Operation Savannah: Task Force Zulu & the Rommel of Angola

By Kelly Bell

Background

As Portuguese military personnel and settlers prepared to depart Angola in 1975, a civil war was breaking out in that newly independent colony. The three anti-colonial insurgent movements—FNLA, UNITA and MPLA—were each making a bid for power. The FNLA and UNITA had some connections with the West, but the MPLA was inclined toward the Soviet bloc.

The three factions all had their origins in the anti-colonial insurgency just concluded against Portugal. The FNLA, led by Holden Roberto, drew its membership from the Bakongo tribes. It was based in Zaire and its area of operations was northern Angola. UNITA, headed by Jonas Savimbi, was built around the Ovimbundus, the largest single ethnic group in Angola. They operated mainly in the south-central part of the country.

The MPLA, under Agostinho Neto, recruited supporters from Angolans living in urban and coastal areas. The MPLA took an openly Marxist-Leninist line, calling for a one-party state.

The official date for Portuguese withdrawal was 11 November 1975 and, ever since the government in Lisbon had announced a year earlier they were going to withdraw from their African empire, the three factions had been maneuvering for position. The Eastern Bloc began shipping large volumes of arms, as well as personnel, to turn the MPLA guerrillas into a regular army. In May 1975 the first 250 Cuban technicians and advisors arrived. Meanwhile, UNITA looked to the Chinese for support, while the FNLA brought in European mercenaries to bolster its ranks while also taking advantage of covert CIA assistance from the US.
Portugal had been involved with what is today Angola since the 16th century, when it established fortified trading posts along the coast. Angola at the time wasn’t a country; rather, it was a region containing several warring kingdoms. The Portuguese wanted the coastal settlements as bases to support their trans-oceanic trade to the East Indies as well as the African slave trade. Later the Portuguese moved farther inland, but it wasn’t until the late 19th century that the area that became modern Angola took shape. As part of the general European colonial “scramble for Africa,” the Portuguese established the current borders in 1891. They also began to develop some of the area’s resources and built a railroad. During the Cold War, three major anti-colonial insurgent groups arose: the Angolan National Liberation Front (FNLA), the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and the National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA). Open warfare broke out in 1961, and the colony became something of an arena for Cold War conflict even then. The MPLA was supported by the Soviet Union; UNITA was supported by communist China, and the US gave at least verbal sympathy to the FNLA. The Kennedy administration wanted Portugal to withdraw from its African empire, in part to prevent the communists from being able to further exploit the anti-colonial movement. That created tensions between Washington and Lisbon, since Portugal was a member of NATO. Portuguese counterinsurgency efforts proved largely successful in Angola. That was in part due to reforms implemented by the colonial armed forces, which won the support of sizable sectors among the populace. It was also due to rifts among the FNLA, MPLA and UNITA. The big change came in April 1974, when the Portuguese military overthrew the government of Antonio Salazar. Salazar was something of a dictator, and while the Portuguese government began to take more of a nascent communist regime taking over next door, the South African government began to begin to take more of an interest, as did Washington.

Enter Pretoria

On 9 August 1975, Pretoria took the precaution of deploying South African Defense Force (SADF) troops into South West Africa and sending a small infantry unit into Angola to guard the vital hydroelectric dam at Ruscana, near the border. There was also the Calujeque Dam, 25 miles upriver in Angola and then still a year from completion. The dams and connected hydroelectric complexes were important strategic assets, as the entire region relied on them for water and electricity. The South Africans further justified the move because the dams had been funded largely by investment from their country.

There were also other factors at work. And the Africans nationally gained control of South West Africa as a mandate from the League of Nations following World War I. While the United Nations later tried to take over South West Africa as a Trust Territory, the South Africans refused to yield control. An insurgency was then organized by the South West Africa Peoples’ Organization (SWAPO), which set up bases in southern Angola and was soon launching raids across the frontier. Meanwhile, bolstered by Soviet and Cuban support, the MPLA was steadily consolidating its hold in southern Angola, bringing 12 provinces and most of the towns there under its control. It was also pushing UNITA into a shrinking zone in the central part of the country. The South African government aligned itself with UNITA, since they both had a common enemy in the MPLA. On 5 October a SADF advisory team that had been supporting UNITA clashed with MPLA forces advancing on Nova Lisboa (Huambo), turning them back. That move enabled UNITA to hold the town, and South Africa thereby became a major player in the Angolan civil war.

