

From the bestselling author of *32 Battalion* and *The Terrible Ones*



THE  
**BATTLE**  
— OF —  
**SAVATE**

32 Battalion's Greatest Operation



**PIET NORTJE**

**THE  
BATTLE  
OF  
SAVATE**



**THE  
BATTLE  
OF  
SAVATE**

**32 Battalion's Greatest Operation**

**PIET NORTJE**



Published by Zebra Press  
an imprint of Penguin Random House South Africa (Pty) Ltd  
Reg. No. 1953/000441/07  
The Estuaries No. 4, Oxbow Crescent, Century Avenue, Century City, 7441  
PO Box 1144, Cape Town, 8000, South Africa

[www.zebrapress.co.za](http://www.zebrapress.co.za)

First published 2015

Publication © Zebra Press 2015

Text © Piet Nortje 2015

Cover photographs © Department of Defence Documentation Centre and Leon Grobler

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,  
without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

PUBLISHER: Marlene Fryer  
MANAGING EDITOR: Robert Plummer  
EDITOR: Bronwen Leak  
PROOFREADER: Mark Ronan  
COVER DESIGNER: Monique Cleghorn  
TYPESETTER: Monique van den Berg  
INDEXER: Sanet le Roux

ISBN 978 1 77022 779 8 (print)

ISBN 978 1 77022 780 4 (ePub)

ISBN 978 1 77022 781 1 (PDF)

*For those who fought in the Battle of Savate  
In remembrance of those who fell*



# Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ix
Preface.....	xiii
1 War on the Border.....	1
2 Planning Operation Tiro-Tiro.....	21
3 Advances.....	41
4 The assault.....	71
5 Consolidation.....	115
6 Debrief and result.....	137
7 The founding father throws punches.....	145
8 Information vs. disinformation.....	157
9 Savate Day.....	181
10 Let us remember.....	191
11 32 years later.....	205
Appendix: Operation Tiro-Tiro nominal roll: rank-wearing members.....	229
Abbreviations and acronyms.....	231
Glossary.....	233
Index.....	239



# Acknowledgements

Compiling this book brought back many memories, especially when I read the recollections of the men and realised that I had been involved in some of the incidents they described. To everyone who contributed, even if it was only one sentence, your recollections appear in this book under your name. Please accept these simple references as my acknowledgement and gratitude to you, not only for helping me, but also for preserving the history of the Battle of Savate. I could list the names of the veterans who provided me with information and their personal experiences, but I prefer to use the space to tell the story of the battle.

Nevertheless, there are a few former 32 Battalion members who have made a tremendous effort to help me and whom I wish to thank individually:

Colonel Jan Breytenbach, for allowing me to include his opinion of the Battle of Savate in this book.

Justin Taylor, for unselfishly authorising me to use his personal memoir, *A Whisper in the Reeds*, which is the most complete memoir regarding service with 32 Battalion that I have ever read.

Kevin FitzGerald, for going to the effort of calling together former Reconnaissance Wing men to answer my questions and offer their recollections.

Frans 'F.L.' Smit, who was responsible for the declassification of the 32 Battalion files for my book *The Terrible Ones*. Not only did he answer my wish for a speedy declassification, but he also found the official Operation Tiro-Tiro war diary, which was not recorded on any index list and was hidden away between other files.

Stefanus van der Walt, for allowing me to use his 2010 Savate Day address, 'Let us remember', which appears in Chapter 10. He also supplied most of the material concerning the 2012 Savate battlefield tour. Without his help and support, this book would never have seen the light.

Peter Williams, who managed to convince a few guys – who, for years, had promised to give their recollections but never produced – to produce.

Anton Roets and Marius Scheepers, two former 32 Battalion men who do not feature in the book, but whose video recordings of the 2012 Savate tour added to my knowledge.

Several people who are not former 32 Battalion members also went to great lengths to help me and deserve my thanks:

Tinus de Klerk, who unselfishly sent me documents covering aspects of Operation Tiro-Tiro that he found in files other than the 32 Battalion ones, while researching his own Special Forces publication.

Angela McIntyre, for her work on the oral history project, *Missing Voices*, about the untold stories of the apartheid era. Some of the interviews she conducted with former 32 Battalion men, including a Portuguese-speaking soldier, have been incorporated into this book. Her work is available from the William Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand. Michele Pickover and Gabriele Mohale from the library kindly provided me with copies of the *Missing Voices* interviews.

Linda de Jager, of Endgame Media, carried out extensive research for her own television production, and unselfishly allowed me to use her interview with one of the Battle of Savate veterans.

Louis Engelbrecht, for sharing his life story and amazing military career with me, and for allowing me to use his story in this book. Unfortunately, for security reasons, I am unable to write about his military achievements; however, I am sure that both his late parents would be extremely proud of him.

