RHODESIAN COVER SHOOTING

Prelude

Also known as Drake Shooting, Rhodesian Cover Shooting may be defined as the shooting technique employed to quickly kill concealed insurgents through the various phases of close quarter combat in the African savanna and jesse bush. The method did not replace "fire and movement" procedures, but was rather the primary activity of them. Cover shooting has also been described as a "flushing" action, but this is not strictly accurate. While flushing terrorists from their concealment has obvious advantages, particularly when working with close helicopter support, the first objective of cover shooting was to kill the enemy without the need to see him or locate his exact position first. Likewise the method should not be confused with other foreign practises such as walking suppression fire directed "at the jungle." Cover shooting was not a random spraying of bullets, but a deliberate and methodical routine designed to elicit maximum effect for the least expenditure of ammunition.

After the declaration of U.D.I. in 1965, the Rhodesian war continued for another 15 years and tactics changed greatly as lessons were learned during that time. For this reason experiences may well disagree on opinion and detail. This discussion is also somewhat biased towards the practises of the Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) and the combat patrols of the Police Anti-Terrorist Unit (PATU). As such, it cannot be held up as either definitive, or complete.

In 1964 the Rhodesian Light Infantry changed roles to that of a Commando Battalion. Deployed in rapid reaction "Fire Force" operations designed to vertically envelop insurgent groups, the cover shooting technique played a significant part in the Battalions overall success. In it`s 19 years of existence, most of those fighting at the very forefront of a bush war, the Rhodesian Light Infantry never lost a battle.

Rhodesian SOP

1) The Rhodesian Light Infantry`s platoons, called Troops, and those of many other units including PATU, were subdivided into "sticks" of 4 men each, the number of armed soldiers that can be carried by an armed Allouette III helicopter, called a "G-car". Stop groups (stops), patrols, ambushes and often sweep lines were made up of single sticks, although larger sweep lines could be made up from sticks para-dropped by a Fire Force (FF) Dakota, or by combining the stops positioned by G-cars, or from those sticks transported by land vehicles.

2) Excluding the pseudo gangs of the Selous Scouts and others, each stick usually consisted of three riflemen with FAL (FN) 7.62 rifles, and one machine gunner with an MAG-58, similarly loaded with 7.62 long. One, and sometimes two of the riflemen carried an A76 radio, while the third rifleman was a fully trained combat medic and carried fairly extensive medical supplies for the stick i.e Ringers Lactate drips, drugs, bandages etc. Obviously the stick NCO/Officer carried a radio.

3) All weapons were zeroed for 100m, and sights were set to the same range. Riflemen usually

carried 7-8 magazines of 19, or even 18 rounds each (Placing a full 20 round load into an FN magazine damages the magazine spring in the long term and caused stoppages). These would be supplemented with a few extra boxes of 20 rounds each for reloading. The gunner generally carried 500 rounds in 100 round belts (2 belts x 50 rounds linked together), while in earlier times the gunner carried 400 or less. On external ops into Zambia or Mozambique etc, the gunner would carry 800 rounds, with the stick riflemen carrying extra belts and a spare gun barrel - It was not unusual for Rhodesian units numbering a few hundred to attack training camps containing many thousands of terrorists (Usually, but not always, with mortar and full air support etc).

4) All webbing for magazine storage was designed to enable quick magazine replacement. Unlike methods used elsewhere, riflemen generally did not tape two magazines together to enable a "quick" reload, largely due to problems of dirt getting into the up ended magazine. While the AK47 is easily capable of firing when in a filthy condition, an FN with dirt in the breech area is guaranteed to suffer from stoppages - Very bad news for a stick in a "Contact." Every third or fourth round of a magazine load was a tracer, and troops generally loaded two consecutive tracers as the final rounds to indicate the end of supply. For some, the preference was to make the last round a single tracer, the previous two or three rounds normal ball, and prior to those were loaded the tracer pair to WARN of end of supply. In this way we were already thinking of a reload before reaching the need to do so. Keeping an eye on the breech block was also normal practise, the sliding block remaining to the rear when the magazine was empty.

