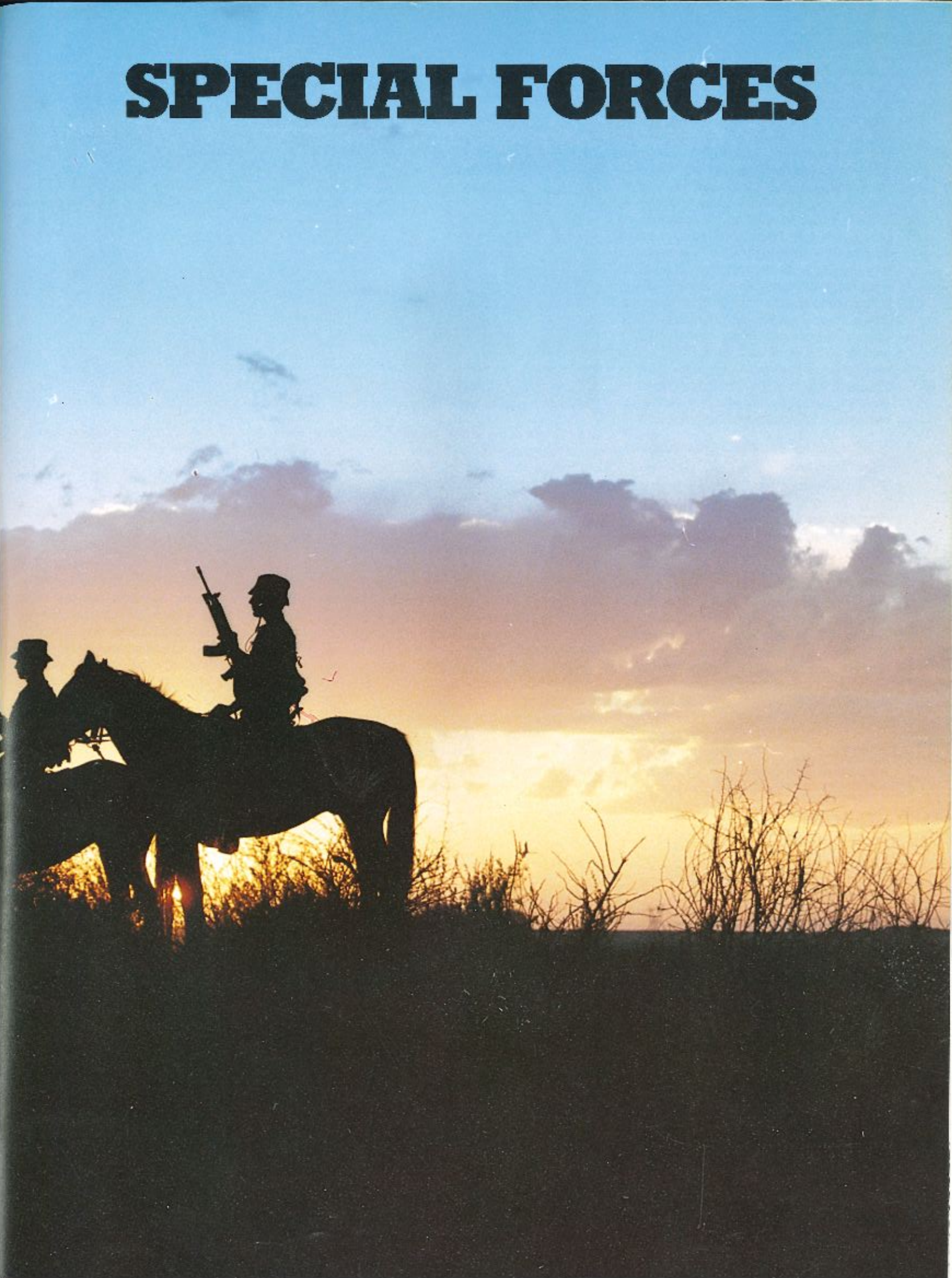


SPECIAL FORCES



Like any military establishment, the SADF has its elite units which distinguish themselves both in their performance and in their 'rites of passage.' While there is only one true special-forces element – the Reconnaissance Commandos – several other units maintain similar standards in personnel selection and training and in their operational performance. None of them is eager to discuss its doctrines or tactics, but most have released occasional information on selection procedures and training. Both 32 Bn and the elite police counterinsurgency unit, 'Ops K,' have given some insight into their operations. Apart from Ops K, one other non-SADF unit is discussed here: the SWATF's unique SWA Specialist Unit. Finally, it is worth noting that both the South African Police (SAP) and the Transport Services Police maintain highly efficient anti-terrorist units which shun publicity entirely.

1 Reconnaissance Commando – The 'Recces'

With the paratroops moving toward a more conventional airborne-forces role, the SADF felt a distinct need for an SAS or Fernspäher type of unit. This need was met by the establishment of a small specialist unit in Durban (1 October 1972) called 1 Reconnaissance Commando. Since then, a number of additional Recce Commandos have been established, including a CF element and 4 Recce, based at Langebaan in the Cape and trained for amphibious operations. All have amply proved their worth on operations, and the 'Recces' have earned the admiring re-

spect even of the tough 'parabats' and the bush war experts of 32 Bn.

One of the tasks of the Recce Commandos is that of gathering intelligence on activity in enemy rear areas. The execution of special operations in the enemy rear also falls within their ambit. In general, they could be described as specialists in strategic intelligence, although the war against PLAN insurgents has seen them carry out tactical intelligence-gathering missions. On occasion, they have also been used as an elite combat element, as was the case in operations during 1982 which were aimed at the elimination of two PLAN front headquarters. Normally, however, the superbly trained Recces are too valuable to risk in a combat role despite their undoubted efficiency. As is the case with their equivalents in other countries, they are best employed in a covert observation role.

Previous page: Mounties in the training area of the Equestrian Centre.

Below: Ops K personnel waiting on their Casspir APC in the course of a patrol.



Above: An Ops K patrol takes a break while trackers in the background cast about for fresh traces of insurgents.

Little has been released about how the Recces are organised or how they operate. It has been said, however, that their basic element is the five- or six-man team wherein each member is a specialist of some kind. A typical team might include a tracker, a navigator, a medic, an explosives expert and a signaller. On the other hand, there have also been occasional references to reconnaissance teams as small as two men operating well inside Angola, which can safely be taken to refer to the Recces.

Operational and tactical details are non-existent, which is only natural considering that the Recces must rely always on stealth for the success of their missions and often for their very survival. Broadcasting their methods would be one way of committing suicide. The only information available in this regard is that they are trained in the use of boats, and that they do have some armed and modified vehicles among their equipment. Given the thinly populated nature of much of southern Africa, it does not take too much imagination to see them sometimes operating in a style not dissimilar to that of the British Special Air Service (SAS) of World War II.

Both the selection procedure and the actual training of the Recces are very stiff indeed, putting even the Paras and 32 Battalion in the shade. Above all, every effort is made to avoid roughnecks or 'muscle-bound morons.' While the Recces must be very fit indeed, they also need more than an average intellect to carry out their mission. Strong character and a considerate nature are additional requirements for their role: any weakness of



Right: A rare picture of members of a Reconnaissance Commando on exercise. Both soldiers facing the camera have had their faces blacked-out for security reasons.





character or inability to get along with other team members could all too easily spell the failure of a given operation. The toughness of the selection process is demonstrated by the fact that a typical year may see up to 700 applicants – in themselves a select group – of whom perhaps 45 make the grade. It is also interesting that more than 75 percent of the Recces have their matric, and not a few hold university qualifications in very diverse subjects.

