

CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS OF THE SAAF IN ANGOLA: 1987-1989. PRELUDE TO THE FINAL STAGES OF THE WAR

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1. INTRODUCTION

In one of the most comprehensive works detailing the “Border War”, *South Africa’s Border War, 1966-1989*, the author, Willem Steenkamp, reaches the following conclusion: “If the war proved anything, it was that although most insurgencies end in political solutions, he who has lost the penultimate military phase has no right to say anything when the armed struggle concluded not with a Bang but with the whisper of papers being shuffled at a conference table.”² These words of Steenkamp contain valuable insights into the actions of the South African Defence Force (SADF) during the last few years of the Border War. On the one hand, there were the militarists who wanted to fight it out on the battlefield and who were relentless in their efforts to catch the enemy unawares. On the other hand, there were the politicians who wanted to keep the electorate happy by announcing military victories – without any losses.

Looking at the events in northern Namibia and southern Angola during the last years of hostilities, it should be borne in mind that, seen from a more holistic point of view, the conflict revolved around the independence of SWA/Namibia and its people. This fact attracted the attention of, *inter alia*, the Organisation of African Unity, the United Nations and the five Western powers.

Despite the merciless fighting, the downing of aircraft and the losses in terms of human lives, the future of SWA/Namibia and all its inhabitants was not determined on the battlefield alone. In the end, negotiations and diplomacy made the prospect of peace a reality. The fact that the military component of the conflict forced all the role-players to the negotiating table is a significant factor that must be kept in mind.

2. CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS SAAF - 1987 TO 1989

It is against the foregoing backdrop that the last military operations of the SADF during the Border War will be discussed. By the middle of 1987, all military observers became fully aware of the fact that the Angolan Defence Force, supported by

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² Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa’s Border War, 1966-1989* (Gibraltar, 1989), p. 187.

Cuban forces and Russian advisers, were busy with a massive build-up of troops, with the aim of destroying Savimbi and his UNITA movement once and for all. Thousands of tons of the most modern Russian military equipment arrived at all the Angolan airports and harbours. These activities were accompanied by a sharp increase in the number of Cuban troops joining those who were already in Angola.³ The combined forces of the Angolan Government were extremely serious about this new approach, and to increase their chances of success the whole operation was placed under the command of Gen. Shagnovitch, assisted by Gen. Sanchez. It was clear that the combined Angolan/ Cuban/Russian forces were determined to avoid another defeat (with the accompanying losses), like the one suffered in 1985, when a similar military operation failed disastrously.

At the beginning of July 1987 the South Africans finally realised that UNITA, on its own, would not be able to withstand the enemy onslaught. Against this backdrop, Operation Moduler was conceived to halt the FAPLA forces' push towards Mavinga and Jamba, Savimbi's headquarters. (All official documents of the SADF indicate the spelling of the operation as Moduler, and not Modular.) Initially, South African assistance to Savimbi amounted to one battery of a 127 mm rocket launcher and a 120 mm mortar platoon, each of which was protected by an infantry platoon. As it became clearer that this element would be unable to stop the advancing FAPLA forces, the SADF increased the number and size of the armaments/equipment used in eastern Angola. These did not include 101 Mechanised Infantry Battalion and 61 Mechanised Battalion, but also G-5 and G-6 cannons. As the operation started to build up momentum, 4 South African Infantry Battalion, as well the first South African tanks (Olifant tanks, which were modernised Centurions), were deployed on the battlefield.⁴ It should be stated unequivocally that the total number of soldiers used in the South African campaign during 1987 and 1988 in southern Angola, never exceeded 3000.

FAPLA's southward offensive started in earnest on 14 August 1987, when six brigades began moving from Cuito Cuanavale in a southward direction. Part of their strategy was to deploy armoured vehicles around the most important towns in southeast Angola. Despite harassing fire by UNITA and elements of the SADF, the FAPLA forces made good progress, and at some stage found themselves on the southern side of the Lomba River. Before a proper bridgehead could be established, the South African mechanised support force attacked the FAPLA forces, which suffered considerable losses. The fighting took place in September, and again at the beginning of October. The South African forces suffered a limited number of casualties, but the FAPLA force was dealt such a devastating blow, that they had no

³ E George, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965-1991. From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (London, 2005), pp. 197-214.

