

# **A Tribute to the Crew of Puma 164**

**(and its last 14 passengers)**

**Shot down at Mapai, Mozambique  
6 September 1979**

By Neill Jackson, January 2010



## **The Crew of Puma 164**

**Pilot: Captain Paul Denzel Velleman**

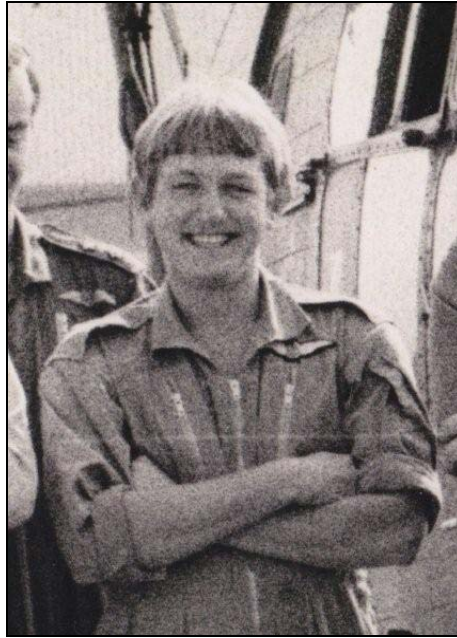
**Co-pilot: Lieutenant Nigel David Osborne**

**Flight Engineer: Sergeant Dirk Wilhelmus Marthinus (Dick) Retief**



**Captain Paul Velleman**, who would have turned 25 on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1979, had nurtured a lifelong ambition to be a pilot in the South African Air Force. He was the youngest of three brothers, and matriculated from Pretoria Boys High School. He joined the South African Air Force immediately after completing his National Service, and was said to have been a very dedicated pilot, who took his flying very seriously. He was described as being an extremely friendly young man, with a gentle yet strong personality. He lived with his mother in Umhlanga Rocks, and cared for her. She never recovered from the shock of Paul's death, and apparently died of a broken heart two years after the loss of her beloved son.

A close friend and neighbour, Paul van de Wall recalls fun times spent surfing, paddle-ski-ing and braaing together as they lived only 200 metres from the beach. His wife Sharon also got on very well with Paul's girlfriend, and the two couples spent a lot of time together. Paul van de Waal says that he has lost contact with Paul's girlfriend, but that up until a few years ago, she had never married. The van de Waal's were devastated at the news of Paul's death, and they donated a swimming trophy to his Junior School, Atholton Primary School, in his memory.



**Lieutenant Nigel Osborne** turned 21 on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1979, less than one month before his death. He matriculated at Durban High School and joined the Army for six months, until he was old enough to join the South African Air Force. He was an outstanding golfer with a bright future in the game, having represented Natal Junior Schools, but flying was his first love. He was apparently flying Impalas in the SAAF before he even obtained his driving licence. He was known as an exceptional pilot, and had previously made news headlines for his part in the rescue of six foreign seamen from their sinking ship off the Natal coast.



**Sergeant Dick Retief** was 29 at the time of the crash, and had been married to his 21 year old wife Lynette for less than a year. They had a four-month old son, DuWayne. Sergeant Retief had grown up and been schooled at Koster, in the Western Transvaal, and was the eldest of four children. He was a keen golfer and fisherman, and he and Lynette would often go on fishing trips together. Dick had taken the place of a good friend, Sergeant Willie Beurain, who had volunteered for the operation, but then had elected to stay behind for the birth of his daughter.

Lynette Retief was expecting her husband to return from the bush trip on 7<sup>th</sup>

September, but instead an Air Force chaplain came to break the news of her husband's death. She was reported in the press as saying: "My husband died as a hero for our country and this thought is of great comfort to me."

Lynette could never bring herself to re-marry, and only really started moving forward with her life in 2004, after being shown photographs by her brother of the wreckage of a crashed military helicopter in Mozambique. Ironically, this wreckage was from the shooting down of the Rhodesian Air Force Bell helicopter at Barragem Bridge, on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1979, the day before the loss of Puma 164 on the same operation.

