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Memoirs of Anthony Richard Turton***

Transition Across the Red Line

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Having been issued our combat kit in Grootfontein, we drove in convoy to Oshivello where we received the official briefing and training we would need for our operational deployment in Sector 10. Oshivello 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 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.

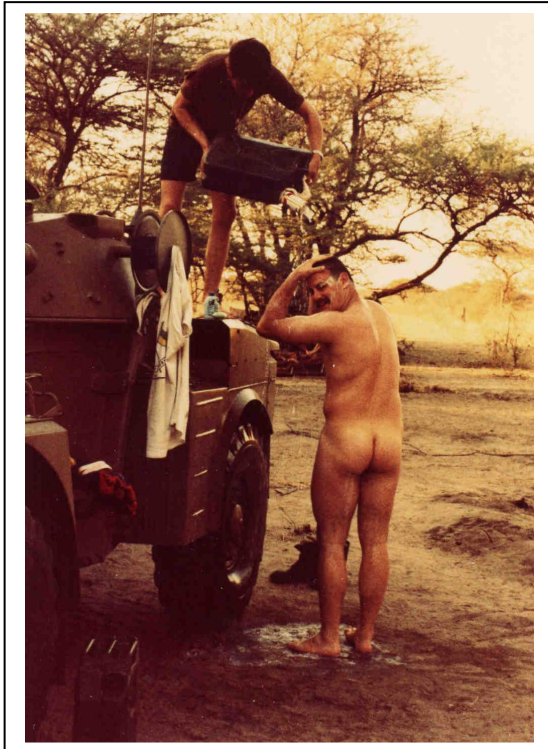
In the surrealism that enveloped me I sensed somewhere far away, a thumping, much like a body-blow from a powerful boxer. It was felt more than heard.... one after another, *whump... whump... whump...*, felt in the pit of the stomach, almost sub-audible and tactile at first, but very powerful. Then shouts 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 Oshivello 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”.

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Images of the Transition across the Red Line taken at Oshivello.

Top: members of Troop 23 write letters home (left to right – Paul Roos, L Cpl Andrew Brink, myself, Lt Gerard Back, Cpl Bossie Bosman and L Cpl Pottie Potgieter). Bottom left: Cpl Eric Prinsloo takes a bush shower while his driver Mannie pours water from a jerry can. Bottom right: back from a communal shower I have a cooking pot on my head like a helmet while Bouwer points and laughs as Paul Roos packs away his shower kit. Everything is done as a team – even going to the toilet!

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Troop 23 at Oshivello in the shade of the Kameeldoring tree mentioned in the story. Standing from left to right, myself (Crew Commander 23 Bravo), Cpl. Eric Prinsloo (Crew Commander 23 Charlie), Cpl. “Bossie” Boshoff (Gunner 23 Alpha), Tpr. Paul Roos (Gunner 23 Bravo), L.Cpl Brink (Driver 23 Alpha). Kneeling from left to right, Mannie (Driver 23 Charlie), L.Cpl Lennie Rogers (with a gun to his head as always) (Gunner 23 Charlie), L. Cpl “Pottie” Potgieter (Driver 23 Bravo), Tpr Riaan “Lammies” Lambert (Gunner 23), Tpr Bouwer (Driver 23), Lt. Gerard Back (Troop Leader 23), Sgt. David Gadd-Claxton (Troop Sergeant 23 Alpha). Every photo ever taken of Lennie Rogers shows that he has a gun to his head. He later took his own life and looking back now I believe this was a plea for help. At this stage Paul Roos and Lennie Rogers were both veterans of Operation Savannah, Riaan Lambert was a veteran of Operation Protea and Gerard Back was a veteran of Operation Smokeshell.