5) FAL 7.62 tracers were red, while the AK47 tracer rounds of our opponents were green. Tracers were a good means of directing the stick`s fire onto an observed target when using the command, "Watch my tracer," and could be used as the "Fireball" to mark a target for strike aircraft i.e when commanded to, "Send Fireball." Other means of identifying a terrorist position to aircraft included smoke or phosphorus grenade, or mini-flare (pencil flare). I am aware of the use of a S.N.E.B rocket by the Selous Scouts on O.P. as the Fireball.

6) Patrol formations were usually single file, extended line (sweep line), or a "Y" when with a tracker (Tracker at the junction of the Y`s arms, protection at the forward two arms, and a controller at the back who directed the tracking operation). Double file formations were, to my knowledge, never used, due to the unnecessary confusion that they add to an ambush, and increased risk of A.P. mines on dirt roads etc. In all formations the gunner was next in position to an NCO or Officer.

7) Troops of all units generally used a standard webbing arrangement having magazine pouches mounted on the belt, with the belt attached to an over-shoulder harness to help bear the load. Others however, including the RLI, used chest webbing or "Fire Force jackets" to carry the magazines and one phosphorus grenade, one shrapnel grenade (M962), and one or two smoke grenades of different colours. FF jackets also had pouches built in for essential kit, including a sleeping bag, or an A76 radio etc. The jacket has been copied with many versions still available all over the world today. The riflemen`s jackets were similar to those worn by gunners, the latter`s having large side pouches for the ammunition belts. Two water bottles (or four depending on the time of year and so availability of water) were carried on the belt, together with essential supplies in two kidney pouches. If on an "extended" stay, all non-essential kit was stowed in light weight Bergen back packs, which could be dropped when speed and mobility were again

required, leaving the soldiers carrying battle kit only.

8) Use of grenades (apart from the obvious): Blue smoke has been used to indicate a call sign requiring a "Casevac" (pronounced Kazz-er-vack) of a wounded stick member, although any smoke colour could be used depending on the stick`s grenade loading. Smoke grenades were an essential for marking "FLOT" to aircraft (Forward Line of Troops), and often the Fireball, or for rapidly identifying the stick`s position to a K or G-car, such as when a quick up-lift by G-car was required to reposition the stick elsewhere on the battlefield (K-cars were command/killer Allouette III`s with a side mounted 20 mm Hispano canon instead of the usual G-car`s side mounted twin Brownings. All weapons were operated by the chopper technician/gunner. G-cars were troop transports first, becoming close support Gun Ships after troop deployment, while the K-car carried the Fire Force Commander, usually the relevant Commando`s Commanding Officer, who over saw the battle). When required for marking a friendly position, FF sticks also spread out maps on the ground, and had day-glo panels stitched into their bush caps etc that could be placed next to each soldier individually.

Some Rhodesian Army units, including the Police`s combat patrols of PATU, carried the Zulu 42 rifle-grenade, but there was much debate about it`s effectiveness and it was not a popular choice with the RLI - It took time to load, requiring the magazine to be removed and a Ballastite round fed manually into the FN breech for firing. Care also had to be taken in case a live round were accidentally and fatally fired into the grenade - which was not unknown. For the rapid reaction operations of the RLI, where speed and agility were required, it was a clumsy and ineffective weapon. Nevertheless other units have patrolled with the grenade already loaded and with the FN magazine in place - On one occasion a soldier of the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) accidentally fired a mounted Zulu 42 inside a Fire Force helicopter (This was an unusual incident as generally cocked weapons were not allowed on the choppers.) However on another occasion a PATU stick broke up a skirmish line attack when the three riflemen dropped their Zulu 42`s right into the line of skirmish by firing their grenades in the mortar role - Rifle butt placed on the ground, barrel to the sky. The stick`s MAG had been hit in the gas works, the bullet ricocheting to hit the gunners hand, and the gun was refusing to fire anything other than a single round between a manual cocking. Consequently the gunner attempted to use it as a sniper weapon instead, making sure every round counted! While perhaps unimpressive in the "damage" department, and dangerous to use when in the hands of the inexperienced, Zulu 42`s did produce a large amount of black smoke on detonation and may have retained a useful demoralizing value (Not worth the weight!)