She later met Cobus Malherbe, a former Captain in the South African Special Forces and on Saturday 11 April, 2009, the very day that the search team discovered the crash site of Puma 164 and were standing beside the graves of its crew and passengers, Cobus and Lynette were standing at the altar getting married. Lynette has taken this as a sign from Dick that she has taken the right course of action, and that he approves of her marriage with Cobus.

### **Background to Operation Uric/Bootlace**

In September 1979, Rhodesian Combined Operations headquarters issued the orders for a massive air and ground strike against Frelimo and ZANLA positions in the Gaza Province of Mozambique.

This action was given the codename of Operation Uric, and was separately known as Operation Bootlace in South Africa, in an attempt to conceal the involvement of Rhodesia's only allies in the cross-border strike.

From a political point of view, Operation Uric was designed to strike a decisive blow against the ZANLA forces based in Gaza Province, and thereby hopefully weaken Robert Mugabe's bargaining power at the upcoming Lancaster House conference. It was also hoped that by severely damaging Mozambique's economic infrastructure, President Samora Machel would be convinced that he had to persuade Mugabe to remain at the negotiating table until a settlement was reached, in order to prevent further expensive damage to his own fragile economy.

### **Operation Uric – The Plan**

In order to achieve its aims of restricting the movement of Frelimo troops and ZANLA terrorists into the south-east of Rhodesia, Op Uric was split into three main phases:

Phase One was the disruption of road traffic by the planting of more than 300 landmines on all major and minor roads used by military vehicles, and the destruction of rail and telephone communication links in the province.

Phase Two was the destruction of five strategic bridges, which combined with the mining program, would effectively isolate Gaza Province from its main sources of supply, being Maputo and Inhambane on the Mozambique coast.

Phase Three was the exploitation of the Frelimo 2 Brigade Headquarters at Mapai,

from where all troop movements into and out of Rhodesia were controlled.

### **Friendly Forces**

The frontline troops committed to Op Uric comprised 112 specialist troops from all three squadrons of the Rhodesian SAS, 72 highly trained operators from South Africa's 1 Reconnaissance Commando, 192 para-trained commandos from the Rhodesian Light Infantry's Support Commando and 1 Commando, and 12 specialist demolition experts from 1 Engineer Squadron.

A total of 388 frontline soldiers, with a large administrative and intelligence back-up.

The air effort consisted of 8 Hawker Hunter ground attack jets; 6 English Electric Canberra bombers, of which three were provided by the SAAF; 12 Dakotas, 8 from the Rhodesian Air Force, and 4 from the South African Air Force, 2 configured for command and control roles, 4 as freighters and 6 designated as paradaks (Para-trooping Dakotas); 6 Cessna 337 Lynx ground-attack aircraft, including 2 to be used as airborne command platforms by the Army Airborne Commanders; 6 Bell 'Cheetah' troop-carrying helicopters from the Rhodesian Air Force; 12 Aerospatiale Puma troop-carrying helicopters, plus one spare aircraft, provided by SAAF; 10 Alouette 111 helicopters from both Air Forces, configured in both troop-carrying and gunship roles; 2 Super Frelon helicopters, provided by SAAF, for use as freighters and the uplift and return of damaged aircraft from Mozambique, if required.

As a back-up, the South Africans had placed on standby a battalion of South African paratroopers with Puma helicopter transport at an SADF base close to the Mozambique border.

In addition, SAAF Mirage and Buccaneer strike aircraft were on standby at nearby Hoedspruit Air Force Base should they be required, and in case of any interference from Tanzanian Air Force MIGs.

### **Enemy Dispositions and Targets**

FPLM forces in the Gaza Province were estimated to be in the region of 3 500 strong, with 70% of this number being deployed along the line of rail/road between Choque and Malvernia, the area of interest of Op Uric. The heaviest concentrations of troops were at Mapai, Malvernia and Mabelane. In addition to this, there were assessed to be approximately 5000 ZANLA terrorists in Gaza Province, either resident in the vicinity of Frelimo bases or in transit to and from Rhodesia.

