

THE FINAL PHASE OF SOUTH AFRICAN TRANSBORDER OPERATIONS INTO ANGOLA: REGIMENT MOOI RIVER AND OPERATIONS MODULAR, HOOPER, PACKER AND DISPLACE (HANDBAG), 1987-1988

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1. BACKGROUND

Various national and international factors resulted in South African transborder operations in Angola. The retaining of South West Africa (Namibia), which was entrusted as a C-mandate territory to the mandatar South Africa in 1918, and the "communist danger"¹ may be presented as the primary reasons for this. The bush war and the involvement of the South African Defence Force (SADF) may be divided into five phases: the beginning of the conflict (1958 to 1966); support by the South African Police (SAP) and the Portuguese (1966 to 1972); escalation of the conflict (1972 to 1976); South West African as well as Angolan pre-emptive operations (1976 to 1983); and the final phase (1983 to 1990).²

The SADF and SAP were involved for the full duration of the bush war, and since 1 August 1980 they were supported by the South West African Territorial Force (SWATF). The South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO, founded in 1960), with the Ovamboland People's Congress (founded in 1958 in Cape Town by Herman Toivo Ja Toivo as an organisation for dock workers) as its precursor, in contrast, had the liberation of South West Africa as objective. In 1962 SWAPO (who in the meantime had established its headquarters in Lusaka) decided to combine the political liberation struggle with a military offensive against the South African forces. For this purpose a military wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), was created.³

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¹ SL Barnard, "n Historiese oorsig van die gewapende konflik op die noordgrens van SWA/Namibië 1966-1989", *Acta Academica* 23(1) 1991, p. 110.

² ARMOR, Potchefstroom, File 265: Anon., "Die Landgeveg", pp. 2-60, addendum to Circular Letter Commander 7 SA Division/Commander RMR, 30 June 1993.

³ L Barnard, *Pantser in aksie: 1 SDB 1933 - 1993* (Bloemfontein, 1993), pp. 51-2.

Because of certain international events, the struggle for South West Africa was not limited to battles between SWAPO and the South African forces only. As a result of amongst others a coup and the economic and moral burden caused by overseas colonies, Portugal withdrew from Angola and Mozambique in a rush in 1974, leaving the former colonies in chaos. In Angola the three liberation organisations, namely Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola (MPLA: Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), Frente Nacional de Libertacao de Angola (FNLA: National Front for the Liberation of Angola) en Uniao Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA: National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) entered into conflict with one another. At that stage the Cold War was still in full swing, and the USSR and its Cuban ally provided arms and economic aid to the Marxist-oriented MPLA (with its military wing FAPLA). Cuba even went as far as to send thousands of soldiers to Angola as from April 1975 to assist the MPLA. Initially the other liberation organisations did not receive aid, but South Africa militarily and economically assisted the Western-oriented UNITA, with the 'moral' support of the USA, in an attempt to prevent the establishment of a communist state on the northern border of South West Africa.⁴

SWAPO, supported by the MPLA, established military bases in the south of Angola, in an attempt to penetrate South West Africa more effectively. Therefore it was only a matter of time before the South African forces not only encountered SWAPO, but also the MPLA and Cuban forces. However, South Africa did not adopt a wait-and-see attitude, but attempted to retain the initiative, particularly through so-called pre-emptive operations. One of the objectives of the first full-scale transborder operation, dubbed Operation Savannah, was the establishment of a Western-oriented government in Angola which would not tolerate any SWAPO bases or communist-oriented Cubans on Angolan soil. The South African government was secretly supported in this objective by the USA, and Angola was invaded by Task Force Zulu on 14 October 1975 with their knowledge. The task force, which was later reinforced by task groups Foxbat, Orange and XRay, achieved considerable successes over the enemy. During this operation the SADF entered the area of conventional warfare for the first time since the Second World War, and within 33 days they penetrated Angola for approximately 3 200 km.⁵

Early in December 1975 the chief of the Army already suggested to the commander of 101 Task Force that citizen force units should also serve in Angola. The reasons offered were that in so doing, these units would gain operational experience and

⁴ HJ van Aswegen, **Geskiedenis van Afrika van die vroegste oorsprong tot onafhanklikheid** (Kaapstad, 1980), pp. 481-4; Barnard, **Pantser in aksie**, p. 52; L Scholtz, **Beroemde Suid-Afrikaanse krygsmanne** (Kaapstad, 1984), pp. 177-8; W Steenkamp, **Borderstrike!: South Africa into Angola** (Pretoria, 1983), p. 3.

