

News

The British women behind world's first all female anti-poaching unit

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Major Alice Bromage training the Black Mambas CREDIT: ALICE BROMAGE

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By Hayley Dixon

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Named after Africa's most deadly snake, the world's first female anti-poaching unit have won international acclaim for their work protecting rhinos.

But what is not known is that behind the scenes there is a team of British women who are quietly dedicating their lives and their expertise to make sure that they South Africa's Black Mambas are a success.

Everything from the tactical training, the finances, and running the operations room which co-ordinates the Mambas movements on the ground - all traditionally male roles - are being run by women from the UK.

This is perhaps no mistake, given that the team was chosen not only to change attitudes towards poaching but also to the role of women.

Their success has inspired support from across the UK, in particular from the Sandhurst Sisterhood, an informal group of female veterans whose uniform the Mambas wear.

Major Alice Bromage, 42, said that bringing the two groups of women together has been an inspiring experience.



Rhinos roam and feed the conservation area CREDIT: AFP

She first became involved with the Mambas in 2016 during her resettlement period from the British Army and has drawn upon the skills she developed in Afghanistan and Iraq to help train the women in leadership, tactics, performance development and empowerment.

Having worked in counter-insurgency, counter terrorism and peacekeeping missions she said that the skills required for anti-poaching are the Army's "bread and butter".

She said: "The support network from the UK has been amazing. The Mambas wear the DPM uniform that we wore in the 80s and 90s. This kit has been obsolete for 10 years but lots of people have all still got it in the attic or the back of cupboard.

"I was aware that that is what the Mambas wear and a lot of that has been from donations from the UK.

"We put a call out to Sandhurst sisterhood and we were able to send 650kg of uniform, hundreds of sets of uniform."

"The have been so many donations, books, clothes, toys. Being able to join those two sororities together and to show the Mambas the support from the British female military community has been incredible."



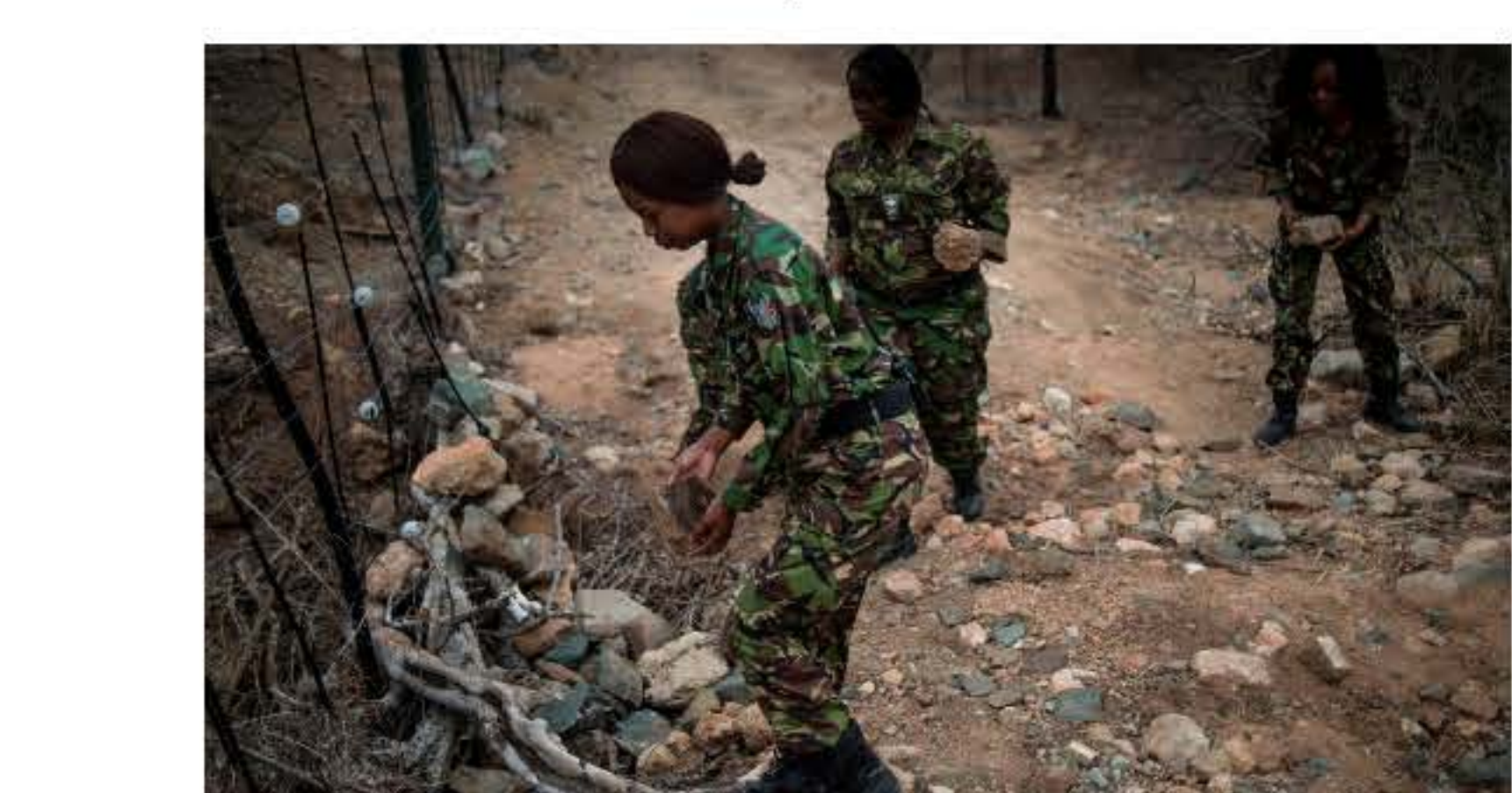
Major Alice Bromage with members of the Black Mamba anti-poaching unit CREDIT: ALICE BROMAGE

