

## Fond Memories of Border Control days in the Zambezi Valley.

By: Brian Lewis

The unique experiences I shared with the men of my Troop in 2 Commando will remain with me until I draw my last breath.

I count myself as one of the few fortunate to have spent many bush trips doing foot and vehicle patrols in one of the Worlds most magnificent wilderness areas.

These “adventures” and the mates I shared them with, were the grounding of a skill set that was to stand me in good stead in the war years that lay ahead.

The tight bonds of friendship and camaraderie nurtured in those times would be strongly cemented for life, and I shall never forget these men, my friends with whom I shared many of the incidents I am about to relate.

One of the highlights for me personally in the time I have been a member of the RLI Association has been meeting up with some of my fellow 2 Commando mates from the late 60s early 70s. Being able to have a few cold ones at our monthly Prayer Meeting at Dickie Fritz with “Ouens” like Charlie “Hotfoot” Davies, “Bones” Eric Bonner , Bez Bezuidenhout ,MJ Smith ,Terry Tribe , Gerry Cilliers , to mention a few, has made these occasions very special for me.

Catching up on the good old days of Border Control in the Zambezi Valley and sharing our experiences has always brought back a flood of great memories.

Most of the memories we shared always seemed to have an element of fun, which I guess was indicative of the relaxed modus operandi in the early phase of the war.

Ten day vehicle patrols through the Zambezi looking for evidence of gook activity , and looking out for our next swimming hole on the Zambezi river was just part of our normal daily activities in the bush .



Even the routine of night guard duties was extremely relaxed in those days, and usually we sat on camp chairs next to a small wood fire in the centre of camp.



Some forty years later, meeting up again at one of the Prayer meetings, we would recall the many incidents we shared, and have a good laugh at the antics we all got up to.

This short period of time together, sharing a beer or two and rekindling the past always lifted my spirit, reinforcing the bonds of friendship.

On these occasions at Dickie Fritz , I often found myself remembering friends who had sadly past on during or after the war ,and wished that they could be with us as we reminisced about the those early days of Border Control .

Each one of the men I have mentioned played a part in the experiences I lived through in the Zambezi Valley.

Each man had his own story to tell, stories that could easily fill a book, maybe one day someone will put pen to paper.

Mates like Eddie Kaschula , Gordon Scannell , Hank Stratford , Izzy Izard, Brian Dunn, Dave Strydom , Bobby Phillips , Dickie Dixon , Hank Stratford, Colin Mac Master , Arence Vermaak , Butch "Boots Alexander , Boet Botha , Bruce Elston , Bill Viviers, Blu Tounsend , John Reiley ,Rick Ward , Charlie Krause, Phil Lawton , Eddie Desousa ,Bundu Peters, Shane Beary , Skippy Deklerk and Felix Hanneman, to name a few of the more memorable characters who helped shape me and my life in the RLI .

How grateful I am to each of them for being able to share my life with them and to have had the privilege of experiencing first hand those early days of the bush war .Just how good those early days truly were ,were never appreciated by me until long after they had ended .

Many years later, and after our war had ended I returned to this pristine wild wilderness and was fortunate to spend a week in Mana Pools camping with my two children .

We camped under an old tarp beneath the giant trees which lined the banks of the Zambezi River, and I tried as best I could to recreate the conditions of life in the bush as a soldier, just so my children could enjoy some of the experiences I did.

I made a point of taking them to as many “off the beaten track” spots as I could remember.

The trickle of tourists had begun making itself felt, and restrictions were being enforced all over the Mana Pools area, making it difficult for me to reach some more memorable areas.

This was to be my last visit to the Zambezi Valley for some thirty five years.

In hind sight I often think how we tended to take life, and the beauty of places like Mana Pools, Rukometjie and Chewore for granted. Little were we to know then that most of us would only be fortunate enough to get to come back to this glorious wilderness areas once or twice more, before the war escalated to such an extent that we were to spend more time on choppers and daks than we ever did patrolling the valley and surrounds on foot.

For some of us it would be the last time we would set foot on the Valley floor ever again. We would “bomb shell”, spreading far and wide throughout the world to start a new chapter in our lives, thus only able to take with us memories.

