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# SPECIAL REPORT



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Gorillas by Kamol Komolphalin

## HIS NAME WAS DIGIT by Dian Fossey

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## HIS NAME WAS DIGIT

Digit was 2½ years old when I first met him in September 1967 on the slopes of Mount Visoke within the Parc des Volcans of Rwanda. He was then a playful little ball of disorganized black fluff from which protruded two button-like velvet brown eyes full of mischief and curiosity.

I had come here to continue my study of the behavior of free-ranging mountain gorillas which had started seven months previously on Mt. Mikeno within the Parc des Virungas of Zaire where George Schaller had conducted his memorable gorilla study in 1958-60. Digit was one of 14 individuals in Group 4, a typical gorilla group, though one about to undergo dramatic changes during the first year of observations. Group 4 was Digit's home group, the group into which he was born. His father, most likely the aged dominant silverback of the group, Whinney, was to die of pneumonia in May 1968: his mother, also aged, disappeared and was assumed to be dead in October 1967. These losses left Digit orphaned, but because of the manner in which gorillas organize their familial group structures over prolonged periods of time, Digit remained within his group surrounded by half-sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins. The cohesiveness of the gorilla group structure has no other parallel in nonhuman primate societies.

Following his mother's loss, Digit shared the night nests of his father, Whinney, until the latter became too old to keep up with the group in March 1968. Then Digit sought proximity with a second silverback within the group. Amok, but he too left the

group a year later. With the exception of the eldest sons of dominant silverbacks, maturing gorilla males outside of the main bloodlines of the central hierarchy of a group, have this far always left their home groups in order to form their own groups by obtaining females from other sources. In time, this would have been Digit's role. There was yet a third silverback in Group 4, Uncle Bert, who took over group leadership following Whinney's death. Although Uncle Bert was, several years later, observed stringently protecting and "mothering" a young female orphan neither he nor Digit shared much proximity and, it seemed obvious, even at a young age, that Digit would, upon maturity, become a peripheral male to Group 4.

During the first two years, observations of gorilla groups on Mount Visoke were greatly hampered by the animals' fear of humans, a fear they had justifiably gained throughout the years of encroachment by cattle grazers and poachers, though gorillas were at that time usually poached only for reasons of "sumu." The tradition of "sumu" (poison) is deeply entrenched in the cultures of both Rwanda and Zaire.

Certain parts of the silverback's body, the ears, tongue, distal phalanges of the small fingers and testicles, are cut off and used in a potion which the Africans say will either kill or induce virility depending upon the amount used. It was only in later years, when Europeans and tourists began flocking into the country, that gorillas began to be killed for their skulls and hands which were





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sold as trophies or souvenirs. This intolerable practice concentrated more on silverbacks whose massively crested skulls appealed to the warped individuals who purchased them.

Because of their deep-seated fear, it took about 2 years to habituate the gorillas on Mt. Visoke, to earn their trust and confidence, and to finally become completely accepted by them. During that time, and even now, I have purposely not habituated gorillas to the Africans who so loyally work at camp and without whose help the study could never have succeeded. The reasons for this policy should be apparent: that split second that it takes a gorilla to try and identify and recognize the African who approaches him as observer or poacher is just the time needed to cost the gorilla his life from a bow or spear. Gorillas within this area of the Virungas know Africans only as poachers. This practice should continue only until the very last poacher is driven out of the area so as not to further endanger the animals. Digit's group, like the other three main study groups, consisting of a total of 48 animals, usually ranged only on the steep slopes of Mt. Visoke between 10-12,000 feet elevation, (3000 to 3650 meters) during the initial years of the study. Although some 30 square kilometers of ideal gorilla habitat lay in the saddle terrain adjacent to the mountain and unquestionably had been utilized by the predecessors of these groups, none of the animals would risk leaving the relative security provided by the steep slopes to go off and range within the saddle domain of poachers, their traps, and dogs, countless hundreds of cattle herds and their grazers, honey gatherers and wood-cutters. As a result, the ranges of the four main study groups overlapped considerably within a heavily

overused slope area of 19 square kilometers. Therefore, because of spatial restrictions, interactions between groups occurred frequently. Group 4, under the new leadership of young, inexperienced Uncle Bert, was constantly harassed by two other groups who sought to "kidnap" four young females maturing within Group 4. The four females were Digit's closest peers and ranged in age from 2 years 8 months older to 3 years younger than he. Following the death of Whinney, and the departure of Amok, Digit was constantly in their company in playing, grooming, feeding, and nesting activities. The other group members were either too old or too young to provide the types of social interactions required by the maturing young male, but the four females accepted him completely.

