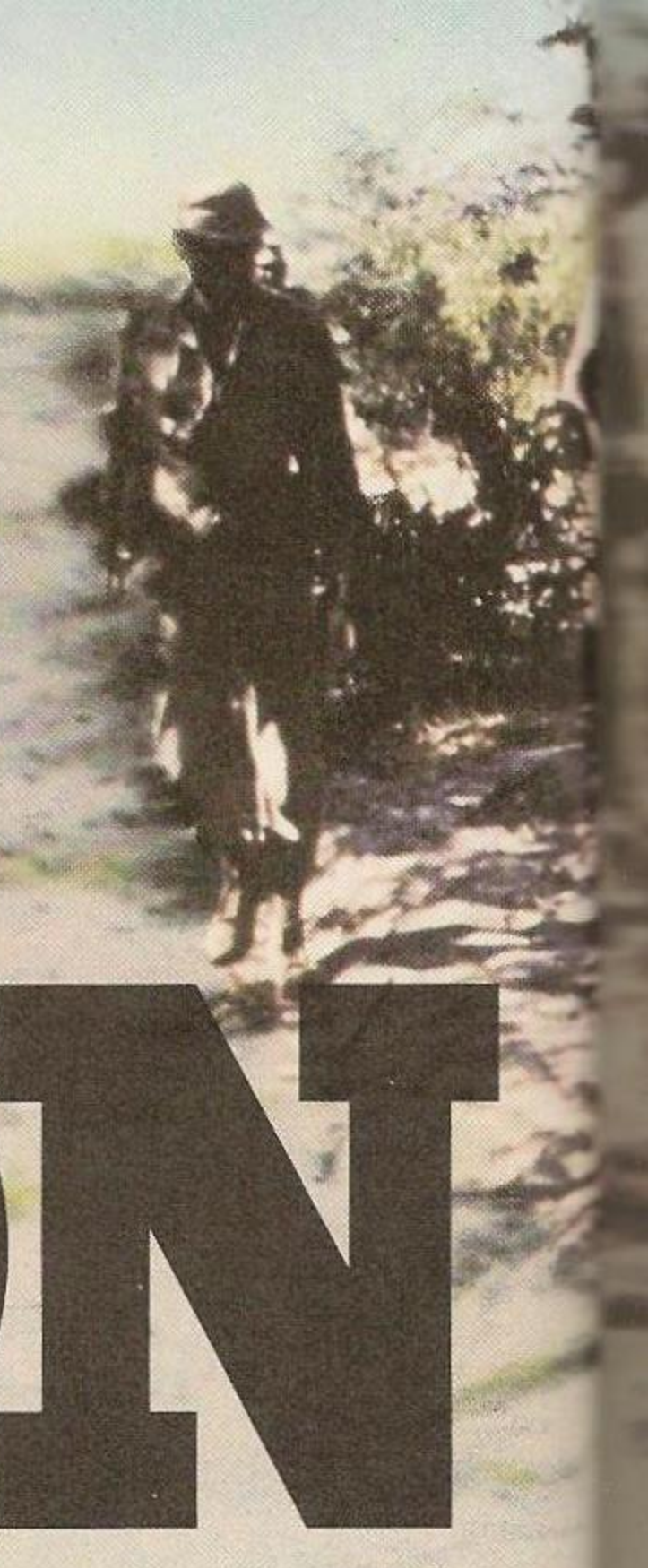


CROWBAR ACTION



Scouring the bush lands of South West Africa for SWAPO insurgents, the hunter-killer combat groups of Koevoet operate on the principle of maximum firepower

THE COLUMN of four Casspirs and one Blesbok had broken from the heavy bush into an open pan spotted with trees and drooping thickets, a water hole at the centre. Suddenly it came... Boesman's voice crackled over the radio - 'Contact!' My eyes snapped to Du Rand, sitting across from me. There was one of those forever half-seconds before Jim spat 'Contact!' and grabbed for his weapon.

Following a week-long tour of the South West Africa/Namibia Operational Area, I stepped off the C-130 Hercules back at Ondangwa Air Force Base. The lieutenant meeting me looked as though he was attending a funeral. 'Authorisation finally came through an hour ago,' he intoned, shaking his head. 'You leave tomorrow for a week in the bush with Koevoet.'

'Koevoet' - pronounced 'koofoet' - is the old and now unofficial name for the South West Africa Police Counter-Insurgency (SWAPOLCOIN) unit. Little known outside the operational area, this predominantly black unit has accounted for almost 25 per cent of the 10,351 losses suffered by the Soviet-backed South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) terrorists infiltrating across the border from Angola. Since its shaky beginning eight years ago, SWAPOLCOIN has killed over 2500 armed terrorists. Its own losses have been less than 90.

'I was sent up here in '78,' recalled Brigadier J.G. Dreyer, the commanding officer of SWAPOLCOIN, 'to see what role the police could play against terrorism.' Drawing on experience gained in the Rhodesian bush war, Dreyer at first envisaged a Selous Scout-type unit, employing blacks in the counter-insurgency role. 'I learned in Rhodesia,' Dreyer emphasised, 'that you must use the local people because of their knowledge of the language,

customs and terrain. An all-white force would be totally ineffective in this kind of war.'