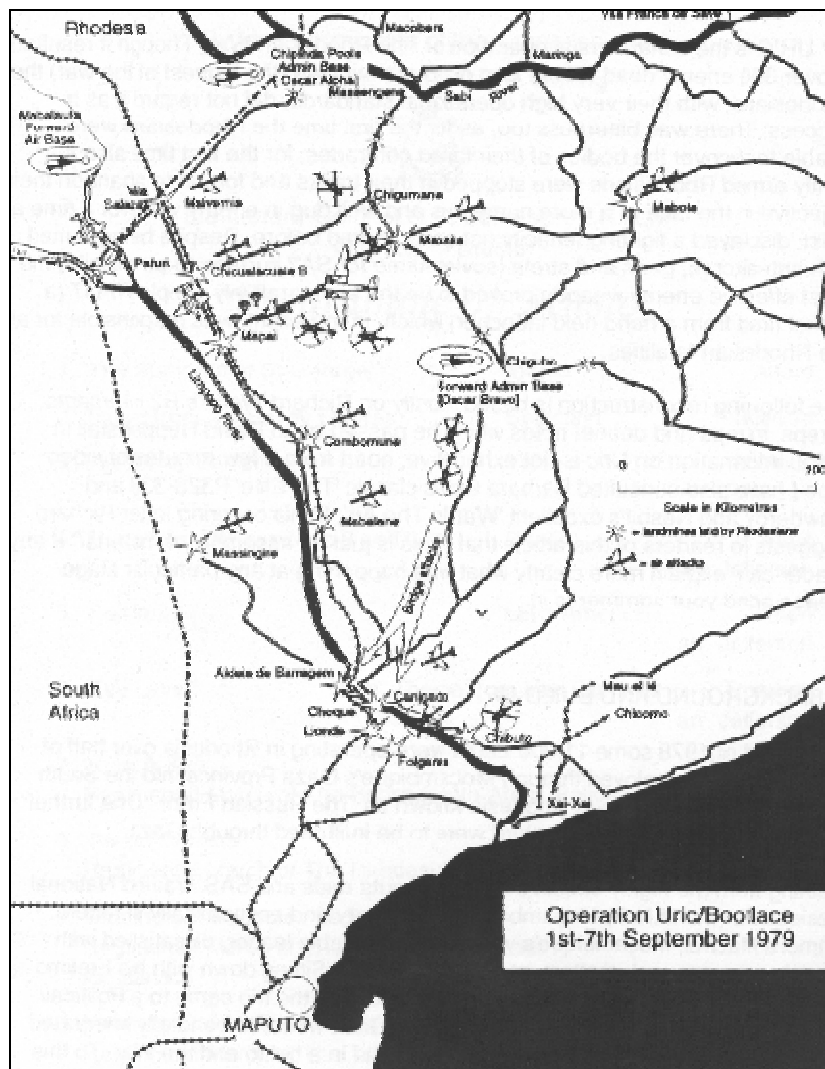
Malvernia Town contained a Frelimo Battalion HQ, and was protected by 250 to 300 troops, backed up by anti-aircraft and heavy weapons including 4 x 12,7mm and 8 x 14.5mm heavy machine guns, 4 x 23mm and 1 x 37mm anti-aircraft weapons plus 6 x SAM 7 anti-aircraft missiles, 75mm, 82mm and 107mm recoilless guns, 60mm and 82mm mortars and 122mm rocket launchers, and also the possibility of armoured personnel carriers. Malvernia was targeted for air strikes only, with no ground troop deployments.

Mabelane contained another Frelimo Battalion HQ, with approximately 200 soldiers of various support units in residence. Various anti-aircraft weapons including

14,5mm, 23mm and 37mm were identified at this base. 75mm recoilless guns and 122mm rocket launchers plus tanks and APCs had also been observed during aerial reconnaissance. Mabelane was also earmarked for air strikes only.

Mapai contained the 2 Brigade HQ with an Infantry battalion, one tank regiment and a 76mm recoilless rifle battalion based in the huge camp adjacent to the town. The tank regiment was equipped with 18 x T34 tanks, 4 x GSP ferries and various armoured personnel carriers. 6 x 122mm rocket launchers and 6 x BM-21 (122mm Multiple rocket launchers, also known as Stalin Organs) had also been identified at the base. Anti-aircraft weapons included up to 20 x 37mm and 23mm anti-aircraft positions surrounding the base plus SAM-7 and possibly SAM-3 radar-assisted anti-aircraft missiles.

