

**SOME REMINISCENCES ON THE OPERATIONS CONDUCTED BY COMBAT TEAM 3**  
**BATTLE GROUP 10 (61 MECHANISED BATTALION) DURING OPERATION PROTEA**  
**BY (THEN) MAJOR JOE WEYERS**

**COMMANDER COMBAT TEAM 30 (C SQUADRON 61 MECH BN OP PROTEA 1981)**

**INTRODUCTION**

**THE AIM OF THIS DOCUMENT**

The aim is to try and enhance and fill out the narrative written by the then officer commanding 61 Mech Bn, Commandant (now Major – General Rtd, Roland de Vries), in the official publication pages on Operation Protea by 61 Mechanised Battalion Veterans Association.

The contents of this document can be utilised by anyone who, in the interest of military history and the preservation of our proud military tradition in the SADF, deems it as a contribution towards it, whether in full or extracts thereof.

**SCOPE OF CONTENT**

I have limited the scope of this document to only such items that may have slipped by in the version written by Genl de Vries and to add personal observations, interpretation of orders, personal experience and also to provide reasons for certain actions taken during the course of the operation.

It is also undertaken with deep respect for the courage displayed by our National Servicemen, the strong leadership and support I received from the Officers and NCO's under my command as well as from my superiors, especially Cmdt de Vries.

Combat Team 3 started off as a well-trained and drilled fighting force from Omuthiya, ready to take on anything that might come our way.

I have taken the liberty to name the different sections of this narrative according to those of the original for ease of cross-referencing.

**OPERATION PROTEA WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE OPERATIONS**  
**CONDUCTED BY BATTLE GROUP 10 AND COMBAT TEAM 30**

**PRE-DEPLOYMENT : FORCE TRAINING –KNOWLEDGE IS POWER**

I had the honour of being trained as an Infantry Platoon Commander by the then Major Roland de Vries, fresh out of the Military Academy as part of our all-arms training phase in 1973 at Infantry School, Oudtshoorn. From that beginning I was taught that a normal army obstacle course was not a method to torture young candidate officers, but an instrument to create a course of fire and manoeuvre tactics, utilising cover, moving from one fire base to another, deploying massive concentrated direct fire and to spend minimum time presenting yourself to an enemy when crossing an obstacle.

**These principles were also the norm at 61 Mech Bn. We practised each and every eventuality, war-gamed it, found solutions to tactical problems, drilled our troops to perfection and we wrote it into Standing Operational Procedures. We were not automatons as initiative within the framework of SOP'S was encouraged and innovation was applauded.**

**61 Mech Battalion trained and operated as a cohesive and formidable fighting force, capable of taking on any comparable enemy force three times its own size in any situation. This is no paper bravado at all, but a function of our battle groupings, the integration of air-land battle assets, the manoeuvrability of direct fire on the battleground, the manoeuvrability of our long-range artillery by fire and the absolute determination to maintain the objective, maintaining the balance of forces at the critical point in order to achieve superiority of firepower where it matters, fire control and integral manoeuvre and last, but not least, the calibre of the men we had the absolute privilege to command. Without them, our plans would have been a figment of the imagination.**

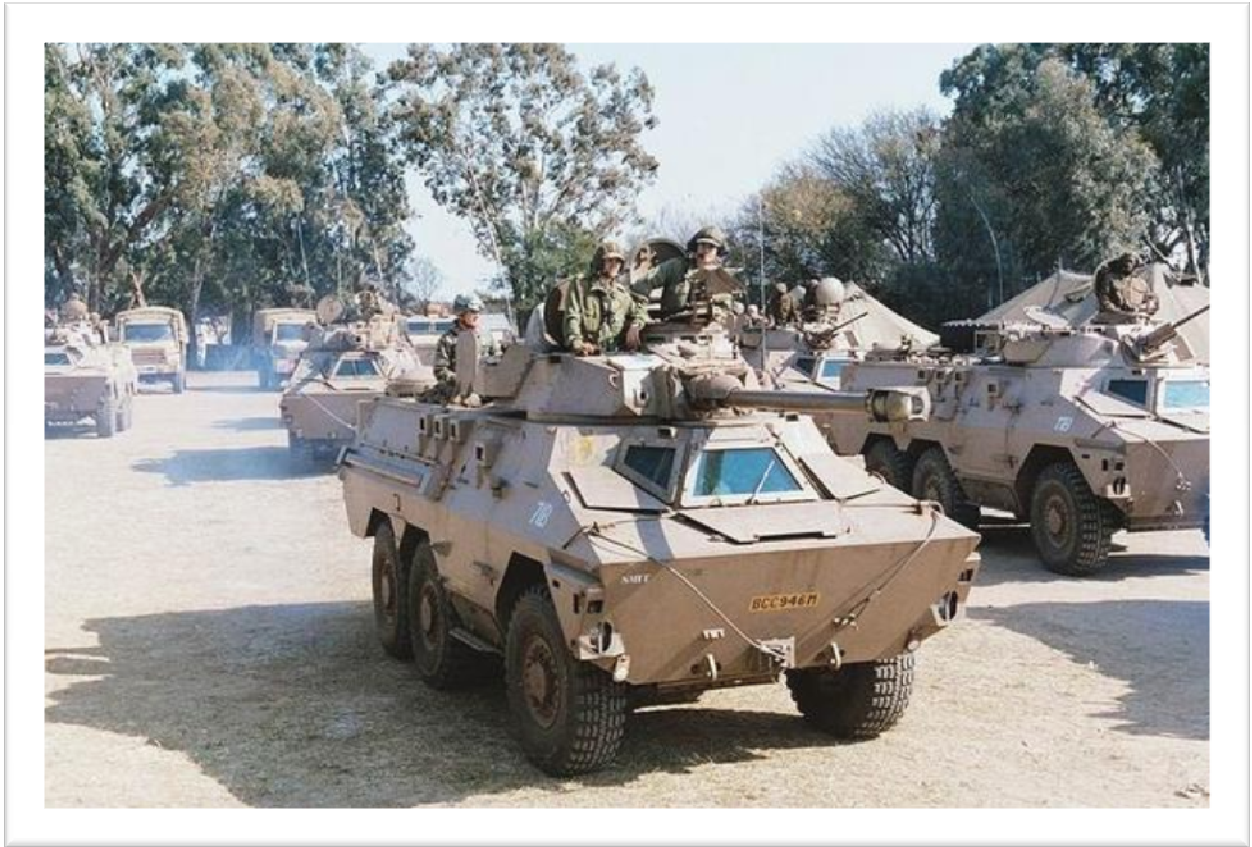
**During our training phase with 61 MechBn (Not the first time for me as I was deployed with E Squadron, 2 SSB, previously in 1979 to the battalion when we participated to counter PLAN incursions to the farming areas of SWA under command of Commandant "Dippies" Dippenaar.**

