

**How did it come about that South African unconventional units,
which were successful in many battles, were unable to turn their
victories into political success during the South African Border War
1966 - 1989?**

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Statement

I hereby declare that *How did it come about that South African unconventional units, which were successful in many battles, were unable to turn their victories into political success during the South African Border War 1966 - 1989?* is my own work and that all sources used within have been properly cited by means of complete references.

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Abstract

The South African Border War 1966 – 1989 was a war fought between South Africa, Cuba and Angola. Battles were mainly fought in southern Angola but within South West Africa SWAPO attempted to mount an insurgency against South Africa. This saw the introduction of several unique South African unconventional units and managed to win many battles but this did not result in South African political success. This thesis looks at these units in depth and analyses their impact by describing some of the operations in which the Recces, 32 Bn, 44 Parachute Brigade and Koevoet were involved. In the introduction the background of the war is looked at, followed by an introduction to each of the four units in question. The main part of the thesis consists of various South African operations during the war, followed by an analysis and lastly a conclusion is reached regarding the political outcome.

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Introduction

During the South African Border War the main South African efforts were made with specialized unconventional ground units who managed many victories in the battlefield. However these victories did little to bring about a victory for South Africa. This paper will look at these units in detail and come to a conclusion about why the successes on the battlefield were not translated into political success. Firstly a brief introduction to unconventional warfare.

“Military activities conducted through or with underground, auxiliary or guerrilla forces to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power¹.” This is the definition provided by the NATO glossary of military terms. There is no standard definition for unconventional warfare let alone for unconventional units, there are however certain characteristics they all have in common. First and foremost unconventional units are established to add specific capabilities to a country’s security forces that lies outside the traditional framework of defense. Unconventional units allow for greater options which is in no small part due to the fact they are often operate under total secrecy. The definition that will be used in this thesis will rather focus on these characteristics as opposed to creating a definition that is to be set in stone.

Area of focus

A total of four units were chosen for this thesis because they matched certain characteristics in the South African Border War, the conflict that lies at the heart of this research.

¹ Aksit, C. (2012). NATO GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND DEFINITIONS (ENGLISH AND FRENCH). Brussels: NATO.

These four units were the 32 Battalion, the South West African Police Counterinsurgency Unit (Koevoet), the 1st Reconnaissance Commando (Recces) and the 44 Parachute Brigade. These units will be introduced in some detail below but first it is time to list the characteristics that made these units unique.

All of these units were created to respond to specific challenges on the battlefield that could not be met by conventional military means. These four units all had an elite status and extensive selection procedures, especially the Recces. Most SADF units stationed in SWA only stayed there for short deployments, the four units mentioned above were active in the warzone fulltime and thus had a much better understanding of the war than most other units.

Operating covertly was an essential characteristic for these units in order to maintain plausible deniability on the part of the South African government. The nature of the operations that these units undertook was highly dangerous and required special training as well as tactics to perform. In addition it was these units that bore the brunt of the fighting, as well as the casualties during the war.

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly to show the importance these units had during the Border War. Secondly and most importantly to show how despite achieving military successes on the battlefield these military successes were not translated into political success. By definition military force is used in an effort to achieve political goals.

Before moving onto the units themselves a few other points need to be addressed, firstly the sources used for this paper and secondly the political situation of South Africa, which heavily influenced the war itself. The political situation is very important in order to explain why the

successes on the battlefield were not enough to achieve political success for South Africa.

Sources

‘In war, truth is the first casualty’ was said by the Greek Aeschylus more than 2,500 years ago yet these famous words remain true to this very day. In wartime objectivity nowhere to be found with both sides seeking to undermine each other, often in an effort to attempt to ‘justify’ their actions.

The Border War is no different in that sense. It pitted South Africa and to a small degree the United States against a socialist bloc comprising of Angola, Cuba, the USSR and her allies. The Border War was a very complicated conflict that also featured many non-state actors such as SWAPO and the UN. Furthermore it was a conflict that was resolved with both sides claiming victory though in practice neither side accomplished all their objectives.

The Border War is a very difficult war to analyze not only because of the many countries and factions involved but primarily due to the lack of common ground when it comes to sources. The sources which are available, which are not that many to begin with, are clearly divided as being either pro – South Africa or anti – South Africa. While controversy with regards to wars is nothing special, with regards to this conflict, controversy is taken to another level entirely. In particular with regards to the battle of Cuito Cuanavale 1987 – 1988 available sources paint a drastically different picture of events.

While this thesis seeks to utilize sources from both sides it proved to be very difficult to find sources that apply to the very specific topic of elite South African units. Non South African sources are used but they can only be used in the bigger pictures as they simply do not include the level of detail required for this subject. Therefore nearly all sources used in this thesis are

from the South African perspective and they also cover the units in question with the most details. The sources themselves most date from the post-Apartheid era with a few exceptions, though it should be noted that the majority of sources are aimed for a white South African audience. This bias should be kept in mind while reading this thesis but unfortunately there is little that can be done about this as these sources offer the best insights into the subject matter.

Political situation of South Africa

The Border War took place in a very complex political climate. It involved a variety of both state and non-state actors and it's one of the Cold War's many so-called "proxy wars". In order to gain a better understanding of the conflict, a closer look at South Africa's political situation is required. In this section, both the domestic and foreign politics will be looked at.

Domestic

The most important domestic factor was the victory of the National Party led by Mr. Hendrik Verwoerd in 1948 which saw the introduction of Apartheid. While it is outside the scope of this paper to go into detail about Apartheid, Apartheid did play a very large role in both domestic and foreign South African politics.

The National Party was continuously in power from 1948 until 1994 when Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) won the elections, the first fully democratic elections in the country's history. During the Apartheid period, the National Party was able to rule virtually without any domestic opposition. During this period the ANC was banned and labeled a 'communist terrorist group'. On the whole, the Whites in South Africa, the only ones with real power under the Apartheid laws, went along with Apartheid and those who opposed it were persecuted.

Domestically, the biggest problems faced by the National Party were to keep order. Starting in the 1960's, the ANC began a violent campaign which included bombings and assassinations in an attempt to destabilize South Africa. The National Party's top priority was to remain in power and to deal with any threats, both domestic and foreign to the best of their ability.

Foreign

In terms of foreign politics, South Africa was in a very difficult position mostly due to its Apartheid policies. Apartheid was condemned by the international community and as a result of that, there was an international embargo placed against South Africa in an effort for the country to abandon Apartheid. This embargo was not universal but it did make it very difficult for South Africa to strengthen her military. Only very few countries were willing to sell arms to South Africa, where under France. Apart from arms most countries were reluctant to invest heavily in South Africa because they were worried about the response of their citizens and the international community.

The fall of the Portuguese colonial empire in southern Africa and the signing of the Lancaster House Agreement left South Africa isolated and essentially without allies. The United States did give some support during the Border War through the CIA, but this was only covert and did not last.

In both foreign and domestic politics, South Africa saw itself as the last bastion of white power in Africa, ever since Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. The fall of Rhodesia was extremely worrying to South Africa as Rhodesia had been a friendly buffer state between South Africa and other countries that viewed South Africa as hostile.

The status of South West Africa (Namibia) played a crucial role in this bigger picture. South Africa sought to keep hold of this territory whilst her enemies wanted South Africa to relinquish her claims to this territory which was allegedly illegally occupied and should become independent. South Africa was extremely concerned that when they lost South West Africa, the war would spill over into South Africa itself and result in the complete destruction of South Africa.

The international arms embargo also meant that South Africa would have to adapt her military accordingly. As a result South Africa developed an extensive military arms research and production program to manufacture their own weapons and supplies. In addition, South Africa went on to develop specialized units, such as those mentioned in this paper, to help deal with specific problems faced during the Border War.

There was another reason why South Africa preferred to use small specialized units during the Border War. It offered deniability. With South Africa under intense international scrutiny, it was much easier to use unconventional units as it was far easier to deny their use in the field. Operations carried out by the 32 Bn, Koevoet, 44 Brigade and the Recces were hardly known in South Africa, which was exactly what the SA leadership wanted. Firstly to give the impression that everything was under control and secondly to keep the international community at bay. Due to these two reasons the civilian leadership was often in disagreement with the South African Defense Force (SADF) on the best way to fight the war. Often the SADF was told that the war would have to be fought in limited ways using limited forces and because of this the unconventional units were used.

The origins of the Border War

The South African Border War, commonly referred to as the Angolan Bush War or simply the Bush War was a conflict that took place from 1966 to 1989. It mostly took place in South-West Africa (Namibia) and Angola between South Africa and her allies facing Angola and her allies, primarily Cuba. The South African Border War, henceforth known as Border War, was very much entangled with the Angolan Civil War as well as the Namibian War of Independence.

The roots of the conflict can be found in 1915 when South Africa invaded German South – West Africa (Namibia) as requested by the Allied Forces. After the end of the First World War the League of Nations put South Africa in charge of the territory labelling it a C-class mandate². The territory was ruled as a de facto fifth province, with a small part of around Walvisbay being incorporated by the Cape Province³.

In 1945, the United Nations (UN) was formed and together with the League of Nations dissolved in 1946 the South African government under Jan Smuts sought to take over the entire territory. In 1946, South Africa formally applied to the UN for this but the request on grounds that the population of South West Africa (SWA) had not been properly informed. Instead the UN requested South Africa to place SWA under closer international monitoring, the so-called trusteeship, in which the administration would be examined by international monitors, but South Africa refused. There was no obligation for South Africa to enter in this trusteeship agreement

² Goldstein, Langhorne, *Guide to International Relations and Diplomacy*, 2004, p13

³ Shillington. *Encyclopedia of African history*, 2005, p1066

and the end result was a legal dispute that would not be resolved for another 44 years, until 1990. The UN took this matter to the International Court of Justice which in 1950 ruled that:

‘the mandate given to South Africa was still in force; that the UN had taken over the League’s supervisory functions; that South Africa couldn’t unilaterally alter the international status of the territory; and that it was still under no obligation to enter into trusteeship agreement with the UN’⁴.

Formation of SWAPO/PLAN

It was in the late 1950’s that organized resistance began against the administration of SWA by South Africa with the forming in 1957 of the Owambo People’s Congress (OPC) in Cape Town, South Africa. Its main purpose was initially to oppose the unjust labor laws which prevented the Owambo people for working outside their home region unless they could manage to obtain a special permit, which were only valid for a short period of time. Two years later, in 1959 the OPC was renamed into the Owambo People’s Organisation (OPC). It was in April of that year that Sam Nujoma became the leader of the organization in Windhoek, the capital of SWA. Later on Sam Nujoma became the first president of independent Namibia in 1990. In 1960 that OPC was reconstituted as the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO)⁵.

The main aim of SWAPO was to gain independence from South Arica in the form of an independent black ruled state. They would start by undermining the existing administration and to eventually take over. The People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) was established in 1962 and under the guidance of Nujoma it started to recruit Owambo tribesmen to be trained in

⁴ ICJ. (1950). International status of South-West Africa. The Hague: ICJ.

⁵ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p16

guerilla warfare and sabotage⁶. PLAN fighters were trained in neighboring countries, such as Angola, Tanzania but also in the Soviet Union and other Soviet aligned nations. It was impossible to train in SWA as this was too dangerous. The plan was to infiltrate small units of PLAN into SWA to establish bases close to the Angolan border. This effectively set the stage for an armed conflict as South African authorities would not yield to SWAPO or any other black liberation movement and would use force if so required.

In the summer of 1965, six PLAN fighters trained in Tanzania, infiltrated into SWA across the Zambian and Angolan border. This group set up a base in Ongulusmbashe in Owamboland, the border region next to Angola. ‘This initial group, and their successors, were responsible for the string of attacks, murders and mayhem that was to evolve into the conflict that came to be known as the ‘Border War’’⁷

South Africa enters the War

Initially counter-insurgency was the responsibility of the South African Police (SAP) within SWA but on April 1st 1974 it was handed over to the South African Defense Force (SADF)⁸. Counter insurgency is defined as ‘Comprehensive civilian and military efforts made to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances⁹.’ The main reason behind using the police instead of the military was that initially the South African leadership sought not to escalate the conflict but they soon realized that they had no choice, due to increasing violence from SWAPO/PLAN.

⁶ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p17

⁷ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p42

⁸ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p44

⁹ Aksit, C. (2012). NATO GLOSSAR OF TERMS AND DEFINITIONS (ENGLISH AND FRENCH). Brussels: NATO.

At first the SAP was poorly equipped and vastly undermanned to guard the very long northern border of SWA. This changed in 1966 when a few SADF helicopters were brought in from SA to increase the mobility of the SAP units operating in the border area¹⁰.

In the spring of 1966 the SWA authorities received information that there might be a secret SWAPO base somewhere in the Owamboland area. It was then decided by Pretoria (seat of South African government) to send a special team under command of Major 'Rooi Rus' (Red Russian) Swanepoel into SWA to investigate this rumor¹¹.

By the beginning of August 1966, Swanepoel's team had confirmed that there was a SWAPO base in the Owamboland area but they had not yet managed to fix the location. It was however clear that a full-scale assault would have to be made on the base and for this purpose additional men and equipment were gathered. The biggest problems facing the South Africans were bureaucratic ones, the SADF was not allowed to intervene as the SAP held full responsibility. The SAP was completely unprepared for any military operation, they had neither the proper weapons nor specialized units. Pretoria then decided to send experienced personnel from the 1st Parachute Battalion to SWA, though they would be wearing police uniforms, to assist the SAP¹².

A force of 24 men and seven helicopters was raised and spent time training for the assault at a military base just outside of Pretoria. This mission would be unique as it was the first time the SAP would launch a counter-insurgency operation as well as it being the first time that SADF personnel would be involved in ground combat since the end of WWII¹³.

¹⁰ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p44

¹¹ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p20

¹² Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p23

¹³ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p23

The operation codenamed Operation *Blouwildebees* (Blue Wildebeest) took place in the morning of August 26, 1966¹⁴. This date is generally regarded as the start of the Border War, a war that would last until 1989. The operation was commanded on the ground by Commandant (Lieutenant-Colonel) Jan Breytenbach, a man who would be pivotal in the development of SA's unconventional units as will become clear later on. The overall command lay with SAP Brigadier Dillon. Inexperience on the part of the South Africans was reflected by the fact that only two SWAPO fighters were killed, a further nine were captured and the remainder fled the scene¹⁵. The South Africans themselves suffered no casualties in this surprise helicopter assault.

Jan Breytenbach and other men taking part in this operation would end up as some of the most distinguished personnel of the SADF during the Border War. Jan Breytenbach in particular had a very important role in the development of South Africa's unconventional units, in particular with the 32 Battalion, 44 Parachute Brigade as well as with the Special Forces (*Recces*). Breytenbach started his career in the Royal Navy where he served in the Suez Crisis in 1956. He also took courses in England before he returned to the newly Republic of South Africa, where he had to make the difficult choice to leave the Royal Navy, or risk losing his South African citizenship¹⁶. Breytenbach and some other SADF personnel took part in a Rhodesian SAS (Special Air Service, Special Forces unit) selection course which he and 11 others took, the majority of them passing¹⁷. It was after this course that Breytenbach suggested to establish a South African Special Forces Unit to the head of the SADF at the time, General Hiemstra, who was very much against the idea of losing the best and brightest of conventional units to an

¹⁴ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p45

¹⁵ Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966 – 1989*, 1989, p22

¹⁶ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p20

¹⁷ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p23

untested and untried unconventional setup¹⁸. Soon however, international events in Biafra (Nigeria) lay at the root of the formation of the first South African unconventional unit, the Reconnaissance Commando (Recces).

