

Regiment Mooirivier and South African Transborder Operations into Angola during 1975/76 and 1983/84

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Introduction

The dedicated training that Regiment Mooirivier (RMR) received since its establishment in 1954, was thoroughly tested in 1975/6 and again in 1983/4. The involvement of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in Angola introduced a new era in the history of the RMR.¹ In this article the role of Regiment Mooirivier in Operations Savannah and Askari will be described and analysed with an emphasis on the experiences as remembered by the members of the Regiment themselves.

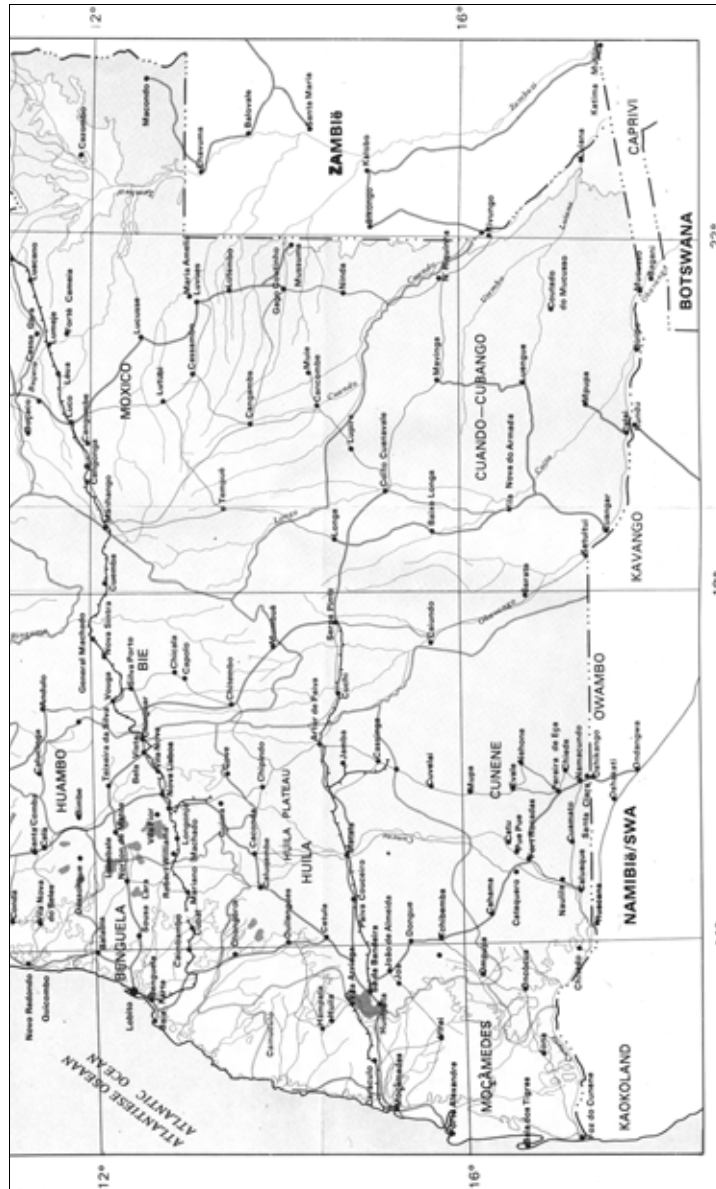
The question may rightfully be asked why the South African Defence Force was involved for more than twenty years in South West Africa/Namibia and Angola (see Maps 1 and 2) in the so-called Border War. Various national and international factors contributed to this, but there is no simple answer to the question. However, the retaining of South West Africa/Namibia, which was entrusted to South Africa in 1918 as a C-Mandate territory, and the 'communist danger' may be raised as primary reasons.² The Border War and the involvement of the SADF may be divided in five phases: the beginning of the conflict (1958 to 1966); support of the South African Police (SAP) and the Portuguese (1966 to 1972); escalation of the conflict (1972 to 1976); operations in South West Africa/Namibia and Angolan pre-emptive operations (1976 to 1983); and the final phase (1983 to 1990).³

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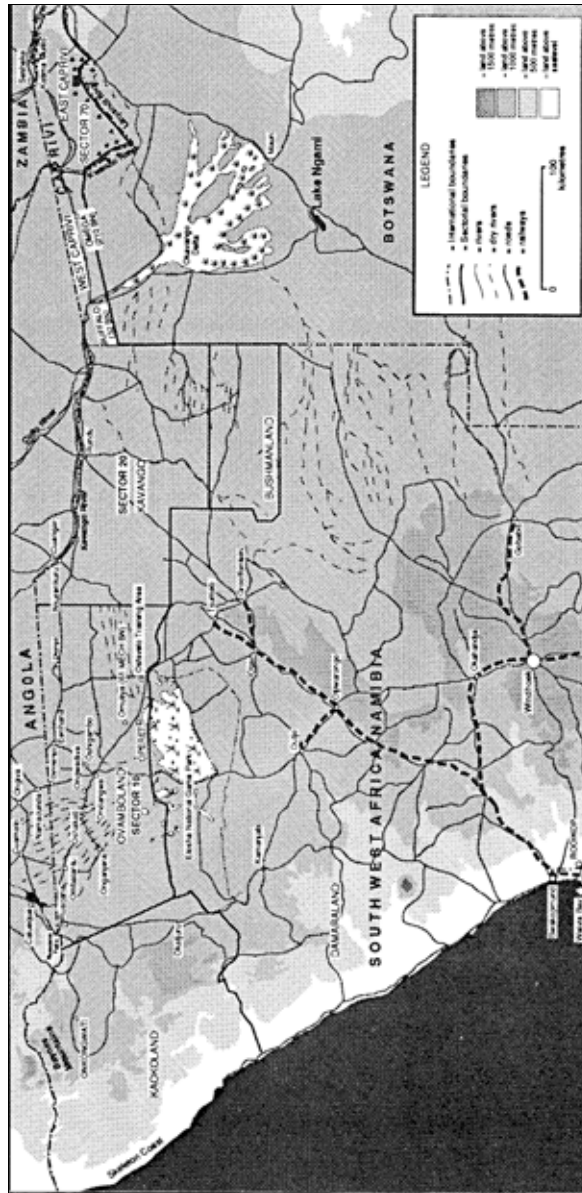
1 Archive Regiment Mooirivier, Potchefstroom (hereafter ARMR): File 252: Anon, *Regiment Mooirivier – 'n Historiese oorsig*, p 2

2 S L Barnard, "'n Historiese Oorsig van die Gewapende Konflik aan die Noordgrens van SWA/Namibië 1966-1989", *Acta Academica*, 23, 1, 1991, p 110

3 ARMR., File 265: Anon, *Die Landgeveg*, pp 2-60. Supplement to *Omsendbrief Bevelvoerder 7 SA Divisie/Bevelvoerder RMR*, 30 Junie 1993



Map 1: Southern Angola From: FJ du T Spies, *Operasie Savannah: Angola 1975-1976* (SADF Directorate of Public Relations, Pretoria, 1989)



Map 2: South West Africa/Namibia From: W Steenkamp, *Suid-Afrika se Grensoorlog, 1966-1989* (Ashanti Publishers, Rivonia, 1990), p 10