Two selection courses are held each year, prior to which recruiters visit various units to outline the nature and role of the unit and its training programme. They also show films of the process to ensure that there are no false impressions among potential applicants. Potential candidates then undergo thorough medical and psychological examinations and are quizzed about their reasons for wanting to join and what they think they can contribute to the unit. Even prior to this very searching interview, they must pass a PT test which includes:

- a) 30 km with normal kit and rifle and a 30-kg sand bag in 6 hours;
- b) 8 km in long trousers and boots, with rifle, in 45 minutes;

- c) 40 push-ups, 8 chin pulls and 68 sit-ups within a specified time;
- d) 40 shuttle runs of 7 m each in 90 seconds;
- e) Swim 45 m freestyle.

Those who pass this PT test, plus the medical and psychological examinations, and convince the selection board that they have something to offer the unit, can then enter the three-week pre-selection programme course! This kicks off with two weeks of strenuous PT for eight hours a day to prepare aspirants for the rigours of the selection programme proper. Some lectures on relevant subjects are thrown in with the same purpose. Usually some 20 percent of the applicants drop out during this phase – eloquent testimony to its harshness, given the standard of fitness required even for entry.

This is followed by a one-week water orientation programme in Zululand. This tests the candidates' adaptability to water and their adeptness in small boats. Instruction is given in the use of kayaks, two-seater canoes and motor boats. Navigation exercises take candidates many kilometers through swamps, and there is an 8-km race with poles over the dunes – one four-man pole per two men. Candidates are allowed to form up into teams of their choice during this phase and are watched closely for teamwork and leadership; a buddy rating is called for toward the end of the phase. Rations are gradually reduced during the week. Candidates are rated for adaptability, swimming and



Above: Parabats jumping from a Dakota. Despite their age the Dakotas still give good service.

other water skills, ability to work under difficult circumstances and stress, resistance to cold, claustrophobia, co-ordination and fitness. At this point another 20 percent drop out.

The remaining candidates are then flown to the Operational Area for the final phase of the selection programme. The

Left: Like the Recces, 32 Battalion is little photographed. This picture shows a 32 Bn officer, Captain Jan Hougard on one of the unit's few public displays with a selection of captured weapons. Below: Mounties of the SWA Specialist Unit in training.



first week here takes the form of a bush orientation/survival course during which they are taught which plants are edible, which give water, how to get a fire going without matches and how to cope with lion and elephant. The first day of this course sees the candidates stripped and searched for cigarettes, tobacco, sweets and toiletries – only kit and medical items are left to them. They are then given time to build a shelter with their ground sheet – which must be dug in 45 cm – and are marked on its neatness, practicality and originality. Rations are further reduced and water is limited to five litres a day per man.

Apart from the survival training, PT stays with them throughout: a typical day might include an hour of PT before a breakfast consisting largely of water; observation tests wherein candidates are given a fixed route to follow on which they must identify and note down ten different objects; three runs over an assault course – the last with a 35-kg pack, including a mortar-bomb container filled with cement; a five-km run along an *oshana*

Below: Ops K men waiting to take up positions along a road while another group pushes an insurgent patry toward the road where they will be attacked in the open.



Above: Dog handler and dog on patrol training at the SADF Dog Centre.

(gully) without their kit, followed by loading up again and carrying a tree trunk back to their camp. During this phase the candidates are evaluated for adaptability; water discipline; bush navigation; fear of the dark, animals and heights; ability to do without food; care of weapons and equipment; memory; powers of observation; leadership; and the ease with which they move in bush. Particular emphasis is placed on the ability to get on with others

while under stress. A second buddy rating is called for.

This phase ends in a spate of automatic rifle fire that heralds the next stage which is intended to try the candidates psychologically to the uttermost – and succeeds. Then comes the 'crunch' phase. One morning the men are told that 'The course

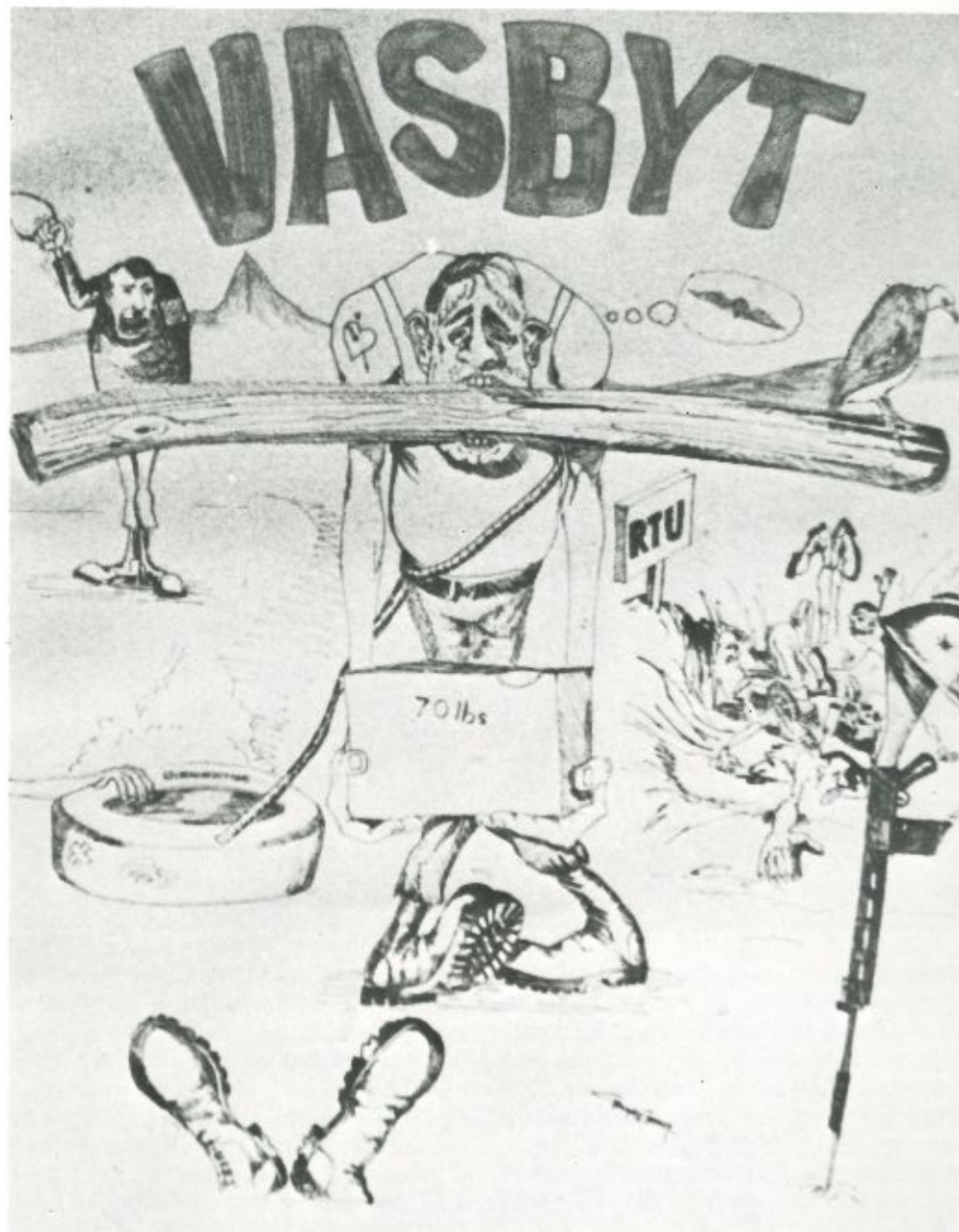


is 51 degrees magnetic. You walk 38 km and your RV is 1900 hours this evening at a dirt landing strip. If you make it, you may get some food.' Twenty km along they are met by some of the instructors and allowed to fill their water bottles – while the instructors drink and spill ice-cold soft drinks. On arrival at the RV, each man is given eight biscuits – only to discover that they are contaminated with petrol and totally inedible. Meanwhile, the instructors have a happy barbecue picnic which any candidate can join – if he is only willing to drop out.

