

Chapter 39 – The Battle of Bulawayo

David Chimbare kept John busy with several mundane tasks, which belied his glamorous sounding title of aide-de-camp to the colonel. David held a top-level position in military intelligence, which kept John's interest, despite his role not presenting him with a physical or intellectual challenge. Against the rules, David often shared top-secret information and high-level rumours with him, as they were more like friends than the usual relationship between a senior and junior officer.

The emphasis in the post-independence period was on creating the Zimbabwe National Army through amalgamating the Rhodesian, ZANLA, and ZIPRA forces. 'The ZIPRA cadres believed the army favoured ZANLA for promotion and supplies, so many deserted with their firearms. But many ZANLA cadres also deserted the army. Both groups resorted to banditry and attacks on white farmers.'

In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, the ZANLA and ZIPRA camps stood right next to each other. In November 1980, less than seven months after independence, following an inflammatory speech by the Minister of Finance, fighting broke out between the two groups. The trouble only lasted for two days, but it showed the difficulty facing the planned amalgamation of the three forces.

In a period of political and social change, John was privy to news of events, both past and planned. With his focus on the enthralling changes within the country, he neglected to contact Norah again, despite his intention to do so. He only tried to contact his mother when David told him they would go to Bulawayo on secondment to the military intelligence unit in Brady Barracks. He rang several times but got no response. Perhaps she was out, or the phone wasn't working.

John received little notice of the move. He rushed to put his things together and said goodbye to Martha and Walter, reassuring them the assignment would be short term, and he'd soon return. He hurried to Chikurubi Barracks, where he would meet David and drive him to Bulawayo in the army Land Rover. Both he and David looked forward to their first visit to Matabeleland. While David attended to formalities, John filled up the Land Rover, checked the water in the radiator, and pumped the tyres. They finally set off at two o'clock in the afternoon.

'What will we be doing in Bulawayo?' John asked.

'The government is concerned there may be a repeat of the fighting between ZANLA and ZIPRA. They want to keep a watch on the situation, and we're there to help give early warning of any signs of trouble.'

'Can't the Bulawayo people do that?'

'Yes, but they worry the commander of army intelligence in Bulawayo might favour ZIPRA, so they want us to report back on our view of the situation.'

'It's a worry that even on your level, there is distrust between the three sides.'

'It won't be easy to get the various parties to trust each other. That's why Mugabe relies on the Rhodesian forces to keep order. It's ironic he trusts them more than ZANLA.'

Despite the ubiquitous police roadblocks, they made steady progress as they passed through the small towns on the road, only stopping in Gwelo for dinner at the Midlands

Hotel. One hundred and sixty kilometres farther, on the edge of Bulawayo, they turned into Brady Barracks and stopped at the boom gate.

A serious young guard approached the Land Rover to check their credentials, before returning to the guardroom to call the corporal in charge.

The corporal saluted David. 'Evening, Sir. The colonel has left for the evening, but we were expecting you. Your room is at the officers' quarters—it was the last one available. Unfortunately, we weren't aware you'd be travelling with your aide-de-camp, and there are no more free rooms. If you hold on, I'll check if there's something available in the NCOs' quarters.'

After a few moments, the corporal returned. 'You're in luck. Sergeant du Toit has vacated his room, so the lieutenant can have that one. I'll show you the way.'

The corporal hopped into the back seat of the Land Rover and guided John to the officers' lines. David climbed out and retrieved his rucksack before turning to John. 'Meet me in the officers' mess for a drink in half an hour.'

John drove on to the NCOs' quarters. After getting directions to the officers' mess, he thanked the corporal and climbed the three steps to his room. The heavy key clicked open the lock, and he entered the cramped space. The stale air reminded him of Isaak's hut at the foot of the mountain on the Mozambique border. How long since Sergeant du Toit vacated this room?

John flicked the light switch by the door, and the dull incandescent bulb presented him with a stark room. No lamp graced the bedside table, so Sergeant du Toit was clearly not a reader. The thin mattress on the single bed hid the groaning springs that supported it. The corporal assured him the bed linen was fresh, and in the dim light, he could only trust the man was correct.

He put his things away in the narrow cupboard, brushed his teeth, and rinsed his face in the washbasin in the corner. There was no ensuite for NCOs. He'd forgotten to ask the corporal about the toilet block, but guessed it wouldn't be too hard to find. After checking his appearance in the faded mirror above the basin, John walked to find the officers' mess.

Quiet, everything was so quiet. A Monday evening, and the officers' mess looked almost deserted apart from David, who waited for him at the bar. Two white officers sat in armchairs in a corner of the room. They ignored the newcomers, but the bartender was friendly enough, and David ordered two Lion Lagers.