**I, and Captain Koos Liebenberg, commander of Alpha Company mechanised infantry, practised combat team operations with groupings consisting of two combat teams:**

- An Armoured strike force based upon "C" Squadron, 61 MechBn with 3xRatel 90 Troops (4 Ratels per Troop), 1 Mechanised Infantry Platoon (ex – A Company), an Anti-Tank Section (4x Ratel 90) plus 3x Armoured Support Troop Sections with Ratel 60 Mortar vehicles (platoon strength), with additional supporting arms as engineers, artillery etc. as the mission dictated.**
- An Infantry heavy force based upon "A" Company 61 MechBn with 2x Infantry platoons (4x Ratel 20 per platoon), 2x Ratel 90 Troops (ex-C Sqn), 2xArmoured Support Sections (1x Ratel 60 mm mortar each) and an Anti-Tank Section (4xRatel 90) with other supporting arms.**

**Absolute devastating firepower over a frontage of 1 000 meters in close terrain and 2-3 000 meters in more open country. Mutual support, fire and manoeuvre tactics and integration of all arms were the order of the day. Good communications, free-flow of battle information, command and control on all levels made a winning combination.**

**Absolute devastating firepower over a frontage of 1 000 meters in close terrain and 2-3 000 meters in more open country. Mutual support, fire and manoeuvre tactics and integration of all arms were the order of the day. Good communications, free-flow of battle information, command and control on all levels made a winning combination.**



RATEL 90 AND RATEL 20 AFV'S

## THE BROAD DESIGN OF BATTLE FOR OPERATION PROTEA

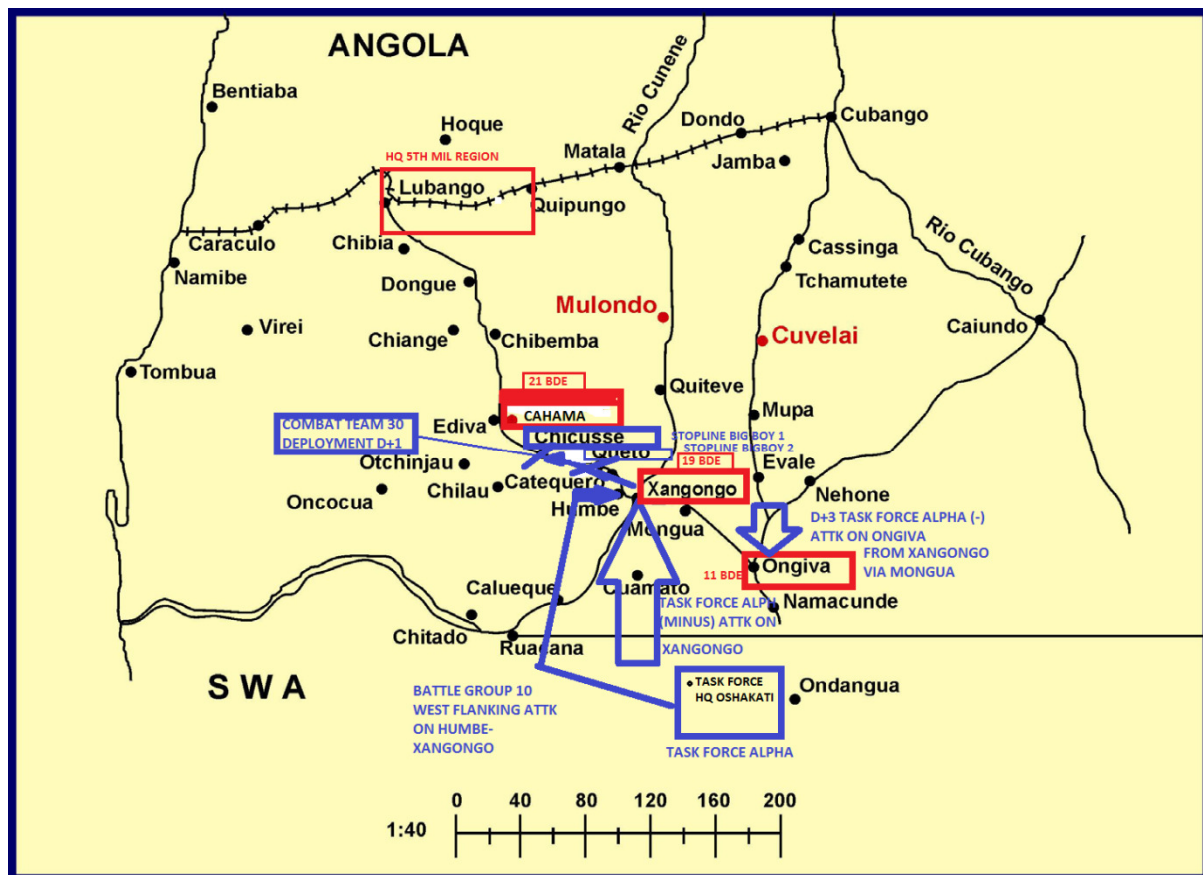
I do not want to go into the realm of strategy, but the aim of the operation in a nutshell was to destroy the secure bases, main logistical supplies and infrastructure of PLAN (Peoples Liberation Army of Namibia). A so-called army that never occupied one inch of Namibia (then South West Africa) and only could spend time there to “liberate” the people by sending them to their “forefathers” with indiscriminate mine-laying on public roads and “press-ganging” school children into unwilling “recruits” for their diminishing armed wing, and terrorising the population with summary executions of anyone that showed resistance to their *modus operandi*.

With PLAN logistical integration with deployed FAPLA formations to provide secure bases and security for PLAN fighters in case of an attack by the SADF on them, it became imperative to disrupt and destroy these secure base facilities, to prevent any Angolan or Cuban forces interfering with the relentless hunt on PLAN.