The SADF and the South African Police were involved in the Border War for its full duration and were supported by the South West Africa/Namibian Territorial Force (SWATF) from 1 August 1980. The South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO, founded in 1960), which was preceded by the Ovamboland People's Congress (founded in Cape Town in 1958 by Herman Toivo Ja Toivo as an organisation for dock workers), on the other side, aspired for the liberation of South West Africa/Namibia. During 1962 SWAPO, who by then had established its headquarters in Lusaka, decided to combine the political liberation struggle with military action against the South African forces. For this purpose a military wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), was launched.⁴

International events contributed to the fact that the struggle for South West Africa/Namibia was not limited to SWAPO and the South African forces. Because of, amongst others, a coup and the economic and moral burden associated with overseas colonies, Portugal withdrew in haste from Angola and Mozambique in 1974, leaving the former colonies in chaos. In Angola the three liberation movements, namely *Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola* (MPLA: People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), *Frente Nacional de Libertacao de Angola* (FNLA: National Front for the Liberation of Angola) and *Uniao Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA: National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), got involved in a military struggle against one another to gain political control. The Cold War was already in full swing at that stage and the USSR and its Cuban ally provided the Marxist MPLA (and its military wing FAPLA) with weapons and financial aid. Starting April 1975, Cuba even went as far as to send thousands of troops to Angola to assist the MPLA. At first the other liberation movements did not receive aid, but for strategic reasons (such as preventing the establishment of a communist state on the northern border of South West Africa/Namibia), South Africa, with the moral support of the USA, started giving military and financial support to UNITA, who was sympathetic towards the West.⁵

SWAPO, supported by the MPLA, established military bases in the south of Angola in order to penetrate South West Africa/Namibia more effectively. Consequently it was only a matter of time before the South African forces would not only encounter SWAPO, but also the MPLA and Cuban forces.⁶ South Africa did not adopt an attitude of wait-and-see, but was determined to maintain the initiative through their so-called pre-emptive operations.

4 L. Barnard, *Pantser in Aksie: 1 SDB 1933 – 1993* (NG Missionary Press, Bloemfontein, 1993), pp 51-52

5 H J van Aswegen, *Geskiedenis van Afrika van die Vroegste Oorsprong tot Onafhanklikheid* (Academica, Pretoria, 1982), pp 481-484; Barnard, *Pantser in Aksie*, p 52; L Scholtz, *Beroemde Suid-Afrikaanse Krygsmanne* (Rubicon Press, Cape Town, 1984), pp 177-178; W Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!: South Africa into Angola* (Butterworth, Durban, 1983), p 3

6 Since the aim with this investigation is to assess the role of an SADF regiment in the conflict from their vantage point, SWAPO, the MPLA and Cuban forces will occasionally be identified as "the enemy" in this article, implying that they were perceived as such by the SADF

Operation Savannah, 1975-1976

The primary objective of Operation Savannah was to advance the establishment of a Western-oriented government in Angola, which would not tolerate any SWAPO bases or communist Cubans on Angolan territory. The USA secretly supported the South African government in these objectives and with their knowledge Angola was invaded on 14 October 1975 by Task Force Zulu. This task force, which was eventually reinforced by task groups Foxbat, Orange and X-Ray, achieved exceptional success against the enemy. During this operation, the SADF for the first time since the Second World War ventured upon the terrain of conventional warfare. Within 33 days it had penetrated approximately 3 200 kilometres of Angola.⁷

Early in December 1975 the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General M.A. de M. Malan, already suggested to the commanding officer of 101 Task Force, Major General A.J. van Deventer, that Citizen Force units should also serve in Angola. The explanation given for this was that it could be an opportunity for these units to gain operational experience, and that they could replace the national conscripts whose service term would have ended by 7 January 1976. This plea was heeded and during December 1975 and January 1976, no fewer than 35 South African Citizen Force units were called up. Members who were called up had to sign a statement in which they confirmed their willingness to serve in Angola as volunteers, without any identification tags ("dog tags") or any markings of rank. The signing of the statement caused anguish with some members of the Citizen Force who preferred to serve by direct order of the government and not as volunteers. The Citizen Force units were deployed in southern Angola and were mainly divided in Combat Groups Juliet, Hotel, Golf and Lima. Some units were only partially incorporated in combat groups, or not at all. Those who were not incorporated, were used as reserves during counter-insurgency operations, as escorts for convoys of refugees and to patrol the Oshivello training area.⁸

On 19 December 1975 Commandant C.H. Heenop, commanding officer RMR, received the order that RMR had to report for border duty in January 1976. RMR had to report in Potchefstroom on 4 January 1976 and in Bloemfontein on 8 January 1976. It was no easy task to call a regiment to arms shortly before the festive season. Nevertheless, the following day Heenop, with the help of key-personnel, managed to complete the call-up instructions of the conscripted men. The required documentation was mailed by 18:00. On 8 January 1976 at 07:00, the men of RMR departed from Safercamp, a railway station close to Potchefstroom Dam, concealed among thorn trees.⁹

7 S. du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola: Die Verhaal van Suid-Afrikaanse Soldate in Angola, 1975-1976* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1989), p xii; S L Barnard, "'n Historiese oorsig van die gewapende konflik aan die noordgrens van SWA/Namibië 1966-1989", *Acta Academica*, 23, 1, 1991, p 115

8 Du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola*, pp 36, 220; F J du T Spies, *Operasie Savannah: Angola 1975-1976* (SADF Directorate of Public Relations, Pretoria, 1989), p 277; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/K M Basson, W H van Zyl, 5 May 2001

9 ARMR: File 243: C H Heenop, *Grensdienst*, s a , pp 1-4

Combat Group Hotel and 101 Task Force Reserve (B-Squadron of RMR)

Shortly before the beginning of the operation, a parade of about fifteen minutes was held. At this occasion, P.W. Botha, the South African Minister of Defence at the time, delivered a message of support to the men.¹⁰ On 11 January 1976 members of RMR left Bloemfontein for Grootfontein, where they arrived two days later. They immediately departed for the Oshivello training area, where they would receive special training. Regiment headquarters were designated as the headquarters for Combat Group Hotel (including B-Squadron of RMR, under command of Major P.J. Randles)¹¹, with Commandant Heenop as commanding officer of this combat group. As the core part of Combat Group Hotel, RMR participated in Operation Savannah until mid-February 1976.

