

# INTERVENTION IN ANGOLA



The 25th of April 1974 brought an event in Lisbon which was to have far-reaching consequences in Africa – a *coup d'état* that toppled the Portuguese Government and heralded the end of some 400 years of Portuguese presence in Africa. August 1974 brought formal announcement of the decolonisation of the Portuguese African provinces of Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea, as well as Portuguese territories elsewhere. The richest and largest of these was Angola, which the Portuguese had reached in 1482 and begun to settle from 1575.

Impending independence found Angola in a rather confused state, with three major 'liberation groups' each claiming to be the most legitimate and representative: the FNLA, the MPLA and Unita. The 'People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola' – MPLA – was founded in 1956

around the Angolan Communist Party (PCA). The FNLA had its origin in the Northern Angolan People's Union founded in 1957 while Unita – The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola – was formed by Jonas Savimbi in 1966, after he had broken away from the FNLA two years earlier.

The MPLA had opened its 'military' campaign with several mainly urban attacks in February 1962. These failed miserably, costing the MPLA most of its urban cadres and forcing it to become an organisation in exile. FNLA's ancestor, UPA, began more successfully in the rural areas along the border with Zaire. By the time their campaign of terrorism had been put down in September/October, many thousands had died in what one of their own commanders, Marcos Kassanga, called 'a real fratricidal struggle.' He

added that 'A figure' approaching 8000 Angolans were savagely massacred by tribal elements of UPA.' These revolts then gradually grew into campaigns of insurgency against Portuguese rule, although they never lost the fratricidal element.

By 1974, when the Lisbon coup changed everything, the insurgencies in Angola had been all but defeated by the Portuguese; all three of the major movements were confined to relatively small parts of the territory, largely fragmented and fighting chiefly among themselves. This latter aspect naturally assumed even greater importance after the announcement of decolonisation. One of the MPLA's responses was to despatch a large contingent to the Soviet Union for training in December 1974, capitalising on its PCA background and the early links forged with the USSR. Soviet sponsorship soon proved its value. Not at all enchanted with the possibility of another movement – less devotedly Marxist/socialist – gaining the upper hand, and unconvinced of MPLA military prowess, they took the precaution of mobilising some 'fraternal assistance.'

The first Cuban troops arrived in Angola as advisers to the MPLA from April 1975; they were soon followed by arms shipments – all this while the three 'liberation' groups were ostensibly still preparing to join a united transition government to be followed by elections. By mid-1975 all pretence had ceased, and the three major insurgent groups were back at one another's throats with a vengeance. That August the MPLA Defence Minister travelled to the USSR to seek troops. He was referred to Havana, and Castro was assured that the bills would be settled by



Above: A SAAC C-130 lands at Luso airport on 11 December 1975 immediately after the town had been captured.

Previous page: South African troops leaving Angola are met at the SWA border by Defence Minister Botha.

Main picture, below: The remains of a FAPLA supply column after a South African attack.





the situation and moving to challenge this rather blatant Soviet takeover. When Western help finally did begin to flow to the other two groups, it was in dribs and drabs, never properly planned or coordinated. Arguably, the major problem here lay in the very effective work done by Moscow's 'useful idiots' in blocking and delaying such assistance. Then, too, the United States had not yet recovered from the trauma of a lost war – albeit by default – in Vietnam and was not about to rush into another even superficially similar situation.

