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Memoirs of Anthony Richard Turton***

Anthills and Airfields

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The assault moves in under cover of darkness. My troop is to the left of the axis of advance, careful to avoid the wetland that we know exists at the far end of the runway which is our designated primary target. We navigate off the burning tower, so as to keep the radio net clear for more urgent traffic. The driver knows what to do as he synchronises his actions with the Crew Commander and gunner.

“Alpha Group move now, out!” comes the command over the network.

That is us, so we move, careful not to advance faster than the vehicles on each side of us, the driver navigating through his periscopes off the burning tower visible in the clear night air. As we move, the Bravo Group is stationary alongside, laying down covering fire of both 90 HE and Browning.

“Bravo Group move now, out”, comes the order from the Squadron Commander. Silently the well trained crew stops in position, the driver looking for cover as appropriate to present the lowest possible profile for an RPG counter-attack, the gunner laying down long bursts of co-axial Browning, the machine gun shuddering to life in front of the Crew Commander who feeds in new belts of ammo as needed, but punctuated by 90 HE as the Bravo Group leapfrogs past us to a tactical bound between us and the target.

“Alpha Group move now, out”, and we are again on the move protected by the covering fire being laid down alongside our axis of advance.

Suddenly the vehicle slews to the left and the engine races, our wheels losing traction on the rough ground.

“What happened?” I ask into the battle comms.

“Dunno”, comes the terse reply as the driver engages reverse and guns the engine.

The vehicle tilts violently to one side, like a tortoise losing its balance. We cannot move forward or back and we all know that being stationary means we are as good as dead.

I order the gunner out of the turret to take a look while I monitor the radio net ready to call for support if need be. He unplugs his curly cord and jumps out of his hatch, onto the ground. Seconds later he is back.

“We have hit an ant hill and all four wheels are off the ground”.

“Shit”...

And so the attack goes on, disappearing into the distance, leaving us to our sorry plight. Surrounded by darkness and in eerie silence we ponder our fate as we try to dislodge ourselves from the ant hill. A recovery Ratel arrives and the Tiffies drag us

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off, but in the process the shackle breaks and we need to repeat the exercise. Eventually we are free and we rejoin the Combat Team, now busy with the final assault.

The next day the Squadron unwinds as they start to recall the different incidents that made up the complex whole of what it was that they had just collectively experienced, bursting into song after each story is presented ...

“Sakke, sakke vol dagga,
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,
Jy is my meisie,
Ry ons op die trein...

As jy kan sleep,
Soos ek kan sleep,
Dan sleep ons tot die shackle breek,
Of course yes,
Oh yes of course yes...”

Laughter ripples across the sea of soldiers celebrating life as only soldiers can ... and the chorus erupts with renewed vigour. Not to be outdone, a gunner recounts how fast his crew commander could change the ammo boxes feeding the co-axial Browning, a particularly difficult task given the small space in which to move, which gives rise to the next round of banter.

“Sakke, sakke vol dagga,
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,
Jy is my meisie,
Ry ons op die trein...

As jy kan laai,
Soos ek kan laai,
Dan laai ons sonder geen bohaai,
Of course yes,
Oh yes of course yes...”

The spirits soar as the singing gets competitive when someone recounts how, during all the shooting, the water supply was damaged by shrapnel from a 90 HE round, causing an unanticipated fountain in the midst of the carnage.

“Sakke, sakke vol dagga,
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,
Jy is my meisie,
Ry ons op die trein...

As jy kan skiet,
Soos ek kan skiet,
Dan skiet ons tot die water giet,
Of course yes,
Oh yes of course yes...”

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Now the focus turns to a specific gunner, who according to his crew commander hit every target he was assigned with one single shot of the 90, attesting to his accurate aim. Another soldier translates this into lyrics and lets rip with ...

“Sakke, sakke vol dagga,
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,
Jy is my meisie,
Ry ons op die trein...”

As jy kan mik,
Soos ek kan mik,
Dan maak jy mos ‘n groot indruk,
Of course yes,
Oh yes of course yes...”

Attention now shifts to the combat engineers whose clearing of the bunkers with high explosives impressed someone.

“Sakke, sakke vol dagga,
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,
Jy is my meisie,
Ry ons op die trein...”

As jy kan skiet,
Soos ek kan skiet,
Dan skiet jy mos met dinamiet,
Of course yes,
Oh yes of course yes...”

Every team has its resident complainer who is never satisfied with the logistics, particularly the food, and he now comes up for a group ragging.

“Sakke, sakke vol dagga,
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,
Jy is my meisie,
Ry ons op die trein...”

As jy kan kla,
Soos Piet kan kla,
Ons jag jou weg met die koswa,
Of course yes,
Oh yes of course yes...”

Not to be outdone, the next soldier volunteers a story about how he is missing his girlfriend and cannot wait to get back home. The mood of the group changes palpably as someone in the crowd starts the next round of singing ...

“Sakke, sakke vol dagga,
Kanne, kanne vol wyn,

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Jy is my meisie,
Ry ons op die trein...

As jy kan vry,
Soos ek kan vry,
Dan vry ons tot ons blisters kry,
Of course yes,
Oh yes of course yes..."

And thus the process of bonding is cemented, with cordite, humour, song and camaraderie shared by a cohort of men far from home, who have all experienced stress and disjointedness that civilians will never understand.