Operation Protea was launched on 23 August 1981 to destroy the Swapo command and training centre at Xangongo and its logistic bases at Xangongo and Ongiva with the intention to neutralize SWAPO's military forces in Southern Angola between the Cunene and Kavango rivers, also known as the Central Theatre.

It was absolutely necessary to eliminate two FAPLA Brigades deployed in southern Angola. Two SADF Brigade –sized formations were formed, Task Force Alpha and

Task Force Bravo. The mission of Alpha was to attack the PLAN logistical bases at Xangongo and Ongiva and if any resistance to this attack was met, to destroy FAPLA 19 Brigade deployed at Xangongo and their 11 Brigade at Ongiva.



61 Mechanised Battalion formed part of Task Force Alpha and formed the nucleus of Battle Group 10. Sub-units from 61 Mech were also detached to other combat groups and received replacements from other units with armament different to the Ratel type vehicles we were equipped with.

Battle Group 10 was to advance on Xangongo via a westerly route from Ruacana to the north-west side of Xangongo to cut off any escape from enemy forces from there during the attack of the rest of Task Force Alpha on Xangongo. Thereafter a blocking force had to be deployed to the north-west in the direction of Cahama to prevent any threat to further operations against PLAN and FAPLA at Ongiva. Cahama was the home of FAPLA 21 Brigade, a strong force with tanks, mechanised infantry, augmented by artillery and a contingent of Cuban troops, Soviet advisors and supported by aircraft from Lubango. 21 Brigade was in fact the “fire-force” to support FAPLA Brigades deployed further south.

SOME COMMENT ON THE FINAL COMPOSITION OF FORCES

No wonder we were highly upset by the breakup of our cohesive units by command decisions made at brigade and higher levels by chopping and changing the sub-units of existing unit groupings. Combat team 30 found itself minus one Ratel 90 Troop, but an added Eland 90 Armoured Car Troop as replacement. Although the Eland was an excellent armoured car, it was not suited to rapid fire and manoeuvre with Ratels.

However, seen in the light of the task Combat Team 30's task to deploy as a blocking and screening force towards a possible intervention from FAPLA 21 Brigade at Cahama with possible Cuban assistance, the deployment of the combat team on the main axis of the Xangongo-Cahama tar road, the Eland could play a valuable role.

Battle Group 10, comprising only 61 Mech Bn, would have been the ideal one for the attacks on the main objectives of the operation, namely the attacks Xangongo and Ongiva. I could understand the frustration and disappointment of Cmdt de Vries not to be directly involved in those attacks. But, the die was cast and we gave it our best shot to perform our tasks to the best of our ability to make a success of the operation as a whole. The viewpoint expressed here were later vindicated by the words of Cmdt de Vries after the debacle at Ongiva when components of Battle Group 10, including vital elements of my command had to be hastily deployed to Ongiva and reinforce an already committed sub-unit of 61 MechBn (Combat Team Mamba) under command of Captain Koos Liebenberg to further strengthen the rest of Task Force Alpha's attack to save the day. Well done Koos and your band of savages (compliment)!

I am proud of the fact that the individual Troop Commanders, Ratel Commanders and Support Troop Section Leaders from my command could fit in so quickly and execute the task given to them. We trained for it, Roland de Vries demanded it from us and expected nothing else!

#### **ON THE MOVE - OMUTHIYA TO RUACANA**

Saturday, 22 August 1981 had dawned – D minus 2. Combat Team 3 was first out of the blocks, leading the Battle group out of Omuthiya. I have never felt that sense of awe again in my life, looking back at that vast array of lethal combat power on the move to a destiny that only military historians could later describe in detail, but not have felt part of it.

The route was not unfamiliar to us as Combat Team 3 had reconnoitered the route previously during the build up phase of the operation, between Omuthiya and Onaiso.

Moving in column, with the whole combat group behind us, the van of my Combat Team were going through all the battle drills required for crossing obstacles, negotiating difficult terrain and avoidance of possible landmine traps when I decided to abolish this encumbrance. These procedures had already slowed the rest of the Battle Group to rendezvous with our replenishment point.

I decided to take the risk upon myself to expedite the movement and promptly moved into the van of the column. I knew that I was ignoring SOP's, but, making a command decision on the spot, I advanced with my Command Ratel Call Sign 30 to take point position of the advance, after congratulating the advance Troops and supporting engineers on their diligence to adhere to SOP's, but from hereon we would move non-tactically to Onaiso.

We were barreling along the Northern border of Etosha Game Reserve, an area we had covered during the buildup phase of this operation.

I Felt that we were safe and radioed to all that we have to keep best speed at about 40 kmh. when we approached a typical North-South cutline crossing our East-West route A sense of dread entered me, and, before I even had the time to warn my driver, an almighty explosion erupted underneath my vehicle's left frontwheel. The blast was deflected by the round Commanders hatch and I, with enough bodily fluids swirling from nose and ears, took a survey of Ratel 30. My rear-link radio operator, De'Almeida, was standing outside the Ratel with his radio telephone clamped to his ear but the connecting wires were missing! Everyone checked out and I was grateful for the design of the Ratel and its resistance to a TM 57 anti –tank mine. This mine was probably a legacy of Op Carrot? The Tiffies were close on the heels of the Engineer Squad to secure the area and I mounted the Ratel of my 2 IC, Chris Gildenhuis, to continue the advance. During the blast of the anti-tank mine, some stray Browning links shot up from the floor of my Ratel and caused some painful blows and perforations on my lower extremities, but the job had to continue. By the time we reached our Forward Assembly Area, Ratel 30 arrived soon after with a new differential and wheel assembly. The members of my TSC section were wizards and throughout the Operation proved their expertise to keep wheels turning. Without them we would have been stranded. The massive blast of a landmine underneath you, the resultant disorientation and confusion cannot be described. I was absolutely concerned about my driver as he was closest to the blast, he was however first onto the intercom demanding "*why the hell did you fire on the move without telling me.*" Being an Eland 90 crew member before this, he was not out of line, but rationalizing the event in the best way possible way.

