

A GREATER SHARE



OF



HONOUR



The Memoirs of a Recce Officer



Major Jack Greeff HC, PMM, MMM

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Operation Savannah: The Angolan Civil War

"The enemies of my enemies are my friends."

- Mao Tse Tsung

The voice of RSM Badenhorst of 5 South African Infantry Battalion, where I was serving as an Infantry corporal, roared across the camp, "Greeff, come here!" I double marched and halted in front of the big RSM. Admin clerks peeped through the curtains of their comfortable offices to see what my fate would be. "Get yourself ready for orders before the OC at 1030. Clean your boots and get your beret. And you must be bloody careful, your hair is getting too long again!" "For what RSM?" I dared to ask. "Man moenie nog blerrie vra nie!" (Man, don't bloody ask). "Goed RSM." I made an about turn and marched off to the Support Company headquarters, where I was running the Vickers machine gun platoon, to inform the company commander about the orders. He was just as evasive about the reason. A worried man, boots shining, I left tea earlier than usual to be at the RSM's office seven minutes before the time stipulated for the orders. My name was entered into the orders book. I could not make out the reason for the orders. The OC's office door opened and I was marched into the office and unceremoniously halted in front of the battalion commander, commandant Louis Heap. He started his explanation. "Greeffie, as you probably know the Portuguese have pulled out of Angola and there is a civil war raging at the moment. Should the FAPLA forces win the war it will mean that SWAPO and the Cubans are on the doorstep of South West Africa. Chief of the army is looking for a mortar instructor to present some training. The person must

be unmarried and a volunteer. Do you see your way open for it?" There were many questions I would like to have asked but decided against it. The RSM with his pace stick clutched under his arm was breathing down my neck anyway. "Yes commandant I will go", I answered. "Good, you must report to Army HQ in two days wearing civilian clothes. Take only one pair of boots. You will be briefed and kitted out elsewhere. Mooi loop Greeffie. (Go well Greeff)."

Rundu military base in the Kavango region of South West Africa was familiar to me as I had already done three bush tours there. This time however it was a beehive of activity as aircraft, vehicles and troops rushed in and out. The helicopters were also much more active than before. I met Captain James Hills who asked me what I was doing there and whether I was part of his group, I replied that I was detached from 5 SAI to Chief of the Army, as a Mortar Instructor. "I think you must come with me," he said and we went to the Operations room where I met Major Frank Bestbier. I was informed that I am part of a training team who would train a FNLA force to counter the Communist and Cuban backed forces of the MPLA. The operation was to be kept Top Secret. I collected my small bag containing only my toiletries and the pair of boots I was ordered to bring, and followed Captain Hills to another part of the camp where I met the rest of the group. Most of them were qualified paratroopers and there were also three *Recce* Operators. I felt like a lost fart in a windstorm away from my unit amongst these tough paratroopers and *Recces* for whom I had the greatest respect. I tried to do the Parachute course some months before but was injured two weeks before it started. The idea was to join the *Recces* after the para course. My friend Anton Retief who served with me at 5 SAI and with whom I trained for the course had passed the parachute course and the *Recce* selection and was already serving with the *Recces*. Although I knew most members of the group from previous Infantry courses

we attended together at the Infantry school, I still felt out of place. I was not airborne qualified! Sergeant 'Vingers' (Fingers) Kruger, a veteran Paratrooper and a tough *Recce* Operator had a look at my regular army boots and advised me to use a warm iron and distort the pattern on the soles, which I did. 'Vingers' was part of a second group doing similar training near the town of Mpupa in Angola, under command of Colonel Jan Breytenbach and he gave us a lot of good advice while we were waiting for all the logistical preparation to be completed. Somehow I was glad I was not part of Colonel Breytenbach's group who consisted mainly of *Recce* Operators. I already had an inferiority complex just being with the Paratroopers. I always used to shit myself when I came close to Colonel Breytenbach at Oudtshoorn where the *Recces* had their base and where I spent many weeks on Infantry courses. His gray eyes scared the wits out of me and he looked like the kind of person that would slit your throat without twitching an eye. He was also the founder of the *Recces*.