⁵ Barnard, "n Historiese oorsig ...", p. 115.

that they could serve in the place of national servicemen whose military service would expire on 7 January 1976. The appeal did not go unheeded, and during December 1975 and January 1976 no less than 35 South African citizen force units were called to service.⁶ A number of transborder operations, during which mixed success was obtained, were thereafter launched by the SADF.

2. OPERATIONS MODULAR AND HOOPER (JULY 1987 TO MARCH 1988)

Early in 1987 the SADF obtained information that FAPLA and the Cubans were busy with intensive preparations to force UNITA from south-eastern Angola. The FAPLA-Cuban forces developed Cuito-Cuanavale as a 'firm base' to launch offensives against Mavinga and Jamba from there. The SADF effectively supported UNITA through Operations Modular and Hooper, and focused on the Cuito-Cuanavale front in these operations.⁷

The southward FAPLA offensive started on 14 August 1987 with six brigades and initially made good progress. However, because of the deployment of the South African mechanised forces the FAPLA forces were unable to cross the Lomba River. During the battles of 13 and 14 September UNITA lost 40 men, and the South Africans six. In contrast, at least 382 FAPLA soldiers were killed. After the fierce battles of 3 October the FAPLA forces retreated to the area around Cuito-Cuanavale. Because FAPLA was still capable of launching another offensive, UNITA and the South Africans did not withdraw.⁸

On 9 November 1987 the fiercest battles of Operation Modular took place. The South Africans and their allies, at that stage a brigade strong, attacked 16 Brigade of FAPLA between the Chaminga and Hube Rivers, and the next day the RSA Brigade destroyed FAPLA's tactical group between the Vimpulo and the Mianei Rivers. During the battles, which lasted seven days, the FAPLA forces suffered severe losses: 525 men died, 33 tanks were destroyed and a considerable number of arms, vehicles and equipment were taken by the South African alliance. In contrast, the South Africans lost 16 men. No large-scale battles took place thereafter and on 5 December general Jannie Geldenhuys, chief of the SADF, announced that the SWATF and SADF forces were about to start a tactical withdrawal.

⁶ FJ du T Spies, *Operasie Savannah: Angola 1975-1976* (Pretoria, 1989), p. 277; Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/KM Basson, WH van Zyl, 5 May 2001.

⁷ Barnard, "'n Historiese oorsig....", pp. 122-3.

⁸ CJ Nöthling, "Kort kroniek van militêre operasies en optredes in Suidwes-Afrika en Angola (1914-1988)", *Militaria*, vol. 19/2, 1989, pp. 14-5.

A new offensive was expected against UNITA, and the South African allies decided to pre-empt this planned offensive by means of Operation Hooper. The objective of this operation was to force all FAPLA troops from the area between the Cuatir11 and Chambinga Rivers. In this way the resumption of the offensive could be prevented. However, Operation Hooper was only activated the following year, because the South African conscripted troops were about to demobilise on 15 December 1987, and the January recruits first had to be trained thoroughly.⁹

Eventually Operation Hooper was launched in January 1988. On 13 January 1988 the 21st FAPLA brigade, which was deployed along the Cuatir River, was driven out of the area. In the process FAPLA lost 250 men and a large amount of arms, whereas the South Africans had no losses. The following day the 59th brigade of FAPLA, which had amongst others lost 230 men and 9 tanks, also had to retreat. By the end of February the combined UNITA and South African forces attacked three FAPLA brigades which were deployed at the Tumo River and Dala. As the FAPLA forces suffered severe losses and were effectively "trapped in a predetermined area at Cuito Cuanavale", the South African forces continued with the tactical withdrawal which had started in December of the previous year.¹⁰

