



Picture: Cela Hospital, Angola. South African Air Force Alouette helicopter in the foreground, 1975
Picture credit: Kevin Bowden

Operation Savannah - The battle of the casualties of the war

A memoir by Johan du Preez, July 2017

An intervention on foreign soil

I heard the explosion only after I fell to the ground. The sound was muted as if it came from afar, somewhere from the surrounding bush. My first thought was that someone was shooting at me.

At that moment movement and time as I know it, changed. Activities around me continued as if in slow motion, then it shifted as if time didn't exist at all. It was as though I wasn't really there. I felt that I'd been moved to an adjacent dark and soundless dimension. Here I was kept safe while things that I couldn't see were happening where I physically had been moments before. While floating in this darkness, scenes from my childhood and later flashed in black-and-white before me.

Suddenly the darkness and the experience of time without end were gone. I was lying on my back with dust settling around me. I smelled burning flesh and tasted the sickening stench of the plastic explosives which had detonated moments before. I chose not to look down at my legs. It wasn't necessary. I knew I had stepped on a landmine.

It was about two o'clock on Monday 1 December 1975 on a stifling afternoon in the western part of central Angola, around 400 km from Luanda and 900 km from the northern border of South-West Africa (now Namibia).

The political backdrop

I was in Angola on military duty at the time. It all started in 1974 when, in Portugal, the government was overthrown by a military coup and the new government decided to grant all Portuguese colonies their independence. This led to a civil war in Angola.

In his book, *Angola – Operation Savannah 1975-1976 (Pretoria 1989)*, prof. F.J. du Toit Spies stated that the independence process in the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Guinee-Bissau went off relatively smoothly. However, in Angola a civil war broke out between three opposing freedom movements – UNITA, the FNLA and the MPLA – each wanting to be in control of the country on 11 November 1975, the date set for Portugal to leave.

Ideologies played an important role. The MPLA had a Marxist base and had the support of Russia, Cuba and other communist countries with, amongst others, their military forces already deployed in Angola. UNITA and the FNLA leaned towards the West, receiving lesser, mainly clandestine support from America and France.

In July 1975 the internal conflict reached a critical level in favour of the MPLA. UNITA and the FNLA approached South Africa for support. Involvement by America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), led to the South African government agreeing to render covert military support to these two movements. As a result the South African Defence Force (SADF) became involved in a clandestine military operation in Angola over the period July 1975 – January 1976. The campaign was known as Operation Savannah.

My involvement

My role in Operation Savannah was as an officer in the South African Army's Engineer Corps. I was a career soldier, being a member of the SADF's permanent force. I was based at 2 Field Engineer Regiment in Bethlehem (South Africa) at the time and had the rank of lieutenant. I never saw myself as one of those dynamic movers and shakers of this world. However at the age of 25 this young and footloose lad who grew up in the Free State was looking forward to his career in the Engineer Corps – as a person wanting to contribute in a constructive manner to the lives of those around him and, as a soldier, ready to do whatever my country would ask me to do.

Our role as combat engineers (in general referred to as sappers) was to ensure the mobility of our own forces and to hinder the mobility of the enemy. We were trained in various military engineering disciplines – road and bridge building, purification and supply of water in bulk, mine warfare, demolitions and erecting or breaching obstacles, to mention a few.

It was against this setting that my engineer troop consisting of 30 men and me – as part of a bigger force consisting of infantry, armoured, artillery and other elements – crossed the border into Angola in our Unimog 4x4 trucks on a hot afternoon in November 1975. Our destination was a village named Cela – 900 km further north – where we would join the South African Army’s Task Force Foxbat as reinforcements.

A memoir written 42 years later

I’m writing this memoir some 42 years later to recount a part of the history of Operation Savannah not many know about, a part that must be told. It’s my recollection of a battle that began in Angola, but ultimately was intensely fought 3000 km from the front – the battle of the casualties of this war at 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria.