The unmarked Dakota aircraft made its way towards Serpa Pinto (now Menongue) flying at tree top level. Strapped on the floor were some boxes containing foreign uniforms, boxes of sardines and condensed milk and bags of maize meal, our staple diet for the next few weeks. Seated together in the aircraft, all dressed in civilian clothes, were Major Frank Bestbier the Group Commander, Captains Hills, Grobler and Harris the Company Commanders. The rest of the men were Corporals apart from Andre Diedericks and Koos de Wet the two *Recce* Operators, Sergeant Duke, an Infantry Instructor and myself. Our cover story would be that we are mercenaries assisting the FNLA forces of Daniel Chipenda and Holden Roberto. The *Dak* landed on it's first pass and as we taxi'd towards the terminal. I saw the runway lined with black soldiers standing at ease with their arms folded across their chests, cradling an assortment of weapons and dressed in an array of uniforms. I could feel the adrenaline pumping. There they

were, our former enemies against whom I patrolled the Angolan bush north of Sifuma not long ago, attempting to prevent them infiltrating across the border from Zambia. Now we were in their midst and they sure looked mean enough as they stood with their legs spread wide apart, chests puffed up like cheeky roosters and decorated with an assortment of hand grenades, bayonets, red and white scarves and badges. Having not seen a "terrorist" in my four years as an Infantry Corporal it felt strange to suddenly be amongst hundreds of them, heavily armed. The doors of the aircraft opened and we were swarmed by the troops who could no longer control their curiosity and broke their formation. As we stepped down onto the tarmac one of the troops approached us and in very good Afrikaans said " *Middag my baas, julle bring baie kos van Rundu af, dit is mooi so*". (Good afternoon my boss, you are bringing lots of food from Rundu, this is very good.) It was Johannes who, before the war, worked on one of the mines near Tsumeb in South West Africa. Like so many migrant workers from other Southern African countries he could speak Afrikaans or *fanagalo*, which is a mixture of various African languages and the *lingua franca* of all the mines in South Africa. It was clear that the bush telegraph was operating well and our cover story of being mercenaries was blown from the start.

Our training base was some distance out of town in an old *Flecha* training camp consisting of some thatched huts, which was our accommodation and various bigger buildings which we used as dormitories for the troops. The troops were a ragged bunch and not near the vicious lot we saw on the airstrip who apparently was mainly UNITA. The two factions, UNITA and FNLA, were supposed to be allies but UNITA was far better equipped with surplus Second World War equipment and weapons with compliments of the American CIA. We issued the force with green uniforms and canvas boots. The surprise came when we opened the weapons consignment flown in a few days later. Vintage Vickers

machineguns, brand new, complete with condenser cans and belt boxes as they were packed for World War Two. The mortars were old British 3-inch tubes, also packed for the war fronts of World War Two. All the numbers as well as that of the Dutch 7,62 mm FN rifles were erased. The force was organized into three rifle companies, a machine gun platoon and a mortar platoon. After withdrawing all the different types of weapons the troops had, ranging from Sten 9mm sub-machine guns to a few AK-47 rifles, the training started in earnest.

My interpreter was a Zambian called Mapenzi. He could speak English well. He had no military bearing and with his spectacles looked rather more like a schoolteacher, than a FNLA guerilla fighter. I could never really determine why as a Zambian he joined the war.

The mortar sights were easy to use and teach to the troops. The crewmember merely set the given distance in metres on a range table and leveled the horizontal bubbles in the sight. It even had a foresight and a "V" type rear sight, which could be aimed at the target during direct fire in similar fashion than when firing a rifle. It was clear from the beginning that we would not be able to deliver indirect fire as the maximum range of the bombs was only 3000 metres and we had no means of controlling or adjusting fire. The old bombs were also prone to drop short. The crews were thus taught to bring the mortars into quick action, aiming them directly at the enemy position, the direction of which I would point out to them using the aiming posts. They would come into action slightly behind a rise, in a type of "hull down" position. All the important commands and distances were taught and given in Portuguese. Slowly my mortar platoon started to come into shape and what at first seemed like an impossible task, was now becoming a reality. The infantry platoons led by the *Recce* corporals were also performing well and the Angolan bush was alive with troops running around, commands shouted and squads

counting the time, until one day. Nobody reported for parade. On investigation we found that we had a mutiny on our hands. The troops refused to continue. It was something quite unusual and unheard of for us, coming from a very well disciplined army. The mutiny continued for a few days until Daniel Chipenda, the leader of the southern faction of the FNLA, came down personally to sort out their grievances. Some troops did not return and disappeared with their weapons. This caused a breakdown in the confidence in the troops that took some time for us to regain.

Our training was drawn to a quick close when one day we were suddenly ordered to prepare the troops to join the fighting columns further north. The standard of training of all the troops was high. The whole mortar platoon of eight weapons could come into action and deliver direct fire within minutes. It required a lot of supervision and control from me, shouting, aiming weapons and checking sight settings. At this stage the training team were preparing to return to South Africa as there was no talk of fighting with them, or so we thought. The message came that we must board an aircraft to Sa da Bandeira (now Lubango), from where we would assist the force to start their advance on Luanda. One day, just before we left, some of the troops reported that they had arrested a lot of SWAPO terrorists. This came as a surprise to us and we went to investigate. The group of about thirty SWAPO terrorists were on their way to South West Africa and decided to visit their former comrades in arms at the training base, not knowing that the situation had changed somewhat in recent weeks. The FNLA troops arrested the lot and they were held in custody and evacuated to South West Africa a day or so later by air. This was somewhat of a bonus for us. It was also a good start for Operation Savannah, as the operation in Angola was called.

