

## **Killer bees, crocs, rhino and leopard: ten days in the Zambezi Valley, November 1979**

(Max Traun)

This is not much of an action story but worth telling, and quotes from my diary. The entry for 11 November 1979 reads as follows:

Although retraining is supposed to start tomorrow, all members of 2 Commando have received an emergency call to get back to barracks ASAP. RIC reports 6 ZIPRA battalions positioning themselves on the Zambian border between Kariba and Kanyemba in the east. Our task, along with much of the Rhodesian Regular Army, RLI, RAR, SAS and SS, are to ground-deploy in certain sections of the Zambezi Valley to cover known infiltration routes. Now more than ever does it sink in that the war is not going well.

The next morning we leave for Kanyemba via Mashumbi Pools. En route the TCV in front of me detonates an AT mine but while the truck is a write-off, nobody is hurt. Troops are transferred to other TCVs and the wrecked truck is left by the road-side. By mid-day of November 13, we reach Kanyemba, along with elements of Support Commando's Recce Troop. We immediately prepare ourselves for infiltration, leaving camp establishment chores to the HQ element. However, low cloud cover and continuous rain prevents our deployment by chopper until the morning of the 15th. HQ element, plus a number of follow-up sticks, and a camp protection element, remains at Kanyemba. My section, with Trp. Stevenson as my 2IC (he replaces L/Cpl. Chris Van Zyl who has a large festering abscess on his foot), plus 6 riflemen, will be deployed by two choppers at Hot Springs on the Tunsu River, 5km south of our operational area alongside the Zambezi River. Our task is to OP/ambush/recce the area around the mouth of the Tunsu River, and to create diversionary tactics („fireworks“) at The Gate to our east and where the Chishangarashi River joins the Zambezi River to our west. Other 2 Commando call-signs cover known infiltration routes further inland to our east and west, and include sticks of Cpl. Rudi Krusberski, Sgt. Jansen Van Vuuren, Cpl. Toni Braunschick and L/Cpl. Colin Tappsell. No local habitation is known for the area except members of the (two-toed) Batonka tribe, very shy and unlikely to be encountered.

Casevac in case of battle is direct by chopper. As for all extended operations, we are given anti-histamine (bee stings), tablets for water sterilization and malaria. Bilharzia is a problem. Hawker Hunters are on stand-by if required; book numbers, other call-signs, maps, sit-reps daily by 13.00pm, stop-press daily early am, other VHF-channels; communications security as there are existing „listening stations“ along the Zambian border; detailed intelligence on CTs, etc. etc.

On our drop-off point at Hot Springs, chopper blades disturb an African killer bee hive, with the entire hive swooping down on us with very clear intentions – terrifying. All of us dash into a pool some 50 meters off, with only our mouths sticking out to gulp air. The swarm aggressively hovers above us for another 10 minutes. Every man was severely stung and one requires anti-histamin to reduce the swelling around the eyes. So we are off to a good start.

On arrival at the Tunsu River mouth, I detach Stevenson and his 3 men to permanently OP and to maintain continuous radio comms with both myself and back to HQ – he will get my daily sit-rep and stop-press reports, and will relay these to our OIC.

Myself plus four men, including Ali Arslan „The Greek“, with Mario Vidal (ex Spanish Foreign Legion) on the MAG, leave the OP-team to recce and lay an ambush to the east of the Tunsu River mouth. On the way, we spot two canoes on the other side of the river and mark them on the map for later report. We continue our approach to The Gate where we mortar the ZIPRA base at Kavalamanja in Zambia, some 400m N across the River. Looking across the river towards the ZIPRA base reminds me of my close friend Frank Battaglia from 3 Commando, US national and ex-Vietnam and Spanish Foreign Legion veteran. He was from my intake 159 and was killed on the 6th

of March 1978 during „Operation Turmoil“ at Kavalamanja. After Frank died, his brother Denis also came over from the US, joined 2 Commando and I often had him in my stick as MAG gunner. Good men. Later in the afternoon we return to the original canoe sighting where we ambush an apparent landing site for the night.

The following day Mario Vidal's MAG knocks out two canoes sitting at The Gate across the river, and the ambush at the original canoe sighting is repeated without success (about 3 km between these points). As yet, we record no signs of recent crossings but are told via Stevenson that 6 Troop killed one CT and captured another while in ambush. The spoor of the remainder of the CT group is heading north, with possible ex-filtration intentions at The Gate. We establish an ambush at The Gate but are to RV with Stevenson tomorrow.