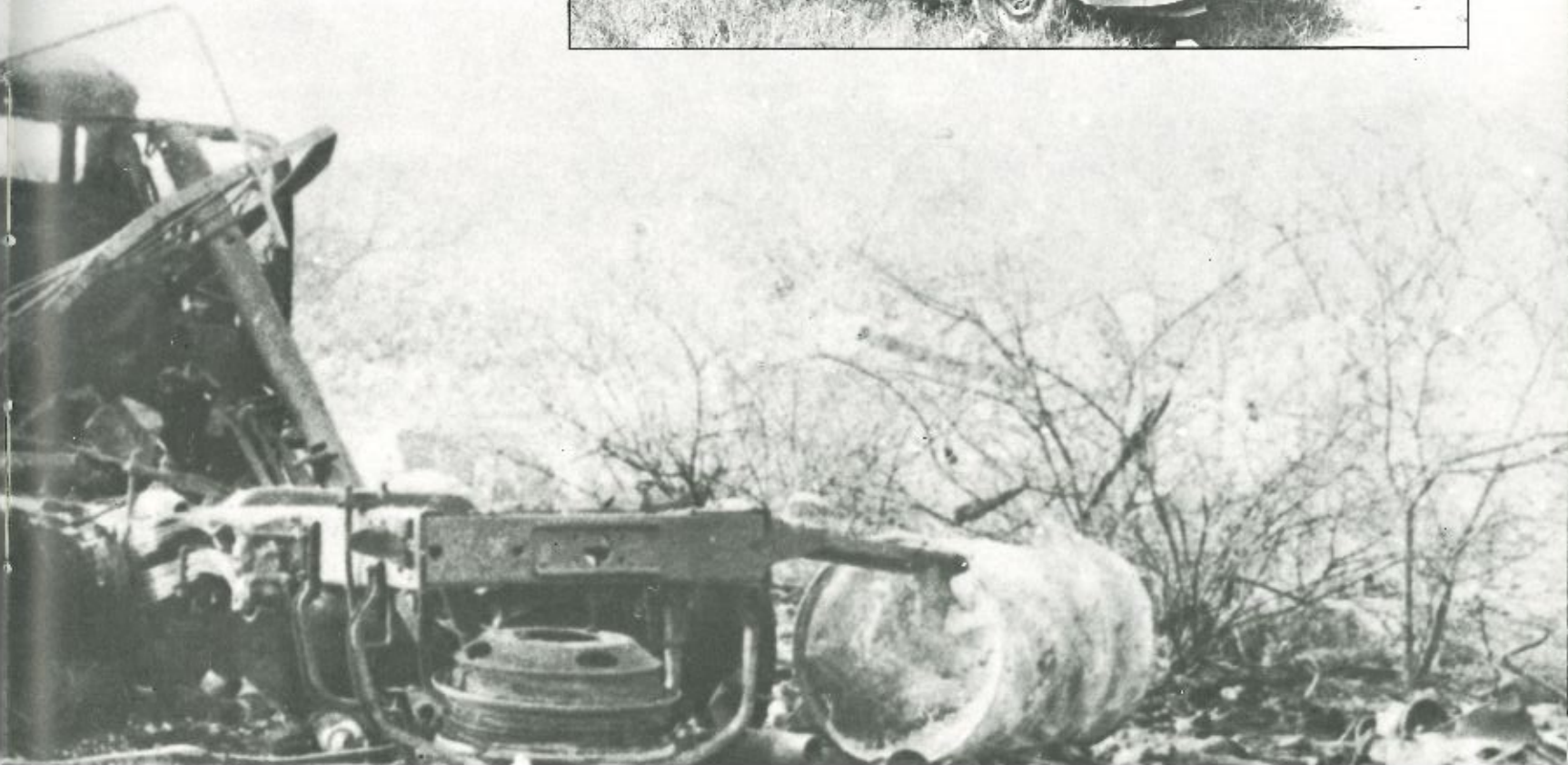
Concern was not limited to the major Western Powers. South Africa, for instance, was not overjoyed at the prospect of a clearly Marxist group coming to power in Luanda – if only because of the bolstering effect this would have on the insurgency being conducted by SWAPO

*Left: South African staff at work amid political graffiti in Angola in early 1976.*

*Below: Refugees of the Angolan fighting.*

Moscow. Two hundred more Cubans arrived in Luanda on 16 August after which their arrivals accelerated, although most were flown or shipped to the Congo (Brazzaville), where they remained in transit until moved into Angola. Much additional equipment was also shipped, both directly to Luanda – by then effectively under MPLA control – and to Pointe Noire in the Congo. This Cuban force finally grew to 15,000 men by early 1976.

By now even the most sanguine Western governments could no longer conceal from themselves what was happening in Angola. There remained, however, a world of difference between recognising





in northern SWA. In fact, it had already become necessary to send troops into southern Angola (9 August 1975) in an effort to protect the Calueque and Ruacana hydro-electric and irrigation schemes; begun in co-operation with the Portuguese, these were now nearing completion. Essential to the development of the region – and particularly northern SWA – they had become a target for PLAN sabotage, and their workers also felt generally threatened by the increasing chaos around them after the departure of Portuguese troops.

