

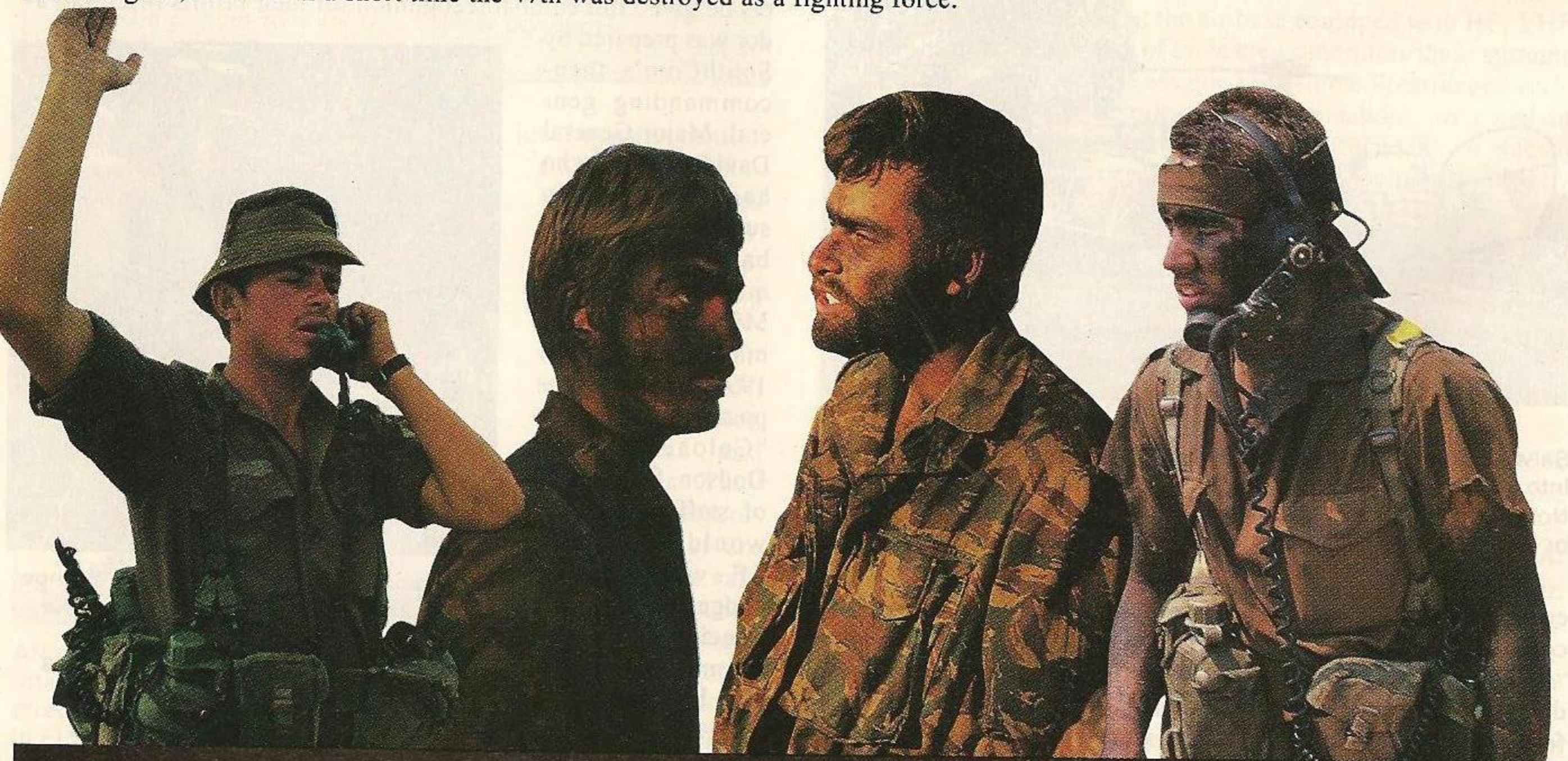
SOUTH AFRICA'S “SEALS”

