

A SKIRMISH IN AFRICA



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In memory of 2nd Lieutenant A. J. (Gus) Du Toit,
3 Independent Company, Rhodesian African Rifles,
killed in action.

It is true what they say; '*... only the good die young*'.

Foreword

A Skirmish in Africa is a story set in the time of the civil war in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the mid-1970s. The 'Bush War' between the liberation movements and the Rhodesian regime started in 1966 and ended with the independence of the new Zimbabwe in 1981.

This was a time of considerable upheaval in post-colonial Southern Africa with liberation struggles taking place in South West Africa (Namibia), Rhodesia and South Africa. In addition, there were superpower-sponsored civil wars taking place in the ex-Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola and in the Belgian Congo (Zaire). The liberation struggles provided fertile ground for the extension of Cold War influence by the major powers. China was supporting regimes in Tanzania and Mozambique while the Soviet Union, together with its communist ally Cuba, were active in Angola, Zambia and South West Africa. The USA were supporting opposition movements in Angola and Congo and providing tacit support for South Africa in its war against the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) and the Cubans in Angola.

Britain, as the ex-colonial power in Rhodesia, maintained economic sanctions and an arms and oil embargo. Sanctions were a response to the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) declared in 1965 by the Rhodesian Government led by Ian Smith. Britain was anxious to ensure a path to black majority rule in Rhodesia but was strongly resisted by the white 'rebel' government. Feeble post-UDI British foreign policy regarding its rebellious colony, plus internal pressure caused by the war in Northern Ireland, a struggling economy, labour strike action and the oil crisis, left a political vacuum where the so-called 'Rhodesia Question' became a Page 5 story. During the crucial 1974 – 1979 period, weak Labour Governments under Harold Wilson and then James Callaghan made half-hearted attempts to negotiate a settlement between the opposing parties, all failed. The longer the war went on the more polarised the respective positions became.

The liberation movement in Rhodesia, called the Patriotic Front, consisted of two very different organisations; the liberation movement led by Joshua Nkomo, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and the movement led by Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

The Soviet Union had taken the decision to support the liberation movement led by Joshua Nkomo, ZAPU. The Soviets trained freedom fighters in bases in Zambia, Tanzania and Angola and the most promising black leaders were sent to the Soviet Union for training. Considerable philosophical and tribal differences existed between Soviet-supported Joshua Nkomo, ZAPU, and the movement led by Chinese-supported Robert Mugabe, ZANU. Joshua Nkomo drew his support predominantly from the Matabele tribe in the south, while Robert Mugabe's support was drawn virtually exclusively from members of the Shona tribe in the north. The differences in supporter base had resulted in open warfare between the competing liberation movements with a series of leadership purges. The alliance between Nkomo and Mugabe, however, allowed the two movements to suppress their differences to focus instead on the common enemy, the white minority government.

While the two communist superpowers jockeyed for greater influence, the leaders of the 'Front Line States', Samora Machel of Mozambique, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, had their own agendas. They too were seeking to influence the outcome of the liberation struggle to their respective advantage.

On the opposite side of the political divide lay Ian Smith and the white Rhodesian electorate. Smith made a number of secret approaches to Joshua Nkomo, his preferred partner, to negotiate a settlement. All were rebuffed. Realising that a political settlement was vital, Smith commenced a negotiation with internally based black leaders, the so-called 'internal settlement'. The prospect of an internal settlement, which had the potential to be internationally recognised, spurred the Patriotic Front to even greater violence.

The apartheid regime in South Africa was desperately trying to prop up their position in South West Africa and Rhodesia, the 'Buffer States'. The South Africans supplied Rhodesia with weaponry including military helicopters and pilots, but as importantly, they kept the lifeblood of the country, oil and fuel supplies flowing north. Thus the rivalries between the super-powers and the leaders of the Southern African states added to a dangerous mix which intensified the war to the extent that it escalated into the neighbouring countries. Rhodesian forces, in an attempt to staunch the flow of insurgents into the country, intensified raids into Zambia and Mozambique attacking training

camps and military bases but also destroying vital infrastructure such as roads and bridges.

