military Performance Predict the Dynamics of Conflict in Sierra Leone?

The normative theory of military performance appears to have done an admirable job at predicting how the five norms thought to enhance military effectiveness would influence the behaviour of the military forces discussed in this paper. This section analyzes each of the theory's predictions in turn.

Tactical Innovation

The normative theory of military performance predicts that military forces that strongly emphasize norms promoting creative thinking, personal initiative, and decentralized authority should demonstrate significant tactical innovation. Tactical units within these forces should routinely seek tactical advantages over opponents by, for instance, using maneuver warfare, and not rely exclusively on simple frontal assaults when attacking or counterattacking.⁶⁶ This prediction was borne out in this case. Indeed, EO's personnel relied on maneuver warfare throughout the conflict by deploying units in locations that provided them tactical advantages. For instance, EO positioned units to herd and trap RUF troops so that they would be easier to kill or force out of an area. This involved deploying several groups of mercenaries around a battlespace and then using one or more groups to drive rebel infantry toward the other groups.⁶⁷ On occasion, Sierra Leonean Army soldiers participated in these operations. Herding tactics served to both trap the rebels and force them to fight an enemy force closing in on multiple sides. The mercenaries used this tactic, for example, when they assaulted an RUF camp near Gandorhun.⁶⁸ Specifically, the mercenaries' infantry teams were deployed as stopper groups

⁶⁵ Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, 24.

⁶⁶ Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness" (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996), 66. The US Army's *Field Manual 100-5: Operations* defines maneuver warfare as "the movement of forces in relation to the enemy to secure or retain positional advantage," to gain an advantage over the adversary requires that the commander be able to imagine a situation different from his present situation, one in which he has an advantage over his enemy derived from a different spatial arrangement. William S. Lind, "Maneuver," in *Brassey's Encyclopedia of Land Forces and Warfare*, ed. Franklin Margiotta (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1997), 662. Contemporary maneuver warfare developed in part out of the German concept of *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics), which emphasizes decentralized decision making authority and personal initiative: "orders tell the subordinate what is to be accomplished while leaving him maximum latitude in deciding how to accomplish it. In effect, he is given a goal, and it is left to him to attain it. This is done at all levels of command. As part of mission orders, the subordinate is expected to show a high level of initiative." Lind, "Maneuver," 665. Maneuver warfare demands that the commander quickly develop an operation plan that will allow him to place his forces into the newly imagined, spatially-advantageous position that anticipates the likely reactions of his adversary. Consequently, these forces ought to opt for more complicated flanking and envelopment maneuvers in situations where such maneuvers could be advantageous.

⁶⁷ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 358; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 243-246.

⁶⁸ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 364-365; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 231-232.

around one side of the camp to keep the rebels trapped inside.⁶⁹ When they were in position, the firm's mortar team launched several shells into the camp to panic the rebels right before the firm's Mi-24 launched an air-to-ground attack to herd the rebels toward the stopper groups. The operation killed approximately 40 rebels, and motivated many others to surrender as soon as they encountered EO's infantry.⁷⁰

At other times, EO's Fire Force employed tactics intended to confuse and disorient large groups of RUF fighters by assaulting them with small teams approaching from multiple directions. According to Claassens, "there would be only 5 or 10 guys on a team moving in but we would come through the forest and sometimes we would choose routes that would they (the RUF) would not expect us (to take)... We would often take a quick stab, just 10 guys moving toward the camp, engaging the enemy and pulling back."⁷¹ Following this, another group of 10 soldiers would assault the rebels from another direction, followed closely by still another small group of infantry.⁷² Then the first group of infantry, which would have repositioned itself in the interim so that its next attack would come from another unexpected direction, would start the cycle again.

EO's maneuver tactics constituted a considerable innovation over the style of warfare that had prevailed in Sierra Leone before the firm's arrival. As Singer rightly describes, "Whereas the previous style of warfare prior to EO's arrival had been road-side ambushes and quick withdrawals, EO... mandated the constant pursuit and punishment of the rebel force, whenever it came into contact... and sought to engage the RUF in stand-up battles that the rebels were loathe to face."⁷³ Indeed, by controlling the movements of the RUF fighters, EO deprived them of the insurgents' central advantage: the ability to engage in combat only at times and locations of their choosing. With very few exemptions, these tactics allowed EO to kill large numbers of RUF in single engagements.