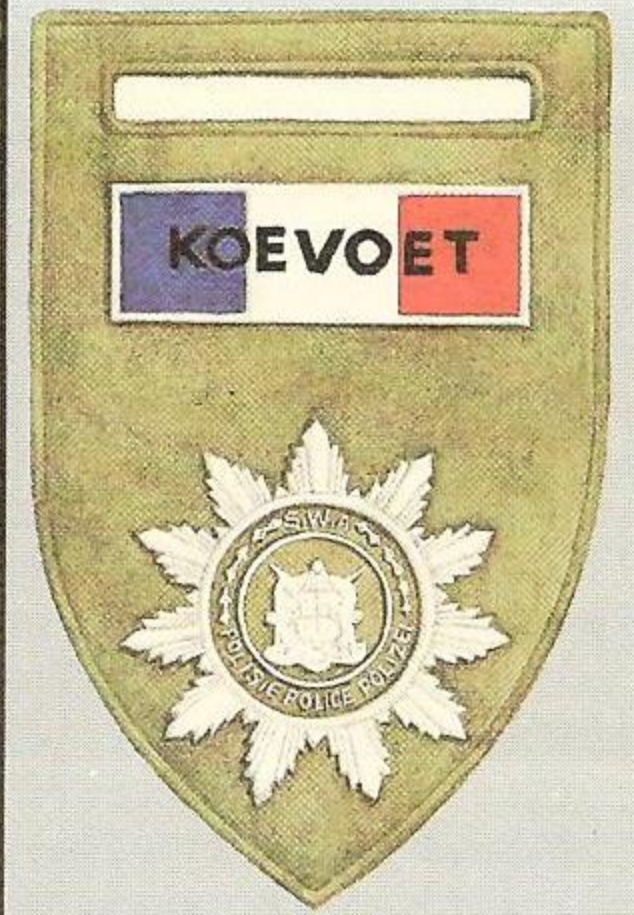
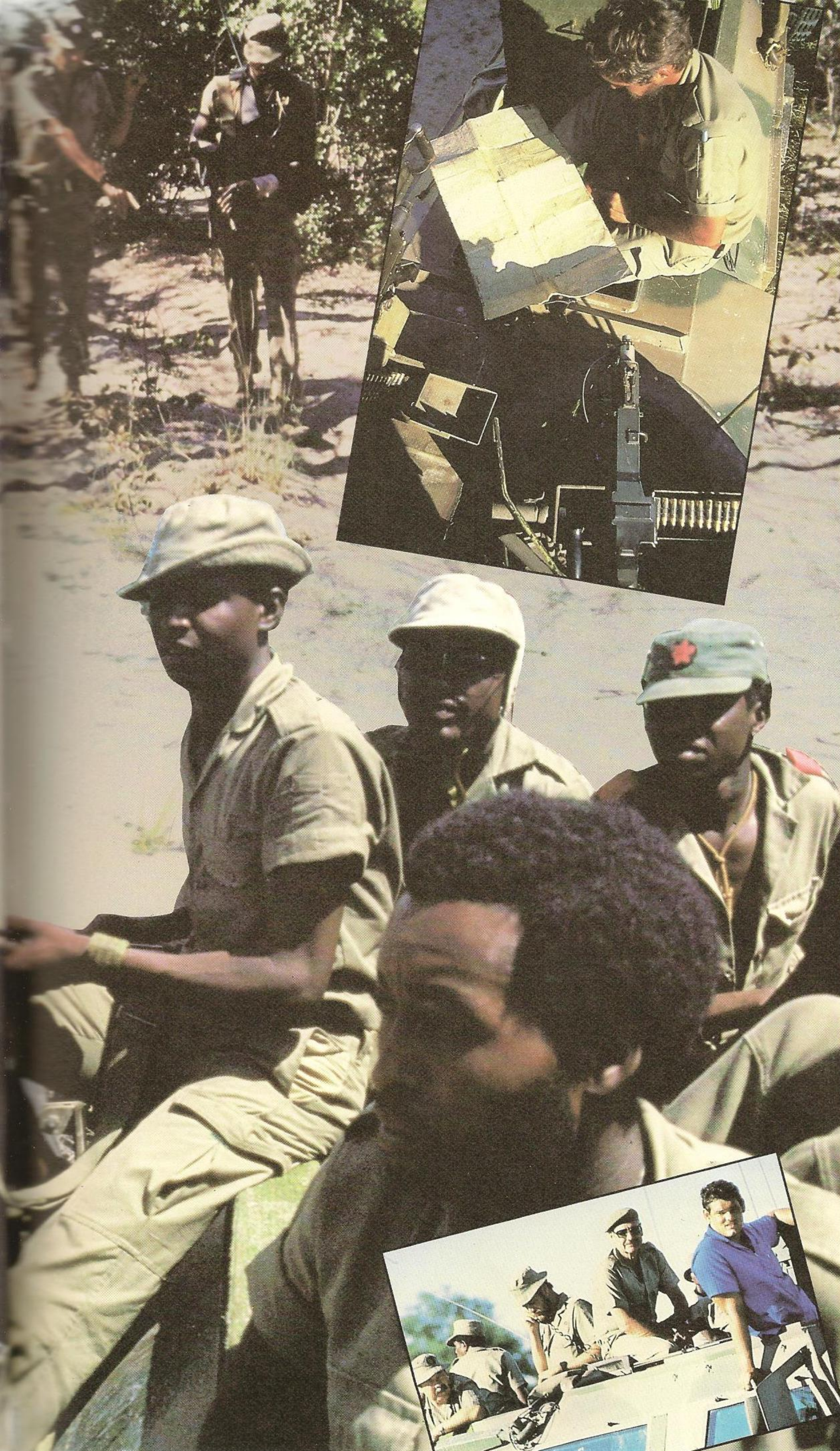
As the Ovambo people comprise half the population of South West Africa/Namibia, Dreyer approached a senior Ovambo headman and discussed his ideas. The headman was impressed and, at Dreyer's request, recruited 60 Ovambos skilled in tracking and weapons handling. The new unit was given the letter 'K' as its designator. The K became Koevoet, Afrikaans for crowbar. Never was a unit more aptly dubbed.

Reporting to SWAPOLCOIN headquarters, I walked into Captain Bernie Ley's office. He got down to business. 'Blood group?' he asked. 'Next of kin? Your group leader will issue you with a weapon. Ever fired an R5?' Any thoughts that this might be a boy-scout-camping-trip-in-the-woods affair quickly evaporated. I asked if I needed to take any identification. Captain Maritz - who has the reputation of carrying around more shrapnel than the rest of 'Ops K' combined - walked in as I asked my question. He smirked as he replied: 'I don't think any "terr's" gonna be too impressed with your press cards.'

Outside, the Casspir armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and Blesbok mine-protected supply trucks pulling out that morning were being loaded. The cars' guns, which had been taken down when the groups had returned from a bush patrol the week before, were being remounted. Depending on the personal preferences of the group leaders, the cars carried a combination of two 0.3in Brownings or 7.62mm light machine guns (LMGs), or a 0.5in Browning with two of the lighter guns. At one time, a number of Casspirs carried Soviet 14.5mm guns. This practice ended, however, when supplies of captured ammunition ran out. Looking into the cars, I saw a bewildering array of foreign and domestic hardware. In addition to each man's Armscor R5 rifle with 50-round magazine, there were 60mm mortars, RPDs, PKMs, RPG-7s, single and six-shot 40mm grenade launchers, LMGs with bipods, an occasional R1, and enough belted and boxed ammunition to keep things hot for quite a spell. 'Maximum firepower,'

The combination of men, tactics and a maverick at the helm has made Koevoet one of the world's most successful special warfare units. The maverick concerned is Major-General J. G. Dreyer (bottom right), the commanding officer of 'Ops K'. Dreyer is seen in the centre of the picture, wearing a beret. Top right: Warrant Officer Marius Brand plots the position of Zulu Alpha. Above right: Constable Dean Viljoen points out terrorist spoor to his radio operator. Right: Maximum firepower.





KOEVOET

During the first few months of Koevoet's existence, Colonel, now Major-General J. G. Dreyer's force operated on a shoestring budget. Dreyer had been allowed to take only four officers with him to the South West Africa/Namibia Operational Area, but he was determined that his concept for combatting the 'terrs' should succeed. After recruiting another two officers and 60 Ovambo tribesmen from the area, Dreyer put 'Ops K' through a rigorous training programme.

Koevoet's first major success came in 1979, after 12 SWAPO terrorists bayoneted four civilians to death and managed to elude the army. One 'Ops K' officer and 23 Ovambo trackers were flown to the scene and followed the spoor for the next seven days. In the contact that ensued, the SWAPO commander was killed. Koevoet was soon killing 50 to 80 terrorists a month.