¹⁸ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p20 - 21

Origin of the Reconnaissance Commando (Recces)

Nigeria was granted independence from the British Commonwealth on October 1st, 1960. In 1967, due to vast unrest and prosecution of the Ibo tribe, the eastern part of the Nigeria proclaimed itself independent and called itself Biafra¹⁹. By late 1967, after initial skirmishes were fought, a full scale civil war had erupted. Almost immediately Nigeria blockaded the whole country of Biafra. Biafra started off in a vastly inferior military position and sought extensive help from foreign countries including South Africa.

At the beginning of 1969, Major General Frits Loots was on a liaison mission with the Portuguese in Luanda, Angola and was approached by two officers from Biafra who asked for South Africa's aid. At the time, Loots was the director of South Africa's military intelligence. Later on Loots would become the commanding officer of all South African Special Forces²⁰. The situation was deteriorating rapidly for Biafra and the officers urgently requested South Africa to provide them with weapons and supplies to aid their struggle.

Loots took the request to Pretoria where it was decided that covertly aiding Biafra would benefit South Africa's position politically. It was acknowledged that militarily the aid provided would amount to 'only a drop in the ocean' and that Biafra's days of independence would soon be over²¹. In the end it was decided that South Africa would supply Biafra forces as well as train them in guerilla tactics. This would have been a task for the Special Forces but at the time (1969) no such unit was yet in existence. Eventually the task was assigned to Commandant Breytenbach who chose some men who had joined him in the SAS course, as part of his team.

¹⁹ Meredith, Martin. *The first dance of freedom – Black Africa in the postwar era*, 1984, p208 – 211

²⁰ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p56

²¹ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p25

Breytenbach and his team flew into Biafra through Rhodesian aid and began training Biafra guerilla fighters as well as bringing in supplies. By late 1969, it became clear that the Biafra war effort would not be able to last for much longer despite South Africa's, and other nations' best efforts. The whole operation, as outlined by the start by general Loots was just a 'drop in the ocean' but politically the operation was a success in cementing relations with other African nations. At the beginning of 1970, organized resistance collapsed and the state of Biafra ceased to exist. Breytenbach first left Biafra for France where he took part in French Special Forces training, previously unknown to foreigners but he eventually returned to South Africa in March 1970²².

Despite the fact that Biafra fell soon after South Africa pledged covert military support, the success of the operation convinced general Loots that the SADF needed its own permanent Special Forces unit. By success it is meant the political success that South Africa achieved, as well as gaining military experience. The Defense Minister at the time, P.W. Botha approved Loot's plan to form such a unit, even though SADF chief, General Hiemstra was still against it.

The unit was put into motion, very low key and Loots placed Breytenbach in command. Breytenbach used his Biafra team as the foundation for the new unit and soon after he managed to recruit 12 Officers and lower ranks for the new unit. Initially the unit was called the:

'Alpha Operation Experimental Group, then for a time the Delta Operation Test Group. Its purpose, if anyone cared to ask, was to test the readiness and awareness of other army formations²³'. At first the unit was highly covert as it was not officially sanctioned by the SADF top brass. The unit's first mission took place in August 1970 when they were asked to plot water

²² Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p33

²³ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p24

holes in Angola which were used by SWAPO units. This was not quite the start the unit had in mind but nonetheless they got the job done together with some Portuguese units.

The unit undertook a more challenging mission in 1971 when it began a mining campaign to counter SWAPO operation in SWA in the Caprivi region. By 1971 SWAPO had begun to actively plant mines (both anti-vehicle and anti-personnel) to attack the SAP units patrolling the area as well as to intimidate the local population.

By late 1971, the mines had become a grave problem and Pretoria decided that the risk was too big politically to attack camps in Zambia, where intelligence sources had determined that SWAPO units would withdraw to after they planted their mines.

Without authorization from Pretoria, Breytenbach took matters in his own hands and decided his unit would plant mines of their own in retaliation. Teams of two to a maximum of five Recces infiltrated into Zambia and planted mines which caused many casualties. Mostly Zambian military personnel but also SWAPO.

Soon after the first reports, Breytenbach was called to Pretoria, he expected a medal but instead was questioned about the situation like he had done something terribly wrong. At first Breytenbach denied all accusations. Later on when he spoke to General Louw, he admitted that it was his unit that carried out the mining in Zambia. Gouw was pleased with Breytenbach and said 'Good show, it's about time we retaliated²⁴'.

²⁴ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p45

It was not until October 1st 1972 when the unit became official after a change of personnel at the highest levels of the SADF. Admiral Bierman became the SADF Chief and General Malan took over as the head of the army²⁵.

The unit was officially entitled the Number 1 – Reconnaissance Commando, even though Breytenbach suggested it should be called the Parachute Commando, but General Loots disagreed, thus in the end the name Reconnaissance Commando struck or Recces for short.

During the decades that followed the Recces took part in many operations during the Border War, which will be looked at later. First another unit which owed a lot to Jan Breytenbach will be looked at, the 32 Battalion.

²⁵ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p38

Origin of the 32 Battalion

The 32 Battalion was without doubt the SADF's most controversial, yet at the same time its most distinguished unit that served during the Border War. This is another SADF unit that owed a lot to Breytenbach's input, who served as the unit's first commander, founding the unit in 1975.

The 32 Battalion (known hereafter as 32 Bn) came into existence in the aftermath of the Angolan Civil War. Portugal granted independence to Angola and its other African colonies in November 1975, in the aftermath of the coup that took place in Portugal in 1974.

During the war that led to the eventual independence of Angola, three organizations were involved, who fought not only against the Portuguese, but also amongst each other. These were: the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) and lastly the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

The MPLA was supported by the socialist bloc, most importantly the Soviet Union and Cuba whereas UNITA and FNLA were supported by the West, most importantly the United States and South Africa. Starting in early 1975, South Africa began delivering weapons and supplies to FNLA to aid them in their struggle against the MPLA²⁶. Initially the FNLA held the military advantage but in the months that followed the MPLA gradually turned the tide and it became evident to Pretoria that more aid would be needed to halt the MPLA.

²⁶ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p2 -3

On August 28th 1975, Operational Order 8/75 was signed by SA defense minister PW Both, stating that the SADF would provide ‘whatever support was needed to halt the MPLA’s advance²⁷.’ A few days earlier UNITA and FNLA joined forces to counter the MPLA together.

The SADF came to the conclusion that in order for their weapons to be best utilized the FNLA ought to be trained by SADF personnel on the ground and this assignment fell upon Jan Breytenbach²⁸.

Breytenbach was of the opinion that adding SADF officers to FNLA units would be effective:

‘... the success of operation depends on good low level command and control, which means white South African control, also to be exercised over logistical support... they (FNLA) requested that we should support them not only with training, but also with the physical planning and control of operations²⁹.’

On September 24th, 1975 South Africa began Operation *Savannah* in an effort to aid FNLA and UNITA and sought to push back the MPLA. This operation will be described in greater detail in the following section. Breytenbach commanded Bravo Group, a rag tag unit that would form the eventual nucleus of the feared 32 Bn.

The 32 Bn consisted mostly of Angolan troops and South African officers plus other men from all over the world. At first Breytenbach had virtually nothing to work with except for the determination of him and his staff. It was only bit by bit that his unit received equipment and it

²⁷ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p5

²⁸ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p38

²⁹ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p9

would take until August 29th 1977 till the 32 Bn was an officially designated SADF unit. A telex was received that include the following:

‘Col van Heerden (Army HQ) confirms that the org of 32 Bn was finally approved and accepted by minister on Monday 29 Aug 1977...Congratulations – at last!³⁰’

After the 32 Bn came into existence it saw combat more than any other unit, apart from perhaps the Recces, which is in no small part due to the fact that the 32 Bn base was right at the frontline, located at Bagani in the Caprivi Strip³¹. The next unit to be looked at is the 44 Parachute Brigade, this was yet another unit which had a large input from Jan Breytenbach.

³⁰ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p50

³¹ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p38

Origin of the 44 Parachute Brigade

The 44 Parachute Brigade was formed on April 20th 1978 and commanded from the outset by Brigadier M.J. du Plessis and Colonel Jan Breytenbach, the latter was a qualified parachute officer. The unit was formed after Defense Minister P.W. Botha gave the approval in April 1978.

The South African history with regard to paratroopers dates from September 1960 when it was decided that 15 officers would undergo paratrooper training with the Royal Air Force. Rhodesia had just created its own paratrooper unit and in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, tensions began to rise in South Africa. All these men received their wings and the men returned to South Africa in December 1960. These men formed the nucleus around which the 1st Parachute Battalion would be built. Under SADF Order 74/61, the 1st Parachute Battalion officially came into existence on April 1st 1961, a mere two months before South Africa declared itself a Republic³². This unit was founded at Bloemfontein at the Tempe base. Initially this unit consisted solely of Permanent Force (fulltime SADF personnel) however later on Citizen Force (part-time) also became a part of the unit. As has been stated previously members of this unit took part in Operation *Blouwildebees* in August 1966, marking the first time that SADF personnel were used in combat since the end of WWII.

The unit's first deployment as an independent unit came with the advent of Operation *Savannah* in 1974/1975. Two companies were deployed to relieve Portuguese communities who had gotten trapped by the MPLA.

³² File G/SD/3/1, VOI1, Enclosure 1, dd 28 February 1961, Archive group 1 Para Bn, Rack 17, Box No.5.

Initially the brigade amounted to 1st Parachute battalion (Permanent Force) and 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions (Citizen Force). However the SADF soon came to the conclusion that these units, comprising solely of infantry would simply not be a sufficiently balanced force for conventional operations. It was thus decided to reorganize the unit into an all-arms formation that included an airborne component, thus the brigade was expanded to allow for engineer, signals, anti-tank, maintenance, anti-aircraft as well as workshop units to give the brigade a near self-sufficient profile.

It was in May 1978 that the 44 Parachute Brigade would become famous for Operation *Reindeer*, which took place in Cassinga, Angola. This operation will be described in detail in the following section.

The final unit to be looked at is the South West African Police Counterinsurgency Unit (Koevoet), this was a very unique unit and one that Jan Breytenbach had no part in.

Origin of the South West African Police Counterinsurgency Unit (Koevoet)

The South West African Police Counterinsurgency Unit (known hereafter as Koevoet) was the most effective unit against SWAPO. During the period 1978 – 1989, whilst comprising only 10% of all forces in SWA, they were responsible for some 70% of all contacts with SWAPO³³.

As was stated in the introduction, SWAPO began infiltrating into SWA starting in the mid 1960's. By the late 1970's SWAPO increased its efforts and the conventional approach carried out by South Africa was simply not effective enough to counter this threat. The SADF was in control externally, yet internally SWAPO was growing ever more powerful.

The use of mines by SWAPO was demoralizing both the local SWA population but also reducing the movement of the security forces. By 1978 the war in SWA was literally a stalemate.

'On March 1977 PW Botha announced in parliament that in the two years since April 1975, 231 insurgents had been killed in Owamboland, the Kavanago and the Eastern Caprivi. The Security Forces had lost 33 men and the infiltrators had killed 53 black civilians during the period³⁴.'

Brigadier Jannie Geldenhuys took over as General Officer Commanding South West Africa Command. His primary task was to 'manage the security situation and contain the level of insurgency so that the constitutional process could develop in an atmosphere of peace and stability³⁵'. Another task Geldenhuys set out to do was to reduce the number of South Africans

³³ Hooper, Jim, *Koevoet!*, 2012, p65

³⁴ Geldenhuys, Jannie, *A General's Story*, 2009, p60

³⁵ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p41

fighting in SWA by replacing them with SWA personnel. By 1982, 60% of those serving in SWA were from SWA and by the end of the decade this number went up over 70% of the total³⁶.

In the midst of 1978 Colonel 'Sterk' (strong) Hans Dreyer, an SAP officer who served in Rhodesia was sent to SWA. The SAP and the SADF had discussed the insurgency problems in SWA and wanted to come up with a solution. The plan was to use the Recces and the security branch (special police charged with national/internal security) working together to establish a unit that operated like the Selous Scouts in Rhodesia. The Selous Scouts were a highly effective counter insurgency unit that was highly praised and seen as a model for counter insurgency operations.

Dreyer's initial task was to set up intelligence gathering operation of the local SWA population, this was Top Secret Operation K, K standing for Koevoet (Afrikaans for crowbar)³⁷. The idea was to gather intelligence by using the local SWA population about SWAPO's movements and whereabouts. Once the intelligence was analyzed and deemed useful, orders would be given to the Recces to move in and to eliminate SWAPO.

Initially Dreyer started off with just four men under his command. 'How can I fight a war with only four men?' Dreyer asked his boss, police Commissioner Johan Coetzee. 'It will have to do for a start' was Coetzee's reply³⁸.

It soon became apparent that the plan would need to be revised as the Recces were too preoccupied in Angola to be able to offer much assistance in terms of capturing SWAPO for intelligence. The operation was changed entirely and reverted back to 'basic' police work by

³⁶ Geldenhuys, Jannie, *A General's Story*, 2009, p60

³⁷ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p53

³⁸ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p54

creating networks of informers, talking to the local populace. Dreyer soon also discovered that the local population, the Owambos were excellent trackers. Dreyer then made sure that his expanding staff would consist of teams of police constables who would always employ trackers as well to track SWAPO tracks.

The addition of trackers changed Koevoet around and the unit was soon vastly expanded and also given special equipment to deal with the landmine threat. Special mine protected vehicles called Casspirs were allocated.

‘Combining their police investigational abilities and skills at getting information, the tracking abilities of their special constables, the landmine protection provide by their Casspirs – with the support of SAAF helicopter gunships – Koevoet emerged as the premier counter-insurgency unit in SWA³⁹.’

During the ten years of existence, Koevoet took part in 1615 contacts with SWAPO and managed to kill/capture 3,225 SWAPO for the loss of 160 dead and 949 wounded Koevoet. Koevoet suffered more casualties than any other South African unit during the Border War⁴⁰.

³⁹ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, inside cover front side

⁴⁰ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, inside cover front side

Chapter 3

Select South African Operations during the Border War

This section, the main part of this thesis, is designed to give the reader an indication of the type operations undertaken by the abovementioned units. Given the length of this thesis, it is impossible to even mention all of the operations thus a choice was made to mention a few select operations. The decision was made to mention every unit in at least one operation with the exception of Koevoet, who will receive their own separate section as the nature of their operations was vastly different from those of the other units in question.

The operations to be used are as follows, written in chronological order:

- Operation *Savannah* 1975 – 1976 by Bravo Group (later became 32 Bn)
- Operation *Reindeer* 1978 by 44th Parachute Brigade and 32 Bn
- Operation *Super* 1982 by 32 Bn
- Operation *Askari* 1983 – 1984 by 32 Bn and Recces
- Koevoet Operations 1979 – 1989 (own separate section, as they undertook more than 1,600 engagements with SWAPO/PLAN in SWA)
- Battle of Cuito Cuanavale (Operations *Modular*, *Hooper* and *Packer*) 1987 -1988 by 32 Bn, 44th Parachute Brigade and Recces

Operation Savannah

Operation *Savannah* marked the first time that the South African military fought in a conventional campaign since the end of WWII. Operation *Savannah* was the supposedly covert SADF incursion into Angola to support the movements fighting against the MPLA, UNITA and the FNLA at the time. During the course of the operation the political situation changed rapidly with the introduction of Cuban ground forces in late 1975 as well as the US withholding their support for SA and essentially abandoning its unofficial ally in this conflict. Before going into further detail regarding the conflict, it is important to look at the roots of this operation.