Recces Able and Well-Armed Despite International Embargo

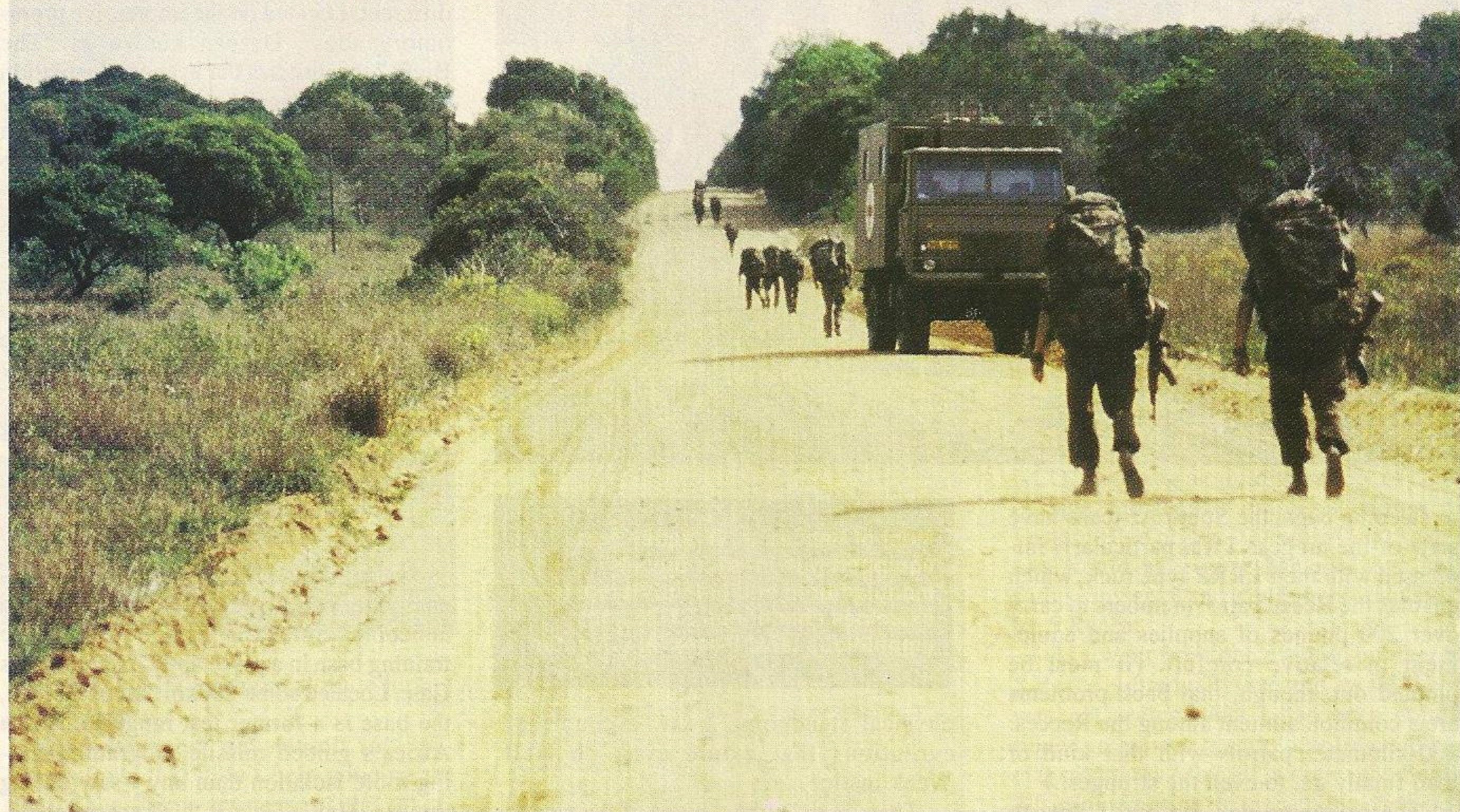
by Larry Bailey

Unlike their U.S. Special Forces and SEAL counterparts, South Africa's Reconnaissance Regiment troopers truly specialize in strategic and tactical reconnaissance. And though they are extraordinarily proficient in the use of small arms and have conducted some of the “hairiest” operations in modern warfare, the “Recces” are far more valuable to the South African Defense Forces (SADF) as eyes and ears. They think nothing of sending out a two-man team to patrol a couple hundred clicks into enemy territory to set up an observation post (OP) to monitor enemy installations, movements, or lines of communications.

