



### **Anthills and Airfields** © Anthony Turton 2010

The assault moves in under cover of darkness. My troop is to the left of the axis of advance, careful to avoid the wetland that we know exists at the far end of the runway which is our designated primary target. We navigate off the burning tower, so as to keep the radio net clear for more urgent traffic. The driver knows what to do as he synchronises his actions with the crew commander and gunner.

"Alpha Group move now, out!" comes the command over the network.

That is us, so we move, careful not to advance faster than the vehicles on each side of us, the driver navigating through his periscopes off the burning tower visible in the clear night air. As we move, the Bravo Group is stationary alongside, laying down covering fire of both 90 HE and Browning.

"Bravo Group move now, out", comes the order from the squadron commander. Silently the well trained crew stops in position, the driver looking for cover as appropriate to present the lowest possible profile for an RPG counter-attack, the gunner laying down long bursts of co-axial Browning, the machine gun shuddering to life in front of the crew commander who feeds in new belts of ammo as needed, but punctuated by 90 HE as the Bravo Group leapfrogs past us to a tactical bound between us and the target.

"Alpha Group move now, out", and we are again on the move protected by the covering fire being laid down alongside our axis of advance.

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Suddenly the vehicle slews to the left and the engine races, our wheels losing traction on the rough ground.

"What happened?" I ask into the battle comms.

"Dunno", comes the terse reply as the driver engages reverse and guns the engine.

The vehicle tilts violently to one side, like a tortoise losing its balance. We cannot move forward or back and we all know that being stationary means we are as good as dead.

I order the gunner out of the turret to take a look while I monitor the radio net ready to call for support if need be. He unplugs his curly cord and jumps out of his hatch, onto the ground. Seconds later he is back.

"We have hit an ant hill and all four wheels are off the ground".

"Shit"...

And so the attack goes on, disappearing into the distance, leaving us to our sorry plight. Surrounded by darkness and in eerie silence we ponder our fate as we try to dislodge ourselves from the ant hill. A recovery Ratel arrives and the Tiffies drag us off, but in the process the shackle breaks and we need to repeat the exercise. Eventually we are free and we rejoin the Combat Team, now busy with the final assault.

The next day the Squadron unwinds as they start to recall the different incidents that made up the complex whole of what it was that they had just collectively experienced, bursting into song after each story is presented ...

"Sakke, sakke vol dagga,  
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,  
Jy is my meisie,  
Ry ons op die trein..."

As jy kan sleep,  
Soos ek kan sleep,  
Dan sleep ons tot die shackle breek,  
Of course yes,

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Oh yes of course yes..."

Laughter ripples across the sea of soldiers celebrating life as only soldiers can ... and the chorus erupts with renewed vigour. Not to be outdone, a gunner recounts how fast his crew commander could change the ammo boxes feeding the co-axial Browning, a particularly difficult task given the small space in which to move, which gives rise to the next round of banter.

"Sakke, sakke vol dagga,  
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,  
Jy is my meisie,  
Ry ons op die trein..."

As jy kan laai,  
Soos ek kan laai,  
Dan laai ons sonder geen bohaai,  
Of course yes,  
Oh yes of course yes..."

The spirits soar as the singing gets competitive when someone recounts how, during all the shooting, the water supply was damaged by shrapnel from a 90 HE round, causing an unanticipated fountain in the midst of the carnage.

"Sakke, sakke vol dagga,  
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,  
Jy is my meisie,  
Ry ons op die trein..."

As jy kan skiet,  
Soos ek kan skiet,  
Dan skiet ons tot die water giet,  
Of course yes,  
Oh yes of course yes..."

Now the focus turns to a specific gunner, who according to his crew commander hit every target he was assigned with one single shot of the 90, attesting to his accurate aim. Another soldier translates this into lyrics and lets rip with ...

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"Sakke, sakke vol dagga,  
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,  
Jy is my meisie,  
Ry ons op die trein..."

As jy kan mik,  
Soos ek kan mik,  
Dan maak jy mos 'n groot indruk,  
Of course yes,  
Oh yes of course yes..."

Attention now shifts to the combat engineers whose clearing of the bunkers with high explosives impressed someone.

"Sakke, sakke vol dagga,  
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,  
Jy is my meisie,  
Ry ons op die trein..."

As jy kan skiet,  
Soos ek kan skiet,  
Dan skiet jy mos met dinamiet,  
Of course yes,  
Oh yes of course yes..."

Every team has its resident complainer who is never satisfied with the logistics, particularly the food, and he now comes up for a group ragging.

"Sakke, sakke vol dagga,  
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,  
Jy is my meisie,  
Ry ons op die trein..."

As jy kan kla,  
Soos Piet kan kla,  
Ons jag jou weg met die koswa,  
Of course yes,  
Oh yes of course yes..."

