



XMAS at CUITO – DEC 1987

(Extract of the Diary of J Vermaak)

“.....The Pilots pushed the throttles to full power. The rotors of the 2 helicopters tore at the warm December air. The revs increased steadily until there was a deafening noise. Inside the chopper we could feel the blades straining and pulling to lift off with all the kit and men crammed inside. Sluggishly one wheel broke free from the runway, then the other and finally we were airborne. As the speed gathered the pilots turned the two Pumas due North. *We were on our way to Cuito!*

We had arrived at Fort Foot in Rundu just a week ago and had prepared since then. Deployments from Rundu normally meant deploying with Unita. This would be the same but just on a different scale. There had been a series of briefings with a lot of detail. It confirmed that there was a full-scale offensive into Angola by an RSA battle group. The purpose was to push FAPLA out of south east Angola all the way back to Cuito. In addition Unita needed to be left in control of the entire South East Angola when done.

The briefings had laid out how we would take over from the 5 Recce teams that had been deployed with the Battle formations for the last 4 months. The feedback of their fighting at battle of Lomba was intense. We had now also prepared for a deployment of around 4 months. All in all, there was some 22 of us. We would form 2 - 6 man teams that would work on individual tasks per team once we joined with the combat group.

The helicopters reached the Angolan border in just a few minutes. Unless you knew it was a border you would miss it. It was just a straight cutline in the bush with the straight line in the sand that extended as far as you could see – no fences, no boards, no control points. It seemed to me much like two schoolboys would drag a line on the ground and challenging for a fight. We were doing the same. We had crossed the line. The sound of the rotors would accompany us to the fight some 300km further.

This first section of Angola was well controlled by Unita so the flying posed little risk. We flew low over the woodland covered landscape. The endless trees canopy stretched from horizon to horizon with only the snakelike lines of the riverine grass breaking the uniformity. The scene below was a familiar site. It was 14 years since the conflict started in 1974 and we had all been here before – many times.

The landscape prompted the many memories of the previous operations. We knew Villa Nova would be just upfront – the last time I had been there was a few years go in the adapted Unimog’s. After that would be the air routes where at times we had hunted their Jet fighters and Air Force with the SAM7’s. Then there were all the long-distance raids like Ops Cloud when we went all the way to Luena some 680km from the border and 350km past Cuito. We had walked the last 375km through the Tropical Angolan bush just to do one nights work – then we walked back again. Then off course there were all the roads and bridges that were blown up, and the trains, and the night time strikes. Those deployments were all clandestine, focused, precise and secretive. For those we had prepared and rehearsed and rehearsed again targeted a specific outcome. Once ready we would deploy, strike and extract – no one knew.

This time it was different - the offensive known as Hooper/Modular was not a clandestine deployment, it was a full scale military offensive with forces not seen on this scale before on the African continent. This time we were on our way to a clear and well contested front line. This would not be a strike or a fight – it would be war.....

..... The landscape we flew over was mostly unpopulated due to the civil war. There were little or no roads and villages, just an endless flat tree-scape. Every now and again what looked like a dirt road snaking under the tree canopy would be visible. This was the reminder of the convoys that had passed here on the way North. It had been many.

The tracks were not clear but in the briefings we were updated on what had been deployed. There were the Olifant tanks on their first cross border deployment. The incredible G6 cannons was on full battery scale as were the MRL batteries. The mechanised infantry in the ratels had passed here. The convoys of support that takes the ammunition and food had passed here. A full combat group of some 1 500 troops was deployed already and they were over 250km North into Angola. We were just abreast Mavinga now.

Just before dark we passed over the Lomba river. The Lomba had reached notoriety for the fierce battles that had raged there just a few weeks earlier. From here forward there was the threat of enemy missile or ground fire opening up on the choppers, so we sat in the open doors looking for signs of hostility. Soon the dark set in and we flew the last leg under the cover of night. We arrived at the Tac HQ about 45 minutes after sunset.

A chopper on the ground is vulnerable so the debussing is always a quick affair. We clear the chopper rapidly and it fills with departing troops just as rapidly. Within minutes it lifts off again and then dissolves into the dark. For the last 2 hours our senses had been filled with the noises and smells of the Puma's but now we were in the quiet of the bush. Slowly our ears adjusted to the silence around us in the pitch black night.

A colleague was at the LZ to receive us. We heaved on our heavy backpacks on and followed him to our designated bashers. It was some 800m (in bush terms about 15mins) from where we landed. I can smell the smoke of fires even though I can't see them. I can smell the mielie meal and cassava being cooked but can't see the coals or the pots hidden away in the sunken cooking pits. I can hear the familiar whine of battery chargers being turned by hand and the muted voice of a signaller reading OTLP (One Time Letter Pad) code over the radio. All of this is familiar. It is the sound and smell of a camped Unita Force.

Some 400m further we reach our designated area. There is no welcoming party. It is past 8pm and everybody was already retired to their sleeping places. My friend stays a few minutes and briefs us about the routines and what to do if there is an air raid, or bombardment and then leaves. He would collect us just after first light the next morning for our first briefings. We get out the sleeping bags and get used to the sounds of the night. Between the crickets and nightjars we can identify the muted clicks and clanks of metal on metal. These are new sounds. These aren't sounds of the bush. There are no large noises, nor visible fires, no parade grounds, no tented camps but the noises reveal the presence of an army camped for the night.

At first light we are up. As the day gets brighter we can see where we are. There are about 12 little bashers scattered around. These are for the Recce contingent. Next to this we can see the outline of some Ratels - mechanised infantry. I can't see the Unita places we passed during the night as the trees restricted clear vision to about 75m. We go for the first briefing. On the way we pass some more Ratels and some logistical vehicles. It was very clear that this was a big force. Some brief banter from our 5 Recce buddies act as hello. then we start. Maj D Reihardt did the briefing and was busy handing over to our Forward Commander Maj D Coetzee.

The first briefing lasts 3 hours. It confirms the status of the events to date. The current position was that FAPLA had been hit very hard at Mavinga and at the Lomba but still had a major force deployed just North West of where we were. It needed one final push.

..... They had 21bgde and the 54th and were dug in some 40km from where they were. FAPLA was a force of some 8 000 people with tanks, artillery, anti air, mechanised infantry and support. They were dug in ready to defend. Their Migs fighter jets did daily bombing raids regularly and had air superiority

We had a full battle group inclusive of tanks, artillery and mechanised infantry with about 1 500 RSA troops. There was also the Unita support of close to 4 000 people. The maps clearly showed the terrain and position and the position was plain to understand. Push the enemy over the Cuito river then cut the bridge – OR - cut the bridge and destroy. The terrain was easy to understand and there was no escape from the situation that a decisive fight was looming. As if to accentuate the point a siren goes off warning of the incoming enemy aircraft. There is a scurry of people to make sure all are under their nets and into shallow foxholes. The planes pass over without incident and the briefing continues.....