On 18 January 1976 Combat Group Hotel travelled by road from Oshivello to Pereira de Eca, where they received the combat equipment from Colonel C.J. Swart (commanding officer of Task Force Zulu). With this movement across the border RMR became the first Citizen Force armoured vehicle unit which served in Angola. During January and February 1976, Combat Group Hotel was responsible for the defence (*via*, for example, intensive patrolling) of the central part (from Evale to Mupa) of the border between South West Africa/Namibia and Angola. At one stage members of this combat group in search of SWAPO soldiers penetrated Angola as far north as the towns of Mulondo and Cassinga, situated on the banks of the Kunene River. Combat Group Hotel made no contact with the enemy, however. Some of their medical personnel did helpful work and provided clinic services to the local population. The medical officer of RMR, Lieutenant H.O. Penzhorn, for example, did duty at Pereira de Eca. This was in accordance with the general policy of the SADF to win the favour of the local population. With the final withdrawal of the South African Defence Force from Angola in March 1976, Combat Group Hotel was disbanded. Thereafter RMR was deployed as part of 101 Task Force reserves in Ovamboland. There they played an important role in amongst others the relocation of Portuguese refugees from Angola to Grootfontein.¹²

The biggest part of the task to relocate the refugees was controlled by Commandant A. Moelich, who made his headquarters in the city hall of Pereira de Eca. Three armoured vehicle groups (among which RMR's B-Squadron under command of Captain Willie van Zyl) and two infantry squads participated in "Operation Refugee". The operation was completed in two phases. Initially the refugees were taken across the Angolan border by air. During this phase the armoured troops and infantry soldiers formed a cordon around the airport. Later on the refugees were taken to Ondangwa in convoys of about 150 private vehicles per trip, under escort of the armoured vehicles and infantry soldiers.¹³

10 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/W H Van Zyl, S G Greyling, 5 May 2001

11 ARMR: File 27: *B-Eskadron adreslys*, s a

12 ARMR: File 124: *Eenheidsgeskiedenis: 1 September 1975 tot 31 Augustus 1976*, p 3 Supplement to Letter *Bevelvoerder Regiment Mooirivier/Bevelvoerder 82 Gemeganiseerde Brigade, 11 November 1976*; ARMR: File 107: *Program van Verrigtinge, Revueparade ter viering van Regiment Mooirivier se 25 jaar, 29 September 1979*; ARMR: File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, 4, 2, November 1984; Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, p 223

13 Du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola*, pp 214, 218; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/W H van Zyl, 6 November 1999

During this time heartbreaking scenes were witnessed, which touched even the most hardened soldiers. Rumours that the SADF was about to evacuate the south of Angola, as well as the threatening attitude of the liberation organisations, caused Portuguese citizens to flee Angola in a frenzy. As a result they took with them only the most precious and essential possessions which could be transported in a private vehicle. Among their most precious possessions were their pets, but these could not be transported across the border. Lieutenant Ken Basson (second in command RMR's B-Squadron) and his helpers had the unpleasant task of confiscating all domestic animals. Some members of the SADF took advantage of the refugees' predicament. Cigarettes, for example, were worth so much that a carton of cigarettes could be exchanged for a motorcar. The latter was quite useless under the circumstances. The refugees also had to hand in their arms and these were purchased by members of the SADF for next to nothing. The Portuguese owners of the arms merely had to sign a "contract of purchase", whereafter the new owners could get the required licences for the arms in South Africa without much trouble. Notwithstanding strict orders to the contrary, the South African soldiers started collecting the goods that had been left behind. There were even cases of double beds which were removed from houses and transported by armoured vehicle, in an attempt to ensure a good night's rest.¹⁴

Combat Group Golf (A-Squadron from RMR)

Combat Groups Golf and Lima were responsible for guarding the western entry routes to southern Angola. Some of the combat groups were also deployed to guard the Calueque-Ruacana project (an ambitious hydro-electric water scheme). RMR's A-Squadron, under command of Major R.J. Penzhorn, formed part of Combat Group Golf and they gained valuable experience about incorporating and coordinating other service weapons. Furthermore, this squadron had to operate away from the supervision and protection of the tribal headquarters. As part of Combat Group Golf, the squadron helped to guard the Calueque-Ruacana water scheme until the end of March 1976.¹⁵ Combat Group Golf was divided in Combat Teams 10, 20 and 30. Combat Team 10 had to prevent the enemy from reaching Calueque, while Combat Team 20 was responsible for a defence system in the area of Beranangato, as well as patrolling the road to Chipa and Chitado. Combat Team 30, in Otchinjau, undertook patrols to Oncócuá, Ompupa and Cahama.¹⁶

Broadcasting stations such as the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Cooperation meticulously kept the rest of the world up to date about the movements of the South African troops in Angola, while the South African local propaganda (due to, *inter alia*, the Government's fear of intense national and international criticism) brought South Africans under the impression that the SADF was not involved in Angola at all. As a result their wives or girlfriends mistrusted many of these soldiers. An example of this is the case of Captain Japie Venter's (RMR) wife who was under the impression that he was serving in the north of South West Africa/Namibia and who resented the fact that he did not write or call.¹⁷

14 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/W H van Zyl, K M Basson, J M Venter, 6 November 1999

15 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, pp 283, 285; ARMR: File 27: *A-Eskadron adreslys*, s a ; ARMR: File 124: *Eenheidsgeskiedenis: 1 September 1975 tot 31 Augustus 1976*, p 3 Supplement to *Brief Bevelvoerder Regiment Mooirivier/Bevelvoerder 82 Gemeganiseerde Brigade, 11 November 1976*; ARMR: File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, 4, 2, November 1984

16 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, p 286

17 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/J M Venter, 6 November 1999

Apart from routine work, like establishing temporary bases, manning roadblocks, building roads and undertaking reconnaissance patrols, the men from RMR regularly held sports parades. These consisted of soccer matches, tug of war, rugby (they played against Ruacana on Saturday 6 March 1976 and won 15-12), angling, swimming and donkey-riding. On Tuesday 23 March 1976 at 03:20, A-Squadron finally moved out of Angola. To their delight they were informed that they would return to South Africa at the end of March 1976.¹⁸

One of the many dilemmas of the South African troops in Angola was the poor communication with higher headquarters. According to Lieutenant Ken Basson the high command at one stage did not know where he and his troops were. Determining their position was complicated by the exceptionally flat and vast topography. Proper communication was also a problem due to poor radio equipment and the vast distances. When the necessary coordinates were requested, they were referred by high command to another post. To add to their frustration, the coordinates were changed four to five times a day to raise security and to confuse the enemy. As a result there was a shortage of essential provisions and they were left to their own devices. However, they did not lack the necessary resourcefulness. Troop Commander Lieutenant Chris Schulenburg, for example, managed to get a successful poultry-farming project off the ground, in spite of their extensive travels. At least the men were assured of fresh eggs. The only drawback, though, was that the cock invariably climbed onto the muzzle of the armoured vehicle at the break of dawn and crowded everyone awake.¹⁹ The men of RMR also towed sheep and goats (left behind by fleeing civilians) along by cart and could even trade with these sought-after commodities.²⁰

At 15:00 on 30 March 1976, RMR left Grootfontein for Potchefstroom on troop-train number 221. Major Penzhorn acted as troop-train commander. The passenger list consisted of the following: 298 RMR-members, 33 members from 36 Engineer Support Unit and 149 members from Regiment President Steyn.²¹ However, because of heavy rain the train could only go as far as Makwassie and buses were arranged to take the men to Potchefstroom. For many the impatience to get home was too much and they preferred to hitchhike. They took only the necessary with them and left the rest of their equipment behind in the train. Sergeant-Major S.W. van der Merwe consequently had to remove the equipment from the train and transport it by bus to Potchefstroom. Commandant Heenop meanwhile arranged an enormous welcoming party, but to his dismay only about half of the men arrived in Potchefstroom on 3 April 1976. Although 29 South Africans were killed in action during Operation Savannah²², by the grace of God no member of RMR was killed or seriously wounded.²³