Because I do not live in South Africa, Lourens Etchell spent many hours at the Department of Defence Documentation Centre doing research on

my behalf, working through thousands of documents and sending me photographs of document pages. If it were not for his dedication, this work would have taken much longer.

Eugenio Camacho, who graciously travelled to Cuangar to conduct interviews with Savate veterans. His efforts helped me to either confirm or contradict facts in my email correspondence with the FAPLA acting commander.

During the battle, only the Chief Staff Intelligence (CSI) operative was allowed to take photographs. The Battle of Savate images that appear in this book were taken by him and come from the official 32 Battalion operations photograph album and the Department of Defence Documentation Centre photograph library. These photographs are of poor quality because, due to the operation's security classification, the film was developed by CSI rather than professionals. The rest of the photographs were taken by various people, some of whom indicated that they had received them from someone else, who had, in turn, got them from someone else, etc. Most of the 2012 battlefield tour photographs are from Justin Taylor and Stefanus van der Walt.

I owe much gratitude to Marlene Fryer and Robert Plummer of Zebra Press for agreeing to publish this book. By doing so, they have ensured that important South African military history is preserved for generations to come.

Special thanks go to my wife, Mariana, and our children, Ruanné and Mariné, who both followed in my footsteps to become soldiers in the British Army. Ruanné is a full-time soldier in the Royal Welsh Regiment and Mariné is part-time with the City of Edinburgh Universities Officers' Training Corps while she studies at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. My family's support has never wavered over the years, and they cheerfully tolerate my endless hours at the computer. Without your love and understanding there would be no books. You are and always will be my most important concerns.



# Preface

On 21 May 1980, under the codename Operation Tiro-Tiro, 32 Battalion attacked and routed, without air or artillery support, the FAPLA brigade at Savate, a small Angolan town in the Cuando Cubango Province 75 kilometres north of the border with South West Africa. Fifteen members of 32 Battalion were killed in the action and many more wounded. It was the highest South African casualty rate in a single skirmish since the start of the Border War. Overall, however, Savate was a significant victory for 32 Battalion. According to reports, FAPLA suffered heavy casualties and the invaders captured a great many vehicles, weapons, ammunition and other equipment, as more than a thousand FAPLA cadres fled the base.

Operation Tiro-Tiro, or the Battle of Savate, as it became known, was the first time the SADF had engaged FAPLA in battle since 1975. And, despite the record number of casualties, it was 32 Battalion's biggest victory since its formation in March 1976. Even though the Border War came to an end in 1989 and 32 Battalion was disbanded in March 1993, to this day a remembrance service and parade are held annually on the Sunday closest to 21 May to commemorate the Battle of Savate, and to remember 32 Battalion's victory and the price they paid.

Perhaps the best explanation of why this particular encounter became a 32 Battalion commemorative day can be found in a recent email sent by Colonel Jan Breytenbach to former members of 32 Battalion:

British paratroopers still remember Arnhem as a costly failure, but also as a magnificent example of paratrooper courage in the face of terrible

odds when pitched against several German divisions, one of which was [an] SS 'Panzer' division.

The French Foreign Legion remembers the heroic and stubborn stand of a small force of legionnaires when attacked and totally wiped out by an overwhelming force of Mexicans.

The Paratroopers of the SADF remember a tough contest that almost ended in disaster when they fought and won a battle against tremendous odds at Cassinga.

Similarly, 32 Battalion had adopted the Battle of Savate as the 'leitmotif' to forever afterwards remember 32 Battalion comrades who fell during Savate, mainly because it was the highest casualty rate they ever had after Bravo Group had become part of the South African Army.

The first account of Operation Tiro-Tiro was written by Colonel Breytenbach and published as *They Lived by the Sword* in 1989. My book, *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit*, followed in 2003 and included some additional information. Dr Louis Bothma's *Die Buffel Struikel (The Buffalo Battalion)*, published in 2005, added even more. The account of the battle was still, however, incomplete.

I continued to intensively research and collect information in order to write a more definitive book about the battle, and in 2012 published *The Terrible Ones: A Complete History of 32 Battalion*, which I believe contains the most complete and accurate coverage of Operation Tiro-Tiro written to date.

Since then, however, a few things have happened.

After a long and costly struggle, I finally managed to obtain the declassification of top-secret Operation Tiro-Tiro documents stored in the military archives (permission to declassify these documents had been previously refused).

Then, in 2012, men from the 32 Battalion Veterans' Association visited the Savate battlefield as part of the 32nd commemoration of the battle. Unbeknown to the chairman of the association, he would meet the man

who had been the FAPLA brigade's acting commander on the day of the attack. Before this unsolicited meeting, I had been trying, through every possible channel, to determine the identity of, and make contact with, the FAPLA commander on that day. But either the Angolan military did not know who he was or, more likely, they were reluctant to give me the information.