'Well, this isn't the party night I expected,' said David. 'If things don't improve tomorrow evening, we'll have to find our entertainment in the city.'

After the long drive from Salisbury, the cold beer soothed John's dry throat.

'So, what's the programme for tomorrow?'

'We'll meet the commanding officer tomorrow morning and take it from there.'

At breakfast, David and John introduced themselves to the four officers eating in the mess. There was no sign of the two officers who ignored them the previous evening. A bowl of ProNutro mixed with cornflakes, followed by fried eggs and bacon, and a steaming cup of tea, set them up for the day. After returning to their quarters to brush their teeth, they walked to the administration block.

It turned out David knew the commanding officer from the meetings in Harare. He was an amiable fellow, and after another cup of tea, he offered to show David and John around the

barracks. They stepped out of the administration block and walked past the classrooms and the signal trainees' barracks on the left. Farther along, on the right, stood the signals centre with its radio mast, and beyond that lay the high-ceilinged army intelligence building. David was interested in that building because he'd be working there during his stay in Bulawayo.

'Apart from the school of signals and military intelligence, we also train the engineers here, and there's also the detention barracks where we train the military police,' said the commander.

'Can we have a quick look inside the intelligence building?' David asked.

Although John was David's aide-de-camp, he wasn't in military intelligence, so he couldn't go with them into the building. He walked across the open ground that fronted the signals centre and stood in the shade of a large tree growing near the signal trainees' barrack room. Despite the recent rains in Bulawayo, the bright morning was comfortable and less humid than Salisbury.

Brady Barracks had an air of quiet organisation, though the Bush War was not long past. John saw none of the usual chaos he associated with the army barracks he'd seen in Salisbury. Looking down the deserted road past the administration block, and down towards the barracks' entrance, only the guard at the boom gate was visible. An occasional soldier turning up for duty, or walking between buildings, was all that broke the monotony.

David's return interrupted John's contemplation of his surroundings. 'After lunch, I'll be working in the intelligence building. While I'm busy, go into the city and check it out.'

Well, that sounded a lot more interesting than hanging around the barracks.

Lunch was a passable meal of bream, boiled potatoes, peas, and carrots. In the company of other officers in the mess, John needed to remember to call David, sir, in line with military protocols. As their friendship grew, they'd slipped into calling each other by their first names, but Rhodesian Army discipline prevailed in the amalgamation process.

At two o'clock, following lunch, David returned to the intelligence building, and John hopped into the Land Rover and drove to the barrack exit. Now, several soldiers walked along the road towards the boom gate. He'd caught a change of shift, with signalmen and others going off duty. On the road opposite the boom gate, two young soldiers were thumbing a ride to the city, and John offered them a lift.

It was a short drive into Bulawayo's CBD, where he dropped off the young men by the Grey's Inn, near Selborne Avenue. On the way, he'd discovered the young soldiers were Ndebele, training to become signallers. John parked the Land Rover on 8th Avenue near the Haddon and Sly department store. The streets looked busy with traffic, though quieter than Salisbury. Pedestrians crowded the pavements. As far as he could tell, Bulawayo's atmosphere was relaxed. The civilian population appeared to be going about its business as normal, with no obvious signs of tension following the November clashes.

Later, back in the officers' mess after dinner, David and John found a quiet corner to chat. David listened to John's impressions about the atmosphere in the city before enlightening him with what he'd learnt in the intelligence centre.

'The civilians may be relaxed about things because it's two months since the November clashes between ZANLA and ZIPRA, but military intelligence is concerned about a repeat of the clashes. The Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) have set up operational headquarters in Entumbane in a beerhall overlooking the ZANLA and ZIPRA camps. It's surrounded by a

six-foot wall, so they've nick-named it The Alamo. There's a genuine concern the ZIPRA forces at the Gwaai River Mine and at Essexvale might try to combine and join in any future clashes. The RAR have set up observation posts on the roads leading into Bulawayo.'

'If more clashes break out between ZANLA and ZIPRA at Entumbane, will the RAR in the Alamo be able to stop it?'

'I doubt it. ZANLA and ZIPRA each have about fifteen hundred men, three thousand in total. The RAR at the Alamo has fewer than one hundred, and a further four hundred are based at Methuen Barracks. Between them, they have four Eland armoured cars at their disposal.'

On *eighth February 1981*, the officers' mess was abuzz with news. ZANLA cadres at Connemara Barracks in Gwelo carried out a surprise attack on the ZIPRA contingent, killing several and driving the others into the surrounding bush.