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- 18 ARMR: File 213: *Oorlogsdagboek A-Eskadron*, 22 Januarie 1976 – 24 Maart 1976
 19 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/K M Basson, C A Schulenburg, J M Venter, 6 November 1999
 20 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/J M Venter, 6 November 1999
 21 ARMR: File 53: R J Penzhorn, *Bewegingsorder*, 26 March 1976, p 1
 22 W Steenkamp, *Suid-Afrikaanse Grensoorlog 1966-1989* (Ashanti Publishers, Rivonia, 1990), p 60
 23 ARMR: File 124: *Eenheidsgeskiedenis: 1 September 1975 tot 31 Augustus 1976*, p 3
 Supplement to *Brief Bevelvoerder Regiment Mooirivier/Bevelvoerder 82 Gemeganiseerde Brigade*, 11 November 1976; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/S G Greyling, J M Venter, 5 May 2001

The first contact of RMR with the operational area was strikingly depicted in *Die Silwer Arend* ("The Silver Eagle"), RMR's newsletter:

Although they did not encounter the enemy, the experience they gained on a vast number of areas are of immeasurable value. The fact that the Regimental Headquarters had to absorb sub-units from other units under a single command, to group various service weapons in balanced combat teams, and to plan and execute the application of such combat teams, meant that all those who were involved in the experience gained insight and knowledge which cannot be calculated in financial terms.²⁴

Operation Askari, 1983-1984

During 1983/84, 82 Mechanised Brigade, and therefore also RMR, did border duty (the latter for the fourth time). The three RMR-squadrons took turns to do border duty: Combat Group Bravo (including RMR's B-Squadron) from 7 April to 5 July 1983; Combat Group Charlie (including A-Squadron from RMR) from 4 July to 2 October 1983 and Combat Group Delta (including C-Squadron from RMR) from 1 November 1983 to 31 January 1984.²⁵

The general objective of Operation Askari was to effectively counteract SWAPO's infiltration of South West Africa/Namibia from the south of Angola. Accordingly it was decided that the SADF should not only attack locally, but also across the border (Angola). Cahama, Cuvelai and Quiteve-Mulondo therefore had to be isolated, exhausted and terrorised so that FAPLA would either withdraw or desert on a large scale. SWAPO then had to be dealt the maximum losses.²⁶ The planning and execution of Operation Askari took place from Sector 10 Headquarters in Oshakati, under command of Brigadier J. Joubert (land forces) and Colonel R.S. Lord (air forces).²⁷

Operation Askari would be completed in four phases. Phase one involved an in-depth reconnaissance by special forces, whereafter the South African Air Force would attack the Tyhoo/Volcano basis of SWAPO in the vicinity of Lubango between 1 November and 30 December 1983. The offensive isolation of Cahama, Mulondo and Cuvelai between 16 November 1983 and mid-January 1984 was planned in phase two – this would also include cutting the enemy's communication and logistic connections. Furthermore, FAPLA had to be terrorised and demoralised to such an extent that they would be forced to withdraw further to the north. Phase three would consist of establishing a South African dominated territory west of the Kunene River by the beginning of February 1984. The final phase involved "the final stopping of

24 ARMR: File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, 4, 2, November 1984

25 ARMR: File 16: *Jaarlikse Verslag tot 31 Desember 1983, Bevelvoerder Regiment Mooirivier/Direkteur Dokumentasiediens SAW*, 31 January 1984, p 3. Supplement to *Brief Bevelvoerder Regiment Mooirivier/Bevelvoerder 82 Gemeganiseerde Brigade*, 7 March 1984; ARMR: File 252: Anon, *Regiment Mooirivier - 'n Historiese oorsig*, s a, p 2; ARMR: File 238: 7 April 1983 to 5 July 1983, *Naamlys, Regiment Mooirivier, Veggroep C, 4 Julie 1983 tot 2 Oktober 1983, Naamlys, Regiment Mooirivier, Veggroep D, 1 November 1983 tot 31 Januarie 1984*

26 ARMR: File 63: *Bevelvoerder Sektor 10, Op Plan: Op Askari (Sektor 10/309/1)*, 23 September 1983; ARMR: File 63: *Artillerieregimentsbevelvoerder, Art Opso no 1/83: Op Askari - Fase 2 van Sek 10 Gevegsontwerp*, 27 November 1983.

27 R S Lord, "Operasie Askari (a sub-commander's retrospective view of the operation)", *Militaria*, 22, 4, 1992, p 2

the incursion [of SWAPO], internally if necessary".²⁸ Cuban-supported FAPLA's involvement with SWAPO for the first time necessitated a mechanised South African combat group to act purely conventionally. Up to that stage, combat groups had been deployed for purposes of counter-insurgency only.²⁹

Combat Group Bravo (RMR, B-Squadron): 7 April to 5 July 1983

Commandant J.B. Swart of Regiment Groot Karoo acted as commanding officer, with Major J.J. Haggard as the combat group's second in command. The Combat Group RSM was First Warrant Officer G. Peo and Reverend J. Coetzee served duty as the chaplain for the combat group. The composition of the combat group was as follows: Regiment Groot Karoo minus one company, one squadron from Regiment President Steyn, one armoured vehicle squadron from RMR (B-Squadron of RMR under command of Major K.M. Basson)³⁰, one artillery battery from Regiment Potchefstroom University, one anti-aircraft battery from Regiment Eastern Transvaal, one field engineering battery from 13 Field Squadron, one signal battery from 82 Signal Unit, one combined platoon from 3 Maintenance Unit, one light workshop battery from 71 Field Workshop, one combined medical platoon from 5 Medical Battalion and one section of military police from 7 Provost Company.³¹

Combat Group Bravo's border duty started out negatively, when 14 RMR-members were injured in a Ratel armoured vehicle accident near Upington, on the way to the operational area.³² Captain Willie Coetzee acted as convoy commanding officer, by order of Commandant Blackie Swart, and had to issue his convoy orders based on very little and cryptic information. All that was clear, was that the convoy were not to leave the tarred road under any circumstances. Their movement was kept such a secret that the Military Police put up signposts with directions at a turn-off only shortly before the arrival of the first group of Ratel vehicles in the convoy. The Military Police allegedly also put up a signpost just before Upington, but the driver of the first Ratel apparently missed this sign. As a result he drove on to the National Gemsbok Park and only realized that he was lost when the tarred road ended. He drove over the next hill, but could not pull off the road completely. In the ensuing cloud of dust, the second Ratel crashed into the left side of the first and then skidded forward, whereafter a chain collision followed. The injured were transported to the nearest hospital as quickly as possible, from where they were transferred to 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria. The same evening Captain Japie Venter and Commandant Faan Greyling visited some of the injured in 1 Military Hospital.³³

After the unfortunate incident, the groups of Ratels continued their journey to the border area by road, while the rest of the combat group was transported to Ondangwa by air. After a short training period, the combat group moved in vehicles through the

28 Lord, "Operasie Askari", p 3

29 ARMR: File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, 4, 2, November 1984; ARMR: File 63: *Uniform*, 101, 30 January 1984

30 ARMR: File 238: *Naamlys, Regiment Moorivier, Veggroep B, 7 April 1983 tot 5 Julie 1983*.

31 ARMR: File 241: *Beplanningskaart, Veggroep A, Onderhoudspan 1, Veggroep B, Onderhoudspan 2, s a*; ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 253: *Bevelvoerder Veggroep Bravo, Staande orders Veggroep Bravo, s a*

32 ARMR: File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, 4 [sic], 2, September 1983

33 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/P R Tscheuschner, K M Basson, J M Venter, 7 November 1999

Oshikango border post to Angola. The combat group was divided in combat teams which each had to undertake sweep operations in a specific area. To the utter frustration of, for example, the B-Squadron, no contact was made with the enemy. When Corporal L.P. (Wittes) van Wyk, one of the armoured vehicle commanders, spotted a Russian vehicle during one of the sweep operations, he could not contain his fighting spirit any longer. Without waiting for an order of the armoured vehicle commander, he made a dash for the Russian vehicle, damaging the antennas of the Ratel in the process. Major Basson had to send a support group to “catch” the Ratel. “Wittes”, however, was furious that his commanding officer dared to keep him from a “well-deserved” combat!