In this story, I have attempted to give the reader a snapshot of what the war was like for both sides together with an idea of the many contradictions that faced the warring parties. This story is based in the province of Matabeleland, but more directly to the area around the famous Victoria Falls.

On the Rhodesian side this story relates to a sub-unit of the Rhodesian African Rifles, 4 Independent Company, made up of young white national service officers and NCOs and black riflemen and NCOs seconded from the regular 1st and 2nd Battalions RAR. The RAR fought in Burma during the Second World War; post-war it served with Commonwealth forces during the Suez Crisis in Egypt (1951-1952) and fought in the Malayan Emergency (1956-1958).

On the Freedom Fighter side, the story includes a Brigade of Zimbabwean People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), the military wing of ZAPU, and their charismatic leader.

The detail on military tactics and weapons is authentic and will appeal to a reader interested in military history and the subject of counter-insurgency. As is inevitable I have drawn from my own experience as a nineteen-year-old national serviceman in the Rhodesian Army.

In the end, soldiers fulfil the bidding of their political masters. Consideration of concepts such as 'right' and 'wrong' become blurred but that does not detract from the bravery and commitment of the men in the thick of battle. Their sacrifices were no less trivial and no less tragic.

*

'Our votes must go together with our guns. After all, any vote we shall have, shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should remain its security officer, its guarantor. The people's votes and the people's guns are always inseparable twins.'

Robert Mugabe (1924 -), a leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) speaking in 1976.

1

The mining town of Kamativi, northeast Rhodesia (Late -1970s)

'CONTACT ... CONTACT ... CONTACT... 42 ... 42 ... 42, this is 43 do you read?' The voice on the radio in the hot cramped police station hissed and spluttered, as if a thousand miles distant.

'43 this is 42 ... go.'

'42 ... Contact ... Approximately one hundred Charlie Tangos ... I am about eight clicks northwest of your loc.' The urgent, metallic voice was tainted with a hint of panic.

Heavy gunfire could be heard in the background through the static.

43 was the c/sign for 2nd Lt Charlie Williams, commander of 3 Platoon, 4 Independent Company, RAR. He had been following a group of communist insurgents, for two days, all the way from the *Cordon Sanitaire* minefield at the Gwai Gorge on the Zambezi River about 40km to the north. The Army Engineers had picked up the spoor¹ on the dirt road between Mlibizi and Victoria Falls.

Williams' follow-up² group had steadily closed on the enemy during the day, calling in when the trackers updated the age of the spoor... 3 hours, 2 hours, 1 hour ... 30 minutes. Williams had reported that he had seen fresh urine only minutes before making contact. The enemy were heavily loaded, moving slowly, a re-supply group heading for Lupane TTL 120km to the south.

Williams had only twenty-six men with him.

42, the c/sign for 2nd Lt. James Gibbs, OC³ of 2 Platoon 4 Indep, looked across at his 2IC⁴ Sergeant Mike Smith standing anxiously at the door, no need to give any instructions, he had heard. The two policemen in the room watched in silence. Gibbs was about 6ft 2", lean; his blue eyes peered out from a blackened face, covered in thick sticky camo-cream.

2 Platoon had been waiting expectantly all day, listening. When Williams radioed, '30 minutes', the tension in the air became palpable, a taste in the back of the throat. There was a smell of nervous sweat ... nobody spoke.

'Hello 2 ... Hello 2... this is 42,' Gibbs had grabbed the hand-piece for the Police HF radio. 2 was the c/sign for the sub-JOC at

1 Tracks

2 The process of tracking and following insurgent groups.

3 Officer Commanding.

4 Second-in-Command.

Wankie, some 50km to the east.

'42 ... 2 reading you fives, go,' came the instant response.

'Roger, 43 has made contact at grid reference ... One hundred Charlie Tangos we are responding. Can you send air support? ... Over.'