3. OPERATION PACKER, MARCH 1988

During Operation Packer, which was launched in March 1988, 82 Mechanised Brigade (mainly consisting of citizen force members) continued to protect the eastern bank of the Cuito River. The concentration of FAPLA forces moved west to the area of Sector 10 (South West Africa) and the Fifth Military Region (Angola) during the first half of 1988. The purpose of the FAPLA-Cuban forces was to divide the South African forces between the Cuito-Cuanavale front and the Sector 10 front.¹¹

From 21 February to 22 April 1988 one squadron of Regiment Mooi River (RMR) was called to participate in Operation Packer. RMR was initially instructed by 82 Mechanised Brigade to provide four armoured vehicle troops for this operation. Two groups would be under command of 1 Regiment De la Rey (1RDLR) and the other two under command of Regiment Great Karoo. These armoured vehicle troops would be deployed by the respective regiments as anti-tank platoons. Lieutenants Heiko Stark and Stoney Steenkamp, two senior lieutenants who had already successfully completed the captain's course, were appointed as commanders

⁹ Steenkamp, pp. 152-3.

¹⁰ Nöthling, p.15.

¹¹ ARMAR, Potchefstroom, File 265: Anon., Die Landgeveg, pp. 2-60, 2-61, addendum to Circular Letter Commander 7 SA Division/Commander RMR, 30 June 1993; Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/WH van Zyl, 8 February 2002.

of the two RMR groups, which would operate separately. After the second unsuccessful attack on Tumpo and new planning by the Higher Head Quarter in Rundu, it was decided to join the four RMR groups in a single squadron, under command of 1RDLR. Lieutenant Heiko Stark acted as commander, lieutenant Stoney Steenkamp as second in command and staff sergeant Pine Pienaar as squadron sergeant-major. Commandant Boet Schoeman from 1RDLR served as battlegroup commander and major Willie van Zyl from RMR as battlegroup second in command.¹²

On 20 February 1988 RMR members departed by bus from Potchefstroom, Klerksdorp and surrounding towns to 7 Division Mobilisation Centre in Bloemfontein. Captain Japie Venter and lieutenant Kobus Taljaardt handled the enrolment process in a soaking wet Bloemfontein. During the mobilisation phase it rained so much that some of the tents were knee-deep under water. The commander, 2IC, adjutant and logistics officer of the battle group, for example, had to hurriedly move to another tent, because theirs was completely under water. In consultation with the staff of 7 Mobilisation Centre one vehicle hanger was vacated so that the men could sleep dry.

On 25 February 1988 RMR members under command of lieutenants Stark and Steenkamp departed from Bloemspruit Airport to Rundu. RMR would take over the necessary battle equipment from 61 Mechanised Brigade in the operational area.¹³ The rest of the battle group received vehicles at 7 Mobilisation Centre and started the long route over land to the operational area at 06:00 the following day. The last vehicles reached the first overnight place in Upington at 18:00. En route to the operational area they also overnighted in Keetmanshoop, Windhoek and Grootfontein. On 1 March 1988, at 16:00, the battle group entered Angola via a bridge built across the Okavango River by the engineering corps.¹⁴

In the meantime the RMR departed from Rundu by Samil-100 to the assembly area, approximately 16 km north of the Okavango River. Shortly before their departure, the commander 20 Tactical Headquarters and his team informed the officers in detail about the tactical situation north of the Okavango River, with Cuito-Cuanavale as focus.

¹² ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 14: Annual Report to 31 December 1988, Commander Regiment Mooi River/Director Documentation Service SADF, 31 December 1988, p. 3, addendum to Letter Commander Regiment Mooi River/Commander 82 Mechanised Brigade, 31 December 1988; Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen, WH van Zyl and H Stark, 6 May 2001.