Other African states, too, were gravely concerned by the course of events in soon-to-be-independent Angola. Prominent among these were the Ivory Coast, Zambia and Zaire, the latter both neigh-

*Below:* Unita soldier sporting an unusual line in camouflage uniforms in February 1976. The pictures appearing on his clothes are of Unita's leader, Jonas Savimbi.



bours of Angola with no delusions as to the potential consequences to them of an MPLA victory. As the only regional military power, South Africa soon found herself in the strange position of being approached by a number of normally hostile African Governments with the request that she should shoulder her responsibilities as an African power and intervene in Angola before it was too late. From March 1975 there had also been several approaches by both Jonas Savimbi and Holden Roberto (FNLA), which had been rejected. Finally, South Africa unbent sufficiently in August of that year to supply a quantity of infantry weapons to the FNLA after Roberto had undertaken to bury his differences and to co-operate with Unita. The South African involvement then began to accelerate.

Late in August South African representatives met with the FNLA and Unita in Angola and agreed to provide assistance in the form of training and advisers. Two training camps were set up in southern Angola, partially staffed with SA Army instructors. One, at Calombo south of Silva Porto, trained Unita personnel; another at Mapupa trained FNLA troops loyal to Daniel Chipenda, who had partly broken with Roberto. The FNLA elements in the north had to be content with support from Zaire and – very little – from the United States. Together, the two training camps in southern Angola were to provide a crash training programme for some 6000 troops over a six-week period. Unhappily, these measures proved woefully inadequate to balance out the support in troops and equipment that were going to the MPLA. By mid-September MPLA forces controlled virtually every centre of any importance between Luanda and the SWA border and were holding in the north.

With independence due on 11 November, it was clear that more drastic measures were needed. Accordingly, South African troops in Angola began to take a more active interest in the proceedings, moving from a purely training and advi-

*Above left:* Soviet-made jeep captured during Operation Savannah and pressed into South African service.

*Above:* FAPLA prisoners being searched by South African personnel immediately after their capture.

sory role to one of planning, handling heavy weapons and partial command. The immediate priority was to prevent further MPLA penetration of Unita/FNLA territory. Their first clash with a Cuban/MPLA force came on 5 October, when a Unita company with 14 SA advisers moved to block an MPLA advance on Nova Lisboa. Contact with the enemy was made some 7km outside Norton de Matos when the Unita force was ambushed at a bridge. Most of the Unita troops decamped under fire from light artillery, mortars, recoilless rifles and some old T-34 tanks. One of the Panhard AML-90s supplied by Zaire and manned by the advisers managed to destroy a T-34, and another was destroyed by a jeep-mounted 106mm recoilless rifle. A number of anti-tank missiles were then fired at the enemy position, which was promptly abandoned.

The second phase of what had by now become Operation Savannah was to reverse the tide and gain as much ground as possible before independence day. The Unita/FNLA forces were obviously in no position to achieve this. Thus the choice lay between active South African military participation on the one hand and – in effect – acceptance of an MPLA victory on the other. With the Angolans requesting it, several African states urging it, and the United States hinting at passive support at the least, the SA Government decided to bend for once its oft-proclaimed policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

Even so, the intervention was to be decidedly low-key, and the force involved actually never grew much beyond 2000 men. The first combat force to be formed after this decision was Task Force Zulu, which was placed under the command of the stoutish, unassuming Colonel Koos van Heerden, who was soon to earn

the nickname 'Rommel.' Flown up from Pretoria at short notice on 9 October, he was given the most cursory of briefings and the general mission of gaining as much ground as possible in western Angola before 11 November. He then went on to Cuangar to form his force and plan his operation.

Nothing daunted, van Heerden set to with a will and was ready to move on 14 October with his rather motley force. This consisted of one battalion of mostly Caprivian Bushmen under the command of the irrepressible Cmdt Delville Linford, and another of roughly 1000 FNLA troops under an Angolan, Commandante Basinha, advised by the later Officer Commanding 44 Parachute Brigade, Jan Breytenbach. The training standard of this battalion was anything but likely to inspire confidence – two companies had had one month's training courtesy of the SA Army instructors at Mapupa, the third had enjoyed all of four days of training. This problem was to become serious once the force began to come under artillery fire, as it lacked the cohesion, discipline and experience needed to weather such attention with equanimity. Supporting elements at this stage were few – some 81mm mortars and several elderly Vickers MMGs. Transport consisted mostly of Portuguese vegetable trucks.