Not to be outdone, the next soldier volunteers a story about how he is missing his girlfriend and cannot wait to get back home. The mood of the



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audience changes palpably as someone in the crowd starts the next round of singing ...

"Sakke, sakke vol dagga,  
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,  
Jy is my meisie,  
Ry ons op die trein...

As jy kan vry,  
Soos ek kan vry,  
Dan vry ons tot ons blisters kry,  
Of course yes,  
Oh yes of course yes..."

And thus the process of bonding is cemented, with cordite, humour, song and camaraderie shared by a cohort of men far from home, who have all experienced stress and disjointedness that civilians will never understand.



**A T54/55 Russian main battle tank (MBT) knocked out on the road between Menongue and Caiundo. © A. R. Turton 2010.**

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### Aerial Ballet and Napalm

© Anthony Turton 2010

The axis of advance was in a north-westerly direction, roughly parallel to the only road in the area, but taking place in the bush alongside. The bush was thick in places, which meant that we had to zigzag in order to avoid sustaining heavy wear and tear on the Eland's, never a good thing before an engagement. The advance had been made in radio silence, except for the reporting from each combat team as they reached their respective start lines. The whine of the four-wheel drive gears, lulled by the constant inflow of cool air, soothed me in the crew commanders hatch as I watched the surrounding bush - the crew commander is the eyes and ears of the crew, none of which have 360 degree vision. All combat teams were now in place and it was approaching H-Hour, that magical time when the engagement would commence. Nerves were tight and engines idled as the banter from the crew was audible over the battle intercom. Radios were silent except for the constant hiss from the headset inside my helmet. I was monitoring three different networks - the "Alpha Net" was used within the Troop and Combat Team, the "Bravo Net" was used between the Combat Team and the Battle Group, and the "Battle Comms" were used within the vehicle itself - switching as needed using the controls on the chest piece linked by curly cord to the battle comms box inside the turret.

Then suddenly it happened, a thunderous roar as a jet aircraft flew in at tree-top height, the turbulence felt by us on the ground. In a split second it was gone, followed by a second and a short while later, a third. As the attack went in, these three jet aircraft acted with perfectly synchronised precision.

With the element of surprise, the first dropped ordnance on the target a few kilometres ahead of us. *Whump, whump, whump* - the detonations hit us seconds after the flash of light and the billowing clouds of death and destruction as the beast called HE was unleashed. The first aircraft went into a graceful climb. A perfect circle and backward summersault over the target as the second went in. *Whump, whump, whump* came the sounds from the second attack, punctuated with a jittery staccato of small arms fire as the enemy awoke to their plight.

Then the second jet goes into the graceful climb, about 90 degrees out of phase with the first, now nearing the zenith of the circle, flying upside

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down. Now the third goes in - *whump, whump, whump* - followed by more intense small arms fire as it goes into the backwards roll at exactly the same time as the first pulls out of the 3 o'clock position, now lined up on the target for a second attack, this time with rockets.

White vapour trails are visible as the rockets are unleashed and the first jet breaks to the left, leaving the battlefield. The second is now in the 3 o'clock position and follows suit in perfect synchronicity. *Whoosh* go the rockets, greeted by *thump, thump, thump* as the first set hits home. Then number two peels off and number three goes in. Within seconds it is over and the target is ablaze, a pall of smoke rising a short distance before us.

Radio silence is broken as we are ordered in to the attack.

I am amazed by the sheer destructiveness of machines that can be so graceful in the sky. What kind of brilliant people apply their minds to engineering sophistication of this nature?

But I cannot ponder this for long as I order over the battle comms, "HE Action, Loaded".

The gunner calmly replies, "Firing switch on."

"Range, one two hundred..."

"One two hundred set..."

"Machine gun nest below large tree, traverse left ... Steady ... On!"

"On", replies the gunner.

"Fire", comes the command from my dry throat as I tuck my elbows into my sides to avoid the recoil of the breach block to my right, forcing my forehead onto the brow pad to prevent my face being smashed as the turret lurches backwards from the stallions kick.

*Thump* goes the gun next to me, almost sub-audible because we are shielded from the super-sonic boom by the heavy armoured steel of the turret. As the breach block slides back the empty case is ejected into the *doppie* bin and I grasp a second round from the circular shell rack behind me. Twisting my shoulder in perfectly synchronised unison I swing

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the shell into the breach, flipping it with my fingers to ram it home, triggering the breach block closure with a hard metallic *clunk*. Then my eyes follow the tracer from the round just fired and not yet on the target, ready to give corrections for the second round if needed. My heart races as the tracer arcs.

Will it hit home? *Whump* - the shell detonates in a roar of HE, sending sandbags and ammo boxes skywards in a graceful arc of diabolical destruction, as flesh is flailed from bone by the insane screech of shrieking shrapnel, commanded by that gluttonous beast buried deep inside the TNT.

