

ONE

The sign read: INHAMINGA – VILA FONTES. It gave the distances to these tiny villages in kilometres in blistered white paint on a split plank. It did not, however, say that, short of leaving the country altogether, this was the only road that linked Lourenço Marques and Beira with the substantial towns of Quelimane and Porto Amelia, not to mention a mass of smaller towns and villages. Possibly, the reason was that there are times of the year when one was lucky to even reach Inhaminga without four-wheel drive. When the rains have begun, the Zambezi is in flood. The floodplains of the lower Rift Valley are a quagmire and every depression in the sandy road a small lake. Then it would be of no consequence what the sign read because anyone who had reason to move in the area would go by train. Or fly.

The names on the sign meant nothing to the two men in the grey Landrover truck. They could not have pronounced them even had they tried. The sign itself, however, and the road it indicated were of vital importance. The driver slowed and pulled up on the verge just beyond the turn off. A six-berth caravan swayed and rocked behind it.

"It's in that quarter behind us, Stan. Let's stroll casually over it and see where we can get the Landy in." The passenger spoke over the cigarette that he was lighting.

The driver muttered, "Kay, Sir," as he flipped open his door and got out, stiffly.

The passenger watched Stan, six-foot-six and broad with it, as he passed the sign and walked with even paces back down the main

road, muttering the count under his breath. At "three hundred" he stopped and did a few knee-bends. He would be noting a marker to use as a bearing to right-angle off the road. Sighing loudly, the passenger watched, flinging his arms back and back as if to remove some stiffness from them. The sun was setting straight down the road, purpling the tarmac. It glinted off a distant bicycle but otherwise there was nobody about. The grass on the quarter that they were interested in was burned in patches but a lot remained, taller than Stan's head as he left the road and disappeared.

Now the passenger stepped over the storm water contour, moving quickly away from the road. By good fortune he found a track that seemed to be heading in the right direction. He marked it with a knot of grass. He winced as the spears of grass seeds wriggled through his clothes and some of them pierced the tender skin of his crotch and belly as he followed the overgrown track. He could hear Stan whistling loudly in the semi-dark to guide him, but he nearly fell into an excavation that suddenly appeared. He skirted it. Soon he reached Stan and stood hunched, pulling grass seeds from his calf-length socks.

"There's an old quarry back there that we'll have to skirt," he jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "But the track leading to it will be quite a help. I've marked it for you. It ends in a clearing where the loading lorries must have waited at the edge of the quarry. Sand for the road, about two years ago, I'd say."

"Funny they didn't mention it," Stan said. He snorted, "Still, they were right about the sand. They had to be, only giving us a hand auger, Sir." The other man smiled tightly. Orders were always given by 'they', all grumbles directed at 'them', always 'their' fault.

"It's not Sir, it's Bill, for Christ's sake. Now unhitch the Rover," he said, "after you've pulled the caravan up the track to the clearing.

Don't be too sneaky, just as if you're camping here for a few hours' kip on our way to Beira. Then bring the Rover here."

"Oh, we are going on to Beira, then? Nice to know," Stan said, sardonically, as he set off.

Bill watched him in the twilight: the broad-set shoulders too square, the pace too measured, the fists with the thumbs set tight on the forefinger. He knew that his own posture would be similar unless he concentrated on relaxing, even slouching. He smiled. Their short hair, too, was a giveaway in this age of shaggy styles, even in Africa. Though both wore shorts and coloured shirts, any keen observer would guess that they were military: Rhodesian or South African. They were in fact Rhodesian Special Air Services men; a lieutenant and a sergeant, both with A-grade security ratings. Both had been recalled from Border duty, on the very Border they had crossed less than three hours ago as tourists, for a quick, thorough briefing in Salisbury. They were still trying to get used to calling each other Bill and Stan.