From this somewhat shaky start, Task Force Zulu went on to establish a new record for rapid movement:

- 19 October – takes Perreira d'Eca after moving the long way around via Serpa Pinto and Artur de Pavia, having found the direct route impassable;
- 20 October – takes Rocadas in co-operation with armoured cars and a mortar group which are then attached;
- 22 October – takes Joao de Almeida after a brisk fight with MPLA forces protecting this headquarters and communications centre;
- 24 October – takes Sa de Bandeira, the MPLA administrative headquarters; more armoured cars and mortars attached;
- 28 October – takes Mocamedes, threatens to sink a Portuguese corvette if she does not leave by morning – which she does;
- 31 October – stops advance at Catenague and clears eastward to prevent a renewed MPLA attempt to move on Nova Lisboa, destroying the enemy force at Cubal in co-operation with Task Force Foxbat, which had been covering Nova Lisboa;
- 4 November – takes Benguela airport and the outlying MPLA and Cuban training camps and barracks, seizing valuable fuel in the process;



Above: FNLA badge.

- 5 November – takes Benguela;
- 7 November – takes Lobito and is joined by Foxbat, but does not require assistance; further movement is now held up pending a decision whether to withdraw prior to the 11th as originally intended or not;

Below: 8.5-inch gun in action in Angola. These elderly weapons were badly outranged by the opposing BM-21 rocket launchers.





Above: Quadruple 14.5mm anti-aircraft gun system captured by the South African forces in Angola.

- 13 November – takes Novo Redondo after heavy fighting which also brings the first fatal SA casualty of the campaign; part of the force is detached to assist Foxbat in the area of Santa Comba.

Zulu now took up a defensive position to await the outcome of political consideration. Van Heerden made it clear that any further advance would require additional forces, as he was now up against a well-dug-in enemy on the far side of a river and flooded swamps. Finally, Task Force Zulu was ordered to pull back to Novo Redondo, whence it was later ordered to Cela, and there disbanded.

During the 33 days of its advance, Task Force Zulu covered 3159km while fighting 21 skirmishes and launching 16 quick and 14 deliberate attacks. Some 210 enemy troops were killed, 96 wounded and 56 captured for the loss of 5 (1 SA) killed and 41 (20 SA) wounded.

Four other Task Forces, formed at various times during this phase of the operation, also performed well in the face of considerable difficulties. Foxbat was formed in mid-October 1975. Comprising one Unita battalion and a squadron of SA armoured cars, Foxbat moved out on 25 October to block the Cuban/MPLA advance toward Silva Porto; a Cuban general was killed in the ensuing fighting. The bulk of Foxbat then moved west, with detachments sent to Santa Comba and Cela to cover against enemy interference. Foxbat took Quibala on the 27th, co-

operated with Zulu to defeat an enemy force at Cubal on 1 November, took Norton de Matos on the 3rd, deployed east of Lobito on the 6th to block any enemy escape from Zulu's attack, moved to Cela on the 9th to link up with its detachment there, and moved on to Santa Comba on the 11th. Limited action followed in the general Santa Comba-Quibala area over the next three weeks.

North of Santa Comba, near Catofe, Foxbat then fought one of the hardest actions of the campaign around an anonymous bridge marked on the maps as 'Bridge 14.' Now reinforced to include an SA infantry company, a mortar platoon,

some engineers and a mixed battery of eight 140mm (5.5") and 87mm (28pdr) guns, Foxbat came up against a force including a Cuban infantry battalion and liberally supported by artillery elements that included several BM-21 122mm multiple rocket launchers. Fighting around the bridge itself took place between 9 and 12 December before the Cuban/MPLA force conceded the field. Fighting in the general area continued for some ten days in all. Among the equipment captured at the

Below: Despite the lavish Cuban and Soviet aid the MPLA forces also had to improvise. The photo shows an armed and armoured bulldozer knocked out near Luso in December 1975.



bridge were ten 76.2mm field guns, 22 120mm mortars and five BM-21s, one of which was salvageable. It was brought back to South Africa, where it became the pattern from which the Valkiri system was developed.