#### **MOVE FROM RUACANA TO THE FORMING UP PLACE (D-1/D-DAY)**

This move was one of those textbook tactical moves, probably a datum point in the annals of Military History. The masterminds were de Vries and Rahl. The two point Troop Commanders of Combat Team 3 were tasked to prepare route maps, compass bearings, trip meter readings and keeping orientation with Orion's belt! We set about the task to navigate, at night, across the Angolan veldt.

We set out from Ruacana that night with thick choking dust kicked up by each Ratel in front of you and no respite was forthcoming for any commander, at any level, we Had a job to do. We exited our vehicles, walked our distances to avoid magnetic Influence of our vehicles, cross checked with each other and moved towards the next Report Line.

What a great team I had! Myself, being involved with the minute –to-minute actions of navigation and movement with the navigating Troop Commanders, my 2IC, Captain Chris Gildenhuis was informing our HQ of progress and adherence to the overall progress of the advance. To be spared a feeling of micro-management, Chris and Thys, worked as a team to get results.

#### **WEST FLANKING ADVANCE TOWARDS HUMBE**

After a harrowing night of bundu-bashing, delays on the march due to flat tyres, crossing a treacherous dry-river bed and numerous other worrisome details, we found ourselves on the main Xangongo-Humbe-Cahama tar road.

The main task of my Combat Team lay to the west, in the direction of Cahama where

FAPLA 21 Brigade was deployed as, inter-alia, the counter-attack force for any threat against the Ongiva-Xangongo-PuePue triangle. It was with trepidation when we swung south-east in the direction of our first attack objective, Humbe, with our back towards 21 Brigade at Cahama. For the advance to contact in the direction of Humbe, I acted as the second –in-command of Combat team 20, reinforcing them with two Ratel 90 troops.

## **CAPTURING HUMBE AND EXPLOITATION TOWARDS THE CUNENE RIVER**

What followed in the attack to the west of the Cunene River at Humbe was not a major fight. It was almost a set-piece formality. No hostile forces were encountered during the advance to contact and empty trenches were reported by air recce on Humbe. As the FAPLA Forces in Xangongo were now subjected to air strikes and artillery bombardment, no break-out from FAPLA forces from Xangongo over the bridge to Humbe was expected.

In the event of finding an empty objective, an alternative one was allocated to the battle group. The tiny settlement at Muceipo, close to Humbe, could possibly provide home to a SWAPO force of unspecified strength. Muceipo included a few buildings, a missionary and a hospital. Originally for the main attack, we would have by-passed Muceipo and sorted it out later.

As we approached this little settlement I became wary of the fact that it included a mission and a hospital. I anticipated the command to attack the settlement and had my gunners glued to their optical sights directed on Muceipo. The initial warning order given by me, pre-empting the order from Koos Liebenberg, was to have my two Ratel 90 Troops swing through 90 degrees in line and advance to contact on Muceipo.

As I received the command to deploy and clear up Muceipo, we could see some FAPLA troops running away as if all the hounds of hell were loose on them. My gunner then shouted that he saw figures dressed in white and light blue standing near a door at one of the buildings. A sense of dread coursed through me and I immediately cancelled the order for the Ratel 90 Troops to deploy and advance, but rather to take up firing positions off the road to cover an advance by my 2IC, Chris Gildenhuys, with two Ratel 60 Support Troop Sections to move onto the objective. The reason for this move was to prevent any trigger-happy 90mm gunner to start blasting away at running FAPLA soldiers and causing more collateral damage to life, limb, civilians and infrastructure than warranted by the situation. By the time I could make the amendments to the original plan, I had Koos Liebenberg hopping mad and Cmdt de Vries also providing some extremely good, but belated advice. The addition of more infantry to my little team in the form of Pale van der Walt was welcomed and the moratorium placed by me on the firing of any 90 mm gun without my command, probably prevented a catastrophe.

I am thankful that, with hindsight, myself and Cmdt de Vries were very hesitant to launch an attack as we had planned. With the heat of impending battle already coursing through our veins, one mistake could have unleashed devastating force upon an already vanquished enemy and the compassionate Catholic sisters trying their best to alleviate the already wounded and traumatized soldiers of Angola.

In all fairness to Captain Koos Liebenberg, he was a soldier with a mission and nothing would be allowed to interfere with it. It is with deep respect to him, that I can say that his agitation was compounded by the fact the two Ratel 90 Troops were at



that stage on an elevated stretch of the tar road and deployment meant leaving the road, drive down a steep incline and climb up to a firing position, swinging through 90 degrees before reporting “Ready” by Troop.

Later during the subsequent phases of the operation I had the opportunity to speak to the nuns at Mucceipo again. They told an amazing tale about a convoy traveling from Cahama to Xangongo, crammed with FAPLA troops, all of a sudden jumping off on the move at about 60 km per hour! The result was broken limbs, some deaths and dozens more with severe lacerations and concussion. These troops ended up in the clinic run by the sisters and were in the process of recuperation when our battle group rudely intruded their peace. Due to the interdiction sorties flown our Impala MK2 aircraft on all logistic routes prior to the operation, an anti-aircraft lookout in the convoy mistook a raven for an inbound Impala MK2 strike on them. His warning shouts were enough reason to dismount on the move with dire consequences.



*Photo © D Wingrin*

**Impala Mk2 Light Attack Aircraft**

The rest of the day was much of an anti-climax and later, on the advance to the bank of the Cunene, sporadic fire-fights broke out between our forces and fleeing FAPLA soldiers. It was rather a one-sided turkey-shoot.

### **DEPLOYMENT OF COMBAT TEAM 3 TO STOP LINE BIG BOY ONE**

After a restless night my combat team prepared for our deployment to our covering position facing FAPLA 21 Brigade at Cahama. Our proposed defensive position was about 18 km from Cahama astride the tar road Lubango-Cahama-Xangongo in the vicinity of Chicusse. The battle for Xangongo was not yet over and we had to wait for that to be sorted out first.