The Phosphorus grenade, while officially carried for "night demarcation" and excellent as a general smoke indicator, was also superb for flushing out terrorists from thick or rocky cover, for breaking up enemy skirmish lines, or for taking out a cave or bunker etc. It was never to be thrown up-wind, but nevertheless remained a very popular choice by the usually out-numbered Rhodesian units - On one operation where terrorists in a cave were proving particularly difficult to evict, the stick attempting the eviction placed a bunch of assorted grenades and all their camping gas cylinders into a back-pack. The "bomb" was then lobbed into the cave, to very good effect.

Depending on the operation, and especially on externals, RLI troops could be issued with a "home-made" grenade called a Bunker Bomb. This was a pure percussion weapon built with two

plastic caps from the cases of mortar bombs. The caps were joined together and fitted with a standard grenade detonator, pin and handle mechanism, and filled with plastic explosive. It was obviously much larger than a normal grenade, but it could still be held in the hand, and within reason, thrown in the same fashion. Bunker Bombs detonated with rather spectacular results, particularly in small buildings.

9) Air Support: The Rhodesian Light Infantry, occasionally the Rhodesian African Rifles and SAS, and less so other units including PATU, had available real-time helicopter support (I can already hear howls of hysterical laughter!) As many helicopters were tied up in Fire Force operations or on externals toward the last years of the war, a common complaint from other units was the lack of, or delayed response to a request for a Casevac (All Rhodesian helicopter types could act as a Casevac, with the original French designed seating in the Allouettes rearranged by the Rhodesians to make this so). For the RLI or RAR Fire Force teams, having three or more G-cars and a K-car overhead added an extra dimension to their cover shooting, which included directing the exploding 20mm canon shells of the K-car, or the twin .303 Browning fire of a G-car into the terrorist position as well. Terrorists flushed out of cover and running were also particularly vulnerable to attention from above. A Casevac, if needed, was immediately available once fire from the terrorist position was dealt with and the stick medic had completed his work. Fire Force ops similarly had the provision of a spotter aircraft, usually an armed "push-pull" Cessna 337, called a Lynx. This had Browning .303 machine guns mounted in the wings, and could carry an assortment of weapons including mini-Golf bombs, and S.N.E.B rockets. The Lynx has also been used to Casevac wounded, as were other aircraft.

For bigger problems Rhodesia had Hawker Hunter jets for air strikes with 30mm Canon, a pair of superb 1000 pound Golf bombs and so on. There were also a few dated Canberra Bombers which were first class on external operations, where they dropped hundreds of the bouncing balls from Alpha bombs onto terrorist training camps, usually timed to catch a few thousand terrorists on their parade square.

Lastly a few old British Vampire jets were also used on air strikes. One of the unique weapons carried by this aircraft was a converted 250 gallon drop tank loaded with darts, referred to as "Fletchets." Another cheap invention, Fletchets were basically 6 inch nails fitted with a cheap plastic fin arrangement pushed down the length of the nail to the head. The Vampire would dive at some speed onto the target and drop the tank, which would then break open releasing many hundreds of Fletchets capable of easily burying themselves up to the tail fins in very solid trees.

10) In every army there remains the difficult issue of how to deal with inexperienced command, a problem that can be exacerbated by the nature of small unit COIN operations in Africa that often required a good level of bush craft and hunter/killer type skills - things that cannot be taught within six months by the Officers School of Infantry. As a result of having this experience, often many years of it, Rhodesian stick leaders, usually NCO`s, were given far greater say in immediate combat actions than would be normal elsewhere, and this without apparent conflict with good junior Officers. While a Troop Officer played a significant role overseeing his Platoon during pre-deployment, it should be recognized that in "stick" sized operations the same Officer had less influence over the actions of the other sticks within his Platoon once they were deployed. This was especially the case when the action of all sticks was directly overseen by a FF Commander. The Troop Officer`s influence however changed dramatically when the sticks

reformed to Platoon strength, as for example when on larger sweeps or during full scale Commando assaults of external training camps. It was in these situations that a junior Officer`s overall leadership skills and "field of battle" training came into clear play.