Of course we never knew this at the time, we were too busy doing what we truly loved doing, being in the bush and chasing down gooks who were “hell-bent” on taking our beautiful land away from us.

In those hot sweaty days of early border control, often we were required to make our own roads, often crossing swollen rivers or streams in our open 4WD vehicle packed with a few compo boxes, jerry cans of fuel, enough for ten days at a time.

Patrols of this nature usually consisted of four men, this included the driver. The face veil became very useful, a must have item when patrolling in the valley and was used to fend off the hordes of tsetse or Mopani flies that would aggravate and sting us at every opportunity.

At times we “shot for the pot” to supplement our dry rations, our kill would be skinned and gutted with the carcass left for the predators.

If we were close to the Zambezi River we would make camp on the banks overlooking this great river, always choosing a spot where we could cool off with a swim to wash off the dust and sweat from the dry dusty bush roads we had travelled on all day.

I recall too the time we did a vehicle patrol from Chirundu to Mana Pools, mostly using game trails or old hunting tracks to find our way to some given rendezvous. It was the dry season and all rivers and streams were bone dry and we were forced to spend many hours digging and pushing the land rover out of the deep and fine river sand in the dry river beds.

I recall the times I was the croc guard standing on a high advantage point overlooking the chosen swimming spot, making sure that the “Ouens” who were

having a “goof” [swimming] were safe from crocs ,the odd hippo , or from an ambush from gooks .



Invariably this meant we had to off load the entire land rover ,to lighten the load, dig and push until the vehicle was free and could once again grip the track , and then to re load all our kit back on .

Sometimes, depending on the skill of the driver, this would occur at least twice a day. On one occasion during the infrequent rains we were attempting to cross a small river which was barely flowing, and in the process we became well and truly bogged down in deep clay like mud, in the middle of this stream.

No amount of pushing, or cajoling the driver to employ his best skills was going to free all four wheels from the grip of this clay mud , resulting in us having to off load the vehicle .

This took a fairly long time as the stream was wide and although mostly shallow we were laden down with all the kit from the vehicle, and often would find ourselves sinking ankle deep in the clay like mud.

The only person lucky enough not to endure this hardship was the sentry posted on the banks of the stream to give early warning of approaching danger fro Gooks or wildlife.

Unbeknown to us a heavy downpour of rain had occurred in the catchment area of the escarpment which overlooked the Valley floor, and a torrential flash flood was heading our way.

It was only when we had managed to dig all four wheels free from the claylike mud and pack the holes with stone and pieces of log that we heard a distant roar.

Not realising immediately what it was, caused us to lose valuable time in completely freeing the vehicle.

Before we had time to react it was too late, as the wave of frothy muddy water carrying logs and branches and all manner of debris flowed strongly toward the land rover in the middle of the fast swelling stream.

Eric “Bones” Bonner, our Patrol Corporal took charge of the driving and with quick and experienced skills he managed to free the vehicle and at full throttle he sped for the bank just as the water began lapping the floor of the land rover.

The remainder of us were scurrying around snatching a few empty jerry cans and various items of our kit, which had started to flow down stream.

We eventually managed to gather ourselves and repack, commencing our journey along the bone dry tracks of an old hunting road.

A valuable number of lessons were learnt that day, but nothing could compare with the thrill of watching a small stream instantly turn into a raging river, and just how unpredictable nature could be .

We were to encounter one or two more similar occasions that this would occur, however we were by now well skilled to avoid such places.

I wonder how many of my friends who are still around today can recall the unique and very popular pub in the trees , overlooking a few hippo pools, situated just outside the Mana Pools camp .

We often frequented this place, and enjoyed sitting at the bar high off the ground among the branches watching the game come down for water, while we also quenched our thirst with some ice cold beers.

I did try to find evidence of this pub in the trees when I took my two children and went back to Mana Pools. Sadly there was no trace of this once unique Pub.

I count myself fortunate to have had the privilege to have visited this wonderful wildlife wilderness, as a soldier and as a civilian.

I am even more fortunate and extremely grateful that I am able to recall just a fraction of the wonderful memories I have of Border Control in the Zambezi Valley.

