

THE ROLE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN AIR FORCE (SAAF) DURING THE SADF'S CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS IN ANGOLA, NOVEMBER 1981-1982: A HISTORICAL EXPLORATION

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It was particularly during the late seventies and eighties that the various arms of service of the South African Defence Force (SADF), and particularly the South African Air Force (SAAF), were involved in several cross-border operations. The most well-known of these included: Reindeer in 1978, Saffraan, Rekestok, Lunge, Sceptic, Backlash, Bootlace in 1979, Butterfly in 1980 and Carnation and Protea in 1981.² Seen from a South African military perspective, the SA forces achieved great successes, particularly during Operation Protea. The SAAF assisted the army in what was described as the largest mechanised operation of the SA Army since World War II.

The SA forces lost only ten men, compared to more than 1 000 losses on the side of FAPLA and SWAPO. About 4 000 tons of equipment were seized by the SA forces, including tanks, armoured vehicles and anti-aircraft guns, as well as about 200 logistical vehicles. This operation was also the SAAF's largest since World War II and the Korean War.

No fewer than 132 different aircraft were tasked by the SAAF, carrying out 122 missions and dropping 33,35 tons of bombs during these sorties.³

In an analysis of Operation Protea, Maj. Gen. Dippies Dippenaar said: "Die operasie is met groot sukses uitgevoer...groot hoeveelhede krygstuig is gebuit en daar kan met reg gesê word dat Operasie Protea die patroon van operasie(s) (sic) en die magsbalans in SWA/Namibië verander het tot die voordeel van die SAW – die volgende drie jaar...is die inisiatief van die insurgente in die suide van Angola hulle ontnem."⁴

It is against this background that the cross-border operations in which the SAAF participated at the end of 1981 and during 1982, in Angola, must now be scrutinised more closely.

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² RS Lord, *From fledgeling to eagle. An analysis of SAAF Air operations in southern Africa, 1966-1989* (s.l., s.a.), p.1. Cf. DW Pidsley, *The South African Air Force. A perspective in the context of the growth and development of the South African society up to 1985* (SA Air Force College, s.l., s.a.), pp. 125-135.

³ Eenheidsgeskiedenis. *Geskiedenis van 310 LMBP vanaf 1976 tot Junie 1989*, (s.l. s.a.; Pidsley), pp. 132-133; Maj. FA Young, *The history of 25 Squadron of the Air Force*, (s.l., s.a.), p. 191.

⁴ Brig. Gen. D Dippenaar, presentation: Die konsep van pre-aktiewe (sic) optrede soos toegepas in die verlede met 'n vooruitskouing op die toekoms (Border War Seminar, School of Armour, Bloemfontein).

1. OPERATION DAISY

The next cross-border operation in which the SAAF took part was Operation Daisy, which took place from 1 to 20 November 1981. During this operation, which extended over about three weeks and was undertaken jointly by the Army and the Air Force, the primary objective was to destroy the military infrastructure of SWAPO in the central theatre of south Angola. As in the previous operations, certain responsibilities were assigned to the Air Force, including air attacks on pre-determined targets, air defence missions, close air support to the Army, interdiction of enemy logistical routes, visual and photo exploration, transporting troops and casevac. To meet the demands the Air Force utilised no fewer than 80 aircraft that initially operated from airports in the north of SWA (now Namibia), but later also from airstrips in south Angola. A total of 479 missions were carried out by the SAAF during this operation.

Sector 10 and Air Force Command Post (AFCP) were responsible for the planning and execution of the operation, under the command of Lt Gen. “Witkop” Badenhorst and Maj. Gen. Ollie Holmes.⁵

The operation took place in the vicinity of Chetequere, about 240 km north of the Angolan border. Air attacks were followed by attacks by the ground forces, while paratroopers were also dropped as stopper groups. The SWAPO bases – which were distributed over a large area – were deserted, with a few exceptions. Air attack operations with Pumas and gun ships were launched to secure the airstrip. During operations at Cahama, the helicopters were assisted by six C130/C160 transport aircraft that successfully dropped three parabat companies in an airborne operation. The presence of the SAAF was augmented by the participation of Buccaneers and Mirages, which bombarded the targets. During the mopping-up operations (which consisted mainly of attacks and replenishment of supplies), an event took place which, as far as the SAAF is concerned, will be entered in the record books.

From the beginning of Operation Daisy the SAAF, as well as ground troops, became aware of MiG fighters of the Angolan Air Force beginning to fly over the area. As this was the first time in the Border War that such steps were taken, it naturally elicited a reaction from the SAAF. The hero of the day, Brig. Gen. Johan Rankin, describes the events of that day when he and his No. 2, Capt. Johan du Plessis, became engaged in combat with MiGs.

“Op die 6de November 1981, so teen 7 vm was ek en my ‘wingman’, kapt. Johan du Plessis, op die hoogste gereedheidsstand by die Lugmagbasis by Ondangwa. Ten spyte van ’n uifers warm Novembermaand, was dit so vroeg in die oggend dat die temperatuur in die kajuite nog draagbaar was. Dit is in hierdie stadium dat die SA radars ongeïdentifiseerde vliegtuie by Cahama kon waarneem. Voor hierdie gebeurtenis het die vegters van die SALM tevergeefs probeer om die MiG-vegters van die vyand in ’n ‘dogfight’ te betrek. Die

⁵ Eenheidsgeskiedenis. *Die geskiedenis van 310 LMBP vanaf 1976 tot 16 Junie 1989*, pp. 23-27.