EO also made creative use of combined-arms warfare throughout the conflict.⁷⁴ This could involve using a combination of the helicopter-mobile Fire Force's light infantry, the Mobile Force's BMP-2s, the mortar team, and one or more of the force's Mi-24 and Mi-17s – often all at the same time.⁷⁵ For example, after one of the force's reconnaissance teams located an RUF base at Moyamba, the mercenaries attacked it with the Mi-24 and both Mi-17s immediately in advance of a ground assault by the Mobile Force's BMP-2s and the Fire Force's infantry teams.⁷⁶ This tactic proved very effective, for it resulted in the deaths of at least 30 rebels and forced the rest to abandon their base, which undermined their ability to launch raids against Freetown. In exchange, EO suffered only one casualty, a former Koevoet operator who lost an eye to RPG shrapnel.

The normative theory of military performance also predicts that military forces emphasizing creative thinking, personal initiative, and decentralized authority should have little difficulty adapting to unforeseen developments on the battlefield, such as if their opponents were

⁶⁹ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 229-232.

⁷⁰ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 364-365.

⁷¹ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, 113.

⁷⁴ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 335; David Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 53-54.

⁷⁵ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 335; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 222-223; Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention*, 53-54; Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, 113; Venter, *War Dog*, 533.

⁷⁶ Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 137; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 222; Pelton, *Licensed to Kill*, 262-263.

to breach their defensive lines. This prediction played out in this case.⁷⁷ Indeed, Lafras Luitingh, one of EO's chief executives, argued emphatically that his personnel reacted "with rigor" in such situations.⁷⁸ Venter similarly argued that EO's force in Sierra Leone was, "an extremely versatile fighting group... because they remained flexible in their approach to the kind of problems that might arise. Each situation was handled on its own terms. Nothing was predetermined or fixed."⁷⁹ Of critical importance, the Fire, Air, and Mobile Forces quickly supported each other when any of them encountered an unexpected situation, such as a particularly large and well-armed RUF ambush. As a result, the force usually dealt with these situations swiftly and decisively.

For example, when the Mobile Force encountered an unexpectedly large RUF force at a concealed listening post on the main approach to an RUF base, Grobler, the Force's commander, radioed the Fire Force to deploy behind the rebels to trap them between EO's two combat groups.⁸⁰ In another incident, an RUF ambush force was noticed only seconds before it launched an attack but, despite this, EO's personnel responded immediately by laying down rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire, which put the would-be ambushers to flight.⁸¹ In still another incident, a twelve-man infantry team was rescued by one of the firm's Mi-17s after being surrounded by a force of approximately 140 rebels equipped with a heavy 12.7 mm machine gun.⁸² Discussing the importance of providing rapid support to the firm's ground forces, Arthur Walker, a helicopter pilot during the war, stated that the ground forces "needed us right there, able to react at a moment's notice, and we were... that's what the job was about and in the end our efforts prevailed."⁸³ He went on to argue that, "it didn't take long for them (RUF ambushers) to realize that, if they exchanged blows with us, they were going to die."⁸⁴ Providing a general assessment of this phenomenon, Venter recalled observing a "remarkable level of camaraderie between the 'brown jobs' (ground troops) and the 'blues' (pilots)," and concluded that rapid mutual support in the face of unexpected threats "became a feature of Executive Outcomes activities" in Sierra Leone.⁸⁵

Turning now to the RUF, the normative theory of military performance predicts that military forces that weakly emphasize norms promoting creative thinking, personal initiative, and decentralized authority should demonstrate little tactical innovation. Tactical units within these forces should generally use very simple tactics, if any, such as full-frontal assaults, straight at their opponents, when attacking and counterattacking.⁸⁶ These predictions were borne out in this case because, throughout the conflict, the rebels relied almost exclusively on a single tactic to engage the mercenaries: establishing an ambush position from which they would launch a full frontal assault, straight at their opponents. A typical RUF ambush occurred during EO's approach to Baiama. Venter, who was travelling with the mercenaries at the time, recalled the incident years later:

⁷⁷ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 249.

⁷⁸ Avant, *The Market for Force*, 87; Al J. Venter, "Sierra Leone's Mercenary War: Battle for the Diamond Fields," *Jane's International Defense Review* 28 (November 1995).

⁷⁹ Venter, *War Dog*, 478.

⁸⁰ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 335.

⁸¹ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 246.

⁸² Venter, *War Dog*, 502.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 494-495.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 497.

⁸⁶ Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness", 66.