As been mentioned previously, the social coup that erupted in Portugal during April 1974, lay at the root of this conflict. It was decided that Angola would become an independent nation on November 11th 1975 and that all Portuguese troops would be withdrawn by then as well. In the middle of 1975, Angola was engulfed in a full-blown civil war and by August 1975 the MPLA had taken over control of most towns in central and southern Angola. The sides opposing the MPLA, UNITA and the FNLA were in urgent need of foreign aid for which they went to SA and the US.

The Ruacana Falls located on the Kuene River is part of the top 10 largest water falls of the world. SA realized that this location had huge potential as being the site of a hydro-electric power plant ever since they had taken over SWA. It was in 1969 that SA and Portugal signed an agreement to develop a hydroelectric plant system, a massive project. By 1979 SA had invested R261 million into the plant and everything around it⁴¹. To ensure an adequate water level for the dam, especially in winter months when the water level was lower, storage dams were built

⁴¹ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p21

further up the river. One of these dams was located some 15 kilometers north of the Angolan – SWA border at a place called Calueque. Most of the construction took place in Angola however the electrical plant itself, with the exception of a 1, 5 kilometer water supply tunnel was located in SWA.

By 1974, the construction was well underway with construction carried out by workers from many different international countries. SWAPO had identified the location as a prime target and had told workers that they should either leave or getting the risk of being killed. Following the coup in Lisbon, Portuguese soldiers were withdrawn from Angola and the workers demanded that the SADF protected the area. In early August 1975 UNITA troops had harassed and robbed South African workers on their way home from the site. It was this event that persuaded South Africa to intervene militarily in Angola. By many this event was seen as an excuse for South Africa to intervene militarily however Pretoria intended for this intervention to be small scale and most importantly covert⁴².

On August 9th 1975, a SADF infantry platoon supported by a two armored cars moved into the area and secured it against the Angolan independence movements, which were quickly routed from the scene. A few days later South Africa negotiated with Portugal and proposed that Portugal would guard the area until the November 11th 1975 elections and that the SADF would continue to do so afterwards. Portugal was simply unable to do so and they suggested that the SADF should guard the area until the elections and then make a deal with whoever would win the elections in Angola⁴³.

⁴² Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p22

⁴³ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p22

General Viljoen, who was in command of the operation said the following about the operation:

‘...It is true that South African involvement in the scheme was big and it’s true Ovamboland was very dependent on the water, and South West Africa on the electricity, but I must be honest, I always got the impression it was a handy way of explaining an operation that didn’t have the intention of protecting Calueque and Ruacana. It was a handy explanation to use to the rest of the world.’⁴⁴

South Africa and the US began to covertly supply UNITA and FNLA in their struggle against the Soviet bloc backed MPLA beginning just before the SADF intervention. The American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was heavily involved as well ferrying in supplies with American planes which were later transferred to SADF planes to minimize the US presence.

Cuba also became heavily involved in Angola, its Communist leader at the time, Fidel Castro supported the MPLA based on the idea of ‘Internationalism’ as well as to raise the profile of Cuba in the Third World. It has long been suspected that Cuba was a mere proxy of the Soviet Union but research found this claim to be incorrect. Cuba decided to intervene in Angola independently of the Soviet Union, though most weapons and supplies were delivered by the Soviet Union. In the fall of 1975, significant numbers of Cuban regular forces began arriving with sophisticated Soviet weaponry and Cuban forces fought battles with the SADF⁴⁵.

In September 1975, Pretoria finalized plans to invade Angola and to push back the MPLA in support of UNITA/FNLA. To accomplish this taskforce Zulu was formed, comprising of battle group Alpha (commanded by Commandant Delville) and Bravo (commanded by

⁴⁴ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p23

⁴⁵ Warwick, Rodney, *Operation Savannah: A Measure of SADF Decline, Resourcefulness and Modernisation, 2012*, p355 -357

Breytenbach). Breytenbach had three companies of FNLA troops under his command and the whole operation was designed

‘in a way that would allow the SADF ‘plausible deniability’ – all signs of South African involvement had to be hidden, with troops wearing non-specific or former Portuguese uniforms and using Portuguese G3 and Belgian-made FN rifles. Their vehicles would be Land Rovers or vegetable trucks bought from Angolan refugees⁴⁶.

On October 14th, both battle groups began their attacks northward into Angola, within two weeks Breytenbach’s Bravo Group had advanced all the way across Angola to reach the Atlantic Ocean at Moçâmedes and Porto Alexandre. It was during the battle of Catengue on November 2nd 1975 that the Bravo Group encountered Cuban forces in battle for the first time.

On November 4th 1975, after the failure at Catengue Castro gave the order to commence Operation *Carlota*. During this clash at Catengue on November 2nd six Cubans were killed and it threw Luanda into panic⁴⁷. Castro had to make a choice, to either to withdraw Cuba’s training personnel immediately to prevent further losses or to escalate the situation and commit thousands of regular forces. In the end Castro went for the latter option. On the same day the first planes left for Luanda filled with troops. The first priority of Castro was to ensure that the MPLA could hold on to Luanda, the capital of Angola.

Contrary to public opinion at the time of the events, Castro launched operation *Carlota* on his own, without consent of the Soviet Union. Castro stated the following ‘We acted... but without (Soviet) cooperation. Quite the opposite, in fact⁴⁸’

⁴⁶ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p17

⁴⁷ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p76

⁴⁸ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p76

In early November the situation was most dire for the MPLA, who had steadily been reinforced by thousands of Cuban soldiers flown in directly from Cuba.

By this time it also became clear to SA leadership in Pretoria that the capture of Luanda would be impossible by November 11th, Angola's Independence Day. The SA cabinet was told that a 1,500 strong taskforce might suffer up to 40% casualties, if such an operation were to be carried out. Worried of suffering such heavy casualties Pretoria decided that Task Force Zulu should withdraw south while the SADF was still in a favorable military situation⁴⁹.

On November 10th an ill-advised attack was launched by the FNLA against Quifangondo, just east of Luanda that ended in complete failure. The outdated SADF artillery were vastly outgunned by the superior Cuban BDM-21 rocket launchers and the promised SADF bombing took place from too high due to fear of casualties. By November 18, Task Force Zulu had travelled 3,159 kilometers and inflicted heavy casualties and suffered very few in return⁵⁰.

On November 25th the SADF suffered its first military defeat during this operation at Ebo. A total of five SADF soldiers were killed and 11 were wounded during an ambush carried about by Cuban and MPLA forces. The following day a SADF spotter plane was also shot down over Ebo.

On December 9th the next major battle was fought at a bridge over the Nhia River, bridge 14. Withdrawing Cuban forces had blown up this bridge to slow down the SADF advance on Quibala. During this battle the SADF was able to utilize their rather limited artillery very effectively using forward observers. During this battle, won by the SADF, 4 SADF members were killed as were roughly 400 Cuban/MPLA troops. For Cuba this was a heavy defeat, not

⁴⁹ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p93

⁵⁰ Warwick, Rodney, *Operation Savannah: A Measure of SADF Decline, Resourcefulness and Modernisation, 2012*, p371

only in terms of personnel lost but also in terms of equipment. The SADF engineers who managed to repair the bridge were congratulated for their extreme bravery and adversity during this battle with many of them receiving awards for their actions. While the battle was a military victory, SA failed to capitalize on it due to divided leadership and in the end, arguably the greatest SADF victory of this operation, resulted neither in tactical nor strategic gain.

Pretoria ordered both task forces to halt any further advances and to consolidate their positions and postponed the decision to withdraw. In January 1976, Cuba launched a series of counter attacks forcing the FNLA south. On January 23rd 1976, the decision was finally made for the SADF to withdraw to SWA, at the time SADF forces numbered some 4,000 – 5,000, above the number initially sanctioned by Pretoria due to the Cuban intervention. By early February only a small rearguard was left in Angola to help UNITA maintain bases. On March 27th 1976 the final SADF troops had left Angola⁵¹.

Without the support of the SADF in Angola the MPLA supported by Cuba was able to take over virtually all of Angola, with the exception of a small strip close to the SWA border. In the end *Savannah* was a failure for Pretoria, although it suffered ‘only’ 49 dead, the political costs were far greater. It was not until March 1976 that SA admitted it was fighting in Angola, which in the end was a failure in terms of how it should have handled the media. In November 1975, it was already leaked to the press that SADF was fighting in Angola; Cuba used this as their justification to intervene. Another crucial aspect is that at the end of 1975 the US government and their forces on the ground, the CIA, withheld their support to South Africa. The US could not be seen openly aiding South Africa. By the end of *Savannah* Cuba had increased its

⁵¹ Warwick, Rodney, *Operation Savannah: A Measure of SADF Decline, Resourcefulness and Modernisation, 2012*, p376

force from 1, 000 at the start of *Savannah* to more than 36,000 by the end of it⁵².

In conclusion however it must be remembered that *Savannah* was mostly a political failure, from a military prospective the SADF hardly lost any battles, it was mostly due to Pretoria's failures that *Savannah* ended up as a failure. In the end the operation is best summarized by General Viljoen who stated that it was a 'war of lost opportunities'⁵³.

⁵² George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p115

⁵³ Steenkamp, Willem, *South Africa's Border War*, 1989, p60

Operation *Reindeer*

A few years after operation *Savannah* South Africa launched its first cross border operation in 1978 seeking to gain the initiative in their fight against the SWAPO insurgency into SWA. The SADF knew the basic rules of an insurgency as stated by General Geldenhuys, General officer commanding SWA:

‘The basic truth in an insurgency war is that the insurgent, potentially and often in practice, has the initiative... In a conflict situation the one who has the initiative seldom loses and we knew we had to find the way to seize and keep the initiative. One way to do this was to act first instead of waiting, by taking the battle to the insurgents⁵⁴’

The SADF thus came up with a plan to strike first at SWAPO in Angola before they would move in SWA. Operation *Reindeer* was the end result. It was a plan that consisted of three separate strikes into Angola. By 1978, SWAPO had established many bases close to the Angolan – SWA border, with their main headquarters located deeper into Angola. SWAPO knew that they were safe as the MPLA government backed them as well as Cuban military forces. SWAPO infiltration was becoming increasingly worrisome for the security situation in SWA⁵⁵.

Until operation *Reindeer* the SADF had hardly ventured into Angola with the exception of small detachments of 32 Bn for reconnaissance or small attacks. The SADF was entirely structured in a defensive formation within SWA.

SADF leadership requested permission from Pretoria to venture in Angola and to neutralize SWAPO target before they could infiltrate into SWA. The operation consisted of three separate,

⁵⁴ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p72

⁵⁵ McGill, Alexander, *South African Airborne Operations*, 2000, p61

simultaneous attacks. The main target was named Alpha target 'Moscow' at Cassinga, a small town located some 250 km north of the SWA – Angola border. Alpha target was to be attacked by a force of 257 paratroopers under command of Commandant Jan Breytenbach⁵⁶. SA intelligence had determined that SWAPO had established a major headquarters here consisting of a large recruitment training base, a logistics center as well as recuperation facilities⁵⁷. It was estimated that some 1,500 SWAPO would be at this location, as well as numerous Cuban advisors and an unknown but significant number of civilians⁵⁸.

Intelligence further observed that the Cassinga headquarters were responsible for orchestrating incursion into SWA from several bases close to the SWA – Angolan border. Two of such bases were also attacked. Target Bravo 'Vietnam' consisted of six bases some 30 kilometers north of the SWA – Angola border, located at Chetequera. Target Bravo was attacked by units from the 2nd South African Infantry Bn, commanded by Commandant Frank Bestbier.

The last target, target Charlie, were several smaller bases located tot the east of Chetequera, which were to be assaulted by several companies of the 32 Bn, under command of Commandant Deon Ferreira. Prime Minister B.J. Vorster approved the overall plan and it was scheduled to take place on May 4th 1978, Ascension Day⁵⁹.

Due to the nature of the operation and the danger involved for the SADF forces secrecy and effective planning were vital. A major concern for the attack on Cassinga was the location of a Cuban battalion some 16 kilometers away, as the source of a possible counter attack⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p134

⁵⁷ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p72

⁵⁸ McGill, Alexander, *South African Airborne Operations*, 2000, p62

⁵⁹ McGill, Alexander, *South African Airborne Operations*, 2000, p62

⁶⁰ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p134

Secondly the SADF forces would be outnumbered roughly five to one and thus a swift attack was key before SWAPO could mobilize to defend effectively.

The assault began at 08:00 with an airstrike, which was timed to coincide with the morning parade to attempt to maximize casualties. SADF bombers caused widespread damage and confusion amongst the SWAPO present. The paratroopers, even though they missed the drop zone by 1.5 kilometers, moved in quickly and managed to sweep the target with ease. Within a few hours Cassinga was declared secure and by early afternoon helicopters arrived to extract the paratroopers.

At roughly the same time the Cuban battalion had organized to come to the defense of Cassinga but they were attacked by SADF attack planes and their column was virtually annihilated. It is estimated that at least 100 Cubans were killed during this attack⁶¹. By the time that Cuban forces had arrived at Cassinga, the last SADF troops were leaving the area and by the evening the entire unit was safely back in SWA.

The SADF suffered three dead, eleven wounded and one Missing In Action (MIA), SWAPO suffered some 600 dead and 340 wounded⁶². The Cubans suffered at least 100 dead plus three tanks, seventeen armored personnel carriers, seven trucks and three anti-aircraft guns, according to SADF reports.

While the Cassinga raid, as it was later called, was a tremendous success, Operation *Reindeer* still consisted of two other components. Battle Group Juliet was to attack the SWAPO headquarters designated Vietnam and 32 Bn was to attack a total of 17 smaller bases located up

⁶¹ McGill, Alexander, *South African Airborne Operations*, 2000, p65

⁶² George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p134

to 30 km north of the Angolan border⁶³. During the planning of the attack by the 32 Bn little intelligence was available on the targets ‘and a decision was made to focus on the ‘shallow’ target rather than going for deep penetration into unknown territory’⁶⁴. This decision was made to minimize the risk of SADF casualties.

The attack by Battle Group Juliet was also underway on May 4th and highly successful with SADF suffering only two dead and sixteen wounded prior to their withdrawal back to SWA. In contrast SWAPO suffered some 250 dead and had 250 of their members captured by South African forces.

It was not until early morning on May 6th at 04:15 to be precise before the 32 Bn moved into Angola to commence their part of Operation *Reindeer*. The final plan was for 32 Bn to systematically destroy SWAPO bases, one after another⁶⁵. 32 Bn’s attack started after an artillery assault on bases, and afterwards 32 Bn moved in to neutralize and destroy them. Initially 32 Bn operated without air support but it was decided that helicopters offered a much greater flexibility and effectiveness. During the planning no one had thought to inform the air force that helicopters would be required. Initially after artillery shelling 32 Bn found several bases deserted as it took them too long to reach the bases after the artillery bombardments. The use of helicopters drastically reduced the time and as a result 32 Bn was able to engage SWAPO forces. On May 6th, a tragic friendly fire event occurred when one 32 Bn member was killed and eighteen were wounded when artillery landed on the wrong coordinates. An inquiry later showed that improper maintenance was the cause for the friendly fire incident. On May 11th the final targets were

⁶³ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p129

⁶⁴ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p129

⁶⁵ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p129

struck and by 10:00 on that day all 32 Bn member were back across the border in SWA. Records do not state how many casualties SWAPO suffered during the final phase of Operation *Reindeer*.

