

VORTEX

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LARRY BOND




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A signed first edition of this book has been privately printed by The Franklin Library.

Also by Larry Bond

RED PHOENIX

*Dedicated to our brothers and sisters, Mary Adams and Jim Bond,
Erin Larkin-Foster, and Colin, Ian, Duncan, and Christopher Larkin.*

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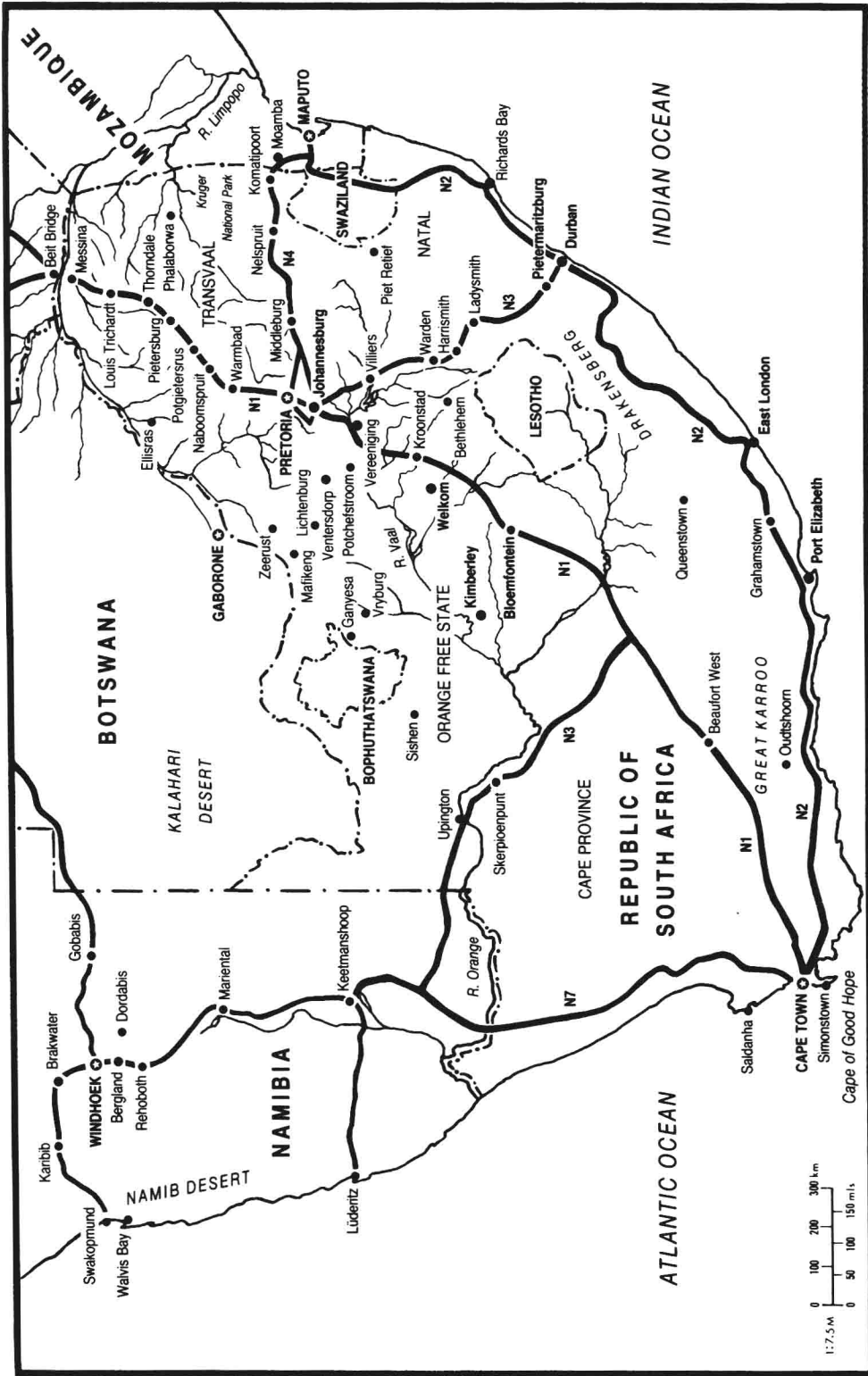
Finally, we would like to thank two men without whose constant and invaluable aid and advice this book could never have emerged from our word processors: our editor at Warner Books, Mel Parker, and our agent, Robert Gottlieb of William Morris.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Though Patrick Larkin's name does not appear on the front cover, *Vortex* is his book as much as it is mine.