Dayton-radarvegterkontroleur, maj. March Facer, het die twee Mirage-vlieëners van die posisie van die vyandelike vegters ingelig totdat radiokontak verbreek is.⁶

Brig. Gen. Dick Lord, well-known “vlamgat” in the SAAF, briefly summarises the events that led to the shooting down of the MiG No. 2. The accompanying schematic representation will help to provide the reader with a more detailed picture of the events.

“Major Johan Rankin and Lieutenant Johan du Plessis pitched to 25 000 feet in fewer than 30 seconds, and were undetected by the enemy radar controllers. Johan du Plessis sighted the enemy flying in the opposite direction, and they passed between 3 and 5 nautical miles on the port beam. They identified the enemy as two MiG-21s flying in a fighting element formation at the same height as the Mirages.

Jettisoning their drop tanks, the F1s entered a hard left turn that brought them in behind the unsuspecting MiGs. The enemy were flying 1 000 to 5 000 meters apart, with the No.2 aircraft trailing 30 degrees behind the leader's beam. The MiGs were flying directly into the sun, precluding as hot with the Matra 550 infrared guided missile. Instead, Rankin – closing in from astern on enemy No.2 – fired a burst of 30 mm explosive shells from approximately 350 meters. Immediately, a puff of smoke appeared around the MiG and fuel started leaking from the fuselage.

The MiGs entered a tight, descending, left-hand turn and jettisoned their fuel tanks; Major Rankin, by now within missile range of the leading MiG, attempted to launch his own missile, which malfunctioned. Rankin re-entered a curve in pursuit of the MiG No. 2, instructing Johan du Plessis to go after the MiG leader. MiG No. 2 committed a cardinal sin of aerial combat by reversing his turn, allowing Johan to close range rapidly and fire again with his cannons. The MiG exploded, immediately breaking into two behind the cockpit and forcing Johan to break away violently to avoid the debris. He watched as the stricken aircraft spiralled down in flames, and saw the enemy pilot eject.

Meanwhile, Johan du Plessis followed the MiG leader, who had entered a last-ditch spiral manoeuvre. Twice he entered the firing parameters for a missile launch but his missiles also failed to fire, the high ‘G’ descending turn possibly exceeding the Matra 550 launch limits.⁷

As the radar warned that other MiG fighters were on their way to the area, Rankin called back his wingman and returned to Ondangwa.

This dogfight took place in the airspace above Cahama in southeast Angola. As one can expect, there was an atmosphere of great excitement when Rankin and his co-pilot landed on the runway of Ondangwa. Rankin recalls vividly how everyone congregated on the runway to welcome him back properly. This was the first time since the SAAF's involvement in the war in Korea that a South African pilot became engaged in a dogfight with the enemy, and he even succeeded in delivering a severe blow to the Angolan Air Force by shooting down a MiG-21. Of course this achievement was celebrated properly!⁸

⁶ *Leo Barnard Collection*; Tape recording of interview with Brig. Gen. Johan Rankin, 24 June 1996.

⁷ Dick Lord, *Vlamgat, the story of the Mirage F1 in the South African Air Force* (Weltevreden Park, 2000), pp. 110-112; Cf. also Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War, 1966-1989* (Gibraltar, 1989), pp. 98-99; Eenheidsgeskiedenis. *Die Geskiedenis van 1 Eskader van die SALM* (March 1990, s.l., s.a.), p.144.

⁸ *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interview with Brig. Gen. Johan Rankin, 24 June 1996.