As an example, during the bloody 1987 Angolan battle of Cuito Cuanavale, during which the back of the Soviet/Cuban-led MPLA army was broken, the Recces were instrumental in assisting the rebel Unita forces. On one occasion, the MPLA's elite 47th Regiment was observed trying to cross the Lomba River by a Recce team. The call for fire was answered by the South Africans' feared 155mm G5 and G6 guns, and within a short time the 47th was destroyed as a fighting force.



These white Recces have had no problem living with their black counterparts, working with them or worshipping with them. Author sees race relations in Recce units as potential proving ground for post-apartheid South Africa.
Photo: Al J. Venter



Similarly, a Recce team spotted artillery for the daily three-shell blasting of the Cuito Cuanavale airport runway and the daily two-shell trashing of the road to the airport. This was a rather clever way to deny the airfield to the MPLA without having to seize and hold it. The three shells made the runway unusable, while the two shells closed the road along which repair crews had to travel. Ergo, for the daily price of five 155mm shells, the enemy was denied access to his own airfield.

While much of these units' activities remains shrouded in secrecy, there is an increasing tendency to "open up" about their capabilities and past operations. In line with this new openness, I became the first foreign beneficiary of the SADF's tentative new policy of allowing access to previously restricted defense information, organizations and installations.

Right Tour At Right Time

My trip was the result of a fortuitous combination of circumstances; the executive director of the National Defense Council, Major Andy Messing (retired SF), inquired at the South African Embassy about the possibility of my conducting a visit to the South African special operations units. Discussions with the defense attaches revealed that the SADF were indeed interested in having a former SEAL officer

visit those units, as they were highly desirous of reestablishing counterpart contacts with the West after two decades of isolation. My visit was viewed as a potential icebreaker, and, if the South Africans' forthrightness and openness would have any effect on events, an opening to the West might well be in the offing.

I was met at Jan Smuts International in Johannesburg by my escort officer, South African navy Captain Jan Fourie, who proved to be a demanding taskmaster for the next two weeks. I was collected Monday morning by Jan and taken to army headquarters in Pretoria, where I was briefed by the director, reconnaissance regiments and by selected staff members. During the afternoon I visited the Recces' logistics warehouse, where I was shown an exhibit of weaponry, communications equipment and field gear developed by the Recces during the period of South

Trainees at Hell's Gate near end of 25-klick forced march. Recces routinely operate not only far from logistical support, but from transportation as well. Photo: Larry Bailey

Africa's ostracism from the family of nations. Suffice it to say that necessity and ingenuity have worked to equip the Recces in a manner that would be the envy of many a Western nation's special ops establishment.

From radios to rifles to rucks to chow

Recces have been well-supplied with a variety of surreptitiously purchased and SA-produced weapons. Below are Soviet-made Dragunov sniper rifle, top, and an Austrian-made Steyr SSG sniper rifle. Photo: Larry Bailey





Most of Recces' adversaries are equipped with inferior Soviet-manufactured equipment. Here a team examines abandoned PT-76 light amphibious tank. Photo: Al J. Venter

to sleeping bags, the South Africans have state-of-the-art gear. I was particularly impressed with their LRRP-type ruck, which enables the Recce patrol members to carry over 200 pounds of supplies and equipment in relative comfort. (It must be pointed out, though, that back problems are a common ailment among the Recces: 200-kilometer patrols with that kind of load finally get to even the strongest.)