Armed with combat statistics, Dreyer flew to Pretoria to argue his case. Money and equipment were soon on the way, including three Hippo armoured personnel carriers, the forerunners of the Casspirs. Dreyer was now convinced that highly mobile hunter-killer teams were the most effective way of dealing with terrorists in the dense bush. Each heavily armed

Koevoet group was therefore organised into 40 Ovambo trackers, four officers and four Casspirs. Added to each group was one Blesbok supply vehicle. Above: The insignia of the South West Africa Police Counter-Insurgency unit.

said a voice. I looked around. It was Warrant Officer Marius Brand. I would be spending the next week with Brand and his group, Zulu Alpha. Brand is tall, lanky and moves with the loose-jointed swagger of a western gunslinger: 'In a contact, you gotta overwhelm the terrs, break them up and kill 'em now-now. Especially in an ambush...you drive straight into them with maximum firepower.' He smiled, but his eyes stayed as cold as those of the snake on Zulu Alpha's group insignia.

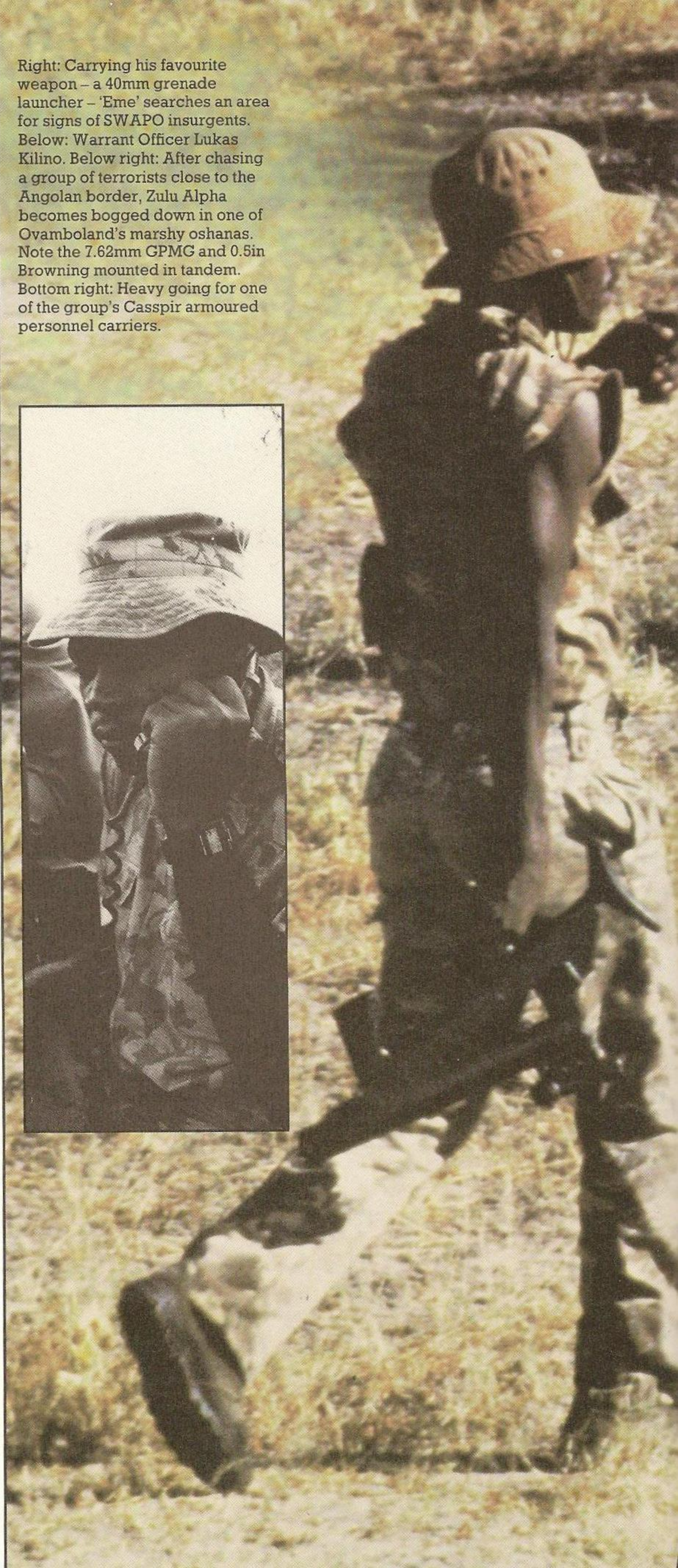
Once on the road, Brand noted: 'We're killing them faster than they can be replaced. The terrs are having to kidnap recruits and train them against their will.' Later in the week, I would follow the progress of a group tracking three SWAPO terrorists who had kidnapped 10 people. The radioed reports lasted two days before the civilians were rescued. The kidnappers never made it across the border either.

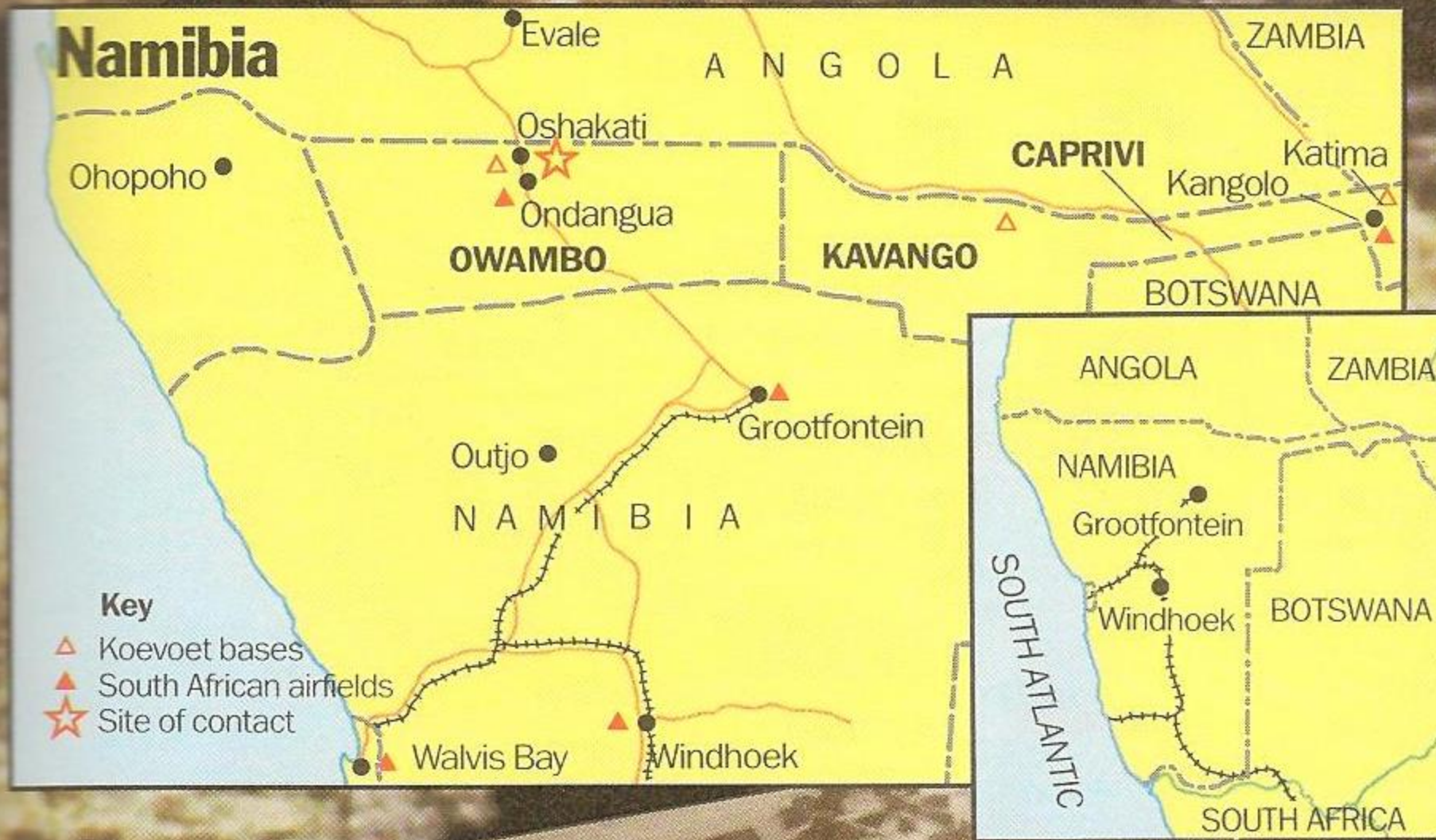
Once in the bush, every civilian becomes a possible source of information. At each kraal, the trackers dismount and question the local population. To my surprise, the trackers came back with reports that three terrorists had been seen or heard about in the last two days. My surprise must have been evident. 'I can promise you, there are 10 to 15 terrs within 10 "klicks" of here,' volunteered Marius, answering my unasked question. 'The bad thing is that if they hear we're in the area they sit tight or get the hell out. They're really scared of us.' Working the area until late afternoon, it was obvious that these three were keeping a very low profile. With the sun low on the horizon, we joined up with Dean Viljeon who was temporarily ramrodding Zulu Mike's new Wolf Turbo APCs. Just before sunset, a suitable location for a temporary base (TB) was found. With the Casspirs and Wolf Turbos set around the TB, guns facing outward, food and bedding were unloaded. A dozen cooking fires were soon going strong. Being in the middle of 'indian' country with fires blazing seemed a touch unorthodox, I thought, but the guys explained that SWAPO was too frightened of Koevoet even to think about hitting us.