2 Commando's 7 Troop were on follow-up of 4 CTs, killing three of them. In the meantime, we RV with Stevenson at the Tunsu River mouth. A message came in from our OC – a CT capture revealed a supposedly active crossing point below The Gate. My whole section, including the OP element, change location immediately to establish an OP and ambush at The Gate. After deciding on a route we set off and make our way inland, crossing over a mountain range using an old game path, rough and rocky country, and little vegetation cover, saw several black rhinos. We keep off the ridges, and after a hard 4 hour march in blistering heat we reach our objective. No spoor other than navigational marks indicates the possible canoe landing / crossing point. Stevenson is sent off to establish an OP, while my team starts the slow approach of our ambush site, which we achieve by last light with all troops, machine guns, claymores, etc., in position, and comms established with our OP. No sign of movement on either side of the river.

Had a narrow escape from a cranky black rhino that walked into our ambush position. My orders are to remain in ambush / OP until a resupply necessitates a walk-out. The Zambezi River is within about 30 meters of the ambush position and we spot plenty of large crocs drifting up and down the river. I (and others) had to tough out one of the most frightening tasks of my years as game ranger before I joined the RLI in 1977, and during the war, and it involved refilling our water bottles after dark. We all had 3 bottles each, hence 24 bottles in all. So every evening, two men (in rotation) crept down to the edge of the river, one man standing guard for protection mainly against croc attack, while the other man quietly sunk his hand into the dark water until the gurgle told him that the bottle was full. 24 repetitions with the clear knowledge that the river is swarming with large crocodiles. It was my turn on at least one occasion and I knew the wily crocs from my game ranger years, their ability to pick up on routine behaviour and then lying in wait to drag their prey under water in a lightning strike. It would clamp its jaws around the man's arm and he would disappear in a swirl of water, too fast for the guard to react. When my turn came, it seemed to me that the gurgling sounds must attract any croc within a considerable distance, each bottle taking an agonizing eternity to fill up. We used slightly different spots each night to avoid routine and croc ambush, but this experience is not one I would be keen to repeat.

No suspicious movement or sound is detected on either side of the river. Two Zambian military jets cross over our heads into Rhodesia but return shortly afterwards – cheeky sods, times have changed. Resupply takes place this afternoon. Having little time to lose to meet the chopper, we start on a long and tough march high up into, and over, a mountain range to our south and successfully RV with the chopper to collect our resupply of food. I request for a new area to our east to recce, which is granted, and spend the night on the mountain under a continuous down-pour of rain, huddled miserably under hastily erected shelters – little sleep.

At first light the following morning, we slowly make our way towards our new objective, another section of the Zambezi River, but find no signs of recent passage / crossing of ZIPRA. Found old, rusted tins of SF origin. Cloudless and intensely hot. We establish base and ambush position within a very thick piece of river line vegetation adjacent to a possible canoe landing site. Nights on the Zambezi River are memorable if only for the extraordinary sounds of wildlife – grunting hippos, roaring lions, cackling hyenas, the occasional trumpeting elephant, birds,.... an orchestra. That night, during my guard shift around midnight, with my back rested against a grand old tree and the FN on my lap, all men fast asleep, I had an encounter with a leopard that was too close for comfort. I first heard him some 50 to 100 m downriver, the typical rasping sound resembling a saw cutting timber back and forth - clearly a leopard on the hunt. I then heard him twice more. When living in the bush as we do, one develops an extra sense. I was fully alert but without undue alarm, listening to all the other sounds around me, irritated by the snoring of the ouens, and of course waiting for the give-away sounds of a canoe quietly propelled by paddle across the river. It was a dark night and only the likely landing bay to our left was clearly visible. I last heard the leopard to my right; all my men are fast asleep. Suddenly – a tiny twig snaps right in front of me, making my hair stand on end – the leopard is only a couple of meters away. Together with my FN, I level a high-pitched scream in his direction. He is as surprised as I am, breaking through the bush, upstream across the ambush site. My heart is racing, but the leopard settles down again quicker than I do because within a few minutes I can hear his rasping voice again, back on the hunt for something to eat. By then my guard replacement is due but there is no need to wake him up – all men are wide awake and a bit confused.

The following day half my section (2IC plus 3 men) is uplifted back to camp, the rest of us are uplifted two days later. It is the 25th of November 1979 and we make our way to a prearranged point some 2 km to our south. Comms with the incoming chopper is established and we are on the way back again, happy but looking a little worse for wear. At Kanyemba, we find that virtually the whole of 2 Commando had already returned to Salisbury. After a quick meal at Kanyemba, where Support Commando had taken over our job in the Valley, we board a Dakota with Major „Pedro“Hean for our flight back to barracks. We remain on stand-by during our 7-day R and R.