The following day Jan and I flew to Cape Town, in the environs of which we spent the next two days visiting 4th Reconnaissance Regiment (4 Recce, as it is called) and the navy's diving school.

4 Recce is best described as "an Army SEAL team." While they are trained to perform the LRRP and direct-action missions conducted by the other two regiments, they also have a maritime responsibility. With oxygen-rebreathing scuba and rubber boats as part of their inventory, they didn't have to tell me exactly what they did. Rumor has it that, during a time of certain hostilities, a Soviet freighter in a certain Angolan harbor, along with some MPLA gunboats, found their resting places alongside their piers, courtesy of a certain Recce. Having spent the better part of two days in the company of 4 Recce's officers and top enlisted, I am convinced that the regiment would compare most favorably with my own SEAL teams.

Combat Diving School

The South African navy's diving school, while not special operations oriented, is a very impressive institution. It is here that South Africa's explosive ordnance disposal personnel are trained. Despite the economic blockade imposed by the rest of the world, the school has managed to procure top-of-the-line diving gear and associated auxiliary equipment. Compared to U.S. diving schools (SEAL diving excepted, of course), this one is far tougher from a

physical standpoint. I saw a couple of evolutions that would even do Hell Week justice.

Then on to Durban, home of the navy's Strike Flotilla and of the 1st Reconnaissance Regiment (1 Recce). The Strike Flotilla is aptly named; while I was not made privy to details, it is clear that numerous direct-action missions conducted by the Recce regiments were directly supported by the Israeli-built gunboats comprising the flotilla. Operating far beyond their organic fuel ranges, these crafts are supported at sea by one of the South African navy's two large logistic-support vessels. It was clear that the "pariah" status accorded South Africa by the rest of the world (save Israel, Taiwan, and a couple

of other nations) has worked to make the South African navy almost totally self-sufficient. It is learning, as are the Recces, that it is not a second-rate maritime of its counterparts in other countries.