Major Bromage added: "It is great to have British women involved as we don't have any of social bias that still exists in South Africa.

"We walk in not seeing them as anything but equal. They had never had a white women stay with them before, but the idea of sleeping in same room with the Mambas for however many weeks, it did not cross my mind. It is a really lovely exchange of experience and knowledge."

The Mambas were founded in 2012 by Craig Spencer, a distant relative of Winston Churchill, and Amy Clark, 33, who left her life in Colchester, Essex, to run the project through their charity Transfrontier Africa.

Ms Clark had always dreamed of getting involved in conservation so when Mr Spencer asked her if she would come and help in 2006 she had no hesitation in giving up her job as a kitchen manager. Though her main role is finance director, she now single handedly runs the administrative side of the charity.



The Black Mambas plug a hole in the boundary fence CREDIT: AFP

"The reason that we chose women is because of their roles within the community," she explained. "It is their responsibility to bring up the children and the grandchildren and they pass on stories and can reach the next generation. It is a long term investment."

Major Bromage added: "If you have got 35 women who are providing for an average of 9-10 people per family that is 350 people immediately who, if the Mambas were to stop functioning, would not receive that support anymore.

"The British mentality is that you include the family in the activity."

Now numbering 31 women and one man, the Mambas modus operandi is influenced on British policing.

Like bobbies on the beat they are unarmed when they patrol the Balule Nature Reserve, which forms a part of the Kruger National Park. They carry out boundary patrols to check for poacher activity, set up road blocks to search those entering and leaving and sweep for snares.

But also, importantly, the women take the conservation message back to their local communities to compliment the outreach work the charity runs in local schools.



The Black Mambas wear old British Army uniform CREDIT: AFP

The woman who acts as their eyes and ears of the women on the ground, tracking their movements, the rhinos and the reports of poaching activity is Lisa Trueman, 35, a veterinary nurse from Cardiff.

She has found herself running the operations room, meaning that she manages the wildlife crime analysis and acts as the link between the Mambas and the armed guards.

Ms Trueman said: "It is not just the Mambas who are taking on what are traditionally seen as men's roles. We are here as non South Africans running an operations room and it took a long time to build that respect.

"I used to go to security meetings with 30 big Afrikaans men and they would all wonder what I was doing there.

"You build that respect and then you start having success. The Mambas are doing so well, it is almost changing the way that women are perceived in South Africa.

Animals in danger | The world's most threatened species

African elephant

Africa's elephant population has crashed by an estimated 111,000 in the past decade primarily due to poaching.

2016 estimates suggest there are 415,000 elephants across the 37 range states in Africa.

Maned wolf

The Maned wolf, along with other large mammals including the giant anteater, is threatened by the increasing conversion of grasslands into farmland for grazing and growing crops in the Brazilian Cerrado and only 20,000 animals remain.

Hellbender salamander

The Hellbender salamander underwent population declines of 77 per cent across five locations in Missouri between 1975 and 1995.

Degradation of habitat from the effects of agriculture and the recreational use of rivers is believed to be the main cause of the decline.

Orca

Orca populations in European waters are under threat from persistent organic pollutants (POPs).

Despite legislative restrictions on their use, these pollutants are still present in rivers.

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"It is changing the mindset, changing how women are seen, and black women in particular, in South Africa."

Their efforts have seen poaching activity reduced though there is still some work to be done to eradicate it completely in South Africa, which has more than 80 percent of the world's estimated 25,000 rhinoceroses.

Ms Trueman said: "The Mambas are not there to catch poachers, they are there to prevent poachers. This is about stopping Rhino's dying - I don't want to react to gunshots, I want to stop them in the first place."

Ms Clark added: "As an organisation we count our success on the amount of time we go without losing a rhino, rather than the amount of poachers who are arrested.

"Rather than chasing for arrests we would rather disrupt things so that they don't get the reward in the first place."

To find out more about the Black Mambas, or to donate to their training visit [www.empowering-success.co.uk/black-mambas/](http://www.empowering-success.co.uk/black-mambas/)

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