**My first surprise that day was to be informed that the formidable Colonel Jan Breytenbach and his motley crowd of 44 Para Brigade “Pathfinders” will come under my command for the move and deployment at Big Boy 1. Make no mistake, I was at two minds simultaneously, the one welcomed him as a brave officer and a person could count on for support when things get rough. The other was with trepidation, because Jan was known for doing his own thing, when he wanted to, with anything at his disposal. Later on a bit more about him and his band.**



**44 Para Pathfinders and their vehicles during Op Protea**

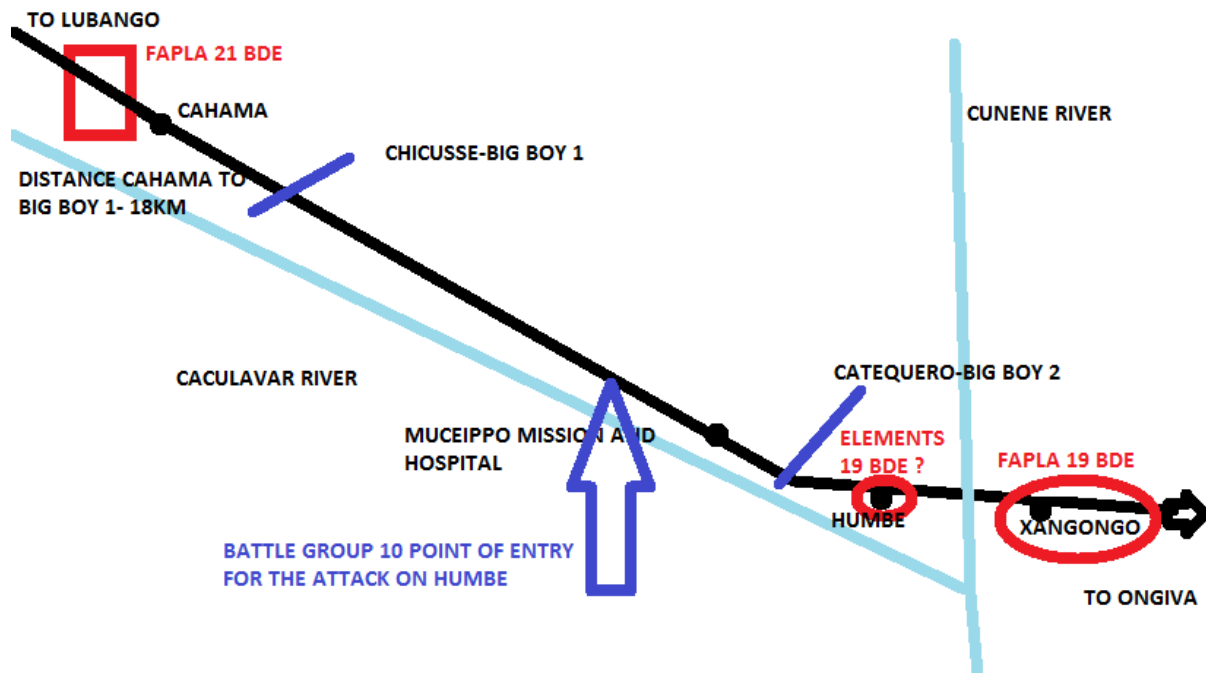
**The order came through to advance to Big Boy 1 during mid-morning D+1. Without further ado we were on our way. I planned the advance to be done in a single vehicle column with fighting elements spread throughout it. The tactical movement forward was done by the two Ratel 90 Troops leapfrogging forward, supported by an Infantry Platoon with Ratel 20's. My second –in –command, Chris Gildenhuys, was designated to be fire support co-ordination officer for the air-, artillery- and mortar assets assigned to us.**



**AMC-3 BOSBOK Observation Aircraft**

Chris was also assisted by our Forward Air Controller (FAC) Lt Jacques du Randt. The move was a text-book example of fluid movement, control and rapid execution. Few words were spoken on the command net and I let the two troop commanders coordinate their movement forward between themselves and aided by our spotter aircraft, a Bosbok. I could enjoy listening to their observations and comments as we moved forward.

SCHMATIC DIAGRAM OF THE AREA OF DEPLOYMENT TO BIG BOY 1



By mid-afternoon we were about 5 km away from our objective and I called a halt for two reasons. I did not want to reach the objective too early in the day for FAPLA to organize a daylight reconnaissance on our positions if we were perhaps already spotted by elements. We also had a Recce two-man team deployed in the vicinity and I wanted to make contact with them and secure the join up with us. I had our FAC land the Bosbok recce aircraft, assigned to us, on the road and briefed the pilot, Freddie, on what I wanted done. We could not raise the recce team on our radios and getting some height we could try with our VHF line-of-sight comms. I also wanted to see what the terrain looked like ahead of us to finalise our deployment. Map and air photo interpretation was far from the real thing, thus we set off with the Bosbok.

We climbed to about 1500 ft above the column and slowly circled it going wider each time round. Suddenly Freddie flung the aircraft down in a steep dive, shouting "gun flashes left!" At that stage I was calling the Recce team call-sign on the radio. I got the fright of my life and was on the verge of calling Chris for artillery fire, when a voice broke through saying "Mossie hierbo, het julle ons seinflitse gesien?" (Sparrow above, did you see our signal flashes?). As the adrenaline drained out of my system I could barely inform the Recce team to walk to the side of the road to be picked up.

