

## **"OVER THE HILL AND FAR AWAY"**

**(Memories from a distant past)**

**By: Russell H Fulton**



**"Sleep safely in your beds because rough men stand ready in the night  
To visit violence on those who would harm you".**

I remember my very first op jump as a very young and newly 'winged' RLI "Ek sé" in Support Commando, 1RLI. On completion of our basic static line parachute training at the home of 1 Parachute Battalion in Tempe, Bloemfontein we returned to Rhodesia after a less-than festive basic parachute training course. We had run with 50lb concrete blocks, 'nursed' them as our wives and jumped with the insufferable buggers too. I never quite managed to fall in love with this particular 'wife' suffice to say that 'she' soon had the measure of me.

And so, 'half-qualified', we returned to the rarefied Highveld air of Salisbury and continued with our 'wake-up-to-reality' conversion course at New Sarum. In the "Republik" we jumped 'clean fatigue' from 1,000 feet and later at 800ft but....back in Rhodies these former jump heights were to become a mere figment of our quite infertile 'parakadish' imaginations. In our man's army we did 'fun (training) jumps' at 1,000ft or 800ft but operational descents were generally from an altitude of +450-500ft....but only if the pilots of 3 Squadron, Rhaf remembered to adjust their QNH (Query Nautical Height) settings before take-off that is. That's another story for another bleak day....

And so it was, another week of conversion jumps in our own webbing, wearing our weapons strapped to our sides and jumping at operational height, in to water and at night...over and over again until those who could still walk at the end of the week were 'awarded' their parachute wings on the frost bitten New Sarum DZ on the final day.



With our newly acquired Para wings stitched on to the right sleeves of our kit we were promptly dispatched to re-join our Commandos at the various FAF's (Forward Air Fields) dotted around the country where we were immediately assigned to Para duties on fire force. As paras, our role was principally to form the 'sweep line' when we hit the deck and to move towards the target areas/s and engage. Heliborne troops were generally deployed as Stop Groups before the paras jumped and whose function it was to assume 'cut-off' positions on likely gook escape routes from the target area. The sweep line (paras) would advance, engage and flush the gooks from their coop and in the direction of our stop groups who would 'stop' them. It was a process of vertical envelopment that worked extremely well and, with a good K-Car commander, the pervading outcome of a fire force deployment was a good kill rate on the Commando chalk board at the end of the day and quite a few "chibulis" to sate our insatiable appetite for the same.

Support Commando, 1RLI was based at Grand Reef airfield near Umtali until we were pre-positioned close to the Sabi/Lundi confluence for an external in to 'Porkers' (Mozambique). I was a machine gunner [FN MAG 58] and about to go on my first external as a paratrooper. We plastered 'Black is Beautiful' camo cream all over our faces, arms and legs and then kitted-up. Our Para harnesses were tensioned to eye-popping levels and we then staggered under our heavy kit (the usual first line fire force ammo plus several extra ammo belts and spare barrel in my case) to the waiting Dakotas where we were loaded starboard and then port side. I must confess that, and despite having been involved in numerous contacts leading up to this little soiree, I was now more than a touch nervous as it was going to be my first op jump and in to 'Indian country' at that. I should point out that the RLI had not enforced strict dress regulations for operational descents and the preferred attire was generally t-shirts (usually sleeveless) green twill shorts, lightweight stitch-down boots and face veils tied around the head or none at all. Personalised webbing (containing either FN magazines or MAG belts, one day's rations, two water bottles, A76 batteries and last, but by no means least, the ubiquitous packet of Madison 30 and trusty box of Lion Matches) plus our weapons of issue completed the ensemble. Whilst far from what one would call a 'picture of military splendor' we were young, extremely well trained, brim-full of testosterone and more than capable of doing Rhodesia's bidding!