Thereafter the squadron regrouped and moved further. However, Basson and his group did not realize how close they were to Cuvelai until the advance guard came across the front bunkers of Cuvelai. At the request of one of the troop commanders, Major Basson and his men rapidly gave supporting fire. During the contact one of the armoured vehicles’ towers was unable to turn and without thinking of his own safety, one of the men physically turned the barrel in the direction in which the gunner wanted to fire. The enemy fled and equipment, such as their radios, could be seized. After the squadron had regrouped, they were under attack of heavy artillery fire from the Cuvelai base. The enemy did not know exactly where the South Africans were, however, and merely fired in a general direction. On the same day B-Squadron moved back to the area where the rest of the combat group was. There they pitched camp and spent the night. The next day, which became known as “Bloody Sunday” in the annals of the South African Defence Force, several infantry companies came into conflict with the enemy. To the frustration of Ken Basson and B-Squadron, they could not give the foot-soldiers the fire support that they desperately needed. The combat group commanding officer, Commandant J.B. Swart, and his second in command, Major J.J. Haggard, were unable to control the battle, because they were engaged in a severe radio battle of their own. This “battle” was due to different interpretations on how the Operation should be executed. As a result, Basson got conflicting instructions from the two men and, although he had the necessary firepower, he and his men never participated in the battle, in which several South African soldiers died.³⁴

The next day Brigadier Joep Joubert arrived with reinforcements (amongst others parachutists). Large sweep operations were carried out, but in spite of all their effort, they could not make contact with the enemy again. During the next few weeks, several more sweep operations took place, after which the combat group returned to South Africa.³⁵

The following words of praise by Commandant J.B. Swart, the commanding officer of Regiment Groot Karoo, did preciously little to compensate for the terrible disappointment of having been so near, yet so far, from the battle:

34 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/K M Basson, 7 November 1999; 5 May 2001

35 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/K M Basson, 7 November 1999; 5 May 2001

I would very much like to use this opportunity to request you [Commandant Faan Greyling] to convey my appreciation to Ken and the men from his squadron for the way in which they completely accepted my command and for the unselfish way in which they carried out the tasks for which they were responsible. It was a pleasure to work with them and you have reason to be proud of them.³⁶

The commanding officer of B-Squadron, Major Basson, later commented:

I think under circumstances we coped well with our task and some of us could boast of touching Cuvelai. I am sure a lot of us would have liked to be part of the main onslaught.

Basson added that

... there were many events which one could not easily forget, be they happy or otherwise. This proves that border duty is no easy task. I am proud of having shared that with you.³⁷

However, Combat Group Bravo did not achieve its objective of launching such an onslaught on the enemy that the latter would flee. To the contrary, the South Africans were the losers in that battle. Poor central control, especially during “Bloody Sunday”, the fact that the enemy were entrenched and the deceptively dense bush of the flat territory could be considered as contributing factors in this regard.

Combat Group Charlie (RMR, A-Squadron): 4 July - 2 October 1983

Commandant T.A. Coetzee was the commanding officer of the combat group, with Major M.G. Schoeman as his second in command. First Warrant Officer J.P. Vermaak was the combat group's RSM and Reverend J.J.J. van Rensburg served as chaplain of the combat group. The composition of this combat group was as follows: 1 Regiment De la Rey minus one company, one artillery battery from 7 Medical Regiment, one tank squadron from RPS, one armoured vehicle squadron from RMR (A-Squadron under command of Major D.J.F. Myburgh)³⁸, one anti-aircraft battery from Regiment Eastern Transvaal, one field engineering battery from 13 Field Squadron, one signal battery from 82 Signal Unit, one combined platoon from 3 Maintenance Unit, one light workshop battery from 71 Field Workshop, one combined medical platoon from 5 Medical Battalion and one section of military police from 7 Provost Company.³⁹

Combat Group Charlie was mainly involved in the onslaught on Cahama. On 23 August 1983, A-Squadron was summoned to Xangongo to prepare with the rest of Combat Group Charlie for an onslaught on the outskirts of Cahama. The purpose of the onslaught was to test the reaction capacity of the “bees” (Red Eyes, 155mm Howitzers and 120mm mortars) and to determine their deployment. The next day at 08:00, A-Squadron was at Chicusse, about eleven kilometres east of Cahama. Before long the enemy bombarded them with the “bees”. Amazingly there was only one injury – an engineer soldier whose eardrums burst when their Buffel was hit by a shell. Chicusse was again attacked on 31 August 1983 and 6 September 1983. At least 28 confirmed “heads” and, in the words of Major Myburgh, “many unconfirmed

36 ARMR: File 204: *Brief, J.B. Swart/F. Greyling, 11 Augustus 1983, Die Silwer Arend*, 4 [sic], 2, September 1983

37 ARMR: File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, 4, 2, November 1984

38 ARMR: File 238: *Naamlys, Regiment Mootrivier, Veggroep C, 4 Julie 1983 tot 2 Oktober 1983*.

39 ARMR: File 140: *Bevelvoerder Veggroep Delta, Staande orders Veggroep Delta*, undated, p 2

heads” of the enemy were lost. In addition, A-Squadron undertook several sweep operations during their border duty and in the process rounded up several suspicious persons.⁴⁰ Yet this combat group, too, was unable to intimidate or exhaust the enemy to such a degree that they would flee. Thus SWAPO and its allies could claim that they successfully withstood the South African onslaught on Cahama.