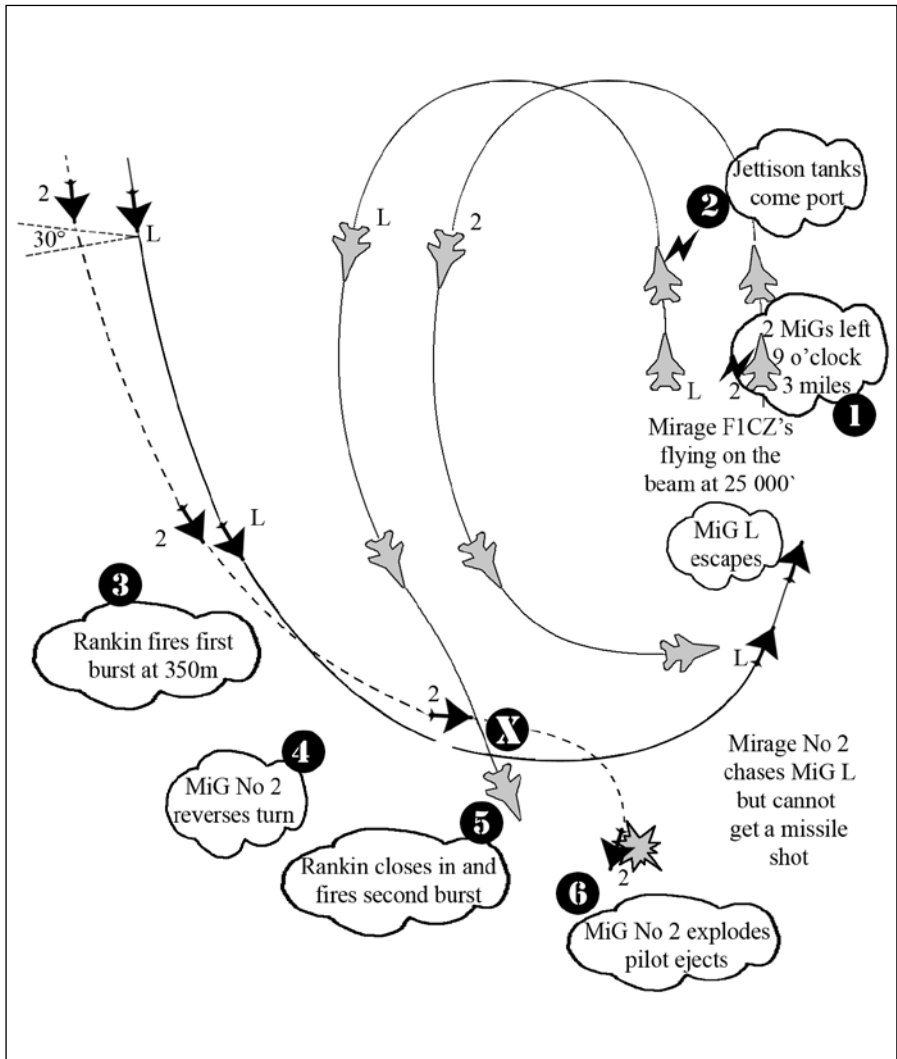


Figure 1: first MiG kill⁹

⁹ Lord, *Vlamgat...*, p.111.

However, there is another side to this matter that drew the attention of the senior officers in particular, and for which they had to get answers. Without fear of contradiction, it can be accepted that the events of 6 November 1981 implied, *inter alia*, that the Angolan Air Force would begin to challenge the superiority of the SAAF up to that stage of the Border War. Consequently, the SAAF would have to apply new doctrines and fly other profiles to address this new enemy threat.

One of the most well-known “vlamgatte” of the Border War, Dick Lord, gave a clear explanation of the changed circumstances under which the SAAF had to function during operations in Angola in his contemplation of the specific events:

“Perhaps the most significant change in the war in southern Angola over the period 1975-1989, was the expansion of the Angolan Air Defence Network. During the period 1975-1981 the SAAF had complete freedom of movement in southern Angola. We were able to carry out recesses and air strikes with impunity, as their main axis of air defence was situated along the Namibe-Menonque railway line. The enemy, however, knew that if they were to win the war, they would have to move their air defence forward to regain control of their own airspace. This they did bit by bit, and almost every time they caught us by surprise, either by a new deployment, or by a new type of weapon or missile. They even built airfields and moved aircraft without us knowing about it. We were indeed very lucky not to have lost a greater number of aircraft to ground-air defence.”¹⁰

If we only consider the action of the SAAF, Operation Daisy was of a much more limited scope than Operation Protea, for instance, but they succeeded in achieving the stated goals nevertheless. Johan Rankin’s shooting down of the MiG-21 was a great bonus for all members of the SAAF, which would serve as an encouragement to do their part with the same devotion and sacrifice in the years to come.

2. OPERATIONS SUPER, BOSSIES AND MEEBOS

The next year, 1982, was also a particularly busy period for the SAAF. Apart from undertaking literally hundreds of missions over hostile territories during this year, the Air Force also took part in three specific operations, namely Operations Super, Bossies and Meebos. Another reason the people of the Air Force will still remember this year for a long time is the fact that they lost quite a few aircraft during operational missions. In addition to the aircraft that crashed or were shot down during the above-mentioned operations, they also lost quite a number of aircraft in other ways during this year.

As early as 5 January 1982, the Puma of Capt. John A Robinson, Lt Michael J Earp and Sgt Kenneth G Dalglish was shot down during an operational flight and the three crew members perished. Furthermore, it is important to know that Lt Earp was the son of Lt Gen. Dennis Earp, later the chief of the SAAF.¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interview with Maj. Gen. Dennis Earp, 18 May 1996.

On the 10th of April 1982, one of the most colourful figures of the civilian force who flew with the SAAF, Maj. HA (Tigly) Kessler, died during an operation assisting Koevoet.

