

Strike Force 1978

Rhodesian hierarchy thought it would be good publicity if Rhodesian African soldiers were getting high kill rates too. So the RAR were brought into Fireforce duties. This bumped an RLI Commando out of Fireforce rotation so they were deployed into Strike Force. Strikeforce would be deployed into a hot area using OP's and patrols and supposedly clean it up. The Rhodesian Air Force stated they preferred RLI on Fireforce. An aggressive RLI Fireforce sweep would cover an area in 5 minutes that would take RAR 2 hours. Both units would kill all enemies in target area but RAR moved man by man, cover into cover and choppers would get tired orbiting and orbiting... The RAR were great soldiers though. RLI moral sagged while on Strikeforce as it didn't get much in kills or captures. Its been said an RLI commando living in nice quarters not getting Fireforce callouts and kills are grumpy where a commando living in mud under tarps between trucks getting kills regularly are happy. Support Cdo was stuck with Strikeforce for 2 bush trips and hated it. Their usual tactics were to deploy a half dozen OP's (observation posts) into target area. OP's would watch area for terrorists, feeding parties, communist bloc uniforms on the laundry line etc. Then in the morning trucks would drop off several sticks or the sticks would have walked in previous night. These sticks would sweep the target Tribal Trust Land (TTL) talking with locals to see what they could stir up. There would be back-up from Fireforce and /or Mortar Troop vehicles. The OP's would note who was running and to where. Sometimes there weren't enough OP's with binoculars and radios to keep track of all the runners. Some African males would run into huts change their clothes etc these would be arrested. Sweep lines would make their presence felt and often end up by the local store with guys buying cokes etc. OP's would monitor the area after the RLI sweep line passed because sometimes real gooks would emerge from the bushes. They would be checking if any local tribes' people were sellouts and brutalize or kill them. This happened once while I was doing OP duty and I had to call back the sweep sticks from afar but the gook disappeared into the bushes at the bottom of my OP gomo. Sweeping sticks didn't find him; I hoped he would come up to join me for tea so I could give him a 7.62 lump of sugar, no luck. A zeroed sniper rifle with scope would have been handy a few occasions. Strikeforce only produced a few fleeting contacts, handful of arrests and a dismal kill rate. Of several Strikeforce deployments I submit the following scene for posterity.

Umtali got attacked again from a nearby gomo. This time by a 80 man ZANLA heavy weapon unit with Soviet made recoilless rifles, mortars and 12.7 machine guns. This ZANLA group then headed west into Rhodesia. We heard that the Territorial Army trackers said it was like following a herd of elephants. 2 days later they lost spoor?? Police Special Branch said these gooks joined up with a resident gang of a 120 gooks in the TTL east of the Penalonga Road for a big socializing time. Support Cdo Strikeforce was tasked to deploy and get them. I was a new stick leader for this operation also the Cdo MA3. A map used for the briefing showed a spot 'X' that SB were quite certain these 200 gooks would be. Also on the map were the spots for a few Support OP's; one being right on the 'X' spot marking the gooks! A troop commander's stick had that hazard OP task and I was sure glad it wasn't me, I would be with the sweepline. We had 3 Cdo on call as Fireforce at Grand Reef and some Grey Scouts were patrolling the area north of ours. We would have 2 Mortar Troop vehicles and two 106 recoilless rifles on vehicles from Antitank troop also for support. A heavy weapons unit verses a heavy weapons unit. Support Cdo mortars have already duelled with Frelimo mortars each aiming at each other's tubes sound using SWAG (Scientific Wild Ass Guess). Duelling recoilless rifles could be interesting.

At night vehicles take us all up the Penalonga Road to the drop-off point. We all do a long walk in to the holding area before the start point of the sweep. The OP sticks will carry on walking to their respective OP's. The stick commander for the hazard OP had been wounded in the legs twice before and his legs are really hurting him. The other officers would sometimes tease him about his much scarred 'sexy' legs in camp. It is decided that MY stick will do the hazard OP. SHIT! I have 3 choices: A- give him painkillers and say "carry on", or B- find a payphone call the union office and say this is really a Recce Troop job but we do C- be good soldiers and follow orders. There is that rule MA3 always gets the hazard job! I've done many OP's before but never onto such a hotspot. Well American LRRP's in Vietnam and our own SAS and Selous Scouts regularly did this work so could we? Its part of a soldiers job to recon and find the

enemy. In my mindset it's not IF but WHEN we find these terrorists and concern for safety of my men under my command.