⁴ Helmoed Römer Heitman, *South African armed forces* (Cape Town, 1990), pp. 215-217.

choice but to regroup and retreat to Cuito Cuanavale.⁵ Although the FAPLA offensive now came to an end, it most certainly did not mean that the combined forces of UNITA and elements of the SADF had gained the upper hand. For instance, between 9 and 16 November, fierce fighting took place in the vicinity of the Chaminga and Humbe Rivers in which the South African forces lost 16 men and UNITA an unknown number, versus the more than 500 FAPLA soldiers killed in the course of the battle.

Any war or fighting has, despite the hostilities, a deeply human dimension. During Operation Moduler, for example, Rodd Penhall, a Puma pilot, had to evacuate casualties from an area west of Mupa – a most difficult undertaking. As a result of ongoing fighting in the area, Penhall had to land in pitch darkness. Just before landing, he switched on his lights for a second – and experienced one of the most heartrending moments of the Border War. In front of him, a South African soldier lay on a stretcher, tidily covered by a blanket. Both his legs had been severed and were neatly arranged, side-by-side, on top of the blanket.⁶ It is at such times that one has to control one's emotions and act automatically to evacuate the injured soldier to the nearest medical post for immediate specialised attention.

By the middle of December 1987, Operation Moduler drew to a close, and was followed by Operation Hooper.⁷

At this stage, the FAPLA forces were reinforced, but the reinforcements were mainly used to defend Cuito Cuanavale and its surroundings. For the next three months, Operation Hooper consisted chiefly of attacks and counterattacks, which the two opposing forces launched on one another. The South Africans were unable to conquer Cuito Cuanavale on the western side of the river, while the FAPLA forces' onslaught against UNITA likewise ground to a halt. The FAPLA forces, especially, were very well entrenched behind a network of mine fields, as the South African armoured units soon discovered.

By March 1988, the two opponents were locked in stalemate, and Operation Hooper ended. Operation Packer then commenced. The SADF largely scaled down their presence in southeast Angola, and 82 Mechanised Brigade, which consisted mainly of Citizen Force members, was deployed in the area. A number of factors resulted in the operation being called off by the middle of the year, and the withdrawal of the South African forces from the area took place by means of Operation Displace. The Chief of the SADF, General Jannie Geldenhuys, announced that their goals had been reached, which made withdrawal a reality. The fact that the opposing forces remained locked in stalemate, undoubtedly contributed to the decision to withdraw.

⁵ Helmoed Römer Heitman, *War in Angola. The final South African phase* (Gibraltar, 1990), pp. 40 *et seq.*

⁶ *Leo Barnard Collection*, recordings of interviews conducted with Colonel Rodd Penhall, 14 June 1997.

⁷ George, pp. 215-235. Cf. also Heitman, *War in Angola ...*, pp. 169 *et seq.*

A maneuver by the Cubans in western Angola (in the vicinity of Ruacana) to advance in a southerly direction towards the SWA/Namibian border, posed a major threat to the South African forces near Cuito Cuanavale. It would have been easy to encircle them to prevent them from reaching the northern border of SWA/Namibia. Furthermore, negotiations between the different role-players to bring the Border War to a close, were already at such an advanced level that a final agreement was in sight.

Looking back at the last major cross-border operations in which the SADF participated, one wonders about the role the SA Air Force (SAAF) played in the whole process. It should be clarified right from the start that the combined forces of FAPLA, the Cubans and PLAN had access to the most modern and sophisticated anti-aircraft and missile systems available in the world at that time. These not only included 14,5 mm machine guns, but also the effective 23 mm cannon, and the almost complete series of SAM missiles, including the brand new SAM-16 and SAM-8 systems. Seen from the perspective of the Air Force, operations Moduler, Hooper and Packer could not be compared with any previous cross-border operations. Historically speaking, it is interesting to note how the Angolan Government reacted to the SA Air Force's actions in Angola. In an official statement which appeared in *The Namibian* in October 1987, the following are indicated as losses suffered by the SAAF:

September 6, 1987: "Six Impala planes on reconnaissance flights over FAPLA positions were shot down by our anti-aircraft defence." September 22, 1987: "Three Mirages overflew FAPLA positions and one was shot down."

September 23, 1987: "A South African helicopter overflying areas to the east of Cuito Cuanavale was brought down by the Angolan Air Force and all its occupants perished." September 26, 1987: "Three South African planes were shot down when overflying our troop positions."