The final balance of this operation stands at roughly 10:00 SWAPO and Cuban dead, hundreds wounded and 250 captured as opposed to six South Africans dead, one MIA and thirty wounded. General Geldhuys stated the following about the attacks afterwards ‘The Cassinga attack was a jewel of military craftsmanship – and SWAPO knew it.’⁶⁶ Operation *Reindeer* was the SADF’s most successful operation against SWAPO

‘and inflicted losses in personnel and material from which SWAPO never recovered... a resounding success, shattering SWAPO’s Angolan infrastructure and delivering a devastating psychological blow.’⁶⁷

Politically speaking the attack was an enormous failure as SWAPO accused South Africa of attacking of what SWAPO quickly labelled as a ‘refugee camp’ where hundreds of ‘women and children were massacred’. To this very day the Cassinga raid remains the most controversial operation undertaken by the SADF. Afterwards the SADF did admit that some civilians were caught in the crossfire and were killed.

‘Afterwards, at the debrief, paratroopers told in detail how these ‘refugees’ used 23mm anti-aircraft cannons in the ground role against them; how hundreds of ak-47 rifles were found next to bodies; and how the ‘refugees’ offered stiff resistance from extensive fortifications surrounding the village.’⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Geldenhuys, J, *At the front*, 2009, p99

⁶⁷ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p135

⁶⁸ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p87

The international outcry provided SWAPO, Cuba and Angola with a useful diversion on the real issue, how it was possible for the SADF to eliminate some of the most important SWAPO facilities this easily inside Angola and suffering so few casualties in the process. Interestingly enough the heavy Cuban losses are not mentioned in official reports who speak only of 'light losses', though officers who were there during the attack knew otherwise. Ultimately Operation *Reindeer* showed that South Africa was willing to strike first against SWAPO and it would do so again if required. Cuba's forces were woefully unprepared defensively for an airborne attack as was carried out on May 4th 1978. SWAPO's reputation was greatly affected and it would take years to recover from the damage suffered that day. Lastly and perhaps most importantly Operation *Reindeer* showed that Cuba's forces would be sorely needed in Angola and could not be withdrawn starting in 1979 as was planned. At the end Cuban forces would stay in Angola for twelve more years, until 1991 when the final troops were brought back to Cuba⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p135

Operation Super

Starting in February 1982 SWAPO activity was detected in the till then relatively quiet western sector in Angola. Radio intercepts indicated that SWAPO might be attempting to infiltrate into SWA using the Kaokoveld⁷⁰, the coastal desert that runs along northern SWA and southern Angola separating the inland from the Atlantic Ocean. This region is extremely rugged and ‘the rocky, hilly terrain makes mobile vehicular warfare almost impossible...Perhaps this factor induced SWAPO to attempt their infiltration here’⁷¹. There were two main reasons for SWAPO’s plan, firstly the SWAPO casualty rate when infiltrating through the Owamboland was ever increasing due to better security measures taken by the SADF and SAP. Secondly operating through the Kaokoveld ‘would stretch our resources and our defensive capabilities’⁷². This news greatly upset SA high command and they decided to send in a ten man Recce team to gather intelligence on the ground⁷³.

From late February till the beginning of March 1982 several trucks had made their way from Cahama to Iona, a location some 30 kilometers north of the SWA – Angolan border. A SWAPO radio message intercepted on March 4th stating ‘Area cleared of all’⁷⁴. This radio intercept got the SADF alarm bells ringing and on March 9th a ten man Recce team from the 5th regiment was flown into Angola by helicopter and dropped off some 20 kilometers east of Iona. At Marienfluss, just south of the Kunene River, dividing SWA from Angola, tactical

⁷⁰ Spriggs, A. (n.d.). Africa: Coastal Namibia and Angola. Retrieved from World Wildlife Fund: <http://worldwildlife.org/ecoregions/at1310>

⁷¹ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p203

⁷² Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p203

⁷³ Stiff, Peter, *The Silent War*, 1999, p359

⁷⁴ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p181

headquarters was set up under command of Captain Jan Hougaard. This detachment consisted of 36 32 Bn members, two Puma transport helicopters, two Alouette gunships and were on standby as a reaction force⁷⁵.

On the way to Iona the Recces planted some mines on the road leading from Moçâmedes and at 03:00 on March 10th a six vehicle convoy approached driving towards the south and the lead vehicle was knocked out by a mine. An airstrike was ordered by the SADF tactical headquarters but due to bad weather the planes were unable to take off. The five remaining vehicles split up, three turning back where they came from and the last two continuing southwards.

During the day the Recces had reached Iona and reported back to the tactical headquarters that the area was deserted but the Recces did find vehicle and human tracks heading south and the team decided to pursue them. Soon after three SWAPO were captured and shortly after 14:00 contact was made with a larger group of SWAPO consisting of 17 fighters. Alouette gunships and a 12 man reactionary force were brought in and not long after 14 SWAPO lay dead and 3 more were captured. The prisoners were brought back to the Marienfluss headquarters where they revealed, after interrogation, that 200 SWAPO were located at a base 10 kilometers south of Iona located in the Cambena valley⁷⁶.

At the tactical headquarters, planning began immediately to launch an attack on the SWAPO camp to be launched at 12:00 on March 12th. Captain Hougaard would lead the attack. The attack force would consist of 45 men from 32 Bn Delta Company, three 12 man stopper groups (units designed to cut off an enemy's retreat) and a 12 man mortar group. A 36 men

⁷⁵ Nortje,Piet,32 *Battalion*, 2003, p181

⁷⁶ Nortje,Piet,32 *Battalion*, 2003, p182

reserve unit remained on standby at Marienfluss. The air component would consist of five Puma helicopters for transport and four Alouette gunships. Soon after takeoff however heavy rain had reduced visibility to almost zero and the attack had to be postponed until the next morning 07:30⁷⁷.

The assault force had been very close to the base by the time it was called off and back at the SADF headquarters officers were worried that SWAPO had abandoned the base and fled. Headquarters wanted to call off the second attack but Captain Hougaard was convinced that the base would still be operational and wanted to launch a second attempt, in the end Hougaard turned out to be right⁷⁸.

The attack was launched after the gunships over the base, which was large, measuring 1,000 by 1,500 meters. Initially the gunship pilots could not spot the enemy, as they had camouflaged themselves well, attempting to blend in amongst rocks and small bushes. It was only after SWAPO fired up the gunships that crews realized the enemy was right below them⁷⁹. Under Alouette gunship cover the 45 men from the 32 Bn were landed only 50 meters away from the base and commenced their assault.

The mortar group was deployed on the high ground to deliver fire support, it turned out that the base was manned by 300 SWAPO, and not 200 as the SWAPO prisoner had claimed. The 32 Bn troops were thus outnumbered roughly 7:1, and normal doctrine calls for a superiority of 3:1 when attacking an enemy. The gunships were utilized as so-called 'force multiplier' (a capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the

⁷⁷ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p182

⁷⁸ Stiff, Peter, *The Silent War*, 1999, p361

⁷⁹ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p204

combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment)⁸⁰. Soon after the attack began, one of the stopper groups was also relocated to an attempt to even out the odds, though the 32 Bn troops remained heavily outnumbered⁸¹.

SWAPO had made a grave error in the location of their base, which was established in a narrow valley, with high ground on all sides and it lacked a clear escape route. The landscape itself seemed lunar, consisting mostly of rocks, small bushes and high cliffs. SWAPO were continuously under attack from the gunships which caused SWAPO very heavy losses. SWAPO sought to shoot down the Alouettes using SAM-7's but due to the very low altitude the gunships were flying at the missiles failed to lock on, and they did not possess proximity fuses⁸².

The fighting lasted roughly till 15:00 by which time the 32 Bn troops had nearly run out of ammunition but by then the base had been mostly cleared of resistance. The exhausted 32 Bn troops were gravely concerned of a SWAPO counter attack during the night originating from the north, but fortunately for them no such attack materialized⁸³.

In the morning additional 32 Bn troops arrived to assist with the final mopping up. Captured documents revealed that the SWAPO troops at this base had been ordered to establish supply caches in the Kaokoveld in anticipation of SWAPO infiltrations and attacks into SWA. A lot of weapons and equipment were seized, including RPG launchers, machine guns, dozens of rifles as well as many rounds of ammunition. In addition thousands of kilos of food were confiscated and brought back to SWA⁸⁴.

⁸⁰ Sharp, W. L. (2001). Joint Publication 3-05.1. Washington D.C: Department of Defense.

⁸¹ Stiff, Peter, *The Silent War*, 1999, p361

⁸² Stiff, Peter, *The Silent War*, 1999, p361

⁸³ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p184

⁸⁴ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p184

Operation *Super* was a tremendous success for the SADF, and it was only named *Super* two days after the base had been attacked. The SADF had managed to put a hold on SWAPO plans to infiltrate into SWA through the Kaokoveld. During this attack SWAPO losses amounted to 201 dead and 7 captured. 32 Bn had 3 men killed and 5 wounded, given the number of SWAPO they faced it is remarkable how few casualties they had suffered. 32 Bn members were quick to thank the gunships for their outstanding support during the attack and believed they deserved a lot of praise for their efforts during this operation.

The SWAPO base was completely destroyed and it was never attempted again by SWAPO to infiltrate into SWA through the Kaokoveld. Captain Hougaard received personal congratulations from South Africa's Prime Minister, P.W. Botha afterwards for this outstanding victory. 5 men who had taken part in the operation were awarded the *Honoris Crux*, South Africa's highest medal, for their services, these men were Captain Ellis, Sergeant Stephen Coetzee, Second Lieutenant Petrus Nel, Temporary Sergeant Victor Dracula and lastly Rifleman Bernardo Domingos⁸⁵.

⁸⁵ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p204

Operation Askari

In 1981 the SADF carried out operation *Protea* which successfully neutralized SWAPO in southern Angola in a massive conventional attack. By the end of 1983, SA intelligence reports suggested that SWAPO had sufficiently recovered from this major setback⁸⁶. SWAPO was preparing for major infiltrations in early 1984 and the SADF decided to prematurely attack SWAPO in Angola. The aim of the operation was ‘to prevent a SWAPO Special Forces incursion to the south⁸⁷’. A complex plan was decided upon, the end result being called operation *Askari*.

Operation *Askari* was initially scheduled to commence in early November but this was delayed due to negotiations by SA foreign minister Pik Botha in Rome regarding SWA. Operation *Askari* would consist of four phases which were designed around the following general guidelines for this operation:

- a. ‘The enemy must be stopped externally
- b. Deep reconnaissance coupled to offensive actions must be commenced at an early stage
- c. Maximum use of mobile elements for follow-ups must be made
- d. Security forces must operate pro-actively, not re-actively
- e. Security forces must maintain the initiative
- f. An infiltration during 1984 must simply not take place. Not even 10 terrorists must successfully infiltrate⁸⁸’

⁸⁶ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p193

⁸⁷ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p300

⁸⁸ Lord, R, *Operation Askari*, 1992, Vol 22, Nr 4, p2

These outlines were straightforward with the exception of guideline f, which was completely impractical and should not have been included for this operation. The four phases of this operation were as follows:

‘Phase 1: Deep reconnaissance by Special Forces followed by a SAAF (South African Air Force) attack on the “Typhoon”/Volcano” base close to Lubango between 1 November and 30 December 1983.

Phase 2: Offensive reconnaissance/isolation of Cahama, Mulonodo and Cuvelai from 16 November to mid-January 1983. The aim being, to cut enemy communications and logistics lines in the deep area and to terrorise and demoralize FAPLA to such an extent that they would withdraw.

Phase 3: To establish a dominated area from west of the Cunene River, through Quiteve, Mupa, Vinticet, eastwards through londe, by the beginning of Feb 1984.

Phase 4: The final stopping of the incursion, internally if necessary.⁸⁹

There was however a major problem for the SADF right from the outset of this operation: ‘because of the possible political consequences, though, they were given severe limitations. They were prohibited from launching direct attacks against any of the targets⁹⁰. The entire operation was designed from the beginning with the political consequences in mind yet to the SADF it meant that they were unable to carry out this operation as they would have liked nonetheless they simply had to carry out their orders as outlined in the operational plan.

⁸⁹ Lord, R, *Operation Askari*, 1992, Vol 22, Nr 4, p3

⁹⁰ Stiff, Peter, *The Silent War*, 1999, p366

Opposition consisted of SWAPO who were supported by FAPLA (Angolan armed forces). A number of towns were heavily fortified with AAA (anti-aircraft artillery), SAM (surface to air missiles), ground artillery and machine guns. Cuban ground forces were not found in the immediate vicinity except for a few advisors, as it was Castro's policy to not:

‘...deploy substantial formation in areas where they might become pitted against the SADF...The Cuban's main fighting strength was in Luanda. At the time of Operation *Askari* they posed a potential rather than an actual threat to the South Africans.⁹¹

The operation got underway in early December 1983 with the deployment of 5 Recce teams of various sizes, the largest Recce deployment of the entire war. ‘They were deployed west of Cahama, east of Cahama, in the vicinity of Mulondo, in the outskirts of Cuvelai and were also tasked to reconnoiter the Lubango area⁹²’.

The Recces were handed a difficult task but in general had managed to do well in acquiring tactical intelligence which was utilized to prepare for the remaining phases of operation *Askari*. The main target of phase one, a SWAPO training facility at Lubango was struck at 09:20 by SAAF bombers. This strike was a success and the SAAF suffered no losses.

On December 6th the main assault was launched, consisting of four mechanized battle groups each of roughly 500 men supported by air strikes and Recce teams⁹³. The main effort was launched towards Cuvelai with diversionary attacks on Cahama and Caiundo. The 32 Bn was

⁹¹ Stiff, Peter, *The Silent War*, 1999, p365

⁹² Lord, R, *Operation Askari*, 1992, Vol 22, Nr 4, p3

⁹³ Geldenhuys, J, *At the front*, 2009, p165

sent to Cassinga where 32 Bn reconnaissance teams had begun operation as early as November 26th as part of Operation *Askari*⁹⁴.

Phase 2 began with an assault on the town of Chama, a well-defended town manned by the FAPLA 2nd Brigade. The SADF 61 Mechanized Bn assisted by artillery was given the task to occupy the town. Firstly two Recce teams sought to neutralize FAPLA logistics between Cahama and Chimemba while SAAF strikes struck targets within Chama⁹⁵. On December 16th the encirclement of Chama began and SAAF bombings plus artillery began to pound Chama around the clock. Intelligence obtained indicated that the morale of the 2nd Brigade at Chama was falling due to the SA pressure and it appeared as if the SADF plan was working. By the end of December 1983 however, international pressure had reached a point where all efforts had to be called off at Cahama and the 61 Bn was withdrawn. This was a grave mistake by SA leadership ‘maintenance of the aim is a fundamental principle of war. All the effort put into the Cahama operation was not only wasted, it reinforced the enemies morale⁹⁶’.

Two further unsuccessful diversionary attacks took place at the towns of Mulondo and Ciundo. The Mulondo assault was called off in early January 1984 for the same reasons as the Cahama operation. Ciundo was different. Originally it was never part of the *Askari* plan and in the end its addition was a poor choice and the town was not taken, despite a concerted effort over the period of three weeks.