Mapai was scheduled for a combined ground and air attack on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1979.



In addition, four heavily armed Motorised Infantry Detachments (Mobiles) began operating in Gaza Province during April 1979, tasked with providing a quick reaction force to any trouble spots over the entire Province, and concentrating mainly on the strategic rail and road routes.

Five strategic bridges were designated for destruction on 5<sup>th</sup> September:

Barragem Bridge, an expansive wall damming the Limpopo River, with road and rail access over the top, and containing sluices vital for the release of water for the downstream irrigation projects. The destruction of this massive structure was allocated to the Rhodesian SAS.

Canicado Bridge, a newly built bridge over the Limpopo River, linking the towns of Canicado on the east bank, and Choque on the western side of the river. This bridge was allocated to 1 Commando, RLI and the specialist demolition experts from 1 Engineer Squadron. This group was flown to their target bridge by the Pumas of Hotel section, including the ill-fated Puma 164 (Hotel Four), flown by Paul Velleman, Nigel Osborne and Dick Retief, and fourteen of these men were on board when this aircraft shot down the following day.

Folgaes, two relatively small but vital canal bridges on the Macia to Choque road. Maximchopes rail bridge over a tributary of the Incomati River.

Changane River Bridge on a major access route in the east of the area. These bridges were all successfully dropped by the 1 Recce operators with the minimum of fuss.

In total, 40 targets were identified and designated in Gaza Province for attention during the course of Operation Uric. These ranged from Frelimo military headquarters, base camps and outposts, through economic targets such as bridges, dams, canals, roads and railway lines, to ZANLA transit camps and storage facilities.

### **Events Leading to the Downing of Puma 164**

In the early hours of Saturday morning, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1979, 13 SA 330 Puma and 2 Super Frelon helicopters took off from AFB Swartkops near Pretoria, and routed via AFB Pietersburg, where the crews were briefed on the upcoming operation in Gaza Province.

The Pumas flew low level to Chipinda Pools in the south eastern Lowveld of Rhodesia, in three loose formations of four aircraft each, with good friends Capt Paul Velleman and Lt Mark Dutton bringing up the rear, using callsigns Hotel Three and Hotel Four respectively.

Capt John Church flew the one spare aircraft to Chipinda Pools. This was Puma 164, and it was the thirteenth helicopter in the formation.

The Puma crews were in action shortly after arriving at the forward base, tasked with flying troops and supplies to the external Admin Base, code-named Oscar Bravo,

situated near the disused Banhine National Park airstrip, 160 kilometres inside Mozambique. The Puma pilots were all amazed at the numerous places from which they attracted hostile small arms and RPG-7 fire, even from the most innocent looking small villages, and two helicopters were damaged by ground fire on this first day.

In fact, after the week involved on Operation Uric, only two of the thirteen Pumas returned to South Africa *without* damage from enemy fire, and these two were reported to have had most of the paint missing from their undersides, due to the ultra low level flying of their cautious pilots!

Paul Velleman and Mark Dutton, operating as a pair of aircraft, were returning to the base at Chipinda Pools after a re-supply run, when Mark Dutton's Puma suffered a fuel booster pump failure, which rendered a significant amount of their fuel unusable. Whilst Mark and his co-pilot Craig Reid were searching around frantically for a suitable landing zone, the Puma's engines suffered a flame-out due to fuel starvation, necessitating a forced landing in amongst some dense bush and trees.

This resulted in severe tip damage to the main and tail rotor blades of their aircraft. After Flight Engineer Pine Pienaar had refuelled from a spare drum on board the Puma, Mark Dutton lifted off carefully and flew the damaged helicopter slowly back to the base at Chipinda Pools.

Immediately after landing, the two pilots were tasked with another re-supply run to the external Admin Base, and Mark Dutton, Craig Reid and Pine Pienaar transferred their kit over to the spare Puma, whilst their damaged aircraft was attended to by the SAAF ground technicians.