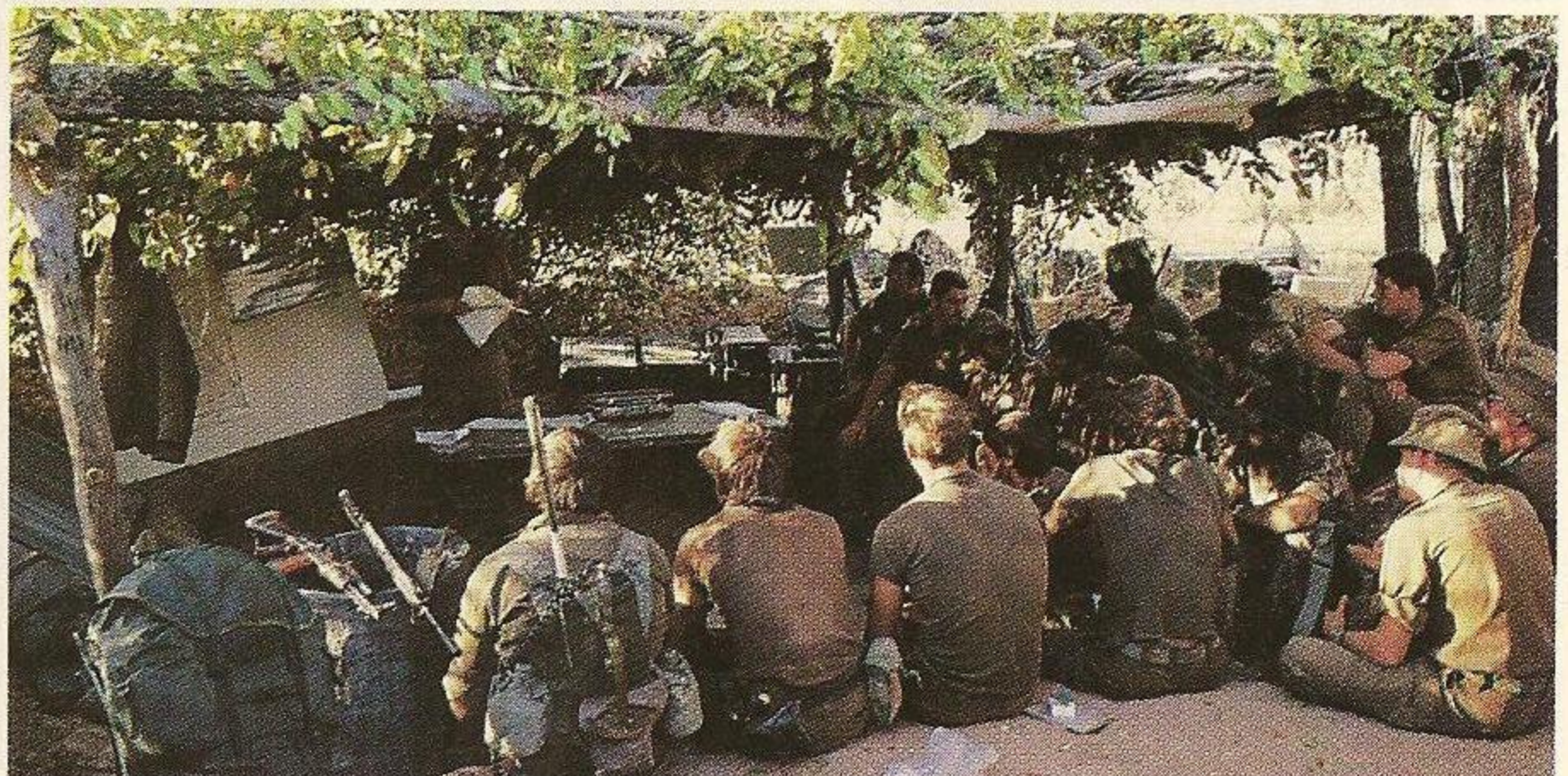
1 Recce exhibited the same levels of professional competence as did 4 Recce, although their Area of Operations (AO) is different. Located on the impressive promontory above Durban known as "The Bluff," the unit has the near-total isolation sought by all special units but attained by few. A highlight of my visit there was an equipment display where I first got a close look at the Recce rucksack. From pistols to flashlights to web gear to motorcycles, 1 Recce's bag of tricks looked very similar to those I have seen exhibited at countless SEAL and special forces demonstrations. It was eminently clear that 1 Recce has learned some valuable lessons in how to equip oneself for combat; it also became increasingly clear that I was visiting what may well be the world's most capable combat force.