October 3, 1987: "Three South African Puma helicopters were shot down between Lomba and Cujamba."⁸

It is clear that the foregoing statement was created for propaganda purposes since no documents/sources could be tracked down in South Africa to confirm these claims. While the initial period of the conflict was characterised by unlimited use of air space, circumstances changed to such an extent that it is doubtful whether the South Africans still enjoyed a favourable air situation during the last stages of the war.

This issue, of course, remains open to debate, but the most important views on the matter can be subdivided into three categories. In the first place, there is a group who believes that the Angolan Air Force regained the initiative and thus also a favourable air situation from the South African Air Force.

A Russian senior lieutenant of the Reserve Force, who served in Angola, Anatoly Eduardovich Alekseevsky, expresses the following opinion about the Russian role in the Angolan War:

⁸ *The Namibian*, October 1987.

“The Cuban MiG-21s operated successfully, the South African Mirages ran away from them all the time. We called on the Cuban fighter planes a couple of times and by the things they did in the air it was clear that these were the Cubans. They performed such amazing things in the air. Once the Cubans encountered the Mirages, they almost entered aerial combat, but the South Africans simply left, ran away. They see from the MiGs’ flight pattern that these weren’t Angolans. The Cubans didn’t insist on aerial combat and safely returned to the base. But the fact that they could cover us from the air, besides our ability to shoot at the Mirages from the ground, really helped us.”⁹

There is a second school of thought which believes that the SAAF still ruled the skies of southern Angola at the end of the Border War. They admit that the modern anti-aircraft and missile systems of the Angolans, as well as the sophisticated MiG-23 fighter aircraft, outclassed those of the SAAF, but they are still of the opinion that the training of the South African pilots was of such a high standard that it elevated them above the Angolans.

The truth is probably to be found in a third point of view, namely the perspective of those who thought that the Angolan Air Force gradually gained the upper hand as a result of their greater resources and the closeness of their bases. This enabled them to operate reasonably freely over all parts of the battlefield. Observers aligned to this school of thought also point to the fact that the Angolan Air Force, as early as 1988, already had a fleet of 150 fighter aircraft, which included 30 or more MiG-23 fighter planes, 61 MiG-21 fighter aircraft, a large number of SU-22 planes, and some attack helicopters. The great advantage of the Angolan Air Force was that their fleet was still expanding and that any losses could easily be replenished.¹⁰ Despite this formidable display of the most modern Russian armaments and equipment, the SAAF, with its aging fighter planes, still managed to keep on lending support to the ground forces. Although the SAAF no longer had the freedom of controlling the Angolan skies, as was the case at the beginning of the hostilities, they were still effective enough to do the necessary replenishments, evacuate casualties, move troops around, and provide limited air support. The threat posed by the enemy’s air power forced the SAAF to increasingly change its tactics and actions, and to adapt its profiles again and again. Among other things, it entailed that most missions, especially those of the Pumas and transport aircraft, had to be flown at night. This posed formidable challenges to the training and skills of the pilots and aircrews of the South African aircraft.

Regarding fighter planes, the SAAF mainly used the Mirage FIAZs of 1 Squadron, stationed at Hoedspruit. In spite of their efforts, the “Billy Boys” of 1 Squadron were unable to shoot down another MiG, as they did a few years earlier. Johan Rankin, the hero of 1981 and 1982, and men like Cmdt Carlo Gagiano (present chief of the Air Force), Maj. Arthur Piercy and the other pilots of 1 Squadron, tried

⁹ Gennady Shubin (ed.), *The oral history of forgotten wars. The memoirs of veterans of the war in Angola* (Moscow, 2007), pp. 56-57.

¹⁰ *Barnard Collection*, recording of interviews with Gen. Willem Hechter and Brig. Gen. Dick Lord, 22 August 1997, Brig. Gen. Gawie Winterbach, 23 August 1997.

in vain to add another “bandit” to their list of enemy planes shot down. The above-mentioned efforts to down enemy aircraft meant that South African fighters had to fly undetected (under the enemy’s radar cover) to the target area, and then suddenly ascend to attack MiGs flying nearby. In a few cases, South African pilots even managed to stalk some MiGs from behind and fire missiles at them. However, they were unable to shoot down any MiGs, since these fighter planes simply switched on their afterburners and outflowed both the Mirages and their missiles.¹¹ Clearly, good training and the experience of many years were no match for a super-fast, modern fighter plane.

