

Chapter 30 – Heavy Blows

John settled into his new role and the routine of camp life. The camaraderie of his men made his existence less boring. He'd completed six months of formal training, and when a section commander fell ill and died, David gave John a third section to manage. Two more sections, and he would control a platoon. Already, he was the camp's fitness trainer and took part in the periodic platoon commander and trainer meetings that David and Clarence ran.

News filtered through about a massacre at the Elim Mission, where ZANLA guerrillas hacked to death eight British missionaries and four children, one, a three-week-old baby. They raped four of the five women before killing them. A sixth, seriously injured woman, survived the attack, and one man hid when an African servant warned him about the guerrillas' arrival.

The details of the attack shocked John, and he snuffed out any sign of celebration amongst his men.

'We should not target women and children in this war. The male missionaries were here to help our people. It's not the message we should convey to the civilised world. There's never any excuse for barbarism.'

When John expressed the same sentiments at the leaders' meeting, Clarence was quick to criticise him. 'That is sell-out talk! In some camps, they'd beat you to death for such words.'

John wasn't about to back down. 'Are we liberators or savages? How can you justify killing children and their innocent mothers?'

'I know you lived in a white man's house. That is why you say these things. Your mother was his servant and perhaps, also his whore.'

'Don't speak of matters in which you are ignorant. Many here have mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers who have worked for white employers who treated them well.'

David stepped in to calm the heated exchange. 'Ingwe has a point. My mother works for an old white madam who she loves. When we kill, it should be the enemy soldiers. What benefit can come from killing innocent civilians?'

Another trainer joined in the discussion. 'I worked for a good boss. He helped me in many ways. I'm here because I believe we need to free our country from minority rule. I don't hate the white man, but I want us Africans to control our own destiny.'

Clarence insisted on having the final say. 'The whites need to fear us. If the women know they and their children aren't safe, they will pressure their husbands to settle with us. That way, the war will end sooner.'

The meeting ended with several of the leaders expressing conflicting opinions. John seethed at the deputy commander's comment about his mother, but was relieved to discover he was not alone in his thinking. A few of the others appeared to share his views, but the majority stayed quiet, fearing the consequences of incurring the deputy commander's wrath. They knew David focussed more on strategic matters, leaving discipline to his vindictive deputy.

John was conscious he'd further damaged his relationship with Clarence. His public disagreement with the deputy commander and David's support was enough to set off Clarence's desire for revenge. Before now, no one had challenged him in public. John's boldness gave others the courage to express their agreement, and that in the deputy commander's view threatened his authority.

A cool breeze blew in from the east as John lay on his sleeping mat, thinking about the events of the evening. Clarence could only have found out about his and his mother's home arrangements from Simba and Katunda. They must have been conspiring together. Only now did John realise how dire were his circumstances.

The Elim Mission massacre took place in the Vumba Mountains, near the Mozambique border. Commander Kutuyisa's camp wasn't too far from there, and John wondered if one of his teams carried out the senseless slaughter. He couldn't accept such happenings and resolved to leave the camp as soon as possible.

He pulled his blanket around him as the chilly wind strengthened as if a portend of approaching peril. Various avenues of escape from the camp filled his mind as sleep overcame him.

Two days after the fractious leaders' meeting, David gave John two more sections to control and raised him to the rank of platoon commander. It gave the aggrieved Clarence more reason to resent him. At the very time, John planned his departure from the camp.

Since the leaders' meeting, Clarence avoided him, so it was a surprise when, three weeks later, the deputy commander came to his tent with a smile on his face.

'See this list?' Clarence waved an official-looking piece of paper in front of John.

'What is it?'

'One of our comrades got it from a police station they burnt down in the Buhera District. It's the names of terrorists the police have on a watch list. Dissidents they are looking out for.'

John took the list, scanning the two dozen names on it. Simba's name and Takunda's were there. The others he didn't recognise, apart from the last name, his own.

'How am I on this list?'

'Who knows! Someone must have reported you. Maybe it was Simba or one of his relatives. Either way, I wouldn't like to be in your shoes if the Rhodesians caught you. You're a wanted man now.'

John's heart sank. If he somehow left the camp and returned to Rhodesia, he wouldn't be able to lead his earlier existence. It would also complicate his search for Simba, the reason he first came to the camp. How could he prove to the authorities he wasn't a real guerrilla? For now, he was stuck. He didn't go with his first two sections when they were deployed. Instead, he received two more sections to make up his numbers. David was determined to keep him in the camp.

One month later, almost exactly a year after he arrived at the camp, came news of the shooting down of the Vickers Viscount airliner, Hunyani, Air Rhodesia Flight RH825. The celebrations in the camp were muted because it was the rival ZIPRA guerrillas who downed the plane with a Russian heat-seeking missile.

The stricken plane tried to land in a cotton field close to Karoi, but a ditch at the end of the field caused the plane to cartwheel. Of the fifty-six people on board, thirty-eight died in the crash. The ZIPRA guerrillas murdered ten of the survivors. Three others hid in the bush and evaded detention, while five had left earlier to seek help. Four women, two girls aged eleven and four, and a three-week-old baby were amongst those shot and bayoneted.

