



OPERATION SAVANNAH - 7 DEC 1975 FROM CONVENTIONAL WARFARE TO GUERRILLA TACTICS

BRIDGE 14 – NHIA RIVER – SGT D ROXO

The Battle for Bridge 14 occurred after the battles at EBO in Late November – early December. It was at EBO that the RSA Force had suffered their first heavy losses and could not advance. They had to regroup and needed a different route. Bridge 14 was located on the Nhia river, on the route from Cela to Quibala. In November Battle Group Foxbat had engaged an MPLA force at the bridge. FAPLA retreated across this bridge and placed demolition charges on the bridge that left the bridge partly damaged. The advance of the South African forces along the only tarred road to Quibala was brought to a halt at the Nhia river. As it was in the peak rainy season the river was full and the low-lying riverine area was swampy. The bridge would be the only means of crossing with heavy vehicles. The crossing would be a hard-fought battle.

At the time of this battle, the South African Government had already made the decision to withdraw its forces from Angola in view of the lack of International support for South Africa and Unita. As these decisions were being made, the battle for Bridge 14 took place and the message hadn't been sent yet.

Battle group Bravo had reached Cela by 23 Nov 1975. The rainy season was in full swing, and the advance became increasingly difficult on account of impassable roads, strongly flowing rivers and bridges that had been blown up by FAPLA and the Cubans. At Cela, Bravo Group was split up and the once successful group splintered into different groupings. The 1 Recce detachment that was part of Battlegroup Bravo set up base in the old hospital. On the next push North, they had to cross the Nhia river – some 35km further Northwards. The river in the rainy season was an impassable barrier to vehicles and would present a very different challenge to what they had experienced since the start of Ops Savannah some 6 weeks earlier.

There was a strong enemy contingent stationed to the North of the bridge and the bridge would be defended with artillery, heavy weapons, mines and gunships. During the first week of December the enemy sent a new commander and reinforcements. Their base was some 20km north of Bridge 14, at the village of Catofe. The force was considerable and consisted of over 1,000 Infantry, artillery, and APC's. The FAPLA commander used a house a few km North of the Nhia river as an HQ and ammunition depot.

Cmdt JD Breytenbach, the commander of 1 Reconnaissance Commando that was assigned to Task Force Zulu, was tasked to assist the Task Force and would execute various tasks at the bridge. These would include deploying an observation team on the nearby hill called Top Hat, deploy another team behind the enemy positions to conduct harassing actions like mine-laying and ambushes, as well as to conduct a reconnaissance of the bridge and the positions. He tasked one of his team leaders - Danny Roxo - to perform the reconnaissance of the bridge.

Danny Roxo was a seasoned fighter, having spent most of his life in the bushes of Mozambique. Roxo was of Portuguese birth and had won acclaim as a seasoned hunter – he clearly knew the bush. For the previous 10 years he had been in Mozambique fighting terrorists, rescuing hostages and had earned the reputation as the Phantom of the Forest. In Mozambique he was a living legend. FRELIMO commanders in Mozambique had put a \$100 000 bounty on his head—an astronomical amount of money by contemporary standards; however, nobody even dreamed of trying to collect it.



In early 1974 he did the 1 Recce selection at the ripe old age of 41. After passing this he joined Cmdt Breytenbach as a Sergeant just prior to Battle Group Bravo setting off on Operation Savannah from Calai on 14 October 1975. Bravo Group's first action of Operation Savannah was on 17 October when the lead company were ambushed by UNITA at Cuvelai. After the company had formed an assault line the UNITA ambushers fled into the bush. The fact that the FNLA and UNITA were supposed to be on the same side had obviously not reached all Savimbi's men in the field.

Back to Bridge 14. The bridge could not be seen from the South Africans positions some 8km back. On 27 November Roxo was tasked to see if the bridge was intact and to try and determine where FAPLA were. He was assigned an infantry platoon and 4 Eland 90 armored cars. Not too long after Roxo and his men had moved out the distinct sounds of gunshots from a contact could be heard by those in the rear. In the words of Col Jan Breytenbach "Danny's story was remarkable, he arrived with his patrol at a hill at the bridge area where he decided to leave all his men and the cars, while he went ahead on foot, on his own, to reconnoiter the bridge. Unbeknown to him there was a strong FAPLA position slopes of the hill that he passed, and they watched Danny with eagle and expectant eyes as he marched his solitary way to the bridge".

Danny arrived at the bridge, saw that it was partially blown and that there were 3 Cubans standing around what appeared to be a 14.5 anti-aircraft gun on the far side of the river. He promptly shot 2 of them after which all hell broke loose as all sorts of weapons opened on him from the far side.

Roxo decided on a hasty retreat back to his own patrol, along the same route that he had used to get to where he was. He ran slap-bang past the FAPLA soldiers on the slopes of the hill who had a glorious view of the speeding little man thumping the tar road past their positions. They opened fire but somehow it did not quite work out the way they had planned. Roxo told the story in his own inimitable Portuguese way. "Coronel I run and go tat tat tat – and I run and I go tat tat tat tat – and I run and go tat tat tat tat – and suddenly the shooting it stops; no more FAPLA" he smiled from ear to ear. Danny claimed to have shot 2 Cubans.



Unknown to Roxo some FAPLA forces had caught 2 x partisan force soldiers assigned to the Task Force that had strayed as they tried to round up some cattle while he was busy at the bridge. Both were kept separately as prisoners at Catofe – a little town some 20km North of the bridge, and both escaped separately within a 2-day interval. While we debriefed them, it transpired that Roxo had shot a total of eleven enemy, 2 x Cubans and 9 x FAPLA, the latter while dashing through the ambush. Danny was evidently the talk of the town in Catofe and both escapees overheard the troops discussing the incident while their captors were having a booze up the night after it happened.

For this action Roxo was recommended for and later awarded the Honoris Crux. Roxo became the first non-South African to win South Africa's highest award for bravery, a medal he was never to receive due to his untimely death in August 1976.

In Aug 1976, during a patrol near the Okavango river, his personnel carrier struck a landmine and overturned, killing one man and crushing Roxo beneath it. The rest of the vehicle's crew tried to lift the vehicle to free him, but it was too heavy. Breytenbach wrote: "Roxo, in keeping with his dauntless character, decided to make the best of things, lighting a cigarette and smoking it calmly until it was finished, then he died - still pinned beneath the Wolf. He had not complained once, nor uttered a single groan or moan, although the pain must have been excruciating."