The main effort of *Askari* was directed at the town of Cuvelai, which hosted a large SWAPO training facility⁹⁷. This base was located 5 kilometers from the town itself and the

⁹⁴ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p194

⁹⁵ Lord, R, *Operation Askari*, 1992, Vol 22, Nr 4, p5

⁹⁶ Lord, R, *Operation Askari*, 1992, Vol 22, Nr 4, p5

⁹⁷ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p135

assault began on January 3rd 1984. The SAAF began bombarding the base and a radio intercept indicated that the air strikes were successful ‘Seventy-five per cent of my artillery has been taken out by the South African Air Force⁹⁸’.

The SAAF played an important role in the capture of this town flying many sorties with both fixed wing planes as well as helicopters providing support to the advancing SADF ground troops. Cuvelai was surrounded by many minefields and together with the heavy rainfall, the SADF advance bogged down. When SADF forces finally reached the base they discovered that both SWAPO and FAPLA had vacated the area, fleeing north⁹⁹. A substantial number of these troops fleeing north ended up being captured by 32 Bn stopper groups who were deployed further north.

SWAPO and FAPLA were aided during this four day battle by two Cuban battalions and at the end of the day the fighting at Cuvelai was the deadliest confrontation during Operation *Askari* and accounted for 21 out of the 24 dead suffered by the SADF during *Askari*. SWAPO, FAPLA and Cub lost 324 men and 11 T-55 tanks, 14 armored cars. The SADF also captured an intact SAM-9 system¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹.

On January 10th the decision was made to put a halt to all SADF forces involved in *Askari* due to international pressure. Operation *Askari* was finished and it was regarded as a success by the SADF. Between December 1983 and January the SADF suffered 32 fatalities compared to 407 of the enemy, a ratio of 13:1¹⁰². In addition to vast human casualties scores of

⁹⁸ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p309

⁹⁹ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p311

¹⁰⁰ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p317

¹⁰¹ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p181

¹⁰² Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p318

weapons and supplies were captured at Cuvelai and sent back to South Africa. Nonetheless, on the whole the operation failed in its main aim.

‘The overall aim of *Askari*, however, was to prevent an infiltration to the south in 1984. Five hundred and fifty-five terrorists were killed during 1984 in addition to those who died during *Askari*, indicating that although they suffered losses the pattern of insurgency war continued. We failed to achieve the main aim¹⁰³’.

¹⁰³ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p318

Koevoet Operations 1979 – 1989

As has been mentioned in the introduction of this unit Koevoet was a highly specialized SAP counter insurgency unit. It operated in northern SWA and many times into Angola but it was not under the jurisdiction of the SADF. There would be many occasions when Koevoet would clash with the SADF and the top SADF Generals who would command the SWA theatre did not think highly of Koevoet.

‘I could never agree with the methods of Koevoet.’ said General Viljoen ‘They had a cruelty about them that certainly didn’t further the hearts and mind of the people.’¹⁰⁴

Another General, General Meiring stated the following about Koevoet: ‘Koevoet was not a law unto itself, Koevoet was just *unto itself*.’¹⁰⁵

In the unit introduction, it was also stated that during their 10 year period directly in the frontline it took part in more than 1600 contacts with the enemy. It is out of the scope of this paper to discuss all these contacts and engagements. Instead this section will analyze exactly how Koevoet operated and will conclude with looking at the unit’s final operation, in which the unit successfully repelled a surprise SWAPO invasion of SWA in April 1989.

Koevoet was initially established as an intelligence gathering tool for the Recces. The aim was to gather intelligence and provide trackers for the SADF who would then proceed to take out targets when the intelligence was deemed correct. It was soon determined that the reaction time was too slow. Initially by the time the operations were approved and about to be carried out by the Recces it was often too late. General Dreyer insisted on a special police unit

¹⁰⁴ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p65

¹⁰⁵ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p65

that combined intelligence gathering with its own paramilitary reaction units. As was to be expected, the SADF was highly skeptical of Dreyer's plans and stated remarks such as:

'How the hell can you succeed when we have failed? And what about your COIN units? They haven't exactly been the greatest success in history'.

Dreyer replied with 'Well, we'll see won't we.'¹⁰⁶

The addition of Koevoet's own reaction force was extremely important to their success, their reaction time was almost zero and they were able to immediately engage enemies once they had picked up their trails.

'The new reaction force was a tremendous success, engaging in thirty-six contacts in its first ninety days of operation. It didn't take long for Koevoet to become well-known throughout the operational area. During its first year of operation, Koevoet killed 511 PLAN terrorists while losing only twelve of its own men.'¹⁰⁷

While having its own reaction force was a big part of the success of Koevoet its true secret of success was its relationship with the local population in the area that it operated in. Roughly 90% of Koevoet members came from the Owamboland, the part of SWA bordering Angola, which was also the region where Koevoet was stationed.

'The secret of Koevoet's success is working with and relying on timely information from the local population in the operational area. The information they get is up to date and obtained through normal police work. Their approach to counterinsurgency is that it is

¹⁰⁶ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p68

¹⁰⁷ (2011). Retrieved from Koevoet 1979 - 1989 "Komesho": <http://koevoet.webs.com/>

essentially normal police work involving a lot of combat and that it is not warfare in the normal military sense. Koevoet, like SWATF's 101 Battalion, also uses the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief by employing former terrorists to catch PLAN infiltrators. About a quarter of the Koevoet trackers were ex-PLAN terrorists. Not only do they pursue their former comrades with the zeal of the converted, but their knowledge and use is invaluable due to their uncanny insight into the likely movements and reactions of the hunted PLAN groups. They would follow a trail to a conclusion no matter where it took them. Koevoet was not restricted by battalion, company or military sector boundaries. It was not unusual for Koevoet groups to chase their target back and forth through Owamboland, over the border into Angola and to catch them near FAPLA bases some distance into Angola.¹⁰⁸

The paragraph above taken from a website created by Koevoet veterans describes exactly what made Koevoet so effective especially in terms of intelligence gathering as well as their procedures.

The men who made up the vast majority of Koevoet were regarded by many as the finest trackers in the entire world. Tracking refers to the ability to locating people or animals based on the tracks, footprints, waste, trash that they leave behind while moving. The Owambos were regarded as second to none and their exploits in Koevoet reflected their talents.

When it came to engaging enemies, Koevoet operated in two different ways depending on the number of enemies that they faced. Single or small groups of SWAPO were pursued by

¹⁰⁸ (2011). Retrieved from Koevoet 1979 - 1989 "Komesho": <http://koevoet.webs.com/>

trackers on the ground with Casspirs (heavily armored mine resistant ant personnel carriers) would secure either flank.

Larger groups of SWAPO would be pursued by Casspirs rather than by trackers on foot as these vehicles allowed for much greater firepower, maneuverability and being heavily armored which gave much better protection to Koevoet personnel. In addition making heavy use of vehicles made it a lot easier to identify friends or foe, given that SWAPO would also be on foot and never using vehicles while attempting to infiltrate into SWA. Another important point regarding ethnicity is explained below.

‘In general, Koevoet personnel came from the ethnic group in which area the Koevoet team would be operating. Owambo’s work in Ovamboland, Kavango’s in Kavangoland, etc. However, the groups are not made up exclusively of sub tribes within the main tribal area. They are usually mixed so that each group will have at least one or two men from each area that will be familiar with its terrain, people, dialect and customs.

This procedure is similar to having policemen patrol the neighborhoods they grew up in- they know it and the people living in it.¹⁰⁹

1988 – 1989

United Nations Security Council Resolution 435, adopted on September 29, 1978, called for a cease-fire and elections that were to be supervised by the UN in SWA, which led to an independent Namibia. Furthermore a UN advisory group UNITAG (United Nations Transition

¹⁰⁹ (2011). Retrieved from Koevoet 1979 - 1989 "Komesho": <http://koevoet.webs.com/>

Assistance Group) would be established to observe the elections and the complete South African withdrawal from the country¹¹⁰.

South Africa refused to implement this resolution until Cuba would agree to withdraw its large contingent of soldiers out of Angola. It was not until more than 10 years after the initial vote, December 22nd 1988 when South Africa agreed to implement this treaty when it signed to Tripartite Accord. This treaty signed by South Africa, Cuba and Angola granted full independence to Namibia and called for the complete withdrawal of both South African and Cuban forces from SWA and Angola respectively. Namibia was to become independent on March 21st 1990.

April 1st 1990

On this day United Nations Security Council Resolution 435 was to be officially implemented. Before this date the SADF had already withdrawn nearly all its forces back to South Africa and the local SWATF (South West Africa Territorial Force) had nearly been dissolved. Koevoet was also supposed to be dissolved as part of the implementation of Resolution 435. On this day defensive responsibility fell upon the SWA police and no longer on the SADF.

SWAPO fighters were also supposed to be in their bases awaiting demobilization, the reality was very different though. In the months leading up to the April 1st 1989 there were rumors that SWAPO was not following the agreement that was signed and was in fact preparing

¹¹⁰ Wellens, Karen, *Resolutions and statements of the United Nations Security Council (1946-1989): a thematic guide*, 1990, p200

for a final assault on SWA, to take place on April 1st 1989. South African intelligence apparently did not take this threat seriously and continued to carry out their part of the resolution as planned.

SWAPO began infiltrating into SWA during the night of March 31st 1989 with a force of some 1500 – 1800 fighters. On March 31st 1989 a few SWA police patrols picked up tracks of these SWAPO infiltrators and the police authorities and the SADF were immediately notified of the threat. The UNITAG force in place was not able to contain the situation and it was decided that South Africa would reactivate its troops to neutralize the threat.

Operation *Merlyn*

South Africa quickly formed a plan called *Merlyn* and the aim was ‘to stop the SWAPO’s infiltration into SWA at the implementation of Resolution 435 on April 1 1989.’

‘By early morning on 1 April, it was clear SWAPO had violated every clause of the settlement and had launched the largest incursion of the entire war. Around 1,500 heavily armed SWAPO terrorists had crossed the border.¹¹¹’

The first radio reports from SWA police were thought of as April fool’s jokes but it was not long until the reality was confirmed by a Koevoet officer. ‘Negative, negative... This is no April fool’s joke...this is for real. We are dealing with a serious situation here.¹¹²’

The SAAF was alerted but at the time, due to Resolution 435, the number of helicopters and planes that were on alert was almost zero. In the next few days dozens of helicopters were ferried in directly from South Africa along with ammunition, as this had already been shipped back.

¹¹¹ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p459

¹¹² Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p351

Koevoet bore the brunt of the fighting which was heaviest during the first nine days. On the first day the situation was most desperate for the South Africans and initially the SAAF helicopter pilots did not have clearance to aid the troops on the ground, due to restrictions in place because of Resolution 435¹¹³. Fortunately for Koevoet the restriction was soon lifted when the extent of the SWAPO invasion became fully known.

Koevoet responded in their usual professionalism and were largely responsible for successfully repelling the invasion. During the first 9 days of the invasion they killed 294 SWAPO and captured 14, in addition several hundreds were wounded. By comparison, the SADF killed another 18 and captured 26 SWAPO. The SA security forces suffered 125 casualties, of which 25 died, 20 of these were Koevoet¹¹⁴. A total of 21 police vehicles had also been destroyed or disabled.

While the heaviest fighting had seized on April 9th, it would take another few weeks of sporadic fighting before operation *Merlyn* was deemed over. SWAPO's surprise invasion had failed at a terrible cost.

¹¹³ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p463

¹¹⁴ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, p465

Battle of Cuito Cuanavale

Introduction

The battle of Cuito Cuanavale remains a controversial point in history, even today more than 20 years after it took place. It was a battle where both sides claimed victory. At an ANC conference in December 2007 the following was said about this battle

‘the 20th anniversary of the defeat of the SADF at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, which marked a turning point in the Apartheid war...and providing impetus to the process that led to the negotiated end of Apartheid¹¹⁵’.

General Geldenhuys insists that ‘We (SADF) did not attack Cuito Cuanavale. The central highlands and the Benguela railway line were not in our planning at anytime whatever¹¹⁶’.

This battle is marked by many myths and also marked heavily by propaganda, Cuba and Angola easily won the propaganda war. Given South Africa’s political situation and its isolated position in the world this was not surprising. However it must also be said that the political leadership in Pretoria underestimated the power of propaganda in the eyes of the international community.

In order to give the best possible understanding of the battle, a variety of sources will be used, ranging from Cuban, Angolan, Russian, neutral and of course South African. Many sources

¹¹⁵ African National Congress (ANC). 2008. Statement of the National Executive Committee of the African national Congress on the occasion of the 96th anniversary of the ANC: 8 January 2008. www.anc.org

¹¹⁶ Geldenhuys, Jannie, A General’s Story, 2009, p243

are contradictory in parts nonetheless the utmost care was utilized to try to ensure the best possible narrative for the reader.

Background to Cuito Cuanavale

In 1984 the MPLA – Cuban – Soviet alliance were starting preparations for what they saw was the final assault to wipe out UNITA and take over Angola entirely. Cuba increased its troop strength in Angola to more than 31,000 by the end of 1985, with additional troops still to arrive. In addition more than 3,500 advisors/technical staff mainly from East Germany and the USSR were also in Angola to help the MPLA and Cuba operate the sophisticated weaponry that the USSR was bringing to the country. More than \$1 billion of USSR weapons entered Angola between 1984 and 1985 according to Western intelligence reports¹¹⁷.

On September 2nd 1985, the MPLA launched the largest attack to date against UNITA. The main objective of the attack was to capture Mavinga, UNITA's main logistical center, and to then move on to UNITA's headquarters at Jamba. It quickly became apparent that UNITA was unable to hold back the attack and Pretoria decided that the SADF had to intervene or risk the complete collapse of UNITA.

It was decided that the SAAF would be fully mobilized and it was used to great effect to attack the MPLA continuously. On the ground the SADF placed only a few companies to aid the UNITA and help organize the air assault. According to radio intercepts the MPLA suffered 4,719 casualties due to the SAAF¹¹⁸. Soon afterwards SADF artillery was also brought into position and together with the SAAF efforts the attack, called operation *Congresso II* was soon spent.

¹¹⁷ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p81

¹¹⁸ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p83

‘The FAPLA sustained nearly 2,500 casualties, losing more than a dozen aircraft, thirty-two armored vehicles and over 100 trucks... the soviet lost ten killed and nine wounded while the Cubans... suffered fifty-six killed and sixty wounded, their heaviest loss since the ‘Cassinga Raid’ seven years before. UNITA lost 500 killed and 1,500 wounded... and only just managed to hold onto Mavinga thanks to the last-minute South African intervention¹¹⁹’.

The USSR was becoming ever more impatient, especially after Gorbachev took over as the leader of the USSR early March 1985. He decided that the USSR needed to reform and change its policies both economically and politically. In December 1985 one of the USSR’s top Generals, General Konstantin Shaganovitch arrived in Angola to take command of all forces located there, including the Angolan armed forces. Shaganovitch was the highest Soviet General to be deployed outside of Europe or Afghanistan, he was highly regarded in Afghanistan and regarded as a counter-insurgency expert¹²⁰.

The losses sustained during the offensive were immense and it would take a long time for the MPLA to recover from them. The USSR brought even more equipment in during the winter of 1985/1986 to launch another offensive in 1986. This offensive too became a colossal failure

‘For the Cubans, the failure of a second consecutive offensive was deeply demoralizing, and the mounting Cuban casualties aggregated the discontent brewing in the army, leading to several senior officers to conclude that the war in Angola was a lost cause¹²¹’.

