



Pathfinder Company: 44 Parachute Brigade 'The Philistines'

Graham Gilmore

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Colonel Jan Breytenbach writes in the foreword: “On Ascension Day, 1978, a composite South African parachute battalion jumped onto the tactical HQ of SWAPO’s PLAN army, based at Cassinga, 250 kilometres north of the Angolan border to destroy the facility, their logistics, and to wipe out a strong concentration of SWAPO guerrillas. The airborne assault, part of Operation Reindeer, was an unqualified success; the whole base was destroyed. 608 PLAN fighters were killed, with many more wounded which pushed the final SWAPO death toll to well over a thousand. We lost only four paratroopers killed in action plus a dozen or so wounded. According to airborne experts in Britain and Australia, this was the most audacious parachute assault since the Second World War; the mounting airfield was well over 1,000 nautical miles away. I was the commander of that airborne assault, which although successful above all expectations, also highlighted many shortcomings, some of which nearly led to a disastrous outcome.”

44 Parachute Brigade was formed later that year, with the need for a specialist Pathfinder Company patently clear. Into the ranks came professional veterans from the UK, USA, Australasia, Rhodesia and elsewhere, from such Special Forces units as the SAS, Selous Scouts and the RLI. “This is their book, a collection of stories about the founding and deployment of a unit of ‘Foreign Legionnaires’, from different parts of the world who became welded together into a remarkable combat unit, unsurpassed by any other South African Defence Force unit in their positive and aggressive approach to battle. For me it was an honor to have faced incoming lead together with them.”

Graham Gilmore enjoys country life in the natural beauty of East Anglia and the Fens but was born a Londoner in 1952. An innate fascination with history and all things military inevitably led him to joining the Grenadier Guards, and for six months the Guards Depot drilled into him soldiering skills of the highest standard. Graham left the British Army in 1977 to join the Rhodesian Light Infantry in their war to prevent communist guerrillas overthrowing the country. After two years as the signals rep to Support Commando, 1RLI, Graham was promoted to Signals Troop Sergeant, but with the fall of Rhodesia to the Marxists in 1980, he moved to South Africa to continue the anti-terrorist fight with the Pathfinder Company, 44 Parachute Brigade. He returned to England still on crutches after being wounded in Angola and joined the Territorial Army. After a career in VIP security Graham is now a leading member of the Victorian Military Society for whom he runs The Diehard Company, an internationally renowned reenactment group. He advises and writes articles on the British Army on Home Service and on campaign during Queen Victoria’s reign.

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