I include segments from my personal journey. More important, though, I highlight the vital role that the medics played during and after the campaign.

Angola – an abandoned country

My recollection of Angola as we advanced further north into the country, was the beauty of the countryside. The flat bush landscape of the south gradually made way for a mountainous skyline and lush, green vegetation. It was sub-tropical, even tropical in places.

This stood in stark contrast with the destruction we saw as we progressed. We drove through empty towns with only bullet-ridden and graffitied buildings telling stories of skirmish and destruction that had recently taken place. We witnessed devastation we could not fathom at the time.

There was the unpleasant smell of the countryside at times. As a newcomer to this desolation, I made myself believe that perhaps it had to do with decayed animal carcasses. However, in the back of my mind these putrid odours gradually layered into one overall consciousness – it was the smell of death. Mortality had become a reality in this part of the world.

We saw what was left behind after people had fled.

The first signs were the abandoned trucks and other vehicles along the roads that we regularly came across on our way north, all of them pointing south, away from the destruction we were heading into. We were told that the Portuguese families used them to escape to safety, to what was then still known as South-West Africa. These vehicles either broke down or ran out of fuel. Before abandoning them, the owners removed the batteries to make them even more inoperable for anyone wanting to use them afterwards.

Not knowing what unexpected tasks awaited us, we sappers had a habit to deliberately scout around to see what resources were available in the areas where we operated. In fact, it was a part of our operating procedure to compile an ever-expanding inventory of what we found so that we could use it during operations, if

needed, to accomplish our task.

My search took place in the eeriness of abandoned, fully fitted-out buildings and infrastructure, but with no people in them. It was as if those working and living there had been snatched away by some unseen force, leaving behind exactly what they were busy with at the moment of departure.

I remember walking into an auto repair workshop. A car lifted on a jack still had the creeper and tools of the mechanic spread out next to. It was clear that he was working on the vehicle when he abandoned at the spur of the moment.

How does one deal with sudden anarchy when one's life is at stake? How does one pick up the pieces afterwards if one has to flee with one's family, leaving everything behind and not knowing what the next day, even the next hour would bring?

I came upon a fully-stocked warehouse with Caterpillar spare parts. Again, the workplace showed that those who worked there had to leave in a hurry. A dignified elderly Angolan man with grey hair was sitting at the wide open doors to the building, devotedly at his post and still safeguarding what was inside. Due to language differences, we could not communicate and it felt wrong to ignore him as I entered the space that was important to him. I felt respect and pity for him at the same time. For a moment two people who were worlds apart, but brought together under the uncertainties of his changing world due to civil war, looked each other in the eye with compassion. And for a fleeting moment both of us knew that these circumstances beyond our control would be changing our lives forever.

I gave him a packet of cigarettes. It was all that I had with me.

Arriving in Cela

Cela was a neat village in the western part of central Angola. Although relatively small, it reflected a gracious lifestyle that those who had lived there must have enjoyed. Well-designed, white painted houses with terracotta tiled roofs amongst abundant natural vegetation replicated the Portuguese-style architecture of this part of the world. Task Force Foxbat HQ was located in an upscale double-story building.

It was here that I first saw him – this mysterious man with a presence, dressed in a green uniform without any rank insignia (we were issued with green uniforms for Operation Savannah – for clandestine reasons we were not allowed to wear our insignia or our South African uniforms), combat boots, 9 mm pistol in a low-slung holster on a leather belt on his hip and, if I remember correctly, a communist AK 47 assault rifle on a sling over his shoulder. With a somewhat reserved look in his eyes and a businesslike approach he appeared to be a loner.

“Must be from our Special Forces – a recce,” I said to myself.

Less than a week later this recce, in a forward field hospital in Cela, started to cut off what was left of my trousers and boots after I'd detonated an anti-personnel mine a few hours before. That night he operated on me and amputated my right leg above

the ankle – an operation so well executed, even the surgeon professor who took over my treatment after being casevaced to 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria could not stop talking about it.

