



Op Mulligan

by Captain Russell Fulton

It was mid-July 1979 that A Company 1RAR was deployed on framework operations in the Mangwende TTL. My platoon (3 PI) had just returned to our company base following a ten-day deployment that included overt day patrols, OPs and ambushes; intelligence received from Special Branch on the area was 'red hot' with gooks aplenty and we had had numerous punch-ups with ZANLA. The area was 'brim-full' with kopjes, caves and all things nice and there were seldom any dull moments.

On our arrival back at our company HQ mid-morning (16 July 1979), I debriefed my platoon before attending a thorough debrief with my company commander, Major Ron Marrillier BCR. I was told that we were to rest the following day and to draw rations and stores and that I was to present myself together with my Platoon Warrant Officer, Munyika Collins, for orders group the next day at 15h00 ahead of redeployment that night. What fun we had. Hardly time enough to write a letter or scratch your arse whilst on the army pay roll. Time was fleeting so I grabbed my towel, Colgate Palmolive green apple shampoo, toothbrush and toothpaste plus a new bar of Lux soap and headed off with great strides (large enough to split my arse) in the direction of the showers and smelling decidedly rancid. Funny that: it was early winter but you were still capable of 'squirting' perspiration when that unwelcome chatter of Kalashnikovs and the like broke the silence and disturbed your mood and thoughts. I heard the urgent footfall of someone running behind me and the call from my batman, Private Emmanuel Thomas Mukonoweshuro ('Mujiba' as I affectionately but rather unkindly referred to him), "*Ishe, Ishe ... Sunray wants to see you IKOZVINO*" (IMMEDIATELY)!" I cursed under my breath and thought a little angrily, "*What the f**k now!*"

I presented myself before my OC at the ops vehicle and he impatiently summoned me in and, pointing at the wall of 1:50,000 map sheets that took up the entire length of the canopied RL 4.5, told me that there was a big scene on the go in the neighbouring Chikwakwa TTL. A 'Jumbo Fire Force' under the command of Major Bruce Snelgar SCR (Post), OC 3 Commando 1RLI was involved in a major contact and they were taking casualties and required immediate back-up. I was told to immediately hand-pick two sticks and prepare for immediate departure to the Mtoko road, join the RLI 'land-tail' and await uplift by G-Car.

Having served in the RLI, I knew full well that if a 'Jumbo Fire Force' was deployed and were calling for reinforcements that the shit was well and truly in the fan. I had selected my PWO as the other stick commander and ordered him to include two MAG gunners in his stick as I had done. I selected my platoon sergeant, 'Spokes' Bonias, a former 1 (Indep) RAR 'sparrow' (tracker) who was diminutive in stature but a man who I honestly believed capable of following spoor on water. Yes, I know, impossible but I think you get my drift? Spokes was an old warrior and an excellent shot who could probably snap-shoot the ticks off an impala's arse from 100 metres; a *masodja* with an insatiable appetite for a scrap and he would make an excellent 2IC for my call sign. I included my personal MAG gunner and one other, my trusty 'Batman'. We changed radio frequencies, did a comms check and boarded a company vehicle and set off for the Mtoko road to the grid reference we had been provided as our uplift point. We listened in on our HF radios to what was happening on the ground and in the air and all the while we could here that familiar sound of K-Car 20mm Hispano cannon and the equally spooky sound of a 'Dalmatian' (4 x .303 Browning machine guns configured like a modern-day Gatling gun) spewing their deadly loads and interrupting the now completely dysfunctional voice procedure between K-Car 1 and the stop groups on the ground. This was interspersed with regular reports of "Contact, contact". Hmmm, so much for that much anticipated shower, cold Castle and hot meal I had been savouring.





As the two G-Cars landed on the Enterprise–Mtoko road we were ‘welcomed’ aboard and I donned my headset and received a quick in-flight briefing from Major Snelgar (SCR-Post) and we were on our way to the contact area flying fast and low and hedge-hopping as we went. So much for that last Madison cigarette before the games began.