And so it was from the chairman of the veterans' association that I learnt the identity of the commander and acting commander at Savate: respectively, the then governor of the Cuando Cubango Province and the then administrator of Cuangar, a town and municipality in Cuando Cubango and with jurisdiction over Savate. Both were retired FAPLA generals and now politicians. I also learnt that a few Savate battle veterans lived in Cuangar.

After the 2012 Angolan elections, both the governor and the administrator were replaced and it took me a while to trace their whereabouts. I used friends and acquaintances – mostly former SADF and 32 Battalion members now working in Angola – to try to make contact with the men, but this prompted late-night visits to their houses by the Angolan security and intelligence agency. I therefore advised them to drop the issue, as I did not want to see anyone get arrested on my account.

In the meantime, I managed to make email contact, first via a middleman but then personally, with the administrator who had left Cuangar and was now administrator of Rivungo, a small town on the Angola–Zambia border. What started off as a healthy exchange of useful information deteriorated into his denial of documented facts, claiming they were false propaganda of the South African apartheid regime (maybe because I had questioned some of his original remarks). He told a different version of events, which painted FAPLA in a good light but contradicted what happened on the ground. After a while he became vague and eventually disappeared into thin air. I then learnt that he had been transferred to Jamba, the old UNITA hometown, after a riot against his style of governing broke out in Rivungo.

Interestingly, at around this time, many aspects regarding the Battle of Savate, which for more than three decades had gone unquestioned, were now being queried in publications and on other platforms. When the first books were written about the battle, no documentary proof or evidence was available and the authors had to rely on individuals to obtain information. Ironically, it was some of these individuals who were now questioning their own recollections. And others who had originally accepted their accounts were also now expressing doubt. It was time for me to use my new insights to tell the full story.

While it is unfair to analyse Operation Tiro-Tiro because the SADF commander on the day has passed away and cannot defend the decisions he made, I can nevertheless explain how the operation was planned and executed, what went wrong and what went right, and the results of the attack. I can outline the SADF strategy of the early 1980s and delve into why 32 Battalion attacked Savate on behalf of UNITA in the first place. I can attempt to explain why the events and figures that are now being questioned are in fact correct.

When soldiers speak about battles or about contact with the enemy, one often hears expressions like ‘no, that’s not correct, it did not happen like that. Ask me. I was there. I know.’ It is true that what one person experiences and sees during an event is not necessarily the same as what another experiences and sees. During enemy contact, a soldier on the left flank of the attack line, for example, does not have the same experiences, fears or challenges as a soldier on the right flank, even though they may be only a few metres apart. While the personal recollections of soldiers who have lived through conflict are valuable, eventually memories fade, especially those concerning names, places, dates and times.

Not many official documents concerning the Battle of Savate are available, so, like many other operations in which 32 Battalion took part over the years, this battle also has its myths and unanswered questions. During my research for my first book, *32 Battalion*, Major General Deon Ferreira

gave me his handwritten orders. These, however, were the deployment and attack plans, and it is known that the operation did not go according to plan.

This account is therefore based on a number of sources: the official war diary, situation reports, the original operation order, which includes a sketch of the Savate base defence, the aforementioned recently declassified documents and the personal recollections of 35 former 32 Battalion members who took part in the battle. My only regret is that there are not more recollections and personal experiences of the Portuguese-speaking men involved. I tried hard to get these, but gave up after I offered a middleman (the son of a 32 Battalion soldier) a substantial sum of money to interview Savate veterans on my behalf. All I got was a word-for-word copy of the battle as published in *They Lived by the Sword* masquerading as six interviews with Savate veterans. Only one of those men, whom he called Savate veterans and had supposedly interviewed, had a name that appeared on the Savate battle nominal roll.

The official Operation Tiro-Tiro war diary was updated in the Omauni operations room as the battle progressed. I include pages from the diary in this book to confirm facts and to put to bed some of the arguments that still rage around the attack, such as that regarding the strength and composition of the teams that did the initial reconnaissance. The war diary is, after all, the only official document available to confirm dates and times of events that took place during the Battle of Savate.

A note on nomenclature: the South African Border War was fought in South West Africa, at the time under the control of its southern neighbour. The territory received independence in 1990, when its name was changed to Namibia. Because the war was fought in what was then South West Africa, I will refer to it as such throughout this book.

I have followed the standard writing procedure of identifying a person in the first instance by their rank, initial (and in some cases their full Christian name or nickname) and surname. Thereafter, only the surname

THE BATTLE OF SAVATE

is used. This is not a sign of disrespect towards a particular person's rank, but a convention.