Combat Group Delta (RMR, C-Squadron): 31 October 1983 to 22 January 1984

Combat Group Delta was under command of RMR Headquarters, with Commandant S.G. Greyling in command. Major P.J. Randles from RMR initially acted as the combat group’s second in command, with First Warrant Officer S.W. van der Merwe as RSM and Reverend A.C. Kuyper as chaplain. Combat Group Delta consisted of the following elements from other units: one company from Regiment Groot Karoo, one company from 4 South African Infantry, one artillery battery from 7 Medical Regiment, Regiment Mooirivier minus two squadrons (A-Squadron under command of Major H.A. Kallmeyer)⁴¹, one anti-aircraft battery, one field engineering battery from 13 Field Squadron, one signal battery from 82 Signal Unit, one combined platoon from 3 Maintenance Unit, one light workshop battery from 71 Field Workshop, one combined medical platoon from 5 Medical Battalion and 1 section of military police from 7 Provost Company.⁴² The fighting strength of Combat Group Delta on 11 December 1983 was a total of 1 055 men (76 officers, 979 warrant officers and privates).⁴³

Combat Group Delta was already compiled in Bloemfontein and departed from there by aeroplane for Grootfontein, from where they travelled by road to the Oshivello training area. During the training phase Major Johan Randles had, due to conflicting personalities, such severe clashes with the high command that he withdrew on short notice. Pressed for time, Commandant Greyling then had to approach Major W.H. van Zyl, who could not do border duty because of difficult personal circumstances. Van Zyl nevertheless agreed to help and his addition to the headquarters was regarded by Commandant Greyling as an advantage to the operation. Major Van Zyl arrived at Oshivello only a day before the combat group was due to move across the border and without having attended the training phase himself.⁴⁴ Van Zyl, an experienced and well-trained soldier, nevertheless effectively adapted to the conditions and effectively executed his duties.

The initial plan was to attack Cuvelai from the south-east. Accordingly the combat group proceeded to Mongua, situated about a hundred kilometres north of the border between Angola and South West Africa/Namibia, where they spent the night in temporary bases. However, the south-eastern attack was not carried out immediately, because the combat group received an order from Brigadier Joubert to rescue a small combat group west of the Kunene River. This combat group, under command of Major Dries van Jaarsveld, was used as a deception tactic and the enemy who had surrounded them, was about to wipe them out. Combat Group Delta therefore

40 ARMR: File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, 4, 2, November 1984

41 ARMR: File 238, *Naamlys, Regiment Mooirivier, Veggroep D, 1 November 1983 tot 31 Januarie 1984*

42 ARMR: File 140: *Bevelvoerder Veggroep Delta, Staande orders Veggroep Delta*, s a , p 2

43 ARMR: File 159: *Seinberig, 82 Gemeganiseerde Brigade Veggroep Delta/Sektor 10, Pers/254/Desember 1983*

44 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/S G Greyling, S W van der Merwe, W H van Zyl, 11 December 1999

changed direction and moved to Secwendiwa. At first they moved by road, which was made safe with great difficulty by the engineering personnel. The process took too long, however, because any insignificant object, such as caps of cold drink bottles, set off the mine detectors. As a result, Major Van Zyl decided rather to confront the incredibly dense bush, and he did not lack the necessary resourcefulness. The infantry of Groot Karoo navigated at the front, while the leading Ratels forced open a path. The convoy moved at a snail's pace, progressing between six and eight kilometres per night.⁴⁵ The first group of vehicles was approximately an hour and a half ahead of the vehicles at the back. Major Kallie Kallmeyer and Captain Japie Venter covered the rear. The varying sizes and associated mobility of the vehicles had a concertina-effect on the convoy. Exhausted drivers sometimes had to wait several minutes for the vehicle in front of them to start moving again, and they inevitably fell asleep. In such circumstances Japie Venter, for the sake of discipline and the danger of landmines, climbed from vehicle to vehicle to wake the embarrassed guilty parties.⁴⁶

On Christmas Eve, at about 00:00, the enemy in Cuvelai for some reason ceased fire. Because of that Combat Group Delta could start their Christmas celebrations in relative quiet. For safety reasons each team held a separate barbecue. Despite of strict safety measures the lights of a Christmas tree were burning on top of a Ratel (the O-vehicle) in the middle of the camp. Power for the lights on the tree was relayed from a generator of an Air Force Ratel. For many of the hardened soldiers far from their loved ones, knowing that the attack on Cuvelai was imminent, it must have been an intensely emotional experience.⁴⁷

The next day the intimidation phase (approximately 26 to 30 December 1983) continued from the western side of Cuvelai. Patrols were regularly sent out and as soon as they came within a certain distance of Cuvelai, the artillery and mortars roared from Cuvelai. Later it was established that the enemy fired at previously registered targets. The so-called battle-broadcast speaker was used in an attempt to unnerve the enemy to such a degree that they would take to flight. Because of the exceptionally flat territory, sound travelled very far, particularly at night. Powerful sound equipment was mounted on a vehicle and then one of the soldiers who could speak Portuguese shouted out intimidating South African propaganda. Every hour a round was fired in the direction of Cuvelai to keep the enemy from sleeping. The threatening tactics had no effect, though, and as Combat Group Delta had to move off course in any event to rescue the small combat group, it was decided to attack Cuvelai from the north-east and thereby also to cut off the northern escape route. However, this plan was doomed right from the beginning, because the Cuvelai River, which was in flood, formed a natural barrier between the attack force and the enemy's main posts.⁴⁸ Commandant Greyling's objections against the original plan of attack were dismissed by the higher headquarters in Oshivello, who insisted that the attack should be launched from the north-east.⁴⁹ This short-sightedness would cost the higher headquarters dearly.⁵⁰

45 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/S G Greyling, W H van Zyl, 11 December 1999; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/W H van Zyl, 5 May 2001

46 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/H A Kallmeyer, 11 December 1999

47 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/S G Greyling, 11 December 1999; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/W H van Zyl, 5 May 2001

48 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/S G Greyling, H A Kallmeyer, 11 December 1999

49 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/S G Greyling, 11 December 1999

50 ARMR: *Dagboek, Bravo Kompanjie, 8 Desember 83 tot 14 Januarie 84*, pp 6-7

The following day the first onslaught on Cuvelai began and the movement orders were as follows: Combat Team 10, Combat Team 20, Combat Group Headquarters (Zero) and Combat Team 30. All the side-streams of the river were running and the vehicles got stuck in almost every one of them. The mechanics from the light workshop battery were an example of preparedness and bravery. On every occasion they moved forward with a salvage vehicle ("white stallion") and jumped out of the vehicle in spite of heavy mortar fire, attached kinetic ropes to the stuck vehicles and pulled them out of the mud. During the salvage operations two kinetic ropes broke, because the vehicles could not be pulled out slowly, but by a "rush and pull" technique. Due to the crisis with the stuck vehicles, the first attack, which already should have started at dawn, could only begin at about 09:00. Commandant Faan Greyling wanted to postpone the attack because of the delay, but the higher headquarters stubbornly refused.⁵¹ They wanted to round off the attack as soon as possible and then withdraw from Angola due to intense international pressure.