'42, copied, we are scrambling a Lynx, Echo Tango Alpha your loc ... sixteen minutes.'

'42 copied ... out.'

Gibbs hurriedly folded his 1:50,000 map that he had spread on the table, then looked up at Smith standing in the door. 'Smithy let's get down to the helicopters,' he said confidently, trying to disguise his own nervousness. The Sergeant nodded, swallowing hard, this would be Mike Smith's first contact with the enemy.

Sgt Mike Smith, c/ sign 42Alpha, was at least four inches shorter than Gibbs, green eyes, more solidly built; he too was covered in camo-cream, now streaky from sweat. Smith turned, hoisted his webbing then walked out into the late afternoon sunlight. He called out to the two sticks of men waiting in the shade of a tall Msasa tree.

'43 has contact, maybe a hundred ... put on your kit and double down to the helicopters,' he shouted loudly, certain that his voice belied his own apprehension.

The sudden realisation of the time of day hit Mike Smith as he jogged down the road from the police station to the waiting helicopters, *Shit it's 4:30 already, we have only an hour or so of daylight! This is not good.*

Two Alouette III G-cars were parked one behind the other on the cricket pitch at the sports club at Kamativi tin mine. They had flown down from Wankie that morning in anticipation of the contact. The pilots had heard the contact report on their radios and they were already winding up the turbines. The blades began to spin throwing up dust and bits of cut grass.

'Smithy you take Stop 2 ... I am Stop 1⁵,' shouted Gibbs over the whining engines. The Alouette III G-car could only carry four troops plus the door-gunner and pilot. The door-gunner doubled as the 'tech' or maintenance technician. As the engines spun up the tech could be seen fussing over the twin .303 Brownings mounted

5 The break down of the traditional infantry section into smaller four man teams called Stops. The name derived from the term used to describe a group of men used to block the escape of insurgents after a contact. In a Fireforce, Stops were numbered Stop 1, Stop 2, Stop 3 etc. A Stop Group could be made up of more than one c/sign and more than one Stop, as in the case of troops deployed by parachute.

on the left of the helicopter.

The two sticks led by Gibbs and Smith ran through the stinging dust to the front of the helicopters, crouched down, waiting for the pilot to signal for them to load. *Not much of a cricket pitch, more dirt than anything else* Smith thought to himself as he covered his nose and mouth with his hat, *you wouldn't want to be diving for the ball on the midwicket boundary.*

The helicopter engines reached full power with the blades spinning in a blur. The pilot gave the thumbs up to show he was ready. Smith glanced back at his stick, Dube the MAG machine gunner, festooned in belts for 500 rounds, the 'Gun' his pride and joy, Moyo and Fauguneze the other two riflemen squatted behind him, their faces etched in concentration. As he ran forward to the helicopter, bent almost double out of the way of the blades, Smith felt the blood drain from his head; this was also his first deployment from helicopters, *a hundred Gooks⁶ only eight of us! ... Shit!*

The Alouettes skidded over the trees in line astern, buffeted by the hot afternoon thermals. It was still over 36°C on the ground. The tech leaned over and passed Smith a headset, which he slipped over his head. He could hear the two pilots talking to each other. The tech in Smith's chopper gave a short test burst with the twin Brownings; a spent casing missed the capture bag and bounced onto the floor of the helicopter. The loud shuddering of the machine guns vibrated through the whole helicopter. Smith watched the casing as it rolled back and forth, his mind trying to come to grips with the reality of what was rapidly unfolding. *This scene⁷ is going down.* His stomach twitched with an empty, sick feeling; he had no idea what to expect.

It took only a few minutes to find the contact area. Thick clouds of black smoke hung over the trees, a bush fire had started, probably caused by white phosphorous grenades or tracer bullets.

'42 ... 42 ... where the fuck are you? I am taking serious concentrated fire ... they are assaulting our position ...' there was clear desperation in Williams' voice.