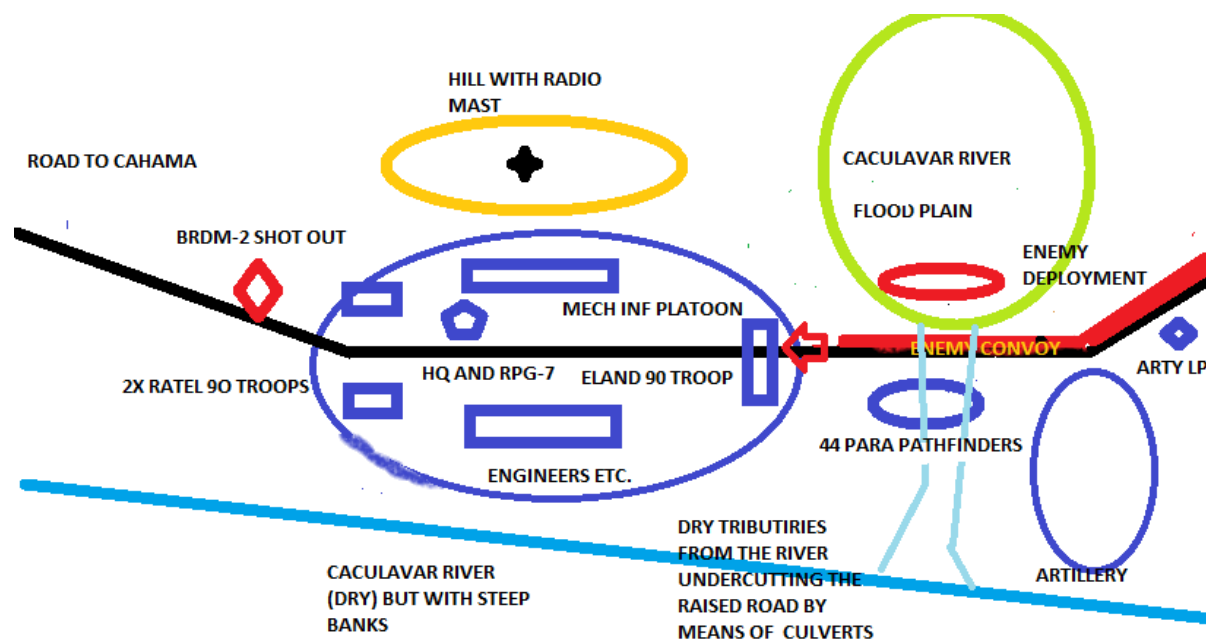
We continued our recce towards Chicusse and spotted an ideal place for our defensive position. The road from Xangongo to Cahama dipped towards a dry river bed, across low-water concrete culverts and then upwards towards high ground in a semi-"S" bend. The high ground was also topped with a thick, woody copse and a radio mast in the middle of it before levelling out in the direction of Cahama. The road was also elevated in the area of the river flood plain and could be used as partial cover by the support elements of our force.

*“Landing on the road with the Bosbok, I and Chris Gildenhuys finalised our deployment plan and issued orders. Just before last light we moved into our defensive positions for the night, Chris co-ordinated the arcs of responsibility and fire with the different elements of the combat team and drew up the fire plan.*

*At that stage Colonel Breytenbach and his team joined up with us and were allocated their positions. Soon thereafter an explosion ripped the air and I saw the radio mast on the hilltop tumbling down. I was furious with Breytenbach as much for destroying Angolan infrastructure as for the fact that he might as well have advertised our defensive position to the FAPLA High Command! I was never known as a person with diplomacy and tact, my personal hang-up, but Jan overstepped the mark and I had no choice to confront this formidable man. On approaching him, with his close-set eyes upon me, I wanted to throw the book at him, but he calmly said to me “ Joe, hoop hulle is nou lekker wakker” (I hope they {enemy} are awake now). That took some of my edge away and I could only say that I am glad he disposed of an enemy reference point to bring down DF fire (Defensive Fire) upon us.*

Jan Breytenbach was spoiling for a fight, any fight. “But not with me” I thought. I said to him that I had a job to do and I did not have to have any further complications to add to it, but I appreciated his addition to my force. Jan said not to worry and promptly set off with his band to secure our local perimeter. This time he adhered to the plan not to move further north-west than my deployed forces. A little bit of gaining some respect from Jan and it felt good to have him on my side. Later that little bit of trust relationship we built proved to be worth much more than a radio mast.

#### THE NIGHT AMBUSH: DEPLOYMENT DECISIONS NIGHT D+1/D+2 AT BIG BOY 1



The Caculavar River to the south of the road was also fed by numerous tributaries and these drained into the river from the north by means of culverts over which the built – up tar road crossed in some sections. In the dry season it left a dry flood plain, with an elevated road bi-secting it in a west to east direction. From the flood plain the

contours rose to the hill with the radio-mast and the road followed it in a semi “S” pattern. This served ideally as I could deploy my main direct-fire force of 2x Ratel 90 Troops on high ground astride the road leading to Cahama, facing in that direction as my 12 ‘o clock position. This terrain also assisted me to deploy the attached Infantry Platoon on the right flank, the Support Troop Sections on the left flank with Ratel 60 mm mortars and the Engineer Section. This formed the main defensive position and included vehicles of my ‘A’ Echelon, such as ambulance, ammo trucks, fuel trucks, tech section, etc. The Eland 90 Troop closed the 6 ‘o clock position.

The sloping terrain to my rear also allowed me to position the Artillery outside of the main defensive position as the Caculuvar River formed a barrier between any threat from the south and I deployed Jan Breytenbach’s as a security force for the Artillery between them and my position. The raised road also formed a natural obstacle and both the Artillery and 44 Para were deployed to the south of the road. The deployment of Listening Posts completed the final deployment.

We settled into our night routine and looked forward to a night of uninterrupted sleep.

**“30 CONTACT! CONTACT! WAIT, OUT.”**

*“At about 22h20 I was handed the radio with a message from the LP manned by our Artillery Troop. Speaking directly to the LP they informed me that a convoy was approaching their position and were driving without lights on the tar road from the direction of Humbe. My first thoughts were that it was a log convoy of own forces that lost its way somewhere (remember the Recovery Team and their vehicle that drove right through our own lines into the arms of the Cubans during OP SAVANNAH 1975?). The LP reported within seconds again stating that an armoured vehicle had just passed their position and now “six-wheelers” were driving by. The armoured vehicle was about 400 meters in front of the rest of the convoy and motoring at about 10-15 km per hour. Decision time, own forces or enemy?”*

*I had no time to ponder and had to act and act fast. My first concern was that I could not gamble by unleashing devastating fire-power onto own forces and at the same time could not jeopardize the security of my own combat team. I assembled a four-man RPG team with me on the verge of the tar road in the middle of our defensive area. Through Chris we established a “hold fire” order for all units in our defense perimeter except for the two Ratel 90 Troops deployed left and right at our 12 ‘o clock position with the explicit order to fire only on command at a designated enemy target that might approach them from the rear and then to open fire only when it exits the 12 ‘o clock position. The broad plan was to positively identify the armoured vehicle as friend or foe and then to open fire and destroy it on exit from our position. At the same time we hoped to trap the rest of the convoy on the elevated road opposite the Pathfinders that could open fire once it was established that it was an enemy convoy. The RPG team from my infantry platoon was next to me, should the armoured car be enemy, and try to stop, turn around or open fire. An RPG round would have been adequate for the task and contain any wild shots inside the perimeter.*



RPG-7 ANTI-TANK ROCKET EARLY VERSION (TOP) AND LATER VERSION WITH OPTICAL SIGHT (BOTTOM)