Combat Teams 10 and 20 largely consisted of mechanised infantry and were positioned in a line. Combat Team 30, under command of Major Kallmeyer, was deployed for flank protection, while the 81mm mortar platoon and the artillery provided indirect fire support. During the march towards the enemy the South Africans, who were not visible directly from the Cuvelai base, were met by intense 23mm fire. One of the commanders of Combat Team 30 was so unnerved by the attack that the exceptionally skilful Lieutenant Dirk du Plessis had to take command of two armoured vehicle teams simultaneously. During the attack the officer in command of the mortar section, Second Lieutenant P.M. Liebenberg, lifted the mortar fire by 50 metre leaps, but shortly after the beginning of the attack, the mortars suddenly became quiet. A 23mm of the enemy hit the tower of Liebenberg's Ratel, fatally injuring him. Because of this incident, and because the terrain with felled trees over which they had to move most probably was mined, Commandant Greyling gave orders that they should fall back about fifty to a hundred metres. The standing doctrine for armoured vehicles was to retreat orderly in a line, but what followed on the order was chaos. The vehicles moved in total disorder past the combat group headquarters. Commandant Faan Greyling somehow managed to restore the calm and thereafter they moved to an assembly point beyond the firing range of the enemy posts. The process of salvaging stuck vehicles was repeated with their retreat journey. In addition, the higher headquarters gave order that Cuvelai should be attacked immediately via the northern white road. Commandant Greyling flatly refused to do this and argued that proper planning and reconnaissance were needed first. The white road gave access to a narrow bridge and the Cuvelai base, but only one vehicle at a time could move across the bridge. An attack from that direction would have been suicide, because the enemy would easily have been able to counter the attack.⁵²

The enemy ceased fire during the South Africans' retreat and they did not use the opportunity to wipe out the South Africans, who were struggling for hours to rescue vehicles from the muddy streams. It was already past midnight when the last vehicles, under command of Major Kallmeyer, reached the camp site, about 12

51 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/H A Kallmeyer, W H van Zyl, S G Greyling, 11 December 1999; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/W H van Zyl, 5 May 2001

52 ARMR: File 199: *Seinberigvorm, Veggroep Delta/Sektor 10, 31 Desember 1983*; ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 155: *Seinberigte, Veggroep Delta, reeksnommer 1758, 31 Desember 1983*; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/H A Kallmeyer, S G Greyling, W H van Zyl, 11 December 1999

kilometres north-west of Cuvelai.⁵³ Apart from Liebenberg, Private J.C. Fourie from Regiment Groot Karoo was also killed. Four men had sustained shrapnel wounds when an R4-round accidentally went off in one of the vehicles of Combat Team 20.⁵⁴

After the botched first attack, the groups (mainly two sections) from Regiment Groot Karoo absolutely refused to participate in any further combat. The feeling among the men was that they were always first in the line of fire during an attack and that the attacks were planned in such a way that they were being used as cannon-fodder. Major Kallmeyer had the difficult task of convincing the demoralised soldiers to the contrary. Kallmeyer, supported by his enthusiastic armoured vehicle crew, eventually managed to persuade the foot-soldiers to continue fighting, but on condition that they received proper orders and were not forced to leave the relative safety of the vehicles prematurely. Kallmeyer also decided to side-step the lieutenants from Regiment Groot Karoo, who no longer had the complete trust of their men, by personally and simultaneously giving orders to the whole combat team.⁵⁵

Commandant E. van Lill, officer in command of 61 Mechanised Brigade, was put in charge of the next onslaught on Cuvelai. During the first and unsuccessful attack on Cuvelai, Van Lill and his men tried in vain to intimidate Cahama. They were added to Combat Group Delta as reinforcements. This time it was wisely decided to attack Cuvelai from the south-east and the men moved through the Cuvelai River. In the approach the Light Workshop battery once again showed their skills. The axle of Major Kallmeyer's Ratel broke during the night and the vehicle was towed by the "white stallion" to the next temporary base. There the "tiffies" (technicians) and the crew of the Ratel worked on it throughout the night and the next day at about 07:00, the Ratel was again ready for service. The attack, which would have taken place on 3 January 1984 from the south-eastern side, was postponed until the next day, though, because the combat teams could not reach the marching-off lines in time. Commandant Van Lill and his group, for instance, got hopelessly lost and ended up more or less 16 kilometres north of the planned marching-off line. Van Lill therefore gave orders that the various groups had to retreat beyond the firing range of Cuvelai and to assume temporary bases.⁵⁶

Kallmeyer and his group moved about 5 kilometres south and spent the night in a temporary base. The next morning the protecting hand of the Lord was experienced in a wonderful way. In response to orders from Van Lill, Kallmeyer unexpectedly had to retrace his steps of the previous day to Cuvelai. On the spur of the moment he ordered the convoy to immediately move 90 degrees left, straight across the white road. About 100 metres further they again moved north, parallel to the white road, in the direction of the goal. Later it was established that the combat team had moved down an avenue the width of a Ratel, flanked by seventeen landmines. Because the previous attack came from the east, the enemy concentrated on that side. The decision to attack from the west caught them by surprise. Furthermore, only one tank and one 23mm-artillery-gun were in position on the west of the white road, and one

53 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/S G Greyling, H A Kallmeyer, 11 December 1999; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/W H van Zyl, 5 May 2001

54 ARMR: File 155: *Seinberigte, Veggroep Delta, reeksnommer 1765*, 31 December 1983

55 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/H A Kallmeyer, S G Greyling, 11 December 1999

56 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/W H van Zyl, H A Kallmeyer, S W van der Merwe, 11 December 1999; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/J M Venter, 5 May 2001

on the east of the road.⁵⁷ The officer in command of the operation, Commandant Van Lill, ordered that Cuvelai should be occupied at all costs, in spite of heavy enemy fire. As a result of the determined and effective attack by the South African forces, the enemy fled.

The attack started round about 08:00 and by 14:00 the enemy positions had already been conquered. In the attack one Ratel from 61 Mechanic Battalion was hit by an enemy RPG, slightly injuring one man. A second Ratel, however, was hit by tank fire and four men from 61 Mechanised Battalion were killed. RMR's losses were restricted to the hatch of one vehicle, which was hit by an enemy 14,5mm (a machine-gun mounted on a vehicle), but nobody was injured in the incident. The large number of mines in the area complicated the following clean-up and securing operation. Members of the Engineer Corps therefore secured the territory before the clean-up was undertaken in all earnest. A total of 21 members (among them six from 61 Mechanised Battalion) of the SADF and the SWATF in total were killed during Operation Askari. Their enemy had about 324 fatalities and an unknown number of injured.⁵⁸

In the large-scale clean-up, which lasted until 9 January 1984, a large number of weapons, ammunition and vehicles were seized. The return journey, which started on 10 January 1984, was complicated because the bridge across the Cuvelai River was badly damaged. Personnel from 13 Field Engineer Regiment, however, quickly built "Faan's bridge", named after Commandant Faan Greyling (commanding officer of Combat Group Delta). Engineer officer Johan van Zyl and logistics officer Major Sarel Coetzer (who also was a qualified engineer) supervised the project in which 148 tree-trunks (mostly African teak) each more than three metres in length, were cut. The members of Combat Team 20 lay the trunks and fastened them, while other members filled approximately one thousand bags of sand. The sandbags were layered on top of the tree-trunks to absorb the shock of the moving vehicles. After only 12 hours, the 26-metre long bridge was complete and, with Captain Rob Rodgers walking in front and showing the way to the tense drivers, the vehicles one by one crossed the river on 11 January 1984. Thereafter they returned to South West Africa/Namibia.⁵⁹ By 21:00 on 14 January 1984, the last vehicles arrived from Angola in Oshivello in South West Africa/Namibia.⁶⁰ *Die Silwer Arend* reported that

[t]he Battle for Cuvelai was not always easy, but with the excellent cooperation in the combat group the battle eventually was won. We give thanks to all the Delta members who participated and also in particular to the RMR members. I think that the RMR unit is by now quite battle-worthy. Each squadron and the HQ were involved in combat in which fire was returned. Our men have gained first-rate knowledge of cross-fire and in the process they prepared themselves for greater things.⁶¹