The "Bottom Line" of Rhodesian Combat Ops

11) The stick will be out numbered. It was not uncommon to make contact with 10-30 opponents, or more.

12) While the general area of incoming fire would be known, the exact location of individual terrorists may not. It takes too long to locate their exact position.

13) It was absolutely essential from the moment of "Contact" to react with immediate, accurate, and overwhelming return fire (Referred to as "Winning the Fire Fight").

14) The indigenous people of southern Africa are forced by culture to be right handed. They will be "viewed" on the left hand side of trees and other solid objects if they are shooting around them.

15) Poorly trained terrorists always tend to group too close together. When one is sighted, there may well be others concealed in close proximity. While insurgents would often break and scatter (in Rhodesianese: "take the gap") on hearing an aircraft especially a helicopter, when caught in groups the bunching effect would get worse as pressure from incoming fire and the anti-clockwise whirl of helicopter support took effect. This bunching increased the effectiveness of the cover shoot.

16) Terrorists generally fired on fully automatic - "spray and pray." This would often start high, and would rise. The indiscriminate use of ammunition on fully automatic usually meant they would run out long before the Rhodesian troops.

17) Terrorists fleeing a scene were trained to fire their AK47`s resting on their shoulders pointing backwards.

18) A wounded terrorist in the path of a sweep or patrol would often wait until the "point of inevitability" was reached, before opening fire at very close range. The same can be said for non-wounded terrorists attempting to hide from sweeps, patrols, or helicopters. These were responsible for many of Rhodesia`s casualties. In areas of known incursion, helicopters on search missions have fired into very thick cover just to see if anything foolishly fired back.

19) Due to poor training, Mashona combatants of ZANLA tended to open fire at distance, while the Matabeles of ZIPRA with better training and naturally aggressive natures as a warrior race (Zulu), would tend to open fire from a more combative range - A fact that needed to be considered when patrolling at different ends of the country. ZIPRA were also capable skirmishers etc, using flank movements directed by voice commands or a soccer whistle, and they undertook a great deal more Conventional Warfare training with the ultimate intention of carrying out a classic invasion. This fact was gathered from captures, and eventually encouraged a Rhodesian

SAS raid into Zambia to destroy a great deal of stockpiled weaponry which scuppered the plan (As an example of poor training, school children kidnapped by Mugabe`s ZANLA on the Mozambique border were often given only three weeks or so of communist politicizing and basic AK47 training before being sent back to "liberate" the country. In one instance Rhodesian sniper fire at long range was used to kill some of the escorting men seen issuing orders after the group re-crossed the border. The children panicked and ran from the sniper position, straight into another intentionally set up on a hill two kilometers away. The children, all of them teenagers, some as young as 14, then used up the remainder of their ammunition shooting up the countryside. Out of ammunition and in a right state, they were picked up and sent back to school.)

20) It was not unusual for some terrorists to have had extensive training in Tanzania, Russia or China etc, who were given command - In one instance a terrorist commander and his men put on a very impressive roll and fire display, something the entire PATU stick commented on after the action. The rolling technique did not help this particular gang, as they rolled into a cover shoot.

