

Book Discussion

by Eric McPherson*

Col Jan Breytenbach (author), *They Live by the Sword*, Lemur Books, Alberton, 1990

With the lifting of restrictions on information regarding South Africa's role in the Angolan and Namibian conflicts several books on this subject have been published, one of the latest being *They Live by the Sword*. It is the history of 32 Battalion, from the time of its formation in 1975 until the implementation of UN Resolution 435 and South West Africa's transition to an independent Namibia 14 years later. In the process the roles played by the other participants are revealed. FAPLA (military arm of the MPLA) supported by the Cubans who with SWAPO formed the enemy from the North, whilst the original FNLA, UNITA and South Africa's own SADF constituted the defendents in the South. It was from a FNLA Battalion that the 32 Battallion was formed. Col Jan Breytenbach, a highly experienced South African soldier was the founding commander of 32 Battalion and this is his second book since his retirement from active service in 1987.

The story of the unit should be seen against the background prevailing at the time. As the author puts it, the wheels were coming off the Portuguese African empire and something had to be done in Angola and Mozambique to prevent these territories from going into the communist camp. In Angola it was the communist MPLA which was attempting to get Angola under its heel before the scheduled independence date which was set for 11 November 1975. In South West Africa, as Namibia was then known, the SADF was already active in a counter-insurgency role in containing SWAPO incursions into this mandated territory. Because of the unstable situation prevailing in Angola which was regarded as a threat to SWA, the SADF took measures to protect South Africa's interests. These measures included supporting UNITA and FNLA, two guerilla movements which were opposing the MPLA (FAPLA). UNITA was an organisation started by Jonas Savimbi and had been clandestinely supported by that section of the Portuguese authorities opposed to communism. FNLA started by Holden Roberts, in exile in Zaire, was clandestinely supported by the United States and Zaire. Another measure was to launch Operation Savannah, a campaign in which the SADF penetrated deep into Angola.

It was at this stage, towards the end of August 1975, that the unit which in due course became known as 32 Battalion, was born. The unit was to act in a guerilla capacity and a handful of operators from the SADF's Reconnaissance Commands, which Jan Breytenbach had formed five years earlier were made available to "knock the battalion of FNLA irregulars into shape". The Recces can therefore lay claim to the parent-hood of the battalion. Jan Breytenbach writes in an engaging, easy to read, style and as his knowledge is first hand the book comes across as a sincere account of the exciting events taking place at the time. He pulls no punches and his candour is refreshing in that he is not over-awed by bureaucracy.

The formation and training of this future battalion was a daunting prospect for the author. His description of their first meeting is vivid. "I stared distastefully and with sick foreboding at the most miserable, underfed, ragged and villainous bunch of troops I had ever seen in my life. My eyes were immediately drawn to their bare legs and feet which were covered in festering sores and their fleshless rib cages. Their eyes glistened feverishly from hunger and chronic malnutrition." This then was the rag-tag remnants of a FNLA force which stood before him. He was in the process of forming an unorthodox unit from widely different cultural backgrounds in a foreign country. There were strong tribal affiliations which complicated the issue further. He states that at the time UNITA was working in cahoots with Swapo. In fact UNITA is regarded with disapproval throughout the book and various other revelations may surprise many readers. FNLA itself was split into a northern and southern faction and virtually leaderless. Yet it was from this unpretensions beginning that a highly motivated fighting unit consisting primarily of black troops and NCO's originating from virtually every tribe in Angola, led by White South African officers and senior NCO's, was to emerge. It was a unit in which, as the author illustrates, neither apartheid, nor racism was practised resulting in a mutual bond and sense of purpose in which loyalty to the battalion and comrades in arms became uppermost.

Col Breytenbach gives full credit in the book to the quality of the officers and N.C.O.'s who helped him train and lead the unit. Once the training at Mpupa base got under way and proper feeding took place, the troops quickly developed into a disciplined entity. However, for a considerable time they were to be treated as a cinderella as regards equipment, some of which, including .303 Vickers machineguns, was of World War 2 vintage. Nevertheless, they soon learnt to use these relatively slow firing and generally cumbersome weapons to fine advantage. At a later stage eight Vickers machineguns were mounted on a flat-bed truck which saw service throughout the operation. The story of the flat-bed truck is in itself an interesting tale. The battalion had by now been organised into two rifle companies, a mortar platoon, an anti-tank section and a machinegun platoon.

Their first real action at Cuvelai, near Cassinga nearly ended in disaster when a platoon was mis-directed into a FAPLA ambush by their UNITA guide. They survived this baptism by fire but the colonel resolved not to trust UNITA again. The battalion was by now working together with a Bushmen Battalion under Commandant Delville Linford. They were in fact brigaded with Linford's unit which was known as combat group Alpha and Breytenbach's FNLA group known as combat group Bravo. The combined units were collectively called Zulu Force which was soon to have a major success in capturing Sa da Bandeira, the largest town in southern Angola. Here seven serviceable aircraft and a considerable amount of weaponry and equipment was captured. The troops were overjoyed as they were able to re-equip themselves with camouflage fatigues, "groundsheets cum poncho" and jungle boots as well as Soviet made equipment.

