

# THE OTHER EDGE OF ASYMMETRY: SOUTH AFRICA'S BUSH WAR STRATEGY

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*There is much talk today of “asymmetric warfare”, with scant regard for the fact that it is nothing new. Guerrilla wars and terrorism have been around since the beginning of armed conflict. Also, few seem to consider that “asymmetry” works both ways. There is nothing that is quite as “asymmetric” as a tank driving over an infantryman. It is this latter aspect of “asymmetric warfare” that this article will explore in the context of the “Bush War”.*

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## 1. THE SWAPO INTENT

SWAPO's intention would seem to have been to conduct a classic insurgency, opening with “agitprop” and moving through terrorism to guerrilla operations to, if necessary, conventional war. SWAPO operations through the 1970s and 1980s did not, however, at any time progress much beyond the agitprop/terrorism stage, with only a few sporadic efforts to launch actual guerrilla attacks.

The initial failure to advance its campaign can be ascribed in large part to its inability to win any real measure of support in Caprivi, to which it had direct access from bases in Zambia, or Kavango, which it could, with some luck, infiltrate through Caprivi or via the southeast of Angola. That inability was, in its turn, largely a function of local dislike and distrust, rather than the result of any good counter-insurgency strategy on the part of the South African Police or, later, Army.

SWAPO's failure to advance to guerrilla warfare after it had gained indirect access to its ethnic home base in Owambo courtesy of UNITA, can be explained away as a result of the logistic difficulty of mounting operations in Owambo from bases in Zambia. Its continued failure to do so after having gained direct access to Owambo from southern Angola after 1976, is more difficult to explain other than as an outcome of successful operations on the part of the South African security forces.

Over a period of twelve years (1976 to 1988) SWAPO was unable to conduct a guerrilla campaign in Owambo:

- despite Owambo being its ethnic home base;
- despite enjoying strong support from the Soviet Union and others;
- despite having direct access across a friendly border;
- despite terrain that was exceptionally favourable for hit-and-run type guerrilla attacks – no natural border obstacles, no canalising terrain, no high

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ground for OPs, ample bush cover, ample surface water during the rainy season; and

- despite a rural population living in scattered kraals, easy to access for agitprop or terrorism, and impossible for the security forces to control or protect.

That is to say in spite of having everything in its favour, SWAPO's failure to advance its campaign into the guerrilla warfare stage is, therefore, remarkable. That suggests that the opposing strategy is worthy of study.

## 2. THE SOUTH AFRICAN RESPONSE

The initial South African response was essentially one of standard counter-insurgency strategies and tactics, mainly executed by the Police. That proved effective against the SWAPO efforts in Caprivi and against its initial effort to begin operations in Owambo. Even after SWAPO's alliance with the newly active UNITA facilitated its access through southern Angola into Owambo, all that really changed was that the Army took over responsibility for security from the Police, primarily because the latter lacked both the strength and the equipment for a more extended campaign. The strategy and tactics did not change noticeably.

The focus of operations throughout those years was on routine patrolling, protection of key points and following up, as best possible, attacks by SWAPO groups. The one additional aspect was that the South Africans were able to conduct some operations to the north of the border from almost the beginning: The Police carried out some small-scale raids against SWAPO bases in south-western Zambia, and the Air Force deployed a number of Alouette III helicopters to support the Portuguese forces operating in the south of Angola, thereby also being able to interdict SWAPO movement to some extent. There was also co-operation between the South African and Portuguese intelligence agencies.

The overall tenor of South African operations can, however, be characterised as small groups of infantry walking through the bush carrying heavy packs, looking for SWAPO and, more often than not, not finding them.

That pedestrian approach was adequate, if not particularly successful, until the MPLA seized power in Angola in 1976. That changed the strategic picture entirely as a result of the new government allowing SWAPO to establish bases in southern Angola. At a stroke SWAPO's problems of long approach marches and difficult logistic support were solved: Guerrillas could now dash across the border for an agitprop session, to burn a kraal or to lay some mines, and be back in the safety of a properly defended base in Angola long before the opposing infantry could react.

The combination of proximity, favourable terrain and an accessible population faced the South African security forces with an almost impossible operational situation.