"Stop target", I give the command with a mixture of elation and sadness first felt by me when hunting buffalo with *uMqangabhodwe* in what seemed to be a lifetime away, telling the gunner that his round had hit the designated target. He whoops with delight, adrenalin rushing. The blood lust is now high.

Eyes dart furtively left and right again, looking for a new target. We are now hunters and our prey are men with guns.

"Browning action ... range eight hundred ... traverse left", I bark the orders over the battle comms.

So the engagement commences. Starting with graceful ballet in the sky it ends with the *whump* of HE and the distinctive smell of napalm burning rubber and flesh from steel and bone. With this we become dehumanized as we break all norms of civilization by wilfully taking the life of another human being. And so a small piece of our collective soul dies with each new shot being ordered by my dry throat that sounds so distant to my ears.

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**Troop 23 at Oshivello Base when this story was written. Standing left to right, Cpl. A.R. Turton (Crew Commander 23 Bravo), Cpl. Eric Prinsloo (Crew Commander 23 Charlie), Cpl. “Bossie” Bosman (Gunner 23 Alpha), Tpr. Paul Roos (Gunner 23 Bravo), L/Cpl Andrew Brink (Driver 23 Alpha). Kneeling left to right Tpr. “Mannie” (Driver 23 Charlie), L/Cpl Lennie Rogers (Gunner 23 Charlie), L/Cpl “Pottie” Potgieter (Driver 23 Bravo), Tpr. Riaan Lambert (Gunner 23). Seated left to right, Tpr. “Bouwer” (Driver 23), Lt. Gerard Back (Troop Leader 23), Sgt. David Gadd-Claxton (Troop Sergeant and Crew Commander 23 Alpha). Lennie Rogers always had a gun to his head, or to the head of the person alongside him in every photo ever taken with him in it. He later took his own life. This short story is in his memory for he was a gentle soul.**

### **Transition across the Red Line © Anthony Turton 2010**

Having been issued our combat kit in Grootfontein, we drove in convoy to Oshivelo where we received the official briefing and training we would need for our operational deployment in Sector 10. Oshivelo is located on the Red Line - the border between an area of combat operations and the adjacent non-operational area. After setting up a TB for the night, our Troop bunkered down in the shade of a copse of Kameeldoring (Camel Thorn) trees. We were tired after the long drive and we were left to silently reminisce about the rapid transition from our normal civilian life, to yet another evolution of our respective military personae. Just 48 hours before we had been back in the States (a euphemism for South Africa and home), laughing with our families and dealing with the mundane

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issues of daily life such as paying the bills. As an indicator of the shattered and disjointed lives we were really living in South Africa at the time, we were now entering an operational area as combat troops. Nodding off to sleep, the imprinted whine of the Eland's gears and the rushing of the wind past my helmeted head down into the turret *via* the cupola hatch where each crew commander spent most of his waking hours, merged the reality of life into the pleasing unreality of deep sleep.

In the surrealism that enveloped me I sensed somewhere far away, a thumping, much like a body-blow from a powerful boxer. It was felt more than heard.... one after another, *whump... whump... whump..*, felt in the pit of the stomach, almost sub-audible and tactile at first, but very powerful. Then shouts followed by a nervous chatter of automatic fire, tentative at first but agitated to a crescendo of noise as others joined in. Shoving away the mists of peaceful sleep, I was pulled angrily back into the here and now. *Whump... whump... whump...* punctuating the angry chatter of automatic fire. Alongside me a hollow *thunk* as a now widely awake young soldier brings a mortar into action. Overhead the sky bursts into an orchestra of light as the first illuminating flare is sent from a mortar tube somewhere behind our position. The eerie glare of the illuminating mortar as it spiralled in a rhythmic zigzag to the ground under its small parachute formed an almost magic background to the pyrotechnic display of tracer rounds, spitting angrily into the dark mystery of the surrounding bush from whence the attack was apparently coming. I recall watching the graceful path of the tracers, amazed when they hit something and ricocheted off their beautifully predictable arc into a stochastic display of anger and the pure violence of military conflict. The *whump... whump... whump...* of the incoming mortars was now echoed by the hollow *thunk* of returning fire as the wakening men - yesterday civilians but today combat troops - sprang into initially disjointed action, unifying with time.

"Staak vuur", (cease fire) came the command, bellowed over the cacophony of the battlefield by the Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) of Oshivelo Base.

"Welcome to the Operational Area men, this was just an exercise!"

And thus began yet another tour of duty in the South African army - a series of experiences that was set to define my entire generation - and our daily lives in the place we called home.



