

## Portrait of Commanding officer Seitebatso Pearl Block



On 15 November 2017, MONUSCO received the good news that a woman, Peacekeeper from South Africa was given UN Award as the year's gender military advocate, at Vancouver, in Canada. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the UN Deputy Secretary General for peacekeeping operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix handed the Award to Commander Seitebatso Pearl Block during a Defense ministers' meeting on the UN peacekeeping in recognition of her outstanding job with the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO).

MONUSCO Information Operations Officer conceived an SMS campaign from July 2016 to July 2017, in response to the conflict related sexual violence throughout the Mission's zone. Based in Goma, in the eastern part of the country, Commanding officer Seitebatso regularly met Congolese women, men and youth in a bid to better understand their worries, to reassure and inform them of their rights. Furthermore, she devoted her time to

training her colleagues as well as the rank-and-file on the gender dynamic within the Mission. This helped the military component to develop more inclusive community engagement projects as part of the Civilian Protections strategy aimed to combat the illegal armed groups in the Eastern Congo.

Upon receiving her Award, Commanding officer Block declared ***"I am honored and humbled"*** and said she hoped the award will encourage more women to serve as Peacekeepers. ***"I knew that I should act after the conversations I had with women's groups. As both a Peacekeeper and a woman, I believe we have a lot to give to make the UN more inclusive and connected with the local communities we serve"***, she further said: ***"I would like to take this opportunity to extend gratitude to my chiefs, Lieutenant-Colonel Bev Allen and Major Timothy Graham, heads of the Gender and Child Protection units for extolling my hard work and dedication and pushing for my designation to receive the Award. This wonderful news reached me after completing my tour of duty in DRC and returning to South Africa, I feel humbled and dignified by this Award and hope I will be a good UN advocate and ambassador for women and children across the world. I am also proud to be my country's representative the one to raise higher the colors of the Republic of South Africa in the international and national arenas. It is a privilege for me to be given such an opportunity to make my modest contribution as UN woman Peacekeeper."*** "We are the one who should be more honored and proud, Commander, for having the name of our organization MONUSCO honored at the international arena in such a noble cause. Jean-Pierre

Lacroix, the Under-Secretary General in charge of peacekeeping operations even put it much better: ***“Commander Seitebatso is a role model for all of us and an outstanding example to better illustrate the work done by peacekeepers through taking initiatives and interacting with local communities in a bid to find solutions to their problems and to protect civilian populations, which contribute to saving lives.”***

Commanding officer Seitebatso is no longer working with us, though she returned home a few months ago, we had to take this opportunity to dedicate this ***“Portrait of the month”*** to her. We remain part of the United Nations family after serving it no matter how many times: once, twice, three times, a thousand times, etc. Ms. Block, your MONUSCO family would like to know more about you, we asked over the phone; she took us through her career, step by step: ***“I was born in Rustenburg, NW province and raised by a strong single mother of 4, Sehume Rakhudu. I currently reside in Johannesburg, Gauteng Province, Republic of South Africa (RSA). I joined the South African National Defense Force (SANDF) in January 2004 and was commissioned as an officer in 2007. I am currently working at Defense Intelligence as SO2 External Processor as an analyst for the DRC, but have been transferred to Army HQ wef 01 Dec 2017 as Military Security Officer. I have completed a National Diploma in Security Risk Management in 2013 at the University of South Africa (UNISA). My husband and I have applied to study BA Degree in International Relations with UNISA and still awaiting the outcome of our applications.”***



Will you please tell us how you got to DRC, Commander: ***“I have deployed twice in the DRC under the auspices of MONUSCO, first in 2010 with the RSA contingent as a Company Information Officer and again in 2016 at the Force Hq in the G5 Planning Cell as Information Operations (Sensitization) and Force Intervention Brigade Planner. I have developed a Bulk SMS project that will be launched in MONUSCO in few weeks, a cost effective measure to ensure that the mission’s key messages reach more of the DRC populace. I gained immeasurable experience***

*from both deployments, especially with the practice of the UNSCR 1325 of 2000 and am implementing some of this experience back at home."*