57 Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/ H A Kallmeyer, 11 December 1999

58 ARMR: File 52: *Seinberigvorms, Veggroep 3, [A(?) - Squadron], reeksnommers 344-369*; ARMR: File 63: *Uniform*, 100, 16 January 1984; ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 63: *Windhoek Observer*, 14 January 1984; P H R Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag* (Openbare Betrekkinge SA Weermag, Pretoria, 1989), p 21; Interview: G J J Oosthuizen/S G Greyling, H A Kallmeyer, 11 December 1999

59 ARMR: File 155: *Dagboek, Bravo Kompanjie, 8 Desember 1983 tot 14 Januarie 1984*, pp 8-9; ARMR: File 155: *Oorlogsdagboek, Veggroep D, 070700B tot 071900B Januarie 1984, 090700B tot 091900B Januarie 1984, 100700B tot 101900B Januarie 1984, 110700B tot 111900B Januarie 1984, 120700B tot 121900 B Januarie 1984, 130700B tot 131900 B Januarie 1984*; ARMR: File 63: *Uniform*, 101, 30 January 1984

60 ARMR: File 155: *Oorlogsdagboek, Veggroep D, 140700B tot 141900B Januarie 1984*

61 ARMR: File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, 4, 2, November 1984

Conclusion

Operation Savannah failed in its primary objective to establish a government in Angola that would be sympathetic toward the West and South Africa in particular, and that would not tolerate SWAPO bases or Cubans on Angolan territory. Although brilliant military success was achieved by the SADF, it could not be followed up, in particular because South Africa was forsaken by the USA. The final withdrawal of South Africa from Angola in March 1976 left a vacuum which was quickly filled by SWAPO, Cuba and the MPLA. SWAPO went from strength to strength and as a result several pre-emptive operations followed, amongst which Operation Askari.

Brigadier Lord described the outcome of Operation Askari in these words:

It can be fairly stated that as an operation against SWAPO, Askari produced results that effectively eliminated SWAPO PLAN as a major element in the military struggle. Although the organisation still existed, their military efforts had lost potential and were easily countered. Although we required a large economic outlay to maintain this status quo, they realised and we realised that they could not beat us militarily. In this aspect Askari was successful.⁶²

Combat Groups Bravo and Charlie nevertheless could not succeed in their goal to intimidate the enemy to the point that they would take to flight. In this respect the first phases of Operation Askari therefore failed.

RMR played a vital role in both operations. During the withdrawal phase of Operation Savannah, RMR's substitution of "battle-weary" soldiers and relocation of Portuguese refugees from Angola to Grootfontein proved to be invaluable. In Operation Askari RMR featured prominently in the eventual conquering of the MPLA/Cuban/SWAPO stronghold of Cuvelai. In the process the Regiment gained experience in battle and was very useful in further transborder operations.

Eventually the constitutional future of South West Africa/Namibia was not decided through the barrel of a gun, but through negotiations. In the course of the 23-year long Border War, SWAPO could not win a single large battle. Their ideal to seize power in South West Africa/Namibia by a revolutionary war failed miserably. In the end it was the internationalisation of the South West Africa/Namibian dispute which swayed matters in SWAPO's favour.⁶³

Abstract

Because of the involvement of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in Angola since 1975, Regiment Mooirivier (RMR) actively participated in transborder operations. The SADF and the South African Police (SAP) were involved for the full duration of the so-called Border War on the northern border of South West Africa/Namibia. The South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) strove for the liberation of South West Africa/Namibia. During 1962, SWAPO decided to combine the political freedom struggle of South West Africa/Namibia with military actions against the South African forces. To this end a military wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), was created. International events contributed to

62 Lord, "Operation Askari", *Militaria*, 22, 4, 1992, p 10

63 C J Nöthling, "Kort Kroniek van Militêre Operasies en Optredes in Suidwes-Afrika en Angola (1914-1988)", *Militaria*, 19, 2, 1989, pp 17-18

the fact that the struggle for South West Africa/Namibia was not confined only to SWAPO and the South African forces. Because of a *coup d'état* and the economic and moral burden which foreign colonies entailed, Portugal hurriedly withdrew from Angola and Mozambique in 1974 and consequently left the former colonies behind in chaos. SWAPO, assisted by the MPLA, established military bases in the south of Angola in order to be able to invade South West Africa/Namibia more effectively. It was therefore only a matter of time before the South African forces encountered not only SWAPO, but also the MPLA and Cuban forces. South Africa, however, did not take an attitude of wait-and-see, but wanted to retain the initiative mainly by means of the so-called pre-emptive operations. The general aim of Operation Savannah (1975-1976), like that of Operation Askari (1983-1984), was to effectively curtail the infiltration of SWAPO from the south of Angola to South West Africa/Namibia. In this article the role of Regiment Mooirivier in the mentioned operations will be described and analysed with an emphasis on the experiences as remembered by the members of the Regiment themselves.

Opsomming

Regiment Mooirivier en Suid-Afrikaanse oorgrens-operasies in Angola gedurende 1975/76 en 1983/84

Regiment Mooirivier (RMR) het weens die betrokkenheid van die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag (SAW) in Angola (sedert 1975) aktief betrokke geraak by oorgrens-operasies. Die SAW en die Suid-Afrikaanse Polisie (SAP) was vir die volle duur van die Grensoorlog aan die noordelike grens van Suidwes-Afrika/Namibië betrokke. Die South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) het hom beywer vir die bevryding van Suidwes-Afrika/Namibië. Gedurende 1962 het SWAPO besluit om die politieke bevrydingstryd te kombineer met militêre optrede teen die Suid-Afrikaanse magte. Vir dié doel is 'n militêre vleuel, die People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), in die lewe geroep. Internasionale gebeure het daartoe bygedra dat die stryd om Suidwes-Afrika/Namibië nie net tot SWAPO en die Suid-Afrikaanse magte beperk was nie. Weens 'n staatsgreep en die ekonomiese en morele eise wat oorsese kolonies meegebring het, het Portugal hom inderhaas in 1974 aan Angola en Mosambiek onttrek en gevolglik die voormalige kolonies in chaos agtergelaat. SWAPO, ondersteun deur die MPLA, het militêre basisse in die suide van Angola gevestig om sodoende Suidwes-Afrika/Namibië meer effektief binne te dring. Dit was dus slegs 'n kwessie van tyd voordat die Suid-Afrikaanse magte met SWAPO en sy MPLA/Kubaanse bondgenote te doene sou kry. Suid-Afrika het egter nie net 'n wag-en-kyk-houding geopenbaar nie, maar wou deur veral die sogenaamde voorsprong-operasies die inisiatief behou. Die algemene doel van Operasie Savannah (1975-1976) en ook Operasie Askari (1983-1984), was om die insypeling van SWAPO vanaf die suide van Angola na Suidwes-Afrika/Namibië te kortwiek. In hierdie artikel word die rol wat Regiment Mooirivier in die genoemde operasies gespeel het, beskryf en geanaliseer met die klem op die wyse waarop die lede van die Regiment self hulle ervaringe onthou.

Key words

Operation Savannah, Operation Askari, Angola, South West Africa/Namibia, SADF, SWAPO, Cuba, MPLA, FNLA, UNITA, Transborder operations.