This is the second book that Pat and I have written together, collaborating from start to finish. In a process that lasted nearly eighteen months, we helped each other over literary hurdles, argued politics, tactics, and strategy, and spurred each other on as the deadline approached. Like all good teams, we believe our work together reinforces our individual strengths and skills.

We hope you enjoy the story we've tried to tell.



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

AMERICANS:

Lieutenant Colonel Mike Carrerra, U.S. Army—Commanding officer of Alpha Company, 1/75th Ranger Battalion.

Lieutenant General Jerry Craig, USMC—Commanding officer of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force and later the Allied South African Joint Task Force.

Lieutenant Nick Dworski, U.S. Army Special Forces—Executive officer for Jeff Hawkins's A Team.

James Malcolm Forrester—Vice President of the United States, chairman of the National Security Council.

Staff Sergeant Mike Griffith, U.S. Army Special Forces—Assigned as the heavy weapons specialist for Jeff Hawkins's A Team.

Captain Jeff Hawkins, U.S. Army Special Forces—Commanding officer of a Green Beret A Team.

General Walter Hickman, U.S. Air Force—Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Edward Hurley—Assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, U.S. State Department.

Lieutenant Jack "Ice" Isaacs, USN—A Navy F/A-18 pilot.

Captain Peter Klocek, U.S. Army—Operations officer of the 1/75th Ranger Battalion.

Sam Knowles—Ian Sherfield's cameraman.

Captain Thomas Malloy, USN—Commanding officer of the Iowa-class battleship *Wisconsin*.

General Wesley Masters, USMC—Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps.

- Christopher Nicholson**—Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.
- Lieutenant Colonel Robert O'Connell, U.S. Army**—Acting commanding officer of the 1/75th Ranger Battalion, later commander 75th Ranger Regiment.
- Hamilton Reid**—Secretary of commerce.
- Ian Sherfield**—An American journalist assigned to South Africa.
- Brigadier General George Skiles, U.S. Army**—Chief of staff of the Allied South African Expeditionary Force.
- Rear Admiral Andrew Douglas Stewart, USN**—Commander of the carrier group including the Nimitz-class carrier *Carl Vinson*, later commander of Allied naval forces operating off the South African coast.
- Major General Samuel Weber, U.S. Army**—Commanding officer of the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division.

SOUTH AFRICANS:

- Captain Rolf Bekker, South African Defense Force (SADF)**—Company commander, 2nd Battalion, the 44th Parachute Regiment.
- Brigadier Deneys Coetzee, SADF**—A close friend of Henrik Kruger, now assigned to Army staff headquarters in Pretoria.
- Brigadier Franz Diederichs, Security Branch, South African Police**—Special military commissioner of Natal Province.
- Major Richard Forbes, SADF**—Executive officer of the 20th Cape Rifles.
- Frederick Haymans**—President of the Republic of South Africa.
- Colonel Magnus Heerden, SADF**—Head of Military Intelligence Branch of the Directorate of Military Intelligence.
- Constand Heitman**—South African minister of defense in Vorster's cabinet.
- David Kotane**—ANC guerrilla leader commanding the Broken Covenant strike force.
- Commandant Henrik Kruger, SADF**—Commander, 20th Cape Rifles.
- Colonel Sese Luthuli**—A senior officer in Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military arm of the African National Congress.
- Helmoed Malherbe**—South African minister of industries and commerce in Vorster's cabinet.
- Gideon Mantizima**—Leader of Inkatha, the Zulu political movement, and chief minister of KwaZulu, the nominally independent Zulu tribal homeland inside South Africa's Natal Province.
- Major Willem Metje, SADF**—Assigned to Military Intelligence Branch of the Directorate of Military Intelligence.

Erik Muller—Head of the South African Directorate of Military Intelligence.

Riaan Oost—A South African farmer acting as a deep-cover mole for the ANC.

