



## **OPERATION SAVANNAH - 7 DEC 1975 FROM CONVENTIONAL WARFARE TO GUERILLA TACTICS**

### **BRIDGE 14 – NHIA RIVER - THE LOSS OF SGT F WANNENBERG**

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. Here 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 North. 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 Bridge14 -at the village of Catofe. The force was considerable and consisted of over 1000 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 Breytenbach decided that the weather and terrain made the situation more suitable to guerrilla warfare and tasked his 1 Recce team in Cela to prepare for a mission to reconnoitre the area north of the bridge and execute guerrilla actions behind the enemy lines based on their observations.

The team was made up of:

1. Capt. H Venter - Team Leader
2. WO2 K Conradie
3. Sgt F Wannenberg
4. Sgt HAP Ferreira
5. Sgt Anton Retief
6. Sgt Boats Botes
7. Cpl M Boonzaaier
8. Cpl Nella Nel

*"..... On 7 December 1975 - The Puma helicopter left Cela and landed the team just North of the river a few km east of the bridge. It was a dark night with very little ambient light. The team set off in the dark with Sgt Botes in front and Sgt Wannenberg with him as the other scouts. Even though Sgt Wannenberg had just completed the first snipers course ever held at 1 RECCE he had opted to carry the RPG7 instead and asked that his sniper rifle was carried by his buddy pair Sgt Botes. In the dark they made their way towards the target area. As they moved east the terrain formed a natural gully like depression as one would expect from rivulet like erosion close to a river. They followed this. They had not gone more than 4 km when things went wrong.*

*Unbeknown to them they were advancing directly towards some FAPLA soldiers– in all likelihood a forward warning post for the bridge. The enemy realised some soldiers were coming. No doubt the noise of the landing helicopter and the spotlights the choppers used briefly at night when touching down would have alerted them. This gave them the element of surprise and the upper hand.*

Once the 1 Recce team was close enough the enemy opened fire from the slightly elevated ground above them. The enemy was almost at point-blank range – no more than 10 m in front of them if that. The flashes of the AK47 that opened up on them was almost blinding in the dark. Although the enemy force was not that big the proximity to the team meant that the front members of the team could not be missed.

Sgt Botes had his AK 47 shot out of his hands but miraculously he didn't get hit. This left him with only the Mannlicher Sniper weapon he was carrying. He now had only a bolt action rifle in this heavy exchange of fire. Capt. Venter had also been hit twice – once in the arm and once in the shoulder. Sgt Wannenberg remained standing at first and returned fire immediately before he started to move to get out the direct line of fire. As he started this movement he was hit in the loins. Later M Boonzaaier saw that a bullet had passed between his backpack and his back without touching him.

With the front three almost all out of action WO Conradie took over the command of the team and maneuvered himself into a better position by moving from one firing position to another whilst applying effective fire on the enemy. This helped to slow the enemy fire. He organized the team as they swiftly scampered into a formation that resulted in them almost flanking the enemy. By doing this they had swung the balance of the contact with more effective fire on the enemy. Cpl M Boonzaaier had moved forward and retrieved the RPG7 launcher from the wounded Sgt Wannenberg. He managed to load and fire the RPG 7 rocket into the enemy position. This had a dramatic effect and the incoming bullets to them slowed down to a trickle and effectively ended the firefight.

Unfortunately for HAP Ferreira he was almost directly behind the launcher and the blast had burst his eardrums, so he couldn't hear anything. He couldn't hear the instructions that was being shouted to him and he also didn't understand how loud he was shouting to his comrades. Maybe it was this loud shouting that was the final straw for the enemy and the two sides broke contact.

The team collected Sgt Wannenberg who was bleeding profusely from his wounds – the main artery had been severed. Once they cleared the contact area he hastily received a morphine injection and then got carried out in a groundsheet that was made to function as a stretcher. They set off as fast as they could – southward to the river knowing that they would be pursued as soon as the enemy regrouped and got support from the nearby troops.

The team called in their need for an extraction by helicopter to Cmdt Breytenbach as they made their way back with the wounded Wannenberg in the stretcher. Sgt Botes tried to stem the flow of Wannenberg's blood by pushing the bomb bandages into the gaping wounds of his wounded comrade. Even using his fingers to try and close the artery didn't work and he continued to lose blood. He kept on speaking to him but could see that Sgt F Wannenberg was losing so much blood that it was just a matter of time before his friend would suffer the ultimate fate.

They arrived at the swollen river in less than an hour – they couldn't wait for the helicopter and didn't know when it would come so they crossed the swollen river with their dead comrade and moved into cover away from the river where they could wait for a helicopter. The helicopter crew finally got reached some hours later and they extracted the team very early the next morning..... “

**Transcribed from a conversation with Sgt Boats Botes and checked for accuracy by him on 14 January 2019.**

The actions of the team in this deployment forms part of the legendary motto of the RECCES – WE FEAR NAUGHT BUT GOD. In the face of overwhelming fire they had consistently acted without regard for their own lives and fought as a well-trained team. They survived by going on attack. This action had given them the edge against the enemy and it turned what should have been a massacre into an incredible escape. Sgt F Wannenburg was awarded the Honoris Crux posthumously.

WO Conradie also received a Honoris Crux for his brave actions on the day. This would be his second medal for bravery. WO Conradie was killed in action in Angola on 4 June 1978.

The battle for Bridge 14 continued after this. The Task Force deployed to the bridge a few days after this incident and a hard-fought battle created a bridgehead and allowed the Task force to continue North.

After this incident the operational drills were changed with the following to apply:

- a. In future the Recce Teams would have their own Liaison Officer with other services – ie Air Force Navy or medical services and ensure that a 24 hr radio watch was maintained with direct reporting.
- b. A high percentage of the Recces got wounded or killed during Operation Savannah. After Savannah a greater focus on medical training was added to provide more skills in trauma treatment when behind enemy lines.