**A Russian TMM bridge laying tank on the logistics route between Caiundo and Menongue. © A. R. Turton 2010.**

### **Crimson Circles in the White Sand © Anthony Turton 2010**

The incessant whine of the gears blends into the static of the radios as both sets of sound were filtered through the headset inside the helmet. All hatches were closed because of the recent contact, with only the semi-rounded crew commander's hatches raised at half-cock, to improve the vision for the commanders. They tentatively moved across the killing field, sweeping their eyes through the narrow slits beneath the hatches, hardly noticing bodies contorted by the violence of their last moments alive, being dragged to a central point by dust-covered soldiers, picking their way carefully through the detritus of war.

The Eland in front - a 60mm mortar reconnaissance vehicle with an oddly shaped round turret and an inadequate excuse of a main weapon protruding at a rude angle from its business end - suddenly had its hatches burst open. The gunner popped his head out and hung from the



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turret as his Eland passed the grotesquely twisted body of a recently-killed combatant. To everyone's surprise, she was a woman, either caught in the cross-fire, or else a *Mujiba* (to use Rhodesian army jargon) that was providing food and sustenance to the *Gooks* in the field. She lay there, legs sprawled apart in a sea of white sand turned crimson as she leaked her recent-life into the earth of Mother Africa. She had taken a hit in the left shoulder, probably from an HE round and had been ripped apart in near-surgical fashion, her one breast still intact but the other a tangle of raw meat that was indistinguishable from the rest of what her torso used to be. Examining her remains from the turret as the Eland drove past, the gunner triggered the switch on his chest-piece and whispered into the combat radio network, "Better shag her while she's still warm boys..."

With a dismissive wave of the hand, acknowledging the troops on the ground taking care of the aftermath of contact, they drove past and on to their RV position to replenish ammo, food and fuel and to wait for new orders. Their collective thoughts turned now to warm food and maybe a chance to wash themselves clean.

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**Caramel and Red Eyes**  
© Anthony Turton 2010

Small luxuries are never taken for granted while in the bush. And thus it was that Paul Roos, my gunner and a veteran of Operation Savannah, became famous for his insistence on living it up as best he could. Driven by a hamster-like compulsion to collect anything that could be vaguely useful one day, Paul had found a pressure-cooker in the rubble of a bombed-out house in southern Angola. Sensing that this would one day come in handy, Paul tossed the pressure cooker onto the Eland, in that space behind the ditching plates where anything without a specific home tended to be stored.

One day Paul made a big score. He managed to procure a whole carton of condensed milk from some unsuspecting RQMS rear-echelon-type. Convinced he could make caramel from this condensed milk by using the pressure cooker, Paul started to put the bits and pieces of the plan together. Each Eland had a two-burner petrol stove, which he set up inside a relatively intact house that he had decided to call "home". Noting the absence of the normal safety valve, Paul persuaded an eager Tiffy to

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insert a self-tapping screw, in order to build up the required pressure (he later explained), with a promise of sharing the ensuing rewards.

Tossing the tins of condensed milk into the pressure cooker and closing the lid with the large self-tapping screw conspicuous by its tentative presence, Paul set the stove alight. Just as the pot was coming to the boil, a salvo of incoming rocket fire slammed into the area around the village. Russian Red Eye rockets were being launched against the SADF troops, so it had become time to make for the relative safety of the armoured vehicles.

After the cacophony of the attack came to an end and the troops were ordered to stand down, Paul rushed back to his occupied house to retrieve what by now must surely be a large haul of caramel. As he entered the room he was somewhat surprised at what greeted him. Caramel was dripping from the ceiling and running off the walls. It seems that the pressure cooker had built up a healthy head of steam and with nowhere left to go since the self-tapping screw had blocked the only passage present, had erupted in a deluge of boiling water and caramel.



**This White Stallion is a Mine Proof Vehicle (MPV) and is doing a recovery in Ongiva. The shot out trucks are Russian Gaz troop carriers and the armoured fighting vehicle (AFV) visible to the right and in front of the White Stallion is the author's Eland 90 (Callsign 23 Bravo). © A. R. Turton 2010.**



### The White Stallion of Ongiva

© Anthony Turton 2010

We were called to an urgent briefing by the Squadron Commander one day. A strike force from 61 Mech had become trapped in a minefield and one of the tank-killer Ratel's had been taken out. The mines were British Mk 7's with their characteristic detonation under the second wheel of the vehicle - the first wheel arming with the second wheel detonating the mine. The whole crew had been killed, sadly including a set of twin brothers, who were riding in the same vehicle against regulation. Our mission was to accompany the recovery crew to provide fire support as needed.

Approaching the site of the incident, the turret of the Ratel some distance from the hull, having been ripped off as the on-board ammunition was ignited, a gut-wrenching *thump* hit us in the stomach. The main recovery vehicle, a mine proof "Wit Hings" (White Stallion - the Tiffy symbol), had detonated an undetected mine. As the dust settled a disgruntled Tiffy Sergeant Major half rolled out of the cab. Surveying the site that greeted him, he let rip with a customary string of profanities. The central wheel of the Wit Hings was hanging at a crazy angle with oil dribbling from the exposed half-shaft. Without any further blasphemy, the Tiffy contingent got to work. They jacked up the middle axle, now missing one wheel, and placed it in a chain sling. A hastily cut wooden plug stopped the oil leak.