We'd gone five or six hundred yards further when they (the RUF) hit us again. Once more there was none of the vigor that we'd been expecting. Much of it seemed to consist of small groups of rebels erratically letting off bursts of automatic fire or an occasional RPG. Then, like the others before, they would disappear back into the foliage. The IFVs (the BMP-2s) sent volleys of shells in after them and the heavy calibers caused damage far beyond what we could see from the road. By now both Mi-17s were over us, their PKMs chattering away. They flew in a broad circle and plastered every moving thing that wasn't part of our column.⁸⁷

Multiple accounts of the conflict confirm that the mercenaries faced up to a dozen ambushes/full-frontal assaults each day, launched by groups of rebel fighters that were up to twenty times larger than the opposing mercenary units.⁸⁸ One could have plausibly expected that the sheer volume of these assaults should have worn down the mercenaries' will and capacity to continue fighting. However, as discussed above, this tactic ultimately failed because EO's personnel proved able to quickly respond to the attacks, which greatly reduced their effectiveness.

The theory also predicted that military forces that deemphasized creative thinking, personal initiative, and decentralized authority should have difficulty adapting to unforeseen developments on the battlefield and should learn slowly from their mistakes, if at all.⁸⁹ These predictions were borne out as well. Instead of recognizing the near-universal failure of their ambush/full-frontal assault tactic and putting effort into developing alternative tactics, the rebels invented scapegoats to blame for their failures against the mercenaries. For example, based on the RUF's radio communications, which the mercenaries could freely monitor, and statements from RUF POWs and defectors, the rebels frequently blamed their losses on the mercenaries' alleged use of super-weapons, like poison gas, despite a total lack of evidence to support this assertion.⁹⁰ The superstitious rebels also excused their losses by claiming the mercenaries benefitted from an advanced command of witchcraft or even "divine help," which seemingly overrode the protective powers that had been conferred by the rebels' own witch doctors.⁹¹ As a result of this mentality, many groups of rebel fighters chose to decapitate their own witch doctors following failed battles, after which they would demand a new round of incantations from a fresh cadre of sorcerers.⁹² For their part, the mercenaries were shocked at their opponents' apparent inability to innovate new tactics or, generally, to learn anything from their mistakes, regardless of how many times they were brought to light.⁹³

⁸⁷ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 244.

⁸⁸ Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 190; Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 329-330, 336, 357-358, and 381; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 81; Yekutieli Gershoni, "War without End and an End to a War: The Prolonged Wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone," *African Studies Review* 40, no. 3 (December 1997): 68 and 71; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 220 and 224-225; Peters and Richards, "Why We Fight," 186; Richards, "War as Smoke and Mirrors," 387; Venter, *War Dog*, 482-483, 519, and 546.

⁸⁹ Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness", 66.

⁹⁰ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

⁹¹ *Ibid*; Venter, *War Dog*, 523-524.

⁹² Venter, *War Dog*, 511.

⁹³ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Venter, *War Dog*, 521.

Use of Hand-operated Weapons

The normative theory of military performance predicts that, to the extent that the members of military forces that strongly emphasize norms promoting technical proficiency are willing to familiarize themselves with the functioning of military technology, these forces should be adept at using hand-operated weaponry, such as rifles, bazookas, anti-aircraft guns, and dismounted artillery.⁹⁴ Specifically, the marksmanship of the personnel in these forces should be quite good.⁹⁵ This prediction was borne out in this case, for, after taking the time to familiarize themselves with all the hand-operated weapons they had been issued or had captured during the conflict, the mercenaries' proved to be very accurate shots.⁹⁶

Several accounts of the conflict refer to the mercenaries' ability to lay down "very accurate" fire with all manner of hand-operated weapons during contacts with the rebels. These include accounts of the mercenaries hitting and killing large numbers of RUF fighters with fire from AK-47s; 7.62 mm light PKM machine guns and 12.7 mm heavy machine guns, which were deployed with the ground forces and on the firm's two Mi-17s; 60, 81, 82, and 120 mm mortars; and 105 mm artillery.⁹⁷ The firm was particularly adept with mortars: "we'd hurl a few mortars at where we thought they (the RUF) might be. Our guys had a lot of experience with this stuff and they were accurate. They'd sometimes get them spot on. Then the rebels would disappear into the jungle and there would be no resistance."⁹⁸ Specifically, the firm used these weapons to hammer groups of fleeing rebels and to besiege rebel camps. For example, EO's infantry trapped several dozen rebels inside their camp at Gandorhun while the firm's mortar team systematically eliminated them from afar.⁹⁹ Most importantly, the mercenaries' superior technical proficiency allowed them to effectively respond to the RUF's simplistic frontal assaults and kill enough rebels to make them break off almost immediately.