As habituation progressed and Uncle Bert felt that his group was no longer threatened by the observer, the fear of the young adults gave way to intense curiosity and playful antics directed towards the observer. This type of response behavior consisted of showoff chestbeats, exaggerated struts, branch breaking, and foliage whacking. The young females gave every evidence of enjoying these activities and seemed almost to be trying to outdo one another in obtaining attention. Digit, not one to be left behind, mimicked their actions and soon became equally bold and playful.

In late 1969, because of the close proximity provided in observations, it was noted that the third finger of Digit's right hand was swollen, pink, and held in an extended position. It was then that he obtained the permanent name of Digit after 2 years of a various assortment of names, none of which seemed to fit. The injury



probably resulted from his hand having been caught in a trap. We had greatly increased our poacher patrols and continually herded cattle out of the saddle, thus the gorillas were able to extend their ranges away from the overcrowded mountain slopes into the gently rolling saddle terrain filled with an abundant variety of lush food sources. The range expansion minimized interactions between the groups, though it did subject them to some poacher dangers which I and my limited camp staff could not immediately eradicate within such a large area.

In January 1971, Bravado, one of Digit's closest peers, was taken from Group 4 into another group (Group 5): in June 1971, the other two females closest to him in age were taken into yet another group (Group 8). The two interactions involving the losses of the three females occurred on the slopes of Mt. Visoke. There had apparently been a lack of female births between 1960 and 1970, thus other groups with silverback leaders more experienced and mature than Uncle Bert sought the three females, adults when they left their group, for breeding purposes. During the interactions, Digit, still a young adult, did not participate by backing up Uncle Bert in defense of the females. Frequently juvenile and adult males who share close blood links with the dominant silverback of the group, do assist him by contributing supportive charges and similar threatening actions against the males of the infringing group. Digit, not in the same position as the above males, had spent his formative years occupied with the maintenance and strengthening of his affiliations with his peers rather than being shaped for a leadership role, thus his lack of assertiveness at a young age was not surprising.

The loss of three of his four closest relationships within the group altered Digit's behavior considerably. Amongst the remaining group members, then reduced to only eight others, Digit found little companionship with the silverback and even less with the three remaining older adult females who were fully occupied with their own young infants. So he spent the majority of his time with the fourth remaining female, young Papoose, who, like him, had also been orphaned at an early age. Simultaneously, he increased his observer-oriented behavior to an amazing degree, although this was in no way encouraged. He began soliciting play with observers just as he had previously done with his gorilla companions, by rolling on his back, kicking his feet up in the air, beating lightly on his chest and grinning at the observer. If the first invitation to play met with no response, he would move closer and repeat the entire repertoire until tickled, groomed, or lightly cuffed. His curiosity, one of the most remarkable aspects of the gorilla's personality, compelled him toward complete and prolonged proximity with human observers, even strangers providing they were accompanied by someone from camp known to Digit. He approached to examine both familiar and strange individuals alike, gently pulling hair, beards, ears, clothing and to handle thermos flasks, cameras, binoculars, gloves. One received the subjective impression that he was "relieving the tedium of an otherwise boring day" now that he had only one close companion to play with within the group. The National Geographic Special television film captured several such poignant scenes, the most memorable being Digit examining first my pen and then my notebook before carefully returning each to me and rolling over to go to sleep by my side. That was the nature of Digit-gentle, inquisitive, and trusting.