We were being deployed to attack a ZANLA staging camp roughly 35km's from the Rhodesian/Pork border within Mozambique that went by the name Rio Wanezi. The attack was supported by a preparatory snot-squirt courtesy of 1 Squadron, Rhodesian Air Force (Hunters), followed by a jumbo fire-force deployment comprising two DC3's (Dakotas), several Alouette III helicopters (7 Squadron) and K-Car armed with a 20mm Hispano canon and commanded by the OC Support Commando, Major Nigel Henson OLM (this fine officer was one of a very select group of truly outstanding K-Car Commanders who was held in some reverence by the men under his command). *En-route* we were welcomed in to 'Pork' airspace by some (thankfully) inaccurate fire from three different FRELIMO anti-aircraft gun emplacements as we 'hedge-hopped' our way above the tree line of an otherwise dry and desolate landscape that was Manica/Gaza Province. This unexpected 'chatter' from unfriendly sorts on the ground caused a few lads to reach hastily for their air-sickness bags. What was more unfortunate was the fact that being a 'Para Dak' the aircraft rear door had been removed and the port side prop wash filled the hold with wind and a strong smell of Avgas exhaust fumes. The cocktail of sour beer, boiled eggs, pork sausages and whatever fare these lads had partaken of the night before and/or for breakfast combined quite effectively in to a spontaneous combustion of 'puke gas' that swirled through the hold and caused an unfortunate chain reaction. (A Para Dak wasn't referred to as "The Vomit Comet" for nothing you know!) Fortunately for me I had a pretty strong constitution but I cannot tell a lie, I may not have cotched myself but my eyes certainly watered.... a lot actually! It's a funny thing '*fear*'. It takes on different forms for each of us and whilst I chuckled at the misfortune of my boets', I never openly mocked them as I had a different gnawing deep within me. I refute any suggestion that no-one was without an element of fear going in to battle; from a purely personal perspective, I found that it sharpened my senses and I became acutely aware of my surrounds. When the first shots were fired in anger that fear would evaporate and be overtaken by aggression. If one of our own was wounded or KIA it went a step further...unadulterated rage. It's what we were trained for and, simply, how it was meant to be.

The target was sited no more than one 'click' (1Km) north of the Save (Sabi) River and the camp itself was located within a densely-wooded thicket of trees (Acacia and the dreaded 'Hook-Thorn'); a crescent shaped ridge provided protection from much of the western approach (from whence we would come calling) and stood (roughly) 50ft above the camp; most certainly GTI (Ground of Tactical Importance) in this otherwise featureless terrain. Atop the ridge line was a battery of 12.7mm and 14.5mm anti-aircraft guns each supported by roughly a section strength of ZANLA combatants armed with the usual assortment of AK's, PPsH's, SKS's, PKM's, RPK's and RPD's; an interesting welcoming party I think you'll agree.

When we were about 7 minutes out we were given the command by the Rhaf Number 1 Dispatcher to "**Stand Up', 'Hook Up'**"! This entailed hooking our static line snap hook and securing it to an overhead cable, checking the bungees on the parachute of the man in front and

placing his static line over his left shoulder. Once completed we were then commanded "**Tell off for Equipment Check**". Starting with the port side of the aircraft we then called out '1 okay', '2 okay', '3 okay' and so on from the front to the rear of the aircraft and continued from rear to front on the starboard side. I was in call sign (C/S) 'Vulture 1' which was the first 4-man stick to leave the aircraft and the second man in that sequence. We were then ordered "**Action Stations**" which was the command to move tightly towards the door on the port side. With static line snap hook held between extended thumb and forefinger of the left hand we shuffled forward with left foot forward, leg bent at the knee and tucked behind that of the man in front so that we were like a tin of neatly packed Colcom Vienna Sausages. On the command, we moved forward in unison sliding the left foot forward across the floor and driving the right heel in behind the left as we shouted out "**1-2, 1-2, 1-2**" until the first Para (Lt Simon Willar) was at the door. The jump light was glowing a bright and ominous red and then came the order "**Stand in the Door**"! On this command, Simon shouted "**1-2**" and he was now facing squarely out of the aircraft, half-in and half-out in the slipstream and held firmly by his harness by the number 2 & 3 dispatchers. The jump light turned green and Simon drove out the door on the command "**GO**" followed by a short, sharp slap to the leg! We moved forward swiftly and the aircraft 'vomited' its cargo of adrenalin charged young men in to prop-wash and down we fell as the 15ft static line released from its bungee ties until, at its full length, the outer pack tie broke and the olive-green nylon T-10D parachute canopy was deployed. At a jump height of 450-500ft (150m) one doesn't have much opportunity to take in the scenic sights (at 500ft and at an average rate of descent of 23ft/second you would be 'airborne' for all of 21.74 seconds); so, we rapidly went through our drills (look up, look left, look right, look below, kick out of your seat strap and adopt a parachute position). Next, one focused on a point directly below where you 'hung' in an almost suspended animation assessing what was taking place on *terra-firma* and the drift of the wind.

