

## Book Review

# The Equus Men: Rhodesia's Mounted Infantry: The Grey's Scouts 1896–1980

Alexandre Binda

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### Introduction

*The Equus Men: Rhodesia's Mounted Infantry: The Grey's Scouts 1896–1980* by Alexandre Binda is a meticulously researched and detailed exploration of the roles and functions executed by the Grey's Scouts during the Rhodesian Bush War (1896–1980). First published in 2015 and reprinted in paperback in 2021, the book provides the reader with unique insights and lessons learned from those who were themselves engaged in the conflict in an inimitable and specialised way of warfighting: warfighting by mounted infantry.

The focus of the book is on presenting the personal experiences of the men and women who participated in the conflict and on reflecting on these, rather than on political issues and realities that shaped the decisions about the deployment of the unit. Sufficient commentary about the political situation to contextualise the decisions made about the deployment of the Scouts is nevertheless included. Binda utilises the stories told by members of the unit to present the history of the Grey's Scouts in a very compelling and engaging manner from its origins, through its organisation and development phases, and ultimately in the detail about their operational experiences. The book provides an excellent understanding of the characteristics of mounted infantry forces as opposed to cavalry.

Binda was commissioned to write the history of the Grey's Scouts, and his requests for assistance from former members to gain access to documents and photographs were met with great enthusiasm. There are few surviving official records of the Grey's Scouts, but the Grey's Scouts' roll of honour, the list of names of those who had received honours and awards, and the Grey's Scouts nominal roll are all included in appendices to the book. The pictures in the photographic appendix provide the reader with a vivid image of how the Scouts lived, trained, and deployed. Despite the limited number of official records available, the stories encapsulated in the book reveal the spirit and ethos of the men and women who served in the unit, making the history of the unit come alive.

Binda's book reflects the history of the Grey's Scouts by means of its written history, photographs and maps, and refers to various times from 1896 to 1980 – all of which feature the lived experiences of the men and women who served in the unit. The author included

a comprehensive list of maps as well as photographs of documents and letters that all contribute to a very detailed depiction of the members and of the activities of the unit over time. The inclusion of the impressive array of photographs and documents elevates the book from being more than a collection of “action sequences” to a chronicle of personal encounters, as it also provides the reader with good understanding of the psychological and societal issues that influenced and moulded the organisational culture of the unit. The book reflects details and narratives about the origins of the unit from the time of the Bulawayo Field Force and the Matabele Rebellion of 1896, to developments in Rhodesia, which influenced the development of the Grey’s Scouts from 1975–1976, to deployments between 1977 and 1978, and the situation in Zimbabwe–Rhodesia in 1979 and 1980.

Binda structured the book in chapters that each describes a specific period during which the Grey’s Scouts were developing the unit into a cohesive force. These decisions and subsequent operational lessons learned ultimately informed the doctrine, training and warfighting methods adopted by unit members. The descriptions and facts presented offer personal narratives of how the unit developed and deployed over time. Moreover, the stories – as told by unit members – are at the heart of the value of this book, as it offers readers a comprehensive view of how and why the mounted infantry operations of the Grey’s Scouts evolved over time. Binda succeeds in balancing the textual analyses, provided by the inclusion of maps and documents, with the stories told by members who served in the unit; thus, providing the reader with a unique background to the documents and photographs.

One of the strengths of the book lies in the detailed analysis of the establishment and development of the Grey’s Scouts during the Rhodesian War. Binda provides in-depth descriptions and analysis of how the concepts relating to mounted infantry were developed and of how these concepts were ultimately operationalised.

The author provides us with a detailed account of the strategies, tactics, techniques and procedures used by the mounted infantry during the Rhodesian War. The book also offers important lessons learned in terms of the use of mounted infantry – specifically in the African deployment environment. The Grey’s Scouts were not used in the context of cavalry deployments; the unit was exceptional as its members appreciated and utilised horses as a means of transport, as opposed to using horses as a fighting platform as is the case in the deployment of cavalry.

Binda identifies the advantages of mounted infantry, such as the cross-country abilities of horses, their ability to travel over long distances, their ability to work effectively at night, and their ability to alert riders to impending danger. Binda however also points to some of the limitations associated with the deployment of horses in the mounted infantry role, namely difficulties when moving through dense bush and marshy areas; the significant logistical support required; difficulties in maintaining silence; and the fact that certain geographical areas might have limited the use of horses due to diseases, such as African horse sickness and tsetse fly infestations. The personal accounts and photographs provided by members of the Grey’s Scouts support the findings of the author as far as lessons learned are concerned.

The author's writing style is accessible, the prose is very clear and engaging, and the photographs, maps and lists of names of Grey's Scouts members make this a very engaging and enjoyable read. The book will prove valuable to both academic audiences as well as military enthusiasts. The chapters are well organised and provide the reader with a structured narrative through time.

Alexandre Binda's *Equus Men: Rhodesia's Mounted Infantry: The Grey's Scouts 1896–1980* affords us unique insights into the history of the Grey's Scouts. The author's meticulous research and insightful analysis offer a compelling examination of the establishment of the unit and its development over time. The book encourages readers to reflect not only on the stories as told by the men and women who served, but also on the broader societal implications of the war and the warfighting methods that were employed.

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