EO's ability to use hand-operated weapons effectively was essential to their success in Sierra Leone because, in virtually every contact with the rebels, they were severely outnumbered. In other words, because the mercenaries fielded comparatively few rifles, they had to ensure that a comparatively high proportion of their shots hit useful targets. As Claassens summarized,

The world thinks that Executive Outcomes was successful because of the use of overwhelming technology and superior firepower, which is absolutely untrue.... If you look at the amount of rifles they had as opposed to our rifles, it was 80 rifles against thousands. The reason why we were successful is because we were able to utilize it better... the guys who came with me into Executive Outcomes were.... very, very good at what they did and that's the main reason why we did so well.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Timothy Lupfer, "Tactics," in *Brassey's Encyclopedia of Land Forces and Warfare*, ed. Franklin Margiotta (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1997), 1022 and 1031; Millett, Murray, and Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," 62.

⁹⁵ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 564.

⁹⁶ Thomas K. Adams, "The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict," *Parameters* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1999).

⁹⁷ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 358, 364-365, 384-385; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens.," Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 224-225, 228, 231-232, 246, and 248-250; Venter, *War Dog*, 521 and 545-547.

⁹⁸ Venter, *War Dog*, 521.

⁹⁹ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 364-365; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 224-225 and 231-232.

¹⁰⁰ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

Conversely, the theory predicts that, to the extent that the members of military forces that weakly emphasize norms promoting technical proficiency are unwilling to familiarize themselves with the functioning of military technology, these forces should not utilize hand-operated weaponry very well. Specifically, the marksmanship of personnel in these forces should be quite poor.¹⁰¹ This prediction was borne out as well. Due to their general deemphasis on technical proficiency, the RUF rarely conducted training to learn how to use their hand-operated weapons and were, consequently, terrible shots. For instance, accounts of the conflict, along with the EO's very low combat casualties, indicate that the RUF rarely hit their opponents.¹⁰² The reasons for this were fairly obvious to the mercenaries on the receiving end of this inaccurate fire. For example, one mercenary observed that,

Most of the rebels would fire their weapons like cowboys... from the hip.... Or they'd shoot at us from cover, holding their AKs above their heads. Consequently, they were usually way off target. And when they did hit anything it was luck, not design. We ended up blowing them away.¹⁰³

Venter recalled a similar account, provided by Claassens, of a RUF ambush near Baiama:

A small rebel group had taken up position at a clearing around more abandoned huts, the last stretch of open ground before Baiama. But they didn't use the opportunity as they should have. Because the attackers were close to the road and the BMPs were unable to depress their cannons, the men onboard were forced to deploy directly into the line of enemy fire. Through it all, nobody in our party was hit. Claassens observed afterward that most of the enemy fighters had their eyes closed when they pulled their triggers.¹⁰⁴

The rebels were no more adept with anti-aircraft weapons. Although always on guard for accurate anti-aircraft fire, EO's helicopter pilots found that they could operate quite safely above hundreds of rebel troops, including those equipped with heavy anti-aircraft machine guns, because the rebels simply could not hit the aircraft often enough to bring them down.¹⁰⁵ The rebels were somewhat more adept at using RPG-7s, which they imported by the hundreds during the war.¹⁰⁶ This is likely because an explosive RPG round can cause shrapnel damage as long as it lands in the general vicinity of its intended target.¹⁰⁷ For example, one mercenary lost an eye to shrapnel and three Sierra Leonean soldiers received minor shrapnel wounds when a rebel-fired RPG round hit a nearby tree during a battle at Moyamba.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Claassens' open-topped Land Rover was lost, along with two mercenaries, when one of several rebel-fired RPG rounds

¹⁰¹ Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness", 73.

¹⁰² Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 336; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 225.

¹⁰³ Venter, *War Dog*, 519-520.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 546.

¹⁰⁵ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 353; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 250; Venter, *War Dog*, 494-496 and 502.

¹⁰⁶ Beah, *A Long Way Gone*, 24; Venter, *War Dog*, 508.

¹⁰⁷ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 336; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 246; Richards, "War as Smoke and Mirrors," 387 and 390; Venter, *War Dog*, 509-510.

¹⁰⁸ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 222; Venter, *War Dog*, 481.

slammed into the vehicle's engine.¹⁰⁹ With this said, however, virtually every other account of RPG use by the RUF notes that, while many were fired, none actually hit EO's personnel and ground vehicles, or its low-flying helicopters.¹¹⁰ This is all the more remarkable because EO's BMPs were temporarily immobilized by mud or thrown tracks on at least two occasions, which presented the rebels with stationary, twenty-two foot long targets.¹¹¹ Yet, despite this, the rebels still failed to hit them.