Colonel Frans Peiper, SADF—Commanding officer of the 61st Transvaal Rifles, the battalion guarding South Africa's Pelindaba Nuclear Research Complex.

Fredrik Pienaar—South African minister of information in Vorster's cabinet.

Sergeant Gerrit Roost, SADF—Capt. Rolf Bekker's headquarters sergeant.

Andrew Sebe—An ANC guerrilla and member of the Broken Covenant strike force.

Matthew Sibena—A Xhosa resident of Johannesburg assigned as a driver for Ian Sherfield and Sam Knowles.

Jaime Steers—A fourteen-year-old fighting as part of the Transvaal Commando "Goetke."

Major Chris Taylor, SADF—Executive officer of a Citizen Force infantry battalion based in Cape Town.

Emily van der Heijden—Only child of Marius van der Heijden.

Marius van der Heijden—Deputy minister, South African Ministry of Law and Order, in Vorster's cabinet.

Colonel George von Brandis, SADF—Commanding officer of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Battalion.

Karl Vorster—South Africa's minister of law and order and later president of the Republic of South Africa.

Corporal de Vries, SADF—Capt. Rolf Bekker's radio operator.

General Adriaan de Wet, SADF—Chief of the South African Defense Force.

CUBANS:

Senior Captain Victor Mares, Cuban Army—Executive officer of the 8th Motor Rifle Battalion in Namibia, and later commander of the First Brigade Tactical Group's reconnaissance battalion.

Colonel José Suarez, Cuban Army—General Vega's chief of staff.

Colonel Jaime Vasquez, Cuban Army—General Vega's chief of intelligence.

General Antonio Vega, Cuban Army—Commanding officer of Cuban forces in Angola and later in the South African theater.

MOZAMBICANS:

Captain Jorge de Sousa—The Mozambican officer assigned to serve as a liaison between Vega's forces and the Mozambican Army.

BRITISH:

Major John Farwell, British Army—Commanding officer, A Company, 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment.

Captain David Pryce, British Army—Troop commander, 22nd Special Air Service Regiment, attached to the Quantum assault force.

ISRAELIS:

Professor Esher Levi—An Israeli nuclear scientist familiar with South Africa's nuclear weapons program.

PROLOGUE

MAY 22—THE TULI RIVER VALLEY, ZIMBABWE

The sky demons came in the dark hours before dawn.

Joshua Mksoi saw them first only as a faint flicker on the horizon and turned away without knowing what he had seen. Joshua, the youngest of his father's four living sons, had never had any schooling and couldn't waste time or energy in studying the black, star-studded sky or the waning moon. He had to drive his family's cattle up the dry river valley to their grazing lands before sunrise. It was a task that had consumed every day of nearly half his short life.

The small boy trudged wearily along the trail, herding the long-horned cattle with the sound of his voice and the tip of his hardwood staff. Cowbells clanked and jangled in the quiet night air. Everything was as it had always been.

Then the demons came—flashing close overhead with a howling roar that drove everything but fear from his mind. Joshua stood frozen in terror, sure that these monsters of darkness and air had come for his soul. He wailed aloud as his thin, tattered shirt billowed up, caught in their clutching, sand-choked breath.

And then they were gone—fading swiftly to mere shadows before vanishing entirely.

For long seconds, the boy stood rooted in shock, waiting helplessly as his pounding heart slowed and his arms and legs stopped trembling. Then he started running, chasing frantically after the maddened cattle as they stampeded away into the darkness.

For as much as Joshua understood them, the Puma helicopters, turbine engines howling, might as well have been demons. Filled with malign intent and of fearsome appearance, they certainly fitted the definition. And they were totally uncaring of a small boy's fears.

It was the smallest of the many tragedies that would strike Zimbabwe that day.

STRIKE FORCE, COMMAND HELICOPTER

The lead Puma helicopter shook violently, caught in a sudden upward surge of air, and then nosed over—following the winding, northward trace of the Tuli River valley. Four other camouflaged helicopters followed in staggered trail formation. The group flew so low they were almost skimming the ground, at two hundred kilometers per hour.

Aboard the lead Puma, Rolf Bekker bounced against the shoulder straps holding him in his seat. He leaned forward and craned his head to see past the machine gunner crouching in the open door. A black, uneven landscape filled his limited view.