To complete the picture, it is insightful to take a look at the following statistics, which could also be read against the backdrop of the debate about air superiority during the last couple of operations. In the course of the various operations, the Mirage FIAZs of 1 Squadron flew 683 missions during which a total of 3 068 bombs were dropped.¹² A large number of missions were flown to accompany and protect Buccaneers, while efforts were also made to engage MiGs in dogfights. 24 Squadron, with four Buccaneers, undertook 99 operational missions, during which 701 bombs were dropped.

In the course of the last few operations, the transport planes made an enormous contribution to the war effort. In a personal interview with one of the real “vlamgatte” in the Border War, Brig. Gen. Dick Lord, he did not hesitate to especially emphasise the role of the transport aircraft: “They were the unsung heroes of the last battles of the Bush War.”¹³ Helmoed Römer Heitman, a military analyst who comprehensively covered this aspect of the war in his work *War in Angola - The final South African phase*, writes as follows: “Transport crews are rarely if ever given their due. Their work is not glamorous, and it is generally not regarded as dangerous. Without them, however, many campaigns would have come to a halt. That is particularly true of the SAAF transport crews who flew in support of this campaign in southeastern Angola.”¹⁴

For the purpose of recording the facts, it should be pointed out that the Hercules C130s flew 412 missions and the Transall C160s 169 missions from Rundu to Mavinga and other areas in southeast Angola. Close to 7 000 tons of freight was transported, while 6 800 troops were moved. Taking into account that these night missions were often flown at a height of 100-150 metres in bad weather conditions, it is clear that the aircrews of the transport planes deserve all the accolades they received.

The process of landing at Mavinga was – if humanly possible – even more difficult than the flight from Rundu. No-one describes this process as well as Helmoed Römer Heitman:

¹¹ *Barnard Collection*, recording of interviews with Maj. Gen. Carlo Gagiano, 20 October 1996, Brig. Gen. Johan Rankin, 18 September 1997, Brig. Gen. Chris Lombard, 22 August 1997.

¹² *History of the Unit*, 1 Squadron History, s.a., s.l., pp. 160-167.

¹³ *Barnard Collection*, recording of interview with Brig. Gen. Dick Lord, 22 August 1997.

¹⁴ Heitman, *War in Angola ...*, p. 321.

“The aircraft would call Mavinga from five minutes out to have the runway lights lit. Literally lit: a line of smudge pots on each side of the runway. The aircraft would then descend to 100 meters for the approach, line up, descend, shut the throttles and fly into the runway - watching the tall trees flash past in the landing lights. These trees did not only look menacing, they presented a real hazard. Flying above tree height, the aircraft was exposed to cross-winds, and the pilot had to correct for drift. As the aircraft descended below the level of the treetops, the wind effect fell away abruptly, so that a quick reaction was needed to avoid hitting the trees downwind. Not easy with a fully laden transport! The nimble Transalls managed it every time, but two Hercules planes did connect with trees while landing at Mavinga, fortunately without serious damage. Touching down, the pilots would brake quickly, because they could not be sure of exactly where they were on the runway. The runway lights would be out before the aircraft had finished braking, so the high-speed taxi to the end of the runway was without external crew.”¹⁵

The endless night-flying meant that the aircrews had to rest and sleep during the day. The war also had a few light-hearted moments, as reflected by this entertaining story told by Heitman: A senior officer became extremely upset when he discovered that members of the Air Force were drinking alcohol before breakfast. According to him, this was a serious transgression of the rules, and the perpetrators had to be punished. In the course of the base commander’s investigation, it came to light that the crews of the transport aircraft and helicopters were merely enjoying their evening cocktails after a night’s work before going to bed!¹⁶

During the last operations of the Border War, the normal routines, which had become part of the lives of helicopter crews, were not followed. The Pumas were only used during the night to provide a shuttle service between the far-flung bases, Mavinga and the most forward headquarters. During these missions the Pumas mainly carried passengers and freight. In the course of a night, often lasting 15-16 hours, the Pumas patiently hopped from the one place to the next, to move officers and men, and to do replenishments.¹⁷

Despite the fact that the Pumas were more maneuverable than the cumbersome C130s and C160s, flying and landing in the dark in southeast Angola were very challenging tasks. The heavy thunderstorms often shook the Pumas like leaves, while the bumpy landings and the dust it kicked up, caused disorientation and nausea.