What they could tell from an imprint that I could hardly see was incredible

Late one afternoon a few days later, we were barrelling down the dirt road towards the army base at Eenhana. On either side was thick, heavy cover. More than a couple of groups had been hit along this stretch. Special Warrant Officer Otto Shivute, senior Ovambo of Zulu Alpha, was looking through an Oshivambo-Afrikaans-English dictionary. Finding the words he wanted, he turned to me with a smile: 'If we lucky, ambush!' From sunup to sundown, the radios in the cars were constantly in use. Groups operating from Opuwa in the west, to Rundu in the east, kept Zulu Base and each other advised of their progress and situations. Marius would keep me abreast of the Afrikaans transmissions, especially when a group was on a 'follow up' – chasing spoor. Everyone would be particularly attentive to the radio when a group reported closing on a hot spoor, finally calling for gunships when contact was imminent. Sometimes the attention-grabbing 'Contact' would come through unexpectedly, leaving everyone hanging in suspense until the outcome was relayed. The worst were calls for a casevac chopper to take out their own wounded. Ops K is a close, tightly-knit family – blacks and whites together – and a call for a casevac would keep each man holding his breath

Right: Carrying his favourite weapon – a 40mm grenade launcher – 'Eme' searches an area for signs of SWAPO insurgents. Below: Warrant Officer Lukas Kilino. Below right: After chasing a group of terrorists close to the Angolan border, Zulu Alpha becomes bogged down in one of Ovamboland's marshy oshanas. Note the 7.62mm GPMG and 0.5in Browning mounted in tandem. Bottom right: Heavy going for one of the group's Casspir armoured personnel carriers.





until the extent of the injuries was known.

The first good spoor the trackers found was soon lost on hard ground, found, lost, then found again. Side by side with Zulu Mike, we followed it most of the day. Although it had been described to me time and again, I was amazed at the aggression the trackers showed when they had the spoor. Cars flanking them, they would move at a dead run, often outstripping the Casspirs which could not keep pace through the thick bush. They would run until winded, drop back to their cars, and their places would be taken by others who would drop off the sides of the rolling cars and take the spoor. On hard ground, where the spoor became indistinct, the cars would stop and everyone debuss, fanning out in an attempt to pick it up further on. What they could tell from an imprint that I could barely see was incredible: 'This one old man - short steps', or 'this woman and child', or 'this one SWAPO - soldier with gun walks proud.'

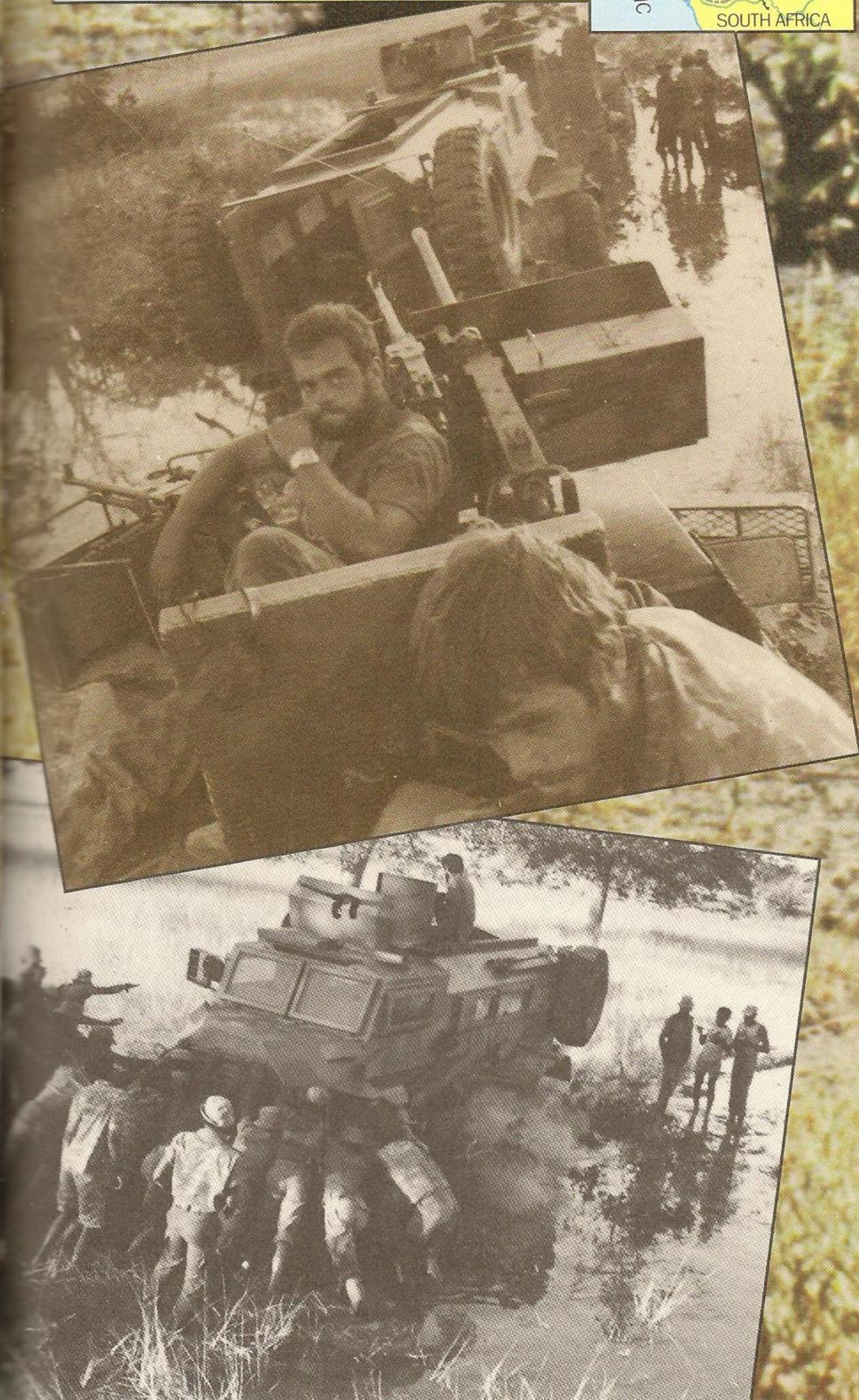
The spoor of 30 to 40 terrorists was found and the groups fanned out, racing off in a cloud of dust

