

ZAMBEZI TOOK A SHARE

By R.M.T. Ngqungwana

The Zambezi flowed quietly, meandering towards the Indian Ocean, as we emerged from a gulley. Looking straight across, the water was not visible. Only when you turned and looked across at an angle was it seen, a dim sparkle that seemed static. All round prevailed a dignified tranquility.

Far over the river could be seen dimly, the escarpment silhouetted against a dark horizon. A hippo gave out a cry, apparently sensing a presence that he deemed intrusive. Or it could have been a warning that the river had its own ways of unco-operation that we had to beware of; only we could not then know.

We retraced our steps so as to walk covered by a hillock and not be visible from the river or from across it. We walked eastwards, parallel with the river for a short distance.

As we emerged to an opening we were challenged by a muffled voice:

"Lizwe"?

"Lilo", our scout answered.

A shadow rose up from the ground and leaned against a tree and beckoned. We moved forward slowly. We had arrived at "Point LOLO" — the point from which we would cross the river into Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

The first man to approach us was Boston Gagarin. He was recognisable only by his stature and his gait. Otherwise Boston was just indistinguishable from the darkness, being very dark himself and short into the bargain. A jovial little chappie who was a wizard in softball back in Kongwa, I do not remember ever seeing him sulky.

Boston was already in his swimming trunk. He was the leader of the "Frog Men", as it were, of the HQ Reconnaissance Group. Reccy was detailed to cross and lead us to Base One, roughly twenty-five kilometres from the river, from where we would be on our own devices.

For days before this night we had been carting materials from a point where our vehicles stopped. Now everything was ready. We were crossing and we were excited.

After consultation with DD the raft was dragged from under a bush to the river shore. The

raft had been manufactured by the "Frog men." Six drums placed in twos' and planks nailed together and placed on top of the sheets and nails. On top of the planks was placed the load.

I was busy with the men, checking their personal equipment and haversacks, giving last instructions on order of movement and did not pay attention to the loading. It struck me that the loading was taking rather too long so I went to investigate and found, to my consternation, that everything we had was on that raft.

I remonstrated with the men but was informed that it had been DD's order to load everything. I went in search of him and found him together with ZAPU's Chief of Operations, both under a bush. DD remained adamant that all sixty-one boxes of ammunition should be on that first load.

"Comrade I disagree. We can't take everything we have in one load. There are sixty one boxes of ammunition, ten bags with guns (each bag containing eight guns) and a box of explosives. I cannot agree to that. What if the enemy appears when we are in the middle of the river? We won't be able to save the guns."

He was unmoved. "Comrade I have noticed that your problem is that you do not trust in the work of others. This place has been well reconnoitred. No enemy will appear".

I wanted to ask if the man had a working arrangement with the men in Salisbury, now Harare, but I was baulked by those words, "not trust in the work of others". Besides I had had some arguments with the man before, about some silly maps they gave me - they were surveyors maps printed in 1942. Out of the thirty-six of the advanced Group or the Sipolilo Company (which was part of the Luthuli Detachment) only seven of us were older than those maps. There were two of those maps.

The man was so cocksure that he even shouted over me, from where he was: "Right, carry on". Man, I even saw the echo of his words cutting the river into Rhosesia. I saw it, not heard it.

Without saying anything fur-

ther I about turned and went to the shore. "Comrade Chief (the Cuban-trained Zapu men were exasperating about their 'Chief' business) why don't you contact the other man that side and ask him not to start the fray while we are in the drink. It will not be fair, it will not be the fairness that the English are ever boastful of. I mean I can't imagine how I can fight and swim and carry all that load..."

"Vundle, shut up", I said.

A long thick rope was tied to the raft and the other end to a tree behind. It was pushed into the water. A few metres from the bank five men boarded the thing. Boston swam alongside, guiding the raft by muscle power.

We, behind, paid in the rope, slowly. We had to assist in controlling the raft by not allowing it to move fast.

Whhoosh-whoosh-whoosh, the thing moved in, slowly, out of visibility. It reached the middle of the river where now the current was strong and fast.