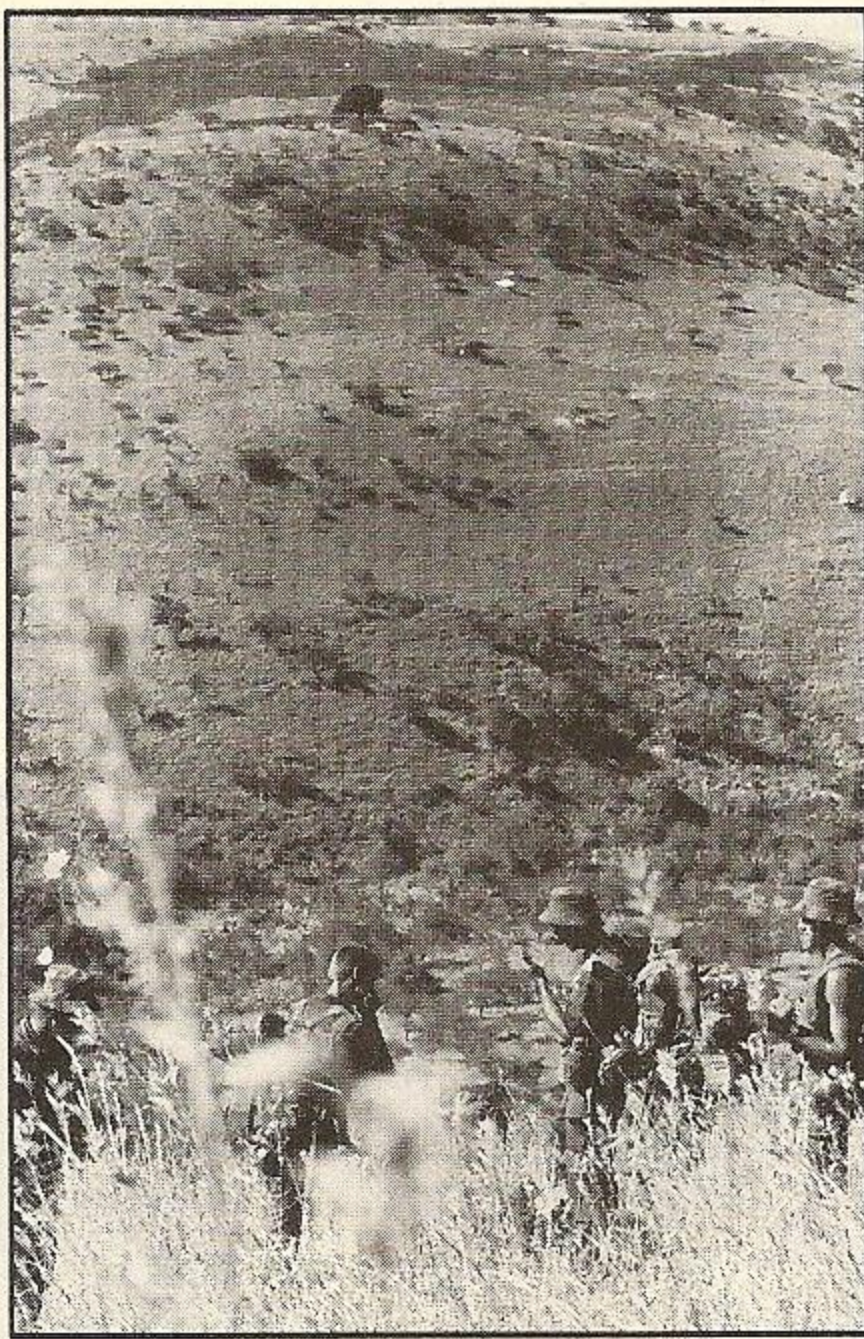
Hell's Gate

On my first Saturday in this phenomenally beautiful country, I flew in a Puma helicopter from The Bluff to the Recce training base in a place aptly named Hell's Gate. Located some 200km east of Durban, the base is a former test range for South Africa's guided missile program. Offering more isolation than any I saw during my trip, Hell's Gate is to Recce what Basic UDT/SEAL (BUD/S) training is to SEALs. For weeks on end the students learn to live with the ruck, marching hundreds of kilometers on training evolutions.

There are no barracks for the students here; every night is spent in a hole in a defensive lay-up site in the bush. Even religious services are held outdoors in a bush chapel of extraordinary tranquility; I attended chapel here on Sunday morning and found it to be a moving experience. South African men tend to be more religious than our own; each Recce regiment had its own chapel and chaplain, and grace

As elite units anywhere, Recces tend to wear/use uniforms and LBE that works — no matter which enemy they took it from. Note variety evident in this briefing. Photo: Al J. Venter





Except for lack of a satellite link, author found the Recce's communications to be state-of-the art. Photo: Al J. Venter

was said before each meal in which I participated.

As a fairly big guy myself (6'1" — 225 pounds), I couldn't help noticing the size of the Recce trainees; of the 42 remaining in the class, fully 30 of them were at least as tall as I was and of appropriate musculature. I suggested to the Recce officers that maybe Darwin's "Law of Natural Selection" was in effect here, effectively making heavy-ruck patrolling a big man's game. I also noticed, contrary to what I had been led to expect, that white and black soldiers, officer and enlisted alike, lived together. This phenomenon was even more observable at my next stop, Phalaborwa (pronounced "Palaborwa"), home of the much-feared (if you're an enemy, that is) 5 Recce.