The Pumas were also assigned a variety of other operational tasks, for instance, dropping members of the Reconnaissance Commando deep in Angola and being available to assist with search and rescue missions.

The SAAF also deployed the Cactus ground-to-air missile system operationally for a couple of weeks. The desired results were not achieved, however, and as a result of, among other things, the problems of moving the system around, it was taken off the battlefield. Another system used for the first time in the Border War, was the unmanned Seeker RPV, flown by 10 Squadron. The Seeker was used mainly

¹⁵ *Barnard Collection*, recording of interview with Helmoed Römer Heitman, 14 April 1996.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Heitman, *War in Angola* ..., pp. 322-325.

for reconnaissance purposes and the tracking of convoys, and later to support the SADF's missile systems. For a while, the Seeker provided valuable information, and eventually only three of them were downed by enemy fire.

This novelty attracted quite a bit of attention. Indeed, on one occasion it took 17 missiles fired from a wide variety of SAM systems to down one Seeker.¹⁸ 10 Squadron could not, however, claim to have achieved any real operational successes with the unmanned Seeker. It is worth mentioning, however, that this new weapon system was quite effectively tested in operational conditions, and that the enemy literally wasted hundreds of missiles on it, with little to show for all their efforts.

Up to now, the SAAF's last operations were viewed from a broad perspective. Henceforth, the focus will fall on a number of tragic events during which the Air Force lost some of its best pilots (either as a result of the men dying or suffering severe injuries) and most valuable planes. The first of these events took place on 3 September 1987, when a ground-to-air missile shot down Lt Richard Glynn.

On 2 September, the first Bosbok aircraft to be used by the SAAF in the last operations left for the target area to the south of the Lomba River. Accompanying the pilot, Lt Richard Glynn, was the commander of 4 Artillery Regiment, Comdt Johan du Randt, who directed his battery of G-5 cannons from the air.

The results obtained on 2 September were so encouraging, that Glynn and Du Randt once again took off from Rundu the next day to repeat the process. Once over the battle ground, Glynn reported that the FAPLA forces were using RPG-7s to fire at him. Before he could be warned that it could not have been RPG-7s, a SAM-8 missile hit the Bosbok, and the plane dived into a swamp south of the Lomba River. Glynn and Du Randt were the first South African casualties of this operation. The bodies, as well as parts of the wreckage of Bosbok 934, were recovered with the assistance of UNITA soldiers and taken to the South African base. This event made the SAAF think, since no one could have predicted that a sophisticated weapon such as the SAM-8 system would be deployed in southeast Angola.

The second event in which the Air Force was involved during the last operations did not entail the loss of a Mirage, but had enormous consequences for the life of one of the country's young fighter pilots. After Arthur Piercy and the rest of the pilots of 3 Squadron arrived at Rundu at the beginning of September 1987, they were on call constantly, in an effort to shoot down a MiG once again. Within the first few days, they tried more than once to add another "kill" to their list of enemy planes shot down, as the missions of Anton van Rensburg and Carlo Gagiano indicate. On 17 September, Piercy's golden opportunity came up when enemy MiG-23s were spotted north of Mavinga. For Piercy it was not unlike a routine exercise, until they

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326.

climbed steeply and released the extra fuel tanks.¹⁹ In the ensuing dogfight, the Mirages managed to tail the MiG-23s and fire a Matra-500 air-to-air missile. The missile missed its target and the two Mirages returned to their home base without experiencing any problems.

The South African fighter pilots were unable to instantly repeat the successes of 1982, and the fact that more than half of them suffered from “gyppo guts” put another spoke in the wheel. Their staple diet of dry bread and Coca-Cola, as well as the unbearable heat in the tents in which they were accommodated, did little to create a positive atmosphere. It was so hot in the cabins of the fighter planes, that small screens were built in an effort to lower the temperature somewhat. To make matters worse, the commander of 3 Squadron, Carlo Gagiano, had to leave Rundu for a few days as a result of his father’s death and funeral. The fighter pilots of 3 Squadron, however, were determined to down a MiG at all costs, and accordingly, they were on standby on a 24-hour basis.