On the fifth morning, we received word that a small army base near the Angolan border had been mortared in the middle of the night. 'Saddling up', we headed for the scene of the crime. When we pulled up an hour later, three other groups were already there. I noted that half the mortar rounds had failed to detonate. The aim wasn't too good, either. All had impacted at least 150m short of the intended target. The spoor of 30 to 40 terrorists was found and all the groups fanned out, racing off in a cloud of dust to pick up the spoor further ahead. The dust came to an abrupt end as we ran into a series of oshanas, low marshy areas with a foot or more of water. The cars slowed to a crawl. Struggling through the 'shanas', it was accepted that the terrorists had probably already made it across the border to safety, but no-one was ready to give up the chase. By early afternoon, and 100m short of the border, it was obvious that Koevoet had lost this round. Zulu Base radioed to say intelligence sources indicated 58 SWAPO terrorists had crossed the border heading for the Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) base at Namukunde, a few kilometres north of us. They had crossed to safety - SWAPOLCOIN's only operational limit is the Angolan border.

As sunset approached, the trackers started unloading bedrolls and weapons, wading to an island in the middle of the 'shana. As they began setting up mortars it finally started to dawn on me that we were there for the night. It also struck me that maybe we weren't exactly in the best of situations. We were stuck fast in the middle of a particularly soft-bottomed oshana. It was getting dark. No other group was near enough to get to us that night and render assistance. Not all that far away were 58 SWAPO holed up in a FAPLA base. And with another FAPLA border post less than five clicks to the east, they had to know where we were. But the night passed without incident, and late the next morning Dean Viljoen and the Wolf Turbos roared in and dragged us out of the quagmire.

On my last morning with Zulu Alpha, we responded to the scene of another mortaring. Again, spoor was found, this time eight of them, but lost on hard ground, found again - just as before. At least this time we had no 'shanas to wade through.

In the middle of a field of rumbling cars, Marius asked if I'd like to ride with the 'Brig', who had come





'Contact.' Only seconds after Zulu November catches sight of a group of SWAPO insurgents, the air is thick with the sound of gunfire. Bottom left: After breaking open his 'blooper' and feeding in a round, Eme takes aim (above left). Meanwhile, Ovambo trackers spray the area outside the Casspir with machine-gun bullets (top and bottom right). Right and far right: Changing a magazine in the heat of battle. Left: Sergeant Jim Du Rand.

out for the hunt. He pointed to a Wolf Turbo. Grabbing my camera bag, I hopped out and ran to the Wolf. Climbing through the rear doors that hissed open for me, I thought maybe I had the wrong car. There was no sign of Brigadier Dreyer. Then I caught sight of a familiar figure in the driver's seat. 'If he has time, you can't keep him out of the field,' one of his staff volunteered with a barely suppressed grin.

The week with Zulu Alpha came to an end. SWAPO, through fortune or skill, had managed to keep out of our way. Groups working other areas of Ovambo-land's 33,000 square miles, however, found what they were looking for. Seven more notches were added to Koevoet's guns.

The following morning, after being granted permission to stay for another week, I climbed aboard the number two car of Zulu November. At the last minute, Sergeant Jim Du Rand had been assigned to ride with me. I felt guilty as hell when he explained this was his last week with Ops K, but since my car commander spoke no English, they wanted someone with me who could translate. After six years with Koevoet, over 120 contacts and more than 300 kills, Du Rand was heading back to South Africa to take up somewhat quieter police duties. When he mentioned that it seemed guys always got hurt or killed just when they were ready to leave, I started feeling pretty rotten. 'No, no, it's okay,' he assured me. 'If I wasn't doing this, I'd be out setting up night ambushes anyway!'

The group leader of Zulu November is the stocky, barrel-chested Willem Boesman. Zulu November is a top-scorer – in 1985, Boesman's group claimed the lives of 50 terrorists. In February 1986, Zulu November hit a 40-man SWAPO detachment, killing 35 in a 12 and a half minute contact. It was a record for Ops K. As we rolled out of Zulu Base, Boesman's score for the first four months of 1986 already stood at 47.

'And then the crazy bastard casually told him to pick it up and bring it to the car'

My car commander for this second week with Koevoet was Warrant Officer Lukas Kilino, who had started soldiering at the age of 14 with Holden Roberto's National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA). When the Soviet-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) seized power in Angola, Kilino made his way south and joined South Africa's little-publicised 32 Battalion. Later, he moved to Ops K. It was not difficult to spot him as a professional.

Boesman's uncanny sixth sense took us into an area where the trackers picked up fresh spoor almost immediately. At one point, they figured the spoor was no more than two hours old and Boesman radioed the air force, putting the gunships on standby.

The relationship between SWAPOLCOIN and the South African Air Force is first-rate. Both think highly of the other. As Marius told me the week before: 'They know we won't scramble them unless we're on a hot spoor and they have a good chance to get kills.'

Although a contact appeared imminent, this particular group of terrorists 'bombshelled' – each taking off in a separate direction – and 'anti-tracked' – backing up on their own spoor, staying on hard ground wherever possible and moving carefully from one tuft of tough grass to another. Anything and everything to make their tracks indistinguishable.

Setting up a TB that night, I listened to an inex-

haustable repertoire of contact stories. Du Rand told of the time he found himself face to face with a 'terr' holding an RPG-7. Jim levelled his gun, only to discover it had jammed. The terrorist looked down at the RPG in his hands, looked up at the 20mm pointing at him and dropped the rocket launcher like a hot potato, raising his hands. Actually, I had heard the story a week earlier from someone who added: 'And then the crazy bastard casually told him to pick it up and bring it to the car!'