Finally, the candidates are put into the bush for five days with a tin of condensed milk, half a 24-hour ration pack and twelve biscuits, eight of which are soaked in petrol. Elephant, lion, and bush fires are among the problems of this final stretch. When they finally get to their last rendezvous, the men are given a new bearing and told there are another 30 kilometres to go. Those who go on find the instructors around the next corner. Seventeen per cent make it.

Those who survive the selection programme must then complete and pass the parachute course before being accepted into the Recces. The actual Recce training lasts some 42 weeks and includes tracking, survival, weapons handling, explosives, unconventional warfare, unarmed combat, mountaineering, guerrilla tactics, bush- and field craft, map reading, day and night navigation and signalling. Throughout this training they are also taught how to handle enemy equipment in each of the categories. Physical training naturally also stays with them and, in fact, reaches new peaks in what is demanded and achieved. The final test is a night or

Below: Para trainee on the assault course.



Above: A recruit's impression of life as a trainee with 1 Para (drawn on a hangar wall) showing the standard features of the training programme.

two in lion country with rifle, ammunition and a box of matches.

The new Recce is now posted to a team in one of the existing Recce Commandos specialising in whatever he proved best suited to during his training. After serving in such a team for a while, members can choose to specialise further in this direction or in other areas like military free-fall parachuting or sea training. The latter includes combat diving, kayak work, small boat handling, coastal and deep-sea navigation and sailing.

Given the demands of their selection and training, the Recces will always be a very small group of men, a group that others look up to as examples of the ultimate individual soldier. Envy plays no part in this, for their work is easily as demanding and often as unpleasant as their training. Only a special sort of man would seriously want to join, and only those are taken on. This is as it should be, and the Recces will continue to produce fine results out of all proportion to their numbers.

44 Parachute Brigade – The Parabats

Long the elite of the SA Army, the 'Bats' retain their image as one of the toughest and most efficient elements; it is really only the advent of the Reconnaissance Commandos that has removed them from the top-dog position. Their own Pathfinder element, however, runs the Recces a close race for that slot. By any measure, the Bats are a highly effective and respected fighting force that has caused PLAN considerable heartache.

While individual South Africans served in various airborne and commando units during World War II, SA did not have any such elements in its own army until the first parachute battalion was formed on 1 April 1961. Comments on that date, it might be added, are unlikely to endear the maker to any paratroops within earshot.



Formed by the man who would become Chief of the Army – W P Louw – after he and a small contingent had trained with Britain's 'Red Berets,' the new unit was based at Tempe in Bloemfontein. The Parachute Battalion soon established its own extremely high standards of fitness and military skill and became the elite – a unit many might wish to join but which

would accept only a few of the best. Soon it acquired a nickname to go with its status, Parachute Battalion being shortened to 'Parabat' or even just 'Bat.'

In 1963 the Battalion was split to create an independent Parachute Training Centre and thereby allow the Battalion as such to become a purely operational unit. By 1967, however, this experiment had been discarded and both training and operational elements were back under one roof with 1 Para. The next development came when the unit's CF element outgrew the

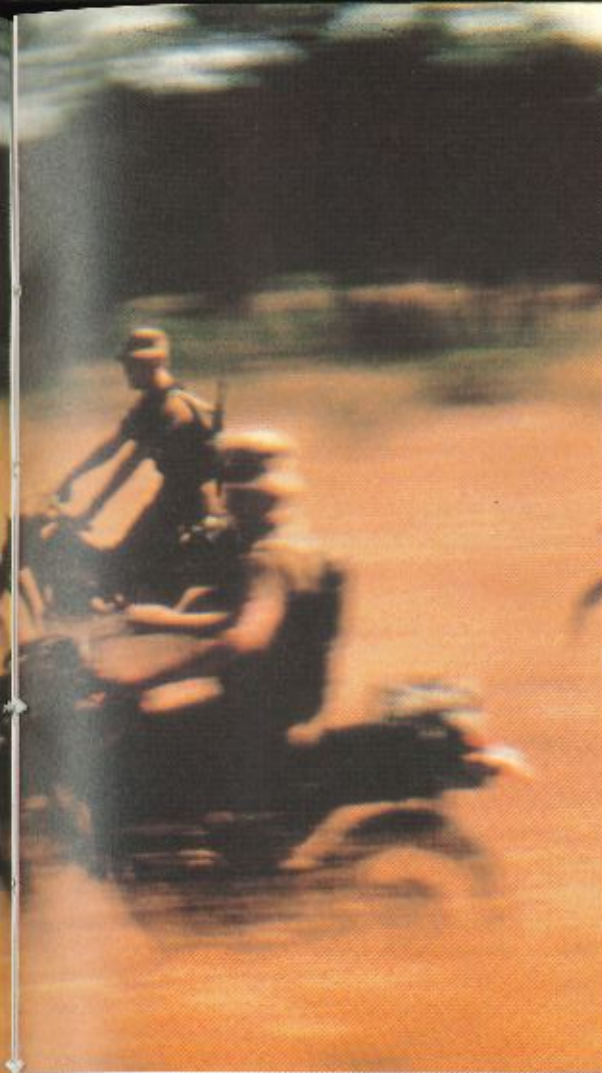
reasonable administrative capacity of the Battalion. One particular problem arose from the fact that its CF members were scattered throughout the country and thus difficult to get together apart from annual camps. Esprit and fresh training in all aspects of their task being vital to the paras, this situation could not continue. Accordingly, a CF Para Bn was formed as 2 Para in July 1971, with an HQ company at Tempe and five rifle companies based in different South African cities.

This battalion received its baptism of fire during Operation Savannah and performed very creditably indeed. With the military situation becoming less favourable, the size of the available airborne force was increased again, and a second CF unit – 3 Para – was therefore formed. Finally, the three battalions were grouped with supporting elements including heavy mortars to form 44 Parachute Brigade, with HQ at Bloemfontein, in 1978. Ironically, this took place at much the same time that the British Army lost its 44 Para Brigade (Volunteers) of the Territorial Army to budget cuts. The new 44 Brigade saw its first action at Cassinga during Operation Reindeer, with elements of all three battalions jumping. Since then the Bats have figured in their primary role in the course of several external operations, including Sceptic, which saw six companies of 1 Para deployed in southern Angola simultaneously, Protea and Daisy.

Elements of all three battalions are also employed on internal operations, usually

Below: A mixed party of Koevoet and SWATF personnel resting on a Ratel during operations against insurgents in the Tsumeb area in 1982.





Above: SWASpes motorcyclists in training.

Right: A Koevoet fighter group leaving its base to begin a patrol in central Ovambo. The leading Casspir is fitted with a captured 14.5mm machine gun.

providing the airmobile reaction forces in different parts of the Operational Area. In this role, as in much of their external activity, they are generally flown to the scene of a contact or fresh spoor by helicopter. Once there, they relieve the troops in contact, who have often been out for long periods and are no longer fresh. Newly arrived, exceptionally fit and highly trained, with the added advantage of fresh trackers, the reaction force elements leave the insurgents little chance of escape. Another aspect related to their success is the fact that their average age ranges in the mid-twenties, granting an edge in maturity over the very young National-Service troops without sacrificing fitness and expertise.