The ‘recce’ turned out to be Colonel Tony Dippenaar, a surgeon from the SADF’s Medical Services, who saved my life and the lives of many others during the war in Angola. This hero soon became affectionately known in Afrikaans as *Die Snydokter van Cela* (The Surgeon of Cela) with obvious reference to – and peppered with typical South African humour – the well-read book at the time with the title ‘*The Doctor of Stalingrad*’ by Heinz G. Konsalik. As the number of casualties he had to treat increased, he also became known as *Die Slagter van Cela* (The Butcher of Cela).

1 December 1975 – How it happened

I received instructions on the morning of 1 December to do reconnaissance along a river further to the west of Cela. I had to identify possible crossing points for building an improvised bridge in case the existing bridge over the river became inaccessible.

We came to a crater in the road, about three hours’ drive from Cela. I got out of the vehicle and walked out ahead to inspect the damage to the road while my men were still disembarking. On my way I stepped on the buried anti-personnel landmine.

As the dust from the explosion settled and before shock could set in, having been trained in the handling of explosives and mine warfare, I knew exactly what had happened from where I was lying on the ground. I also knew the bigger picture. Nobody would lay only one anti-personnel mine in an area. There would be more. I was lying in an unmarked minefield.

I had to remove my glasses to see what was going on around me. The lenses were black from the effect of the blast. Later in hospital, while cleaning them, I saw a multitude of chip marks in the lenses. If it weren’t for my glasses, my eyes would have taken the debris from the explosion.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . “ I found comfort, calmness and strength by reciting Psalm 23 from the Bible while lying there. I knew I wasn’t on my own in this.

My concern for my men made me do something that was right. “Stay where you are!” I instructed them. I didn’t want them to come and help me with the risk of also becoming trapped or injured in the minefield.

I also did something totally wrong. Instead of adhering to the drill to prod with my bayonet in search of possible buried mines on my way out of the minefield, I impulsively and feverishly crept back to safety. The effect of what could have happened had I detonated another mine while doing so, resulted in more nightmares afterwards than the mine incident itself. This became even more real when I later saw soldiers who lost both their arms and their eyesight due to enemy contact

during Operation Savannah.

We didn't have radio contact with Task Force HQ in Cela. My men, ironically, made me lie down in the back of a Unimog truck on top of anti-tank mines we had with us and started making our way back to Cela. All the time one of my men – sapper Ferdi Labuschagne – sat with me. The conversation was about trivial things, amongst others that I'd probably never be able to ride my scrambler motorcycle again.

There was also a bright side to the dialogue.

“Labuschagne, at least now I'll be seeing my girlfriend back in the States long before you'll be seeing yours,” I remember saying to him.

Labuschagne did not respond.

The long, frantic and uncomfortable drive started to get the upper hand. I didn't know how long I would still be able to hang in when we came upon a section of the task force's armoured cars. These guys had radio contact with HQ and called for help. Sergeant John Wahl, who was in charge, later told me how they removed me from the truck, how he deployed his men in defensive positions around us, how he tried to take care of my wound with merthiolate and bandages, and how we waited for the helicopter to arrive that had been dispatched to pick me up.

It was a blur to me. I only remember I asked the sergeant for his 9 mm pistol, which he refused as he must have thought that I wanted to bring an end to it all. I merely felt vulnerable not having my rifle with me anymore.

Through all of this I never looked at my wound. I was concerned that, if I did so, it might have added to the shock, and I didn't want to lose my self-control. I also didn't feel much pain and apparently I didn't lose much blood. I was told afterwards that the heat from the blast sealed off the open veins to the wound.

The thought that I might die never crossed my mind.

Waiting for the helicopter

You think of a casevac – the terminology that the South African military uses for evacuating casualties by air – as a helicopter just coming to pick you up, like in the movies – it just arrives. But, in the Angolan bush it certainly was different.