The result was an escalation of attacks in Owambo and sufficient optimism on the part of SWAPO by 1978 to plan a very large-scale incursion into the then South-West Africa with the intention of disrupting the elections scheduled for December of that year, on which South Africa had staked much of its strategy for ridding itself of the SWA albatross in a reasonable period of time and in an acceptable manner.

The South Africans had already begun to reconsider their approach to dealing with the SWAPO insurgency, mainly focussed on “winning hearts and minds” on one hand and on improving response times on the other, albeit without too much imagination being shown in that respect. Thoughts of building a “Morice Line” along the 450 km or so of open land border were rejected as being far too costly and requiring too many troops to be effective. There was, thus, clearly a need to come up with a better idea. The key impetus for a new strategy was provided by intelligence of SWAPO's plans for a large-scale incursion during 1978.

### **3. A NEW STRATEGY: OFFENCE IS THE BEST DEFENCE**

The basis for the new offensive strategy had been laid by shallow area reconnaissance and disruption operations, some of which saw the light infantry of 32 Battalion carry out what amounted to guerrilla operations against SWAPO in its supposed safe areas. A further building block was the establishment of the Army's first true mechanised force – Combat Group Juliet – as a counter to any Angolan Army adventures in the border area. Juliet saw its first action when it carried out a follow-up operation in the wake of one of SWAPO's few successful guerrilla attacks, during which the guerrillas captured a Sapper who had been stationed at an outlying water point. This was in itself an example that the South African Army was not yet fully “up to speed” in its conduct of the war.

#### **3.1 Pre-emption**

The impending large-scale incursion into Owambo gave the South Africans pause for thought. Given the nature of the terrain, it would be impossible to stop SWAPO at the border. There could also be no question of allowing them to rampage in Owambo. The one remaining option was to pre-empt the incursion.

That pre-emption took the form of Operation Reindeer, which stands out for a number of reasons:

- It was the first major cross-border or “external” operation against SWAPO.
- It was the first operation against a SWAPO base deep inside Angola.
- It saw the first air assault operation ever launched by the SADF.
- Reindeer had four main elements:

- An air assault against the main headquarters, logistic and training centre of the Peoples Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) at Cassinga, some 250 km inside Angola, carried out by a reinforced composite parachute battalion.
- An attack by a mechanised infantry battalion group (Combat Group Juliet – the later 61 Mechanised Battalion Group) against a complex of forward SWAPO bases in the vicinity of Chetequera, some 30 km inside Angola.
- Attacks by two infantry battalions with armoured car and artillery support against forward SWAPO bases in the vicinity of Chatua and Dombondala, some 10 to 15 km inside Angola.
- An attack by 32 Battalion (light infantry) with artillery support against SWAPO forward bases in the vicinity of Henhombe, some 15 to 20 km inside Angola.

None of Reindeer went quite as planned. The air assault suffered near disaster, as such operations tend to, and the ground attacks suffered their share of delays that enabled some guerrillas to escape, although their bases were razed and quantities of weapons, equipment and stores were lost.

The overall effect, however, was shattering: Some 859 guerrillas killed, 202 captured and at least 340 wounded, and valuable intelligence was gained from the documents captured at Cassinga. Also, many of the killed were experienced guerrillas who could not quickly or easily be replaced. The effect of that became visible over the course of the year, when SWAPO's casualty rate increased as a result of having to employ larger groups of mainly inexperienced guerrillas with a few experienced ones to hold them together. The attacking forces lost six soldiers killed, four of them at Cassinga.

The planned large-scale guerrilla incursion never took place.

By 1979, however, SWAPO had recovered to a considerable extent, and was preparing for large-scale infiltration of Owambo, as well as having concentrated large numbers of guerrillas for a new attempt to open Caprivi as an active front.

With the success of Reindeer in mind, the security forces launched two major external operations against the SWAPO build up in southern Angola (Operation Rekstok) and in south-western Zambia (Operation Safraan).

These were rather smaller in scale than Reindeer and also did not attempt to penetrate as deeply into Angola. Rekstok took the form of air strikes on identified staging areas and bases, followed by heliborne troops to sweep the target. It involved only two six-platoon infantry combat teams and some special forces teams. Safraan was carried out by one airborne and two motorised combat teams, each of two companies, with the latter two each having an armoured car troop in support. One infantry company was held as a reserve.