Bill waited, still plucking spear grass from his socks. The trees around him were now mere silhouettes. He saw that they were mostly *M'sasa* like ones near his home in Salisbury. He knew they covered quite a lot of Rhodesia but had not realised one found them so far east. He had only been to Mozambique twice before, as a child with his parents; each time a week in Beira, travelling in on this same road. But that had been more than ten years ago, back in sixty-one. He couldn't remember having enjoyed it much; they'd camped near the shipwreck on the beach. The mosquitoes had been bad both times, and the sea dirty.

He heard the Landrover start up, back, come up the sand road and turn into the track. He heard it stop at the clearing and he assumed the sergeant was unhitching the caravan. He had wondered if they should have the caravan at the auger site but then decided it

would look less suspicious in the clearing than it would in the bush. Not that they were likely to be seen; there was not much traffic after dark, they had been told, as this was a road where terrorists machine-gunned passing vehicles from time to time. Here, at this spot, only six kilometres from the town of Dondo, it was safe enough.

After unhitching, Stan ploughed the Landrover through the bush, back to the place where Bill stood.

"Turn it around," Bill instructed as he got in. "It's just to mark the spot. We'll have some *skof* and come back with the auger later." Bill decided a beer would do no harm even though their job had hardly begun. He reached behind the Landrover seat for a couple of cans that they had bought in Vila Machado on their way down. There were a dozen, each individually wrapped in newspaper to keep them cold. The store owner had done it without their asking; it was a country that respected cold beer.

After a supper of tinned sausages and fried eggs, Bill said, "Well, Stan let's go build a bog."

"Oh, yes," said the sergeant, "the long drop. We wouldn't want to foul this lovely country."

Amongst the caravan tent poles were four lengths that had never supported any tent. Under the single bunk, wrapped in blankets, was a thirty centimetre bare auger head: a cylinder open at both ends except for the shaft-supports on one end and the two teeth on the other. These parts, a spade and *panga* knife were the items they shared out and carried back to the spot they had marked. They also carried a Coleman pressure lamp and a toilet roll. Stan cleared the place of grass tussocks with the spade, while Bill fitted the first shaft to the auger head. It had a ring at the top into which he put a one metre steel rod. He put the teeth to the ground then turned the rod experimentally. They had drilled a three metre hole in heavier

textured material in Salisbury, three days ago, with a similar auger. It had taken them forty minutes. Without mentioning it, they were both listening for the sound of traffic. Some fifteen vehicles had passed on the main road since they had stopped: two on the side road. But it had decreased with the fall of dark.

The auger bit into the topsoil: organic dark for the upper ten centimetres, becoming paler with depth. The auger head filled before it had half disappeared. They shook it out at the edge of the hole and put it back. Each man had an end of the crossbar; they walked around with it, leaning on it to penetrate. They were nearing the limit of the first section when they heard a particularly loud diesel truck stopping. It had been coming down the road towards Dondo. The engine beat hesitated, roaring as the driver changed down and then down again, followed by the squeal of brakes. It had gone past, now it was being backed up. The two S. A. S. men hauled up the auger, hurriedly pushing the parts into the bush.

"Drop your rods and squat," hissed the lieutenant. Stan loosened his shorts, whipped them down and hunkered over the auger hole. Bill tried to level the sand taken from it. There came a muttering of voices from the road but no sound of anyone pushing into the bush. Someone shouted.

"D'you think it's troops?" whispered Stan, getting gooseflesh on his bottom, along with several mosquito bites.

"I hope they are, rather than police," the lieutenant replied, then he shouted back. "Who the hell is that? Why don't you all piss off?"

There was a muttering of "*Inglês, Inglês.*" Then one shouted. "Are you English tourists?" in Portuguese, but since this sounds much the same in English, the two were able to understand.

"No, we are Rhodesian tourists," yelled Bill indignantly. "Not bloody English. Rhodesia."