PIET NORTJE

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

2015

## Battle of Savate

Fear,  
Subdued by the magnitude  
Of aggressive events,  
Developing into a level-headed mechanism  
To survive.

Despair,  
Sinking into a chasm  
Borne of friends suddenly no more,  
Becoming an animal's indifference to killing.

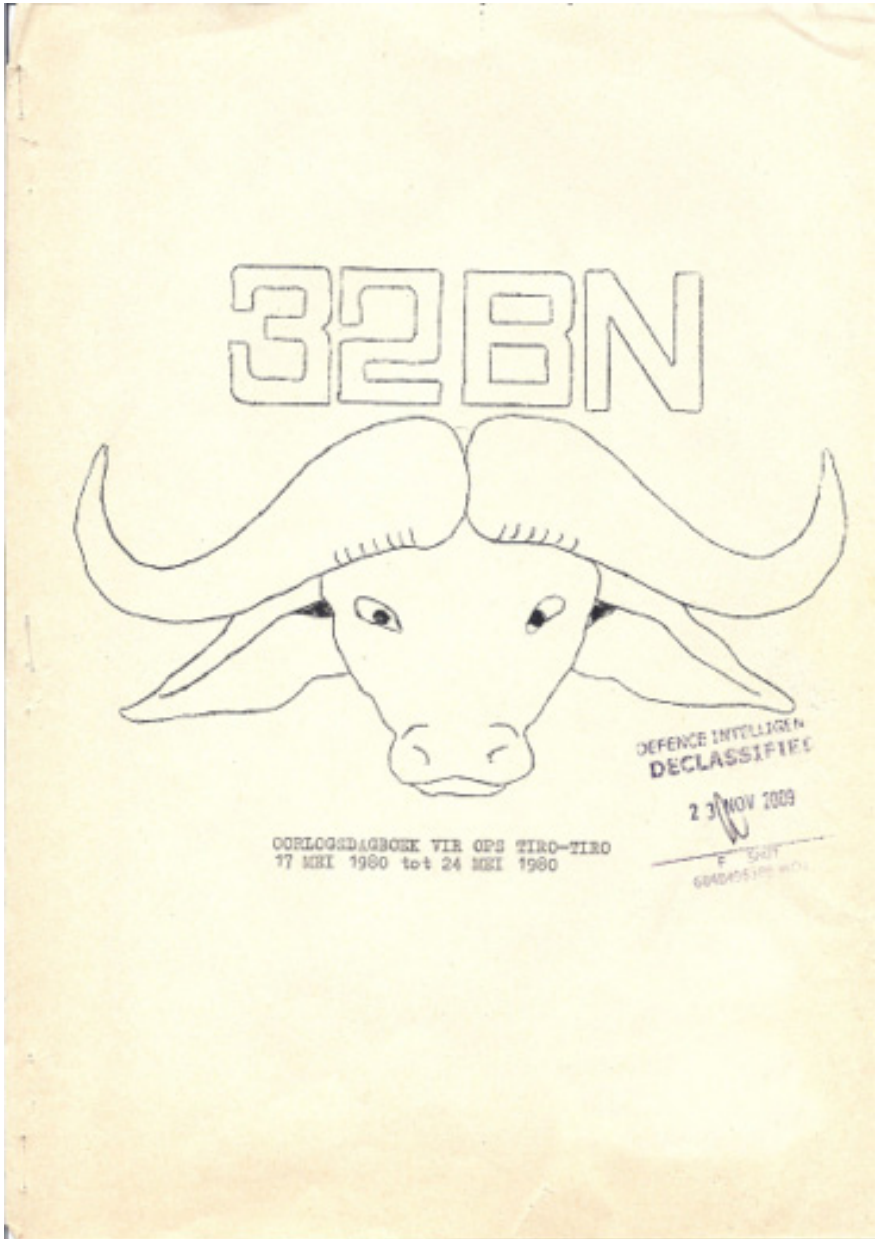
Caught in a void,  
Walls of unleashed destruction  
Cemented by the roar of vices,  
Death ... the opening of a window.

Mindless helplessness,  
A nothing ...  
Enveloped in winds of fear,  
Values and morals of shifting dunes.

Relief,  
Pathetic in its intensity  
Familiar faces –  
Bastian's of trailing lifelines ... shreds of hope.

Drained,  
In vacuums of the aftermath,  
New lights of oppressive realities  
... shadows.

– Second Lieutenant Justin Taylor  
32 Battalion Signals Officer 1980  
Written 28 January 1981



The cover page of the 29-page official war diary

# 1

## War on the Border

By 1975, the writing was on the wall: the Rooi Gevaar (Red Peril) – the South African popular term for communism – was knocking on newly independent Angola's door. It was an unwelcome visitor for South Africa, which controlled neighbouring South West Africa. The 1974 coup d'état in Lisbon, Portugal, which saw the leftist Movimento das Forças Armadas (Movement of the Armed Forces) overthrow the Portuguese regime of Marcelo Caetano, had resulted in independence for Portugal's former colonies abroad.