***“I had scarcely assembled with the RPG team when the rumble of an engine became loud and a squat hulk loomed closer from the darkness. As it passed me I could make out the turret and a sloping engine deck- “just like a hyena I thought” no mistake, a BRDM 2 ! It was probably traveling with infra-red lights on and scouting ahead of the convoy. As the BRDM was exiting our 12 ‘o clock position I remember me shouting over the radio “skiet hom met ‘n 90” (shoot it with a 90***

***mm gun).***



BRDM-2 Armoured Recce Vehicle (note the 2xMagnesium alloy auxiliary wheels lowered)

***At about 50-60 meters range three Ratel 90 shots were fired in rapid succession, none more were necessary as the BRDM was halted in its tracks and burning fiercely. According to the forward troops, one of the crew members escaped, but the driver was incinerated inside the vehicle. Within seconds the exploding fuel and cooking-off ammunition inside the BRDM ignited the four auxiliary magnesium alloy wheels and with blinding light illuminated the whole battle scene. I then grabbed a minute to send my first contact report, “Zero, Three Zero, contact, contact, wait out!”***

***All hell broke loose. The rest of the enemy convoy had not yet reached the perimeter of the main defensive position when the Ratel 90’s of Troop 1 opened fire on the BRDM. Thinking they were under air attack by the SAAF the convoy slewed off the elevated road opposite Breytenbach’s Pathfinders and, as established later, the four towed ZU-23-2 guns opened fire at the heavens above and at the imagined SAAF fighter-bombers!***





THE FORMIDABLE ZU-23-2 AA GUN CAPTURED AND NOW IN USE BY THE SADF. NOTE A CAPTURED ZPU 14.5 AA GUN IN FOREGROUND

## AFTERMATH

*After the initial fire-fight and awesome ZU 23-2 anti-aircraft barrage, the guns fell silent and I could hear shrapnel from exploding 23 mm shells dropping from the sky and clattering on the road and amongst our vehicles. The shouts and screams from the enemy side were also fading and each rustle in the night made by fleeing enemy soldiers were met by immediate fire-belt drill to discourage or prevent any strays blundering into our positions. As Chris quite rightly commented “..we even took pot-shots at the rising moon.”*

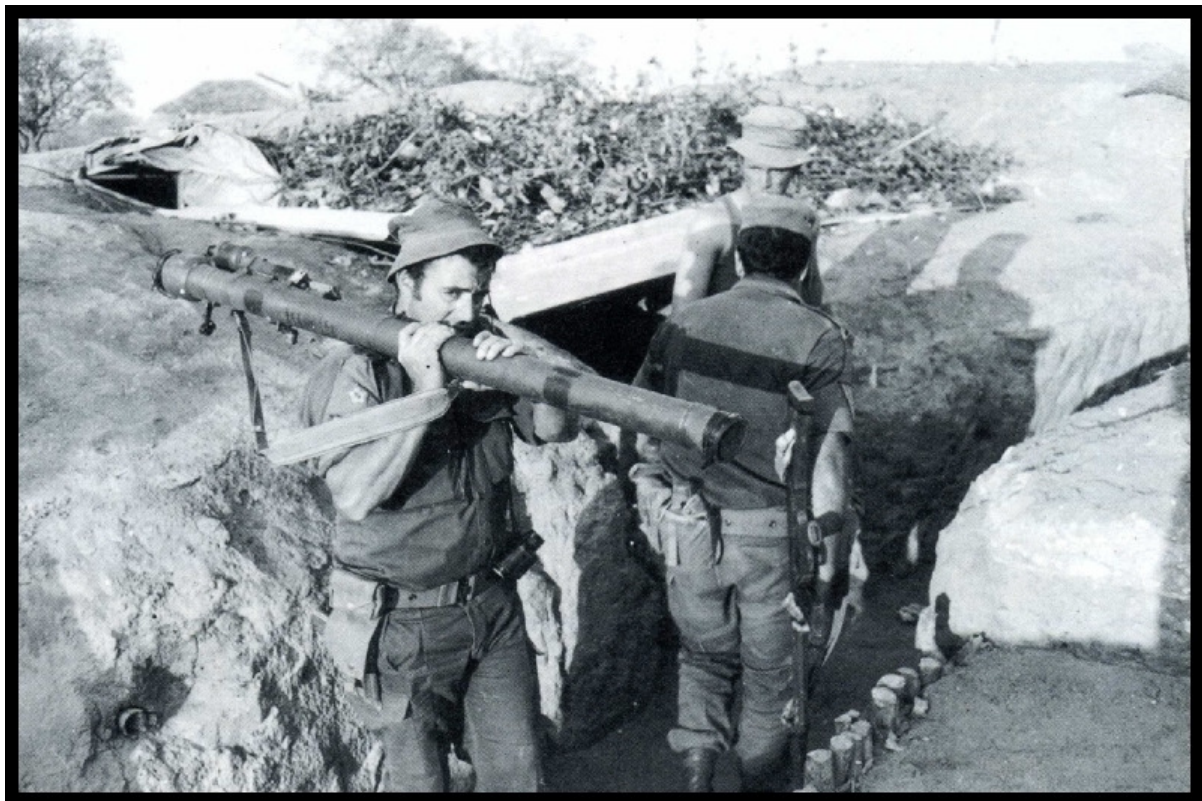
*During this encounter I managed to get out a further contact report to Battle Group HQ by radio by means of a radio-relay station situated hundreds of kilometres away due to bad comms. Neither myself or Chris could answer the numerous questions now pouring to us from higher HQ's. We did not know the exact enemy strength, we did not know how many enemy were dead or wounded and we did not know what was captured or destroyed. I would not allow anyone to venture forth in the dark to start any mopping-up. Good news from our commander, Roland de Vries, was that there were two Buccaneer aircraft on stand-by for us should it become necessary if a foray by FAPLA 21 Brigade from Cahama materialised. We did not feel so lonely anymore as we knew we had the backing of the full might of the SADF behind us.*

*After spending a sleepless night the dawn broke upon the scene of the ambush. The result of this night ambush is well documented by Roland de Vries, but I would like to augment with some minor detail. We found that the enemy that ran into our ambush was a composite FAPLA artillery battery consisting of MRL's, supporting AA systems and a defensive platoon. This*