MONUSCO is indeed a family but a multicultural one, were you comfortable to work with your colleagues from the different parts of the world? ***"I get along with anyone I work with. I can easily express myself but remain professional and disciplined when interacting with my fellow colleagues. I am a team player and enjoyed working with personnel from different countries. I learned a lot from all of them. I do respect all the cultures and traditions because I am from South Africa where culture and traditions are maintained and I grew up knowing that one's cultural beliefs cannot be disrespected. Once I joined the military I learned that we all come from different cultures but there is only one in the Army, the Military culture. A child does not choose where and the situation under which they are born. So I was lucky to grow up in a country where I could make a choice of where to stay and/or work."***

Not everyone can have such an opportunity. Respect for the fundamental liberties in DRC, what do you think about? ***"In my opinion, the situation in DRC is disquieting. The constant violence and human rights violation is alarming. The postponement of the elections also aggregates the violence in the DRC. The women and children are the ones who suffer the most." The United Nations are doing everything in their power to promote the human Rights: "The UN is definitely doing a great job, but there is only so much it can do. The Government of DRC should take the lead in conflict resolution especially that most of the conflicts are due to ethnic tensions. International Communities should also be involved to enforce International humanitarian and human rights laws."***

This is another question I am keen to ask you: you are a military woman, and I would like to put it plainly; people think it is hard for a woman to work successfully in a male-dominated working environment, isn't it? ***"Yes, the military is a male dominated career but in most of the work I do, I prefer working with men and women equally, I try to encourage the advancement of women in the military. During my deployment we formed an Information Operations Working Group (IOWG), having the perspective of both genders during planning, made us more effective."*** It is still a long way to go...some would say; we should move ahead, and with firm determination, we will achieve it!



Well, what does a military woman do at home? Let me start by asking if it was easy for you to find a courageous man to marry you...you are smart and beautiful, that should not actually be an issue... ***"I am married to Captain Sandile Arthur Block who is also in the Force."*** Ha I see, He is also military...Hou, hou so it happens within the Force, the staff inter-marry and what happens next, no military staff left for civilian women...No, No, don't heed this, it was meant to tease you, there will always be enough men! Will your children also be in the military? Will you first tell me how many children you have? ***"I am a proud mother of two beautiful and hyperactive girls, aged 4 and 9. We aspire to adopt 2 or 3 more children to enlarge our family."*** That is more than being brave, nowadays, large families are seen as a dream, far away from many of us, but not for her, she needs it...you might want to stop with ten!!!!, you should stop somewhere anyway because you can't extend the walls of your house. You haven't yet told me what you like to do beyond your working hours at home. ***"In my spare time I enjoy ballroom and Latin dancing, martial arts and have acquired black belt in both karate and taekwondo \*Trained Taekwondo in the UN Gym in DRC) and also volunteer with my family at the local orphanage."*** Wait a minute...Now I realize everything you told me: the military career, the desire to have a large family, adopting kids.... but what I still don't understand is the ballroom dance and the salsa...I have never seen a military dancing the salsa! I should accept anyway because both of us almost like the same things: ballroom dance, salsa...only great minds meet...!



After accomplishing all those activities, do you still have time for house chores (watch out, you are not obliged...captain must certainly take care of the cleaning work)? ***"I don't like doing house chores, but I love to cook and bake, my housemates in the DRC used to enjoy my food very much. I still enjoy the DRC music even here in South Africa. I had an opportunity to attend the Amani Festival in Goma; that was the best day I had in the DRC and the memory I will cherish forever. I also enjoyed watching the soccer***

*team at the church close to my house. And was touched by their reaction when I handed to those kids some stationeries and soccer balls that I bought during my leave in South Africa."*

Any wishes for the DRC? ***"I hope one day (soon) the Armed Groups will cease the violence in the DRC and the country will gain peace and stability. After my first tour of duty in the DRC, I had hoped to go back and I guess I was lucky to be sent back."***

One never knows – you might have other like opportunities – Any wish for yourself? ***"I hope to deploy again one day as a Force Commander for any of the UN Missions."*** Ambitious, Major but we should understand her; she must have a brilliant future career. As far as I am concerned, I wish her the best of luck; she has really been ***"a nice person."***

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