The opening chapters provide considerable insight into Operation Savannah when Zulu Force advanced deep into Angola through Benguela, Lobito up to Quibala, not far from the capital, Luanda. In spite of the South African successes and successful stands such as at Bridge 14 the political and also military scenes were changing rapidly. The Americans were ceasing their substantial material support of both UNITA and FNLA. Under the circumstances South Africa deemed it wise to withdraw from Angola – the withdrawal being completed in early 1976. However, this was only the end of the beginning for Bravo Group as 32 Battalion was now known. A new and protracted border war was to develop

in which SWAPO had to be contained in the now wide open Angolan and SWA border areas.

To Colonel Breytenbach the future of the battalion was obvious. His men were Angolans and should therefore be deployed against SWAPO on the Angolan side of the border. They would operate as small highly mobile and extremely well trained teams. They would, in short, become guerrillas themselves who could hunt down and destroy SWAPO guerrilla gangs in their safe rear base areas. Approval was obtained at high level and so once again Mpupa base became the training ground for a group now swelled by many FNLA soldiers not formerly part of Bravo group. In fact as the author puts it the battalion whose men came from at least 7 tribes was becoming a sort of French Foreign Legion whose oath is *Legro patria nostro* i.e. 'the Legion is our country'.

By October 1976, FAPLA forces with Cuban troop support and virtually unlimited supplies of Soviet war material, were occupying the whole of the Okavango River line from Cuangar to Katuitui. Bravo group had to retain a low profile and was moved to a base on the Okavango called Buffalo Base which was to become its "home" for the next twelve years. At the same time it changed its name to 32 Battalion and Commandant Delville Linford's Bushmen unit became 31 Battalion.

The SADF by now had its hands full in tracking down and destroying large numbers of insurgents who had already crossed into Owambo-land in SWA. In view of international political implications, what was now needed was a task force to track down the enemy and destroy their safe bases in Angola. This is where Task Force 101 had an ace up its sleeve in the form of 32 Battalion which could cross the border almost with impunity because of their ethnic Angolan make-up. However, at that stage they had a major problem in that they lacked firepower. SWAPO had the upper hand in that it had more effective machineguns, heavier mortars, Stalin Organ multiple rocket tubes, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns. However, this was to change later when 32 Battalion would be able to obtain superior combat power.

The latter part of the book is devoted to a seemingly endless description of contacts with SWAPO and by necessity FAPLA because of its close association with SWAPO. It must be remembered that the SADF had to be seen as

protecting SWA and did not wish to become embroiled in a full scale war in Angola. UNITA's role is described from time to time in the book but seldom in a favourable light. Extensive insight is given into the various operations after Savannah, eg Protea, Modular, Askari and Reindeer, the latter resulting in SWAPO's main base at Cassinga being flattened by an airborne assault operation by a composite battalion from 44 Parachute Brigade. This operation resulted in world wide uproar as SWAPO maintained the base was a refugee camp. However as Col Breytenbach, who commanded this particular battalion says these were the best armed and trained "refugees" he had ever come across.

During this period highly effective company and platoon-sized guerilla fighting units from 32 Battalion would penetrate deep into Angola for lengthy periods at a time without the benefit of proper supply lines. Accounts of heroism abound and details of how several of the *Honoris Crux* were awarded are provided. This publication illustrates how 32 Battalion's fighting abilities frequently mauled FAPLA and SWAPO, for example at the Lomba River where the Battalion came to the rescue of UNITA who were faring badly. By this time Ratel armoured cars and G-5 155 mm artillery pieces were providing support to 32 Battalion as an integral part of the unit. Eventually the enemy was forced to withdraw well north of the South West Africa border. The role of the Battalion which had also played a part in helping South African forces consolidate around Cuito Cuanavale now virtually ceased and later with the implementation of UN Resolution 435 the war in SWA/Namibia and southern Angola officially came to an end.

Interested bilingual readers could refer to MILITARIA issues 19/2 of 1989 and 20/2 of 1990 which contain well documented articles on this subject. The first contains an article "Kort Kroniek van Militêre Operasies en Optredes in Suidwes-Afrika en Angola (1914–1988)" by Col C.J. Nöthling and the second "Operasie Savannah: Dagboek van Kapt J.A. Laubscher" by Cmdt Dr Sophia du Preez. Col Laubscher is in fact mentioned towards the end of the book when he was sent from Pretoria to take overall control of artillery during Operation Alpha Centauri.

To purely English readers, military and laymen alike "They Live by the Sword" represents competitive value in a hardback which is stimulating, informative and easy to read. Its 272 pages also contain sixteen photographs and a map as well as a Roll of Honour.

As the saying goes, 'those who live by the sword also die by the sword' and because of its intensive involvement in a conflict lasting approximately 13 years, the cost in lives was proportionally heavier than other units. Eventually the war was resolved by the democratic solution of UN-supervised elections won by SWAPO. However, as the author, Colonel Jan Breytenbach points out, there is now a strong opposition in the Namibian parliament and that democracy might not now exist had the war not been fought.

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