With the Wit Hings hastily taken care of, the Tiffies started to recover the bombed-out Ratel. To my great amazement, the Wit Hings emerged from the bush, with recovered Ratel and detached turret in tow, seemingly unscathed despite the fact that a large anti-tank mine had just removed its one wheel. Escorting the vehicle back to Ongiva I was convinced that it would be kept there for a few days while repairs were affected. This was not to be as the Sergeant Major confidently announced that he would drive the Wit Hings and the recovered Ratel down to Ondangwa.

We provided the escort to this bizarre convoy. From that moment onwards I had incredible respect for the South African developed MPV's and felt increasingly confidence about their combat capabilities.



**This captured White Stallion now stands in the military museum in Luanda. The author is standing right alongside Brigadier Tone Sylvestre, a former FAPLA Commander responsible for the museum. Note the French Panhard standing left. Similar to the Eland in which the author saw service, this particular AFV was captured from FNLA forces early in the war. © A. R. Turton 2010.**

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### **Those New School Shoes © Anthony Turton 2010**

The little girl makes her way down the dusty path. She walks stiffly, in a disarticulated gait, self-conscious of her new school shoes. These are the very first pair of proper shoes she has ever owned in her entire life and she was proud of them. Her parents saved for many months to afford those shoes, but they felt it was a good investment because their daughter was important and their standing in the community was such that she should not be ridiculed by being bare footed at school.

The path to the school crossed a seasonal stream and there she hesitated. Alongside the small stream was a group of soldiers, taking a short rest in the shade of the few trees that were sustained by this small stream meandering across the African savannah.

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She was confused. The soldiers made her restless as she tried to pick her path across the mud caused by the cattle crossing. Focussing her full attention on the mud, she tried to avoid this soiling her brand new shoes, shiny in the African sun with just a hint of dust covering their otherwise unblemished perfection. Sensing her dilemma, a soldier approached, rifle slung across his shoulder and bush hat encrusted white with a ring of salt from the dried up sweat of the morning's patrol dangling from a lanyard to his left epaulette. The girl was afraid, but caught on the proverbial horns of a dilemma, what was she to do? Cross the stream through the mud and soil those shoes that her parents had sacrificed so much to afford, or accept the help of the soldier and risk being accused by the community of fraternizing with the enemy?

Sensing her dilemma, and recognizing his own small niece in the twinkle of that young girl's eyes, he raised his hand in greeting. Hesitatingly she responded. Smiling at her he motioned with his palm to wait as he strode over to a fallen log. He heaved, but the log was just too heavy so he motioned to the other soldiers to help him. At first they complained as only soldiers can, but one by one they slowly got involved. Together they dragged the log to the muddy crossing and manhandled it into position. The little girl focussed her attention on their boots, all scuffed and dusty as they slid in the mud while wrestling with the log. Then, once in position, the young soldier smiled and winked, motioning with his hand that she could now cross in safety. Balancing on the log she tripped her way across the stream and safely on the other side she walked with newfound purpose, proud that her new shoes were still clean, eager to show them off at school.

The Section Leader gave the command to load rifles and proceed with their patrol. The young soldier fell into his predetermined position, responsible for the left flank from 12 o'clock to 9 o'clock as he slipped in his magazine and chambered a round with a metallic *shiiii-clunk*. The section snaked out onto the African savannah leaving the cool shade of the trees behind them, their young faces stern with anticipation as this brief interlude of human contact was pushed to the back of their minds. They simply could not afford to have a lapse in concentration.

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**A T54/55 Russian MBT knocked out on the road between Menongue and Caiundo. © A. R. Turton 2010.**

### **Rat Pack Interlude © Anthony Turton 2010**

When living on Rat Pack's it became common practice to throw away large portions of perfectly good but uneaten food. One day I became aware of a civilian hospital in Ongiva, staffed by the most amazingly dedicated nurses and doctors, who were used to working with very little. I arranged for the soldiers to place their unused Rat Pack food into a few boxes. We loaded those boxes onto the Eland, behind the ditching plates. With permission from the Squadron Commander, my vehicle rode point and as we passed the hospital on a patrol, he stopped the whole combat team. Setting up defensive positions, we were protected as we exited from the turret of the Eland. Grabbing boxes in both hands, my gunner and I delivered the food to the nurses in the hospital. I shall never forget the moment. We unplugged our curly cords from the battle comms box and left our helmets and chest-pieces intact. I recall the clack-clack sound of the chest piece chaffing against the buttons of the fire-proof tank suits as we marched up the pathway in the small garden leading to the hospital. All around us was a sea of silent but dignified faces of civilians injured in

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the conflict. With a noble nod of Matronly authority, she accepted the boxes, which we placed on the ground in front of her feet. Saluting her smartly we turned away, marching to the Eland where we jumped into the turret, reconnected the curly cord from the battle comms box to the chest piece and the moment was over. With a whine of four-wheel-drive gears, I put a 90 HE up the spout in anticipation of possible ambush and reported on my battle comms, "HE action loaded"; to which the gunner replied, "HE action, set - firing switch off".