We check maps and then I lead on. My stick was thrown together the last minute and we have no MAG just 4 riflemen. I brief my men that we won't make crash RV's that they just make their way west to the Penalonga Road and head south to the Support Cdo vehicles. We stealthily carry on skirting kraals, a few dogs bark afar, we have some moonlight and I've always been good at navigating. We stop and listen a few times. After a long walk in we reach our OP gomo. My stick shows no fear but I am concerned for their welfare as I believed that we would likely bump into these 200 gooks. We climb partway up the gomo and stop well above the kraals below. I call a stop as we lost our moonlight and it is pitch black, I can't even see my hand in front of my face. We will move again when it gets light enough to see where we are stepping and I post 50% stand to due to proximity of gooks which I am always mindful of. A note for all you modern military folk reading this we did not have body armour, elbow pads, knee pads or fancy night vision toys. We did the business mano a mano in the bush, using our 5 senses and often a sixth one and often with some help from K car! Recce troop had a couple of starlight scopes but zealously guarded them; I had the nerve to ask for one once. Finally we get a bit of daylight enough to see and we stealthily move to our OP position before kraal inhabitants wake up. We find a good spot with cover and visibility of a lot of huts, a bit below the top. Our gomo is large and runs oblong east and west with features behind it, we are in the middle. We are in undetected and lots of time till the sweep starts. I don't want to find out the hard way we have 200 gooks eating breakfast nearby so I will do a 180 perimeter patrol behind us also to get the lay of the land. I remind my stick if I get into shit with the gooks they follow crash RV plan, safety of my men is important to me. I stealthily do this patrol; the top of the gomo is flat, a couple of shallow caves, no sign of spoor or odours and behind to the north is a wooded valley that could easily hide a thousand terrorists. Our OP side is thickly wooded with boulders everywhere. I rejoin the stick, its safe enough to brew tea and have breakfast. That was a nerve wracking insertion but where the hell are all the gooks?

The Support Cdo large sweep line starts from the south of this huge TTL of many huts. They start so far away I can't even see them and am no help with their runners. Finally they get closer, no sign of the terrorists. The sweep guys move off afar to the west near the road and brew up. We monitor the area for after activity. About midday we hear movement about 70 yards to the west of us. A large force is moving through woods breaking branches etc making a racket. I reckon it is the gook heavy weapon group moving away from Supports sweep troops and coming toward us. I reckon they are manhandling their heavy weapons and ammo crates etc through these thick woods on the slope thus all the branch breaking/ boulder moving noise. I radio in I have movement but no visual. The unseen force is moving very slowly but getting closer sounds like a hundred people. I give regular updates on the radio. Fireforce callout rules were that we must have enemy visual and they must be stationary. Exceptions were made for savvy Selous Scout units. Fireforce is advised of a scene brewing and is standing by and being a large group I'm certain COMOPS are informed and Hawker Hunters are getting checked and standing by. I have my stick in good cover lined up facing the unseen force, we have about 15 yards visibility. I give the orders on my command to fire 2 magazines into the gook position, I'll toss a grenade then we will pull back about 50 yards to avoid flanking attacks. We will take new position to monitor for Fireforce. It seems weird I'll be calling in my old 3 Cdo unit, I wonder how voices I'll recognize over the radio. Not much nearby for heli stop deployment LZs, K car will have to figure something out. There is a lot of loud branch breaking and boulders dislodged, quite a loud ruckus as the unseen enemy force gets closer and closer. Tension is very high and we are ready to fire. Finally after this long time the unseen enemy emerges from the trees and it is a very large troop foraging of baboons! Stand down Fireforce. Good thing for Fireforce callout rules. We monitor the area another couple days which were uneventful for Support Cdo. I get to be butt of jokes for wanting to call Fireforce onto baboons!

Postscript: On the second or third day the Grey Scouts did find the large ZANLA force to the north of Support Cdo deployment area. Instead of calling in Fireforce immediately while there

was plenty of daylight left they decided to take the gooks on themselves. Time was spent planning troop movements whatever, not sure of details. Anyway a Grey Scout soldier on horseback took a direct hit from a RPG thus losing his leg. Grey Scouts realize they are in the shit but it was too late in the day to effectively deploy Fireforce thus the gooks dispersed and got away that night.