The selection and training of today's parabats remains exceptionally rigorous to ensure that the standard of combat efficiency is retained at its very high level. Generally, members of 1 Para will visit the various National Service battalions each year early in the training cycle to look for volunteers. These must then pass a PT test at their unit prior to appearing before a selection board, which looks at their character and motivation. Those who are accepted are then transferred to 1 Para, where they first complete the normal three-month basic training course, with

some differences: PT twice a day, no walking in camp under any circumstances and a 5-10-km run to end each day. Some 10 to 20 percent drop out during this phase, returning to their original units for the duration of their national service.

This phase is followed by some six weeks of advanced individual training, during which such subjects as driving and maintenance, supporting weapons, signalling and unarmed combat are covered. The level of physical training is now intensified to prepare the candidates for the PT course to follow. During this period they are also formed into companies. The two-week PT course that follows is the final crunch for many of the applicants; few who survive will drop out later. These two weeks see something like seven-and-a-half hours of PT a day, including 16-km runs with tar poles and/or 'dogs' – the latter are motor-car tyres which the trainees drag around with them at the end of a rope. A little later comes 'the marble' – a hessian-covered concrete paving slab which the trainees are required to take everywhere with them. During this phase, trainees work in 'sticks' of 12 to enhance the buildup of *esprit* among the survivors. Reporting sick for any reason results in an immediate RTU (returned to unit). Something like 50 percent of the initial survivors drop out during this phase.



Above: Mounty in dense bush in central Ovambo. This is the type of terrain most suited to mounted operations because the horses can pick their way round obstacles quicker than vehicles can plough through them.

Parachute training proper starts only now with two weeks of hangar training. This commences with instruction on how to land and roll without injury and progresses via harness training; aircraft drills and exit training with mockup aircraft; gantry training for air drills; active landing drills in the hangar to simulate different types of landing; parachute orientation;



aircraft orientation; and post-jump drills. A recurrent feature of these two weeks is the training tower or Aapkas. This begins with fan jumps, in which the descent is slowed by air resistance on a fan attached to the harness winch, and goes on to full-harness exit training for both port and starboard exits. Finally, exit drills are practised in sticks.

The first real jump comes after about ten days of hangar training and is generally from some 2000 feet, with the trainees jumping in pairs under the watchful eye of the instructors, who also jump. Seven more jumps follow – including two at night and four with equipment – before the prized wings are awarded. On a typical course, fewer than one in three of the

original applicants will have reached this stage. Volunteers among the new parabats can then go on a six-week Pathfinder course before rejoining their companies for sub-unit training and eventual operational employment.

The pace of training never really slows, however, and pressure is kept on right through the two years of national service and later during CF training. The knowledge that the annual camps will not be any softer is enough to ensure that the men keep themselves fit during their civilian lives. Another important factor is that none would wish to be transferred out of the unit they fought so hard to enter. The *esprit* of the CF units is also outstanding. Far from the usual spate of weak excuses heard by some units when they issue a call-up, the two CF Para Bns often find that more men report than were called up.

Below: 1 Para's training tower – the 'Aapkas' – used to give basic instruction and practice to trainees.



32 Battalion – The New 'Buffalo Soldiers'

First to bear this name were the two regiments of black troops recruited into the US Regular Army after the Civil War to help deal with the Indians. Authorised in 1866, these two regiments saw service throughout the Indian Wars, much of their action on the troublesome Texas frontier and in Arizona. By most accounts they performed with some distinction. Almost 120 years later the same name again refers to a group of black soldiers fighting on a troubled frontier. Wearing a buffalo head badge on their camouflage berets, the soldiers of 32 Battalion have established themselves as probably the finest light infantry in the world today.

Thirty-two Bn was formed as the SA intervention in the Angolan civil war of 1975/6 came to an end. Once SA forces had been withdrawn, the combined FAPLA/Cuban forces advanced quickly southward toward the SWA border, dealing ruthlessly with any remaining opposition. Jonas Savimbi's Unita movement was on its home ground and managed to survive these hard times to become a major force in Angola by the early 1980s. Those FNL troops and supporters caught in the south of the country were rather less fortunate, lacking Unita's large tribal base in the area. With nowhere to go, many chose exile in SWA rather than face a singularly uncertain future in a Marxist-ruled Angola. Large numbers of them settled in Kavango and Owambo, whence some were moved to the sparsely populated West Caprivi.

Among these refugees were many ex-FNL soldiers and their families. Not happy to subsist on charity until they could establish themselves economically, not a few of these men offered their services to



the SA forces in the fight against SWAPO, which had sided with the MPLA. Some did so for purely economic reasons, but most also had a strong desire to fight against the system that had cost them their country. A number also had unhappy memories of SWAPO excesses against family and friends. Whatever their individual reasons, many of them were highly experienced bush fighters and almost all had an intimate knowledge of parts of southern Angola which had been their home until so recently.

With Marxist rule in Angola boding ill for the future of peace in Owambo, this was an opportunity the security forces could not pass by. Accordingly, a new battalion was formed at Rundu in Kavango to make the best use of these potentially very valuable volunteers. With most of the recruits having no experience of the SADF's procedures and systems and with only few former leader cadres among them, the new unit was perforce initially staffed almost exclusively with white officers and Non-Commissioned Officers of the SA Army. Since then, an increasing number of the NCO posts has been filled from within the ranks of the battalion; now only officers and senior or specialist NCOs are posted from elsewhere.

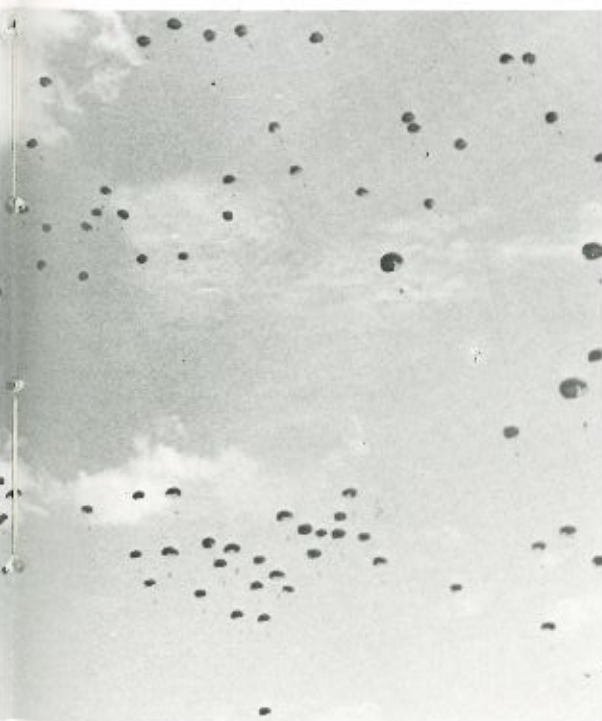
These personnel are carefully selected, with emphasis on eliminating the 'cow-boys' and 'killer' types who would only be a hindrance at best and a menace at worst. While the senior posts are generally filled by Permanent Force personnel, National



Above right: Pack hounds under training at the SADF Dog Centre.

Right: Ops K trackers running on a very fresh spoor, a photograph taken from one of their supporting vehicles.

Below: Paras making a mass jump. As well as such large-scale operations, training also deals extensively with tactics and techniques for operating in smaller units.



Servicemen fill many of the platoon leader and platoon sergeant slots as well as some of the staff ones. These men are very carefully selected from volunteers from among the infantry school graduates each year and are then required to pass an extremely tough orientation-cum-final-selection phase before being accepted into the unit. This is followed by further advanced counterinsurgency training and orientation to allow the new junior leaders to fit into the battalion. A measure of proficiency in Portuguese is also reached during this period.

