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The Saints: The Rhodesian Light Infantry

Alexandre Binda, Chris Cocks

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We've seen the stories of the more 'glamorous' Selous Scouts, the SAS and the Rhodesian Air Force, but very little about the RLI, often underrated, but arguably one of the most effective counter-insurgency units of all time. This was the unit that brought the 'Fireforce' concept to the world's attention?the devastatingly ruthless airborne envelopment and annihilation of a guerrilla enemy. Dubbed "The Killing Machine" by Charles D. Melson, chief historian of the US Marine Corps, the RLI was a veritable 'foreign legion' with over 20 diverse nationalities serving in her ranks.

The RLI, a truly international airborne battalion, fought the bitter Zimbabwean 'bush war' for 15 years, against the overwhelming tide of communist-trained guerrillas. Kill rates don't win wars, but during its brief 19-year history, it is estimated that the RLI accounted for between 12,000 and 15,000 enemy guerrillas, for the loss of 135 men. RLI soldiers were recipients of four Silver Crosses and 42 Bronze Crosses of Rhodesia. An RLI trooper holds the world record for operational parachute descents ?a staggering 73 op jumps?most under 500 feet!

The Saints is not intended as a definitive history but, with more of a classic 'scrapbook' feel, the presentation attempts to capture the essence of this fine unit?what it was like to be a troopie, one of the 'ouens'.

Alexandre Binda was born in Beira, Mozambique in 1945. He joined the Rhodesian Army in 1965. Although he had attested into the Pay Corps, he was to get more operational and combat experience than any of his colleagues. Between 1968 and 1972 he took part in a dozen or so deployments with RLI and SAS combat-tracker teams in support of the Portuguese Army in the Tete Province of Mozambique, countering Frelimo and ZANLA guerrilla incursions from the north. He was awarded a Military Forces Commendation. During his 15 years in the Rhodesian Army, he did a four-year tour of duty with the Selous Scouts and was commissioned in 1979. Alex is a keen student of African military history and has written several articles for Lion & Tusk, the magazine of the Rhodesian Army Association. He is also author of Masodja?A History of the Rhodesian African Rifles.

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