



From a grass verge safely

BY ADIL BRADLOW

“I couldn’t believe my luck ... instead of being safe at home recuperating from flu I hadn’t been able to shake (I’d planned to go to the doctor that morning and log a day’s sick leave) ... I was lying behind a grass verge in the middle of no-man’s land somewhere between South African and Lesotho troops, pinned down by sustained and heavy small arms fire.

I tried to piece the whole thing together: 15 minutes ago we – fellow AP staff writer Andrew Selsky and BBC cameraman, Alistair Lyne – were standing at the top of the hill overlooking the Mapoanyane Military base.

We’d heard there’d been some fighting there; South African troops had landed there at dawn, choppered in by air force Oryxs, and from the accounts of locals, had been met with quite a warm reception. It looked deceptively calm.

Our minds were made up for us when a convoy of 15-odd Ratels came barreling past us, down to the base. We jumped in my car — a 4x4 Subaru Impreza — and raced after them. We figured it was a routine troop movement into a forward position ... it turned out to be a recon patrol, and as we turned the corner to drive past the barracks, we came under a barrage of machine gun and semi-automatic fire. The car immediately took some hits and I saw bullets flash past me. I accelerated and pulled the car alongside the last Ratel using it for cover. With both Alistair and Andy shouting for me to keep cover, I’d jammed my Subaru on to the verge alongside the road, and we hurtled along, next to the Ratel.

Then suddenly I saw the road was running out, and the convoy had come to a grinding halt. Still taking fire, we bailed from the car ... the Ratels looked very inviting and we figured they would give us a ride. Unfortunately our boys in brown and green had other ideas, and when we realised they were about to leave, we had to look for other options.

Hence the grass verge. While those two or three minutes had been seriously intense, the following 15 were off the wall: we were railed upon by those elements of the LDF who were holed up in the mountain overlooking the base, with what seemed like everything they had. Why the LDF took such a dislike to us, we had no idea, but they made it clear that we were not going anywhere.

Thankfully the verge provided sufficient cover and after it became apparent to them that they were wasting lead, they eased up. That was my predicament. For the next six hours I played and replayed this over in my head ... how could I be so dumb ... why didn’t I just say no to the assignment and go to the doctor ... why did we follow the Ratels, and so on.

Dwelling on the past didn’t help much. We needed to think about getting out of this mess. We came up with two plans:

Plan A was to get the SANDF to come and fetch us. Using that miraculous little cellular device, we started working the phones: our office, the local SANDF military liaison (Major Ben van Zyl) and just about anyone we knew who might be able to help. At about 3.30 we thought our prayers had been answered. We saw a convoy of Ratels come slowly down the road. We’d heard from Van Zyl that an earlier “rescue” mission had failed to find us — the grass verge also obscured their view — so we all started screaming and waving to attract their attention. The lead Ratel then came around us and pulled up behind us in open ground. The hatch opened and the officer asked if we were OK? “Just peachy!” I replied. I guess the sarcasm was lost on him because he closed his hatch and then lead his patrol away.

When we called Van Zyl for an explanation, he informed us that that particular patrol had orders not to pick us up! About an hour later he told us: “You are on your own; we don’t have enough men for a rescue mission.” So much for that idea.

Then on to Plan B: make a run for South African lines after dark. We all hoped we would not have to do this. The LDF knew where we were, and kept sniping at us during the course of the afternoon, just to let us know that they knew. We had 10m of open ground to cover and then there was another rise to another road and, we hoped, another drop off. The plan was to run the 10m, dive over the road and leopard crawl to a house some 150m off to the right. From there we would improvise.

We knew the South Africans weren’t far off. We could hear a Ratel moving forwards and backwards and someone shouting commands in Afrikaans (I never thought the sound of the language could be so comforting). We had no idea what they were up to and even called Van Zyl to tell him that a unit was close by and maybe they could help us (“Get up and walk to them if you can hear them,” he advised!).

As dusk approached the minutes seemed to get longer. Then just as we were about to make our move, we noticed that while the sky was getting darker, the ground was still quite well lit. I popped my head up for a look-see and was horrified to see the mountain ablaze — the South Africans had been pasting the hillside with 90mm cannons and 81mm mortars and had set it on fire. Our hearts sank but our minds were made up. After giving the flames a chance to die down a bit, we went.

I doubt any of us will ever cover that much ground in such a short space of time in our lives again; I was first over the rise and led the way into a sewerage trench we found on the other side; bonus time: it headed off in the general direction of the Ratel engine. I charged down the trench with Alistair and Andy on my heels and within minutes we came upon a bunch of very surprised soldiers whose Ratel had got stuck in the mud!

We ended up spending the night with a South African mechanised unit some 2km further up the hill. While totally bulletproof, don’t let anyone kid you that a Ratel is a comfortable ride. With the exception of the hour or so that the LDF was mortaring the South African lines we opted for the freezing cold of the night over the relative warmth of the sardine can.

Also don’t let anyone kid you that miracles never happen. All three of us are testimony to the fact they do!

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