SWAPO had learned from Reindeer, however, and was better prepared to avoid being "fixed and finished". Most of the attacks of these two operations encountered recently evacuated camps, although some casualties were inflicted and some

equipment seized. Also, SWAPO's planned infiltration of Caprivi never took place, while its operations in Owambo had to be scaled down somewhat. Perhaps the most important outcome of these two operations was that Safraan caused Zambia to forbid any further attempts by SWAPO to launch operations from there.

Thus, while Reindeer had been a stunning success, Rekstok and Safraan demonstrated that the security forces had to come up with something better: Pre-emption would not work if SWAPO side-stepped the attacks, something that was not difficult to do when the combination of distances and few roads made the movement of major forces quite easy to detect and monitor.

### **3.2 Sustained disruption**

The next stage in South Africa's developing strategy took the concept of externals one step further, from pre-empting a specific large-scale infiltration to launching spoiling attacks to generally disrupt SWAPO's efforts to prepare and support infiltrations, and to disrupt SWAPO's infrastructure in southern Angola.

The first of these operations was Sceptic, launched in June 1980, with the intention of causing lasting disruption of SWAPO's systems in southern Angola. The main objective was the new PLAN headquarters at a site nicknamed QFL, near Ionde, some 180 km inside Angola, also making Sceptic the second deep strike. Several smaller bases and staging camps were also attacked, and the operation was extended from a short raid to three weeks to exploit intelligence won at QFL to attack other bases that had not previously been identified.

Sceptic was effectively a brigade-strength operation, being carried out by four combat groups each of roughly battalion strength. It resulted in some 380 guerrillas killed and the capture of several hundred tons of equipment and munitions, with some 150 tons and a number of vehicles being taken back to South-West Africa for evaluation and to be used as opposing force equipment in training. SWAPO's logistic infrastructure in the south of Angola had also been decisively disrupted, as had that year's infiltration. Only 17 members of the attacking force lost their lives in the operation.

The success achieved with Sceptic was followed up by stepping up search and destroy operations in the shallow area north of the border. The aim of these operations, mainly conducted by 32 Battalion, was to prevent SWAPO rebuilding its forward staging areas. This campaign was accompanied by an air interdiction campaign to prevent vehicle movement towards the border. There were also some quick-response operations to exploit incoming intelligence. One was Klipkop, the August 1980 raid on a forward staging point that SWAPO had set up in the small town of Chitado near the border.

The effect of these linked campaigns was that guerrilla groups now had to travel, mainly on foot or in very short stages by light vehicle, from bases more than

200 km inside Angola before they could even begin their infiltration of Owambo. The fighting had effectively been shifted to north of the border, and 1980 marked a turning point in the war, after which SWAPO attacks in Owambo declined, and SWAPO casualties rose.

### **3.3 Displacement**

One unwanted result of the success of these first major external operations was that the Angolan government decided to protect the SWAPO bases in the south of Angola. SWAPO was allowed to relocate its bases to “hug” FAPLA bases, and FAPLA reinforced its own elements in the area, including mechanised forces that could respond quickly to a South African incursion.

This new arrangement enabled SWAPO to continue its guerrilla operations and to again establish bases nearer to the border, in the belief that the South Africans would not be willing to risk a clash with conventional FAPLA forces. That assumption was based on the fact that the South Africans had done their best during Sceptic to avoid any clash with the Angolan forces, as well as on a misguided faith in the relative capabilities of the Angolan and South African forces.

The South Africans were indeed reluctant to widen the war in that way, but did not see any practicable alternative to external operations. The actual result of Angola’s decision to protect SWAPO’s forward bases was, thus, unexpected and unwanted: The South Africans decided to take on and eliminate any Angolan forces that attempted to interfere and, indeed, to pre-empt those best placed to threaten their own forces. They also decided that the time had come to establish and to retain dominance in the critical area north of the Angola/Owambo border, rather than to go through the same motions every year.

The result of these considerations was Operation Protea, launched in August 1981.

Protea was in effect a two-brigade operation, comprising one task force of four combat groups and a combat team, and another task force of two combat groups. The external operation was supported by a major internal operation conducted by a third task force immediately to the south of Protea’s area of operations.