I experienced a lot of emotion and uncertainty while waiting for the helicopter. The eerie environment where nobody said a word made me feel even more helpless. Have they really dispatched the helicopter as the radio operator in the armoured car reported? What if they do not find us? These were my thoughts as I was lying there in the bush, waiting. Minutes felt like hours. I lost track of time. It felt like eternity.

Then, suddenly, we could hear the chopper – the high-pitched sound only an Alouette helicopter could generate.

“They're here!”

My overwhelming gratitude changed into a degree of despair as the chopper kept on circling, looking for us.

“What if they don’t see us? What if they continue further and leave us behind!”

Anxiety stepped in. I remember how it felt as if I physically stretched myself high up into the air to touch that bird of safety, to show it where I was.

I cannot recall the Alouette landing and the detail of what happened then. I do remember, however, being put into the chopper on a stretcher with my face merely a centimeter or two above the floor. I do remember staring at the rows of pop rivets in the helicopter’s floor and at the patches of dry Angolan sand in between them. I do remember some of the flight back to Cela. And I do remember how safe I felt then.

After landing, things happened quickly. The Task Force’s medical facility had been deployed in the Cela Hospital. I was made to lie down on what felt like a hard slab where Colonel Dippenaar, with comforting precision, started to examine me while cutting away what was left of my trousers and boots.

“Is it sore?” he asked.

“Only when I laugh,” was my reply.

The colonel wasn’t impressed, but my sense of humour provided the comic relief I needed at that moment.

I was in theatre soon afterwards. Although the anesthetics had kicked in, to an extent I was aware of what was happening around me while they operated, but I never felt anything. The colonel, in particular, was frustrated as he tried to reposition a free-standing light in order to see better. I later told him this. He refused to believe me.

Two neatly typed out entries in a top secret War Diary Log kept by 1 Forward Field Hospital in Cela, recorded the following on 1 December 1975:

- “Casualties: 17h15: Message received that one member was injured in a landmine explosion. 17h35: Helicopter took off. 18h25: Helicopter returned. Priority of casualty: 2. Type of injuries: Blast injury (R) foot, bruising (L) knee, bruising and shrapnel (R) arm, scrotal bruising.”
- “Operations: 1. Type of operation: (R) forefoot. Duration: 2 hrs 45 min. Blood used: 3 units. General condition: good.”

I’m able to quote from the War Diary Log because this and other top secret Operation Savannah war diaries had been declassified by Defence Intelligence in 2012 and made available in the public domain.

The morning after my operation I had the best breakfast ever in my life. After living for weeks on tasteless ration packs that resembled those of the Second World War (my perception, I must add), a medic brought me a steaming bowl of freshly-prepared mealie meal porridge. I was alive, I was lying between clean white linen sheets in a hospital bed, and I had a meal that somebody who cared, had prepared for me.

I felt extremely grateful.

1 Military Hospital, Pretoria

Lying on a stretcher secured in the tail-end section of a massive, empty C130 transport aircraft during a flight from Cela back to Grootfontein in South West Africa was extremely uncomfortable. What made it worse was the intense, penetrating and lingering high explosives smell of the artillery ammunition which had been offloaded shortly before I was put onto the aircraft. It brought flashbacks of what had happened to me the day before and added to my discomfort.

The flight a few days later to Pretoria wasn't much better. All the time I was fighting the burning pain where my lower leg used to be, trying to break out of a fever that was constantly seeking to overpower my mind and my body.

The ambulance trip from the Waterkloof Air Force Base to 1 Military Hospital was not an improvement on the two flights, but at least it was shorter.

Those wounded or injured during Operation Savannah were admitted to the hospital's Ward 1. As was the case with the clandestine nature of Operation Savannah, the outside world (or, at least, South Africans) didn't know about the ward. It wasn't there. It did not exist. So it was for the wounded. Only we lying there and those who treated us knew about the existence and the reality of a war which was kept from the rest of the country. Only we and our close families knew about the shattered soldiers who came back to regroup in a hospital ward before the start of the long road to recovery.