On Sunday 27 September 1987, at about 15:00, their opportunity came up when Comdt Carlo Gagiano and Maj. Arthur Piercy were flying over enemy territory looking for MiG-23s. The above-mentioned maneuvers were repeated, and Piercy was positioning himself and preparing to fire another missile at an MiG, when he saw a bright yellow explosion in front of him, followed by a missile coming straight at him. In an interview, years after the event, Piercy said that the many years of practice enabled him to react immediately and automatically. Since he broke into the missile, he managed to dodge the rocket, and it exploded behind the Mirage.²⁰

Although initially Piercy did not think his aircraft was hit, the mission leader, Carlo Gagiano, decided, as a precautionary measure, to call the attack off and head back to the base at Rundu. Piercy flew in a homeward direction, as low and as fast as he could. Nowadays, he smiles wryly at the way this flight reminds him of the hilarious “American Road Runner”, who is always on his way somewhere at the speed of light. Although the Mirage initially functioned very well and flew at 750 knots, the first warning light came on after five minutes, indicating that something was wrong and that certain systems did not function at all. As time went by, the warning lights came on one after the other. Once outside the range of the enemy radar, Piercy ascended to a higher altitude in an effort to use less fuel and returned his damaged Mirage safely to the base at Rundu.

Carlo Gagiano recalls Sunday 27 September 1987 as if it was yesterday. After the abortive attack on the MiG’s, he communicated with Piercy via radio and repeatedly used his emergency line to receive reports about the damage sustained

¹⁹ G Hattingh and SJ McGuinness, *Die Geskiedenis van 42 Eskader van die SALM vanaf 23 Januarie 1945 tot 31 Maart 1989 (s.a., s.l.)*, pp. D.59, D.60.

²⁰ *Barnard Collection*, recording of interviews with Gen. Carlo Gagiano, 20 October 1996 and Brig. Gen. Arthur Piercy, 18 March 1996.

by Piercy's aircraft. At one point, Gagiano flew so close to Piercy that he was able to determine some of the damage visually: fuel leaked out; there was quite a lot of shrapnel damage; and the brake parachute was gone. During the flight, and especially during the last few minutes before landing, Gagiano used all his knowledge and experience accumulated over many years to keep Piercy calm and assist him in landing on the runway at Rundu, which was only 2 000 meters long.²¹

Arthur Percy executed a perfect landing, but when he tried to activate the brake system, nothing happened; the emergency brake did not react at all. The Mirage literally shot over the runway, heading for the sand-filled safety pit. In the course of time, however, Rundu's white lime-like sand became as hard as the runway's tarmac surface. Piercy's Mirage shot through the fence, and then the front wheel struck a large stone. The impact of this crash activated Piercy's ejection seat, which catapulted him high into the air. Gagiano, who watched the unfolding drama from the air, immediately landed his aircraft in order to help his comrade. After Piercy had been taken to 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria, it took weeks before he once again became aware of the world around him.

His injuries brought an end to his career as a fighter pilot. His sixth and seventh vertebrae were crushed, and he had to hear the news that he would be wheelchair-bound for the rest of his life. If the safety nets lying next to the runway had only been installed earlier, he probably would not have been paralyzed today. But Arthur Piercy does not harbour a grudge. His words contain a lesson to all: "I had a job to do, and I did it to the best of my ability."²²

Carlo Gagiano explains that the tragic accident of his number 2 fighter pilot, Arthur Piercy, changed the SAAF's strategy of enticing MiG-23's into dogfights. Henceforth, the Mirages and Buccaneers would only be used to provide air support and for air-to-ground attacks. The threat posed by the MiG's and anti-aircraft and missile systems was of such a nature that the SADF had to reconsider the way they thought about the Border War. The SADF's ground forces would hardly have been able to withstand an onslaught by the enemy on the ground and from the air.

Apart from Piercy's accident, two incidents which took place during the last phase of the cross-border operations had a huge impact on the SAAF, namely the loss of Maj. ER (Ed) Every and Maj. JW (Willie) van Copenhagen. Both of them were veterans of the Border War, and had carried out numerous missions over enemy territory. Both of them belonged to 1 Squadron stationed at Hoedspruit and both flew with Mirage FIAZs.

The story of Ed Every's tragic death can be summarized as follows: On 20 February 1988, just after 17:30, four Mirages took off to launch an attack on enemy positions in the vicinity of Menogue – the third mission of the day. The

²¹ *Ibid.*, recording of interview with Maj. Arthur Piercy, 18 March 1996.