This spare aircraft was Puma 164.

Taking off again as a pair, with Paul Velleman in the lead, the two Pumas set off into Mozambique once again. About halfway to their destination, Paul called that he had just passed a group of buildings to his left, and both choppers veered to the right. However Mark Dutton's flight path took him directly over the buildings, and the anti-aircraft artillery opened up on them. Despite taking some strikes Mark flew on doggedly, nervously watching his instruments for any warning lights that would indicate they had taken hits to the Puma's engines. Landing at the Admin Area, they discovered that Puma 164 had suffered a 12,7mm strike through the main spar of one main rotor blade, grounding the aircraft overnight whilst a new blade was flown in via Chipinda Pools the next day.

There followed a few days of routine re-supply runs from Chipinda Pools to the external Admin Base, whilst the Operation Commanders waited for the low cloud to clear, before they could give the go-ahead for the launch of Op Uric.

On 5<sup>th</sup> September the bridge demolition phase was launched. The four Pumas of Hotel Formation were tasked to fly the 48 RLI and Engineer troops, under the command of Captains Joe du Plooy and Charlie Small, plus their explosive kits, to their target bridge over the Limpopo at Canicado. During this briefing fate started playing its hand. The task of carrying the bridge demolition team and explosives was designated to Hotel Four in the orders, but Paul Velleman, being the more experienced



commander, took over this assignment and Mark Dutton was moved to the Hotel Three position as a trooping helicopter. The two pilots switched call signs and Paul became Hotel Four, in Puma 164.

After dropping the troops and demolition team at the small town of Canicado, the formation flew a short distance away and landed in a clearing, where they waited for the Rhodesian troops to carry out their tasks on the bridge and in the adjacent town. This they accomplished without any trouble, and then radioed to the waiting helicopters that they were ready for uplift.

After picking up the troops the Puma formation set a heading back to the Admin Base. All was going smoothly until suddenly Paul called on the radio saying that he had flown into wires, and was losing pressure in one hydraulic system. He immediately landed and the other aircraft turned back to see what was happening. They saw Flight Engineer Dick Retief removing the wires which had snagged around the left undercarriage and which had severed a hydraulic pipe. After Dick had made makeshift repairs Paul took off again, and made it safely back to the Admin Base.

At the nearby Barragem Bridge, a Rhodesian Air Force Bell helicopter had been shot down by an RPG-7 whilst attempting to casevac a wounded SAS soldier. The technician, Leading Aircraftsman Alex Wesson was killed immediately, and the pilot, Flight Lieutenant Dick Paxton was pulled unconscious from the burning wreckage by an SAS Sergeant.

### **The Fateful Day**

At the briefing for the assault on Mapai on the 6<sup>th</sup> September, the plan was for Hotel Four to join the formation of Rhodesian Bells, as a replacement for Dick Paxton's aircraft, for the trooping task into the target area.

Mark Dutton expected to revert to his original formation position, but Paul said that he would rather remain as Hotel Four, and take the opportunity to fly with the legendary Bells.



The two formations flew alongside each other on their way to the target, with the Bells flying to the right of the Puma flight, and with Paul's Puma 164 bringing up the rear of the Bell formation.

Flight Lieutenant Martin Bouwer, immediately ahead of Puma 164, suddenly experienced severe tail rotor malfunction, and had to pull out of the formation and make an emergency landing in the Mozambican bush. Paul Velleman moved up to take his position behind the last Bell.

Approximately 5 kilometres from the target area, the low-flying helicopter armada overflowed a small satellite air-defence base, which had been abandoned by most of the defenders as soon as the initial Hunter strikes had gone in on the Brigade HQ at Mapai, earlier that morning. However, a lone Frelimo soldier, armed with an RPG-7 rocket launcher, had remained at his post to confront the enemy.

As the helicopters thundered at high speed over a low rise towards him, he took aim and fired his rocket towards the massed aircraft, just as they drew level with his position.

His rocket struck the right side of the last helicopter in the nearest formation, immediately behind the pilot's seat, detonating on impact and, it is thought, simultaneously igniting the fuel in the tank behind the pilot.