The ward consisted of a large space with a high ceiling, polished vinyl floors and glossy light-blue painted interior walls. There were 50 or more beds in the ward itself and more beds in an adjacent verandah which had been closed off to extend the main facility. It seldom had any empty beds in it. It also had a series of private rooms. The critically wounded were treated there. Nursing staff would sometimes in a low tone of voice and big eyes report on what was happening in these rooms. Sometimes the look on their faces made us realize it was best not ask.

We got used to (did we really?) and became friends with fellow-patients who had bullet wounds, who had lost their sight, their arms, or their legs. For some these injuries were in combination. We felt helpless when we saw the agony of a pilot who suffered from extreme burns after jumping from a shot-down helicopter. We accepted as part of our environment a certain, constant and unpleasant odour of war wounds that needed to heal.

We became a closely-knit battle group fighting a battle of a different kind – a battle against physical and emotional pain, a battle to survive, to get strong and to find meaning again. At times we fought as individuals, at times as a group. But always with the best care and support we could get from the hospital staff.

There were the nurses whose job it was to clean wounds, to administer medication, to freshen the bed linen, to feed us and to bear with us. There were the nursing sisters who became like mothers to us, caring angels whose mere presence took the edge off the suffering, even if it was only for a moment or two. There were the doctors, the surgeons, the specialists, the social workers, the physio therapists, the occupational therapists, the ward cleaners and all of those who worked behind the scenes so that we were taken care of. And all the time the no-nonsense Brigadier Scheepers, the officer commanding of the hospital, was watching from the background to make sure that things ran smoothly in the ward.

Thinking back, it couldn't have been easy for them. How did they deal week after week, month after month, with so much human hardship caused by a war – in this case in young men with their lives still ahead of them – without becoming drained themselves? How did they manage to keep a happy face, always glad to see us when they reported for their shifts? How did they feel when they received instruction to prepare for new arrivals from up north and having to wait for the ambulances to bring them from the airport? How did they cope when someone in one of the private rooms didn't make it?

Who took care of the caregivers?

And caregivers they certainly were. Today I wish I could go back in time to say thank you in a proper manner. I need to thank the crew and the medics who came in the chopper to fetch me after the anti-personnel mine exploded. I need to thank Colonel Dippenaar (he later retired from the military as a general) and his team in Cela, the medical staff in Grootfontein, the medic who wrapped my naked body in a blanket before they hooked my stretcher into the tail-end of the C130 to fly back to Pretoria, the ones who fetched me in an ambulance at the airport and, above all, the staff at 1 Military Hospital. You were the unsung heroes who fought this battle with us.

A letter from the heart

During the past 42 years I've remained friends with Marianne Beukes (her married surname, Ferreira), at the time a social worker from the Medical Services with the rank of lieutenant at 1 Military Hospital. She, together with others, played a major role in the lives of those who were wounded during Operation Savannah.

When I told her that I was putting my experiences to paper, she sent me a letter which offered perspective of a different kind – a very personal account of what she as caregiver went through at 1 Military Hospital. The letter was addressed to each one of us whom she cared for at the time, and still cares about . . .

“My name is Marianne Beukes and I was there. This is my recollection of what I shared with many injured soldiers, whom, in this letter, I will refer to as ‘you’.

At the time I was a medical social worker in 1 Military Hospital who, together with my senior colleague, Major Martie Kruger, was part of the multidisciplinary team that received and treated you in Ward 1.

I was about 26 years old then.

We were the ones who listened to your accounts of what happened so that you could gradually ventilate the trauma, horror and shock out of your systems. We were there before you went into theatre for an amputation or skin graft or to repair whatever internal damage had been done to you. I literally held your hand for more than two hours one evening! We waited for you when you regained consciousness after surgery.