Smith sat anxiously staring at the smoke ahead. *The shit has hit the fan big time.*

'43 this is Blue 1, do you read,' the pilot of Gibbs' chopper called on the radio, a controlled, unemotional voice.

'Blue 1 ... I can hear your engines ... I can't see ... I am in thick

6 American slang from Vietnam, adopted by Rhodesians to describe communist insurgents.

7 Rhodesian slang, a contact with the enemy, a battle.

smoke.'

'43 ... I am going to fly directly over your smoke tell me whether I am on your left or right.'

The pilot clawed for more altitude and flew directly over the smoke cloud.

Smith caught a glimpse of green tracer snaking up from the trees below as the helicopter ahead disappeared into the smoke. Shock! *Fuck! The CTs are shooting at the helicopters!*

'Roger Blue 1 you are over my position, roll left ... roll left.'

'43 ... mark FLOT⁸!' called the pilot, his voice remarkably calm and steady.

'Roger. I am marking FLOT ... NOW ... green smoke,' responded Williams instantly.

A puff of green smoke drifted up over the trees below.

'43, I have you visual ... standby.'

The techs in both helicopters saw the green smoke marking Williams' position and directed a barrage of fire into the trees below. As the helicopter banked violently Smith looked down at the trees flashing by. It was difficult to see the ground through the trees but in the few open patches it was possible to see CTs running in all directions.

'Blue 2, Blue 1, the Charlie Tangos are starting to break off, ... we need to get these stops on the ground, try to find an LZ to the south, I am going to the east.'

'Blue 2 ... copied,' came the clipped response from Smith's pilot.

The pilot looked back at Smith, his gloved forefinger pointing down. Smith nodded. The helicopter broke out of its orbit to the south.

'Captain I have a clearing for LZ ... roll left,' the tech called out to the pilot on the intercom. Smith caught a glimpse of a village below, a small cluster of huts.

'Roger I see it.'

The pilot glanced back at Smith again, pointing down vigorously, descending rapidly. *What can we expect when we hit the ground?*

As the helicopter banked into the LZ a CT appeared in the village clearing, carrying a RPG rocket launcher. Smith stared in disbelief as the man lifted the launcher to his shoulder. *I am going*

8 Forward Line of Own Troops, the line demarcated with smoke grenades, white phosphorous grenades or mini-flares to mark the position of ground forces to allow for safe air strikes.

to die! The tech tried to swing the Brownings around to bear on the CT, firing all the time, trying to 'walk' the bullet strikes towards the target. The back-blast was clearly visible as the rocket ignited. The pilot slipped the chopper to the right desperately trying to get out of the way. Smith watched in horror as the deadly rocket passed inches in front of the canopy ... the helicopter hit the ground hard, dust swirling in red clouds, visibility suddenly reduced to nil.

Dube, to Smith's right was first out firing the MAG as he went. Smith leapt after him, forgetting the headset, which tore off his head as he jumped. The helicopter, suddenly released from its load, lifted as the pilot reapplied full power. Moyo and Fauguneze hesitated for a split second too long, and then jumped to the left; the aircraft was already too far off the ground. Fauguneze landed awkwardly, snapping his ankle cleanly sending him tumbling in the dust, rolling over in agony.

Smith looked up, the chopper was gone. He was completely exposed in the centre of the clearing. He glanced over at Fauguneze, the man writhing in pain. *Fuck ...what am I going to do now?* His mind screamed as he tried to get a grip of the situation. Dube hadn't stopped firing. The CT with the RPG had disappeared. Dust began to settle.

Smith got to his feet and ran over to where Fauguneze lay curled up clutching his ankle. He grabbed Fauguneze by the shoulder straps on his webbing, dragging him across the clearing to the shade of a village hut. The foot hung limply at an awkward angle, bouncing over the uneven ground. Fauguneze made no sound.

Smith turned up the squelch on his A76 VHF radio⁹ so he could hear the communication around him. It hissed loudly in his ear.