The stricken Puma 164 rolled to the right and plunged immediately into the ground, exploding on impact in a huge ball of flame.

Everything happened so quickly, and the helicopters were all flying so low, and so fast, that the eye witnesses on board the other aircraft say that they heard two loud, almost simultaneous bangs, and by the time they looked across, all that could be seen of Hotel Four was a rapidly-forming pall of black, oily smoke billowing skywards from the ball of flame on the ground.



S22 44'24.1  
E32 06'19.0

The shocked pilots called in the tragedy to the Command Dakota, and one of the Bell pilots immediately dropped his troops to search for survivors. The rest of the helicopters were ordered to continue on to Mapai.

The RLI troops, led by Lieutenant Gavin Wehlburg, advanced cautiously towards the crash site, but met with no opposition, and saw no locals.

The whole area was eerily deserted, and strangely silent.

The Puma was found in a sparse tree line at the edge of a grassy clearing.

Immediately the soldiers realised that there could have been no survivors; the helicopter was totally destroyed, with only the engines remaining relatively intact.

The bodies of the men on board Puma 164 had been scattered around the crash site by the impact of the aircraft and the subsequent explosion, and were reportedly still intact, but unrecognizably burnt.

They had all died instantly in the searing heat of the explosions.

Plans to recover the bodies, and any recognizable aircraft parts, were thwarted by the intensity of the ongoing battle at Mapai, and the reluctance of the Operation Commanders to risk any further loss of men and aircraft on a recovery attempt. Wehlburg and his men were ordered to withdraw from the area, and a Hunter strike was called in to destroy any evidence of South African involvement in the operation. This strike was apparently unsuccessful.

With the complete withdrawal of Frelimo and ZANLA troops from the Mapai area, the local headmen decided to bury the bodies of the fallen men where they lay, and placed them in two large graves, next to each other.



These graves remained unmarked and unkept for thirty years, their whereabouts unknown to all but the local population, who treated the crash area with reverence and respect, and no-one ventured anywhere near the grave site.



On Saturday 12 April 2009, a small search party led by former RLI Lieutenant Rick van Malsen discovered the crash site of Puma 164, and the graves of the seventeen brave men who died there. These men were finally laid to rest by their comrades-in-arms, with a short service, and the placing of a memorial cross on the larger of the two graves.

The Roll of Honour of the fallen men was read out, whilst the haunting sounds of The Last Post rang out over the silent African bush.



# Roll of Honour

## Operation Uric

“With thanksgiving, let us remember those who sacrificed their lives so that we may live on in peace. And in appreciation we now dedicate this cross to their memory. Help us to keep them in our thoughts, and to never forget what they gave for us.”

Bob Manser, Originator of the crash site searches in Mozambique.

### 05 September 1979 – Aldeia de Barragem

LEADING AIRCRAFTSMAN ALEXANDER WESSON	RhAF
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### 06 September 1979 – Mapai

CAPTAIN PAUL VELLEMAN	SAAF
LIEUTENANT NIGEL OSBORNE	SAAF
SERGEANT DICK RETIEF	SAAF
CAPTAIN JOHANNES MATHEUS DU PLOOY	1 RLI
CAPTAIN CHARLES DAVID SMALL	RhEng
2 <sup>ND</sup> LIEUTENANT BRUCE FRASER BURNS	RhEng
SERGEANT MICHAEL ALAN JONES	RhEng
CORPORAL LEROY DUBERLY	RhEng
LANCE CORPORAL PETER FOX	RhEng
CORPORAL GORDON HUGH FRY	1 RLI
TROOPER JACOBUS ALWYN BRIEL	1 RLI
TROOPER AIDEN JAMES COLMAN	1 RLI
TROOPER JEREMY MARK CROW	1 RLI
TROOPER BRIAN LOUIS ENSLIN	1 RLI
TROOPER STEVEN ERIC KING	1 RLI
TROOPER COLIN GRAHAM NEASHAM	1 RLI
TROOPER DAVID REX PROSSER	1 RLI

“They shall not grow old  
As we who are left, grow old.  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn,  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.”