Fire and Movement

21) Other than employing the normal visual search attributes of, "Shape, Shadow, Shine, Silhouette and Movement," frequently terrorist positions could be detected simply because "something" just did not look right, even though the viewer might be hard pressed to say exactly what he saw. This ability is very instinctive, and develops with "bush time." RLI`s troops were trained to look THROUGH the African bush and to visualize from the shapes and shadows etc as to what might be lying in it, rather than just looking AT the bush and so seeing only the obvious. Sometimes terrorists would wear their camouflage uniforms over civilian clothing in order to become "civilians" in a hurry if needed, while many simply crossed the border to do battle with no camouflage uniform at all! Another irregular practise among terrorists was to place bunches of elephant grass or small, leafed branches, into their clothing or webbing, apparently to increase the "camouflage" effect. While useful for ambushing as long as the terrorist did not move at all, normal camouflaging techniques were intended to blend the Rhodesians into the African bush, not to make them appear as an object of that bush! In a cover shoot, increasing the natural foliage content of one`s camouflage was merely guaranteeing to have it hit even sooner, as all natural flora capable of hiding a terrorist within the active arc of fire was "killed" as part of the cover shooting technique. Moving, flinching, or twitchy bushes and grass tussocks only served to “flag” the terrorist, and were killed on the spot.

22) When patrolling it was usual to carry out "close to contact" drills when shortening the range to an otherwise oblivious terrorist or group, before making contact, cover shooting, and skirmishing their position. However any targets suddenly sighted within effective range were taken out immediately, usually by snap-shooting from the shoulder with a single round or double tap (usually double). Soldiers would then drop to take cover, roll or "crab" away from the drop position, cover shoot the same terrorist position again, and then cover shoot any other clumps of cover in the near area capable of hiding a terrorist. For those unfamiliar with southern Africa`s bush, "other clumps" included the base of trees, rocks, bushes, ant-hills, areas of elephant grass and so on.

23) When no clear indication of a terrorist`s general position could be ascertained (i.e a "one burst wonder"), the practise was to "kill" any cover within the active arc to the front of each soldier, beginning with cover nearest to that soldier before moving further out. In the case of a sweep line, once a member "walked into" or sighted a terrorist, he immediately shot him, while the other members of the sweep would react to the rifle shot and cover shoot into their OWN arcs of responsibility directly to their front. In all situations the command "Watch my Tracer" (or just, "Tracer" or "Visual"), allowed the rest of the stick to switch their attention to a problem - This did not mean that other areas of possible concealment were then ignored. The affirmative reply to "Watch my Tracer" was, "Seen." Other verbal methods of indicating a target position would be employed if a tracer shot etc would blow the sticks own closing position or ambush.

24) In responding to sudden incoming fire, a sweep or patrol would immediately return fire from either the prone position or from down on one knee, depending on the nature of the surrounding bush. By dropping onto the knee, soldiers often placed themselves below the level of fire from badly trained terrorists, however remaining in position would not be maintained, especially as terrorists usually deployed an RPD machine gun. This fires at effectively the same cyclic rate as an AK47 (650 rpm instead of 600), but the RPD is far more accurate. The Rhodesians spent some time in live-fire training identifying different weapons and their position from the different sounds that they made.

25) While immediate actions drills, the distance to the target, and the nature of the intervening bush and terrain largely dictated the overall response to an attack, where possible a contact at very close range always resulted in an immediate run through of the terrorist position - sometimes difficult or impossible in the thorn scrub of the jesse found in the Zambezi Valley, for example. It remains obviously unacceptable to remain within the killing zone of an ambush. When the range of the terrorists was more substantial, the use of the "crack and thump" method to determine the distance and direction of their position was a useful technique.

26) Skirmishing: At some appropriate point after the initial stages of the fire fight, a deliberate attacking movement called a Skirmish was carried out, ending in a run through of the terrorist position. Three basic skirmishing techniques were employed, usually by sweep lines containing a few sticks. The first method of skirmishing involved splitting the sweep line into two equal sections, called flanks, with one flank moving forward (say 2-5 meters as an example) while the second flank covered the first. When the first flank went prone and restarted cover shooting, the second flank would then run forward until some meters passed the line of the first, and so on. This method is the least likely to result in a "friendly fire" incident, but it is also the easiest to counter. All soldiers running forward did so using open-sighted snap shooting (both eyes open), from the shoulder if a rifleman, or forward of the hip if a gunner. The second skirmish option had every second member of the sweep line designated as one of the flanks, with each member of that flank passing between and through members of the other, leap frogging forward so to speak. Obviously the covering flankers stopped shooting as those moving forward passed them. The third option was called a Pepper Pot, and was usually what option two "degenerated" into as a consequence of the difficult situation. This involved individuals of the sweep line or stick, randomly getting up and moving forward, or going prone and covering, and so on. It is more difficult to implement when in larger numbers, but is also the hardest to counter because prone troops rise from their positions in a very random and seemingly "uncoordinated" fashion. Sticks of four always used something resembling the Pepper Pot when on the assault, or split pairs if a

serious attempt at out-flanking the terrorist position was intended, and so on.