Tigly Kessler was a Namibian and a member of the civilian force element of 1 SWA Squadron, who served in SWA/Namibia throughout. As an experienced civilian force pilot, Kessler played the role of “fighter pilot” in the operational area in his Cherokee 140 for quite a few years. To make his aircraft less vulnerable and also to target the PLAN fighters as effectively as possible, he “armed” his aircraft with a self-fabricated grenade launcher and later also with two AK 47 machine guns that were installed below the wings, and could be fired from the cockpit. His untimely death was a severe blow for all the Air Force staff who knew him.¹²

During an attack on 1 June 1982 in the vicinity of Cuvelai, one of the most experienced fighter pilots in the Air Force, Maj. Eugene Kotze, died when he launched a high-dive attack and crashed into the ground. Just more than a month later, on 10 July, the SAAF lost two more pilots when a Bosbok crashed near Oshigambo, killing the pilots on board, Lt OC Janse van Rensburg and CO AG Roux. One of the most tragic accidents in the history of the Air Force occurred only four days later, on 14 July, when a VIP Merlin returning from an inspection trip in the operational area and while preparing to land at Waterkloof, was involved in a midair collision with a civilian twin-engined Piper aircraft. All the passengers on board of the two planes died, including two senior members of the SAAF.

The full list of SADF members who died was Maj. Gen. JM Crafford, Maj. Gen. DJ van Niekerk, Capt. JIT de Villiers, Lt L Goldstein, Sgt (Ms) A Niewoud.¹³

Operation Super (which, by the way, only received its name after the completion of the operation)¹⁴ was the first major operation of the Air Force in 1982. After Operations Protea and Daisy of the previous year, SWAPO must have begun to realise that the *status quo* could not be maintained, and that an alternative infiltration route to SWA/Namibia had to be opened. After all the enemy radar installations destroyed in previous cross-border operations had been replaced and even improved, they actively embarked on opening a front in the far west of northern SWA/Namibia, in an area known as Kaokoland.

Information to this effect was obtained early in 1982, and reconnaissance elements of 32 Battalion were sent to track down the PLAN fighters who had infiltrated the area, and to be on the lookout for the possible existence of permanent

¹² *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interviews with Col Charlie Marais, 14 March 1995 and Brig. Gen. HAP Potgieter, 18 June 1996.

¹³ Pidsley, p. 134.

¹⁴ Al J Venter, *The chopper boys. Helicopter warfare in Africa* (Halfway House, 1994), pp. 195-203; Jan Breytenbach, *They live by the sword, 32 Buffalo Battalion. Africa's Foreign Legion* (Alberton, 1990), p. 204; Piet Nortjé, *32 Battalion. The inside story of South Africa's elite fighting unit* (Cape Town, 2007), pp. 181-185.

enemy camps. The elements of 32 Battalion were assisted by an air force component consisting of two Alouette IIIs, equipped as gunships, two Pumas and a Bosbok that served as a "Telstar" for communications. On 10 March the Air Force staff departed on a visual reconnaissance sortie along the Kunene to the Atlantic Ocean, which was a mere 20 minutes' flying time away from the Marienfluss, where the main base for this operation had been established. Neall Ellis, one of the pilots of the gunships was a passenger on the Puma on the sortie to the Atlantic Ocean. He and a few of his friends could not resist the opportunity to go fishing in the cold waters of the west coast.¹⁵ It will probably never be known whether the love for angling or the need for fresh provisions motivated the group to undertake this trip.

On the way back to the base it became clear that elements of the attack force from 32 Battalion had been engaged in conflict with PLAN fighters. In the skirmishes that took place, the South Africans succeeded in either eliminating the enemy or taking them prisoner. A total of 14 members of the enemy patrol were killed, and seven were taken prisoner. During the interrogation, it became clear that there was indeed a PLAN camp on the Angolan side of the border, housing up to 300 members of this organisation. This group of SWAPO supporters had direct instructions to build a corridor camp, and to amass large numbers of weapons that could be used in attacks in SWA/Namibia.

In order to achieve the necessary element of surprise for the attack, it was planned as rapidly as possible. This planning included, *inter alia*, that fuel was to be flown in with C130s and C160s from as far as Pretoria, that extra ammunition and the rest of Capt. Jan Hougaard's company, consisting of soldiers of 32 Battalion, were flown in, as well as two additional gunships, helicopters and Pumas. By the afternoon of 12 March, the force was ready to launch the attack. Neall Ellis was not in favour of letting the attack take place so hastily, and was very happy when it was postponed until the next day due to a rainstorm over the target. However, it was not an idle evening for the attack force, as a senior intelligence officer made a sand model of the enemy target on the ground after interrogating the prisoners again. This visual information proved to be very informative the following day.

Just after 07h00 on the morning of Saturday 13 March, the attack force, consisting of 45 men from 32 Battalion (which included an 81 mm mortar group), four Alouette III gunships and five Pumas as troop carriers, departed for the target area.¹⁶ It was located in a relatively hilly area and was only 1 km by 1,5 km in extent, 22 km north of the Angolan border and 75 km from the Angolan coastline. In an interesting article published in the *Cape Times* in May 1982 by its military correspondent, Willem Steenkamp, the entire narrative unfolds very clearly, as recounted by Neall Ellis:

¹⁵ *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interview with Maj. Neall Ellis, 21 March 1996.

¹⁶ Venter, pp. 195-203.

