

British pilot saved friend before dying from Tanzania poacher bullet

Roger Gower, 37, manoeuvred helicopter into tree in Serengeti park, giving friend time to jump before it crashed

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A British pilot shot dead by elephant poachers in Tanzania was a close friend and housemate of the colleague whose life he saved, his brother has said.

Roger Gower, 37, from Birmingham, was tracking criminals who had killed three elephants near the Serengeti national park when one poacher opened fire. A high-calibre bullet passed through the floor of the helicopter, hitting Gower first in the leg then in the shoulder before exiting through the roof.

Despite his injuries, Gower managed to fly the helicopter down into a tree, allowing his spotter, Nicky Bester, time to jump out before it crashed to the ground.

Gower's brother, Max, 42, has set up an online fundraising page to raise £50,000 to help anti-poaching efforts in Tanzania. Max said his brother was close friends with Bester and despite being an experienced anti-poaching pilot had only been flying missions in Tanzania since October or November.

"He was excited about the job. It's a shame he hasn't had an opportunity to do it for longer," he said.

"I'm still trying to find out all the facts. He was obviously in some pain but the amount of time he spent suffering was pretty small and I don't think he realised how badly he had been injured.

"It happened very quickly. He lost consciousness and I think he was alive for some time after that but he wouldn't have known anything about it. He died next to somebody who was one of his great friends out there.

"He lived in a house with two other guys. The chap he was flying with - Nick Bester - was one of those people. My understanding is Roger was very close to those he shared a house with."

Gower, a former accountant who qualified as a pilot in 2004, was flying anti-poaching

missions every other day, Max said. He had worked in Kenya for 10 years, flying both commercial flights and anti-poaching missions, but moved recently to Tanzania to work for the Friedkin Conservation Fund in the Maswa game reserve, where he died on Friday afternoon.

Max added: “He was flying a lot of anti-poaching. He would never have gone near a poacher with a gun. Normally in a helicopter you see poachers a long way out of their range. There’s not that many places to hide.

“As I understand it, he was taken by surprise. He didn’t see the poachers until he was very close to them. I don’t know whether the guy was shooting to kill or not, but he killed him.”

Three men accused of harbouring and providing transport for the poachers have been arrested, but up to five others, including the gunman, are reportedly still at large.

Max said he had set up the Justgiving fundraising page to “do some good and raise money for a cause he [Roger] died working for”. In less than 24 hours, he had raised nearly £10,000 of the £50,000 target. Most, if not all, the funds will go to the Friedkin Conservation Fund that conserves more than 2.4m hectares (6.1m acres) of Tanzania’s protected wildlife areas.

He added: “It’s a displacement therapy because the more time you spend talking to people and doing something, the less time you spend worrying and grieving for the fact you’re never going to see your brother again.

“You realise there are so many good people out there: the world is full of amazing people and it’s just ruined occasionally by a very, very small minority who think and act differently to everybody else.”

Gower and his partner in Brazil had been trying to find a way to live together in the same country, Max said. “He had a girlfriend in Brazil, who I know he loved very much and she loved him. My parents spoke to her last night and she said she was expecting to spend the rest of her life with him.”

The Duke of Cambridge, who has campaigned against the ivory trade, was among those who paid tribute to Gower. Although the pilot was not known to Prince William, a spokesman for Kensington Palace said he was “very saddened to hear of yet more lives lost due to poaching”.

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