27) At no time in the fire fight was any stick member to stop and attend to another wounded member. To do so increased the likelihood of the soldier lending assistance getting hit, and prevented him from continuing with the attack while tending to the wounded man. The exception was a silent MAG in a 4 man stick, this was to be restarted ASAP.

29) For the run through, on command the entire skirmish line would rapidly assault the terrorist position by literally running right through it, firing from the shoulder using open sights and with both eyes open. The practise was to aim over and along a line of a "sweeping" barrel and kill anything within the arc of responsibility as the soldier sprinted through the position and out the other side.

28) Having run through a terrorist position, a head count of friendlies and a return slow sweep was conducted. A particular difficulty arose when the head count came up a stick member short.

The Rhodesian Cover Shoot - "Kill" the concealment, kill the terrorist.

29) In general, Rhodesian cover shooting was the deliberate "killing" of probable cover used by terrorists. No actual visual sighting of terrorists was therefore needed to "take them out," and no time was wasted attempting to identify the exact location of individual terrorists by first searching for muzzle flash or blast, a movement, a shape, and so on. Rather, careful observation of the terrorist`s position was carried out while "killing" their cover.

30) When cover or “drake” shooting, riflemen were to shoot directly into and through the terrorists position, keeping their aim deliberately low, while gunners were required to aim at the ground immediately to the front of that cover - Tumbling rounds, dislodged stones, or fragments of smashed rocks and trees do great injury to those lying in cover, while the earth that MAGs can kick up has excellent distraction and demoralizing value. The basic action was to draw the barrel of the rifle or machine gun across the cover area, usually beginning left to right, while squeezing the trigger at appropriate moments so as to "rake" it from one side to the other. Each round or burst is fired in a deliberately aimed fashion. Experienced riflemen sometimes used two, but no more than three round bursts on fully automatic when snap or cover shooting. Again the first round was aimed deliberately low because the design and power of the FN causes the barrel to rise rapidly on fully automatic. By aiming low, the first round was intended to "skip" and strike a prone target, while the second would go directly home as the barrel lifted. Obviously with a standing target, the terrorist would be "stitched" by the burst. Squeezing off two or three round bursts on fully automatic was also useful for dealing with positions on rising ground or hills.

31) FAL 7.62 long rounds have the power to punch through the tree trunks generally found in the African savanna and jesse bush! AK47`s using 7.62 short, on the other hand, generally did not. This fact was used to great effect by the Rhodesians. When firing into an area that included trees, rocks or ant hills etc, a single round down the left hand side of a solid object was good practise (not forgetting most opponents are right handed), then double tap the base of the tree and continue to the right, squeezing off single (or double) rounds in fairly close proximity (In a Conventional situation, moving from left to right takes out the trigger man before the machine

gun loader or second.) Smallish rocks, strange "lumps", or "bundles of rags" were to be killed. In fact anything out of place was to be dealt with - the "rocks" may be heads, hands, or a pattern on a camouflage uniform etc. The soldier then moved his aim to the next area of cover and repeated the process.

32) To "Win the Fire Fight," riflemen would consume the first two magazines as quickly as it remained practical to maintain accuracy, using single rounds or double taps (While trained to use the double tap, my Commando`s policy was the use of single rounds - Aim, Squeeze and Switch). As with the rifleman`s use of magazines, the gunner was free to offload the first one or two belts. Each stick member was responsible for monitoring his own ammunition usage during the fire fight, and running out was an unforgivable sin!

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