The airfield at Sa da Bandeira, was a beehive of activities. The terminal was shot up and all the buildings were covered with bullet pock marks and shell holes. Most of the many light aircraft

parked in the hangars and along the tarmac had bullet holes. The airfield had just been taken a few hours earlier.

Part of the occupying force was the Bushman Battalion under Colonel Lindford. These former units called *Flechas* and made up entirely of Bushmen, were used by the Portuguese to track down FNLA, UNITA and FAPLA insurgents and were therefore not very popular amongst any of those forces. One C-130 aircraft after the other was being loaded with thousands of Second World War issue Russian PPSH sub-machineguns captured from FAPLA stores, all brand new and still in the plastic packaging, as well as other captured equipment. At least we were not the only ones with old weapons. We constantly recovered several hundred of these weapons and got to the point where we simply removed the breech, tossed it into the bush, smashed the weapon's butt and tossed it in another direction, not even bothering to recover them. Some of our artillery units were issued with the weapons.

Stories of the battle for Sa da Bandeira started filtering in and I realized that we were in a war situation now. Things were getting serious, we were not just going to train the FNLA, but we were also preparing to lead them into battle. Artillery pieces manned by white National Service crews and ammunition were flown in from South Africa. We were joined by some South African *Eland* armoured cars, our version of the French Panhard, some armed with 90 mm guns and others with 60 mm mortars. All the crews were dressed in green uniforms and were unshaven with longer than regulation haircuts. We surely looked like a ragged bunch.

I was given a ten-ton Mercedes Benz truck for my mortar platoon. This was somewhat different than what we were taught at Infantry school. There, we even had to learn what type of radio was mounted in each vehicle, how many litres of fuel were carried and a lot of other detail of the war tables that we did not have now. The eight weapons, which included the tubes, base plates and bipods were packed on top of the ammunition. Two 200-litre

drums filled with water and diesel were stowed behind the cab with the rations of the troops. On top of all this sat the almost forty mortar crew-members. The rest of the vehicles carrying the Infantry were typical Portuguese vegetable carrying lorries, called *groentelorrys* in Afrikaans. They had high wooden frames on the back. It was quite a sight to observe when the convoy was formed. Leading at the front, was Major Bestbier in his Land Cruiser with a light machine gun mounted on the co-driver's side, depicting a scene from the Long Range Desert Group of the Second World War. The rest was an assortment of colours, shapes and sizes of vegetable trucks with me bringing up the rear.

The whole situation at this stage was very confusing. Little orders or situation reports were passed down due to a lack of radio communication and commanders themselves trying to stay ahead of the rapidly developing situation. There were troops everywhere, dressed in all sorts of uniforms, civilian clothes and a mixture of both. It was difficult to distinguish between UNITA, FNLA or FAPLA and who was the enemy. Only at very short distance could one possibly identify the small plastic badges each faction wore or the cloth some of them wore around their shoulders or neck. Each side used a signal by putting up one, two or three fingers by which they were supposed to be distinguished. This never really worked and to this day I do not know which side used which sign.

The column started off heading north. We travelled fast covering long distances over one of the largest countries in Africa. Our column was following in the trail of the Bushman Battalion and the column of Colonel Jan Breytenbach's Bravo group. The leading columns started to meet resistance daily in the form of quick fire-fights lasting a few minutes by which time the FAPLA forces withdrew with great speed. Casualties were not serious.

At the end of each day I would walk over to the other column and listen to the war stories of the day told mainly by the *Recce* Operators and the armoured car crews. They were Anton Retief,

'Vingers' Kruger, Mac van der Merwe and others I knew from Infantry School. Connie van Wyk and Jack Dippenaar served with me in 5 SAI before joining the *Recces*. Each night after listening to the stories of the day, I would prepare the crews or rearrange the mortar equipment to meet the developing threats we might have to face the next day. Going to bed under the truck, I wondered when my turn would come to prove the Mortar Platoon and myself in combat.

The column of Colonel Breytenbach and his *Recces* were fast becoming hardened soldiers handling a few contacts daily. Travelling at the back of the second column I could only hear the shots, explosions and rattling of Vickers machine guns of the contacts ahead. Over the radio I listened to the excited voices of the South African leader element talking in Afrikaans. Afterwards the debris of empty cartridge cases, 90mm gun cases, and other discarded equipment, lay scattered on the road or in the hastily abandoned enemy positions.