After a moment, he looked away from the door and sat back. He'd seen it too often in the past few years to find it very interesting.

Bekker was a tall, lean man with a rugged face. His tanned features were covered with streaked black and green camouflage paint. The African sun had bleached his short-cropped, blond hair almost white. His camouflage uniform carried only the three stars of a captain on twin shoulder boards and a unit patch on his right sleeve. The patch bore the emblem of South Africa's 44th Parachute Brigade.

He pulled the Velcro cover off his watch and checked the time. Just minutes left to the LZ. Bekker looked up and met the wide-open, frightened eyes of the informer, Nkume.

The black was a tall, thin Xhosa tribesman sitting as far away from the open door as the seating arrangements would allow. He looked out of place among the fourteen heavily armed paratroopers who were the helicopter's other passengers. He was unarmed, dressed in worn civilian clothes. The soldiers wore helmets, camouflage gear, and carried compact and deadly assault rifles. They looked very sure of themselves. Nkume did not.

The South African officer scowled. He didn't know the black man's full name and he didn't care. Though he realized that the success of this mission depended in large part on this cowardly kaffir, he didn't have to like it. Bekker's right hand closed around the trigger guard of his rifle and he nodded to himself. If Nkume endangered the mission or Bekker's men in any way, the black would soon be begging for death.

The helicopter pilot's voice filled his earphones. "I'm in contact with the pathfinders. LZ is clear. Two minutes."

Bekker looked back at his men and held up two fingers. As they started checking their weapons and gear one last time, he unbuckled his seat straps and moved forward to stand behind the Puma's flight crew. He stared through the cockpit windscreen.

He would not see the landing signal. Only the copilot's infrared goggles could spot the light marking the drop zone. Instead, he studied the terrain, a mixture of patchy grass and brush.

The copilot said, "I have it," and pointed. Bekker held on to the doorframe as the Puma banked sharply, turning to the new heading.

They were approaching a relatively open spot, clear of scrub and hidden from their objective by a low, boulder-strewn hill.

The helicopter dipped lower still and Bekker felt the jar as it touched down in a swirling, rotor-blown hail of dry grass and sand. He swung round and jumped out onto the ground, followed in a rush by the rest of his men. Two more troop carriers landed seconds later, followed by the last helicopter, a gunship. Soldiers emptied out of the transports, ducking low beneath slowing, still-turning rotor blades.

Assault rifles held ready, the first South African paratroopers were already fanning out into the surrounding brush. A figure detached itself from the shadows and ran to meet them.

Bekker waved the soldier over to him. They shook hands.

"*Kaptein*, I'm glad you made it." Sergeant van Myghen was as tall as Bekker, but thicker, and much dirtier. He and his pathfinders had parachuted in hours earlier to secure the landing zone and scout their objective.

"Anything stirring?" Bekker asked.

"Nothing." The sergeant's contempt for their opponents was audible. "But I've got Kempler posted to keep an eye on the bastards all the same. We're about twenty-five hundred meters from the edge of town."

"Good." Bekker looked around the small clearing. His troops were assembled, ready to march in a spread column of twos with scouts and flankers thrown out to warn of any ambush. Two burly privates stood on either side of Nkume, each within easy knife reach. And nearby, the three lieutenants of his stripped-down company waited impatiently for orders.

He nodded to them. "All right, gentlemen. Let's get going."

Teeth flashed white in the darkness and they scattered back to their units.

The column started moving, threading its way through the tangled vegetation in silence. There were no voices or clattering equipment to warn of their approach.

South Africa's raiding force was nearing its target—one hundred and sixty kilometers inside the sovereign Republic of Zimbabwe.

STRIKE FORCE COMMAND GROUP, NEAR GAWAMBA, ZIMBABWE

Bekker lay flat along the crest of a low hill overlooking the town of Gawamba. His officers and senior NCOs crouched beside him.

The soft, flickering light of a waning moon bathed Gawamba's houses

and fields in a dim silver glow. Bekker smiled to himself. It was perfect. They would have enough light to kill by.