The main objectives of Protea were the towns of Xangongo and Ongiva, which served as both SWAPO and FAPLA bases, and were the sites of SWAPO’s north-western and northern Front headquarters.

Both towns were taken and occupied, and several SWAPO staging points and camps in the area were attacked and razed. FAPLA forces did attempt to defend the towns and engaged the South African forces on several occasions, and were badly mauled in the process. Altogether, SWAPO and FAPLA were estimated to have lost some 1 000 killed, as well as large quantities of equipment – some 4 000 tons - of all kinds. Some 2 000 tons of equipment was taken back to SWA. The attacking force lost ten killed.

Having taken Xangongo and Ongiva, the South Africans this time stayed, establishing their own forward bases in the two towns, from which they conducted area operations to disrupt SWAPO movement from deeper inside Angola towards the SWA border. The result was a dramatic decline in terrorism and guerrilla activity in Owambo.

They remained in occupation of the two towns and the surrounding area until the 1984 Lusaka Agreement, in terms of which South African forces withdrew from southern Angola in return for Angolan undertakings that SWAPO would not be allowed to set up new bases in the area.

Protea was followed in November of the same year with Operation Daisy, which was aimed at a main SWAPO headquarters at Bambi and a complex of bases in the vicinity of Cheraquera, both some 240 km inside Angola. Daisy was not a particular success, the long approach march by the mechanised force having given SWAPO ample time to evacuate the objectives, and only some 71 guerrillas being killed for the loss of two soldiers. It did, however, have the effect of pushing SWAPO even further back into the depth of Angola, making the task of infiltrating into Owambo vastly more difficult.

At the same time as Daisy, the security forces also conducted a number of smaller sweep operations nearer the border to mop up the remaining SWAPO groups still in the area. Other operations followed to hunt down guerrillas crossing through the area, and to attack staging areas and tactical headquarters beyond the dominated area. Among them were Operation Super in March 1982 and Operation Meebos in July/August.

Super was a heliborne operation by a reinforced platoon of 32 Battalion in response to intelligence of a SWAPO staging point being established at Cambeno to support an infiltration into Kaokoland. The guerrillas were surprised and 201 were killed for the loss of just three soldiers. Meebos was a more extended operation aimed at locating and destroying the headquarters of SWAPO's central and eastern Fronts, conducted by special forces and heliborne infantry. The eastern Front headquarters was located and attacked after protracted search operations, and 345 guerrillas were killed and considerable quantities of materiel captures, for the loss of 29 soldiers and airmen, more than half of them in a single Puma that was shot down.

With Protea having produced outstanding results, the South Africans decided to extend the dominated area in southern Angola in order to push SWAPO yet further from the common border.

This took the form of Operation Askari, launched in December 1983. The overall aim of this operation was to extend area of dominance to a line from the Cunene River through Quiteve, Mupa and Vinticent to Ionde; and to eliminate Angolan Army radar and air defence elements in that area, to ensure a favourable air situation, to allow the unhindered conduct of aerial reconnaissance and airmobile

operations, and to be able to extend the area of “*Maanskyn*” aerial night interdiction operations beyond 150 km from the border.

Askari was not a total success, the SA Army having overestimated its capabilities and underestimated the willingness and ability of the Angolan forces to fight back. It did, however, result in the capture of two of the towns among its initial objectives – Quiteve and Cuvelai – and established effective dominance over an area from the Cunene to the Cubango River. Some 361 SWAPO guerrillas, an unknown number of Angolan soldiers and some Cuban soldiers were killed in the course of Askari, for the loss of 13 SA Army soldiers killed.

An unwanted outcome of Askari from the South African point of view was the intense pressure at the United Nations for South Africa to withdraw its forces from Angola. In that sense Askari was “an operation too far”.

The political outcome was the Lusaka Agreement, in terms of which South African forces were withdrawn from southern Angola and the Angolan Army allowed back in to reoccupy the area. In return, Angola undertook to prevent SWAPO from establishing bases or staging camps in the “area in question” and to prevent any SWAPO movement through that area. The terms of the agreement were to be enforced by a Joint Angolan/South African Monitoring Commission (JMC), which would conduct regular joint patrols and respond to reports of SWAPO presence in the area. Not surprisingly, there was little effort on the part of the Angolans to enforce this, and SWAPO again began to move closer to the border.