Task Force Orange was formed on 12 December from a Unita battalion reinforced by an SA armoured car squadron, an SA infantry company and some artillery elements. Its main operations were the seizure of the Salazar Bridge over the Cuanzo River north of Massende and an attack on 15 December toward Quibala to spoil a Cuban attack on Cariango. Task Force X-Ray was formed at the specific request of Jonas Savimbi to protect the Benguela railway line. It opened its operations by taking Luso (11 December) after a three-day fight. Thereafter, X-Ray split into three more or less independent combat teams which conducted clearing operations east of Bucaco – taking the Luchia River bridge, east of Lumege and south of Luso, on 14 December.

In the north, a small South African advisory team had joined Holden Roberto's FNLA force on 6 November after it became clear that he could not cope by himself and that no one else was prepared to help. Their advice – supported by that of the few Americans present – was to concentrate on consolidation and defence of the areas he already controlled. Instead, the FNLA launched an ill-planned and very poorly co-ordinated attack on



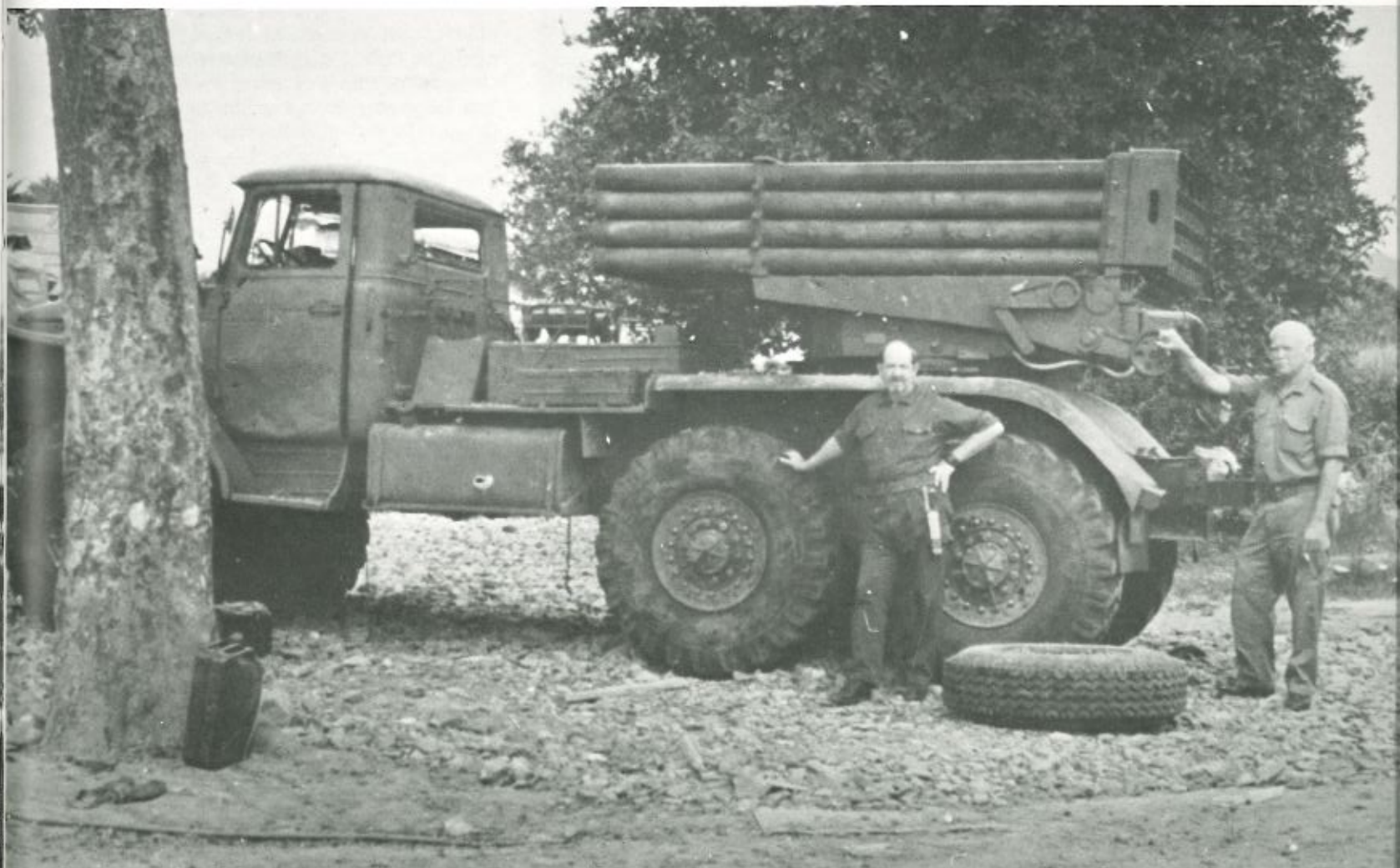
Above: Eland-90 armoured cars at Pereira d'Eca in February 1976. Pereira d'Eca was captured in October 1975.