In October 1971, Digit was observed for the first time attempting to back up the still inexperienced Uncle Bert during an interaction with Group 5, Bravado's new group. The combined displays of the two males of Group 4 appeared more bothersome than worrying to Beethoven, the leader of Group 5, who only occasionally took the trouble to deliberately charge them in annoyance. The interaction, however, provided Bravado with an opportunity to briefly rejoin the members of her home group, all



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of whom, especially Digit, showed unrestrained delight at seeing her again. Their exuberant play behavior lasted for nearly two days and occasionally some of the young animals of Group 5 crossed the intervening 150 feet separating the two groups and joined in the chasing and wrestling play. The interaction was terminated on the second day when Beethoven, possibly somewhat apprehensive about Bravado's reuniting with her home group, forcefully strutted over to Group 4 and, with no small commotion, herded an obedient Bravado back to his own group. To my knowledge, that was the last time the two companions were ever to see one another.

In January 1972, at the age of 6 years, 8 months, Digit was first seen in somewhat unpractised attempts at copulation behavior with the young female, Papoose, of whom he had become quite possessive, and the same type of behavior was again seen several months later with the even younger female, Simba. Neither of these two females, both juveniles at the time, were old enough to be sexually interesting to Uncle Bert, thus Digit had full access to them.

In February 1972, during an interaction, Digit was critically wounded under his right eye and near the center of his neck under the jaw. The eye wound healed slowly, its scar visible for many months afterwards. The neck wound, typical of most severe canine puncture injuries, was still draining a foul-smelling exudate 5 years later. It was last clearly observed as a deep, circular



indentation surrounded by a lattice work of scar tissue in March 1976. The draining infection was considered to have become systemic when Digit's general physique and behavior deteriorated markedly, and he began to maintain increasingly distant travel and nesting positions from the group. At such times, he could usually be located by a chronic cough which had also developed. However, when interactions with other groups were imminent or when females within his own group came into estrus, Digit resumed his proximity to the group and reacted much as he always had before his injury. So, although Digit was still capable of participating in the more outstanding social interactions of his group, his body developed a permanent "hunched" appearance with his back abruptly rounding off to his rump as though he were always on the immediate verge of sitting down. This development, plus a frequently-worn "morose" facial expression, were infinitely remindful that Digit was no longer the healthy youngster I once knew.

As he matured, his interest in the observer naturally decreased as he became more aware of his own social status within the group and the dynamics governing his relationships with others. He still was extraordinarily tolerant of the proximity of observers he knew well and spent long hours every day resting very closely to us when he was otherwise alone on the periphery of his group. His behavior began to alter somewhat towards new male observers whom he sometimes singled out for small bluff displays but this was never done toward females.

In June 1974, the fourth and last of the close companions of his youth, Papoose, left Group 4 to take part in the formation of a new group of a lone silverback male with whom she was later to bear her first offspring. Though still an integral member of Group 4, this loss possibly left Digit more "alone" than ever, but he soon developed a close and somewhat possessive relationship with the youngest female adult, Simba, and actively remained between her and other males once she began to attract sexual attention.

In January 1976 an unusual event occurred when Uncle Bert went to considerable effort to obtain a young blackback male, estimated to be approximately 2 years 10 months younger than Digit. The new male named Beetsme, had been previously traveling with just one silverback: his immigration into Group 4 marked the first, and only, thus far, time a male has been known to transfer into an established gorilla group. It was a puzzle as to why Uncle Bert had sought an additional male in his group which already contained six males giving it a male to female ratio of 1.8 to 1.

Digit's interactions with Beetsme were minimal, and, in particular, when Simba was in estrus, antagonistic. At 11 years of age, Digit himself entered the silverback stage and the time and distance spent up to 150 meters from the group lengthened. To the human observer, it was especially sad to find the once frolicsome, lively, socially inclined individual that Digit had once been now making the solo transition into a permanently peripheral animal in preparation for what should eventually have led to the beginning of his own life as the leader of a new group.

I realise the word "sad" may sound maudlin perhaps even presumptuous for me to conclude when I would encounter him sitting quietly and alone about a hundred or so feet (30 meters) from his group, many of whom were engaged in play or grooming activities in which I vividly recalled Digit so enthusiastically participating in the past. Still, Digit's spatial position apart from the group did serve a special function. In November 1976 my tracker and I were searching for Group 4 when we suddenly saw them some 40 meters away off to our left, day-nesting in a heavy drizzle. I was debating as to whether or not to bother them when out of the brush to our right ran Digit to inadvertently meet the tracker at a distance of 8 meters. Digit immediately stood upright and gave two prolonged screams exposing his upper gums and all

canines. At that moment, he seemed undecided as to whether to charge or to flee until I stepped up into his view and pushed the tracker down behind me. At once he dropped to all fours and fled towards his group who had already taken off and had rapidly run over 100 feet with Uncle Bert bringing up the rear. Digit caught up with them instantly, leaving a strong, pungent, fear odor that remained in the air for over 15 minutes. Here again was graphic reconfirmation of the value of the peripheral silverback and other maturing males who have the responsibility to serve as "watch dogs" in assisting the dominant male in the protection of the more defenseless members of their group.