“We took off from the Marienfluss airstrip. I led and my No.2 was Captain Angelo Maranta. My plan was to have the ground troops 15 minutes behind us when we were over the area. We approached from the west and saw what we thought was a vehicle under some trees. Later it turned out to be an arms cache. Then we knew the camp must be there. Then my flight engineer, Sergeant Steve Coetzee, saw tents – some were proper bell tents but most were just bivvies made from shelter-halves; at first they looked like rocks to me. Then we got closer and I could see the clothes hanging out to dry from the previous night’s rain. The camp was about 500 m by 300 m. There wasn’t much serious camouflage. While insurgents in the camp frantically took cover, he called in his troop-carrying helicopters, which were ‘holding’ about 10 minutes’ flight away. Before they arrived, however, the action started. Some insurgents ran for it down various dried river-beds, while others stayed put in the camp and started firing at Ellis and Maranta.”

Ellis noted

“that ‘two SAM-7’s’ were fired at me and one at Angelo. We avoided them – we didn’t worry about them. I was told a fourth was fired, but I didn’t see it.

We dropped our mortar team on a hill east of the camp, and they began to fire at the terrorists. Later, when our troops were so close that the mortars couldn’t fire for fear of hitting them, they reported the terrs’ movements.

The troop-carrying helicopters dropped the ‘sweep line’, or main attacking force, southwest of the camp. As the men started advancing, the helicopters went back and fetched two ‘stopper groups’, which were placed across dried riverbeds likely to be used as escape routes.”

The commander of the eastern group, 2nd Lt PJS Nel, was one of three security force soldiers killed in the fighting. Ellis remembers that he did “an incredible job”.

About 1 000 m from the camp, the ground troops began to encounter heavy resistance from small groups of insurgents who had ensconced themselves in some of the river gullies. Dislodging them was a slow, dangerous business. At times, supporting fire was brought in only a few meters in front of the troops.

Around noon, however, the first 32 Battalion troops entered the camp on the southern side and mopped up resistance there. Ellis landed in the camp to discuss mopping-up procedures – and found to his horror that he had come down in the middle of a skirmish which was by no means over. Some insurgents in the northern section of the camp, who had been lying low, suddenly opened fire. Ellis recalls:

“There was Johan Hougaard telling me to get in the air, my flight engineer going mad and me sitting there, because to have gone up then would have been suicide, so I sat tight till the shooting was over.”

That’s what Operation Super was like - a small action by global standards perhaps, but not so small by the standards of the men who fought there. More than anything else, two factors won the day – sheer professionalism and modern technology that left the men in the bush with very very few places to hide, according to Neall Ellis.¹⁷

During cleaning-up operations in the base, a large number of weapons in absolutely perfect condition was seized. As far as the fatalities were concerned,

¹⁷ Willem Steenkamp in *The Cape Times*, May 1982.

201 SWAPO fighters were killed, compared to only three of the security forces. Without the active assistance of the Air Force, and particularly the gunships, the successful outcome of such an operation would simply not have been possible. The consequences of Operation Super are of a widely different nature. As far as SWAPO is concerned, they were beaten so resoundingly during the operation that no attempt was ever made again to activate the westernmost theatre on such a scale. As far as the South African attack force is concerned, five of its members earned the *Honoris Crux* decoration, including two members of the Air Force, namely Capt. Neall Ellis and his flight engineer, Sgt (currently Capt.) Steve Coetzee.¹⁸

One often wonders how it is possible to carry on functioning under the most dangerous circumstances imaginable, and even to perform far above one's ability. In an interview with Neall Ellis, he certainly expressed the view of the majority of recipients of the *Honoris Crux* medal when he declared quite modestly:

"It is not a question of bravery or anything like that, but it is something you are trained for and when it happens it just becomes part of your job. You do have moments of gut-wrenching fear, but you can actually get to enjoy it because it gives you a high."¹⁹

After the completion of Operation Super, the Air Force was involved chiefly in two types of operations. In the first case, SWAPO sent nine heavily armed groups of fighters to the farming area south of the Etosha National Park during April 1982. Although six groups could be cleaned up quickly, the remaining three groups kept the forces of the SADF busy for quite some time before they were forced to flee back to Angola across the border. During this period a component of the Air Force, mainly light and cargo planes and helicopters, was engaged in internal operations.

The bombers and fighter planes, on the other hand, were carrying out several attacks on targets north of the Angolan border. During one such limited operation, named Operation Bossies, two of 3 Squadron's Mirages were scooted from Ondangwa on Thursday 13 May. Capt. John Inggs and Capt. Martin Louw were in the cockpits of the Mirage F1s, and their assignment was to shoot down an MI-8 helicopter of the Angolan Air Force that was flying just outside Cuvelai. After flying out as rapidly as the Mirages could, they tracked down the MI-8 helicopter just outside the town. After both of the Mirages had fired at the helicopter, it exploded and crashed to the ground.²⁰ It was evident from this action by the Air Force that the SAAF intended to follow a more aggressive policy in Angola, which would inevitably elicit a reaction from the FAPLA and Cuban forces – the period of total air superiority of the SAAF over the Angolan airspace would soon be something of the past. The limited operation was concluded when the Mirages departed for their home bases again after a week.

¹⁸ Ian Uys, *Cross of Honour* (Germiston, 1992), pp. 92-94.

¹⁹ *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interview with Maj. Neall Ellis, 21 March 1996.

²⁰ Pidsley, p. 134.