The orientation phase lasts roughly one week but varies according to the particular group. It sees the prospective platoon leaders and sergeants divided into syndicates of six and taken to 32's training area near Buffalo, where they are briefed on the requirements of this phase, the danger of wild animals and the procedures to be followed in an emergency. Each group is then issued with a medical satchel and briefed on its use by a medical orderly. Radios and signals instructions issued, questions are called for and answered and then the instructors are let loose on the men.

Each man has his normal kit and

Below: Members of the Para reaction force waiting on the apron at Ondangwa air base in the Operational area. Their normal means of transport here is the helicopter but para jumps are also sometimes used.



Above: Frans Conradie, one of Ops K's best group commanders, has had his Casspir fitted with an ex-Vampire 20mm cannon 'organised' through friends in the SAAF.

equipment and is issued in addition with two mortar rounds and five tins of food that must last him five days. The next few days pass in a blur of marching, physical training, patrolling, river crossing exercises, navigation problems and anything else the instructors can think of. Sleep is frequently interrupted at half-hour intervals for further PT sessions, base defence drills or no reason at all except to try the trainee's patience to the utmost. The daily march is often 23-28 km, sometimes with tar poles in addition to the prescribed

load. At the end of this period the men are loaded into a truck bound for the temporary base where they will undergo further training before being deemed operational with the Battalion. Part way there, they are put back on their feet – with poles – to walk the rest of the way.

The purpose of this procedure is to ensure that only those who can stand up to





Above: A typical paddock at a SWASpes company base in Owambo. Considerable care is obviously taken to tend to the horses' fitness.

the physical and psychological rigours of extended bush operations are accepted into leadership positions. Small groups are out in the bush for five weeks or more at a time locating PLAN's bases and transit camps in southern Angola. While there is always the comforting thought of the SAAF helicopters that will fly in urgently needed supplies, conduct casevac mis-

sions or extract a patrol under almost any circumstances, 32 Bn men can never forget that for most of their time they are well inside hostile territory, far from the support available to other units and almost invariably outnumbered by the enemy.

The proof of the pudding, so goes the saying, is in the eating. On that basis the 'Buffalo Battalion' has amply demonstrated its value. Its almost continuous presence in southern Angola has gone far toward rendering that region inhospitable to PLAN and has also been a key element in

the success of the major operations conducted against the larger PLAN base areas by mechanised forces. In the process, it has also done more than its share of cutting PLAN down to size. By November 1981 the battalion had accounted for more than 1000 insurgents for the loss of 24 of its men and 9 of its officers and NCOs. A 'kill ratio' of more than 30 to one is not easy to match. The disproportion of junior leader casualties to troop casualties also says much for the style and standard of leadership in this unique battalion.

Like all successful military units, 32 Bn has come in for a very thorough campaign of vilification by its opponents and their helpers – both willing and duped. The key element in this campaign has been the claim by a deserter from 32 Bn that it spends much of its time and energy on terrorising the civilian population of southern Angola. This claim says much for the intellectual capacity and military knowledge of those who swallow it. Operating on foot, generally in relatively small groups without heavy weapons, and occasionally well inside southern Angola, 32's soldiers simply cannot afford to antagonise the locals. They rely on them for some of the information that leads them to PLAN, for local terrain knowledge and

Below: One of the more unusual variants of the 10-tonne Kwévoel truck is this horsebox used to support the Mounties' operations.



for their own security. A hostile civilian could all too easily advise the enemy of their presence, or simply fail to warn them of the presence of a larger enemy force.

Among 32 Bn's operations, only Super (discussed in some detail in another chapter) has received a degree of publicity. Most cross-border operations see reconnaissance patrols looking for signs of PLAN activity that could indicate hostile intentions or lead to a target, and keeping tabs on FAPLA to forestall clashes during later operations. In all of this the troops' knowledge of the area, dialects and customs is invaluable, as is their affinity for people who were once their neighbours and are not infrequently their relatives.

Once a target has been identified, subsequent patrols set about developing the available information. They establish the precise nature, location, size and perimeter of the target, the forces within it and what forces are sufficiently near to interfere with an operation. Terrain reconnaissance of the area and its possible access routes also forms an important part of their task. Finally, these patrols and/or others may also be employed to provide a screen for the actual operation. This will often be conducted by one or even two companies of 32 Bn if the target is sufficiently large to warrant it. Smaller targets will be dealt with by the original patrol, or by a small force flown in to support it. The attacking force will generally either approach the target on foot after being transported to the general area, or heli-assault it. Very large targets are left to the mechanised forces.

Most recently, the new-found accord between Angola and the RSA has seen the creation of a joint military commission to control the withdrawal of SA forces from southern Angola, their replacement by FAPLA and the prevention of PLAN movement through the area. Not surprisingly, the SA element of the commission's military forces has been provided by 32 Bn.

South-West African Specialist Unit

The SWA Specialist Unit – SWASpes from the Afrikaans – is one of the most unusual units of any army. A specialised follow-up unit, it grew out of the peculiar requirements of the protracted counterinsurgency campaign in northern SWA. Its basic concept is to combine and blend the skills of highly trained infantry and expert trackers with the mobility granted by horses and motorcycles and the special abilities of well-trained dogs and their handlers.

As in any counterinsurgency campaign, the major difficulty faced by the security forces is actually coming to grips with the insurgents. Once this has been achieved, dealing with them presents few problems. This difficulty is addressed in part by the policy of striking at the insurgents in their base areas and camps rather than waiting

for them to enter SWA and commit some act of terrorism. Another aspect is the protection of likely targets – in effect making the insurgent come to the security forces instead of having to look for him. Cross-border operations cannot, however, stop all infiltration, nor can every conceivable target be protected. It must also be remembered that most of PLAN's insurgents enter SWA either with a general 'armed propaganda' mission or to lay mines, neither of which occupations lends itself to prediction. They will always enjoy the initiative and can often be dealt with only by pursuit.

This problem is aggravated by the extremely flat nature of much of the Operational Area, which grants exceptional mobility on foot. Naturally, this also applies to pursuing infantry, but they will almost invariably have some measure of time lag to make up. By the same token, it is difficult effectively to 'leapfrog' the pursuit in terrain which has no naturally canalising effect. Finally, the often heavy bush severely restricts visibility, further slowing the pursuit if ambush is to be avoided and account is taken of counter-tracking on the part of the quarry. With the Angolan border often only some 50 km from the scene of most incidents, speed of pursuit is both essential and difficult to achieve.

Both armoured cars and APCs have enjoyed some measure of success in high-speed follow-up operations, but they do have several disadvantages. One is the self-advertising amount of noise they make, particularly in bad going. While this has not prevented them from achieving some remarkable successes against groups of insurgents who have either not heard them in time or assumed that they had heard civilian vehicles, fleeing insurgents are more alert and less trusting. Then too, vehicles are hampered by thick bush and also allow only a limited degree of tracking on the move. Finally, vehicles have very limited utility in this role in the mountainous parts of the Kaokoland, where PLAN has made some incursions.

Mounted infantry, on the other hand, showed quite early in the campaign that it could offer almost comparable mobility over much of the terrain in the Operational Area – and better in the mountainous areas – without the disadvantages. By mid-1977 the security forces had enough operational experience in its employment to refine the basic concept. Some of the Army's most experienced infantrymen were tasked with this project, and SWASpes was the result.

A composite unit, SWASpes has three main wings – mounted, motorcycle and tracking. Potential members are selected from among infantrymen who have completed their basic and phase-two training with distinction. Selection procedures are thorough and requirements tough – physically, psychologically and mentally.



Above: Para trainees at work on the assault course. The highest standards of physical fitness are maintained throughout the training period.

