

## Aerial Ballet and Napalm

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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 zig-zag in order to avoid sustaining heavy wear and tear on the Eland's, which was never a good thing before an operation. 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 that the engagement would commence. Nerves were tight and engines idling 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 in perfect 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, and 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 went into the graceful climb, about 90 degrees out of phase with the first, now nearing the zenith of the circle, flying upside 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 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 hit 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 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 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 being cut as the turret lurches backwards.

*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 the shell into the breech, 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 that sends sandbags and ammo boxes skywards in a graceful arc.

“Stop target”, I give the command, telling the gunner that his round had hit the designated target. He whoops with delight, adrenaline rushing.

Eyes dart furtively left and right again. Looking for a new target.

“Browning action... range eight hundred... traverse left...”.

And 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.