¹³ ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 275, H Stark, Regiment Mooi River War diary, 20 February to 2 March 1988; Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/WH van Zyl, 6 May 2001; ARMR, Potchefstroom, War diary, MG Schoeman 1RDLR: Ops Packer, 20 February to 7 April 1988, days 2 and 3.

¹⁴ ARMR, Potchefstroom, War diary, MG Schoeman 1RDLR: Ops Packer, 20 February to 7 April 1988, days 7-11.

During the waiting period in the transit camp (north of the Kavango River), 26 February to 2 March 1988, the routine started at 08:00 with a prayer parade, whereafter the men were informed about the state of affairs at the front. The waiting period was further spent by pitching tents, cleaning and sorting out equipment, lectures by officers, as well as playing soccer and volley-ball.

On 2 March at 18:00, after an endless struggle to get hold of vehicles, they eventually started moving to the front. Two Samil-100 vehicles transported the troops, while personal belongings and supplies were transported by two Samil-50 vehicles. Lieutenant Heiko Stark's diary entry concerning the 62 km route to the first assembly point, about 5 km north of the Mpupa Bridge, discloses much about the situation: "The journey was not quite the most pleasant." A bumpy cross-country ride in a Samil through a densely bushed area without roads certainly is an experience many South African soldiers would not like to relive!

The following day they left for the training area, where Regiments De la Rey and Great Karoo had been deployed. After obtaining the necessary rations and water supplies and after they had stopped at Luengi 1 and 11 to refill, the RMR members moved past the Brigade Administrative Area (BAA). They pitched camp next to a shona, about 800 m from the main logistic route to the front.¹⁵ The men then had the opportunity to clean and dry their clothes and to check their weapons. Two hostile Mig aircraft suddenly flew over them as if from nowhere, turned around and headed straight for them. Stark was convinced that the aircraft moved in for the kill on sitting ducks, but miraculously they did not fire a single shot and disappeared as unexpectedly as they had appeared.

On 14 March 1988 commandant Gerrie Louw of the battle school took over as battle group commander, probably because of his superior experience, while Boet Schoeman was his second in command. Major Willie van Zyl thus took over from lieutenant Stark as squadron commander the following day.¹⁶ After the attack on Tumpo, Louw withdrew and the command structure returned to the way it had been before his arrival. This switching of command in favour of permanent force members caused bitterness among the citizen force officers, as it indicated to them that their capability was seriously questioned. In addition this conduct denied citizen force members invaluable operational experience.¹⁷

¹⁵ ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 275, H Stark, Regiment Mooi River War diary, 20 February to 2 March 1988.

¹⁶ Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/WH van Zyl, 6 May 2001.

¹⁷ Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/WH van Zyl and JM Venter, 8 February.2002.

Shortly afterwards the RMR squadron received the battered armoured vehicles of 61 Mechanised Battalion Group - some of the vehicles did not even have a turret hatch - and took them to the BAA for the necessary repairs. After a short training session the RMR squadron joined the rest of 1RDLR battle group in middle-March 1988. The next day one lieutenant Ventura of UNITA and his men (about 240)¹⁸ joined the battle group. During the period 18 to 22 March they underwent joint training and preparation for the attack on Tumpo.

Since FAPLA dominated the air space, they had to wait for a cloudy night. On 22 March 1988 D-day finally came, and they started the advance to Tumpo at 21:00. A small cross was attached beneath each vehicle with a glow stick, to supposedly facilitate the nocturnal movement. However, the nocturnal manoeuvre started disastrously, because the scouts, who also acted as guides, lost the way. Consequently the first tanks got lost and ended up behind the last ones! In the process of sorting out the chaos, the convoy was stationary for a long time, and because the engines were not switched off, a thick layer of diesel gas caused considerable discomfort. Even during the advance, when the vehicles moved slowly and close together in a windstill night, the men's eyes and throats suffered.