Codename Savannah

Under the codename Zulu, a South African motorized column moved into Angola. It was commanded by Col. Jan Breynenberg and was part of Operation Savannah, which kicked off on 14 October. Zulu was the first of four SADF columns, the others crossing from South West Africa into Cuando Cubango with the objective of clearing the MPLA from the southern border region. Those other columns were codenamed Foxbat, Orange and X-Ray. The overall plan was for all the columns to eventually converge on Luanda, securing the capital for UNITA. The operation wasn’t an exclusive SADF enterprise. Much of its infantry was provided by UNITA, FNLA and South West African forces, with the SADF supplying armored cars, heavy weapons, artillery and some paratroopers. Savannah also had support from the Central Intelligence Agency. Washington saw Angola as a critical new front in the Cold War struggle against the USSR. At stake was the mineral wealth of southern Africa as well as the security of global petroleum shipping routes. With Zulu in the vanguard, the South Africans advanced swiftly.
South African Defense Forces

South African forces operating in Angola were based largely out of South West Africa. The initial commitment in 1975 was in the form of trainers for UNITA and the FNLA, as well as supplying some heavy weapons. The objective was to turn those guerrillas into an effective offensive force. UNITA’s men proved more amenable to training than those of the FNLA, and its forces would later become a major challenge to the MPLA. For Savannah, the South African Defense Force (SADF) organized four task forces.

**Zulu** consisted of a battalion of Captive Strip bushmen from South West Africa and a battalion from the FNLA, reinforced with an artillery battery. The task force was led and truck-transported by a cadre of South Africans. There were also some former Portuguese officers among them.

**Foxbat** consisted of a battalion of UNITA troops and an SADF armored car squadron.

**Orange X, X-Ray** consisted of a battalion of UNITA troops plus an SADF armored car squadron, an infantry company and some artillery. In some accounts these two task forces are called Afo and Bravu, respectively.

There was yet another SADF force operating with the FNLA in northern Angola. Also available were elements of 1 Parachute Battalion, for a total SADF commitment of around 3,000 men.

The South African Air Force and Navy were also involved. The Air Force provided helicopters and tactical fixed-wing aircraft for recon and close support. It also made good use of transport aircraft to move men, supplies and armored cars around Angola. The Navy operated some frigates off the coast, and evacuated some SADF personnel from the country at the end of the operation.

Something Savannah clearly demonstrated was Angolans could be effective troops if they were given good training and leadership. Afterward, Breytenbach would recruit former FNLA personnel into the SADF’s 23rd “Buffalo” Battalion. During subsequent operations in Angola and against SWAPO, that unit proved to be one of the most effective in all the South African military.

East Bloc

The Soviet Union provided considerable support to the MPLA throughout the insurgency against the Portuguese. MPLA personnel were trained in the USSR and then sent back to Angola to lead guerrilla units. The Soviets were also able to send in arms via friendly countries such as Tanzania and the Congo. In that effort they sometimes had the collaboration of leftist Portuguese officers.

With the 1974 coup in Lisbon, Angola was wide open for intervention. In August 1975 the Soviets started an airlift of tanks, MiGs and artillery to the MPLA. Also included were advisers from various East Bloc countries to train MPLA personnel in-country and then sometimes even lead them in the field.

Despite all that, it quickly became apparent more assistance was going to be needed for the MPLA to be able to secure control of the entire country, which meant committing combat formations. A commitment of conventional Soviet Union units might lead to confrontation with NATO, so Moscow got the Cubans involved.

Cuba wasn’t initially enthusiastic about sending troops to Africa, since it could possibly lead to retaliation from the United States directly against Cuba, as well as further shaming his dictatorships already tight budget. Moscow then offered to cover the monetary cost, while also assuring Castro the US wasn’t going to take action so soon after the Vietnam debacle.

An air and sea lift of Cuban forces followed, including both regular armed forces and security troops from the Ministry of the Interior. While Angola was still technically a Portuguese colony until official independence on 11 November 1975, the Portuguese were in no position to object as their goal was simply to get out of the country. By the time of Operation Savannah’s launch, then, Castro already had some 4,000 personnel on the ground in Angola.

**Specifications**

- **Speed (road):** 90 km/hour
- **Speed (off-road):** 30 km/hour
- **Weight:** 6 tons
- **Dimensions:** length 4.04 meters; 5.12 meters
- **Crew:** 3 (commander, driver, gunner)
- **Armament:** 1 x 90mm low recoil gun, 2 x 7.62mm MG, 4 x 2 smoke grenade dischargers
- **Power/weight ratio:** 10.6 kW/t
- **Suspension:** wheeled 4 x 4
- **Range:** 450 kilometers
- **Engine:** 4-cylinder 2.5-liter petrol

A weapon in the SADF inventory that proved particularly effective in Angola was the Eland armored car. It was an upgraded version of the Parkhand AAK-95. While originally designed as a light scouting vehicle, the SADF upgraded it to carry a 80mm gun. That cannon proved effective against both infantry and armor, and the Eland was used for reconnaissance, infantry support and anti-tank work. Further, its cross-country mobility came in handy in the often roadless spaces of Angola. A well-trained Eland crew could outmaneuver heavier tanks, score flank shots, and then break off before a counterattack could be made. Variants were armed with a variety of weapons, including 88mm mortars.

**Two views of Eland Armored Cars.**

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**SADF Col. Jon “Boumead” Breytenbach photographed soon after Operation Savannah.**

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