It was in this service that Digit was killed by poachers on December 31, 1977. On that day, Digit took 5 mortal spear wounds into his own body, held off six poachers and their dogs, allowing the entire family group to flee 4 kms away to safety. Digit's last lonely battle was a valiant and courageous one in which he managed to kill one of the poachers' dogs before dying. I cannot allow myself to think of his anguish, his pain, and the total comprehension he suffered of knowing what humans were doing to him.

The harmless, beloved Digit was killed for the sole purpose of his head and hands which had been hastily hacked off and taken away leaving his mutilated corpse lying on its side in the corner of a flattened, blood-soaked area roughly 50 feet in diameter. We brought his body back to camp and later buried him in front of my cabin where he will remain permanently.

The following days were spent trying desperately to remember that nothing I could ever do would bring Digit back to life, but that I must not have allowed him to die in vain. Correspondence was initiated with responsible officials within this country and abroad as well as with many others who had known Digit over the years and also those known to be deeply concerned with the fate of the few remaining mountain gorillas, estimated as probably no more than 230 within the Virungas.



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A young doctor came up with an assistant and kindly performed an autopsy which indicated that all of Digit's organs were apparently overtly healthy except for a 3 cm cyst in the spleen. It appeared that Digit had overcome the effects of the neck wound he suffered in 1972 which was of little consolation now.

On the same day as the autopsy, I was in my cabin when the woodman, working some 50 feet from the cabin, began yelling "Poacher, poacher." This brought the houseman running to say that a poacher with bow and arrows had been spotted directly behind my camp attempting to kill an antelope. I told all four of the camp staff to chase him and ran after them myself. Just above camp, there is a large meadow which lies between the steep slopes of Mt. Visoke and the vast saddle terrain leading to two other volcanoes. I kept to the middle of the meadow so that the poacher would not be able to cross over and disappear into the saddle, and my men rapidly gained on him against the Visoke slopes and finally caught him. So rarely is a poacher caught in the park that this event truly seemed miraculous. When they brought him out of the forest on to the meadow, I could see that he was one of the Twa from what is basically a poacher village near the park boundary. I saw something else as well which froze my blood and nearly caused me to lose all sense of reason. Both the front and the back of his tattered yellow shirt were sprayed with fountains of dried blood, far more than could result from an antelope killing.

Within a minute he admitted to having been one of Digit's killers. During the following 24 hours, when he remained our captive, tied up in my cabin, I could not permit myself to be left alone with him and concentrated solely on the cause of Digit.

Not long after we had returned to the cabin, the woodman again began yelling "Poacher" and we ran out to find that one of the Twa's hunting accomplices had sneaked up to camp to check on his friend. Another chase started, but it proved fruitless as the poacher disappeared into dense forest where he was lost in a maze of footprints made that day by three other poachers. This is the first time the poachers had been in this area for over three years. The reason for their presence now is that they have killed and poached virtually unchecked in the distant areas of the park, and have nearly decimated the antelope population elsewhere. Simultaneously the duiker and bushbuck population around my camp and immediate working area has increased enormously because of the protection we fought so hard to win for them. The poachers of this area, most with shambas (farms) of their own, kill the antelopes essentially to sell to Europeans and wealthy Africans living in and around Ruhengiri and use the money to purchase pombe (native beer). It is not a matter of being "meat-starved."