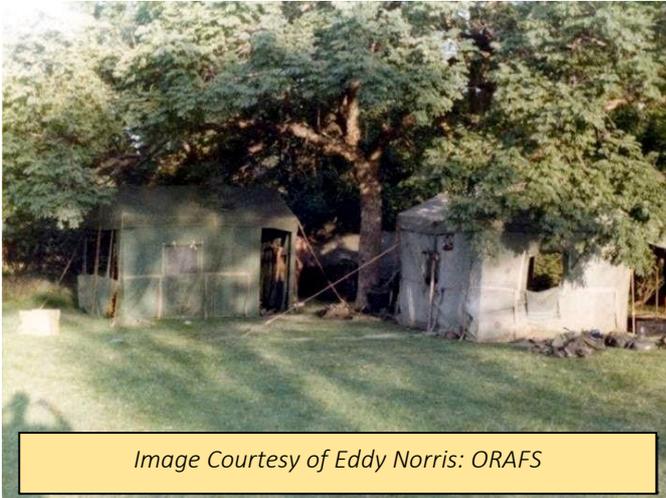


Image Courtesy of Eddy Norris: ORAFS

The RLI had established a TAC HQ at the Enterprise Club and had been conducting Fire Force operations in the general area. This all changed when, on 14 July 1979, Mrs Yvonne Mulligan, a woman of some sizeable deportment and wife of the farmer of Strathlorne Farm, was abducted late in the afternoon by a group of *mujibas* (terrorist collaborators) who were armed with hand grenades. They headed off in the direction of the Chikwakwa TTL in a north-westerly direction but it was later established that they had crossed the Umwinzi River into the Chikwakwa and changed direction, a

deliberate ruse to throw trackers off their intended flight path.

The Chikwakwa TTL was flat, almost linear in shape and devoid of much natural cover except for the eastern boundary with the Mangwende TTL where there was a range of granite dwalas. There were a number of large densely foliated mango trees growing in and around the many kraal lines that would need to be kept in mind as they would provide ‘refuge’ for any gook trying to hide from view. The Chikwakwa was a heavily populated TTL with hundreds of huts and brick dwellings. If the term ‘liberated zone’ could be accurately applied, this was one such area: it was ‘gook central’ and we were under no illusions about that.

BSAP Support Unit were called from their battle camp and hastily deployed in to my earlier ‘stamping ground’, the northern reaches of the Mangwende TTL, and they were bumping in to small groups of ZANLA. PATU and Support Unit were tasked with ambushing well-known crossing points that night but nothing was sprung.

SALOPS (Salisbury Operations), under whose command the operation fell, received orders from ComOps (Combined Operations Headquarters) that the recovery of Mrs Mulligan had become a top priority. The general morale of the farming community and white population in particular was paramount as they believed that the plan to ‘steal’ Mrs Mulligan away to Mozambique was to exact as much propaganda mileage as they could for their cause. By now, and given her gargantuan size, she was being moved by wheelbarrow and pushed on a bicycle to Chipangura kraal where an estimated 25 CTs were understood to have taken charge of her with a further twenty-odd about three clicks away at Gwamura kraal. Lt Col ‘Tufty’ Bate, who was CO of 1RLI, split the Fire Force in two and directed assaults on both kraals.

Our two RAR call signs, Stop 7 and Stop 8 (I think?), were dropped in a sandy mielie field and we headed directly towards a cluster of brick dwellings at the northern end of Gwamura kraal, one of which was ablaze and awaited orders from K-Car 1 to advance. One of the RLI stop groups had, minutes earlier, been dropped within close proximity to where we had just deplaned. K-Car 2, piloted by Ian Henderson with his air tech/gunner Flight Sergeant Willem Joubert, were on the receiving end of concentrated RPD and small-arms fire. The RLI stick had moved alongside the self-same brick dwelling and were opened up on through a window by a CT armed with an RPD; sadly both men were cut down at point-blank range (Troopers Mike Elsaesser and





Bruce McKend. RIP and Salute). Why the dwelling was not cleared by them first remains unclear but that is not for me to question however, and without being critical, it was a tactical blunder that was to have fatal consequences.

As an aside, and for my own personal reasons, I wish to add the following to the anecdote because the actions by a young RAR soldier were profoundly symbolic and reinforced all that was inherently good in the men of the RAR. I now relate the actions of my personal 'Batman', one Private Emanuel Thomas Mukonoweshuro. Whilst awaiting Major Snelgar's orders to advance we were a matter of feet from where Troopers Elsaesser and McKend had fallen. In the interests of maintaining respect for these fine men, their families and their 3 Commando mates who may read this, I will not elaborate on their condition. My 'Batman' unfastened his 'shelter's lightweight' from the back of his webbing and moved forward to where the RLI men lay and, without discussing it, he quickly covered their bodies with his groundsheet. Once done, he returned to my side without looking at me for approval or saying a word. It was an act of brotherly compassion and respect that endeared this young soldier to me all the more. Anyone who ever questioned the integrity, loyalty or otherwise regarding the men of the RAR would fall foul of my 'short fuse' where their reputations were challenged. In my opinion, Mukonoweshuro's actions were highly commendable.

Flt Sgt Joubert opened up with his Dalmatian and eliminated the CT through the roof. Almost immediately K-Car 2 came under fire from another two dwellings and started to take a number of hits; Ian Henderson put the chopper into a low anti-clockwise orbit and Willem Joubert raked both dwellings and took out several CTs. With the dwellings alight, several CTs bolted from the houses and were taken out by one of the RLI stops and my two RAR stops. There were contacts taking place all around us and it was particularly dangerous with firefights raging. We moved forward clearing huts fringed by large mango trees. We were suddenly stopped in our tracks by several bursts of accurate fire coming from the mango trees and despite raking them with our MAG and rifle fire there was no letting up. I called in a Lynx strike and it dropped a 50-gallon 'frantan' on the trees and it silenced the gunfire.