Operation Meebos was the next significant operation in which the Air Force took part. The main goal of this operation was to destroy the SWAPO headquarters at Evale in the central areas of South Angola. However, the base was deserted and the South African invading force changed course to Mupa, where they carried out an attack. These attacks were also not very successful, as the largest part of the PLAN force had moved to Cassinga, where they were attacked by the South African invading force and the base was conquered. As in the case of all cross-border operations in the past, Operation Meebos took place with the assistance of the Air Force. The Air Force's assistance consisted of the following: seven Alouette III helicopters, of which six were gunships and one was a troop carrier, nine Pumas to transport the parabat force, as well as C130/C160s to assist with transporting this force; supplementation would be done by a Dakota, while the Mirage F1s of 1 and 3 Squadron would operate from Ondangwa. The operation commenced on 22 July 1982 and was completed by the middle of August, after which the attack force withdrew from Angola.²¹

With regard to the Air Force, a few of the operation's characteristics were significant. This operation was possibly the one where helicopters were utilised on the broadest basis possible. Not only the artillery helicopters, but also the Pumas as troop carriers were used repeatedly. As the enemy fled before the advancing South African attack force, it was the helicopters that maintained contact through their action, and gave the attacks further impetus. This is evident from, *inter alia*, the number of Helicopter Administrative Areas that were constantly moving together with the Army, as well as the action of the artillery helicopters in particular. In a chapter about Operation Meebos in *Chopperboys*, Neall Ellis sings the praises of the Alouette III helicopter:

"Once again the Alouettes had proved brilliantly. That day, above all others, it had been proved that the French-built Alouette is a versatile and rugged little fighting machine that is also able to take a punch. We had conclusively shown that with the correct tactics and adequate pilot tenacity it is possible for an Alouette to neutralise an anti-aircraft gun emplacement."²²

Neall Ellis was referring to the action of Capt. Henry Friend (Harry) Anderson, who succeeded in putting a 14,5 mm anti-aircraft cannon out of action with his Alouette artillery helicopter in the midst of the small-arms fire and RPG rockets directed against him. Anderson had no fear at all – this is emphasised by the fact that he had also saved his helicopter earlier that day when it almost burnt out. A white phosphorus grenade started a fire in the grass near the Alouette and, with the flames already licking the helicopter, Anderson succeeded in flying it to safety. Anderson

²¹ Eenheidsgeskiedenis. *Die geskiedenis van 310 LMBP vanaf 1976 tot 16 Junie 1989*, p. 28. For a complete version see Venter, pp. 177-190.

²² Venter, p. 184.

was awarded the *Honoris Crux* decoration for his courageous conduct. During this mission, the flight engineer was Flight Sgt PJP (Jock) van der Westhuizen.²³

A few days later, on 9 August 1982, the Air Force suffered one of the heaviest losses during its 23-year participation in the Border War when a Puma was shot down during an operation southeast of Cuvelai and its crew and all the passengers were killed. The events briefly entail that eight Pumas were to transport the paratroopers to the enemy base, where they would attempt to destroy the enemy or drive them off the base. Just after midday on 9 August, the heavily laden Pumas (each with 12 paratroopers on board) flew over a shona, unaware of the fact that a SWAPO force equipped with anti-aircraft guns was ensconced there. Although many years have since passed, Jaco Klopper remembers very clearly how the Pumas flew in a loose VIC formation. The SWAPO forces began firing at John Twaddle's Puma without any warning, and the helicopter's nose immediately began a sharp ascent, while the tail rotor broke off. The Puma slowly rolled over onto its back, crashed to the ground and exploded.

During these tragic events, no fewer than 15 South Africans perished. The three Air Force members who died were the pilot, Capt. John G Twaddle, his co-pilot, Lt Chris W Pietersen and the flight engineer, Sgt CN (Grobbies) Grobler. The 12 paratroopers were all national servicemen from 1 Parachute Battalion in Bloemfontein.²⁴

Immediately after the Puma had crashed, the two gunships that had to provide close air support, flown by Lt Michael A (Mike) Hill and Lt Chris Louw, returned to the area.²⁵ Louw was hit amid particularly heavy fire from the enemy, and while flying over the wreckage at a height of a few meters above the ground he could observe that no-one could have survived the impact. After they had safely left the area, Hill accompanied Louw's Alouette to the Helicopter Administrative Area. He subsequently returned to the place of impact in an attempt to search for survivors, and continued to circle over the area to ensure that the rescue operation proceeded smoothly. Mike Hill was awarded the *Honoris Crux* decoration for this courageous action in the midst of great mortal danger.²⁶ Since the enemy fire was so heavy, no South African aircraft could venture near the wreckage of the Puma. It was only on the following day that one of the most seasoned cross-border operators, Roland de Vries, and his armoured unit could succeed in reaching the wreckage. According to those present, there was no chance that anyone could come out of the Puma's wreckage alive. De Vries's force recovered the mortal remains of the South Africans to be sent home for proper burial.

²³ Uys, pp. 95-97.

²⁴ Venter, pp. 186-187; Eenheidsgeskiedenis, *Die geskiedenis van 310 LMBP vanaf 1976 tot 16 Junie 1989*.