I did not have to wait long to go into combat. One day the column came to a halt on some high ground overlooking the town of Catengue. I parked the vehicle under a large Baobab tree and made myself comfortable on the roof. Shooting erupted some distance to the front and I could see some of the armoured cars retreating fast. There were some sharp explosions as the 90mm guns of the Eland armoured cars were fired from hull-down positions and retreating after each shot. This went on for some time and from my position I could see the armoured cars in a distance racing to and fro, like a family of rats collecting seeds for the winter. It became clear from the radio traffic that there was tough resistance ahead. I warned the troops to stay near the vehicle. This was always a problem when the column halted. Troops would scatter in all directions, looting, chatting to friends and exchanging food or cigarettes.

I was called forward on the radio. The troops fell silent and

we drove ahead to where the fighting was taking place. I stopped amongst some other vehicles parked in a fish-bone fashion along the road and was taken to a slight rise on the left side. Peeping over it, I could hardly make out the enemy positions hidden in the bush on either side of the road on the next high ground. I was told to prepare to deliver overhead support fire for an infantry attack. This was a risky move as a drop short on a mortar bomb due to the wrong or faulty charges, would mean casualties to own forces. "Acao" – "Action!" I shouted and the mortar crews started tumbling off the truck as they came into action.

Arriving first were the base plates which I carefully placed each in its own position. Then arrived the tubes and the bipods which were set up in the direction I indicated to them by means of a red and white post. While they were getting the tubes set up I shouted the distance in metres and in Portuguese so that the number one crew-members could start setting the sights. The number four members of the crews were carrying bombs to each weapon position. The crews reported *pronto* – ready, and I went running to each weapon to check the settings on the sights and the position of the bubbles. The crews were nervous but the constant drilling during training ensured that everything went smoothly, so far so good. The command to prepare the ammunition was given and again I checked that the correct charges were set on each bomb. Sweat was pouring from the faces of all as it was just before the start of the rainy season and the humidity was very high.

Frans van Dyk and his 3-inch mortar crews from the column of Colonel Breytenbach were on the other side of the road. The Infantry platoons were preparing to attack the enemy position. To my amazement I saw that the Vickers machineguns of 'Vingers' Kruger were prepared to attack along with the Infantry. Any Infantry School Weapons Instructor would turn in his grave if he saw what was happening here, everything but what the books were

teaching. Mortars were deployed within the direct line of enemy fire. Vickers machine guns were used as light machine guns, moving with the attacking troops. These unconventional methods were dictated by the terrain and the fact that we did not have all the weapons and equipment that the Infantry school dictates in their doctrines. We were forced to improvise.

The attack commenced and the first mortars were fired. The base plates bounced and kicked up dust. I shouted at the crews to "Check bubbles!" After each bomb the readings were checked. I positioned myself at the number one mortar and kept looking down the line of tubes for any of the mortars that appeared to be out of line, upon which I would rush to it and quickly check the elevation and other readings. Our initial firepower was heavy, but not for long when suddenly the FNLA Infantry troops burst from the bush, retreating faster than they were attacking. Hot on their heels, swearing, kicking asses and slapping them against their heads, were *Recce* platoon leaders trying to control the lot and turn them around to face the attack again.

The attack force eventually got itself reorganized and put in a second attempt. In the meantime the mortars were pounding the enemy positions. The attack force once again disappeared in the dense bush for another attempt and I could hear the *Recce* platoon leaders shouting "*Avanca!* – Forward!" or "come on you fucking so... and so..., get up, *avanca*, *avanca!*" The Vickers machine guns were kept on the tripod and weighed a total of close to eighty kilograms. The Vickers crews carried the guns forward from one firing position to the next, keeping in line with the Infantry attack. I also heard afterwards that the Infantry troops were reluctant to move forward unless the Vickers guns were firing their unmistakable long steady bursts.

The attack started to die down. The odd rifle shot could still be heard and also the unmistakable mixture of Afrikaans and Portuguese commands given by *Recce* Platoon leaders. Colonel

Breytenbach and a few of his men gathered at the mortar position where I joined them in discussing the lone enemy mortar still firing at us. The enemy 82mm mortar was out-ranging our 3 inch mortars. The enemy mortar bomb explosions were slowly creeping closer to our position with the lot of us looking on. But what the hell, we were with Colonel Breytenbach. When you are with him, you do not take cover. In the mean time, a Russian made 82mm recoilless gun with a maximum range of 5000 metres, manned by a South African Paratrooper crew, was brought into action near us to counter the 82mm mortar. We were still watching the approaching mortar explosions when suddenly there was a deafening explosion in front of us.