Shortly after the chapel-in-the-woods service on Sunday morning, a Cessna 210 piloted by a gent named Kobus landed on the dirt strip at Hell's Gate. Turned out that Kobus was a South African air force reservist who was satisfying part of his reserve obligation by ferrying Jan and me to Phalaborwa in his own plane. An engineer by profession, he clearly enjoyed getting the SADF to pay for his avgas while he overflew the veld of Natal.

Lions & Tigers & 5 Recce

Unhappily for those on the veld, however, the drought that has wrought havoc in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, and other parts of East Africa has had a disastrous effect there as well. The entire landscape is brown, and from the sky much of it looks like desert, except that here and there one sees Zulu *kraala* and small herds of cattle.

Fear And Hoping in South Africa

Hope and fear are the two emotions most prevalent in South Africa today. At the moment, however, it seems that fear holds the edge, although it is not the pervasive fear that comes from threats to life and property. Rather, it is the fear of the unknown that results from the constantly changing circumstances of the political debate. It seems that as soon as a course of negotiation is laid out, some new and unexpected factor complicates matters. And, of course, modern South Africa being what it is, that factor is not long in coming, as evinced by the opening of a campaign of terror by the Azanian People's Liberation Army, which has already resulted in the deaths of several innocent whites.

Another recent example is the alleged "dirty tricks" campaign planned by the South African military against the African National Congress. Even though this "plot" was still under investigation, and although there was no evidence to confirm that any action had been undertaken, Nelson Mandela wasted no time in implicating the white government. It must be said that Mandela's "statesman" image has suffered as a result, at least in the eyes of those who are evenhanded in their judgments on the political process in South Africa. Rather than try to cool the emotions of his followers and advocate waiting until the investigation was complete, Mandela was quick to point the finger of blame at President F.W. de Klerk.

A key issue to be resolved in the political deliberations between the various participants in the peace process is that of future indemnity for persons alleged to have committed crimes in defense of past and present white governments. It is clear that such crimes have taken place. What is equally clear is that the ANC is also guilty of criminal acts. What is not clear is how the ANC can demand that retribution be wrought only against supporters of apartheid. The de Klerk government continues to pursue a "let-by-gones-be-by-gones" policy, as demonstrated by its release of several hundred perpetrators of so-called "political crimes." One of the more celebrated cases involved the release of one Ronnie McBride, who detonated a bomb in a popular nightclub in Durban, killing three young women and maiming several other patrons. Released at the same time was the white man who randomly murdered eight blacks in downtown Pretoria. Most South Africans seem to believe that neither should have been released.

— L. B.

After being met at the Phalaborwa airport by the CO of 5 Recce, Jan and I were carried to regimental headquarters for a quick brief-in. Then we transloaded into a

Toyota 4x4 and drove to the home of Jack, a former Recce officer who is now a park ranger in the world famous Kruger National Park, an expanse of territory larger than many countries. After a fascinating tour of Jack's area of responsibility during which we saw a pride of lions that would keep us awake that night, we were eager participants in a *braai*, or barbecue, on Jack's veranda. After delaying bedtime as long as possible in deference to the lions, we finally drove to our overnight abode, a tiny structure and tent in which four of us passed a very wakeful night. (Nice kitty — !)

Next day back to Phalaborwa for the usual indoctrination briefing and equipment display, which once again pointed up the ingenuity of the South Africans in overcoming the effects of the international embargo. Included in the equipment display was a selection of crew-served weapons captured by 5 Recce in Angola; attending these armaments were black NCO's wearing an infinite variety of camouflage and regular uniforms, mostly of Eastern Bloc origin. *SOF* militaria collectors would have gone bananas over uniforms, insignia and equipment displayed by 5 Recce.