In Angola, a war for independence had been raging since 1961. As a Western ally, South Africa had clandestinely supported the Portuguese military in the conflict against the resistance movements fighting for independence. The main resistance, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, MPLA), had sided with Russia, the Eastern bloc leader in the Cold War, and was therefore branded as communist. The other resistance movements – Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola (National Front for the Liberation of Angola, FNLA) and União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, UNITA) – had originally also sided with the Eastern bloc.

Even before Portugal had fully withdrawn from the territory, however, friction between the three resistance movements had resulted in a split that saw them fighting one another for control of independent Angola. The three resistance leaders met several times with Portuguese authorities

towards the end of 1974, and eventually agreed to end their armed conflict. On 15 January 1975, in Alvor, Portugal, they signed what became known as the Alvor Agreement, granting Angola independence on 11 November 1975 and establishing a transitional government.

This cooperative agreement was short-lived. Fighting between the military arms of the three, now political, movements – the MPLA's *Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola* (People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola, FAPLA), the FNLA's *Exército de Libertação Nacional de Angola* (National Liberation Army of Angola, ELNA) and UNITA's *Forças Armadas de Libertação de Angola* (Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola, FALA) – escalated quickly, and the FNLA and UNITA requested support from the West.

At America's request, South Africa this time sided with the FNLA and UNITA to put a non-communist government in power in Angola when colonial rule officially came to an end in November. In the latter part of 1975, the South African Defence Force (SADF) therefore helped ELNA and FALA try to defeat FAPLA militarily, but the MPLA managed to seize Luanda and formed a new government with Agostinho Neto as the nation's first president. Neto established a one-party state and his government developed further ties with the Soviet Union and other nations in the Eastern bloc, as well as other communist states, especially Cuba.

The civil war, however, continued to rage. In early 1976 the SADF left Angola due to mounting political pressure from overseas. After the withdrawal, the FNLA disintegrated, leaving the pro-Western UNITA to continue the struggle against the Marxist MPLA government on its own. For a while, with no declared war between South Africa and Angola, FAPLA was forgotten by the South Africans, even though the SADF continued to clandestinely support UNITA operations logistically in Angola as part of the South African government's Cold War strategy.

In 1975, Colonel Jan Dirk Breytenbach of the SADF had gathered the remnants of ELNA at Mpupa in south-east Angola, where he trained them

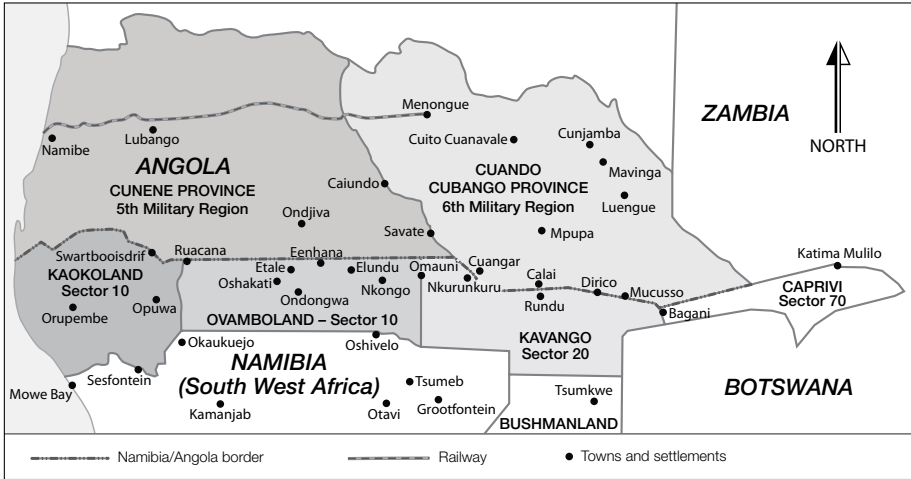
and formed them into what became known as Bravo Group. In March 1976, the South African Army authorised Colonel Breytenbach to move Bravo Group to South West Africa. Bravo Group, which would become integrated into the SADF, was tasked with fighting the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and its military arm, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), which had been waging an insurgency war in South West Africa since 1961, infiltrating the territory from bases in Angola. In October 1976, Bravo Group became 32 Battalion.

What is commonly known as the South African Border War officially started in 1966, when the first shots between PLAN insurgents and the SADF were fired. Now, 10 years on, enough was enough. 32 Battalion would fight PLAN not only inside South West Africa, but also clandestinely in southern Angola.