Covered in dust we milled around, stunned, spitting sand and trying to recover our hearing. "What the fuck were you doing?" I heard Anton shouting at the paratrooper crew who fired the 82mm recoilless gun without warning our group, who were standing right behind it in the back blast. For a moment we all thought that the enemy mortar bomb landed amongst us. The enemy mortar fell silent and we started to move forward. Arriving at the enemy positions, the scene was devastating. The mortar bombs landed spot on the target and caused havoc.

The reason for the stiff resistance we encountered soon became clear with the discovery of dead Cubans. One was lying face down, holding his thumb as if he was hoping that his MPLA comrades would stand and fight, which they did not do. He was hit by a mortar bomb shrapnel and had a hole the size of a man's fist right through his lower back. He died like many other Cubans, for another country and cause. So too, many South African soldiers died for what they believed in at the time, namely that the Cubans and Communists were trying to get a foothold in Angola and would then be on our doorstep. And there we had the evidence in front of us. Strange people from a foreign country, not part of Africa at all, fighting and dying.

The Bushman Battalion took another route in the meantime and encircled the retreating FAPLA force, effectively cutting off their escape. The carnage on the road we were advancing on, told the grim story of troops frantically trying to escape the firepower of the rapidly advancing South African force, only to run into all the firepower that can be brought onto them by fierce fighting Bushmen. From the destruction on the road one could not help but think that the Bushmen probably still bore a deep hatred towards the black man after the many years of atrocities against them by most of the black tribes they encountered ages ago. There were vehicles burnt out along the road creating images of a Second World War air-attack.

Unburied, decomposing bodies were everywhere alongside the road. In some of the burnt out vehicles, charred corpses were grimacing at the passing column. The smell of human corpses could sometimes be detected a few minutes before we reached the actual scene of a skirmish. The windscreen of my truck was shot out and one bullet found it's way through the door and underneath my driver seat. Luckily I was busy at the mortar position at the time and not driving. Driving with the broken window, although cool, we could smell the dead for some distance and the stench sort of stuck in the cabin for some time after passing the scene.

After the battle of Catengue we became part of Colonel Breytenbach's Bravo group and I was detached to Lieutenant Connie van Wyk, a brilliant *Recces* officer and one of the Company Commanders of Bravo group. I knew Connie from 5 SAI where we served together before he joined the *Recces*. We deployed in a company-size ambush position on a tarred road. The early warning group was posted some distance -shouting distance- ahead on a hill. The killing ground was the tarred road on a turn against a fairly steep slope. Any vehicle approaching us from the front did so up a steep hill and as it rounded the corner was faced with a strange bush covered object on the side of the road, disturbing the

normal traffic lane. The approaching vehicle would be anything from twenty to forty metres away. Protruding from this strange "bush" was the 90mm gun of an Eland armoured car aimed right at this stopping point. Connie positioned himself right by the open door of the armoured car in direct contact with the crew. The rest of the ambush consisted of my mortars deployed next to the road not far behind the main group and a small number of Infantry troops deployed not very far in front of the armoured car. They doubled as a kind of early warning, killing and mop up group, all in one.

The whole force slept under their vehicles and were on constant standby. The early warning group would sound the alarm and everyone would take up their designated position. The vehicle would round the corner and immediately slow down to stare at the strange bush ahead. During this time Connie would determine the make up of the target and the 90mm gunner would adjust his aim. If it was enemy he merely gave the command "Fire" to the gunner. When hit, some vehicles would burst into flames, while some would merely start to run backwards leaving the road and tumbling down the cliff, out of the way and leaving the killing ground clear. Sometimes a few shots would ring out as the Infantry picked off escaping enemy. The killing ground would quickly be cleared of debris. Bodies that did not tumble down the cliff were dumped alongside the road not far from the ambush in large mass graves.

Civilian occupants of vehicles were questioned and held captive until the ambush was withdrawn. Many of the travellers in the civilian vehicles were fleeing Portuguese civilians who had tried to stay on in the country for as long as possible in the hope that a solution for the war would be found. Their only safe way out was Southwards towards South Africa where the "good old South Africans" would look after them. They were glad to see us and wanted to stay with the column. They received food and

were shown the way back to the rear echelons that took care of them. This rear echelon was growing in strength by the day as the conflict escalated and the logistical supply lines lengthened.