As one example, the motorcycle wing accepts only some 40 percent of applicants for the training programme and washes out a good proportion of these. Prospective members of the mounted wing and future dog handlers are first sent to the SADF Equestrian Centre and the SADF Dog Centre respectively to learn the rudiments of their new trade.

Once they have mastered the basics of handling their horses and dogs, they move on to the SWASpes base near Otavi. Here they undergo an intensive advanced counterinsurgency course optimised to suit the characteristics of their speciality. The motorcyclists and trackers go straight to SWASpes from their training battalion, receiving all of their specialised training at Otavi. The standard of training at SWASpes is in line with that of their selection procedures and demands the utmost from the men. Once operational, they are posted to the battalions in the Operational Area, usually by platoons.

The primary advantage the 'mounties' enjoy over their 'foot-mobile' opposition is that of mobility, in terms of both speed and endurance. A horse is obviously much faster than a man – the Arabians and Boerperde most commonly used can cover some 60km a day without difficulty. This mobility edge is exploited to the full by SWASpes, who learn the art of tracking from horseback. The horse's load-carrying ability also allows a mounted patrol to stay out longer between resupplies – thus making it difficult for insurgents to predict its movements. Another advantage accrues from the height of the horse, which grants the rider a greatly increased field of vision in bush, which can often be

translated into a very useful advantage in a contact.

The horses' relative silence – they are not shod when used in sandy areas – has resulted in the riding down of several groups of insurgents who heard nothing until the mounties were among them. A final edge results from alert observation of the horse's behaviour – very often a mount will warn of an otherwise unsuspected human presence which could well be an enemy ambush. Not a few soldiers have enjoyed the benefit of this travelling alarm system throughout the history of warfare. One example from the Operational Area saw the horses of a patrol that had camped for the night grow increasingly restive, all of them facing nervously to one side of the temporary camp. When the insurgents launched their attack at first light from that side, they were welcomed by an entirely unsurprised defence.

The motorcyclists enjoy much the same mobility advantages as the mounties, modified by greater potential speed bought at the cost of noise. The latter has, in fact, proved less of a problem than was anticipated. For one thing, the machines are very thoroughly silenced before operational use. Then too, the bush has a muffling and deflecting effect on noise which makes its direction difficult to judge. The motorcyclists' habit of moving widely dispersed at the best speed the terrain will allow helps leave little effec-

tive warning time for the insurgents. The confusion factor can be so great that some insurgents have run right into the very pursuers they were trying to flee. Once in among the insurgents, the motorcyclists discard their machines and deal with the opposition by normal infantry tactics adapted to suit the style of their arrival on the scene.

While the selection and training of the mounties and motorcyclists are highly demanding, prospective trackers face a programme designed to daunt or eliminate aspirants unequal in calibre to the Recces. Superb physical condition must be accompanied by perseverance, controlled aggressiveness, tight self-discipline, above-average intelligence and more than a dash of individuality. The hopeful tracker candidate will also need to be intimately familiar with the veld and its inhabitants – and able to live off it for days at a stretch.

The basic tracking course builds on this to provide a knowledge of spoor interpretation, enemy countertracking techniques and the local flora and fauna. Emphasis is placed on instilling the concept that tracking is more than merely following a physical spoor – no matter how difficult that may be. Effective military tracking also requires an above-average tactical sense and alertness to the almost indiscernible changes in wildlife behaviour that can indicate the presence of the enemy, or

give an idea of whether he has passed and when.

To pass, the candidate must be able to follow a tricky test spoor for at least one kilometer in a set time. Evaluation is on an individual basis, with instructors rotated daily to eliminate the chance of a biased evaluation – either way. Real tracking competence naturally then comes with increasing experience. An advanced course emphasises the more esoteric tracking and countertracking techniques and survival in different environments. This course usually winds up with a survival test.

What even the most skilled trackers cannot achieve, well-trained and -handled dogs often can, a fact not lost on the security forces. SWASpes uses several breeds of dog in different roles. The Alsatian remains the favourite patrol dog, combining a good nose with discipline, intelligence, controllable aggressiveness and an alert nature. Preference in tracking goes to the Labrador and the Australian Sheepdog, although Alsatis, Bloodhounds and a Doberman/Rottweiler cross are also used with success. Other tasks assigned to these canine counterinsurgents include mine detection and explosives sniffing – the latter during searches and at roadblocks.

Below: Mounties in the training area at the Equestrian Centre.



A relatively recent development is the counterinsurgency application of the Irish Packhound concept, using the dogs to track, run down and corner the quarry for infantry or, more practically, mounties, to deal with. While these dogs are not well disciplined and respond somewhat erratically to commands, they track well and can keep up a speed of 15 km/h for over four hours, peaking at 30 km/h for some 15 minutes. It takes little imagination to realise that the combination of mounties and packhounds is one few insurgents will be able to elude.

It is, in fact, very much this combination of the mobility of the mounties via horse or motorcycle and the skill of the tracker/dog combination that makes SWASpes what it is. To illustrate this by an example: A tracker team on a follow-up picked up a relatively old spoor early one morning. A section of mounties with their own trackers took it over from them and fol-

lowed the spoor through the day. By last light, they had made up so much ground that the spoor was fresh enough for dogs to pick up and follow. A team of handlers and infantry was then brought up by vehicle and followed the spoor through the night. Early the following morning, the insurgents found their entire day ruined by the arrival of troops just as they were about to move on.

Operation K: The Police's Intelligent Crowbar

Any counterinsurgency campaign has one excellent and virtually foolproof measure of a unit's effectiveness: the effort and viciousness with which the insurgents vilify it. Much as the Army's 32 Bn became the target of a campaign accusing it of wholesale rapine and pillage in southern Angola, so the Police's 'Operation K' has been widely accused of totally barbarous behaviour inside Owambo. The fact that

both units practise a style of operation that relies largely on at least the neutrality, if not the friendship, of the local population is quietly ignored. Unfortunately, the ignorance of military matters among many of the vociferous is such that even the honest if misguided ones among those who carry much of the campaign cannot see just how far afield they are. The less honest ones would not worry anyway.

'Operation K' grew out of routine Security Police operations in Owambo; it was founded officially in June 1979 with a strength of 10 security policemen – both black and white – and 64 locally recruited special constables. The fundamental concept was to provide for the fastest possible development and exploitation of information gained through various channels and also a speedy reaction to the identification of spoor in the course of routine operations. Initially the unit concentrated on this intelligence work and on





Above: SWASPES Mounty at speed in training. The combination of the horse's mobility and silent movement has proved particularly valuable in action. Left: A mass jump by members of 1 Para.

tracking. Support came from a small fire force provided by a Recce Commando. Even this entailed some delays in following up intelligence and spoor, so by early 1980 Operation K had formed its own small fire force. Operating at first on foot, this element soon acquired a number of Hippo APCs. When stronger support was required, the Para reaction force was called upon.

The new operation brought in 36 contacts in its first 90 days, and success has been the norm ever since. During 1980 it accounted for 511 insurgents killed for the loss of only 12 members of the unit. Toward the middle of that year, the new unit's name 'Koevoet' – Afrikaans for crowbar – had already become well known to the forces on both sides, although their attitudes to it were rather different. By early 1984 the Minister of Police could report to Parliament that Operation K had accounted for 1624 insurgents killed in some 721 contacts since its inception. Police casualties in these contacts have remained low.