Operation Askari was thus the high-water mark of South Africa’s external operations strategy.

The Army continued to harass SWAPO in Angola by means of special operations – by Special Forces and by 32 Battalion – and later also again conducted disruption and cross-border follow-up operations, but never again on a large scale.

### 3.4 Summing up

The key aspect of this strategy was the decision to decline to continue with a classic counter-insurgency campaign, but to rather take the fight to the enemy. That strategy enabled the Army and the Air Force to:

- Seize and, later, maintain the initiative.
- Employ conventional and semiconventional tactics and weapons, in which it enjoyed an unmatched asymmetric advantage.
- Engage lucrative targets, causing maximum casualties, equipment losses and general disruption.
- Drive the guerrilla bases and staging camps far from the border, forcing them to conduct long and perilous approach marches through areas dominated by the Army; making resupply of deployed guerrilla groups virtually impossible, thereby forcing each group to return to its base after only a brief



foray, again having to move through Army-dominated areas; and making successful escape after a contact vastly more difficult.

The forces involved included Special Forces, mechanised combat groups, motorised infantry, light infantry (32 Battalion) and air-mobile infantry.

The ground and air-mobile operations were complemented by air interdiction, mainly carried out by Impala Mk 2 light attack aircraft flying armed reconnaissance missions. Some were flown on moonlit nights (*Maanskyn* operations), effectively disrupting and even interdicting vehicle movement, greatly hampering SWAPO's efforts to move guerrillas and supplies forward.

The result of the strategy of "external operations" was a sharp and sustained decline in SWAPO activity in Owambo until after the Lusaka Agreement.

When it became clear that Angola was not keeping SWAPO out of the border area, the Army again began conducting operations in southern Angola to disrupt SWAPO. These operations included shallow operations such as Boswilger and Egret in 1985 and deep operations such as Firewood (an attack on a base 35 km north of Cassinga) in 1986. They were on a smaller scale than during 1981/83, but SWAPO was once again largely driven away from the border.

That situation lasted until the 1988 deployment of Cuban forces into the south-west of Angola, which began to interfere with Army operations against SWAPO.

#### **4. SUPPORT FOR UNITA**

In parallel with the developing strategy of external operations, the SADF also stepped up support for UNITA. The purpose here was essentially twofold:

- To ensure UNITA dominance in southeast Angola, thereby sealing off Caprivi and most of Kavango to direct cross-border infiltration by SWAPO. That halved the length of the border and the overall area needing full protection, dramatically reducing the forces required.
- To face the MPLA government with a threat of an insurgency that would draw the focus of its forces away from protecting SWAPO. That made SWAPO bases an easier target for pre-emptive, disruptive and displacement strikes, and made it possible to employ light forces to interdict its approach routes to the border without undue risk.

The implementation of this strategy included the employment of 32 Battalion to seize a number of towns in southeast Angola for UNITA, as well as operations to defeat the various FAPLA offensives aimed at gaining control of southeast Angola. Best known among the latter is the 1987/88 campaign of operations Moduler, Hooper, Packer and Displace, which had the initial objective of stopping the 1987 offensive, which was achieved with spectacular success on the Lomba River in September 1987; and was then extended to clear FAPLA from east of the Cuito and Cuanavale

Rivers, with the aim of preventing a new offensive during 1989. That was essentially achieved by March 1988. While FAPLA did retain a small bridgehead east of Cuito Cuanavale, around Tumpo, it was in fact not able to launch a new offensive until 1990, which UNITA was able to defeat without South African support.

Less well-known are earlier operations, such as those of 1985, focussed on providing air and artillery support to help UNITA stop the FAPLA offensive (Operation Wallpaper), and on air transport to enable it to quickly regroup forces from the Cazombo salient in central eastern Angola to the southeast around Mavinga (Operation Weldmesh). These operations involved Special Forces, 32 Battalion, MRLs and the SAAF.