As I went from one event to another at 5 Recce, I gradually became aware that I was not seeing what I had been conditioned to expect, a rigidly segregated social structure. After all, weren't the South Africans fighting to preserve apartheid? Wrong again. 5 Recce was without doubt the most fascinating social organism I have ever seen, starting with the ethnic groups represented — there were 15, representing every country and most tribal groups (including white) in southern Africa. Then consider the languages spoken — 35, including Afrikaans. And while most of the officers were white, the great majority of NCOs, including the operations sergeant major, were black. Inquiry revealed that 5 Recce's personnel had been recruited from Angola, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and other countries, in addition to South Africa.

The logic of this heterogeneity is made evident when one considers the difficulty white soldiers have in infiltrating black-populated territory. As the CO told me, only black soldiers can effectively fight a black enemy. It follows that only contented and fairly treated black soldiers could be expected to fight soldiers of their own race.

Role Models For A New RSA

That 5 Recce was well and truly integrated as a fighting unit was clear; what was equally clear was the effort command had made in ensuring harmonious relations. As an example, a regimental church was developed to minister to the needs of the various Christian denominations rep-

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resented by 5 Recce. This church incorporated Catholicism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, and who knows what other branches of the faith into its services. It was surely a testament to ecumenism I never expected to find.

The irony of the 5 Recce situation is noteworthy when one considers the present state of affairs in South Africa. Even before apartheid was consigned to the scrap heap it deserved, 5 Recce and other SADF formations had rejected it as being incompatible with their missions. It occurred to me during my visit that maybe 5 Recce and similar units could serve as societal role models for "the new South Africa." By that I mean that a transitional government could actually point to the 5 Recce as an example of how citizens of the new RSA should treat those of other races and tribes.

Unfortunately, however, the mere mention of 5 Recce causes political flags to go up, as it has been accused of conducting a variety of heinous activities against South Africans of all races. The most notable accusations were levied against 5 Recce

by Bob Nixon (aka Bob Ndmieni), an NCO who was dismissed from the regiment for poor performance of duty. Nixon/Ndmieni, currently holed up in Mozambique, accused his former comrades-in-arms of everything from participating in ethnic massacres to throwing ANC supporters off trains. That none of his allegations were substantiated in the least seems not to matter to the press or the ANC and its allies.

Nonetheless, common sense would indicate that if convicted murderers and other terrorists can be forgiven and freed from prison, a military unit, however feared, should be permitted to make its contribution to a lasting peace in South Africa. To disband the reconnaissance regiments (as is being done with the predominantly black 32nd Battalion) would be folly in the extreme, given its potential to serve as a bellwether for a future South Africa.

The officers of 5 Recce, to a man, insisted that political change in South Africa was both good and inexorable. They unanimously expressed a desire to serve a new government as professionally as they have served the old, and I believe that any new government would lose a formidable ally, both militarily and socially, were 5 Recce to be disbanded. The goodwill evident in the relations within the unit should be the regiment's contribution to a new era of race relations in the country. A sad commentary on the opposite tack is what happened in Zimbabwe when it was made clear that the Selous Scouts, the Rhodesian SAS and other special units were not welcome in the new defense structure of Rhodesia-Zimbabwe.

What happened? Simply that some of the best military men in the world went south to join the SADF, and the notorious North Korean-trained 5th Battalion became the preeminent special forces-type organization in Zimbabwe. That unit's murderous bent was made manifest in the Matabeleland massacres in the early 1980s, events that created lasting hatred toward the Shona tribe on the part of the Matabele.

Why should not even an ANC-dominated government extend the hand of friendship to the elite units of the SADF? As someone smarter than I once said, "The best way to remove an enemy is to make him your friend." I believe that the reconnaissance regiments would gladly serve new masters, given equitable treatment by those masters. After all, professional military men have long understood that their loyalties are to the institutions from which they sprang. That those institutions are changing will not affect the loyalty of the Recces. They should be saved.

Captain Larry Bailey USN (Retired) spent 28 years in the Navy, 27 of those as a SEAL, including three years in Scotland, five in Panama, four in Bolivia and three years as CO of the Special Warfare Center. He is now associated with non-profit, pro-defense organizations. ✕