MPLA forces north of Luanda. This proved a disaster, but Roberto was not to be deterred and continued in similar vein until he had squandered all his gains and used up the bulk of his forces. From being within 30km of Luanda, the FNLA was quickly pushed back to the Zaire border. The South African advisors were extracted by the frigate *SAS President Steyn* in a tense night operation.

South Africa now found itself facing another major decision. With the northern front stabilised, and the flow of Cuban troops and Soviet weaponry into Angola

continuing unabated, the forces deployed in Angola would have to be reinforced and provided with heavier weapons if they were to stay in the field. At the same time, the Western nations had essentially given up the cause as lost, and the former limited consensus among the African states had begun to break up, some argu-

Below: Captured Cuban BM-21 122mm rocket launcher.



ing for the retention of SA forces in Angola and others urging their early withdrawal. A measure of embarrassment entered the picture after several SA soldiers were captured and put on public display at the OAU (Organisation for African Unity) conference and elsewhere. What had been a comfortably secret operation had now acquired very unhappy implications. The final straw came when the OAU split neatly down the middle on the issue of whether or not to recognise the MPLA Government.

The South African Government knew that it could not carry the full burden of the Angolan problem alone. If the Western Powers were not willing or able to play their part, South Africa would have to pull out and leave the Angolans to their fate.

*Below: One of the most difficult problems in Angola was the poor quality of the roads.*

This decision taken, it was still necessary to move elements of the CF into southern Angola and to delay the discharge of National Servicemen to allow a reasonably proper hand-over to Unita and southern FNLA forces and to ensure a controlled withdrawal. The withdrawal began on 22 January 1976, reaching a line just north of the Angola-SWA border by the end of the month. This was held until the end of March, when the remaining forces withdrew into SWA. The advancing Cuban/MPLA forces finally arrived at the border on 1 April, but did not succeed in eliminating Unita, which remains a major thorn in their sides.

For the SADF, Operation Savannah was something of a mixed experience. Certainly its officers and men had performed very well indeed, but the unfinished campaign left a bitter aftertaste, reminding some of the American failure in Viet-



nam. That the failure was political rather than military and that it was, in fact, chiefly a failure on the part of other countries' politicians, was poor consolation. There was also a measure of concern that some future hostile African Government could misinterpret these events and come up with the fond belief that SA forces had been ejected by military means - a misconception that could lead to a fatal decision. Then, too, the obsessive secrecy surrounding the operation even after it had become public knowledge all over the world did serious damage to the standing and credibility of the SADF in the eyes of its nation - damage that has not yet been fully made good.

On the positive side, Savannah did provide the Army with its first taste of warfare since 1945 and the first real experience of mechanised operations in the African bush. As such, it served to highlight some deficiencies in doctrine, logistics and equipment which have since been addressed, by and large successfully. It also gave the Army as a whole the confidence that it would be up to conducting the highly mobile and flexible operations that would become necessary in a serious conflict. Finally, Savannah prevented the early destruction of Unita, which has paid off in that the MPLA Government has demanded the diversion of major PLAN elements to assist it against Unita forays, thereby easing the pressure on northern SWA. In military terms, then, the books for Operation Savannah can be said to balance with, perhaps, a small profit. Had the propaganda aspect been less ineptly handled, Savannah could very easily have been made into at least a partial political success as well.