In 1986 the SADF conducted three Special Forces operations to cripple the planned offensive: A raid on Namibe, in which fuel stocks were blown up; an anti-aircraft ambush outside Menongue, in which the transport taking the Angolan/Cuban/Russian command team to Cuito Cuanavale was shot down; and a raid on the airbase at Cuito Cuanavale, which caused major damage. Operation Alpha Centauri, G-5s and MRLs and air strikes in support of UNITA forces then stopped the actual FAPLA offensive.

#### **4.1 Summing up**

While the SADF often found UNITA to be a difficult and irritating ally, its support for UNITA was strategically worthwhile: Right up to the end of the war UNITA's dominance, albeit with SA Army and Special Forces help at times, of southeastern Angola meant that there was no SWAPO infiltration into Caprivi or most of Kavango, greatly reducing the load on the security forces. In addition, strong Angolan forces and most of the Cuban force in Angola were tied down in operations against UNITA, leaving few forces free to protect or support SWAPO.

An unexpected additional effect was that the Angolan government required SWAPO to provide troops to fight UNITA. During the critical mid-1980s more than one third of the total SWAPO strength was tied up in security and counterinsurgency tasks – roughly twice as many as could be freed up for raids into Owambo.

While this strategy may not have been asymmetric in the sense of this article, it was, of course, perfectly asymmetric in the more usual sense of the term.

### **5. NEW TACTICS: TAKING A SHOTGUN TO THE KNIFE FIGHT**

The second major element in South Africa's response to the SWAPO insurgency was a shift away from classic counterinsurgency tactics inside Owambo. Instead the Police and then the Army began to exploit their asymmetric advantages over the guerrillas by going over to mobile operations, using armoured cars, armoured personnel carriers and specialised infantry (mounted, motorcycle) together with

aerial reconnaissance and surveillance, close air support (mainly Alouette III gunships) and heliborne quick response and follow-up operations, based in part on the Rhodesian experience of “fire force” operations.

Mounted infantry, heliborne forces, armed helicopters and aerial reconnaissance and surveillance were not new concepts, merely a little slow in being applied in this case. New or adapted tactics included Butterfly and Lunar operations by airborne forces, area patrols by armoured cars and the mechanised follow-up concept adopted in two different forms by the Police Counterinsurgency Unit and the Army's 101 Battalion.

### **5.1 Butterfly operations**

Butterfly operations were aimed at exploiting intelligence that suggested the presence of guerrillas in a particular area. As many of the guerrilla groups stopped off at “cuca” shops, the most likely ones in the given area were identified, as were other places where they might be. A force of Alouette gunships and troop-carrying Pumas would then be despatched to conduct quick airmobile cordon and search operations at the likely places. While these operations did not often net guerrillas, they did force them to keep on the move, impacted on their morale and undermined their impact on the population of the area. Occasionally these operations were supported by Impala Mk 2 light strike aircraft.

Similar tactics, in the sense of hitting several targets in quick succession to prevent an evacuation, were sometimes employed against SWAPO staging points that intelligence had pinpointed in a particular part of southern Angola. In those operations the attack would commence with a strike by Impalas, followed by an air assault carried out by heliborne infantry with armed helicopters in support. The strike aircraft meanwhile returned to base to rearm and refuel, and then set out to hit the second objective while the air assault force was *en route* from the first, and so on. The use of strike aircraft, armed helicopters and heliborne infantry allowed a series of attacks to be carried out far too quickly for the guerrillas to be able to evade them.

### **5.2 Lunar operations**

Lunar operations were, in essence, joint night-time interdiction operations by spotter aircraft, armed helicopters and paratroops. They grew out of the difficulty faced in enforcing a curfew in flat terrain that allowed ready movement on foot or by vehicle in almost any direction. Ground forces alone were clearly ineffective, and a helicopter gunship would run out of fuel before a ground patrol could get to the area.

The solution finally arrived at was to deploy spotter aircraft to look for any suspicious movement. A gunship would then force the suspicious vehicle to stop, and a Dakota would be called up from a fixed orbit near Ondangwa or another known

point, to drop a stick of ten paratroops to investigate and engage if necessary, being supported by the gunship.

The term “lunar” was because they were carried out in the weeks around the full moon – necessary in the days before modern night vision equipment.

