

# Mike Campbell

Farmer in Zimbabwe who despite torture mounted a successful legal challenge to Mugabe's land reforms

ROBIN HAMMOND / PANOS

Of the thousands of persecuted white farmers who defied President Mugabe in their stubborn determination to stand by their legal right to own and farm their land, none was more successful than Mike Campbell.

He had the Zimbabwean leader declared by an international court — an African one — as a thief and a racist for the land grab he started in 2000. Mugabe could not claim the all-black court was “a Western imperialist tool”, but he declared that he would not recognise the ruling anyway.

Campbell, in his late seventies, was abducted and tortured for daring to challenge Robert Mugabe, but he returned to his farm. Eventually, they had to burn down his home to defeat him. He died of his injuries nearly three years later.

His struggle to keep his land came to the attention of a wider audience with the documentary *Mugabe and the White African*, which won a Bafta for Documentary of the Year in 2009, and was nominated for an Oscar.

William Michael Campbell was born into a farming family in South Africa in 1932. He joined the South African Army after school, but left as a captain in the early 1960s to farm. Like many white Zimbabweans he held his identity and lineage as a white African as an article of faith. The first of his line in Africa was a Scottish sea captain who was awarded a farm in the Cape in 1713 as compensation for the loss of his arm in protecting his ship.

Campbell first encountered what was then Rhodesia on a hunting trip in 1974. He was deeply affected by the pristine bush and its wildlife, and saw the country's potential for farming. He returned to South Africa to sell his farm and in August 1975 he bought the run-down 3,000-acre (1,200-hectare) Mount Carmel farm in Chegutu district, 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of the capital Salisbury (now Harare).

## Having been looted of nearly everything, the homestead was torched

He saw active service in the Rhodesian police reserve during the civil war that brought Mugabe to power in 1980, but life at Mount Carmel was little disturbed. However, in 1997 the farm was listed for “compulsory acquisition”, followed soon afterwards by Mugabe's “revolutionary land reform programme”.

Continual attempts to force him off Mount Carmel were met with his obdurate refusal to leave. Campbell was also one of the white farmers' leading litigators against laws that steadily eroded their legal rights.

In late 2007 Mugabe changed the Constitution to bar farmers the legal right to challenge the seizure of their farms. At the same time six months had elapsed without response since Campbell had appealed to the Supreme Court for protection. Members of the court, controlled by Mugabe appointees, had allegedly been bribed with seized farms.

Campbell turned to the Tribunal of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the 15-nation regional alliance, founded as a court to



Campbell with his son-in-law and workers on his farm. His struggles were the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary

which citizens of member states could appeal when they had exhausted all avenues of appeal at home. Mugabe was a signatory to the treaty setting up the tribunal, which included member states “to act in accordance with the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law”, and to accept the jurisdiction of the court.

Hearings had been postponed repeatedly at Mugabe's state lawyers' request when on June 29, Campbell, then 75, his wife, Angela, 64, and his son-in-law, Ben Freeth, were kidnapped by 16 so-called war veterans. The two men were battered about their heads with rifle butts and Angela was hurled to the ground, breaking an arm in two places, and dragged across the lawn by her hair. They were taken to a militia camp and tortured for nine hours.

Campbell was ordered to sign a scrap of paper stating that he would withdraw the tribunal case but was barely conscious and his right hand was smashed. Angela, who had had a burning branch rammed into her mouth, did it for him, and they were

dumped, barely alive, in a nearby town.

Of course, the signature could not have any validity, and Campbell was in court for the final ruling of the tribunal in November 2008. It declared that Mugabe's land seizure campaign was a lawless act of theft, and racist to boot. Mugabe's regime was ordered to protect white farmers' rights to live and work on their farms. Campbell, who had returned to Mount Carmel, wept for joy. Mugabe's reaction was not unexpected. He dismissed the ruling as “nonsense” and said: “We are not subject to the SADC tribunal.”

Harassment at Mount Carmel continued. In April 2009 a war veteran, calling himself Landmine, forced his way into the kitchen, pointed a pistol at the elderly couple and told them to get out. Freeth recognised the futility of continued defiance and took them away with a few suitcases.

Five months later, having looted the farm of nearly everything, the war veteran set fire to the thatched-roofed homestead. The rest of what had been a model of agricultural enterprise and

of farm labour conditions, and was the country's largest producer of mangoes, exporting 250 tonnes to Marks & Spencer each year, was sinking into dereliction. The 16 hectares of prime citrus were dead from lack of irrigation and the 150 workers and their families scattered as war veterans sold the rotting mangoes to buy beer.

Campbell remained lucid and relatively mobile, but the skull fractures he sustained caused brain shrinkage that started to close down the rest of his vital organs. One morning this month he told his wife: “I'm going to die today.” He passed away peacefully hours later, of cardiac and pulmonary failure.

Two ringleaders of the attack were arrested by police on charges of attempted murder but after a few months they were released illegally on the signature of a court orderly.

Campbell is survived by his wife Angela and three children.

**Mike Campbell, farmer, was born on October 19, 1932. He died on April 6, 2011, aged 78**