I often wonder where you are now. We knew you well for at least three months of your life and sometimes much longer. We tried to walk with you on your road to psychological, social and mental healing. We also talked to your parents, wives and girlfriends for hours to help them to cope with the senselessness of war and your permanent injuries at such a young age. We waited with them outside the operating theatre. We knew no hours or routine. We simply made sure that we were there when you needed us.

We took you to the airport when you could go home for a short break and sat and discussed with you the reaction of people when they saw your injuries, the way adults tried not to stare too obviously, the beautiful honesty of a small child who would come up to you to ask: “And where is your other leg?”

I took many of you to my parents' home when the hospital stay became too extensive and you needed the sanity of a normal household to build up your strength to fight on.

We helped you to enroll at a college to start a new career because you were blinded by a bomb and could not go back to your profession as an electrician. I even danced with one of you who needed to feel what it was like to dance on a prosthetic leg. Desperate times called for desperate measures!

You all were my heroes! I want you to know that. I hope life has treated you well since you left the hospital.”

Time to resume

While in hospital, I had a visit from a personnel officer with the rank of commandant from Army Headquarters. "With your injury you will not be able to continue in your existing role in the Engineer Corps any longer," he said. "We'll be transferring you to an administrative role once you've been discharged from hospital."

I wasn't ready for this. Neither was I willing to let others decide my future while I hadn't even had the opportunity to think about it myself. I'd come this far and I was determined to continue to the finishing line, and to finish in my way.

My response was simple: "Let me go back to 2 Field Engineer Regiment where I was before. Allow me to see if I can still do what I've done previously. If I can, then let me continue. If I can't, only then will I consider changing to an administrative role."

I watched the commandant while he was considering my request. A smile on his face when he eventually looked up conveyed to me that he consented. Perhaps my determination had something to do with his decision, or perhaps it came from an officer with the right people skills and experience to know that this was what would work best for me. I was to stay in the Engineer Corps!

I was discharged after four months in hospital. I had a spanking new prosthesis. I could walk again! Back in Bethlehem, I bought myself a new scrambler – this time a proper 250 cc enduro motorcycle – which enabled me to get wherever I needed to be, whether the military base, in town or out in the veld with the troops during training. I was back where I wanted to be . . . and I was happy.

I wasn't planning to change my life, neither did I have a desire to prove anything. All I did was to make adjustments, where necessary, which enabled me to carry on from where I'd left off and to continue with my career and with life in general. And this I've managed to do with the quiet support of so many others.

And life has been good to me. I met my wife a year after the incident and together we raised two children, today enjoying our grandchildren. I continued my career in the South African Army and left in 1993 with the rank of colonel. I had the opportunity to pursue a second, equally satisfying career in civilian life which ended in semi-retirement a few years ago. And I'm still riding my scrambler, although nowadays it is a somewhat bigger 1200 cc adventure motorbike.

And for all of this I acknowledge and give praise to my Creator who allowed things to happen in my life for a reason, who gave me a chance to continue with what I was destined to do, and who let me lead a full life after what happened to me. Not once have I been on my own in this. He transformed, what could have been a life-destroying incident into an ongoing life-enhancing experience for me.

Going full circle

I started off by saying that I was writing this memoir now, 42 years later, to convey a part of the Operation Savannah history not many know about, a part that also had to be told. I pointed out that it was my recollection of a battle of a different kind, the battle of the casualties of this war. I also wanted to give recognition to those silent heroes of this campaign – the medics.

I wish to conclude on the same note. This was for the most part not about me. I merely used my story to tell about those who risked their lives to extract the wounded from battle in Angola, to stabilize them and to take them back to Ward 1 in 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria where they took further care of us and healed us.

They were the unsung heroes of Operation Savannah who unselfishly sided with the wounded. They bravely engaged and fought the battle with us, a battle that raged 3000 km from the front . . . and for some of those Ward 1 casualties who were particularly shattered at the time, a battle which is still raging today, 42 years later.