### **5.3 Armoured car area patrols**

The first of the new tactics to be employed regularly, was to deploy armoured cars for so-called area patrols. The Army had deployed small numbers of light 4x4 Eland-60 and Eland-90 armoured cars to the border from early in its involvement, but had been using them mainly for road patrol and convoy escort tasks, as per general doctrine for armour in counterinsurgency operations.

From the later 1970s onwards, however, the Army recognised that the unusually flat terrain of Owambo lent itself to a more aggressive use of its light armour, and began using its armoured cars to conduct “area patrols”. These were generally conducted by a troop of four Elands and a section of the squadron’s support troop (infantry) in a Buffel mine-protected APC. Their purpose was to dominate an area, to collect and follow up information, and to be available to foot patrols in the area that might make contact with guerrillas. These patrols proved very successful in “destabilising” an area for guerrillas who had no ready answer to fast-moving armour.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect is that groups of guerrillas were at times surprised in the bush by one of these patrols, the bush having masked the sound of the cars as they approached. In one particular case such a patrol - admittedly coming downwind - came to within 100 meters of a group of 22 guerrillas before the two forces noticed each other. Once in contact, the armoured cars enjoyed their massive firepower, protection and mobility edge over the guerrillas keeping on the move to avoid giving the RPG-gunners an easy target and using their machineguns to knock down any who attempted to fight. Nine were killed and two captured in that contact despite thick bush that lent the fleeing guerrillas good cover.

Area patrols were also at times carried out by Ratel-90s operating as armoured cars, and by mechanised infantry in Ratel-20s. Those vehicles enjoyed the advantages of weight and power to enhance their mobility in thick bush.

### **5.4 Mechanised follow-up**

The Army had meanwhile also experimented with other new tactics. One group of officers developed high-rate-of-advance tracking techniques, using alternate teams of trackers, one running on a spoor while the others rested on the trucks that followed up with the main force of the patrol. Others began to make offensive use of light trucks mounting 12,7 mm machineguns, which had been intended for convoy protection but proved effective “ambush busters” if used aggressively.

Those concepts were combined into a mechanised follow up concept at 101 Battalion in early 1979, using the first Buffel mine-protected armoured personnel carriers that the unit had received. This did not, however, find favour with the Army's commander in the region, and any combat use of the Buffel was forbidden.

#### **5.4.1 The Police COIN Unit**

That ruling did not apply to the Police COIN Unit, whose commander had attended a demonstration of the concept and felt that it made eminent sense. He had developed a Selous Scouts type of intelligence gathering operation, but had not been able to obtain a sufficiently quick follow up from either the Army or the main Police COIN Unit to effectively exploit the intelligence his teams gathered. He began to collect armoured personnel carriers – initially old Hippos – and formed his own follow-up teams – with immediate and impressive success: 36 contacts in the first 90 days and more than 500 guerrillas killed in the first ten months of operations for the loss of only 12 members.

The core organizational element was the “fighting group” of four Casspirs armed with a mix of 12,7 mm and 7,62 mm machineguns. The group was led by experienced detectives, supported by local trackers and protected by locally recruited special constables trained as light infantry. It normally included a Blesbok supply truck, built on the same chassis and fitted with an armoured and mine-protected cab. For longer deployments, a Duiker diesel bowser, also with an armoured and mine-protected cab, was attached.

The core tactical concept was that each fighting group would follow up a specific set of information or intelligence, drawn from a full range of sources. The group would develop that into hard tactical intelligence as it conducted its patrol, feeding it back into the system and at the same time following it up to the point of hitting the “spoor” of a group of guerrillas. At that point the group would go over to physical tracking, either from the vehicles or with trackers and a small protection party dismounted and the remainder following at a suitable distance to be able to provide covering or supporting fire while being outside any likely ambush kill zone. If necessary, other fighting groups would be called in to provide support.

On contact, the tracking party would pull back or go to ground, and the Casspirs would attack the guerrilla group, constantly manoeuvring in and around the contact area while engaging them with machine-gun fire. The special constables would then search the area, while the trackers scanned for “spoor” of fleeing guerrillas.