Presently there are three units involved in Operation K, one each based in Opuwa, Oshakati and Rundu. Each controls a number of roughly platoon-strength fighting groups plus a small intelligence element which also conducts supporting covert operations. Overall control is

exercised from Oshakati by the operation's founder, Brigadier 'Sterk Hans' Dreyer, who has succeeded in building unrivalled *esprit* among his men. This central HQ continuously monitors and evaluates the situation throughout the Operational Area and decides upon the most promising areas of concentration. The groups of all three units are then deployed accordingly, although no area will ever be totally denuded of Koevoet elements. The key here lies in the fact that these groups are not bound to specific areas, even to the area of their unit; they can be and are employed wherever they will be most useful.

The groups themselves generally comprise four Casspir APCs – each carrying a section of ten men – a Blesbok mine-protected supply truck and a Duiker mine-protected fuel bowser. Command of a group falls to an officer or warrant officer, while the sections are commanded by sergeants or, in some cases, constables. The section 2iCs (seconds-in-command) are special sergeants or warrant officers promoted from the ranks on merit. Each section includes a medical orderly. Personal arms were initially a matter of choice, but more recently it was decided to standardise on the R-5 (a short R-4) to simplify ammunition supply. FN LMGs, M79 grenade launchers and some 60mm mortars are carried as supporting weapons. The vehicles themselves are fitted with machine guns, two in each group with a .50-cal or a twin .50-cal/.30-cal mount and two with a single .30 cal.

The integral logistic element allows groups to operate for a week or more, roving over the length and breadth of the Operational Area if need be without worrying about resupply. The bowser is often dropped off at the nearest security forces camp and called out as necessary, but it does accompany the group on forays of more than two days. The groups are sometimes reinforced if this seems necessary, but it is more usual simply to attach another group for the particular operation or contact. In the past, elements of the SWAPOL Task Force were often attached to groups to gain the best possible experience, but this is no longer a regular feature as this force has now built up its own core of highly experienced men.

Generally, the groups alternate a week on operations with a week back in the unit base for rest, repair and maintenance. On operations, the groups will overnight in a police or Army camp if there is one conveniently situated. Operationally, Koevoet relies to a very great extent on information from the local population to set it on the trail of insurgent groups. Not only is this the most efficient way of obtaining accurate up-to-date information, it is also the normal way in which police operate: their approach to counterinsurgency is the eminently logical one that this is essentially police work which happens to involve also a measure of combat, not warfare that relies more than usually on intelligence. The principle of setting a thief to catch a thief is also applied in that most groups include one or two former insurgents. These men are invaluable for their almost automatic insight into the likely movements and reactions of the insurgent groups.

An interesting related aspect is that the insurgents have learned not to wear boots with identifiable treads. Many now wear ordinary tackies or shoes, or commercial boots, some even go barefoot. As a result, it is increasingly rare to find an identifiable enemy spoor by chance. Spoor today is picked out on the basis of intelligence, and only then does tracking come into the picture. The necessary intelligence comes mostly from the local population. An exception to this is naturally when spoor is followed from the scene of a contact or incident, but even then it is often local informants who aid the trackers in ensuring that they are on the correct spoor.

Once a spoor has been picked out of the general mass of tracks littering Owambo, the Koevoet group will follow it to a conclusion at the best possible speed. Unlike most other elements of the security forces, Ops K teams are not restricted by battalion, company or even Sector boundaries. Tactically, the trackers will walk or run on the spoor with the rest of the group following mounted in the Casspirs. If the spoor is lost at any stage, the group will spread out



Above: Koevoet trackers resting during operations along the 'Red Line' that demarcates the southern edge of the Operational Area.

into line abreast and put more people on the ground among the Casspirs until the spoor is regained. A similar procedure is followed when there is any likelihood of the quarry having made a sharp turn off to either side. If the spoor is lost altogether, a widening search is conducted until it is regained, and information is sought from local civilians.

Contacts with single insurgents or very small groups are generally handled by the trackers themselves. If necessary, one or two vehicles will provide support while the rest will either hold back and wait for the matter to be settled, or continue following up the spoor of the rest of the insurgent group, if any. Larger contacts usually take the form of an ambush by an insurgent group that feels powerful enough. Occasionally, this becomes obvious early on from the nature of the spoor. On these occasions the trackers will be pulled back into the vehicles and work from there as far as possible. The actual contact with the ambushing party is then handled as mounted action. Should contact be made before this can be done, the trackers will attempt to remount or will pull out of the contact area, picking off any fleeing insurgents while they wait.

Combat against large groups is carried out mounted if at all possible. The logistic vehicles pull clear of the area and see to their own security, while the Casspirs assault the enemy and then circle through the area of the contact, moving continuously and putting the maximum firepower down on any visible enemy until there is no further resistance. The area immediately surrounding the actual contact is also quartered in search of insurgents who may have split or been split away from their group. Reasons for fighting mounted

include mobility, protection, firepower and clarity. The latter is achieved by keeping all one's troops either mounted or clear of the area, thereby eliminating most of the confusion as to friend and foe that usually accompanies a major contact in flat, heavily bushed terrain.

That these tactics work – totally belying the notion that the insurgent can be fought only on his terms once he is deployed – is clear from the results of Ops K to date. To give but one additional figure: the most experienced fighting group had produced or was involved in some 99 kills by early 1984. The biggest single success to that date had been 34 out of 34. This particular contact arose when a Security Police investigation team from Onessi called for support after its information brought it onto the trail of a large insurgent group. One nearby Koevoet group joined up with them and quickly established that the group numbered 34.

The insurgents were by now aware of the two Security Police Casspirs following them and were very sure of themselves indeed – to the extent of leaving taunting notes rolled around SKS ballistic rounds. Once they reached a likely looking spot, they settled down to lay an ambush. Soon after, they came to the realisation that there were more than two vehicles following them. Suspecting the worst, they decamped and attempted to flee. By now, however, a spotter aircraft was in the air and two Alouettes had also arrived to help spot the enemy and control the contact. One of the helicopters immediately spotted the insurgent group only some 300m ahead of the advancing police. Contact followed almost immediately, with other Ops K groups arriving in time to participate. The action went on for some 40 minutes and extended over a 2km radius. Thirty-four bodies were collected and no spoor could be found leaving the area.

Other contacts have been different but

no less successful. One resulted from the follow-up after a Kaokoland Ops K team had detonated a mine and the recovery vehicle sent to the scene repeated the trick. Groups from Owambo were called in and quickly picked up and followed spoor heading from the scene into the nearby mountains. One vehicle circled far ahead and came up behind the group of insurgents, who were standing behind some bush looking toward the advancing APCs. Sixteen out of 22 were killed in the ensuing contact, one survivor being captured a little later at a waterhole by the bowser crew on their way back to Opuwa after refueling the fighting groups. Bowser crews, in fact, sometimes appear to lead interesting lives – one reportedly entered a fire-fight and killed several insurgents by the simple expedient of chasing them and running them down.

An important and interesting point about Ops K is that most of the men involved do not see themselves as an elite; they tend to disclaim any such notions and insist that they are merely ordinary policemen engaged in what is essentially police work – protecting the law-abiding bulk of the population against the depredations of those who seek to electioneer with guns and mines. Such is the calibre of these men, who have earned the respect of their Army opposite numbers to such an extent that they are even immune to the usual Army versus Police jokes after hours.

Insofar as they can be said to have their 'secret of success,' they feel that it is a combination of several factors. Most important in their view is the fact that all Ops K personnel are volunteers and are in the Operational Area on a permanent basis, not drafted transients who barely get to know the region before their tour is over. Other aspects are their freedom of movement, the higher average age of their personnel and the fact that most of their men are from the region and therefore totally familiar with it.