My men and I began a long examination period with the Twa



we had captured and gleaned the names of all six of Digit's killers, many of whom I had endeavored to have imprisoned previously: 1) KANYARUGANO (the one we caught); 2) MUNYARUKIKO (the leading poacher of the Virungas known to have been responsible for multiple elephant and gorilla killings over at least a 10-year period); 3) GASHABIZI (works constantly with Munyarukiko); 4) NTANYUNGU (has since been caught and imprisoned); 5) RUBANDA (has since been caught and imprisoned); 6) RUNYAGU. In addition, we also obtained the names of the three antelope hunters out around camp that day who escaped us but have since returned to hunt.

What stuns me almost beyond the actuality of Digit's death is the reason he was killed. An African by the name of SEBUNYANA-ZIRIMWABAGABO, who also lives in the small village near the base of the mountain, offered to pay MUNYARUKIKO the equivalent of \$20 for a silverback's head and hands though he had, as yet, no ready customer for them. This is not the first time he has instigated such a crime. To think that the life of Digit could be snuffed out for the sum of \$20: a life that was beyond value. It is an irreconcilable thought.

Here again we have a parallel to the antelope situation in that it seems likely that the majority of gorillas outside the camp's working area have already been slaughtered for their heads and hands, and that the only relatively "abundant" gorilla population remaining consists of the study groups worked with over the years thus protected by the frequency of observations and regular patrols against the poachers. That the poachers had the nerve to attack one of our study groups could mean the beginning of the end for the remaining mountain gorillas. Only if I can elicit enough interest and support will their total decimation be prevented.

I allowed the prisoner to go down to Ruhengiri the following day under the maximum security of the Chef de Brigade of Ruhengiri and three armed commandoes. The Twa had told all of us he knew where the head and hands were buried underneath a

bamboo clump outside of MUNYARUKIKO's house: however, when the Chief went to that spot, accompanied by the Twa, the hole in which they had been buried was found empty. They have yet to be recovered.

My last contact with Digit took place in December 1977 after I had returned from a stay in America. As usual, he was sitting by himself some distance from the group but showed instant recognition as I crawled down to him. We sat together for nearly half an hour exchanging vocalizations, gorilla-style. I do not know what motivated me to take out my camera and snap some six pictures of him, but these were the last ever to be taken of him in life. Since his death, it is now the transferred male, Beetsme, and an even younger male, Tiger, who maintain the "watchdog" roles in protection of their group though I find myself looking still toward the periphery of the group for Digit. I am, of course, still allowed to share their proximity, enter the group bulk, and be one with them, but it is an honor and a gift that I feel I no longer deserve.

I can only very half-heartedly conclude that Digit did not die totally in vain because he gave his life for his group so that they might survive-what? A month? Six months? A year? To sit back to grieve and ignore the actual wanton inhumane reason for his death is to do Digit a grave injustice. One cannot state that he suffered more or less than the countless other nameless gorillas killed in the same manner as victims of man's greed. Perhaps, though, if the public has further knowledge of his life and personality, he can serve to protect those animals remaining, if the entire story is published factually and without bias. For this reason, I am anxious to establish a "Digit Fund" to attempt to raise money to maintain students, to train Rwandans in the patrol of the park, and for additional census work on the Rwandan side of the Virungas to locate the whereabouts and ranges of the surviving population so that stronger efforts may be made to protect them and to actively secure their survival.

Here, at camp, we wake up each morning wondering who will be next.

## HELP MAKE THE WORLD SAFE FOR MWELU

Dian Fossey has informed IPPL that Group 4 had a new baby on 6 April 1978. Dian believes that the father must have been Digit, since Uncle Bert had shown no sexual interest in Simba, the new baby's mother, and Dian had witnessed Digit and Simba mating on 5 July 1977. The new baby was named "Mwelu" - which means "a touch of brightness and light" in Swahili.

With the death of Digit and the threat of further poacher incursions in the park, the future looks bleak for Mwelu, Group 4, and the other gorilla groups in the Virunga Volcanoes.

IPPL is therefore appealing to all members and friends to make a contribution to Ms. Fossey's work so that anti-poaching patrols can be increased and efforts made to protect all the remaining Virunga gorillas.

Please make out your cheque to IPPL, marking it clearly "For Dian Fossey." All contributions will be forwarded directly to Dian so you can be assured that every cent will go to help the gorillas. Please ask your friends to contribute as well as any conservation or animal welfare groups, local or national, to which you belong.

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