Use of Ground Combat Vehicles

The normative theory of military performance predicts that military forces that strongly emphasize norms promoting creative thinking, personal initiative, and technical proficiency should be adept at using their ground combat vehicles. These forces should capitalize on both the maneuverability and firepower of their ground combat vehicles.¹¹² Moreover, vehicle crews in these forces should be able to fire the vehicles' weapons fairly accurately. These predictions were borne out in this case because, although EO only fielded two very old BMP-2 armoured infantry fighting vehicles, armed with 30 mm cannons and 7.62 mm machine guns, and fewer than ten unarmoured Land Rovers, armed with 12.7 mm machine guns and grenade launchers, the mercenaries used them to great effect against the rebels.¹¹³ The BMPs were used to spearhead infantry assaults, often with one or more vehicles assigned to support a particular team of infantry, on several RUF-held settlements, including, for example, Waterloo, Bo, Baiama, Moyamba, and Kono.¹¹⁴ Moreover, on occasion, the BMPs fought from stationary positions, such as during battles where they were rendered temporarily immobile because of mud or thrown tracks.¹¹⁵ Because the vehicles' main armament is located in a movable turret, they could, and always did, engage targets when the vehicle was not moving.¹¹⁶

Beyond this, despite their weaker fire power and lack of armour, the mercenaries favoured the Land Rovers for close infantry support because they could maneuver around a battlespace more easily than the heavier BMPs.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the Land Rovers were often favoured to pursue and cut down groups of RUF fighters, particularly after failed rebel ambushes or after the BMPs' cannon fire motivated a group of rebel fighters to retreat.¹¹⁸ During all of

¹⁰⁹ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Venter, *War Dog*, 533.

¹¹⁰ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 222, 224-225, 228, and 246; Venter, *War Dog*, 509.

¹¹¹ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 144; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Venter, *War Dog*, 479 and 509.

¹¹² Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and Airland Battle* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1991), 33.

¹¹³ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 388; Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 137; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 94; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 224-225; Venter, *War Dog*, 465, 467, and 517. EO modified the Land Rovers to improve their capabilities by, first, removing the excess weight provided by the unarmoured doors, roof, and windshield, and then affixing 12.7 mm DShK machine guns and AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers to them. These additions made the vehicles far more capable of engaging infantry than a standard Land Rover. Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 329; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Venter, *War Dog*, 477 and 514-515.

¹¹⁴ Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 137; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 222, 224-225, and 249; Venter, *War Dog*, 477-478, 514-515, 517, and 547-548.

¹¹⁵ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 144; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Venter, *War Dog*, 479 and 509.

¹¹⁶ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 144; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Venter, *War Dog*, 479, 509, and 547-548.

¹¹⁷ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 225.

¹¹⁸ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 363; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 226-227.

these engagements, the vehicles' accuracy was very high and caused hundreds of rebel casualties during the conflict.

Conversely, the theory predicts military forces that weakly emphasize norms promoting creative thinking, personal initiative, and technical proficiency should not utilize their ground combat vehicles very well. These forces should generally use their ground vehicles as static roadblocks rather than mobile fire support platforms.¹¹⁹ Moreover, vehicle crews in these forces should generally not be able to fire the vehicles' weapons accurately.¹²⁰ These predictions could not be evaluated in this case because the RUF did not employ ground combat vehicles against EO's personnel. The rebels' efforts to use hand-operated weapons to engage the mercenaries' vehicles are discussed above.

Air-to-Ground Attacks

The normative theory of military performance predicts that military forces that strongly emphasize norms promoting technical proficiency, creative thinking, and personal initiative should have little difficulty conducting air-to-ground attacks. Air-to-ground attacks conducted by these forces should demonstrate adaptation to the specific tactical threats being addressed and should generally hit their intended targets.¹²¹ These predictions were borne out as well in this case. Flying two Mi-17 "Hip" transport helicopters and one Mi-24 "Hind" gunship, EO's pilots offered crucial support to the firm's ground operations by engaging rebel troops with accurate rocket, machine gun, and Gatling gun fire.¹²² They were able to do so effectively because, as predicted, they combined a strong emphasis on technical proficiency, which motivated them to train hard to learn how to use unfamiliar Eastern Bloc equipment, with an equally strong emphasis on creative thinking and personal initiative.¹²³

For instance, although initially taken aback by the conditions of fighting a war in heavily forested Sierra Leone, which were radically different from those present above the wide-open grasslands of Angola, EO's pilots quickly set to work analyzing these conditions and determining how to best modify their own behaviour to effectively adapt. One pilot recalled, for example, that discussions about air-to-ground tactics took place on a daily basis, as pilots and ground commanders worked through problems encountered during the day's operations.¹²⁴ One important tactical innovation that developed out of these discussions was that the firm's ground troops began to provide a steady stream of updates to the pilots about the location of nearby rebel

¹¹⁹ Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver*, 49; Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness", 73.