Whilst this was taking place, K-Car 2 had obviously taken a round or rounds through the fuel line and was on fire. Ian Henderson shut the fuel off and tried to auto-rotate the stricken craft and crashed in an open mielie field; the chopper hit the ground hard and the spinning rotors caught the ground and flipped the chopper on its side, severing the tail boom in the process. Ian Henderson sustained burns to his hands and a senior SB officer flying with him sustained shrapnel wounds to the face; both were casevaced back to the Enterprise Club. Light was fading fast and Major Snelgar directed the stop groups to set up an area ambush around the kraal overnight to guard the downed G-Car and to contain the probability of breakout under cover of darkness. There was sporadic fire well in to the night as the stop groups executed their task with a clinical efficiency.

As first light broke, K-Car 1 was overhead and we commenced clearing the huts and houses and recovered a large number of weapons (22 if I correctly recall) and an RPG-7 launcher. There were no more contacts and it was assumed that most of the CT group had been eliminated and any survivors had vanished in to the night.

Whilst we awaited uplift, I will never forget the sight that would soon befall me. I had been on a number of external operations with Support Commando 1RLI into Mozambique and countless more within Rhodesia where there were, of course, a number of successful operations. I had become accustomed to the sights, sounds and smell of war but nothing could prepare me for what was to come. An AFA (African Female Adult) was seated on the edge of a mielie field, her skirt arranged neatly around her but there was a disturbing ashen hue about her. As we weren't prepared to take any chances, we pointed our weapons at her and I



told her in the vernacular to put her hands above her head and to stand up. She raised her hands but did not stand. I, together with Sgt Bonias, walked to where she sat and we soon established that she was a civilian. I offered her my water bottle which she readily accepted. Her face was covered with dust and there were the tell-tale signs of dried tears on her cheeks. I leant down and extended my hand to her to help her up but still she would not stand. Believing she was in an advanced state of shock, I directed Sgt Bonias to assist me in lifting her to her feet. We lifted her off the ground and, to our horror, we saw that her lower legs had been severed below the knees. This poor soul had been sitting in a pool of her own blood, in that place, alone and terrified throughout the night. I had to fight within myself to suppress the tears that welled suddenly and involuntarily as well as the urge to vomit; I simply couldn't ... not in front of my men.

I do not share this terrible experience to offer an insight into the horror of, and reality that is, war. I had many more contacts during my service but this one has been imprinted indelibly in my mind, not for the fighting and our military successes but for the tragedy that often befell innocent civilians caught up in crossfire. Collateral damage is a sad but inevitable consequence of war and I still harbour deep remorse and personal guilt. What else am I to say?

The following morning shortly after first light as we awaited the return of the K & G Cars to the area, I noticed 'Mujiba' fiddling in his webbing and pull out a first field dressing. He was boiling some water in his mess tin to make me a mug of tea and he pulled-up the sleeve of his combat jacket revealing an oozing entry wound in his forearm. I walked over to him withdrawing a disposable Sosegon syringe that hung around my neck and attached to my dog-tags and injected him in his shoulder. He smiled up at me, "*Ndatenda Ishe*", his youthful air of innocence suddenly replaced by a man who had come of age. I examined the wound and noted that there was no exit and surmised that it was a ricochet and the offending bullet head was lodged somewhere in his person. He never said a word to me, his peers or my NCO's about having sustained a gunshot wound....he just got on with it!

When we returned to the temporary RLI TAC HQ at Enterprise Country Club, 'Mujiba' was examined by the RLI RMO, Maj Cliff Webster MLM and the offending and remaining head of a 7.62mm short was expertly removed. Mujiba recovered swiftly and was soon returned to his Ishe's side....right where he belonged.

I was chatting informally to Major Snelgar before re-joining my Company and I related what my Batman had done the previous afternoon; so touched was he that he ordered that he be presented to him which I arranged. He spoke to him quietly before shaking his hand and thanked him for his brotherly compassion. Major Snelgar's actions impressed me and I swore quietly to myself that I would emulate his man-management skills the rest of my days. As for my Mujiba, I was proud as punch.

The RLI TAC HQ and Fire Force relocated to Mtoko to continue the pursuit of Mrs Mulligan and I and my two call-signs returned to the Enterprise Club for debrief and uplift. We RAR types returned to our company base in the Mangwende TTL by vehicle and deployed the following night. Same old shit, different day.

Mrs Mulligan was returned to Rhodesia by the International Red Cross in December 1979 and ZANLA achieved their objective on this occasion.