²² *Ibid.*, recording of interview with Maj. Gen. Carlo Gagiano, 20 October 1996.

fourship-formation consisted of the leader, Maj. Norman Minne, his number 2, Frans Coetzee, Ed Every as number 3 and Trompie Nel as number 4. According to Maj. Trompie Nel, the target was situated so far away from their home base that they had to attack it from the south for the umpteenth time that day. The South Africans thus used the same route and attacked from the same direction every time. With the attack completed, Every dived downwards in order to return home. Just then, he called a missile break. At that stage, when Trompie Nel was about 50 metres from Every, he saw a second missile streaking towards them, but before he could warn Every, the SAM-13 missile smashed into Every's Mirage. The aircraft burst into flames and crashed into the ground. Trompie recalls that suddenly the radio became terribly silent. Then the leader regained control over the formation, and after a short search, necessitated by an acute fuel shortage, they turned homewards. In spite of several rescue missions/efforts via a "telstar", a Puma and even elements of the Reconnaissance Commando, the body of Ed Every, who was flying his 52nd mission, could not be found. Presumably, he was unable to activate his ejection seat and died when his Mirage crashed into the ground. In this regard, Dick Lord's words ring true: "Ed Every was just plumb unlucky."²³ It was a sad day for Johan Rankin, the squadron leader. Not only did he lose one of his best and most experienced pilots, but the whole little community at Hoedspruit, their home base, was grief-stricken.²⁴

Ed Every's death touched the fighter pilot community deeply, because 1 Squadron had been away from home since 7 September of the previous year, when they left for the operational area; they had been away from home for more than five months.

The very last mission of Mirage FIAZs over enemy territory led to 1 Squadron's second casualty of the Border War. On 19 March, about a month after Every's death, a twoship-formation of FIAZs under the command of Johan Rankin, with Willie van Copenhagen as his number 2, launched an attack on a FAPLA base at Baixo Longa, 80 km southwest of Cuito Cuanavale. The fighter pilots were determined to use every possible opportunity to avenge Ed Every's death. Rankin recalls that the men were so eager to go out on missions, that they drew lots to determine who would go and who would stay. On 19 March 1988, it thus came about that Rankin and Van Copenhagen were chosen for the last mission. In pitch darkness, Rankin launched the first attack, and then waited until Van Copenhagen executed his attack. Without being able to see anything, since it was a moonless night, the two Mirages turned homewards. Although they had radio contact with one another, Van Copenhagen gave no indication that his plane was hit or that his onboard systems were malfunctioning. During this return flight to his home base, Van Copenhagen crashed into the ground

²³ *Ibid.*, recording of interview with Maj. Arthur Piercy, 18 March 1996.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, recordings of interviews with Brig. Gen. Dick Lord, 22 August 1997; Maj. Trompie Nel, 14 June 1996; Brig. Gen. C Lombard, 22 August 1997. Also see Dick Lord, *Vlamgat, the story of the Mirage F1 in the South African Air Force* (Weltevreden Park, 2000), pp. 192-193.

and died on impact. The SAAF's investigators found that a fuel pipe had burst and that the Mirage had begun losing fuel pressure. Van Copenhagen must have been aware of this emergency and probably focused all his attention on solving this problem. In the process of doing so, he probably became disoriented, and descended to such a low altitude in the dark that he crashed into trees and died. The wreckage of Van Copenhagen Mirage was only found in southern Angola after an all-out search effort lasting several days.²⁵ Willie van Copenhagen's death is a typical example of a South African pilot willing to put his life on the line to try and save his aircraft. The resulting adaptations/ changes to the flight simulators and the fighter planes, however, could never make up for the death of a fighter pilot.

This was the Mirage FIAZs of 1 Squadron's last mission; on 25 March 1988 the whole squadron returned to their home base at Hoedspruit. Except for a few missions flown by transport aircraft and helicopters, the Air Force's participation in the last major cross-border operations ended. There are several interpretations/ viewpoints regarding the Air Force's achievements. One argument is based on the fact that the SAAF lost only two planes in the course of the last operations as a result of enemy fire, namely a Bosbok and a Mirage. Taking the number of missions into account, this would mean that the Air Force actually performed very well. Another school of thought ascribes the low number of planes lost to the fact that the Air Force scaled down its operations during the last phase of the war.

Perhaps the answer to the implied question relates to the different profiles the Air Force were forced to fly (mainly during the night), as a result of deliberate enemy action. Considering the limitations the SAAF had to deal with, it achieved most of its aims.