The ambush was devastating and the 90mm gun did most of the damage. One strange incident took place where a wounded FAPLA soldier was transported on the back of a pickup truck that stopped at the ambush. The 90 mil round exploded, blowing the front of the vehicle to shreds, the wounded man jumped from the vehicle and escaped leaving the drip dangling from the back of the vehicle, it's liquid dripping on the tar. One wonders how badly wounded he really was?

These two actions, the battle of Catengue and the highly successful ambush, probably prompted the combined Cuban and FAPLA force to adopt a strategy of quick withdrawals during engagements, to ensure a safe escape, as most of the battles after this were short lived. The column advanced quickly and we soon found ourselves in control of the cities of Benguela and then Lobito without much resistance.

In Benguela I went to clear a large store where huge quantities of Cuban cigarettes and cigars were smoldering after being set alight by the fleeing FAPLA. I have never smoked in my life but could not resist the temptation to try out one of the Cuban cigars. I duly opened a bundle and lit one, puffing like Winston Churchill. I felt stupid so I flicked it away and called the troops to help themselves to the mountain of *smokes*. There were also a huge quantity of tinned pork meat and biscuits, courtesy of the Dutch government to the people of Angola.

Some of the infrastructure was still functioning and we managed to get some beers from the residents. In Lobito a few of us had lunch in a fairly good restaurant with a black lady dancing around our table. What a strange experience that was for us South Africans at the time. We were very well received with crowds lining the streets cheering and clinging to the vehicles.

The troops were throwing cigarettes to the people shouting "Viva FNLA, viva Chipenda, Viva Holden Roberto"! It again reminded me of scenes from Second World War movies where the Italian population received the liberating Allied forces.

The short time in Lobito was used to recuperate and we used the opportunity to lie on the beach and swim in the sea. The armoured cars were parked on the beach, towels dangling from the 90 mil barrels. I was also sent to collect some new vehicles from the harbour. Brand new BMW Sedans, Volkswagen mini busses and a military type green Kubelwagen were parked in rows on the harbour, imported for commercial use.

We were given our few vehicles and told that the rest were for UNITA, who occupied the towns behind us as fast as we overran them. The next day I saw one of the new BMW cars with all its windows kicked out and a 3.5-inch rocket launcher protruding from the front window. "These bloody UNITAs, they had an easy war so far. I pity the poor bastard who finds himself in the rear seat when they fire that weapon" I thought to myself.

Little did I know at that time that I would return to Lobito harbour on another mission a few years later.

The advance continued and the war started to become more costly in human lives. Artillery battles were becoming a daily occurrence with the FAPLA artillery outgunning our aging 5.5-inch and 25-pounder guns. The 3 inch mortars were not of much use due to their limited range and 81 mm mortars manned by white South African troops, were taking over from us. When the advance eventually continued after a few days of artillery duels, our column would be leading again.

The strain of combat started to show. One of our Infantry Company Commanders had the habit of spending most of his time in the city while the rest of us were lying outside of town in defensive positions, getting wet and hungry while he ate like a king and organized his loot. This was not good for morale and

one particular night elements of UNITA clashed with our Infantry troops and one person was killed. In my attempt to defuse the very volatile situation I nearly had a shootout with a UNITA Lieutenant.

Near one small town, the name of which I have forgotten, my Mortar Platoon came into action at a road junction in support of the Infantry troops clearing the town. After dropping a few bombs at targets indicated to me by the platoon leaders in the town, using outstanding features such as church towers or high buildings as reference points, the firing died down. I settled down on the tarred road at the tubes to await further instructions. About 50 metres to my right were some guns of the Vickers platoon in action and some vehicles.

A red vegetable truck, loaded with troops, approached us from the rear. We all looked at the unfamiliar vehicle that slowed down and came to a halt about hundred and fifty metres from us, at the back of our column. The troops on the red vegetable truck were giving signs to identify themselves and then slowly fell silent and we all stared at one another in disbelief. The truck was loaded with armed FAPLA soldiers. The nearest of our troops started firing and then all hell broke loose.

The Vickers guns were swung around and started firing and even my mortar crews, using their rifles, got their share of the fighting. I ran to get into a better position to shoot at some of the escaping enemy when suddenly white streaks passed very close in front of me. I realized that I very nearly ran into the Vickers's line of fire. The red truck was riddled with bullets, bodies lay scattered around it and it was clear that no one could have escaped, or so we thought. The command to cease-fire was given and we approached the vehicle with caution. The radiator was blowing off steam, all the wheels were flat, and the engine had come to a halt. Diesel was pouring from the many holes in the tank and from the back of the truck some other liquid was dripping through the planks of the floor.

On opening the back of the truck I was amazed to find four Bushmen curled up on the floor, alive without as much as a scratch and crying like babies. The liquid pouring through the floor was their urine. They all pissed in their pants during the incident. It was a miracle that they survived. We later heard that they had recently been abducted and forced to fight for the FAPLA forces. They were still unarmed and extremely lucky to be alive.