Another factor which complicated the advance and wasted much time, was the so-called "heart break hill", with steep slopes and sandy ground. The tanks moved with relative comfort over the obstacle, but many Ratels had to be pulled out by the recover vehicle. Adding to the disaster, the UNITA soldiers who had occupied strategic higher ground over the previous couple of days, in order to establish suitable observation posts for the artillery, were forced away by FAPLA forces during the South African advance. The attack force, consisting of two squadron tanks, one armoured car squadron and about two company infantry soldiers of UNITA, consequently did not have the necessary observation posts for the artillery. As a result the artillery fire on the target was ineffective and inaccurate.¹⁹

The advance lasted throughout the night and the following morning, at about 06:00²⁰ and about 3 km from the target, the first tank struck a landmine. When lieutenant Stark saw the tank's bogie wheel fly through the air, his first impression was that it was a complete hit. The tanks were supposed to be fitted with mine rollers at the front, but the Samil-100 vehicle transporting the rollers had overturned during the night. A lane 'Pofadder' explosive device was then sent to the

¹⁸ H Heitman, **War in Angola: the final South African phase** (Gibraltar, Ashanti Publishing, 1990), pp. 276-7.

¹⁹ Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/WH van Zyl, 6 May 2001; ARMR, Potchefstroom, War diary, MG Schoeman 1RDLR: Ops Packer, 20 February to 7 April 1988, days 25-32.

²⁰ ARMR, Potchefstroom, War diary, MG Schoeman 1RDLR: Ops Packer, 20 February to 7 April 1988, day 33.

front to force a way through the minefield, but the first explosion must have been a misfire, and the lane explosive device had to be detonated mechanically. Only by 12:00 there was a big enough gap in the minefield for the vehicles to pass safely. However, the attack force was unaware of a second minefield, and this time three more tanks were damaged. Attempts to regain the tanks were fruitless, whereupon commandant Gerrie Louw ordered the men to vacate the tanks immediately. The withdrawal took place head over heels, and in the rush to escape the constant enemy fire, identity documents and personal weapons were left behind in the tanks - even the radio frequencies were left unchanged. This was a severe loss for the SADF, especially as the reconnaissance forces could not succeed in destroying the tanks the same night. The attack force thus withdrew mortified and in a hurry, and spent the whole night returning to the assembly area. On their way back, they again had to struggle to move across "heartbreak hill". During the third attack on Tumpo about 13 UNITA soldiers died, whereas the SADF had no casualties.²¹

That was the third failed attack on Tumpo in only three months - and each time the attack was launched from the same direction. The excellently entrenched and well-armed enemy, insufficient South African intelligence (particularly regarding the second minefield), unmanned observation posts and the hostile, extremely densely bushed terrain, amongst others contributed to the third attack on Tumpo being a total failure.

The entry in the war diary of 1RDLR on 25 March 1988 gives a striking report of the words of consolation of colonel PS Fouché (commander 82 Mechanised Brigade): "Col Fouché addresses the [battle group] and thanks them for the task they have undertaken. Amongst others he says that the boers did not loose (sic!). His personnel are already busy with new plans." However, the situation stabilised to such an extent that only a couple of days later (29 March) the battle group commander received the order to withdraw from Angola by 8 April 1988.²²

4 OPERATION DISPLACE (HANDBAG), FROM APRIL 1988

During Operation Displace (of which Operation Handbag formed part) the South African forces systematically withdrew from Angola, while international peace negotiations were underway. In the second half of 1988 (25 August to 25 October)

²¹ Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/WH van Zyl and H Stark, 6 May 2001; W Steenkamp, **South Africa's Border War, 1966-1989** (Gibraltar, 1989), p. 160.