¹²⁰ Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver*, 49 and 109.

¹²¹ Accurate delivery of ordinance on target has, for example, been described as "the most difficult part of close air support." Timothy Kline, "Close Air Support," in *Brassey's Encyclopedia of Land Forces and Warfare*, ed. Franklin Margiotta (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1997), 179.

¹²² Adams, "The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict."; Avant, *The Market for Force*, 87; Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 137; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Francis, "Mercenary Intervention in Sierra Leone," 327; Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa*, 93; Gershoni, "War without End and an End to a War," 68; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 221; Howe, *Ambiguous Order*, 202; Abdel-Fatau Musah, "A Country Under Siege: State Decay and Corporate Military Involvement in Sierra Leone," in *Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma*, ed. Abdel-Fatau Musah and J. 'Kayode Fayemi (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000), 89; Will Reno, "African Weak States and Commercial Alliances," *African Affairs* 96, no. 383 (April 1997): 180; Richards, "War as Smoke and Mirrors," 395; Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention*, 54; Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, 93; Venter, *War Dog*, 54, 64, and 391.

¹²³ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 329; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 222; Venter, *War Dog*, 491.

¹²⁴ Venter, *War Dog*, 493-494.

fighters, which helped the pilots target their weapons accurately through the triple-canopy jungle.¹²⁵ The firm's ground troops also began launching flares toward groups of rebel fighters, again, so that the pilots could accurately target them through the thick foliage.¹²⁶

In addition, based on conversations he had with the firm's pilots, Claassens was convinced that they were driven by a deep-seated desire to show initiative and to provide ever-better support for the firm's ground troops, regardless of the risk.¹²⁷ The South African pilots seemed to relish the opportunity to find and engage the rebels, with one pilot admitting that, "Looking down those sights was great, especially since the rebels had killed so many innocents. This was payback time!"¹²⁸ Another pilot stated plainly that, "we struck at the terrs whenever we found them, and that was just about everywhere."¹²⁹

When allowed access to the Mi-24, EO made very effective use of the formidable gunship.¹³⁰ Equipped with an armoured cockpit and a diverse array of anti-infantry weapons, which included 57 mm rockets, an automatic grenade launcher, a pair of 7.62 mm machine guns, which were operated by door gunners, and a 12.7 mm Gatling gun, the Hind offered considerable fire power when facing off against large groups of rebel fighters.¹³¹ More importantly, the tactical innovations noted above allowed EO's Mi-24 pilots to consistently hit their intended targets, which were often in very close proximity to the firm's own ground personnel.¹³² Moreover, they accomplished this feat without producing any recorded cases of friendly fire casualties. In addition to these close air support missions, the Hind crews also took it upon themselves to locate and engage targets of opportunity, such as rebel camps or sizeable groups of rebel fighters on the move.¹³³ For example, in one notable incident, a Hind crew stumbled upon and decimated a large group of rebels that was crossing a river to escape the firm's advancing ground forces.¹³⁴

Finally, EO's Mi-17 pilots proved quite adept at delivering their ordnance of light infantry on target and safely retrieving them and/or wounded personnel.¹³⁵ To accomplish this, EO's pilots were willing and able to fly into hazardous landing zones.¹³⁶ Furthermore, like the firm's Mi-24 crews, the pilots and door gunners in the firm's Mi-17s routinely provided close air support for their ground-based colleagues, serving as both observation platforms and highly mobile machine gun nests.¹³⁷ Finally, EO did not lose any Mi-17s to enemy ground fire; however, it did lose one to a bird strike in July 1995 and a second, later in the conflict when, against orders, dozens of Sierra Leonean Army troops flooded aboard the aircraft just as it

¹²⁵ Ibid., 501.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

¹²⁸ Venter, *War Dog*, 503.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 493. "Terrs": South African slang for "terrorists".

¹³⁰ Gershoni, "War without End and an End to a War," 68; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 245; Pelton, *Licensed to Kill*, 262-263.

¹³¹ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 334; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 222.

¹³² Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 185; Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 330-331, 336, and 358; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 240-241; Venter, *War Dog*, 501-503 and 508.

¹³³ Venter, *War Dog*, 480.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 485.

¹³⁵ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 368-371; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 240-241, 245-246, and 250; Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention*, 53-54; Venter, *War Dog*, 508.

¹³⁶ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 240-241.

¹³⁷ Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 137; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 250; Venter, *War Dog*, 545-548.

attempted to take off, which caused it to crash.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, in both instances, the firm's other Mi-17 quickly rescued their comrades.