A key factor was that the Police COIN Unit was willing to deploy groups throughout the operational area as the situation dictated, not allowing itself to be hemmed in by sector and unit boundaries. The mobility of the Casspirs, not least the protection against small-arms fire and mines that allowed free movement along roads without undue time spent on ensuring security or sweeping for mines, made

such wide-ranging deployments possible. The Casspirs and the Blesbok also gave the patrol the staying power to conduct extended patrols and, once in contact, the superior visibility, massive firepower, agility and protection that made them an unbeatable enemy for a group of guerrillas.

Apart from this innovative use of armoured vehicles in counterinsurgency, there are two other aspects of particular interest: The information-intelligence-action cycle was run at the fighting group (platoon) level, making very quick reaction practicable; and the groups constantly kept each other and the headquarters apprised of where they were and what they were doing, making it easy for groups to quickly focus their effort to support one that was on a spoor or in contact. In effect, this was an early example of what would today be termed a “netcentric” operation.

#### **5.4.2 Romeo Mike teams**

The Army shortly thereafter adopted much the same tactical concept, but adapted it for the cross-border follow-up role as exemplified by the operations of the *Romeo Mike* teams (from *reaksiemag*, the Afrikaans for reaction force) of 101 Battalion of the South-West Africa Territory Force (SWATF). Given its mandate to conduct cross-border follow-ups, 101 Battalion tended to operate at the company rather than at the platoon level, and also had access to the usual infantry support weapons. It, too, proved extremely effective.

These basic tactics were also to some extent adopted by the four “modular battalions” that provided the main security force within Owambo. They employed the armoured car troops for area patrols and also at times used their APCs in that role and for fast reaction operations and follow-up.

### **5.5 Summing up**

The adoption of mechanised forces and high-mobility tactics gave the security forces an unbeatable edge over the guerrillas. It made efficient use of their strengths, and it made efficient use of limited manpower. Despite their best efforts the guerrillas never developed a real answer to armoured vehicles used against them in these ways.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

South Africa’s strategy during the counterinsurgency campaign against SWAPO is an excellent illustration of the fact that asymmetry in war works in both directions.

- The external operations enabled the security forces to exploit their asymmetric edge in conventional combat power over the guerrillas, and forced them so far back from the border that infiltration of Owambo became extremely difficult. That presented SWAPO with very serious operational problems

that it was never able to overcome, and greatly simplified counterinsurgency operations within Owambo.

- The support for UNITA effectively closed more than half of the border to SWAPO infiltration, tied down Angolan and Cuban forces and even tied down a major proportion of SWAPO's guerrillas. That presented SWAPO with a major strategic problem for which it found no answer, and enabled the security forces to focus mainly on just 450 km of border, greatly simplifying their tactical problem.
- The shift to making greater use of mechanised forces and mobile tactics within Owambo enabled the security forces to exploit their technological edge even in the classic counter-insurgency environment of internal operations, presenting the guerrillas with a tactical problem for which they did not find a solution.

The overall result was that SWAPO was never able to fully enter the guerrilla warfare stage of insurgency.

It is an open question, of course, what would have happened had South Africa wanted to retain control of South-West Africa. The key question would have been how to deal with the Cuban forces that had deployed in southern Angola in 1987/88; assuming, of course, that Cuba was able to stay the course without Soviet funding and was interested in doing so. One indication of how things might have developed over the medium term lies in the initial planning to take Namibia and destroy the Cuban 50<sup>th</sup> division, thereby creating the space for renewed major external operations. What that might have led to, is yet another open question.

The key issue for the purposes of this article, however, remains that the South African security forces successfully exploited asymmetry against their guerrilla opponents.

There is a tendency to see asymmetric operations only as operations by terrorist or guerrilla groups, with those groups exploiting their inherent weaknesses into strengths, offsetting the normal advantages of the regular forces arrayed against them.

In fact, regular forces have immense asymmetric advantages over irregular forces that they can bring to bear given only the willingness to develop new concepts, strategies and tactics.

And, of course, it has always been the commander who exploits asymmetry who wins. It is just a question of which asymmetric advantage he chose to exploit: Remember, as one example, the German tanks coming through the Ardennes – twice. Remember too that the United States used economic strength, not military strength *per se*, to defeat both Germany and Russia.

Asymmetry is like terrain: It is there to be exploited.