Then things happened. Boston's voice pierced the tranquility from the middle of the river.

"Hee, Dontsa, Baphel'abantu, dontsa" (Pull, men are doomed, pull).

"Heyi, pull men, pull. Fast, pull", I urged.

With all the power we had we pulled back the raft. It was now heavier, as if the thing had submerged already. We pulled.

Guluva (David Sibiya) one of the frog men, came running from behind, holding a small boat aloft, above his head. When he reached the water he made a swift dive in which the boat landed on the water before his body fell into it. Guluva was nimble, acrobatic and fearless.

The strong rowings he had reached the raft; the third made him pass it. Then he dived out of the boat and swam eastwards, leaving the boat behind. It was only then that I noticed someone struggling in the water. It was Robert Moyo, a mature man from Gwanda, South of Bulawayo. Moyo had tied his boots by his laces and slung them over his shoulder. He was now being pushed by the current to Mozambique and beyond. Moyo had never swam in his life.



BOSTON'S VOICE PIERCED THE TRANQUILITY FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE RIVER. "PULL, MEN ARE DOOMED, PULL!"

Guluva dragged him back and reached another one who was rolling in the water. Mlalazi, of our Group's Reconnaissance, had last swam when he was still a toddler. He was now roughly twenty-six. When Guluva reached the boat he had a man in each arm. He headed them both into it and pushed it. I was wondering why he did not board the thing and paddle when I noticed that there was another man in the water, who also had difficulty staying square above the water—he kept on going down head first.

"Pull, men, pull," I urged. I was panicking. We tugged. Boston was busy swimming around the listing raft, pushing and helping the two men who had held on to the thing.

We pulled, breathing hard. It was just my luck to have chosen exactly men who had never made it their business to learn swimming. Like a fool I had not even tried to look for men who could swim, at least for the first crossing.

The small boat could carry only three men and so Guluva remained in the water, pushing the boat to the shore, slantwise against the current. I wondered why he did not cut straight. It was only the following morning when I noticed that there were boulders that he had been avoiding.

Slowly the raft approached; Boston was still busy, pushing the raft encouraging the men not to despair.

We pulled. The thing was heavy. It reached the shore at last. We unloaded what had remained - one bag of guns. Later we discovered that this was the bag in which we had put the only tin we had of detonating capsules.

Guluva and his men reached the shore. The boy looked as if he had just gone for a short swim in a Municipality Swimming Pool, where the deepest point was seven feet.

We carried all into the bushes, boat and raft.

The current had prised loose one of the drums and the raft had capsized after the drum had swum away into the Indian Ocean.

All sixty-one boxes of ammunition (45,750 rounds) seventy-two guns, fifty kilograms of explosives, a few odds and ends like ropes, torches, picks, spades, saws, etc, went into the drink. They are still there for all I know.

The bag that had escaped the ditching was because it had held on a nail. The bag contained the old Italian Beretta rifles you know, the lousy arrar that kicks your collar-bone recoiling after every shot. AK's, Papashas, Checkoslovakian She's,

Soviet DP's, Bazookas, SKS's the lot, fell into the river.

This was on the 28th December 1967. We had to move back, away from the river. Fortunately the MK Commander-in-Chief and the ZAPU Chief-Of-Operations were around. We reported the disaster and I put in a word that I would linger no more near the river. We would cross the following night as I feared to be discovered before we had crossed.

We had our personal arms and ammunition. The load we had lost had been destined for new recruits inside the country. So arms could be brought to us in the country later on.

The C-In-C did not voice objections and the Chief of Operations supported my stand. It was the Security Chief, DD, who attempted to raise objections. A red-eyed glare silenced him. Really the man had cheek. His argument was not based from a security point of view but that the whole Sipolilo operation was based on our recruiting, training and arming the new cadres. A few pungent words that were not complimentary silenced him. We crossed on the night of the 29th December, 1967 and were thirty kilometres inside the country - Rhodesia - by 06.00 hrs of the 30th when we camped.