

# Kishugu

BATTLING FOR THE  
GREATER GOOD





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# BATTLING *for the* **GREATER GOOD**

*Kishugu, which has its roots in forest and wildfire combating, suppression and prevention, is set to light up the global stage with its international experience of delivering integrated fire management services*

**F**ire is a friend to mankind - until it gets out of hand: then it can become a formidable enemy, one that can only be subdued by an army versed in both conventional and guerrilla warfare and co-ordinated ground and air operations. As Johan Heine, co-Managing Director of Kishugu (formerly the FFA Group) speaks - always passionately - about the business he founded 28 years ago in 1986, he relies heavily on military imagery.

Well, that is natural enough for a former air force pilot, but it is much more than a habit of speech. Firefighting, which is Kishugu's raison d'être, is a lot like war, he says. Reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, getting to understand the enemy and the reason why there has been a local uprising is

farming. But fire is capricious, and so is the weather. It only takes a change in wind speed or direction and what was a controlled burn can turn into a conflagration.

Heine, one of the most experienced firefighting pilots in Africa with more than 25 years of aerial firefighting experience under his belt, established a voluntary association of forestry landowners, the Forest Fire Association (FFA) in 1996. FFA hired in equipment and resources as required, focusing on aerial firefighting, dispatch and coordination. By 1995, the organisation had grown to cover up to 70 percent of South Africa.

Along the way, Johan Heine had assisted the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry with the drafting of South Africa's veld and

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*“Aerial support needs ground support.  
Without that it is like fighting a war without  
boots on the ground”*

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vital. Whatever units there are on the ground near the outbreak have the task of reporting back to HQ so that reinforcements are ready if needed. If the initial skirmishes end in victory, then the troops can stand down. If not the conflict escalates, and an extended attack plan is put in place and carried out by a strike force. Sometimes that first crucial battle is also lost, and you have a war on your hands.

In the more arid parts of Africa fire has always been part of the natural environment and nature takes it in its stride. Lightning ignites the savannah, burning large tracts, and when the fires peter out and the rains come the vegetation renews itself and wildlife returns. And controlled burning is likewise a part of traditional agricultural practice that has been carried on into modern large scale

forest fire laws in 1989 and was instrumental in driving the development of Fire Protection Associations (FPAs) in South Africa. However by 2003 it was becoming clear to him that aerial attack was only half the solution to successful fire control. “Aerial support needs ground support. Without that it is like fighting a war without boots on the ground - if you only have air attack in your strategy there is no way you will be really successful.

That led to the birth of the FFA Group, now rebranded as Kishugu (which is the Swahili word for anthill - appropriately for an organisation in which every individual works for the common good). It also gave rise to the mantra he coined, and which has now gained currency in global firefighting circle - ‘Integrated Fire Management.’ “A lot of



Working on Fire addresses  
the prevention and control  
of wildland fires

firefighting agencies in the world have fallen flat because they do not have a sufficient level of integration between dispatch, coordination, aviation, ground support, research, logistics and all the other things that go to make up an efficient operation. So we try not to approach each issue in a silo!"

Today Kishugu Aviation alone operates a fleet of 50 aircraft, of which it owns 70 percent. These provide national and international aerial firefighting services with resources made up of command and control aircraft, helicopters

and helitac crews, and single engine air tankers with water carrying capacities of between 2,000 and 3,000 litres. The most recent of these are four Air Tractor AT 802F aircraft, the largest single engine water bombing aircraft in the world. This plane rivals the performance of twin-engine tankers, but at a fraction of the cost. It uses a patented, computer-controlled firegate to deliver precise coverage levels with extreme accuracy.

You could call these Air Tractors the sharp end of the operation, but the division employs

*“A lot of firefighting agencies in the world have fallen flat because they do not have a sufficient level of integration”*



Kishugu provides specialised and certified training



Ground firefighting operation

around 200 people in all, including 70 pilots who between them fly up to 18 Cessna spotter, or command and control planes, a fleet of 20 helicopters, and a number of fixed wing water bombers. The division has its own Aviation Training Organisation (ATO) to ensure that the pilots fully understand the special demands of firefighting. When it comes to the big beasts though, pilots who are going to fly the Air Tractors go for conversion training to Avialsa in Spain, the biggest Air Tractor dealer in the world, to benefit from the experience of a country with unique experience in aerial firefighting.

When its ten subsidiaries that each adds value to the core proposition, the Kishugu group as a whole employs more than 6,000 people. Among these divisions are Kishugu Training, which provides specialised and

**Did you know?**

**50**  
Aircraft in Kishugu's fleet

**5,000**  
Young people helped by WoF programme in South Africa

certified training globally focused on but not restricted to Integrated Fire Management and fire-fighting related training; Integrated Forestry Services, which provides end-to-end forestry and silvicultural services such as harvesting, transport and fire protection to plantation owners and Fleet Management, which furnishes a wide range of high quality and reliable vehicles to its clients, applying global best practices to its fleet management principles

to ensure the safety and standardisation of vehicles and equipment.

Working on Fire (WoF), today the largest private supplier of Integrated Fire Management Services in the world and operating in seven countries across four continents, started in 2003 as a government-funded job-creation programme within South Africa. Now its



The Air Tractor-802F is capable of delivering retarding foam and water on fires in places that most other craft struggle to reach

*“It is very satisfying to be able to be solving the problems of firefighting and tackling youth unemployment at the same time”*

largest operations are in South Africa and Chile. Implemented by Kishugu in the domestic market, where it currently benefits more than 5,000 people, 85 percent of them are youths, and 37 percent female (the highest level in any comparable fire service in the world). The model has exported successfully and today

Kishugu under the Fire International brand works with minority partners in Brazil, Chile, and Australia. “There was a huge problem of the youth unemployment in Spain and other countries. It is very satisfying to be able to be solving the problems of firefighting and tackling youth unemployment at the same time.”

WoF has given Kishugu massive credibility and authority internationally, and also allowed it to develop contracts tailor made for parastatal and private companies to provide air and ground fire services and training. Almost nonchalantly Johan Heine drops the information that the company has grown at 30 percent per annum for the last ten years. That stellar performance could eventually lead Kishugu to go public but for the time being it has its work cut out keeping its services at the level they need to be in South Africa, while expanding its footprint in South America and Australia.

2014 has been a drought year and consequently very demanding. Kishugu had

far exceeded its planned flying hours before September – always the worst month – had even started. “But we are winning the war,” says Heine. “We have made a huge difference over the last ten years and have come out on top of the whole fire management problem, no question!” **BE**

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