The theory also predicts that military forces that weakly emphasize norms promoting technical proficiency, creative thinking, and personal initiative should have considerable difficulty conducting air-to-ground attacks. Air-to-ground attacks conducted by these forces should demonstrate little or no adaptation to the specific tactical threats being addressed and should generally not hit their intended targets.¹³⁹ These predictions could not be evaluated in this case because the RUF did not possess armed aircraft.¹⁴⁰ The rebels' efforts to use hand-operated weapons to engage the mercenaries' aircraft are discussed above.

Unit Cohesion

Finally, the normative theory of military forces that strongly emphasize norms promoting group loyalty should maintain strong unit cohesion, manifested in consistently cooperative behaviour between group members.¹⁴¹ To put it differently, members of these forces should feel that the other members of the force both can and will help keep each other alive and accomplish their assigned tasks. Therefore, members of these forces should demonstrate discipline in the face of enemy fire and not simply abandon the force without authorization. These predictions were borne out in this case. Indeed, EO's "cohesive," "disciplined" soldiers, who reportedly never "shirked from combat," are among the most oft-noted features of the conflict.¹⁴² For example, during an ambush in which many of Claassens' men were injured or killed by a much larger RUF force that was deployed on top of a high road cutting, several mercenaries at the rear of Claassens' convoy charged through the hail of bullets and RPG rounds to drag their beleaguered colleagues to safety.¹⁴³ Other members of the force rushed to climb the road cutting and engage the rebels with grenades at close range, which succeeded in putting the ambushers to flight. Moreover, the mercenaries were never routed during contacts with the RUF, despite being outnumbered up to twenty to one in some firefights.¹⁴⁴ Rather, in the very few instances where the firm chose to retreat from a contact, its employees conducted organized withdrawals to defensible positions and either formed a circular laager formation, where the men and vehicles faced out toward their attackers, or awaited relief or extraction by their colleagues.¹⁴⁵

This is not to suggest that EO's men were complete angels off the battlefield, because ill-disciplined behaviour certainly did occur. For instance, although the firm enforced a strict no alcohol policy within 48 hours of conducting any off-base operations, some mercenaries did occasionally overindulge between operations.¹⁴⁶ In a few very rare instances, for example, drunken mercenaries caused deadly traffic accidents or wildly fired their service rifles into the air. Claassens also recalled an instance where one mercenary stole from another.¹⁴⁷ However,

¹³⁸ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 221 and 249; Venter, *War Dog*, 488.

¹³⁹ Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness", 69.

¹⁴⁰ Venter, *War Dog*, 26.

¹⁴¹ Millett, Murray, and Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," 66.

¹⁴² Davis, *Fortune's Warriors*, 137; Gershoni, "War without End and an End to a War," 68; Howe, "Private Security Forces and African Stability," 317; Musah, "A Country Under Siege," 94; Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention*, 43; Venter, *War Dog*, 476 and 482.

¹⁴³ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

¹⁴⁴ Ibid; Venter, *War Dog*, 521.

¹⁴⁵ Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 249; Venter, *War Dog*, 479 and 502-503.

¹⁴⁶ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 358; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

¹⁴⁷ Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."

such infractions were severely punished, with sanctions ranging from a severe beating with a hippo hide sjambok to immediate discharge from the firm and deportation back to South Africa. Claassens stressed that the members of the force considered these punishments to be legitimate and fair and that no incidents ever resulted in further escalation or reprisals.¹⁴⁸ He also argued that these punishments were rarely required because the force was generally well-disciplined, both on and off the battlefield.

Finally, a small number of mercenaries chose to quit the Sierra Leonean conflict before their contracts had expired. This occurred, most notably, following the above-described ambush below a high road cutting, where the force suffered two deaths and seven wounded.¹⁴⁹ However, as during EO's earlier conflict in Angola, the mercenaries who chose to leave did not simply flee the battlefield and race for the Liberian border. Rather, those who left did so in an orderly fashion by tendering their letters of resignation to the force's senior officers and leaving at an authorized date and time on one of the firm's own aircraft.