Castro remained optimistic that the war could still be won and proclaimed that ‘Cuban forces would remain in Angola until the end of apartheid if necessary¹²²’.

¹¹⁹ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p194 - 195

¹²⁰ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p85

¹²¹ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p199

¹²² George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p199

Planning for Operation *Saludando Octubre*

In early 1987, planning got underway for what was to be the Soviet's last attempt to win the war military in Angola; the main goals were the same as in the previous two years. Firstly Mavinga was to be captured followed by a final assault on the UNITA headquarters at Jamba.

‘Employing at least 10,000 troops and an additional \$1,5 billion of Soviet equipment – including 150 T-55 and T-62 tanks, Hind helicopters gun-ships (upgraded Mi-24's) and M-46 and D-30 guns... Once again, however the Soviet failed to make contingency plans for a South African intervention.¹²³’

This massive military buildup took place near the town of Cuito Cuanavale. The town itself was small yet of strategic importance due to its geographic position and due to the location of a large military airbase just west of town.

The Soviet were warned of a possible South African intervention but they inexplicably decided to ignore these warnings, despite the heavy setbacks of the two previous years.

‘...it appears that they were confident that the colossal military force concentrating in Cuito Cuanavale would see off any opposition and, dismissing Cuban and Angolan warnings, they went ahead with their greatest gamble of the war.¹²⁴’

The massive preparation did not go unnoticed by the South Africans who, as early as March 1987, had warned UNITA that a massive attack was to be launched in the near future. Initially there was no response from UNITA, it was only after diversionary attacks were launched by FAPLA in April that UNITA began to take the South African warnings seriously. In

¹²³ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p200

¹²⁴ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p200

May UNITA launched a few attacks designed to disrupt supply lines around Cuito Cuanavale but it soon became clear to Pretoria that this was not enough, given the massive Cuban, FAPLA military buildup¹²⁵.

Pretoria initiates covert aid, June 15th 1987

After the initial intelligence reports arrived in South Africa, Pretoria was caught in a big dilemma. It was clear that a major offensive was to take place soon yet the question remained how South Africa would react. SADF leadership recommended a large attack from SWA to attack the rear of Cuito Cuanavale. This approach was considered and then rejected as Pretoria knew it could not hide such an attack from the international community¹²⁶.

Instead a program of covert aid began including Recces, small anti-tank teams and artillery in addition to logistic support to help out UNITA. Pretoria had hoped that this type of support would remain small in scale and hopefully covert as well. It would not be long however before the fighting escalated beyond all expectations and a different approach was required to prevent the situation from worsening¹²⁷.

Pretoria and the SADF formulated a new plan that called for an attack through the south east of Angola, the parts controlled by UNITA:

‘...into an area east of the Cuito River in order to prevent FAPLA from capturing Mavinga. Mavinga held no importance as a town...But nearby, on a plateau...was an important airfield at which heavy transport planes delivered South African and American supplies and

¹²⁵ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p200

¹²⁶ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p88

¹²⁷ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p200

weapons. If that were to fall, then FAPLA forces would be free to advance some 250 km to Jamba, UNITA bush capital in the south-eastern corner of Angola...¹²⁸

Soviets commence the offensive, July/August 1987

By early July 1987, 8 entire FAPLA brigades had gathered at Cuito Cuanavale. 4 of these brigades would advance towards Mavinga while the others would guard the flanks and provide logistical support. General Shaganovitch split his forces into 2 groups, 2 brigades would secure the Lomba River (which is located roughly 30 kilometers north of Mavinga) from the south, so the other 2 brigades could cross it, before the entire force would advance to capture Mavinga.

‘Within days however of the offensive’s launch, however, the leading brigade were bogged down fighting around the source of the Chambinga River (twenty miles east of Cuito Cuanvale). Determined to avoid a repeat of the previous year’s stillborn offensive, the Soviets halted the advance... - and fresh plans were drawn up to resume the offensive in August, prompting the now inevitable South African response¹²⁹’.

Operation Moduler

‘Recognizing that UNITA could not face the renewed FAPLA threat on its own, on 4 August the SADF launched what was to prove its most controversial intervention of the war: Operation Moduler.¹³⁰’

¹²⁸ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p88

¹²⁹ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p203

¹³⁰ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p203

The SADF plan to counter the threat was going to be combined operation to utilize all components of the security forces as effectively as possible. The aims of Operation *Moduler* were as follows:

- Watch and harass FAPLA forces when they deploy
- Monitor and harass the FAPLA force as it advances
- Halt the advance of FAPLA on Mavinga
- Destroy the FAPLA forces involved¹³¹

The SADF gathered a small force initially consisting of 700 troops, mostly gathered from the 32 Bn, a few Recce teams, some artillery units and some anti-aircraft artillery troops. This was called 20 Brigade even though in reality the force amounted to less than a full battalion. By late August this force was reinforced by additional elements from the 61 Mechanized Battalion Group, heavy mortars and more artillery, including the highly regarded G-5 artillery.

‘But even with this reinforcement, the South African force in Angola never exceeded 3,000 men. 20 Brigade’s small size (initially fewer than 1,000 against at least 6,000 FAPLA troops) is illustrative of the contrasts Pretoria put on the SADF in its attempt to keep Operation *Moduler* clandestine, an unlikely outcome when all previous South African interventions had been uncovered with weeks.¹³²’

In late August 1987, a Recce team launched a daring attack behind enemy lines to destroy a bridge over the Cuito River. Despite being attacked by a far superior forces the Recces

¹³¹ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p398

¹³² George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p203

managed to damage the bridge sufficiently for it to be deemed unusable by their enemy. The loss of this bridge caused considerable logistics problems for the attacking Angolan forces¹³³.

It is important to note that the capture of Cuito Cuanavale is not mentioned in the SADF planning ‘The crucial question of when South African forces should withdraw (or whether they should advance and capture Cuito Cuanavale) was left undecided¹³⁴’.

August 14th 1987

On August 14th 1987 General Shaganovitch gives the order to move five FAPLA brigades to the Lomba River and to make preparations to cross it as the first step towards Mavinga. The assault went underway from two sides and the SADF realized they had to prevent the attempted pincer movement or risk losing Mavinga. Initially the SADF was unable to prevent the repeated attacks, 20 Brigade (700) men was simply insufficient to hold back thousands of FAPLA and heavy equipment. It was after this attack that significant SADF reinforcement were authorized by Pretoria. In addition the SAAF began a bombing campaign against the FAPLA brigades that was very effective.

The battle of the Lomba River September 1987

At the beginning of September 1987, a turning point took place during the month long battle of the Lomba River. The fighting here was some of the fiercest of the entire war and it pitted a small SADF force against three FAPLA brigades. The SADF 20 Brigade received heavy G-5 artillery support, Cuban plans sent to destroy them were unable to locate these guns due to excellent camouflage plus warnings from Recce teams located close to airbases in Angola. The

¹³³ Lord, Dick, *From Fledging to Eagle*, 2008, p396 - 397

¹³⁴ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p205

SADF used anti-tank missiles located on armored personnel carriers to great effect and knocked out many vehicles whilst suffering very light casualties in return. By September 27th 1987, the Soviet military advisors who had led this assault were pulled out and the FAPLA units were left without a command element¹³⁵.

Destruction of 47 Brigade

At the end of September Pretoria had decided that objectives of Operation *Moduler* were to be changed to a counter attack and to attempt to neutralize all FAPLA force east of the Cuito River¹³⁶.

On October 3rd the SADF 61 Mechanized Bn, supported by UNITA, counterattacked the FAPLA 47 Brigade with a force of Ratel armored personnel carriers. By 5 PM on the same day the 47 Brigade was in full retreat having lost 127 vehicles, destroyed or abandoned. It was South Africa's biggest battle since the end of WWII. In addition the SADF captured a fully intact SAM-8 system, a world premiere. During the battle FAPLA suffered 600 casualties as opposed to 1 SADF killed and 1 Ratel destroyed¹³⁷.

The battle of Cuito Cuanavale

General Shagnovitch ordered a general withdrawal in the direction of Cuito Cuanavale itself. Pretoria ordered the SADF to pursue the enemy and authorized the deployment of tanks for the first time during the war plus more G-5 and even G-6 (self-propelled G-5 artillery) artillery units. On October 14th 1987, the siege of Cuito Cuanavale was launched when G-5 artillery knocked out a FAPLA command post. According to Cuban/Angolan sources this date

¹³⁵ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p206 - 207

¹³⁶ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p207

¹³⁷ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p93

commenced the 7 month long siege of Cuito Cuanavale. By November the situation had deteriorated sufficiently for Castro himself to intervene and he took personal charge of the situation.

Castro ordered Cuba's finest soldiers to defend Cuito Cuanavale including his personal elite 50th division. Cuba's best pilots and Special Forces were brought into Angola. In addition Cuba sent thousands of troops to Cuene, close to the SWA/Angolan border, a move which greatly worried Pretoria¹³⁸.

'By Christmas, Fidel Castro was starting to feel the heat. Fearing a military catastrophe, he ordered Cuban diplomats and MPLA officials at the United Nations to contact the South African UN mission in New York to explore the possibility of a negotiated settlement in Angola. He suggested that such an agreement should be linked to a settlement in Namibia – exactly what the South Africans had been calling for years.¹³⁹'

SADF leadership wanted to launch a final attack on Cuito Cuanavale itself but Pretoria decided against this, due to the negotiations and wanted to allow Cuba a 'face-saving way of withdrawing from the conflict¹⁴⁰'. It was decided that the SADF was to attack to the east of Cuito Cuanavale in attempt to force FAPLA back across the Cuito River and by doing so it would exert sufficient pressure on Cuba to increase the rate of the negotiations.

International pressure began to mount on South Africa with the UN Security Council demanding the SADF to leave Angola, to which Pretoria responded that it would only go when Cuban and Soviet presence in Angola would be removed.

¹³⁸ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p210 - 211

¹³⁹ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p94 - 95

¹⁴⁰ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p95

On February 14th the first tank battle of the war took place which pitted Cuban tanks versus South African ones. At the end of this one day battle Angolan and Cuban forces suffered a crushing defeat with FAPLA suffering more than 500 killed, Cuban 32 killed and dozens of vehicles knocked out. SADF losses were just 4 killed and 7 wounded.

In the spring of 1988, the SADF launched several assaults to clear FAPLA east of the Cuito River, but given the size of the opposition and their own limited resources they were unable to accomplish this, despite inflicting very heavy casualties. Early 1988, Cuban troop levels were at their highest point of the whole war, with some 52,000 Cuban troops stationed in Angola¹⁴¹. Throughout February and March 1988, the SADF launched a series of assault against formidable defense positions and were unable to dislodge FAPLA and heavy Cuban forces entrenched in them without suffering unacceptable levels of casualties. Further attacks from the east were called off and attacks from the west, which would have been far easier, as originally requested by the SADF, were again denied by Pretoria¹⁴².

Conclusion of the ‘siege’ of Cuito Cuanavale

In April the 3,000 strong SADF force was replaced by a smaller 1,500 strong group whose primary task was to aid the SADF plan to create large minefields and to commence a campaign of deception to trick the Cubans and Angolans into thinking that there was a much larger SADF force in position than actually was the case.

Cuba and FAPLA suffered nearly 5,000 dead during the period September 1987 until April 1988 in addition they lost hundreds of vehicles and nearly 100 tanks. The SADF suffered

¹⁴¹ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p96

¹⁴² George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p234 - 235

31 killed in action and 6 more due to malaria in addition to a few vehicles lost¹⁴³. Immediately after the final attacks Cuba declared victory over South Africa and to emphasize this photos were released showing a captured SADF tank. The US and South Africa dismissed these claims as propaganda, Cuba and Angola had definitely not prevailed. The reality could be seen as more of a stalemate. While the SADF had saved UNITA and neutralized the FAPLA attacks on Mavinga and Jamba, they had failed to force FAPLA back across the Cuito River. Given the limited resources Pretoria allowed the SADF, and also because of the fact that the SADF was denied to attack from the west, the final result is not at all surprising. It is impossible to win a war with limited means, especially when aims and objectives are not clearly defined, as definitely was the case with Pretoria's planning¹⁴⁴.

The battle of Cuito Cuanavale marked the end of large scale battles during the war though it would be another year before a cease fire would go into effect. On December 22nd 1988 a treaty was signed between Cuba, Angola and South Africa in New York marking the official end of the war.

"If defeat for South Africa meant the loss of 31 men, three tanks, five armoured vehicles and three aircraft, then we'd lost. If victory for Fapla and the Cubans meant the loss of 4,600 men, 94 tanks, 100 armoured vehicles, 9 aircraft and other Soviet equipment valued at more than a billion Rands, then they'd won."¹⁴⁵ Said by Colonel Dean Ferreira, commander of SADF forces during battle of Cuito Cuanavale.

¹⁴³ Geldenhuys, J, *At the front*, 2009, p240

¹⁴⁴ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p234 - 235

¹⁴⁵ *Paratus (SADF Magazine)*, March, 1989, p.14

Chapter 4

Analysis of the unconventional units

Introduction

The 23 year long war left its marks. Not only in the countries that were heavily involved in it, but more importantly on the units that participated in the fighting and ultimately on the men that served on the frontlines.

In the introduction, it was stated that the aim of this paper was to show how battlefield successes in the end did **not** result in political success for South Africa. Firstly the units were introduced and several operations in which these units played pivotal roles were highlighted. The question is now raised on why these successes did not result in a major South African political success at the conclusion of the war. Before this question will be answered, firstly the exploits of the units will be looked at in brief. A few comments need to be made about how to analyze such units.

The most common method is to look at the results achieved in wars, operations, missions and such in which the units in question were involved. It must be remembered that results on the battlefield alone often do not tell the whole story as politics and propaganda play a considerable part in it. These last two factors make any kind of analysis challenging, especially in the case of the units described in this paper given the fact that they were employed by South Africa's Apartheid government. This last remark is often used to place the accomplishments of these units in a negative light in the international media.

The unit most heavily criticized of the ones described in this paper was without any doubt Koevoet. They received so much bad publicity, reports of cruelty towards the local

population, dragging bodies through the streets, that the unit's demobilization was required as part of the treaty on the independence of Namibia¹⁴⁶. A few SADF generals were also not very pleased with Koevoet yet they admitted that the unit was extremely effective, though used cruel methods. It must be remembered however that this was a time of war; atrocities were committed by both sides, as is always the case while fighting wars.

The following section would look at each unit individually as it makes the task of analysis easier.

Recces

The South African Special Forces took places in many operations during the Border War, many of which remain classified till this day. The Recces were utilized in a variety of roles, the most important being reconnaissance and commando raids behind enemy lines. The Recces were the elite of the SADF and they were very small in terms of personnel yet their impact was substantial. The number of active operators during the war was classified but it was rumored to be not more than 250 at the height of the war. Typical deployments consisted of a team of five Recces for a single operation. The unit's first big operation, the raid on Dar es Salaam by four men, shows how a small unit can be achieving effective results.

Small-scale commando operations were important. Yet the most crucial role for the Recces during the war was to gather accurate intelligence, often behind enemy lines which the intelligence agencies would use to plan operations. During war, good intelligence and using it properly can make the difference between winning or losing a battle.

¹⁴⁶ Hamann, Hilton, *Days of the Generals*, 2001, p64 - 65

The Recces were held in high esteem both friend and foe and the unit played an important role throughout the war.