²² ARMR, Potchefstroom, War diary, MG Schoeman 1RDLR: Ops Packer, 20 February to 7 April 1988, days 35, 39 and 48.

two squadrons of RMR participated in Operation Handbag.²³ The two RMR squadrons were under command of respectively captain Roelf Marais (A-squadron) and captain Naas Rautenbach (B-squadron).²⁴

From the report by captain Marais it is clear that this was a defensive operation, of which the main objective was to stop hostile infiltration into South West Africa/Namibia. Certain details are known of the fate of A-squadron during Operation Handbag. The men enrolled at 7 Division Mobilisation Centre, Bloemfontein, and left for Oshivello by aircraft on 27 August 1988. A-squadron completed the training phase by 13 September and joined 61 Mechanised Battalion Group a couple of days later to participate in a joint exercise (18 to 26 September). On Sunday 26 September they returned to the Ongong base, where vehicle maintenance was done and where they were deployed in Okalongo and vicinity as of 3 October 1988. About two weeks later the men departed from Grootfontein to the Waterkloof air force base by aircraft. Apart from a few lapses, captain Marais was satisfied with the progress of the operation and emphasised the following positive aspects: the training had been purposeful and of a high standard and participation in exercises had been very instructive; and on the whole the demobilisation action had been managed effectively.²⁵ On 30 August the last South African troops withdrew from Angola, and Operation Displace officially came to an end.

5. CONCLUSION

In the meantime peace negotiations among stakeholders were well on the way. Already on 22 August representatives of the Republic of South Africa, Angola and Cuba signed a treaty in Ruacana according to which all hostilities had to cease. Because of further negotiations two more important treaties were signed in New York on 22 December 1988. The one agreement, between the Republic of South Africa, Cuba and the MPLA, had as its purpose the implementation of the United Nations resolution 435 and the withdrawal of the South African forces from South West Africa/Namibia. The latter action had to take place in phases from 1 April 1989 until the independence of South West Africa/Namibia. The second treaty, between Cuba and Angola, secured the withdrawal of Cuban forces within 27

²³ ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 14: Annual report to 31 December 1988, Commander Regiment Mooi River/Director Documentation Service SADF, 31 December 1988, p. 3, addendum to Letter Commander Regiment Mooi River/Commander 82 Mechanised Brigade, 31 December 1988.

²⁴ ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 204: Die Silwer Arend, vol. 9 (sic!), no. 2, September 1990; ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 88: Undated Name list [Operation Handbag, 25 August-25 October 1988].

²⁵ ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 275, RJ Marais, Nabetrugting van operasionele diens vir die tydperk 25 Augustus 1988 tot 18 Oktober 1988: A-squadron Regiment Mooi River, undated.

months. In this way the road was paved for a peaceful conclusion of the so-called South West African/Namibian issue.

From a South African point of view, Operations Modular, Hooper and Packer were a great success, because a FAPLA victory over UNITA was prevented and SWAPO's plans to gain access to the north-eastern part of Namibia were obstructed. The successful operational concept applied by the South African Defence Force was modelled on mobile conventional warfare, which included defensive and offensive conduct in close cooperation with guerrilla (UNITA) and unconventional forces.²⁶

The hostile forces suffered severe losses, especially during the first two operations: 7 000 men were killed in action, while thousands more were wounded; the Soviet losses of weaponry far exceeded 1 billion American dollars; and because of the threat of the operations, Cuba had to increase its number of soldiers to approximately 60 000. Unfortunately the UNITA losses are not known. The South Africans lost 31 men, 90 were wounded, three aircrafts were shot down, three Olifant tanks were destroyed or damaged and four Ratel infantry combat vehicles were destroyed. The well-known military historian, L Barnard, therefore comes to the conclusion "that the claims of the Cubans and the MPLA that they dominated the battles are devoid of all truth. Seen from a military perspective this action in Angola was a success for the South African government".²⁷

During the more or less 23-year long bush war SWAPO was unable to win a single large-scale battle. Their ideal to take control of South West Africa/Namibia through a revolutionary war failed miserably - it was the internationalisation of the South West African issue which tipped the scale in their favour.²⁸

²⁶ ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 265: Anon., Die Landgeveg, pp. 2-61, 2-62, addendum to Circular Letter Commander 7 SA Division/Commander RMR, 30 June 1993; CJ Nöthling, "Militêre kroniek van Suidwes-Afrika (1915-1988)", **Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Oorsig**, 1989, p. 261.

²⁷ Barnard, "n Historiese oorsig...", p. 123.

²⁸ Nöthling, "Kort kroniek...", pp. 17-8.