The SADF had divided the northern border zone in South West Africa into military sectors, with each sector commander responsible for countering the PLAN insurgency in his operational area. Sector 10, with its headquarters at Oshakati, was responsible for Kaokoland and Ovamboland; Sector 20 (originally called 1 Military Area), with headquarters at Rundu, was responsible for the Kavango; and Sector 70, with headquarters at Katima Mulilo, for the Caprivi. Almost all the infiltration and fighting between SADF and PLAN forces took place in central Ovamboland, because 25 per cent of the population lived in that area and it bordered Angola, from where the PLAN insurgency was being launched.

In Angola, FAPLA had divided the provinces into military regions. The Cunene Province (5th Military Region) and the Cuando Cubango Province (6th Military Region) bordered the South West African operational area.

UNITA's FALA, for their own military command-and-control purposes, had also divided Angola into 17 military regions with each region subdivided into zones.



SADF and FAPLA military areas. Map shows the SADF sector areas of responsibility and the FAPLA military regions (not to scale)

### FAPLA's reorganisation and strategy

Beginning in 1977 and under the guidance of Russian and Cuban advisors, and as part of a reorganisation and training programme, FAPLA withdrew most of its forces from the areas bordering South West Africa in the 6th Military Region. This left most of its bases along the Okavango River, which it had occupied since mid-1976, either manned by a skeleton force or totally abandoned. They had little to worry about though, as FALA deployments in this specific area were nothing more than poorly trained and ill-equipped compact guerrilla companies, lacking both the capability to hold ground or defend bases should they occupy them.

By the middle of 1978, most of FAPLA's reorganisation and training was complete. Organised in line with Soviet military doctrine, it now had motorised infantry brigades (*brigadas de infantaria motorizada*; BRIM) equipped with heavy weaponry, such as artillery, tanks and anti-aircraft systems, to deploy in conventional warfare, and light infantry brigades (*brigadas de infantaria ligeira*; BRIL) to deploy in counter-guerrilla operations.

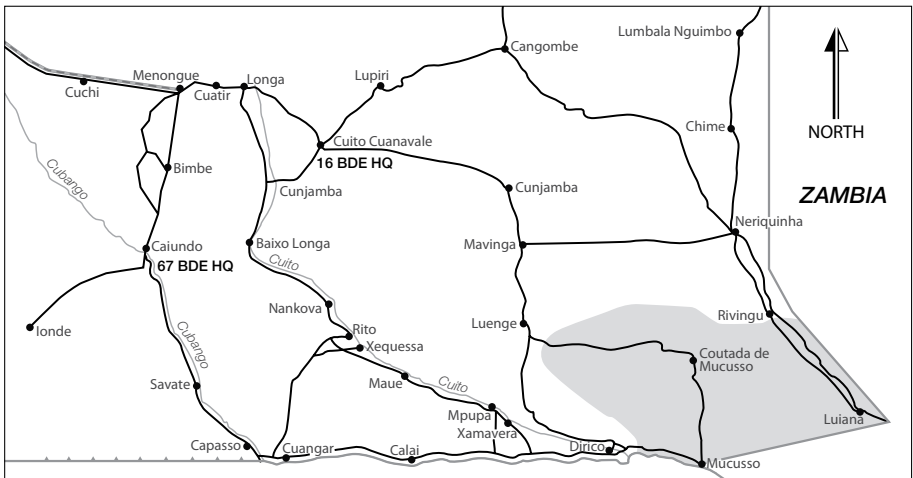
FAPLA established its 6th Military Region headquarters in the Cuando

Cubango provincial capital of Menongue, which later also hosted the main recruit training centre for southern Angola.

The FAPLA regional commander at Menongue deployed 16 Brigade (BRIM) to Cuito Cuanavale, from where it was responsible for the defence of Mavinga and the occupation of towns up to the Zambian border. Mavinga was seen as a strategic position because of its airstrip. If FALA succeeded in occupying Mavinga, it could allow clandestine logistical support to be flown in from South Africa.

At the same time, 67 Brigade (BRIL) established its headquarters at Caiundo. The brigade was tasked with conducting anti-FALA operations in the area between the Cubango (the name given to the Okavango in Angola) and Cuito rivers, and up to the border with South West Africa. It was a vast area for just one brigade to cover, but, again, FALA's military capacity in this area was limited to guerrilla hit-and-run tactics, ambushes, sabotage and general disruption.