Mornings at a TB start before dawn, when the first sleepy risers stir last night's coals into life, sending sparks into the cold, dark air. There is the lonely sound of a cough here and there. The small, ruby glow of a first cigarette punctuates the camp. Sweaters are pulled on against the chill and dark figures begin to cluster round the first fire, palms towards the warmth. As light begins to filter through the bush, more figures slip from brown sleeping bags. Before the sun has made its appearance, there is the smell of coffee in the crisp air. Sleeping bags are rolled up and everything loaded on the Blesbok. Boesman, deeply religious and private, unwraps a small bible and sits alone, reading a passage. I wonder which it might be. When the sun is full-born on the horizon, we move out, another long and dusty day ahead of us. On this morning, a full moon still hangs large and white in the western sky.

The rhythmic ripple of *shh-klacks* is heard as bolts come back and fall on chambered rounds

The morning follows the pattern of all the others: stopping at kraals and questioning the locals, moving through the bush, everyone scanning the ground for spoor. We are sitting under a mopane tree during a noon coffee-break when, without preamble, comes that attention-grabbing word over the radio: 'Contact'. Behind the word, gunfire is heard. Coffee cups stop at lips, and are slowly lowered as ears strain to pull more from the air. Then the call comes for a casevac chopper. Silent looks pass between the men sitting cross-legged on the ground. Pierre goes to stand nearer the car, as though that will force more from the radio. Finally the story crackles through the speaker. A group has hit an ambush. Three terrorists have been killed, but one car commander has been seriously wounded. Nothing more is heard.

Flicking what is left of the coffee aside, we climb into the Casspirs. The mood is camouflaged with thin jokes. Diesels rumble, clutches are engaged and we move out. The routine continues. Later, with two hours of daylight left, we turn west towards Ohangwena. Du Rand and I are sitting inside, opposite each other. The interior of the Casspir brightens as we crash out of the thick bush into the open. It was then Boesman saw them... 'Contact'... I came back from wherever I was, my eyes meeting Jim's for one of those interminable half-seconds. Du Rand spat 'Contact', and snatched his R5 from its vertical rack. Engine powering up and ahead I hear guns of at least one car already going... our car is veering hard left, the car ahead breaking right and everyone grabbing weapons. The rhythmic ripple of *shh-klacks* is heard as bolts come back and fall on chambered rounds, the firepower of a Koevoet group exploding like a burst water main... perhaps only the lead car having a positive target but no-one knowing where the main force might be and everyone laying down maximum suppressive fire. The high-pitched chatters of the R5s mingle with the deep-throated *thud-*



COUNTER-INSURGENCY TACTICS

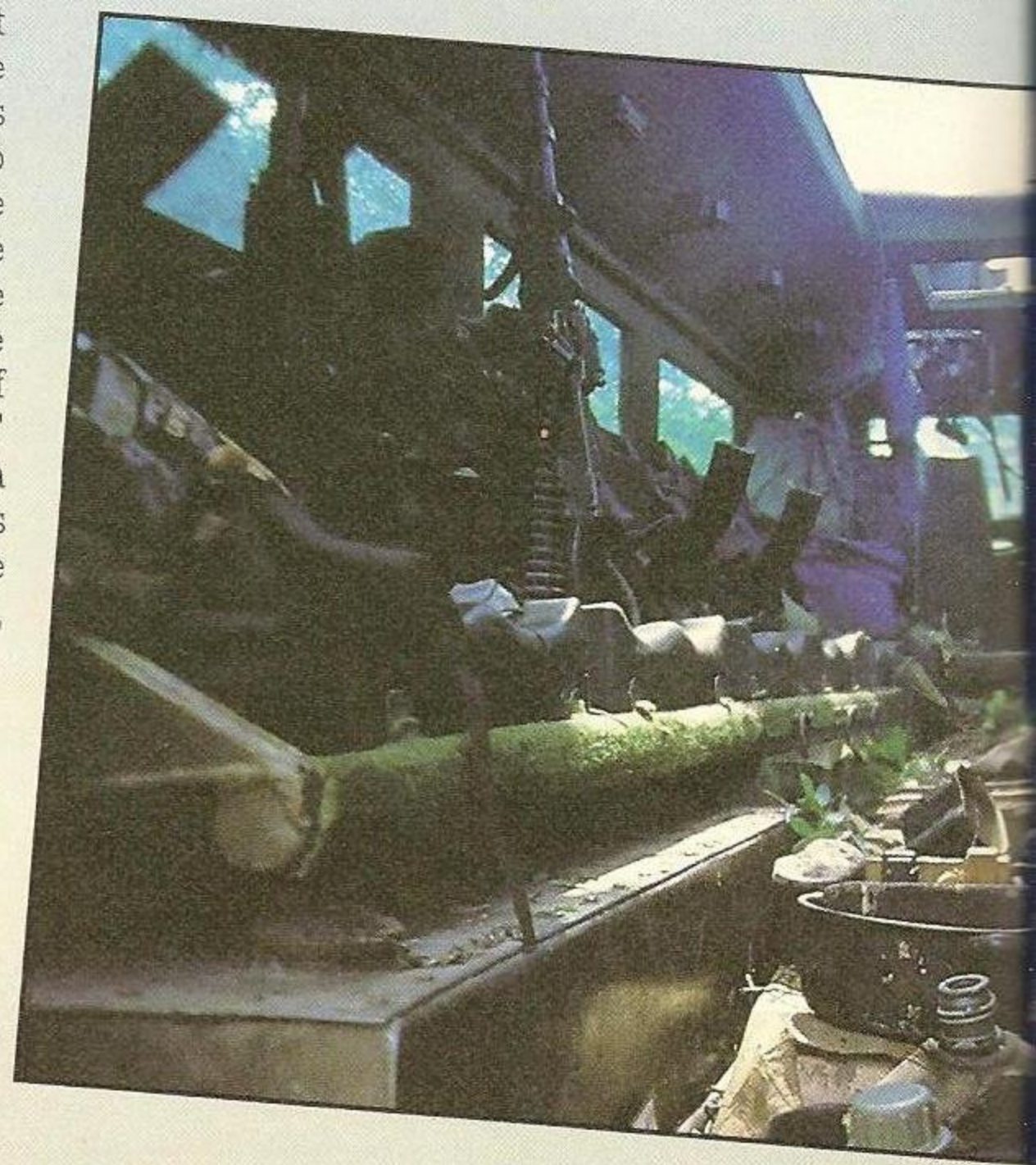
Once the spoor has been picked up, a Koevoet group will attempt to follow it at maximum speed. Unlike most other elements of the security forces, Ops K is not restricted by battalion, company or even sector boundaries. Indeed, its only operational limit is the Angolan border. If the spoor is lost at any point during the chase, men will debuss from the Casspirs and join the trackers in an attempt to find it again. If this proves unsuccessful, however, the search will be widened and information will be sought from the local civilian population. A contact with a single SWAPO insurgent or a small group is normally handled by the trackers, with the vehicles providing second-line support. If the spoor is obviously one of a large group of insurgents, however, the trackers will be pulled back into the vehicles. The contact will then be handled as a mounted action. After the Blesbok logistic vehicles have pulled clear for their own safety, the Casspirs circle through the area of contact and lay down maximum firepower. The area is then divided into sections and the group spreads out, combing the bush for insurgents who may have fled from the battle. By using these tactics, Koevoet virtually eliminates the confusion that would usually occur during a bush firefight. Mobility, protection and firepower, in addition to a reservoir of combat experience, are the keystones of Koevoet's success in the counter-insurgency role.