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**Bridge across the Cunene River at Xangongo destroyed by Special Forces.  
© A. R. Turton 2010.**

### **RPG Fire and Bully Beef © Anthony Turton 2010**

The fire fight was intense, but after the engagement was over the troops milled around the base that they had just captured. One of the soldiers, a captain from a special force unit, was suddenly overcome with deep fatigue as the adrenaline wore off. Rummaging through his kit he found a tin of bully beef which he opened with relish. Looking for a place to sit and eat, he found a ledge. As he settled down he started to eat the meat with some gusto. I looked over towards him and was struck by the backdrop, because a few metres behind him, propped up against the fork of a tree, was an enemy combatant, slumped over like a limp rag doll, his



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head a soft mush caused by the detonation of an RPG alongside, flies congregating along the trickle of congealed fluid dribbling from his nose and meandering across his face down to his chin. As I surveyed this scene I felt inwardly disturbed but outwardly I was unable to show any emotion, so I just looked away as he finished his bully beef, tossing the empty can aside amongst the spent cartridge cases and still-warm corpses.

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The author (right) stands alongside his colleague Isidro Pinheiro of the Okavango River Commission (OKACOM) in front of a captured French Panhard similar to those that he used to do combat missions in. This photo is an example of the value of water as a vehicle for peacemaking. The author has presented himself to his former enemy and made peace with them at the individual level. Note the round port on the turret, which is for the crew commander to eject spent shell cases from the 90mm main gun. The square openings beneath the domed crew commander's hatch are for periscopes. The two tubes behind the authors head are smoke launchers. © A. R. Turton 2010.

### **Moonlight and Sine Wave Symmetry** © Anthony Turton 2010

I slip into a troubled sleep, deep at times but punctuated mostly by the need for vigilance. The sleeping bag embraces me, zipper close by on the inside, with the cold reassuring steel of my 9mm tucked into the top

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corner. Behind me a rustle followed by a metallic sound. Instantly I am awake - vigilant. I gingerly feel for my 9mm, thumb searching reassuringly for the safety which I slide "off". Silently I roll over in my sleeping bag, to face the noise and double tap if need be. I probe the eerie silence of the night, bathed in silver moonlight so bright that even the stars are invisible. Then I see it, furtive in the shadows, a dog with its long tail arched in graceful symmetry with its emaciated belly and sad ribs. It has found a tin of bully beef tossed away by a careless soldier. I take a deep breath, slip the safety back "on" and gradually succumb to the seductive embrace of sleep once again.

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**This Buffel MPV was destroyed by a landmine between Mupa and Xangongo in southern Angola. There were no casualties because the vehicle is designed to protect the troops inside. © A. R. Turton 2010.**

### **Hearts, Minds and Mutiny © Anthony Turton 2010**

The patrol probed the bush, anticipating fire at any moment. The cut-line was close by and the trackers were looking for *spoor*. The relentless sun reflected mercilessly from the shimmering sands of the exposed earth of the cut-line and the soldiers were hot beneath their soft bush hats, encrusted with a white halo of salt from evaporated sweat of missions long forgotten. The Buffel lurched like a drunken juggernaut as it cut a swathe through the virgin bush. Riding on roads was forbidden because of

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land mines so the driver selected virgin territory where possible. Improvised explosive devices (IED's) were often rigged in defiles - artificial choke points that forced the vehicles to go through a given position carefully selected as a killing field - so the troops were at a high level of alert whenever the driver lost the right to select his own path forward.

Suddenly a fence blocked the path. Undecided, the driver slowed down momentarily. Out of the bush came a man wildly gesticulating at the patrol. A soldier slips his safety catch, "off" and raises his rifle while the Section Leader deliberates for a split second. "Ride the fence flat", comes his orders to the driver.

The frantic man gesticulates even harder and shouts to attract the attention of the patrol. More safety catches silently slide to "off" as rifles come to the ready, anticipating action. A soldier chambers a ballistic round and slips a rifle grenade over his flash hider in expectation. A bead of sweat escapes the Section Leader's bush hat, slowly meandering across the dust of his young face, obeying gravity.