He scanned the valley floor. Small plots of corn, wheat, and cotton spread outward from the town, with cattle enclosures and storage sheds scattered between them. A single main street, paved with asphalt, ran straight through the center of Gawamba itself. Narrow, unpaved alleys broke rows of low, tin-roofed homes and shacks into blocks. Two large buildings dominated the north end of town—the police headquarters and the train station.

Bekker checked his watch again. They had less than three hours to get in and get out before the sun rose. He rose to his feet. "Right. No changes to the plan. We've been given a good start, gentlemen, and I'm depending on you to make the most of it."

Bekker met the eyes of the lieutenant commanding his first assault section. "How's the black? Still holding up?"

Hans Reebeck was a little keyed up, but kept his voice even. "Nkume's unhappy, sir, but I'm afraid my men aren't too sympathetic." He forced a grin.

"Just watch the kaffir, Hans. Remember, he knows this country well."

Reebeck nodded.

Bekker turned to his other officers. "On your way then, boys. Send them to hell."

Der Merwe and Heitman saluted sharply and loped back to their units. Bekker and Reebeck followed suit and took their places at the head of the column as it started moving—flowing silently up over the crest and down toward the town.

Without any spoken orders, the column split into thirds. One section of paratroops moved north, toward the police station. Another angled south, slipping quietly into a cornfield. Both were out of sight within minutes, invisible among the shadows.

The rest of the force trotted ahead, spread out into an arrowhead formation with Bekker and a radioman at the point. It was aimed straight at the raid's primary objective.

The objective—code-named Kudu if it had to be mentioned on the radio—was a two-story concrete building one block off Gawamba's main street. Its ground floor was occupied by a small, family-owned grocery store. But the top floor was an operations center for guerrillas of the ANC, the African National Congress.

The existence of the Gawamba operations center hadn't even been suspected by South Africa's security forces until recently. In fact, they'd first learned of it from Nkume, an ANC guerrilla who'd been captured while trying to run a shipment of arms across the border with Zimbabwe. In return for his freedom, and probably his life, Nkume had spilled his guts about this ANC headquarters inside Zimbabwe.

Bekker scowled. Zimbabwe and the other border states had agreed to prevent the ANC from operating on their soil. The lying bastards. He didn't care whether the ANC was operating here with or without the connivance of the Zimbabwean government. Blacks were blacks, and none of them could be trusted to keep an agreement or leave well enough alone.

Now they would learn that defying Pretoria meant paying a high price.

Bekker and his troops reached Gawamba's outskirts and started working their way down a garbage-strewn dirt road, weapons out and ready. Houses lined each side of the narrow street, one- or two-room shacks with rusting metal screens covering their windows. A dog barked once in the distance and the South Africans froze in place. When it was not repeated, they moved on, staying in the shadows as much as possible.

One block to go. Bekker felt his heart speeding up, anticipating action. His radioman leaned closer and whispered, "Sir, second section sends 'Rhino.' "

Good. Der Merwe's men were in position—covering the north end of town, including the road, the rail line, and the police station. He kept moving, with his troops close behind.

Suddenly, they were there.

Bekker and his men found themselves facing the side of the building, a whitewashed wall that had no windows. Nkume's information was right, so far. The radioman whispered another code word in his ear. Heitman's third section was in place to the south.

Bekker checked his rifle, took a quick breath, and scanned both sides of the street. No movement, at least not yet.

He gestured, and the team crossed in a rush. Hopefully any observer would not recover from his initial surprise until it was too late and they were all out of view. Once across, his men took up covering positions while Bekker headed for the rear of the building. Nkume, flanked by his two escorts, followed.

Reebeck met Bekker at the rear and pointed to the back door. It was solid steel, set in a metal frame, and had no lock or handle.

"A little much for a small-town grocery, *Kaptein*," Reebeck observed in a low, hoarse voice.

Bekker nodded abruptly. It was the first direct evidence that this building was more than it seemed.

"Wire it," he ordered.

While a private laid a rope of plastique around the edge of the door, Bekker heard a low rustling as the rest of his men readied their weapons. Sergeant Roost, a short, wiry man with a craggy, oft-broken nose, crouched nearest the entrance and looked as if he couldn't wait for the chance to go through it. Bekker waved him back and took his place.

The private with the plastique finished working and moved away. Bekker