David was concerned. 'John, you better not go into the city today. This latest clash is bound to lead to trouble. If any ZIPRA in the city recognises you're a Shona, you could be in danger. I'll be busy in the intelligence centre, so it'll be a boring day for you. I'm sorry about that. One of those books in the officers' mess might be interesting.'

Apart from a quick lunch when he caught up with David, it was an otherwise boring day for John. He wondered if this would be the pattern for his visit to Brady Barracks. Despite David's suggestion to keep away from town, he jumped into the Land Rover and drove into the city. Everything looked peaceful enough. Perhaps the trouble in Gwelo wouldn't stir things up in Bulawayo.

Following dinner that evening, David was called to the intelligence centre. Something was stirring.

At breakfast the next morning, David filled John in on the previous night's happenings.

'I told you there'd be trouble. When they heard about the clashes in Gwelo, ZIPRA launched a revenge attack on ZANLA at the Entumbane camp. They killed several and chased off the rest. The RAR restored order by driving their Eland armoured cars through the ZIPRA camp, clearing the way for a company of RAR soldiers. They killed a dozen and captured many more.'

'Will that be the end of it?'

'Military intelligence isn't too hopeful about that. The entire process of integrating ZANLA and ZIPRA into the National Army is so fragile, they think there'll be more trouble.' Over the next couple of days, ZIPRA numbers swelled as they smuggled arms into their camp.

On *eleventh February*, fighting broke out between ZANLA and ZIPRA members of a Zimbabwe National Army battalion at Ntabazinduna. Meanwhile, at Entumbane, the two rival groups exchanged fire with rifles, machine guns, and mortars. They also attacked the Alamo, where the defending RAR soldiers stood on the vehicles lined up behind the wall surrounding the beerhall.

At Brady Barracks, John heard the engines and clanking of trucks on the neighbouring abandoned airfield and went to investigate. He stood at the perimeter of the barracks, watching the vehicles and men preparing for action. A few moments later, David arrived.

'I thought I'd find you here. They're mobilising the RAR battalion. We're advised ZIPRA armoured vehicles are on their way from Essexvale. The National Army is desperate to

prevent them from linking up with the ZIPRA forces at the Gwaai River Mine. They're sending the Eland armoured cars to intercept them.'

'I wouldn't mind joining them, instead of just being a spectator.'

'Well, that's military intelligence, John. We are part information gathers and part desk job. We don't risk our resources on participating in action.'

'Yes, but I'm not really military intelligence, am I?'

At Entumbane, ZIPRA overran the ZANLA camp. Those who weren't killed fled, and sporadic fighting spread into the city.

In the early hours of *twelfth February*, on the Essexvale Road, near the Bulawayo General Hospital, the Eland armoured cars ambushed ZIPRA's armoured personnel carriers, destroying them and killing most of the occupants.

Bulawayans struggled to find sleep that night as the sound of gunfire and explosions reverberated through the city, and tracer bullets lit up the sky like a celebratory fireworks display. The Bulawayo Chronicle's front page featured a photo of the night sky.

At the Alamo, the ammunition supplies were running low as the ZIPRA attackers pounded the complex with bullets and rocket-propelled grenades. An RAR relief column reached the Alamo at lunchtime, and the ZIPRA and ZANLA attackers withdrew. The Eland armoured cars drove on to Essexvale, where the ZIPRA force surrendered, ending the rebellion. It was later discovered, ZIPRA's Russian T-34 tanks were inoperable.

Everybody felt relieved. The threat of a civil war had been averted. That evening was the busiest John and David saw in the officers' mess. Cheers and backslapping filled the room as the drinks flowed. Even the two officers who ignored them on their first evening were amiable.

John left the officers' mess later than usual that night. He said goodnight to David and walked to his room in the NCOs' quarters. With no lighting, his eyes grew accustomed to the dark. As he approached his room, he stopped, and the hairs rose on the back of his neck. There, on his top step, he could make out a small bundle of sticks wrapped in knotted string, a clear warning of evil intent. Someone might have consulted an n'anga (witch doctor) to put a spell on him. If so, who and why? He didn't believe in traditional witchcraft, but then, why take chances? John kicked away the offending item and hurried into his room.

He'd not mentioned his ZANLA connections to anyone, and as far as he knew, neither had David. But any Ndebele would have recognised their Shona heritage. His only contacts were the two young soldiers he'd driven into the city, the guards at the boom gate, and the bartender in the mess. As he lay on his bed, pondering the situation and wondering who was responsible, he heard a heavy thud on his door. He jumped up and raced to open it. No one! Then, he noticed the cleaver buried in the wooden doorframe.