This particular town was also the scene of a very unfortunate incident that nearly turned into a tragedy. While we were mopping up the town, two combat teams were sent to recce and clear some routes. The teams consisted of armoured cars, Vickers guns and some Infantry troops. Somehow they approached each other from opposing directions. After the one mistakenly identified the other group as the enemy, a vicious firefight ensued. Both the groups, upon hearing the characteristic fire of the Vickers guns and judging by the accuracy of the returning fire, quickly realized that they were being confronted by their own forces. The firefight ceased but the damage was done. Several key personnel from the columns were wounded and had to be evacuated. Amongst them was Frans van Dyk, who was in charge of the other 3-inch mortar platoon, 'Vingers' Kruger the Vickers Platoon Commander of Bravo group and Eric Palmer, the new Commander of our Vickers Platoon.

Colonel Breytenbach was furious and people rushed everywhere to get out of his way. Fortunately all the wounded were not serious, but they had to be evacuated. Relieved that nobody was killed and the wounds not serious, everyone jokingly agreed that they would not like to wage war against their own countrymen. "*Die Boere skiet te donners goed!*" – (The Boers shoot too damn well) was one remark made by the troops involved in the skirmish.

Up to now the column had been operating as a well-oiled machine. We were slightly better equipped than in the beginning,

thanks to the enemy, and had better rations and logistical backup. The contacts with the enemy were handled as everyday occurrences. Fire support was casually requested by the Infantry platoons and delivered accurately on time and on target. The whole force was forged into a battle hardened unit and any enemy was simply driven off. The troops were becoming veterans, well used to the combat conditions by now and unknowingly to all of us at that time, we were creating one of the most unique military fighting units of our time, 32 Battalion.

The unfortunate incident where the two combat groups clashed broke up the support-weapons command. Some of the other South African units started taking casualties. I was waiting at an airfield one day and saw almost the whole of a white SADF National Service 81mm Mortar Platoon being evacuated after a direct hit by FAPLA artillery on their position. Their Platoon leader was killed. I also saw our initial Vickers Platoon leader, Duke, getting on the aircraft. "Hey, where are you going?" I asked. "I have had enough of this shit. This is not our war," he replied and boarded the aircraft.

Duke, who had a quarrel with Colonel Breytenbach, was replaced earlier by Eric Palmer. Another Staff Sergeant from the Infantry school returned in the same aircraft on which he arrived. After listening to some war stories and watching the dead and wounded being loaded onto the aircraft, he decided there and then that it was enough. Nothing happened to these persons once back at their units. No disciplinary steps were taken. It was probably because the force was a voluntary one, I do not know.

The rains started coming down and conditions deteriorated rapidly. We were dug in and holding a position for some time already, sleeping next to our trenches. It became a daily struggle to keep mortar charges dry and to maintain the tubes. Maintaining the Vickers guns was a nightmare. The ammunition belts would rust and clog up with mud and each of the thousands of rounds

of ammunition had to be cleaned individually. Trenches became mud baths and I got some idea of what the trench warfare was like during the two World Wars. During skirmishes the force was restricted to the tarred roads as the vehicles got stuck when venturing off.

To make matters worse I was now in charge of some Infantry troops, and the remnants of the two Vickers and two 3-inch mortar platoons. Their Platoon Commanders and other members were either wounded or down with malaria. Some of the troops started to go *AWOL* (absent without leave).

One of my tasks, while the column was static was to establish an observation post for a few days on a very high hill. I took Mapenzi my interpreter, a HF radio, some food and off we went. From the hill I could see some enemy activities and smoke from the firing of indirect weapons. I made a field sketch of the positions and presented it to the commander of the column, Commandant Frank Bestbier.

I got my first taste of how a small reconnaissance team can operate. Shortly after my return from the *OP* (observation post) I was informed that the whole FNLA force would withdraw for some welcome leave and regroup again after Christmas of 1975. We deserved the break and we were looking forward to it. This was when I got the worst news of my military career. The telex read that I was transferred to the Infantry School as an Instructor and promoted to the rank of Sergeant. I hated the Infantry School.

The civil war also had its lighter sides. One day we were stationary in a fairly big town. The troops finished their looting and some troops found a new tractor in a garage and mounted it. The driver was not very familiar with the vehicle. His friends clambered all over the tractor. On the pull-away some of them fell off when the tractor nearly stood up its rear wheels. One unfortunate soldier's feet fell through the lift cross bar and he was caught by the leg. The driver could not stop the tractor and raced

down the street dragging the troop behind him like the Cowboys dragged the crooks behind their horses in the western movies.