²⁵ *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interview with Brig. Gen. HAP Potgieter, 18 June 1996 and Maj. Jaco Klopper, 20 March 1996.

²⁶ Uys, pp. 98-99.

Col Piet Nel, former commander of 44 Parachute Brigade, recounts this black day in the history of the paratroopers with sadness.²⁷ However, one significant consequence of these tragic events was that the SADF decided that paratroopers would no longer be transported in large numbers with Air Force aircraft. A single C130 or C160 crashing could imply the loss of more than 60 paratroopers.

Operation Meebos essentially came to a standstill after 10 August, as SWAPO got the message of the South African invading force and simply retreated northwards to their next headquarters. In general, it therefore appears as if the SADF attained its stated goals with Operation Meebos. The so-called “eastern front” of SWAPO with its headquarters at Mupa had been destroyed, and it would be quite a while before this infrastructure would be repaired. Although successes are not often measured against the number of the enemy that perished, it can be mentioned for the record that SWAPO lost more than 300 of its men, compared to 29 losses on the South African side, of which 15 were sustained in the single incident when Twaddle’s Puma was shot down. This operation also gave the Air Force a great deal to think about – a fully loaded Puma had been shot down for the first time. This simply meant that the invasions into Angola and the role of the Air Force in such actions had to be contemplated in a new and innovative way.

The last incident during the year 1982 in which the SAAF was involved not only attracted international attention, but was also an excellent morale booster. Almost a year after Maj. Johan Rankin had shot down the MiG-21 he found himself in the centre of action again, purely by coincidence, when two FICZs of the SAAF’s 3 Squadron became involved in an air-air fight with two MiG-21s of the Angolan Air Force on 5 October 1982. By the end of 1982, the SAAF was engaged in an attempt, during reconnaissance flights, to determine the location of SWAPO bases from which invasions could be launched across the border into SWA/ Namibia. No-one can relate this story better than Johan Rankin himself, as he remembers the events as if they occurred yesterday. He recounts how, together with his wingman, Capt. Kobus Toerien, he had to accompany a Canberra on a mission at Cahama. The mission controller (Capt. Les Lombard) warned them that MiG fighters were on their way to intercept them. Upon approaching, the MiGs fired Soviet Atoll type missiles at the Mirages, but they missed their targets.²⁸

Dick Lord completes this story:

“The F1s completed a 180-degree turn, while the MiGs were turning only gently to the right, maintaining supersonic speed. Radar confirmed the MiGs were outdistancing the F1s. Unable, too close to firing range, Johan switched his intercept radar onto transmit, hoping the MiGs’ radar warning receiver would warn their pilots and force them to turn into the F1s. As was hoped, the MiGs did reverse their turn. Whether this resulted from their radar warning, or whether they were still intent on intercepting the Canberra was uncertain, but

²⁷ *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interview with Col Piet Nel, 21 August 1995.

²⁸ *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interview with Brig. Gen. Johan Rankin, 24 June 1996.

the manoeuvre did allow the F1s to cut the corner and close the range, then drop away. Subsequent examination of the gun camera film showed that the missile had been fired at 3 000 meters, the extreme limit of its range at those speeds.

Closing range, Johan fired his second missile from about 1 500 meters. The missile tracked the MiG, which had entered a descending split-S manoeuvre, and exploded right behind it. The MiG was hit, but still controllable, and continued its left-hand roll before heading back to base, trailing smoke. According to information acquired later, the MiG-21, although damaged, made it back to base. There, however, the pilot was unable to lower the undercarriage and the ensuing forced landing caused additional serious damage.

With one enemy aircraft out of the fight, Rankin closed on the lead MiG, which entered a split-S to the left. Johan followed, overtaking rapidly, and at 230 meters started firing his 30 mm Defa cannons. The MiG exploded directly in front of him, and he could not avoid flying through the fireball of the explosions. The heat and smoke caused the F1's engine to develop a compressor stall. Only after cutting the engine and performing a hot relight, did the engine return to normal.

In contrast, Cobus Toerien found the sortie utterly depressing. He managed to get a MiG in his sight at 12 o'clock, but at 1 500 meters and 80-degree angle off, he could do nothing about it."²⁹

Dick Lord's graphical representation provides a clearer picture of how Rankin shot down his second MiG fighter.

During the second shooting down of a MiG-21, Rankin flew a Mirage FICZ with the number 203. This specific aircraft was the first (and at that stage also the only one) that was painted in a new colour scheme of blue and grey. At the insistence of Gen. Jan van Loggerenberg, (at that stage the CAF of the Air Force) the pilots renamed the aircraft "Le Spectre" (French for "The Ghost") because the colour scheme was so effective.

Despite the national and also international recognition Rankin received for his action, he remained humble: "Ek was maar net 'n gemiddelde vegvlieënier wat besig was om my werk te doen. Dit was egter my tweede gelukkige dag dat ek op presies die regte tyd op die regte plek was."³⁰

²⁹ Lord, *Vlamgat...*, p. 131.

³⁰ *Barnard Collection*: Tape recording of interview with Brig. Gen. Johan Rankin, 24 June 1996.