'Blue 2, Blue 2, Stop 2 ... CASEVAC, CASEVAC ... Over,' called Smith frantically to the helicopter. He waited a few seconds. Tried again. No Reply.

Smith could hear the pilots talking to each other, trying to provide support for Williams, who was now completely silent on the radio.

'Stop 2, Stop 2, Stop 1 ... do you copy,' called Gibbs. He had been dropped to the east.

'Stop 2 go.'

'What is the problem?'

⁹ Small VHF radio, carried by Section and Stick commanders. Also referred to as the 'small-means'.

'One of my stick has broken his leg ... he is US¹⁰.'

A momentary hesitation, 'Copied, hide him in thick bush. We will come back for him later, we need to get to 43's loc ASAP.'

'Roger, Stop 2 out.'

Smith and his stick hurriedly carried Fauguneze out of the village in the direction of the contact to the north. Despite his obvious agony, Fauguneze remained silent, uncomplaining. They found an overgrown thicket and pushed him in under the thorn bush. Smith then stuck an ampoule of morphine into him.

'Fauguneze I have to leave you ... don't shoot at any Gooks, stay completely still'.

Fauguneze nodded and smiled. They all carried three day's rats¹¹ and four water bottles so Fauguneze could last on his own for a while.

'Get some Gooks *Seg*¹²,' Fauguneze looked up at him with a weak smile. The morphine was taking effect. Smith slapped him on the shoulder.

'*Sala kahle*, stay well,' Smith called back as he and the others made off towards the sound of gunfire.

The noise intensified as they hurried forward. Heavy, sustained MAG fire rolled through the bush, grenade explosions and the rattle of .303 rounds from the helicopters filled the air as they flew overhead, one behind the other.

Lt Gibbs with Stop 1 was rapidly closing from the east. His progress suddenly halted by a stream of CTs as they exited the contact area directly into his path.

The arrival of the helicopters had been enough for the enemy to break off the action.

'Stop 2, Stop 2 ... this is Stop 1 do you copy?'

'Stop 2 ... go.'

'We have to RV¹³, I cannot move forward fast enough ... I have too many Gooks to my front,' called Gibbs, frustration etched in his voice.

It was standard procedure in a helicopter deployment for one of the pilots to direct the ground troops, this was not happening.

The Lynx suddenly burst overhead. Its engines at full power were racing, the engine note changing as the pilot banked to look

10 Unserviceable, most often applied to faulty equipment but also applied to sick or injured soldiers.

11 Rations, ration packs. These were designated AS African Soldier and ES European Soldier to cope with dietary preferences.

12 Sarge, Sergeant, the black accent pronounced 'a' as a soft 'e'.

13 Rendezvous.

at the battle below. The scene was out of control. Williams had stopped calling on the radio and there was no response from any of the other 43 c/signs. The two choppers continued to orbit the contact area at low level, shooting at targets of opportunity. Still no instructions were being relayed to the ground forces to direct them onto CT positions. Smith found out later that these were South African pilots who had only recently been transferred to Rhodesia. This was their first scene.

The Lynx pilot tried to take charge.

'43, 43, this is Blue Leader do you read?'

Silence ... Williams made no response.

'43, 43, 43 this is Blue Leader do you read,' called the Lynx pilot, concern now in his voice. *Still no reply ... where the fuck is Williams?*

Then, a faint crackle, 'Blue Leader ... this ... is ... 43Alpha.' It was Sgt Iz Kennedy, 2IC of 3 Platoon.

'43Alpha can you see me?' called the Lynx pilot urgently.

'Negative ... I am lying on my face ... I am hit ...'

'Standby ...' the Lynx pilot hesitated, trying to assimilate the chaotic situation below him.

'This is Blue Leader ... who else is down there?' he called, his voice more insistent.

Smith and Gibbs both replied giving their respective positions. They could both see the Lynx as it orbited at 2,000ft.

'Blue Leader, Stop 1, I am pinned down ... I have CTs to my front and left,' called Gibbs anxiously.