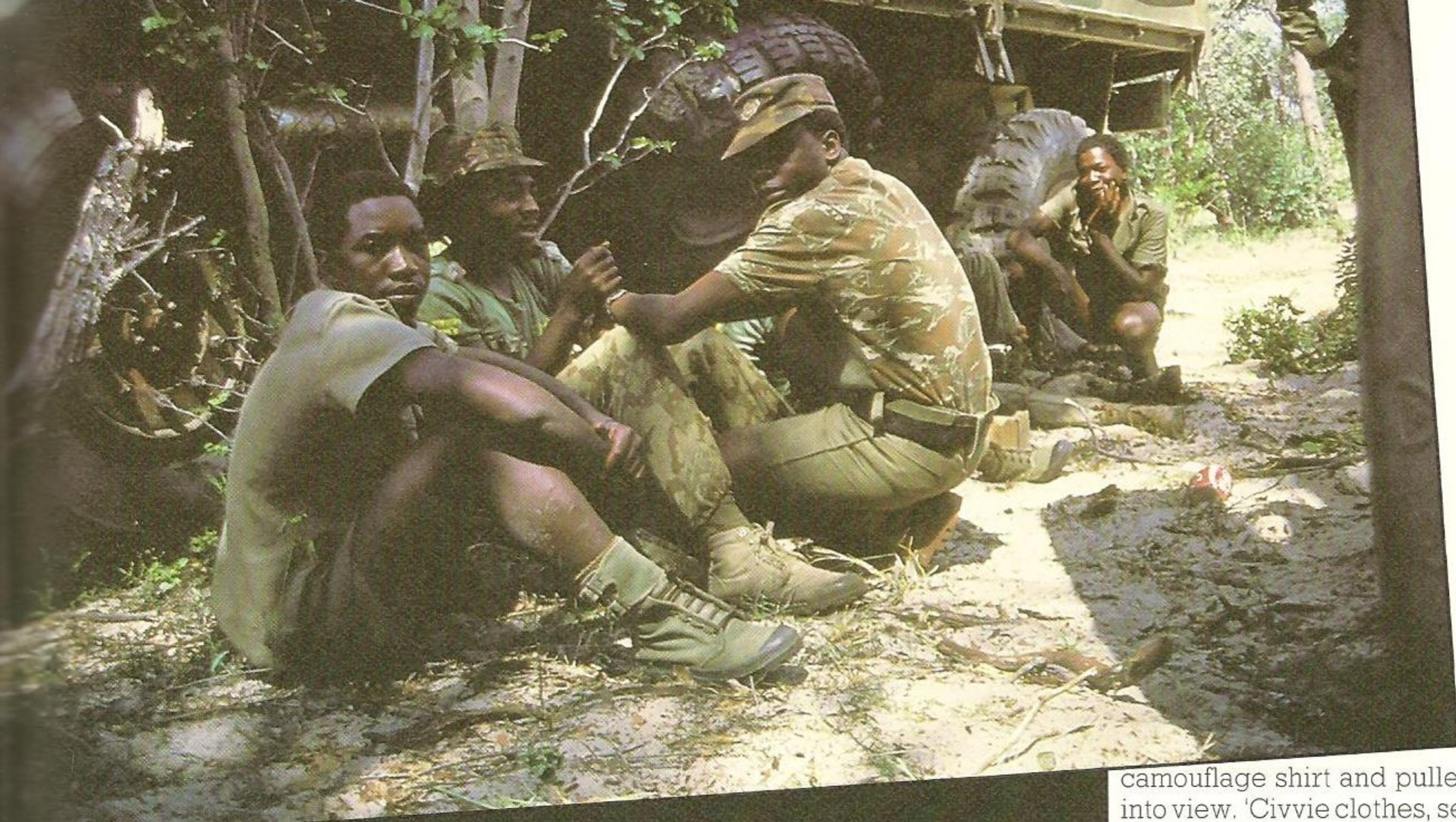
thud-thud-thud of the Browning 'fifties' and everyone in the car is shouting, firing, looking left-right for targets: some standing and firing over the edge of the Casspir, others through the spring-loaded gun ports below the windows. Everyone shouting, the shouting drowned by the firing, hot brass on bare skin, the hollow *whunk!* of a 40mm grenade launcher to my left and seeing Eme, whose baby it is, breaking it open, dropping in another swollen round, firing, reloading, firing. The man to my right jams the short muzzle of his R5 through the gun port just as the 10-ton Casspir bounces hard over a bump, and the R5 comes back inside on full automatic, spraying the inside with hot splinters of 5.56mm rounds. Me jerking my legs away with a sharply expelled 'jeezus!', and then being trampled over by Eme who's run out of ammunition and is diving to the rear of the Casspir for more – bowling me over a second time as he comes back through the throng of unsteady legs: everyone trying to hold on, keep his balance, and fire from the shaking, twisting car that is careering from left to right to present as difficult target as possible for any RPG or Heatstrim, either one of which can take out a Casspir. Me trying to take photos of the chaos inside, and the air seeming solid with the firing, shouting, thin smoke, yelling, hot raining brass and bursts of excited Afrikaans over the radio. Engine racing and drive train screaming in pain as the driver jams up, down and through the gears...me yelling stupidly at Du Rand: 'How many are there! Where are they?' He yelling back: 'When you drive into them like this there's nothing else you can do! I'm trying to stand to get shots of what's going on outside, only to be slammed down by Lukas' hand, then looking out the window and seeing the ground erupting zipper-like under the impact of the fifties racing towards the water hole, tree limbs splintering and shouts of 'komesho!' (forward) 'kolomesho!' (left), 'kolodio!' (right),...*Shinga! Shinga!* (Go! Go!). I'm trying to get a shot of the one next to me who sprayed the inside, his hand laid open and bleeding badly, another whose leg is bleeding...I wonder if I'm bleeding as well,

Below: One of Zulu Alpha's Casspirs on patrol in the bush. By mounting the wheels and axles outside the vehicle's V-shaped hull, the designers have ensured a high degree of protection from land mines. Wheels or axles may be blown off, but very seldom do the occupants of a Casspir receive even minor injuries from SWAPO mines concealed on the road.