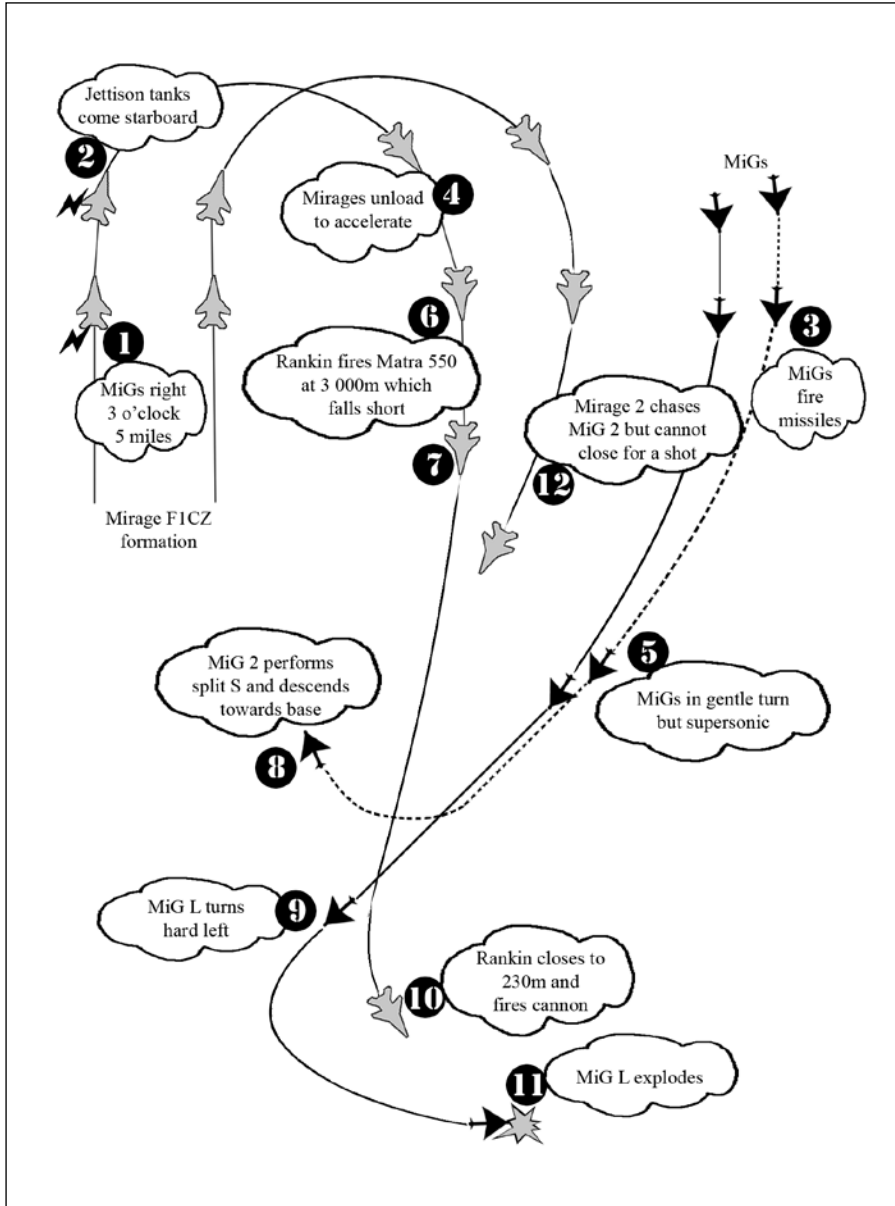


Fig 2: Second MiG kill³¹

³¹ Lord, *Vlamgat...*, p. 130.

3. IN CONCLUSION

In a certain sense, the year 1982 was a watershed as far as the South African Air Force's participation in the Border War was concerned. Not only did they lose a number of aircraft; the enemy also began to display a more offensive and defensive posture. Some of the latest weapons from the East Block countries were provided to the FAPLA and Cuban forces. It was particularly true regarding the anti-aircraft artillery that were used in the anti-aircraft role, as well as in the ground role. The same apply to the various SAM missile systems. The capacity of this air defence presented new challenges to the Air Force. The fact that the MiG fighters were also used in Angola against the SAAF since 1982 necessitated a totally different approach to the SAAF's participation. With each year that passed, the enemy had better and more modern equipment at its disposal, and the task of the SAAF accordingly became increasingly difficult. The counter measures and tactics were no longer as effective. The SADF and the Air Force in particular thus had to think innovatively and differently in order to continue playing an active role in the Border War. This change in thinking would have to be applied at a strategic as well as a tactical level.

The final words about this escalating threat with regard to the air war in Angola belong to Dick Lord:

“We could hold our own with MIG-17 and 21, but not 23s. The MIG-23s were superior, and they had four guided missiles. Towards the end of it, these aircraft and defence systems were superior and we had a difficult time out there; however, the South Africans' training was extremely good and the pilots could hold their own.”³²

³² Dick Lord, as quoted in LC Marx, *Aspects of the Border War, 1966-1989*, unpublished MA dissertation, UFS, November 2006, p. 51.