

NZDF supports British Army's counter-poaching operation

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The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) is supporting the campaign against the multi-billion-dollar illegal wildlife trade by working alongside their British counterparts to support African Parks rangers tackling poachers.

Colonel Rian McKinstry, the Special Operations Component Commander, said two soldiers – one from New Zealand's Special Operations Forces (NZSOF) and one from 1st Battalion, Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1 RNZIR) – travelled to Malawi in March to complement the training of 30 British Army troops in bushcraft and tracking.

The training was conducted at the 548-square kilometre Liwonde National Park in southern Malawi, which is managed by the non-profit conservation organisation African Parks whose president is Prince Harry.

"Bushcraft and tracking are two of the specialist skills that our troops have been known for since the 1950s," Colonel McKinstry said.

"By supporting this training, we are contributing to conservation efforts and helping put an end to illegal wildlife poaching."

During a four-day training in bushcraft, the Kiwi soldiers worked alongside British soldiers to develop appropriate wilderness survival skills including fire-making, sourcing water, gathering and preserving food, and rope-making.

"Tracking down wildlife poachers means carrying out patrols in the wilderness that often last for days," the NZSOF soldier said.

"The purpose of the bushcraft training is to share our experience so that the British soldiers can thrive in the wild and achieve their mission."

Lance Corporal Jed Maskill from 1 RNZIR said the training on tracking, which complemented the training from British instructors from the 2nd Battalion Royal Gurkha Rifles, included both theory and practice.

"A tracker needs to pay close attention to any disturbances or signs in the environment so they can understand the psychology of their quarry or target and anticipate their actions and where they are heading," Lance Corporal Maskill said.

He said these signs could be footprints, broken twigs or bent grass.

Authorities in Malawi have blamed rampant poaching for halving the Commonwealth country's elephant population from 4000 in the 1980s to 2000 in 2015.



Trafficking in ivory, rhino horn and other wildlife products is reportedly worth about NZ \$35 billion a year, making it the world's fifth largest organised crime industry. It damages economic growth and sustainable development, undermines governance and the rule of law, and deprives communities of valuable and finite natural resources. It also brings crime and instability into some of the world's poorest communities.

Above: LCPL Jed Maskill with two of the Malawi soldiers he is helping to train.

Below: Classroom time.

Left: Kiwi tracking skills being put to good use.

What is tracking?

Tracking is a tactic used in jungle warfare to trail and gather information on the quarry or target. Using observation skills, a tracker detects any disturbances or signs left by the quarry as they move through the natural environment and interprets these signs to locate the quarry and anticipate their actions and where they are heading. These signs could be footprints, broken twigs or bent grass.

New Zealand troops' experience in jungle warfare dates back to the Malayan Emergency, when they contributed to the Commonwealth effort to defeat the Communist insurgency from 1948 to 1960. Their expertise in tracking was enhanced further during deployments to Borneo, Vietnam, and East Timor. In the 1960s, New Zealand troops also helped train United States soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War in visual tracking.