In a BBC interview the next day, Joshua Nkomo, the ZAPU leader, claimed responsibility for downing Flight RH825, but denied ZIPRA slaughtered the ten survivors. He laughed about the event, and in doing so, consigned himself to a minor role in the country's future.

Nkomo had been in promising negotiations with the Rhodesian government, but after the BBC interview, the Rhodesians suspended the talks. The ZAPU leader would get no deal with the Rhodesian government and would only play a minor role in an independent Shona majority Zimbabwe.

This time, John didn't need to raise the issue at the leaders' meeting. The trainers and platoon commanders argued amongst themselves about the incident. Several bemoaned the fact it was not ZANLA that downed the plane, while a few others said the ZIPRA guerrillas were savages for slaughtering the survivors.

John caught Clarence looking in his direction. He knew the deputy commander blamed him for the disagreement between the leaders. Clarence raised his hand to silence the chatter. 'We must remain united in our resolve to bring down the white regime. We must not argue amongst ourselves. It's unfortunate those ZIPRA dogs shot down the plane. It should have been us. Our leaders must now surpass this happening with a more dramatic event.'

Unbeknown to Clarence, the ZANU-ZANLA leadership entertained those exact thoughts. A meeting at the highest level took place to discuss the matter. Those present expressed various ideas, with the most favoured being an attack on Salisbury's sewerage system. This would create a major problem for the authorities, while providing an amusing propaganda win for the guerrillas. Before the meeting closed, one participant suggested a better idea might be an attack on Salisbury's fuel storage depot.

Only days before Christmas, the guerrillas attacked the depot with rockets and tracer bullets, causing the fuel storage tanks to catch fire. The fire burnt for five days, destroying twenty-two of the twenty-eight storage tanks, accounting for a quarter of the country's fuel supply. Both ZANLA and ZIPRA claimed credit for the blaze, with Ian Smith, the Rhodesian prime minister, calling it one of the country's biggest setbacks since the war began.

John lay on his sleeping mat, mulling over recent events. A strong summer breeze drove dark, threatening clouds racing across the moonlit sky, sending ghostly shadows sweeping through the camp. The smell of rain hung heavy in the air.

To this point, John imagined the war might never finish. But now, he considered the end might be closer than he'd thought. Could the Rhodesian regime survive much longer, with world opinion behind the guerrillas? He'd need to be careful he didn't fall on the wrong side of history.

As much as he disliked being in the camp, he'd tolerate it a little longer, provided David remained in command. John was in no doubt Clarence detested him, believing he was a sell-out. He thought David liked him, but he was unaware the commander kept him in camp because he wasn't sure he could trust him. If ever Clarence became commander, he'd have to make his escape, despite his name being on the terrorist list at the Buhera District police station.

Clarence pleaded with David to let him deploy John on active service. 'You can see what a divisive influence he is. Look how our comrades argued about killing the plane crash survivors. This all started with Ingwe's nonsense about the Elim Mission massacre. Let's test his loyalty once and for all.'

'Is this because he crossed you at the leaders' meeting? If you hadn't goaded him with that comment about his mother, he wouldn't have challenged you in front of the others.'

'He's been too involved with the whites. That alone should make you suspicious about where his loyalties lie.'

'I made my decision the last time you asked me, comrade. Nothing has changed my mind since then.'

Clarence fumed as he left David's tent. He was determined to deal with Ingwe, the sellout. He needed to make a plan. But what? Perhaps if a top ZANLA commander visited the camp, he could report his suspicions to him. The leadership needed to know David was too soft about discipline. He, Clarence, would make a more suitable commander. But how could he inform the leadership without David finding out? He'd have to wait for an opportunity when the next senior commander visited.

Only two months later, ZIPRA used a Russian heat-seeking missile to bring down a second Vickers Viscount, Umniati, Air Rhodesia Flight RH827, soon after take-off from Kariba. The circumstances were similar to the downing of Flight RH825, five months earlier, but none of the fifty-nine people on board survived.

In less than nine months, Rhodesia suffered several heavy blows.

The Rhodesians were determined to punish Joshua Nkomo for targeting the two planes. Two months after the downing of Flight RH827, Rhodesian SAS soldiers entered Zambia on their way to Lusaka. They intended to assassinate Nkomo, but when they got to his house, he was gone. The Rhodesians suspected the British embassy warned him of the plan.

Meanwhile, back in Camp David, Clarence worked on building support amongst the most militant of the trainers and platoon commanders. He'd got notice of an impending visit by a top ZANLA commander. When the senior commander visited the camp, Clarence's voice would not be the only one criticising David's leadership.

For several weeks, everyone in camp had followed the news about the Rhodesian general election that would lead to the country's first black government. ZANU and ZAPU boycotted the election, and Bishop Abel Muzorewa's United African National Congress (UANC) won.

Clarence raged about the election, saying the blacks in the government were all sellouts. News that the senior ZANLA commander's visit was cancelled did nothing to improve his mood. But then, David announced he was going to Chimoio to attend

a high-level meeting of camp commanders to discuss ZANLA's reaction to the new government. In his absence, Clarence would be in charge.

This was bad news for John. Although David would only be gone for ten days, he feared what the deputy commander might do during that time. Because of their open hostility towards him, John suspected several of the trainers and platoon commanders were close to Clarence.

He had good reason to fear David's absence, for the situation was far worse than he imagined.