***battery probably escaped the attack on Xangongo the previous day by not opening fire on our forces attacking Xangongo and revealing their position to the SAAF and Battle Group 10 attacking from their side of the river.***

***They thought they escaped unscathed and could get back onto the road and drive under cover of darkness to the safety of Cahama. Four of the GAZ-66 trucks were crammed with 23mm ammunition, BM 21 rockets as well as over 20 crates of SAM-7 AA missiles. Tried one out in Xangongo against a 60 mm mortar parachute flare – it worked, but the proximity fuse did not detonate. We recovered 4 x ZSU-23 MM AA Guns, 3 x BTR 152 APC's (The fourth one was shredded by 12,7 mm fire from the guns of 44 Para Pathfinders and unrecoverable), 4 x GAZ 66 trucks filled with ammunition, 2 x BM-21 MRL***



**Captured SAM-7 AA Missile**

***systems and a Lada radio-van. The BRDM-2, shot –out during the night, was now a black, charred wreckage next to the roadside to serve as tomb for the “sacrificed” crew member.***



BTR 152 APC

***As we started mopping up I received the order to evacuate the position at Big Boy 1 and withdraw tactically to Big Boy 2. As I relayed this order to the sub-units of my command, Chris alerted me to that incoming BM-21 MRL rocket fire***



BM-21 122 mm MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHER (MRL)

***from Cahama was on its way. As Cahama was 18 km away and the range of the BM-21 rockets were 20km, the barrage fell short as their fire were probably launched from behind the main defensive positions of FAPLA 21 Bde. This was probably their DF (defensive fire ) task to disrupt and delay an expected SADF attack on Cahama! This was effectively a battle indication that no further offensive action would be undertaken by FAPLA from Cahama and Combat Team 30 could serve its purpose as just as well in the vicinity of Xangongo and the bridge over the Cunene river now in our hands.***

***The blocking position at “Big Boy 2” at Catequero near Humbe was a large rectangular area about half the size of a rugby field with earthen ramps bulldozed on all sides with an exit to the main tar road. On its occupation by us it was evident that a lot of vehicles used this area with oil slicks more or less indicating favorite parking spots. This was, I thought, the ideal artillery gun park for rapid deployment to firing positions to support the FAPLA Brigade defending Xangongo. It could have been the home of the Artillery group that ran into our ambush at Chicusse. They were probably surprised by the arrival Combat Group Alpha at their rear on D-Day and skipped into the bush to avoid a showdown against a superior force.***

**The wisdom to attack from both sides of the Cunene River was proven. The effect of an artillery BM 21 –rocket strike on attacking SADF troops on the other side of the river would have been devastating.**



**Destroyed T-34/85 Tank at Ongiva by "C" Sqn 61 Mech Bn (ex-C Sqn, 2SSB)**

**After our redeployment to BIG BOY 2, I was tasked to reinforce the attack on FAPLA 11 Bde at Ongiva, by the rest of Task Force Alpha, by detaching 2 x Ratel 90 Troops to them. These Troops gave a good account of themselves by taking on, with other 61 Mech Ratel 90 Troops already deployed in battle, to destroy a number of T-34/85 tanks with their 90mm DEFA guns firing HEAT rounds capable of defeating 300 mm of homogeneous steel at a 90 degree angle (you do not get homogeneous steel and 90 degree angles on the battlefield, you get sloped armour and a foe hell-bent on killing you first!). It took real guts and faith in their weaponry and tactics to achieve the destruction of the enemy tanks.**

**I had trained my Eland 90 and Ratel 90 Troops in Anti-Tank tactics by two simple and basic principles:**

- **On recoil of your shot at the enemy tank, you should have already departed from your firing position and on gun run-out have taken a new firing position.**
- **Concentrate directed Troop fire on the most threatening enemy tank (from 4 x 90 mm HEAT rounds striking simultaneously on a tank is going to cause either a kill or a neutralising effect on the crew for the rest of the duration).**

**These principles were not my own, it was conveyed to me by no other than Roland de Vries, as Course Commander of a couple of young Candidate-Officers, undergoing training as Infantry Platoon Commanders at Infantry School, Oudtshoorn, in 1974.**

- **Fire your aimed shots at the enemy, rather aim short than over, as the resultant ricochets, either killing or splattering him with stones and dust, will effectively render him useless, move immediately to another fire position as you do not know who was targeting you and waiting for your muzzle flash and blast.**
- **Control your platoon fire by designating section fire onto defined targets. Imagine the effect if your comrade next to you is ripped apart by 10 x 7,62 bullets slamming into him and you know you maybe the next!**

***In the after-action reports, expounded in more detail by Roland de Vries, the anti-tank tactics employed by the Ratel 90 Troops commanded by “Kleintjie” Kleynhans, “Toffie” Grovè, “Doobie” Helm and others, at Ongiva, they adhered to the principles and achieved success. Two of them were awarded the “Honoris Crux” medals for bravery!***

***This was the first confrontation between SADF Armour and Soviet Tanks. For what is worth, with the confidence gained in our armament, we could continue to fight battles against newer Soviet tank models such as the T-55M encountered at Cuvelai (OP ASKARI 1984) and subsequent operations thereafter. The longer barrels of the T34/85 and the T55/100mm, as well as their slow traversing speed, could not cope with the rapid fire, concentrated fire and movement tactics of the Ratel 90's.***

#### **POST PROTEA**

***I, unfortunately, had to leave the my Combat Team within days after the completion of OP PROTEA to complete the SA Army pre-course for the SA Army Command and Staff Course at SA Army College and could not attend the formal de-briefing sessions after the operation. This is now my belated honour to bestow upon the officers and men of my Combat Team my congratulations for conducting themselves with fighting spirit, discipline and courage. Especially the officers and men of “C” Squadron 2 SSB, that I had the honour to train and battle –ready them for “C” Squadron 61 Mech Bn. Last, but not least, to my superiors, especially to Cmdt Roland de Vries, a “man” among men.***

***I salute you all !***

***Joe Weyers 02/02/2014***

***“Now if you load your rifle right and if you fix your bayonet so and if you kill that man my friend, the one you call the foe...***

***And if you do it often now and if you do it right, you'll be a hero overnight.....”***

***-Roger Whittaker***