"Ah," came the shouted reply, "Ian Smith." There was laughter and a brief consultation. "Good night, Ian Smith, good sleep." More laughter at someone's limited English. It faded. Later the diesel started up and moved off. Stan pulled his pants up.

"Silly bastards were too scared to come and see for themselves."

Bill shrugged. "Most of them come from Portugal and have no interest in this country; conscripts who can't wait to get back home."

"Do you think Portugal will lose Mozambique, Sir? I mean, Bill." Stan reached after the auger pieces, then stood scratching the mosquito bites through his shorts.

"At the rate they're fighting this war, yes. But I feel sorry for the Mozambicans when it goes." He meant the white Portuguese in Mozambique, some of them third or fourth generation settlers, and anybody else that had resisted Frelimo.

"And to them it is a war, isn't it?" Stan assembled the auger. "We use names like 'Border duty' or 'Insurgents' or 'terrorist infiltration defence'. We haven't got around to calling it 'the war'. Yet."

"We will. Let's get on with it. The mozzies are dragging me away," Bill said. They bent to the auger. In twenty minutes it was done. Three metres deep. They hefted the equipment, returning to the caravan. Under one of the bunks they uncovered a cardboard box. In the box was a steel reinforcing sheet. The box measured a metre by sixty centimetres. It was open at the end and seemed to contain plates, pots, pans, vegetables and meals in cans, and cutlery. Stan kept watch on the caravan step with a beer in his hand while Bill unpacked the food, exposing two cylinders that looked like cooking gas bottles. They even had a popular brand name on their sides.

"Okay, give me a hand will you?" The box weighed nearly seventy kilograms with its contents, which would have fallen out of the

bottom had it not been especially strengthened. They staggered over the stumps and sticks, up the track they had made with the Landrover, to the auger hole.

"Bloody peculiar toilet roll we have this time," muttered Stan. They kept looking about for signs of anyone else about, knowing that they would have a lot of explaining to do if they were seen. They put the box down at the hole, then listened. Nothing but the buzz of mosquitoes.

Bill fitted a three-quarter inch steel plate to the bottom of the smaller cylinder, which seemed to be of two sections screwed together under a collar. To fit into the top of the cylinder was another steel plate, saucer shaped, which cupped underneath the larger cylinder. Assembled, the unit was nearly two metres long. Bill attached a cord to the nose, then they lowered it gently into the auger hole which it fitted neatly. Bill dropped the cord in after it. Then they pushed the sand into the hole on top of the cylinders, lastly a layer of the dark topsoil and a tussock of grass. Bill and Stan went off to finish the beers.

Less than eight months later the Portuguese built an army barracks over the spot. No foundation went that deep but it was fortunate that the latrine pits were not dug precisely there.

Bill and Stan had a pleasant weekend in Beira. The sea was clean and there seemed to be no mosquitoes. On Sunday evening they were returning home when the Landrover broke down between Beira and Dondo. Fortunately there was an army barracks nearby. They got permission, when they could find someone who spoke English, to camp in the bush near the outer fence of the barracks. They rigged the tent to the caravan. They augured in the tent, at a slight angle, pointing to the barracks and assembled a second set of cylinders. Sliding this into the hole, they buried it. The following day they were back in Salisbury.

During that fortnight thirty caravans were employed by South African and Rhodesian personnel for similar operations from Lourenço Marques to Porto Amelia. Each team had been briefed separately and was unaware of the others. Also some fifty-five offices, warehouses, store-rooms, houses, flats and shops were rented in the major towns and cities throughout the country. This was done over the following year, very discreetly, by individuals and small companies. Each of these buildings was situated near a barrack, military headquarters, government workshop or military supply dump. In each, one or more sets of cylinders were concealed; either in the ground or in the new cement work, in places that would be unlikely to be disturbed.

Six South Africans and four Rhodesians, all of high rank, were fully aware of all the details of "Operation Insurance." All had the highest security ratings. One officer amongst them was to prove that his rating was undeserved.