During their August/September 1978 offensive, 67 Brigade took the town of Savate – which lies 135 kilometres south of Caiundo and 75 kilometres



The southern Cuando Cubango Province in 1978, showing the positions of the FAPLA brigade headquarters and the area dominated by FALA (grey). All towns outside the FALA area were occupied by FAPLA

north of Cuangar on the border with South West Africa – from UNITA’s FALA guerrillas, and established a battalion-sized base there. The brigade also occupied all their former bases along the Okavango and Cuito rivers as far as Mpupa. The reoccupation not only gave back the initiative to FAPLA, but also effectively cut off all resupply by road from the FALA guerrillas operating in the area.

### **A new South African strategy**

An important strategic objective of the South African military in the Border War was to eliminate any insurgency from Angola into Kaokoland, Kavango and Caprivi. By doing this, the main effort – to clear Ovambo-land – could be achieved more cost-effectively.

When the minister of defence, P.W. Botha, became South Africa’s prime minister in 1978, the country’s until-then low-level military aid to UNITA in the form of food, weapons and ammunition, and codenamed Operation Silver, escalated. In light of FAPLA’s recent reorganisation, the South African generals were of the opinion that there was no point in supplying weapons to an untrained resistance movement and that FALA soldiers should, therefore, be trained. UNITA leader and FALA supreme commander, General Jonas Savimbi, met with Botha on 10 December 1978.

A decision was made to accelerate and expand the training of the FALA guerrillas, who until then had been organised into three fighting groups. The dispersed guerrilla group numbered around 8 000 men, operated in groups of about 10 and carried only their personal weapons and occasionally explosives. They wore a combination of military uniforms and civilian clothing. The 3 000 or so men of the militia group each carried a personal weapon – typically a vintage World War II rifle, with the odd AK-47 between them – and had only a few rounds of ammunition. The compact guerrilla group, with around 4 000 men wearing various military uniforms and operating in companies of about 180 strong, was more organised

and locally trained. The men carried AK-47s as personal weapons and each company had two 81-millimetre mortars and one 75-millimetre recoilless gun.

SADF Chief Staff Intelligence (CSI) Colonel Flip du Preez had been coordinating the support to UNITA from an office in Rundu since 1976. He was now given the task of converting the Dodge City military base on the Caprivi into a FALA training base. (Until early 1977, Dodge City had belonged to 32 Battalion.) Before he could complete the task, however, Du Preez was transferred to Military Intelligence Division (MID) headquarters in Pretoria, with special responsibility for Operation Silver.

On 26 December 1978, fresh from a year-long South African Army command and staff course, Commandant Marius 'Mo' Oelschig was posted to the Rundu office as the officer commanding (OC) the Special Tasks field office. Oelschig, a paratrooper, had served as military attaché in Luanda in the early 1970s and had experience with Angola and UNITA. He spoke fluent Portuguese, which Du Preez did not, and this gave him an advantage in communicating with the FALA commanders. Oelschig's main responsibility was as primary liaison and executive officer for Operation Silver in the Cuando Cubango Province. He reported to Major General Jannie Geldenhuys, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of South West Africa Command, headquartered in Windhoek. Geldenhuys, in turn, was under the command of the chief of the South African Army, Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen.

The strategy regarding the nature and scope of support to UNITA was significantly influenced by Geldenhuys's strategy for the region as a whole. At their first meeting, Oelschig received his first strategic guidelines:

In one of my first meetings with General Geldenhuys, he told me, in no uncertain terms, that he expected me, meaning UNITA, to 'keep Sector 20's doorstep clean'. The ensuing operational concept was to harass and interdict the lines of communication to such an extent that

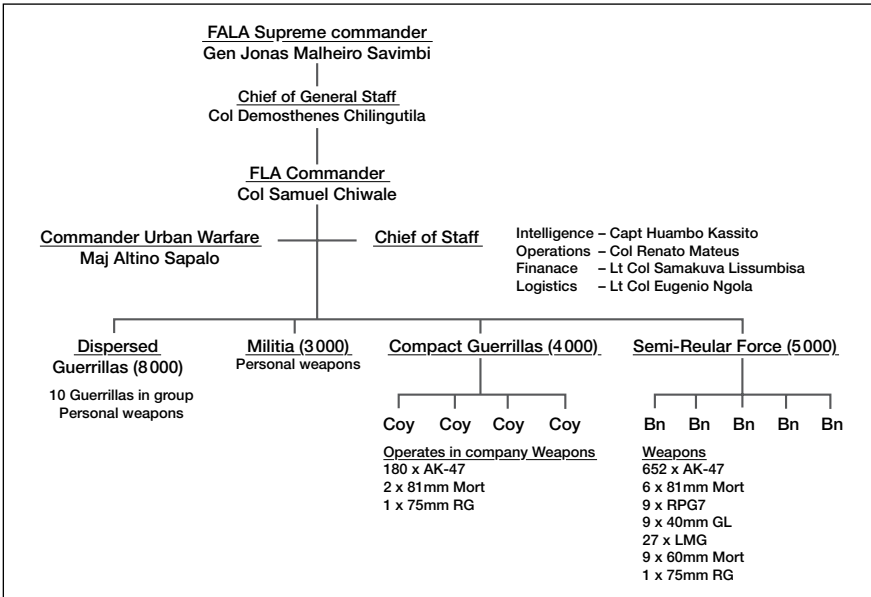
continued occupation by FAPLA of isolated bases like Calai, Dirico, Cuangar, Savate and Mpupa would be unsustainable.