Hesitating, the driver stops before colliding with the fence. "Hold fire", comes the Section Leader's reassuring voice. "The man is not armed". The gesticulating man, keen to protect his *mahangu* crop from marauding cattle, comes alongside, staring unwaveringly into the barrels of an entire section's rifles, grenade and all. Hearts race because everyone knows if you are not moving you are a target. The man pleads with the Section Leader to use the nearby gate rather than ride the fence down. But this is contrary to standard operational procedures (SOP's). No defiles are to be used if an alternative is available and here clearly is an alternative. "Ride the fence flat and proceed", urges a silent voice in the Section Leader's head. For a few seconds the safety of an entire section of infantry weighs in the balance deeply embedded in the head of the Section Leader, too young to legally drive a motor car on the highway back home, but old enough to make life and death decisions like these. Compassion tugs at his heart as the man pleads for his fence. The thin wire is all that protects his crop and thus sustains his family in harsh times like these. The Section Leader orders his men off the vehicle into defensive positions, sending two ahead to probe the defile with bayonets, gingerly penetrating the soft earth of the road at an angle, searching for the tell-tale sign of something hard. The soldiers curse silently under

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their breath, muttering that the Section Leader has gone soft on *Gooks* and is placing the lives of his men at risk.

The defile is declared clear and the Buffel passes safely through with only the driver on board. The men climb back into the Buffel, cursing the Section Leader. "Why the f\*\*\* did you not simply ride the fence down?" Mutiny is in the air. "It is all about hearts and minds," comes the calm reply. "Proceed as before..."

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### **Strim's, Combat Engineers and Battlefield Surgeons** © Anthony Turton 2010

The fire fight was intense with bullets whizzing around wildly, like enraged hornets swarming from an invisible but recently disturbed nest. There were only small arms at this early stage of the contact, with their characteristic chatter like a nervous honey guide leading the badger to a hive in the forest. Suddenly a different noise from a ballistic round propelling a strim off the rifle of the unseen enemy, tossing it angrily towards the SADF section, searching for soft flesh on which the angry beast contained within the TNT could feed. It slammed home into the shoulder of a young man, spinning him around and dropping him like a bag of wet flour. Then silence as everyone waited for the detonation. But nothing... Gingerly, the soldiers lifted their heads to see their buddy lying prone, with the tailfin of the strim jutting from his shoulder. "Shit, it's a misfire... Watch it... It can detonate at any moment", came the staccato order from the platoon commander. Then more of nothing. It was apparently not going to go off. The section leader called in a Casevac and the young soldier was transported to a field surgery, unexploded rifle grenade in his shoulder. The surgeons surveyed their patient, noting minimal bleeding. Ordering a tiffy to place a 6mm steel plate recovered from the side of a Buffel MPV between them and the patient, the surgeons gingerly hooked the tailfin with a thin rope passed over a hastily rigged pulley. As it swung free combat engineers whipped it away, leaving the surgeons to deal with their patient, now bleeding profusely from the hole in his shoulder. He survived. The surgeons were bloody heroes, largely unrecognized for the role they played.

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### Thousand Yard Stare © Anthony Turton 2010

#### A Message from the Mother of the Nation

“They have guns and tanks, we have no arms. But we have stones. We have our boxes of matches. We have our bottles. ... With our necklaces, we will liberate this country!”

Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela Mandela, April  
1986, Soweto.

I arrive at the *Skerp Punt* Tactical HQ for a liaison meeting with my SAP counterpart to find a strange air that I have never encountered before. There is a buzz all around and it is clear that something is very different to my previous liaison meetings.

My counterpart in the SAP - a young warrant officer - seems unable to concentrate and the meeting goes all over the place with no clear focus. Then suddenly a young constable comes in, crouching as he whispers something in the warrant officer's ear. He listens and reflects momentarily and with a resolute look on his face announces that he has to leave the meeting because something has just come up. He motions me to accompany him if I so wish. Sensing that something extraordinary is about to happen I consent and follow my counterpart as he leaves the room in a hurry.

We scramble over to a Casspir with its engine already running. The last time I saw one of these was when we were supporting Koevoet in Sector 10. I climb in, the only soldier conspicuous by my presence because of the nutria battledress I am wearing. I greet the policemen in the Casspir, all dressed in combat fatigues of a different pattern to mine. They stare past me with barely an acknowledgement that I have just greeted them. The air is pregnant with apprehension as the door slams shut. We move out at some speed, jostled around in the back. I look around. The first thing that strikes me is that unlike the Koevoet unit, nobody is sitting on top of the Casspir. Then I notice something else - nobody is talking. In fact, nobody is even making eye contact. The policemen have a vacant look in their eyes. Their clothing is dishevelled and their pockets bulge with invisible contents. There is no banter. No song. No chit-chat. No chirping



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from the resident clown that I know exists in every combat team I have ever seen.

Only silence except for the grinding of the machinery, the occasional rippling bleep from the VHF radios as a message is relayed and that vacant thousand yard stare on the faces of all the passengers.