The white personnel are volunteers, many of them recruited by friends who are in Koevoet. Preference is given to those who already have some years of police experience, but not necessarily in counterinsurgency or COIN. All must first complete the normal SAP COIN training before being trained up more or less 'on the job.' Once with Koevoet, personnel generally stay several years; some now have almost five years with the unit. Transfer out of Koevoet is also up to the individual, who is free to decide when he has had enough. Most of the old hands returned after short spells of normal police duties, but the newer personnel seem more inclined to finish their tour and then settle back into normal routine without problems. It is worth noting that there is nothing to stop a black policeman from volunteering for Ops K. But he would have to be very good indeed to make up

for the distrust of a 'foreign' black face in tribal areas.

Black personnel are recruited chiefly from among the special constables serving in various capacities in the Operational Areas - essentially, the best are 'poached' from other elements. Some are taken directly from the training centre if they have really stood out there. Their promotion is purely on merit as demonstrated in the field, there being no formal promotion courses or exams. They can, however, choose to go into normal police work and must then naturally complete the relevant training and pass the exams. Some have done this. In general, Owambo personnel are employed in Owambo and Kavangos in Kavango, but the groups are not made up of personnel from any particular area within these regions. If anything, it is preferred to mix them a little in order to have at least one or two men from each area who will be familiar with it and its people, dialect and customs.

New members of the unit are assigned to one of the groups and receive their 'polish' up to Koevoet standard in the form of 'on the job training.' When a new group is formed, it is around a skeleton of experienced personnel, and some three weeks of intensive group training follow before it will be deployed operationally. Even then, such a new group will not knowingly be deployed in an area where difficult contacts might be expected until it has had a chance to gain experience as a group. Refresher training is fitted into the rest periods to ensure that all groups maintain their edge. Groups are kept



together for as long as possible, their strength maintained with new recruits, rather than being disbanded and replaced by a new group. In this way both unit cohesion and collective experience are kept alive, as is a valuable degree of *esprit*.

Crowbars, it is true, can be and frequently are used to bludgeon victims into submission. In the hands of an expert, however, the crowbar becomes a very flexible tool indeed, capable of extremely delicate application in order to do the necessary with the minimum of collateral disturbance or damage. If there is any-

Above: A Koevoet Casspir fitted with a captured 14.5mm machine gun. The Casspir is heavier than the Army's Buffel and is preferred by the Police for its greater stability.

thing to be read into the code name of this operation, then it should be this - the skilled application of just the amount of force needed to do the job. This interpretation is borne out both by the statistics and by the anguished screams of 'foul!' issuing from the mouths of the insurgents and their supporters.

Below: Ops K trackers following an increasingly faint and doubtful spoor.



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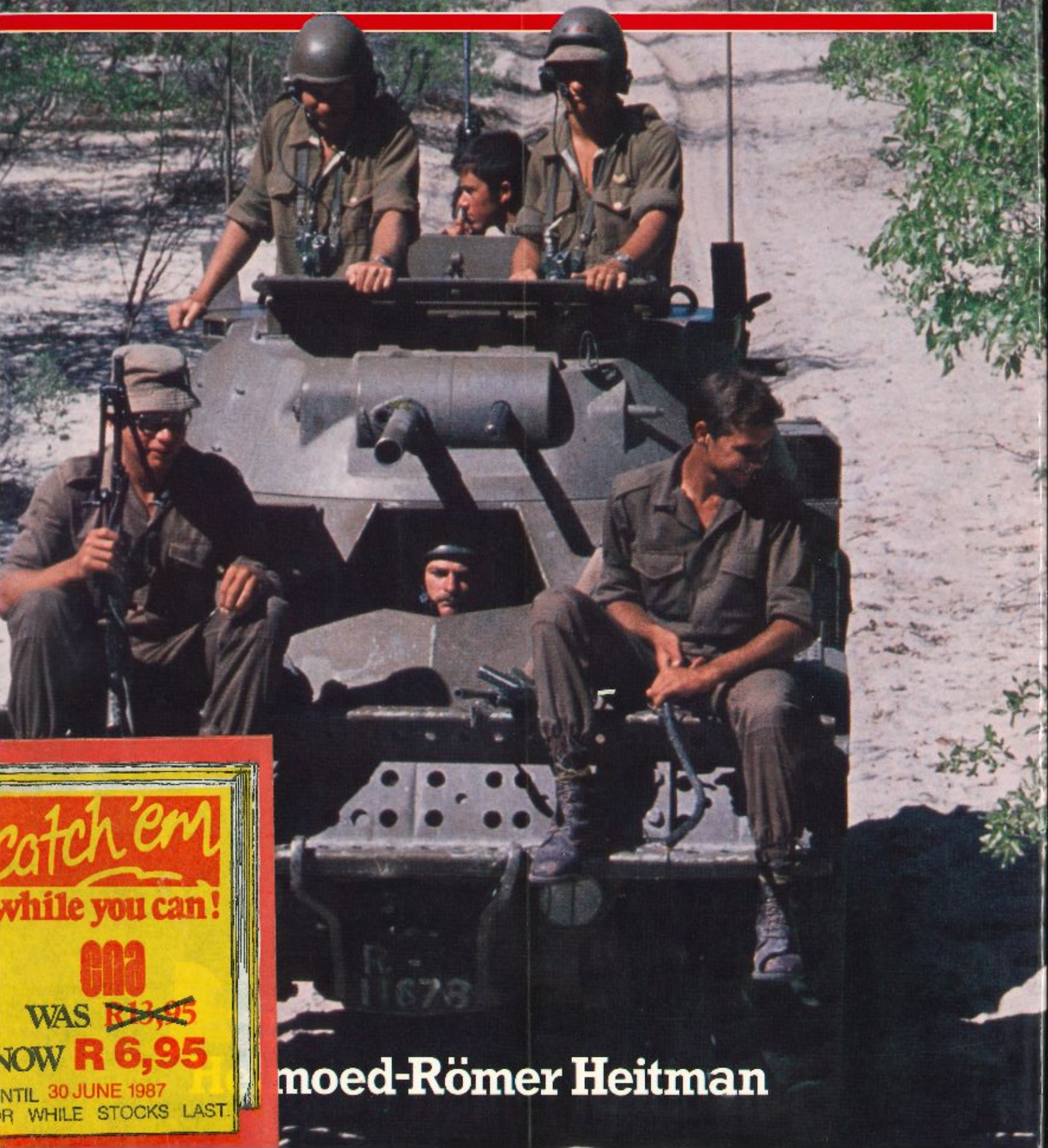


SOUTH AFRICAN WAR MACHINE

ough the South African armed forces have attracted world-wide media attention in recent years and have become known as the most powerful and efficient in southern Africa, comparatively few details of their operations and organisation are known. *South African War Machine* briefly describes the history of South Africa's armed forces, outlining their roles in the World Wars and in Korea and explaining how the country's background has contributed to the unique make-up of South Africa's defence force today. The weapons, organisation and training of each of the South African armed services are fully described, with sections on elite formations like 1st Airborne Division, Kommando Airborne and 44 Parachute Battalion and the special techniques they have developed. The campaigns in South West Africa (Namibia) against the SWAPO guerrillas are fully described as are the various operations in Angola since the initial South African involvement in 1975. Because of South Africa's political isolation its armed forces have a varied collection of equipment ranging from vintage Dakota transport aircraft to the most advanced armoured vehicles and modern weapons of South African design and manufacture. The Armaments Corporation of South Africa (Armcor) has now taken this a step further with intensive efforts to market its products around the world. Recent times have also seen South Africa conclude agreements with both the Angolan and Namibian governments which may lead to far-reaching changes in the security climate of southern Africa.

South African War Machine provides an unparalleled analysis of the country's defence force, written by Helmoed-Römer Heitman's authoritative text is supplemented by carefully chosen photographs, many of them never previously published.

SOUTH AFRICAN WAR MACHINE



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