Up there, with canopy developed, it was deathly silent for a moment and then there was the gut wrenching 'crack & thump' that we were all too familiar with. This was accompanied by the unmistakable smell of fire and lots of it too. The bastards were firing at us and we were helpless to respond in kind; our weapons bound securely to our right sides by our harness waistband! What 'fun' it was watching the red and green tracer arcing their deathly way through the still morning sky and burning neat holes through our canopies as some rounds found their mark. In short shrift, we were approaching the proverbial *vertigo height* (the height when one experiences what is referred to in Para parlance as 'ground rush'.... when the ground appears to be suddenly rushing up to meet you. It is also the most dangerous time during a descent as men, oftentimes, straightened their legs to meet the ground with the result being telescopic or compound fractures). The Hunter strike had silenced the anti-aircraft apron on the ridge line and their high explosive incendiary rounds had set the bush alight creating a potent cross-wind. I realised that I was drifting forward- left at some speed and towards a copse of tall trees. "Just awesome" I thought fleetingly but there was another more uncomfortable experience that awaited me. I was being carried off-line and descending over the copse when it became clear that I wouldn't clear the canopy of one.... the mother-of-all hook thorn trees; what else!! My parachute canopy started to collapse as I tucked my feet under my backside hoping above hope that I would clear the canopy but alas...what can I tell you.... shit happens!

I swiftly forced my legs down, bent my knees, pulled my toes up and positioned my heels directly below my bum and then it happened. There was to be no perfect parachute landing for me as the hook thorns reached out to me in silent protest and buried their vicious barbs wherever they could find purchase. *Yislike*.... I heard tearing and soon realised it wasn't my

canopy making that dreadful sound but various parts of my person. I ploughed through the canopy under the weight of my kit and gun and ended up suspended about 6ft above *terra firma*. There was a hell-of-a party taking place on the ground and I wasn't quite in the mood for attracting any lead so I pulled on my lift web quick releases (Capewell Coupling Type) and dropped quite unceremoniously to the ground. Simon Willar was shouting out to me to check if I was okay and, winded and bleeding; I gave him the thumbs up, removed my Para harness and cocked my gun before running over to join him and the rest of our call sign. When I got to where he was he gave me a quick once over and said "Jesus.... Fulton.... you look like you've been sleeping with a f\*\*\*ing crocodile!", he winked, reached over and gave my arm an affectionate and encouraging squeeze before getting us on our feet and leading our skirmish towards 'Gook Central'. We fully expected a good joust but there was not much of that! (*Simon Willar was a man made of the right stuff, the son of a former high ranking Rhodesian military commander and he was as tough as they came. He had hand-picked me as his gunner when Colours Sergeant "Mad Jock" McKelvie SCR had gone on leave and I remained his gunner for the rest of my service with the Commando. I owe Simon much and for many things too; mostly for keeping me alive and against the most unlikely odds but for also supporting my request to attend the next regular officer selection board early in the coming year*).

Our 'hosts' had evidently decided to forego the anticipated reception we had expected and had, in the main, taken long 'arse-splitting' strides and at great speed in to the middle distance and we were left to clear-up pockets of resistance within the camp and around the general target area. As dusk approached we were dispatched to strategic ambush sites; our position being central on the ridge line. Late that night we heard the sound of armour clanking along in the distance; an unnerving sound which was only ever bettered by the growling of a hungry male lion. The next morning, we were told to hold our position and assume O.P. (Observation Post) work in the event that our 'hosts' in-astutely decided to return. By midday it was hot as all buggery and we had soon exhausted our two water bottles. Well now....it was nigh on 24 hours since we jumped in to this God forsaken piece of real estate and we were now a touch thirsty!