32 Bn

The 32 Bn, together with the Recces mentioned above, was the most distinguished SADF unit during the Border War. The unit was nicknamed the *Buffalo battalion* by the South Africans or the *Os Terríveis* (Portuguese for the Terrible Ones) by the enemy. The 32 Bn was unique in several ways. Firstly most of its members were Angolans and the unit used Portuguese as its main language, as opposed to Afrikaans and English. Secondly and very importantly, the 32 Bn main based was located right at the border between Angola and SWA in the Caprivi Strip next to the Kuvango River.

The main task of the 32 Bn was to serve as a buffer between Angola and SWA. Because of this and the unit's location, they were involved in more fighting than any other South African unit with the exception of perhaps the Recces and Koevoet. 32 Bn was engaged in combat nearly continuously for almost 13 years in 1989 before the unit was recalled to South Africa. During this period the unit suffered roughly 150 dead and killed or captured more than 3,000 enemy troops, statistics that are similar to those achieved by Koevoet. The unit was never withdrawn from the frontline and it was served by professional troops, not by conscripts unlike regular SADF units. This allowed the unit to achieve a unique *esprit de corps*, only few officers would occasionally be replaced, however the vast majority of the troops stayed with the battalion for many years.

32 Bn took part in nearly every battle in Angola and the unit was highly feared by the enemy. The 32 Bn bore the brunt of the fighting which explains the unit's heavy losses but they

played a pivotal role as the buffer between SWAPO and SWA. The unit was disbanded by Pretoria in 1993 as demanded by the ANC.

44 Parachute Brigade

This unit is mostly remembered by its participation in the Cassinga Raid as operation *Reindeer* has become known in popular culture. This controversial airborne attack in 1978 demonstrated precisely how effective a paratrooper assault against a well-defended target can be. Paratrooper units give much greater flexibility and mobility to an army and are very effective force multipliers. 44 Parachute Brigade participated in many operations during the Border War and a troop of paratroopers was always on standby as a reaction force in the operational area. Combined with SAAF support the paratroopers were very effective against enemy troops but their participation in Operation *Reindeer* was regarded as their finest hour. *Reindeer* was the SADF's single most successful operation of the entire war, though to this day SWAPO maintains the statement that the SADF attacked a refugee camp. Nonetheless this attack is regarded as a benchmark for successful airborne assaults.

The establishment of a paratrooper force gave the SADF extra options during the war and the unit's importance was substantial on the battlefield. Nonetheless, compared to the 32 Bn and the Recces, they had less influence on the war as a whole due to the fact that they were not involved in the fighting fulltime, unlike the other two units.

Koevoet

As has been already mentioned, Koevoet remains highly controversial. The unit was extremely effective yet linked to many controversial acts and atrocities. In the unit's introduction it was said that in the late 1970's South Africa was starting to lose the war against SWAPO and a

different approach was required. Koevoet was a unique unit and was created to meet the requirements of fighting in SWA. It combined the excellent tracker skills of the local population with specially designed vehicles and tactics designed by South Africans. Together these made an extremely effective and highly feared unit. During the 10 years of fighting, Koevoet suffered many casualties, roughly 160 dead and more than 900 wounded but they were responsible for more than 3,200 killed or captured SWAPO. Koevoet suffered more casualties than any South African unit in the war, even more than 32 Bn, since the end of WWII¹⁴⁷.

From the unit's establishment in 1978 to its disbandment in 1989, SWAPO were unable to establish bases and gradually take over SWA, as was their plan. This result can of course never be attributed solely to Koevoet but they did play a very large role in it. It is estimated that Koevoet were responsible for roughly 80% of SWAPO casualties in SWA, despite consisting of only a small part of the total South African contingent in SWA¹⁴⁸.

Weapons

A few comments are in order regarding the weapons used by both sides during the war. South Africa was under heavy international sanctions due to her Apartheid policies and most countries had put in place arms embargoes making it virtually impossible for South Africa to import sophisticated weapons. South Africa developed its own arms industry which was able to produce a variety of weapons specifically designed for the Border War. These weapons were highly effective yet not as advanced as the weapons produced by the United States or the USSR.

¹⁴⁷ Stiff, Peter, *The Covert War*, 2004, front flap left side.

¹⁴⁸ Weaver, A. (1996, November 27). Truth and Reconciliation Commission Day 2: 27 November 1996. (A. NTSEBEZA, Interviewer)

A few exceptions included the Casspir armored personnel vehicle and the G-5/G-6 artillery, both of which were regarded as arguably the best in the world.

SWAPO/Cuba, Angola was all provided with Soviet style weapons provided mostly for free by the USSR. The USSR shipped weapons, materials, food and equipment valued between 5.5 and 10 billion US dollars during the 1970's and 1980's¹⁴⁹. This included advanced Soviet weapons available at the time, including Mig-23 fighter planes, T-62 tanks and some of the most advanced anti-aircraft defenses, the SAM-8 system. In terms of quantity of weapons and equipment, South Africa's adversaries had a massive advantage. In terms of quality it was even more in general but the MiG-23 planes and the Mi-24/25 attack helicopters were better than anything that the SAAF possessed due to the embargo.

The lack of sufficient quantities and quality of conventional weapon systems could be seen as another reason why Pretoria preferred to use unconventional units to do to the majority of the fighting. By this it could be seen that Pretoria almost had to do this by necessity, rather than by design as they simply had no other choice.

Politics

In the Border War, as in every war, politics played a very large role. Pretoria had sought to keep the war limited and as far away from the public as possible. However it is impossible to win such a complicated war involving many foreign powers including both superpowers, with limited means. Pretoria did not have a clear vision of what they hoped to accomplish. Even during operations themselves, objectives were often modified which made life very difficult for the military and it was also difficult to accomplish effective results. Essentially

¹⁴⁹ Lyulko, L, 2012

the SADF had its hands tied throughout the entire war; nonetheless despite being outnumbered during most of the battles, the SADF almost always prevailed and won the war militarily. Politically however, the Border War was a massive failure for South Africa that received tremendous negative attention from the international community, which greatly influenced political decisions. A perfect example was the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Instead of attacking from the west, which would have been far easier, Pretoria demanded the SADF to advance from the east, which in the end proved impossible with the very small force that the SADF was authorized to use.

Another very important aspect for Pretoria was their attempt to minimize their own casualties. The main method for this was simply to not employ large regular formations in Angola. The bulk of SA regular forces were stationed in SWA on garrison duty. It has been estimated that 95% of SA troops during the Border War never saw any combat. The brunt of the fighting and the casualties were suffered by the unconventional units mentioned in this paper. The 32 Bn and Koevoet were mostly staffed by non-South African citizens. While there is no direct link to suggest that this was done on purpose, it does leave one thinking. One of the tasks that befell General Geldenhuys, when he was General Officer Commanding SWA, was to ensure more than 70% of troops stationed in that sector were locals.

There was another reason why South Africa preferred to use small specialized units during the Border War. It offered deniability. With South Africa being under intense international scrutiny, it was much easier to use unconventional units as it was far easier to deny their use in the field. Operations carried out by the 32 Bn, Koevoet, 44 Brigade and the Recces were hardly known in South Africa, which was exactly what the SA leadership wanted. Firstly to

give the impression that everything was under control and secondly to keep the international community at bay.

To give an example, often when the 32 Bn took part in operations in Angola the troops dressed in SWAPO uniforms and carried Soviet bloc weapons and equipment. In addition the unit used Portuguese as their main language as communication, which was due to the fact that most 32 Bn troops were Angolans.

Due to these two reasons the civilian leadership was often in disagreement with the South African Defense Force (SADF) on how to fight the war. Often the SADF was told that the war would have to be fought in limited way using limited forces and because of this the unconventional units were used.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

It lies outside the scope of this paper to describe the years of negotiations that preceded the final peace agreement that was signed in New York in 1988 that marked the end of the Border War which lasted 23 years, the ceasefire went in effect in the spring of 1989.

The numerically superior joint Cuban and Angolan forces were never able to destroy UNITA completely, this was entirely due to South African support. On the battlefield South African losses were drastically lower than the losses of SWAPO, Angolan or the Cuban military. The four units singled out for this paper were chosen as they, due to various factors, were able to hit their adversaries time and time again. Having said that, not even these four elite unconventional units were able to win the war for South Africa. The Border War was never a war that was going to be resolved solely by military means, given the high level of foreign involvement and the political landscape at the time.

It is often said that military accomplishments can only be measured by the political results as after, military means are utilized to accomplish political objectives. In the case of South Africa, the stated political objective was not clearly defined and without a clearly defined political objective good military results mean very little as they do not lead to the required end state. A perfect example of this was Operation *Reindeer*. Seen from a military perspective, this was the finest South African operation of the entire war, yet politically it was an unmitigated disaster.

Despite not having a clear political objective, the SADF were able to save UNITA from being destroyed by a massive commitment from the USSR, East Germany and Cuba who

were all aiding the MPLA. South African military success was sufficient to convince the opposing side that negotiating with South Africa was the **only** way to resolve the conflict. The same argument can be made for South Africa. However it must be remembered that South Africa never had the intention to wage a full-blown war neither in SWA nor in Angola.

Turning this question around does raise an interesting point. Based on the military results alone South Africa seemed to be the moral victor, the eventual ceasefire and peace agreement seems to suggest otherwise. South Africa lost South West Africa and in September 1989 F.W de Klerk became the President of South Africa which essentially saw the end of Apartheid. Many opponents of Apartheid speak of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale as the turning point in the end of Apartheid. This claim is somewhat presumptuous as the end of Apartheid was the result of many factors, one of which was the Border War.

The year 1989 saw several big political changes. Firstly the Soviet Union was losing its grip on Eastern Europe, which culminated in Berlin when the border between East and West Berlin was opened on November 7th 1989. The so called fall of the Berlin wall is regarded by many as the end of the Cold War. As was stated earlier the new Soviet leader Gorbachev sought to end Soviet influence in Angola and elsewhere and wanted to conclude the war. Also within South Africa things were rapidly changing. Starting in the mid 1980's political unrest and resistance against Apartheid increased massively. The situation was rapidly spiraling out of control and when F. W de Klerk became SA's President he quickly stated that the system of Apartheid would come to an end. The transition from Apartheid South Africa to democratic South Africa took many years of negotiating between the ANC and the National Party and was only finished in 1994 when Nelson Mandela was elected into office as South Africa's first black President.

In the 1980's the international economic embargo was starting to leave its mark on the South African economy which resulted in a rapidly increasing inflation rate, combined with increasing unemployed especially amongst Blacks combined with the stalemate in the war made sure that South Africa were finally willing to negotiate a conclusion to the conflict. Neither side wanted to appear weak during the negotiations but secretly all parties wanted to resolve the conflict quickly as the war was a huge drain on the economies of both sides.

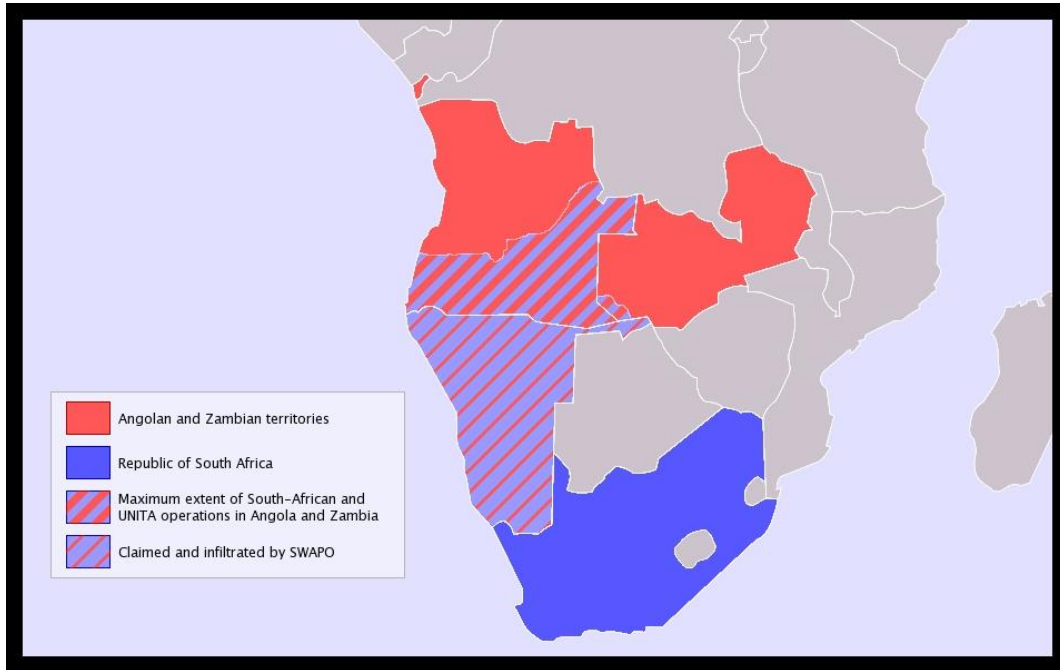
In conclusion, while it is clear how effective these specialized units were to South Africa's effort, their overall effect on the success on the war is rather small. As could be seen in the analysis and the conclusion, the changing political landscape, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the collapse of Apartheid were much more important to the ending of the war.

The new era which is dawning... will lift us out of the silent grief of our past and into a future in which there will be opportunity and space for joy and beauty - for real and lasting peace¹⁵⁰. –

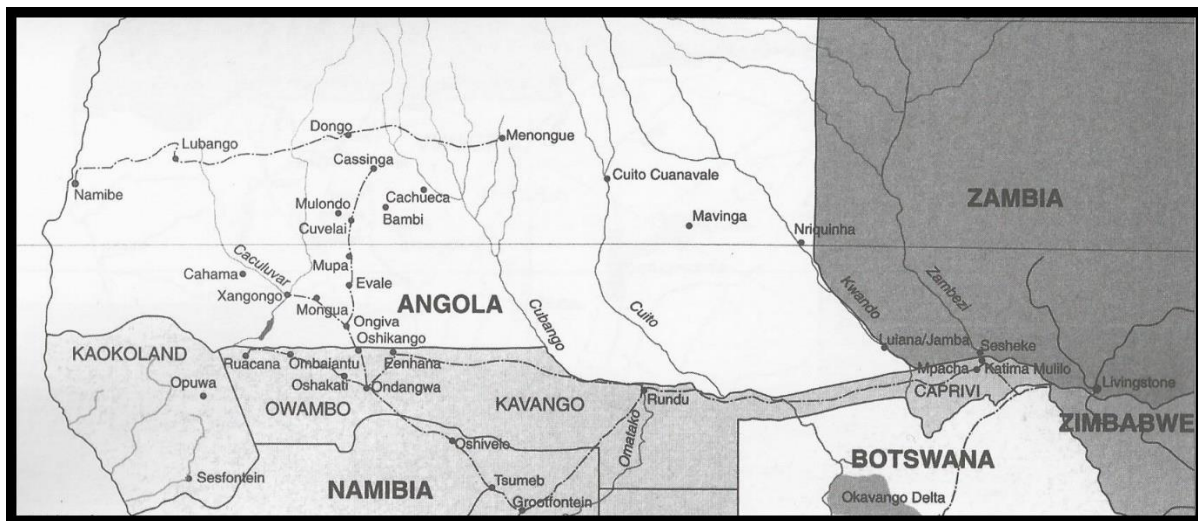
F.W de Klerk

¹⁵⁰ Farnsworth, J. S.