The staccato of a Soviet RPD machinegun and rifle fire was clearly audible to Smith's right. He moved his stick towards the sound of the gunfire, hoping to flank the CTs shooting at Gibbs. The silence from Williams was disconcerting. *Maybe his radio is US,* Smith thought.

'Stop 1, Blue Leader, copied, call me in,' replied the Lynx pilot.

The Lynx banked tightly while at the same time losing altitude. Gibbs directed the Lynx around to fly over his position, giving corrections, 'go left', 'go right'. He then marked FLOT with a red smoke canister.

'Stop 1, I have you visual, confirm CTs in rocks to your west.'

'Affirmative ... Charlie Tango's in rocks to my west, one hundred metres.'

'Stop 1 ... standby ... I am going to throw fran¹⁴.'

The Lynx banked right, then, with engines howling, it dived
14 Frangible tank napalm bomb.

at the rocky outcrop, at right angles to Gibbs' position. The pilot opened up with the .303s mounted above the wing and didn't stop shooting all the way down. The Lynx was virtually touching the trees when the pilot released a fran canister. It tumbled momentarily, exploding on impact, blanketing the rocky outcrop in superheated gas, a deadly, bright orange petroleum cloud.

Smith watched the Lynx strike while sweeping forward towards Gibbs' position, Moyo and Dube next to him. CTs suddenly appearing in the bush ahead, looking back over their shoulders at the Lynx. Smith stopped, lifted his rifle trying to get the peep site on target and then he double-tapped, CRACK, CRACK. The FN rifle bucked in his shoulder.

The movement in front of him seemed to suddenly click into slow motion. *Keep your aim down. Look through the bush ... not at the bush.* He fired round after round, TAP, TAP ... TAP, TAP; trying desperately to see the bullet strikes.

The magazine emptied. *Shit ... out of ammo ... change magazine ... fumble with the chest webbing ... fire and movement ... fire and move ... fire and move! ... keep moving or die.* The voices of his training instructors blaring in his head as he tried vainly to implement what he had been taught.

As Smith and his stick ran forward they could hear blood-curdling screams. The frantan, made from a petroleum gel, incinerated everything in one massive burst of flame. A CT broke cover, his chest and back charred. The man ran a few metres and stopped. He looked over towards Smith, his AK47 hanging from his hand, his eyes wild, staring. He shouted something in siNdebele; Moyo shot him. No further gunfire came from the outcrop, a thick cloud of smoke hung in the air; the stench of burned flesh mixed with fuel frantan filled the air.

More CTs appeared, firing wildly, not aiming, just holding the trigger down on fully automatic, bullets spraying into the trees. Dube gave a short burst with the MAG from the hip. Dust lifted up in front of the escaping men but the panicked and bewildered CTs kept running, not knowing where the gunfire was coming from.

'Shoot the fuckers, AIM ... SHOOT LOW!' yelled Smith, 'Watch my tracer!'¹⁵ Adrenalin was now pumping through his veins, making the picture in front of him suddenly vividly clear, as if illuminated by a spotlight.

The three of them blasted away ... red tracer streaking through the air. Smith had loaded the first three rounds of each magazine 15 The FN tracer round was red. The AK47 tracer round was green.

with tracer as this helped to mark target, to show the other rifleman where he wanted them to shoot. The CTs just kept on running, seemingly oblivious to the gunfire being directed at them.

'For fuck sakes KILL THEM,' Smith bellowed again. Not one CT fell; they disappeared into the thick bush, running like the wind. Smith looked across at Dube and Moyo they had manic grins on their faces, eyes wide.

The bushfire, ignited by the airstrike, had taken hold. Muffled explosions erupted as the ammunition, grenades, mines and explosives, in the abandoned CT backpacks started to burn off.

The gunfire stopped abruptly. A strange silence descended over the bush, broken only by the crackle of flames as the fire spread.

It was rapidly getting dark. ...