Conversely, the theory also predicts that military forces that weakly emphasize norms promoting group loyalty should maintain weak unit cohesion, manifested in consistently uncooperative behaviour between group members. Individualistic members of these forces should tend to feel little loyalty and obligation to their fellow members, which, in turn, should reduce their will to fight. Therefore, members of these forces should demonstrate little discipline in the face of enemy fire and desertion should occur relatively frequently. These predictions were borne out in this case. First, the RUF demonstrated little discipline during contacts with the mercenaries.¹⁵⁰ On the contrary, the rebels fled almost every engagement with the mercenaries, often only seconds after a contact began.¹⁵¹ Moreover, unlike the mercenaries' organized withdrawals, the rebels usually fled in a confused rout. In an unsuccessful attempt to curb this behaviour, the rebels resorted to plying their fighters with an ever-stronger regime of alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines, crack cocaine, and, oddly, gunpowder.¹⁵² This provided no observable enhancements in the rebels' discipline in the face of enemy fire but almost certainly undermined their already lackluster ability to aim their weapons.

Beyond this, RUF personnel developed an infamous reputation for their "gross indiscipline" and deprivations against civilians, both on and off duty, including, but not limited to, theft, rape, cutting off limbs, and murdering expectant mothers.¹⁵³ Finally, the most detrimental effect of the RUF's deemphasis on group loyalty was that, as soon as the mercenaries entered the conflict and began defeating RUF units, large numbers of rebel troops, up to 1,000 at a time, opted to desert and surrender to the government or flee to relative safety in Liberia.¹⁵⁴ Ultimately, although the mercenaries killed several thousand rebels during the conflict, the mass desertions likely played an equally important role in driving Sankoh toward the negotiating table

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid; Venter, *War Dog*, 533.

¹⁵⁰ Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction."; Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 185.

¹⁵¹ Barlow, *Executive Outcomes*, 357-358 and 364-365; Fitzsimmons, "Interview with Cobus Claassens."; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 221, 241, and 246; Richards, "Forced Labour & Civil War," 190; Venter, *War Dog*, 59, 511, 514, and 521; Zack-Williams, "Child Soldiers in the Civil War in Sierra Leone," 459.

¹⁵² Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 190; Peters and Richards, "Why We Fight," 186-187; Richards, "War as Smoke and Mirrors," 387; Venter, *War Dog*, 500-501.

¹⁵³ Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction," 207-208; Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 190; Peters and Richards, "Why We Fight," 186-187; Venter, *War Dog*, 500-501.

¹⁵⁴ Abdullah and Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front," 187; Avant, *The Market for Force*, 87; Clayton, *Frontiersmen*, 197-198; Hooper, *Bloodsong*, 243-244; Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, 113; Venter, *War Dog*, 511 and 536.

with the Sierra Leonean government for they served as undeniable evidence that his movement was rapidly falling apart.

Broad Prediction of the Theory: The Mercenaries Should Have Defeated the RUF

The normative theory of military performance reasons that the military performance of opposing military forces is primarily the result of the interplay of their relative military effectiveness. In other words, the interactive clash of tactical behaviour is the primary determinant of military victory or defeat. Based on this, the normative theory of military performance predicted that the materially weaker party in a military conflict, which Executive Outcomes was in this case, should only have been able to defeat its materially stronger opponent if the weaker party emphasized behavioural norms that allowed it to perform a wide range of tactical behaviour – that is, be militarily effective – and the stronger party did not emphasize these norms because this should have allowed the weaker party to exploit the weaknesses and counter the strengths of the stronger party and, through this, defeat it.

This broad prediction of the theory was supported by the evidence in this case. In sum, the mercenaries emphasized the norms that the theory hypothesized would benefit military effectiveness, and, as expected, their military effectiveness was generally very good. At the same time, the RUF generally deemphasized the norms that the theory hypothesized would benefit military effectiveness, and, as expected, their military effectiveness was universally poor. As a result, the mercenaries were able to defeat the RUF by performing a comparatively broad range of behaviour, which the rebel troops simply could not counter.

Conclusion

The results of this analysis suggest that ideational factors played an important role in shaping the military effectiveness and battlefield military performance of the combatants in this case. Indeed, all of the testable predictions made by the normative theory of military performance were borne out during the Sierra Leonean Civil War. Overall, the normative theory of military performance appears to provide a convincing explanation of military performance in this asymmetric conflict.

The implications of these results are profoundly important because they suggest that governments, international organizations, and anyone else considering using mercenaries to implement their foreign and defence policies should attempt to understand the military culture of the private security organizations vying for their business. In other words, the potential clients of private security organizations cannot afford to determine the suitability of an organization based solely on the size of its inventory of weapons and vehicles or on the length of its personnel roster. Rather, prudent clients must demand access to the inner-workings of these organizations, particularly the junior and senior personnel who would be charged with implementing the terms of any contract, to assess how these individuals think and how they are encouraged to behave. Only then can a client determine whether a private security organization emphasizes the five norms of military effectiveness discussed in this paper and, in turn, determine whether this organization will likely accomplish its required tasks, even in the face of materially superior opponents.

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