Chapter 6
Appendix
Maps



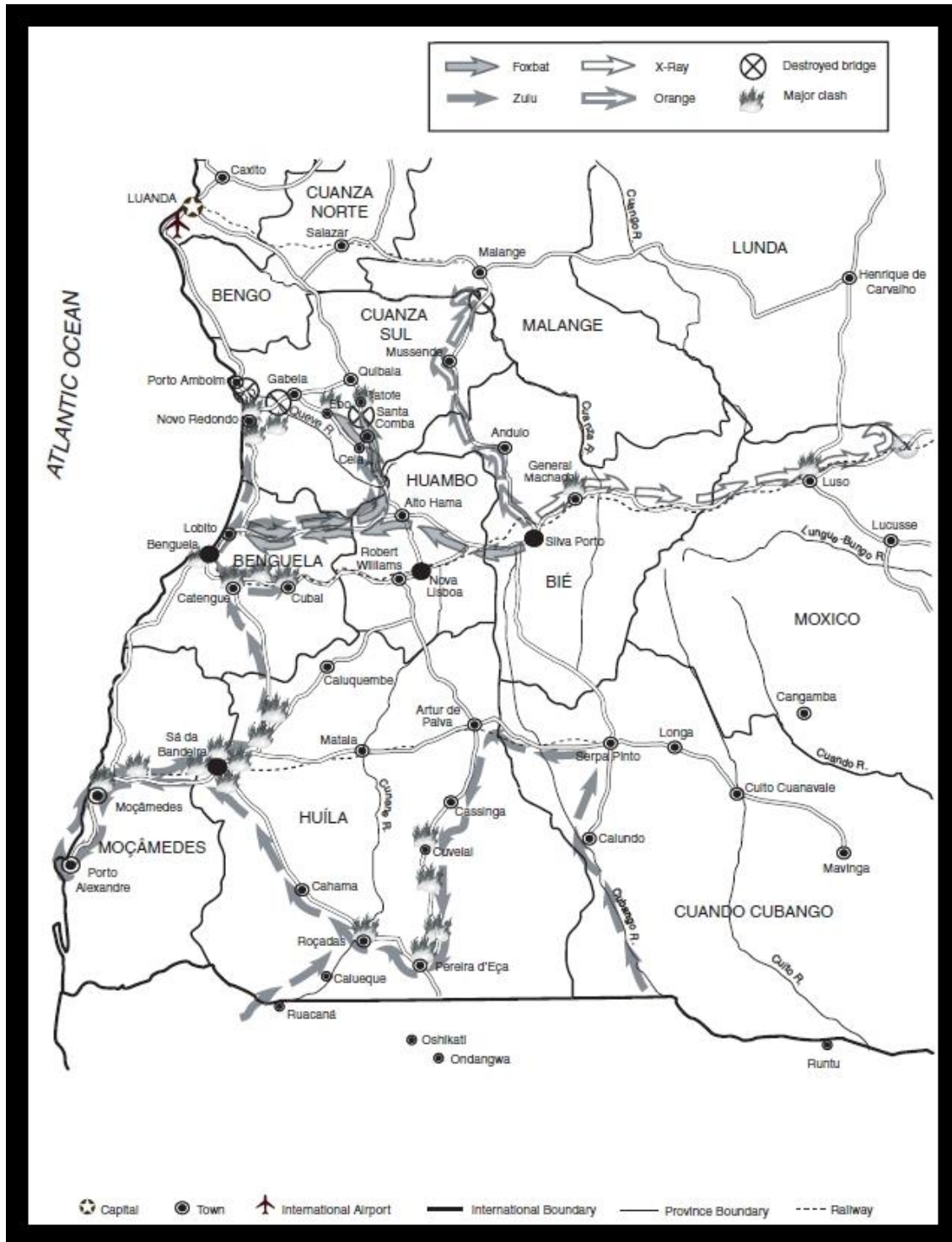
Map 1: Overview of region where the war took place¹⁵¹



Map 2: Map showing Angola/SWA border area, this where nearly all fighting took place¹⁵²

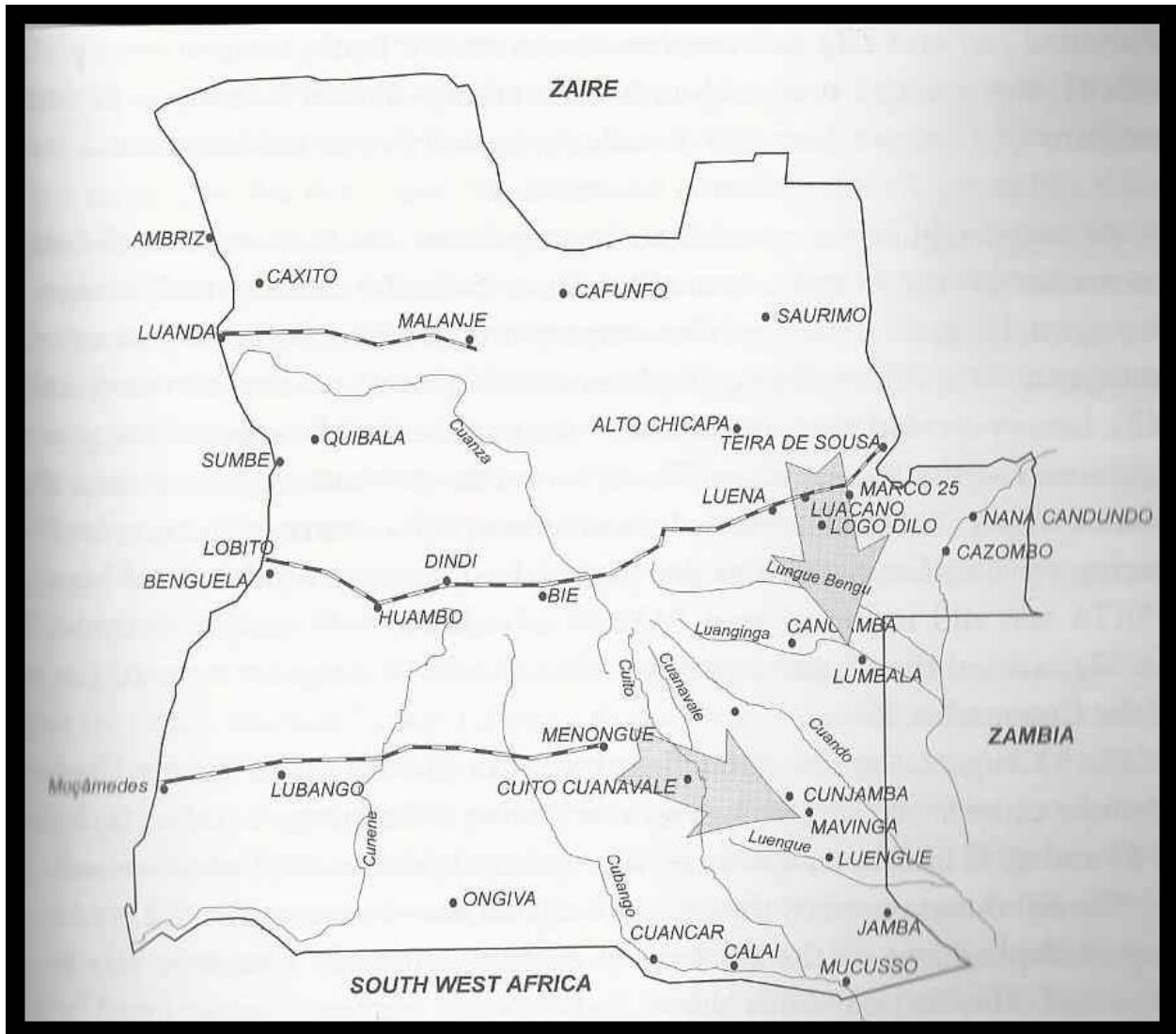
¹⁵¹ http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:South_Africa_Border_War_Map.png

¹⁵² Geldenhuys, Jannie, *A General's Story*, 2009, pxvii



Map 3: Map showing extent of SADF advance into Angola during Operation Savannah¹⁵³

¹⁵³ George, Edward, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965 – 1991*, 2005, p95



Map 4: FAPLA's 1987 offensive against UNITA¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Nortje, Piet, *32 Battalion*, 2003, p235

South African Military Command Structure

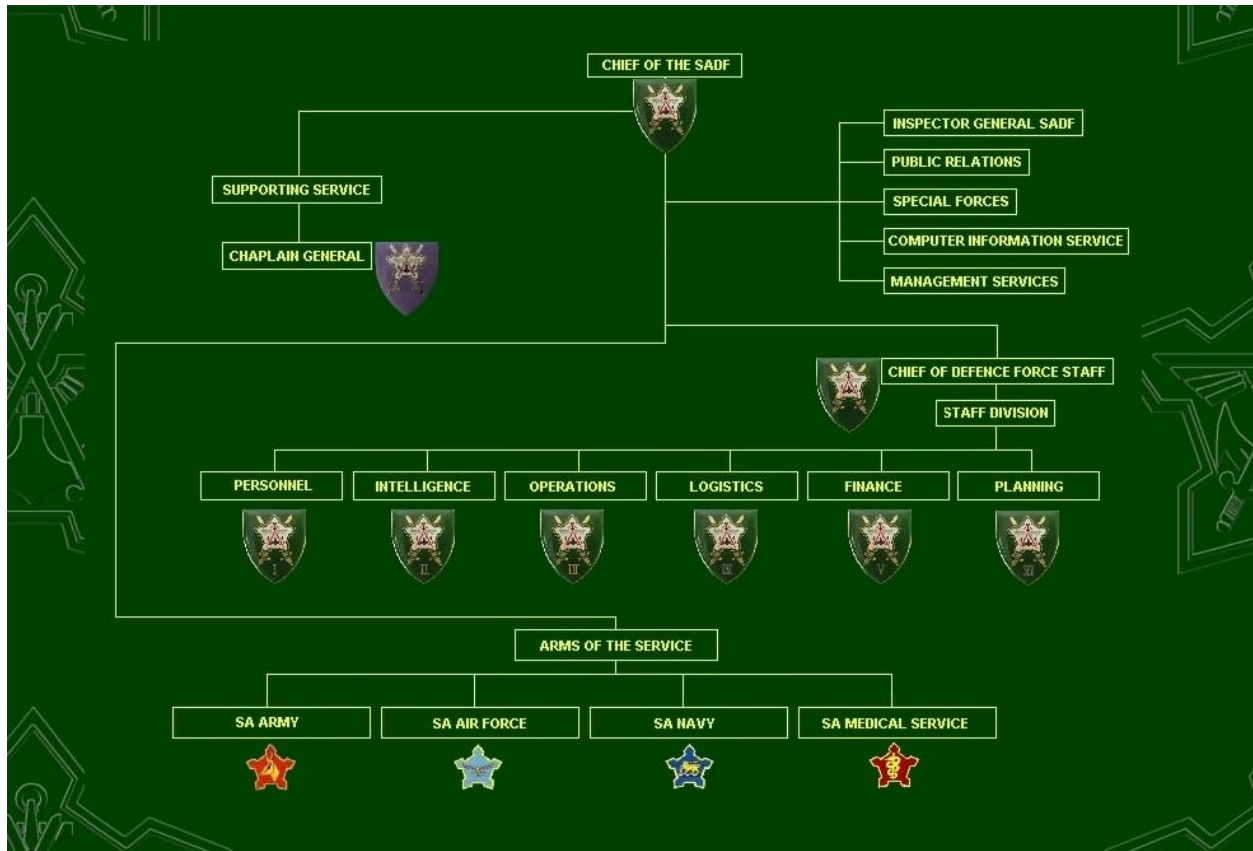


Diagram 1: Outline of the South African Military Command structure¹⁵⁵

The Recces reported directly to the Chief of the SADF.

The 32 Bn and the 44 Parachute Brigade fell under the SA Army.

Koevoet, being a police unit, did not fall under the jurisdiction of the SADF. Koevoet was commanded directly from the SAP headquarters in Pretoria.

¹⁵⁵ Strachan, B. R. (2007)

Glossary

20 Brigade: Name given to SADF contingent at the start of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, consisting of several 32 Bn companies, some Recce units, artillery and support elements

AAA: Anti-aircraft artillery, heavy machine guns or cannons designed to neutralize aircraft, can consist of either mobile or fixed units

Alouette: Light transport chopper of French design, many were modified by the SAAF to carry machineguns and rocket pods to be used as gunships

ANC: African National Congress

Calueque: Location of a dam as part of the SA and Portugal hydroelectric project

Biafra: Eastern part of Nigeria that declared itself independent in 1967, was reincorporated into Nigeria in 1970

Caprivi region: Narrow strip of land on the far east of SWA (Namibia) bordering Angola, Botswana and Zambia

Casspir: South African designed heavily armored mine resistant personnel carriers, used extensively during the Border War

Castro: Fidel Castro was Cuba's leader during the Border War, he sanctioned the Cuban deployment to Angola

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency, foremost foreign intelligence agency, heavily involved during the Border War, ferrying in supplies for UNITA together with South Africa

FNLA: National Liberation Front of Angola

Force multiplier: A capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment

SAM – 7: Soviet designed man portable low altitude anti-aircraft missile system

FAPLA: People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola, initially military component of the MPLA, later it became Angola's official armed forces

G-5: South African designed 155 mm artillery, very long long range and precise, considered as some of the finest artillery in the world

Hearts and minds: Often heard during counter insurgency campaigns, the basic premise is that popular support of the local population is crucial during such campaigns. The side who obtains the most popular support usually ends up as winner during such campaigns

Luanda: Capital of Angola, was the location of main Portuguese garrison when it was still a colony

Mi-24: Soviet designed heavy attack helicopter, very heavily armored, was deployed to Angola in the 1980's

Mig-23: Advanced Soviet designed fighter bomber, more advanced than the SAAF Mirage F1's

MPLA: Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

P.W. Botha: South African Minister of Defense from 1966 – 1978

PLAN: People's Liberation Army of Namibia, military arm of SWAPO

Pretoria: Seat of South African government, used to symbolize SA leadership

Commandant: South African rank, equivalent to Lieutenant - Colonel

Puma: Heavy transport helicopter of French design used by the SAAF, it had capacity for 16 passengers

Reaction force/standby force: Units that are on alert and able to respond extremely quickly when a situation or emergency arises

Rhodesia: Former name of Zimbabwe, neighbor of South Africa

SAAF: South African Air Force

SADF: South African Defence Force, military of South Africa

Sam Nujoma: leader of SWAPO, later first president of Namibia

SAM: Surface to air missiles, radar guided missiles launched from either mobile or fixed units designed to shoot down aircraft

61 Mechanised Battalion: Conventional SADF battalion, well equipped with armored vehicles and artillery, it took part in many operations during the Border War

SAP: South African Police

SAS: Special Air Service, originally British Special Forces, also the name to the SF of several ex British colonies such as Rhodesian SAS, Australian SAS etc

Stopper groups: Units deployed to cut off the escape routes of enemy forces, often employed by the SADF during the Border War

SWAPO: South West Africa People's Organisation

Owamboland: Northernmost part of SWA (Namibia), home to the Owambo people

T-55: Soviet designed tank that entered service in the 1950's, was heavily used during the Border War, but was significantly outclassed by SADF tanks and tactics

T-62: Soviet designed tank that entered service in the 1960's, more effective than the T-55

UNITA: National Union for the Total Independence of Angola

United Nations Security Council Resolution 435: Adopted in September 1978, it called for a ceasefire and UN supervised elections in SWA, in order for it become independent.

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