We approach a clearing amongst a dense cluster of matchbox houses. I am immediately taken by a sense of physics as I gaze upon the crowd, because there is a clear differentiation in the behaviour of certain groups as they revolve like electrons at different energy planes, all locked into orbit around a single clearly-defined nucleus. This sense of order in an otherwise chaotic setting causes me to instinctively seek out the nucleus. On the one side a pall of smoke rises and it is here that the nucleus seems to be located. It is visible because it is surrounded by a clearly defined ring of high energy individuals, all milling around something that is the focus of their collective inward attention. Surrounding this high energy orbit is a second one of lower energy. These are different people, not as animated and somewhat older, not all inwardly focussed but clearly part of the greater whole.

The orbiting electrons part as the Casspir approaches, with the high energy individuals turning to face us, clearly in a state of heightened aggression.

The Casspir stops and the gaunt policemen with the thousand yard stares spill out, each clutching what seems to be a different sort of weapon. A shotgun comes into action while alongside me a sergeant breaks open his *Snotneus* stopper gun. To my surprise he removes a torch battery from one of his bulging pockets and inserts this into the *Snotneus* in front of the massive cartridge. I ask him what the hell he is doing and he casually informs me that the rubber stopper bullets are "ineffective" under these circumstances, but a torch battery "does the trick". I am shocked but do my best to conceal my somewhat naive response.

I feel profoundly vulnerable here, surrounded by gaunt policemen, each with a thousand yard stare and me clutching only my 9mm personal weapon, which strikes me as being totally inappropriate to the point of being laughable. The high energy electrons become distinctly more animated as we approach the centre of the nucleus.

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My breath is taken away as I see it. The orange flames licking like hungry beasts dance across the walls of the tyre. A thick black pall rises. The air is filled with a myriad of sounds. The angry crowd is insulated from me somehow as I watch those mesmerising flames dance. Hungry demons engorge themselves on flesh like gluttons with an insatiable appetite. I suddenly become aware of the smell, the combination of a mass of humanity living in a place where all sanitation services have ceased to exist and hydrocarbons released from the petrol used to start the burning tyre. But above all the air has a unique quality, because it carries the distinct odour of burning flesh and recently-singed hair.

This is my first necklacing and I am shocked by what I see. Unable to comprehend the enormity of the scene around me I instantly understand the omnipresence of that thousand yard stare, which accompanied me to this scene in that silent Casspir with the bleeping ripple of the VHF radio and grinding machinery of war.

Today it seems is as good a day as any for a necklacing; and for me to finally lose my cherry of innocence.

A sensation goes through my body that I have never felt before and I instinctively know that my life has changed forever as I detach emotionally. I feel as if I have a golden umbilical cord connected to some massive placenta in the sky and I travel along that lifeline, looking down at the scene beneath me, ravenously searching for sustenance in this parched landscape populated by high energy electrons orbiting a burning nucleus. My spirit leaves me and dances above, flitting across the landscape at the speed of light, almost like a ball of plasma flashing beneath the loose puffs of cloud in a mirror image of the flames licking that twisted body. I see the policemen on my left and right, but this time from above. I am surprised at seeing myself milling around there in the middle of an ill-defined line of order floating like a loose molecule across a flammable sea of seething anger.

I lose all track of time as my spirit floats free of my body, refusing to come back and make me whole again, seemingly now to have a will of its own. The next I can recall we are back inside that Casspir and I too have a thousand yard stare, my spirit still absent from my body, rendering me an incomplete shell of humanity - a doer now - rather than a thinker and a feeler. I recall stopping at a fast food outlet on our way back to *Skerp Punt*, but I found the crispy skin of the fried chicken to be distinctly

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unappetising, so I chose to remain hungry instead, at least until my spirit returned from its lonely wandering.

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### Geneva Convention Interlude

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Each soldier carries an identity book, consisting of a few pages of information, but in essence recording the number, rank and name of the individual. The centre of the book has a summary of the Geneva Convention, informing the soldier about his rights in the event of capture while on operations.

A common problem in the army arises from hygiene. There are many hundred people, maybe even a few thousand, living under rudimentary conditions, sharing communal facilities. For this reason a common malady is diarrhoea, known in the army as *gippo guts*, presumably having earned this name when South African forces were fighting Rommel in the Western Desert as part of the Allied Eighth Army. In any event, as things panned out, one soldier came down with this malady and hastily made his way to the Thunder Boxes - communal toilets - to relieve the pressure. To his absolute horror, half of the camp had also come down with the same malady and the Thunder Boxes were all occupied. Faced with a serious dilemma, the soldier had to rapidly decide what to do next. Opting for the open bush not far from the Thunder Boxes, he did what needed to be done. But then, a new dilemma... There was no paper and the grass seemed far too hard and unwieldy to be seriously considered for this delicate task.

In a moment of inspiration he remembered the Geneva Convention. Carefully tearing the pages from his identity book, he crinkled them in his hands to soften them and with a blissful far-away look in his eyes he did what needed to be done.

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