Seen from a broader perspective, the cross-border operations of Moduler, Hooper and Packer, as well as the resistance encountered by the forces of UNITA and the SADF in Angola, together with escalating unrest within South Africa and the enormous financial implications, forced the South African Government to the negotiating table. Add to this the non-stop infiltration of PLAN fighters into SWA/ Namibia, and it becomes clear why the South African Government wasted no time in trying to find a solution to the conflict via negotiations rather than by means of never-ending fighting on the battlefield.

It appears that the USSR also believed that a negotiated agreement would provide the only feasible solution. The collapse of its battlefield in Afghanistan, as well as serious internal problems, forced the Soviet Union to adopt this approach. The military strategist Helmoed Heitman reaches the following conclusion, which, in a sense, provides a concise summary of the last cross-border operation:

²⁵ *Ibid.*, recording of interview with Brig. Gen. Johan Rankin, 19 September 1997. *History of the Unit, 1 Squadron History (s.a., s.l)*, pp. 166-167.

“The Soviets had no doubts that they could outmatch and outlast South Africa in force levels, equipment and manpower. What they asked themselves was whether it could be worth the financial and political cost. In the era of *glasnost*, *perestroika* and Soviet financial difficulties their conclusion was that it was not. The result of the South African campaign in southeastern Angola during 1987 and 1988 was thus to shift the problems of the region from the military to the diplomatic sphere.”²⁶

The SAAF’s participation in the Border War did not end with the withdrawal of the South African forces from southeastern Angola. During operations Moduler, Hooper and Packer, FAPLA and the Cubans began a huge build-up in what they called the fifth military region. In terms of SWA/Namibia’s geography, it meant that the enemy forces in the west were advancing in the direction of Calueque/Ruacana. For the first time in the war, the SAAF placed mobile radar systems at Nkongo, and various types of anti-aircraft systems were deployed at, among other places, Ruacana, Oshakati and Ondangwa, to guard against possible air attacks. In the run-up to the fighting which broke out at the end of June, Impalas flew two missions over enemy territory during which they drew SAM-6 and SAM-2 missiles. This resulted in all further Impala missions over southern Angola being cancelled. A Bosbok, which directed fire just south of the Ruacana power station, miraculously managed to dodge a SAM-6 missile.

On 27 June 1988, the last shots of the Bush War were fired. Comdt Mike Muller and his 61st Mechanised Battalion engaged a Cuban tank force. While they were busy fighting, eight MiG fighter planes of the Angolan Air Force attacked the Calueque dam wall. Several bombs were dead on target, and the dam wall sustained serious damage. However, one of the MiG’s missed its target completely and its bombs destroyed the pipeline between Calueque and Ruacana. One bomb exploded close to an Eland armoured vehicle, while another one destroyed a Buffel troop carrier.

Two Pumas, flown by John Church and Capt. Mike McGee, were scooted from Ruacana to do the casavac. This was to be the last mission of the Air Force over enemy territory.²⁷ The great irony of this devastating loss of life was that the negotiators at the conference table had already decided to end all hostilities when the last South Africans in the Border War died. In a certain sense, this last mission of the Pumas concluded a process that began more than two decades earlier with the attack on Ongulumbashe. The Border War officially started with a helicopter attack on PLAN fighters, and ended with Pumas evacuating the dead and wounded from the battlefield.

²⁶ *History of the Unit, 1 Squadron History (s.a., s.l.)*, pp. 166-167.

²⁷ Heitman, *War in Angola ...*, p. 336; *Eenheidsgeskiedenis, Die Geskiedenis van 310 LMBP vanaf 1976 tot 16 Junie 1989, s.a. s.l.*, pp. 35-37.

3. CONCLUSION

The SAAF's participation in Operations Moduler, Hooper and Packer made it clear that the Air Force's role in the war zone in SWA/Namibia and especially Angola, changed radically in the course of the war. The arrival of increasing numbers of Cuban soldiers as well as Russian advisors, added a totally new dimension to the hostilities.²⁸ The SAAF now had to confront some of the most modern and sophisticated aircraft and radar systems available on the planet. Add to that the fact that the very best Angolan pilots flew these planes, and you have a formidable combination indeed. Seen from a South African perspective, the policy makers had a simple choice: escalate the hostilities or seek solutions around the negotiating table.

²⁸ Shubin (ed.), pp. 25 *et seq.*