I remember sitting on that desolate ridge that had zero shade, in 35 plus degree heat, sweating profusely and watching a commercial jet flying at 38,000ft through the perfectly clear azure blue sky and wondering what the passengers were sipping upon. I suddenly 'hated' them all in their holiday-moods and had visions of tall, frosted glasses of lemonade with crushed ice and thick slices of fresh lemon. What a ridiculously gormless thought! I cursed the passengers and then myself realising that all that was available back in the real world was a sip from a saline trip. Don't try that a home folks.... if you have ever swilled on the juice from a can of hot mixed veg you probably won't want to try it again. I can assure you that the taste of a saline drip is a touch 'miffer' but not entirely dissimilar in my book. Within the hour, whilst I sat picking out broken off hook thorns from here, there and every bloody where, I heard Lt Willar say that a Dak was *en route* to do a water drop. It was music to our ears. Sure enough we spotted the Dak approaching swiftly from the west at low altitude and then it released its raffia chutes with suspended wooden crates of bagged water.

I am no dispatcher but I could have told you that that drop height was way too low but the crates were dispatched anyway and crashed in to the floor of the gook camp in a cloud of talcum-like dust followed immediately by a rainbow of watery mist and to a loud chorus from everywhere of "**F\*\*\*\*\*g Idiots!!**" And so, there we sat our bodies slow broiling like langoustines in the Portuguese sunshine as we gazed in hopeful wonder to our south where the sun mirrored itself off the cool depths of the Save River. A decision was taken to send a water party down to

the river with as many water bottles as could be carried. It was a risky endeavour as there was little doubt our movements were being monitored from the river line cover along the southern bank and any commander with even a smidgen of tactical savvy would have set likely water collection points as DF-SOS mortar and/or artillery targets. The water collection party did their business with stealth and efficiency returning safely and without incident. We each received a water bottle and that was it. Our rations, now depleted, we partook of various Scandinavian canned produce and seriously kak Chinese cigarettes that had been cached in the camp complex...Norwegian pilchards in tomato sauce, fruit chunks from Denmark and so on. It was lekker!

We were relieved from our position on the ridge by a band of less than exuberant brothers who entered what was now not dissimilar to a baker's oven with the grill turned on high for good measure. Sun burnt and decidedly bemused we were tasked with recovering the various caches of arms and ammunition to areas cleared for uplift by 7 Squadron. They ferried tons of the stuff in cargo nets suspended below the choppers across the border and returned over and over again. With late afternoon approaching we were told to prepare for uplift and return to Rhodesia; heli-borne troops first! Of course ...right?! As dusk approached we received the inevitable news that the paras would have to 'hold the fort' for another night and await uplift the next morning. Same old, same old.

That night we were revved from across the river by small arms and 82mm mortar fire, the latter falling safely to our north and causing more bush fires. Armour, of the Russian T54 variety, could be heard creaking noisily to our east and only a few kilometers' distant but that's as close as they dared to venture and, frankly, it was close enough for us too! We had held back a handful of RPG7's teams so it would have been interesting if the armour had ventured closer to our position. This weapon, in the right hands, could make your eyes do more than just water; a quite outstanding infantry close support weapon and far better than anything that we Rhodies had in our arsenal.

The next morning the choppers arrived, we emplaned and were delighted to see the arse end of Mozambique. It was to be the first of many forays into *Indian country*; other stories for another time. It wasn't all beers and skittles you know!

**Footnote: -**



The men of the Rhodesian Light Infantry made more parachute jumps than any other military unit in history. While an Allied paratrooper of the Second World War would be considered a "veteran" after one operational jump, an RLI paratrooper could make three operational jumps in a single day, each in a different location, and each preceding a successful contact with the enemy. Between 1976 and 1980, over 14,000 jumps were recorded

by the Rhodesian Security Forces as a whole. The world record for operational jumps by an individual soldier is held by Corporal Des Archer of 1 Commando, RLI, (pictured above) who made 85 operational jumps between 1977 and the end of the war in 1980

***"Don't draw fire! It irritates those around you"***