By 1979, the South African military had changed its strategy to such an extent that the Reconnaissance Commando (the 'recces'), 32 Battalion and, on a smaller scale, 31 Battalion (later renamed 201 Battalion) were now allowed to provide clandestine combat support to UNITA. Five years after fleeing before FAPLA and its Cuban allies, former ELNA cadres, now in the guise of a fully fledged, well-disciplined SADF military battalion (32 Battalion) led by white South Africans, would once again get the opportunity to engage their former enemy.

In line with Botha's directives, Oelschig had set up training programmes. On 5 December 1978, 180 of FALA's best guerrilla fighters reported to Camp Delta, a small clandestine training base on the Caprivi, to receive training in basic intelligence from South African Recce Commando instructors. Savimbi's presidential guard would be derived from this group. At the same time, two experienced 32 Battalion officers, Captain Piet Botes and Lieutenant Des Burman, were transferred to MID. On 22 January 1979, together with six national servicemen, they began training the first 350 FALA compact guerrillas. These would form the basis of what would become FALA's fourth group, the semi-regulars, which, by the end of June 1980, numbered around 5 000. The semi-regulars were organised into battalions based on the South African Army's model and armed as such.

In the meantime, FALA guerrilla activities continued throughout the Cunene and Cuando Cubango provinces. The headquarters of FALA's Colonel Samuel 'Mwanangola' Chiwale was at Cafima, about 100 kilometres south-east of Cassinga in the Cunene Province, which itself was controlled from a CSI field office in Oshakati. By the end of June 1980, Chiwale would be the FALA commander, with 800 compact guerrilla fighters in the area north-east of Ionde alone.

Since FAPLA's reoccupation during its August/September offensive of



FALA organisation by end of June 1980

the previous year, UNITA had not made any effort to upset the stalemate. It was now time for the South Africans to act. On 23 February 1979, Savimbi and Brigadier Miguel N’Zau Puna (UNITA’s secretary general) met with Du Preez and Oelschig, as well as Colonel P. Moller, Commandant J. Swart and Major H. Venter from 1 Recce Commando, at Camp Delta. The decision was made to deploy four recce commando teams of eight men each, starting in March, with the aim of assisting UNITA in operational planning, intelligence gathering, performing reconnaissance tasks, and establishing communications between the SADF and FALA. The deployment, codenamed Operation Broadcast, would entail sending two teams to Chiwale in the Cunene Province and two to support Savimbi in the Cuando Cubango Province.

Four days later, on 27 February, an operational planning meeting was held, again at Camp Delta, between Savimbi, N’Zau Puna, Geldenhuis and his second in command, Brigadier P.E.K. Bosman. At this meeting,

two approvals were given: one for joint operations between the SADF and FALA (although with separate tasks), and the other for the provision of SADF fire support (in the form of 81-millimetre mortars) for FALA attacks. The change in SADF strategy was being clearly marked and the ball was now rolling.

On 8 March in Pretoria, Savimbi met with General Magnus Malan (chief of the SADF), Constand Viljoen and representatives from MID. At this meeting, the overall UNITA strategy and objectives for 1979 were finalised:

The Cuando Cubango border area, which was occupied by FAPLA in their offensive, should be re-taken by UNITA as a matter of priority within six weeks, with the assistance of 32 Battalion troops, if necessary, so as to provide UNITA with a safe base area in which to form the nucleus of an alternative government, as well as to restore the logistical lines and communication between south-east Angola and South West Africa. [Department of Defence Documentaion Centre, File DI/311/1/3 Silver Vol. 8, Enc. 106, 113–15.]

A decision was also made to establish an operational headquarters for UNITA at the Rundu field office, from which FALA operations could be controlled. FALA's chief of staff, Lieutenant Colonel Demosthenes Amos Chilingutla, would fill this post.

Until this point, UNITA was in control of southern Angola, as the operational planning thus far had been guided by politics. Now, however, the first signs of SWAPO's PLAN insurgents infiltrating the Kavango region of South West Africa began to surface. Intelligence reports suggested that PLAN was looking to activate the Kavango and create a foothold for further infiltration of the Mangeti – the traditional white farming area – and beyond. The area west of the Cubango River in southern Angola was uninhabited and had no water resources, making it virtually impossible for