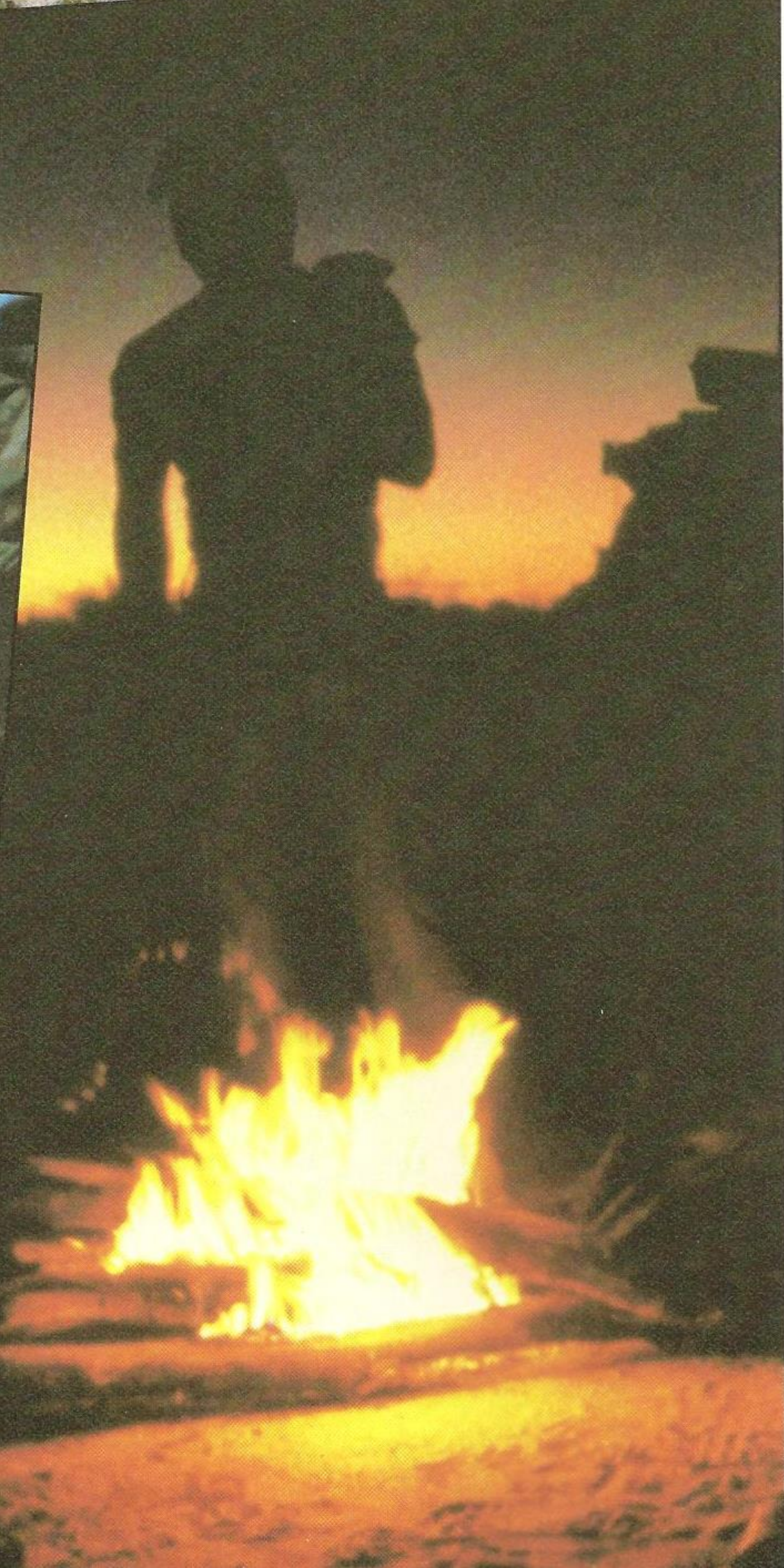
only I don't want anyone to see me looking at whatever it was that stung my legs. I stand again, shaking off Kilino's hand to see Boesman's car angling away from us and pouring fire into the area around the water hole. Du Rand is yelling: 'Under the bush, under the bush' and suddenly we're stopped, the hydraulically-operated doors hissing open...I'm out and running behind the trackers who half-moon around a clump of low-hanging thicket, their R5s erupting streams of empty brass, leaves trembling under the impact of the rounds. Du Rand is next to me, yelling: 'There's one in there!', and I'm wondering what the fuck I'm doing outside the Casspir...following the trackers in under the branches expecting to see a body but seeing only webbing and leather pouches, a gourd half-filled with local mahango beer...I realise the firing has stopped, replaced with hard, gasping laughter and the high-pitched giggles of excitement and relief.

'The bodies are over here,' I heard Du Rand say behind me. Turning and walking towards the water hole, I saw the first one lying face up on a pile of dead branches. Bare feet protrude from camouflage trousers. Further on at the base of a tree was the second, face down, the right foot almost severed by a 50-calibre round. Both bodies with the limp heaviness of new death. One of the trackers yanked the second body onto its back. He reached inside the





Inset, below left: The interior of a Casspir. A line of Armscor R5 rifles can be seen in vertical racks. Left: Sitting outside a Blesbok supply truck, Special Warrant Officer Otto Shivute (foreground) and Ovambo trackers are seen here during a brief rest stop. Below left: Silhouetted against the early morning sun, a member of Ops K warms up next to a cooking fire after camping the night in a temporary base.



camouflage shirt and pulled a tan, checked collar into view. 'Civvie clothes, see?' he hissed, contemptuous of the deceit. An AK-47 lay alongside, the ballistic launcher for the nearby Heatstrims shot cleanly off the muzzle. The bodies were stripped of equipment and quickly searched for documents.

Back at the cars, Boesman explained that, as we came out of the bush, the two had broken from their hiding place next to the water hole. Had they stayed hidden, they could easily have taken out one of the Casspirs, or else gone entirely unnoticed. Such is fate. Jim Du Rand called the contact: 'A last one just for old time's sake.' Daubing at a blood smear on his leg, he admitted it was the worst injury he'd taken in his six years with Koevoet. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Lukas caught my eye. He nodded, raising his fist, thumb up. Thanks, I nodded back

That night, the contact was relived over and over again. The tape I had made of it brought everyone clustered around to hear, asking to have it rewind and listening again, recognising each other's voices amid the fury of the firing. Some re-enacted Lukas shoving me down whenever I tried to stand. Others howled with laughter as they described how Eme ran over me once, and then a second time. In the middle of it all, Lukas caught my eye. He nodded, raising his fist, thumb up. Thanks, I nodded back.

The morning after returning to Oshakati, I was scheduled on a Hercules 130 back to Pretoria. On the way to Ondangwa Air Force Base, I asked the army lieutenant to make a short detour. It was Wednesday, the beginning of a new week for half of Ops K. There was Zulu Alpha, loading up for another seven days in the bush, having spent a week in base. There was Marius, and Apie, Christo, Thys, Otto and Sandsak, Dean, Porky, Jack and the rest whose names I could never remember, just as I had seen them that first day two weeks before. Shaking hands, saying my goodbyes, I knew I was going to miss them. As the car pulled away, I turned to look back, watching until they disappeared from view. Facing forward, I suddenly felt more a deserter than a writer. You crazy bastards, I thought. Go safely.

THE AUTHOR James Hooper is a freelance photo-journalist who accompanied Koevoet on several missions in the South West Africa/Namibia Operational Area during 1986-87.