In the same town some troops found a small sedan vehicle but could not get it started. This did not perturb them from driving, so four of them got into the car while the others pushed it around. The driver and passenger made themselves comfortable complete with cigarettes, sunglasses and the outside arm clutching the door. After some "driving" around they would change and the others would push. This did not last very long before a heated argument broke out which ended the drive.

Connie van Wyk found two giant sized White Horse whisky bottles of ten litres each. With great love and care he packed them into a RPG-7 rocket box and at every stop he would inspect the contents and rearrange the padding to ensure that they were still intact. At one halt he off-loaded the box as usual and put it to the side so that no one could sit on or drive over it. The lone box attracted the attention of Mac van der Merwe, one of the *Recce* Operators, who decided to test his newly found .22 rifle. He fired a few well-aimed shots in his own time at the box. This did not attract much attention at the time but later when Connie arrived, all hell broke loose. Miraculously one of the bottles survived the target practice and I saw it a year later displayed in Connie's room in Durban.

Passing through the various checkpoints to the rear we were gradually stripped of our loot. The first to go were the AK-47 rifles and other beautiful hunting firearms that were collected. Camouflage clothes and other non-South African items were also taken. We started hiding some of the smaller items. The procedures became extremely irritating. Military policemen, or MPs as they are more commonly referred to, treated us with little respect. None of us wore any rank. Our hair was long and we were unshaven. We had been involved in months of fighting and killing. All of us had carefully gathered some regalia of our trip

only for it to be taken by the dreaded MPs. To further rub salt into our wounds, their tents or the buildings they used were decorated with the items they confiscated from fighting troops. One MP sergeant was even sitting reading pornography books while his men searched us. Pornography at the time was banned in good old South Africa and these magazines were sought after items by white South African troops.

The frustration culminated when we reached Waterkloof air base and had to go through yet another search. At this time most of us had very little left. The MPs took some Cuban cigarettes from Danny Roxo, one of the Portuguese *Recce* Operators. He burst out into broken English "*Look at this fucking fat police. He take my cigarettes. He not fight nothing, he just steal from us*". I had my hands full to convince the overweight policeman that he must not take further action, and that he must drop the charges against Danny. We were also held up for being in possession of uncensored letters, which were duly confiscated. We eventually got through, greeted one another and parted. Each person went his own separate way after weeks spent together in combat.

The next day I found myself on a train on my way back to Ladysmith. Some young civilians were in the compartment. They knew nothing of the war. Why should they, the war was a few thousand kilometres away. They were talking about things that I had no interest in, mainly about their own secure little world of cars, girlfriends and pubs. They were irritating the hell out of me. I was longing for my black troops who proved themselves that in combat one could rely on them. I wondered if I would ever see them again. The newspapers said little about the war, just that South African troops were busy with hot pursuit operations into Angola against SWAPO insurgents.

I suddenly felt very vulnerable, almost lost. I was dressed in my only shirt stained with rifle oil, a pair of dirty shorts and my well-worn army boots with the disrupted sole pattern without

socks. I had no money and I realized that to the other occupants in the compartment I must have looked like a tramp. It did not matter at all while we were in Angola. But now, I was in a very different world where appearance matters. The FN rifle was unmarked, one which the MPs did not notice. I had no ammunition for it but hidden inside the empty magazines were some small FAPLA badges that I took from the dead the day we shot up the vegetable truck and the Bushmen survived while urinating in their pants. At least I had some travel companions in which I could trust and who did not mind my appearance.

During the drive from Ladysmith station, the duty driver informed me that the Vickers platoon I trained before I left on Operation Savannah, was converted to an Infantry platoon and sent to Angola. I wondered how they were doing. The driver dropped me at Battalion Headquarters. The first person I walked into was RSM Badenhorst. "*Greeff, kyk hoe donners lyk jy!*" (For goodness sake Greeff, look at you!) he announced my arrival to all the administration staff in the *HQ* who peered around the corners to see what my fate would be. "Go and have your hair cut and dress properly. Be here at 1030 for orders!" he barked. Although the war was already waging for some time, most administration staff and even some Infantry staff were not aware of the fighting and dying going on north of the South West African border.

I was jerked back into reality and I knew then that I must get out of this Infantry outfit as soon as possible. I wanted the war more than the luxuries and routine of the base and was terribly disappointed when I was not allowed to return to Angola to rejoin my black troops. Instead I was ordered to report to the Infantry School as soon as possible in the new year 1976. I badly wanted to lead troops in combat.

My mind was made up. To hell with the Infantry and its regimental routine. I am going to join the *Recces*.