*Above:* Bosbok spotter ready to take off from a base in northern SWA.

*Right:* Badge of the Unita movement.

*Below:* Soviet-made BRDM-2 APC knocked out during the fighting in the course of Operation Savannah.

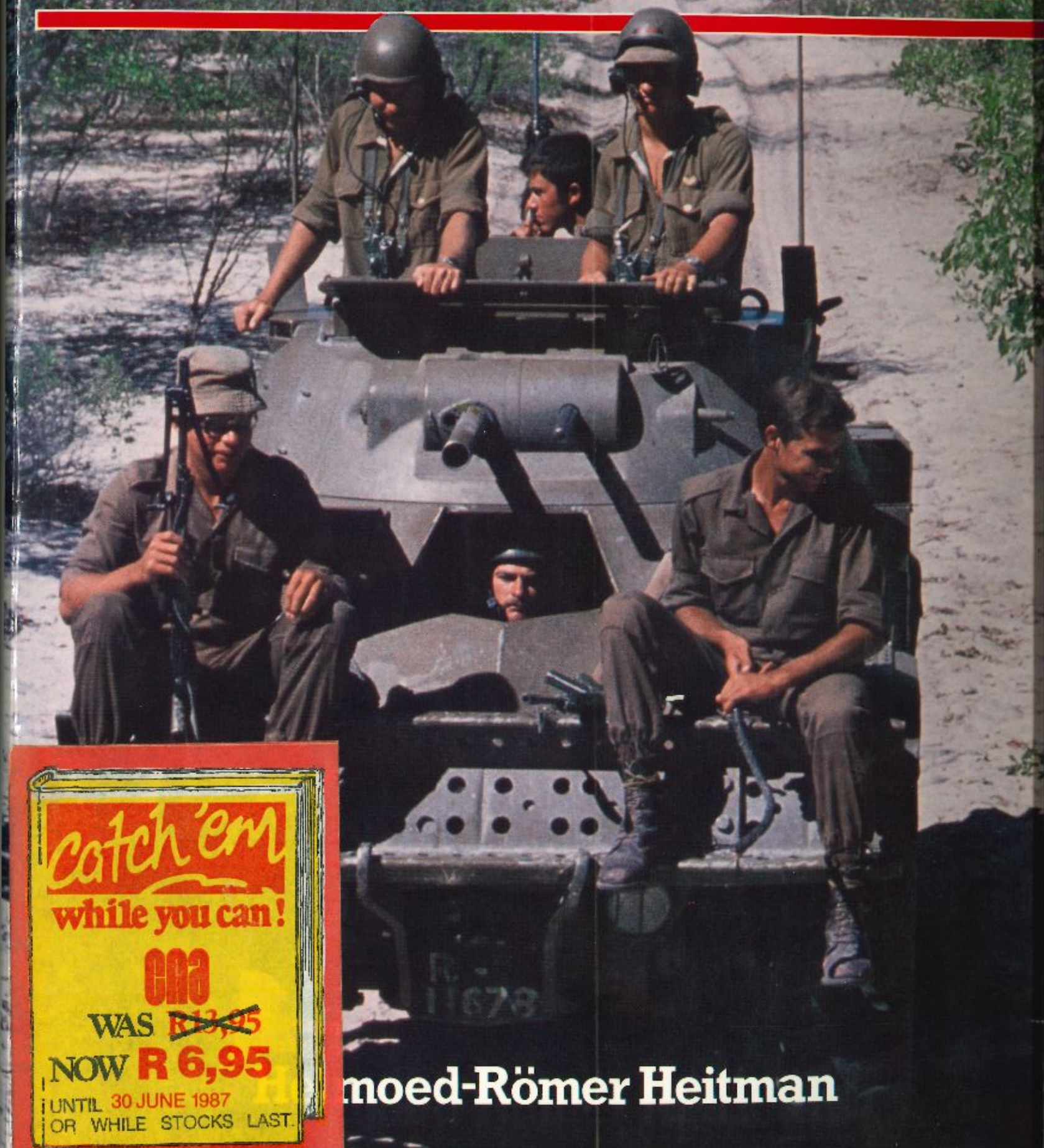


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