

# SADF'S BUSHMENN

## Desert Nomads on SWAPO's Track

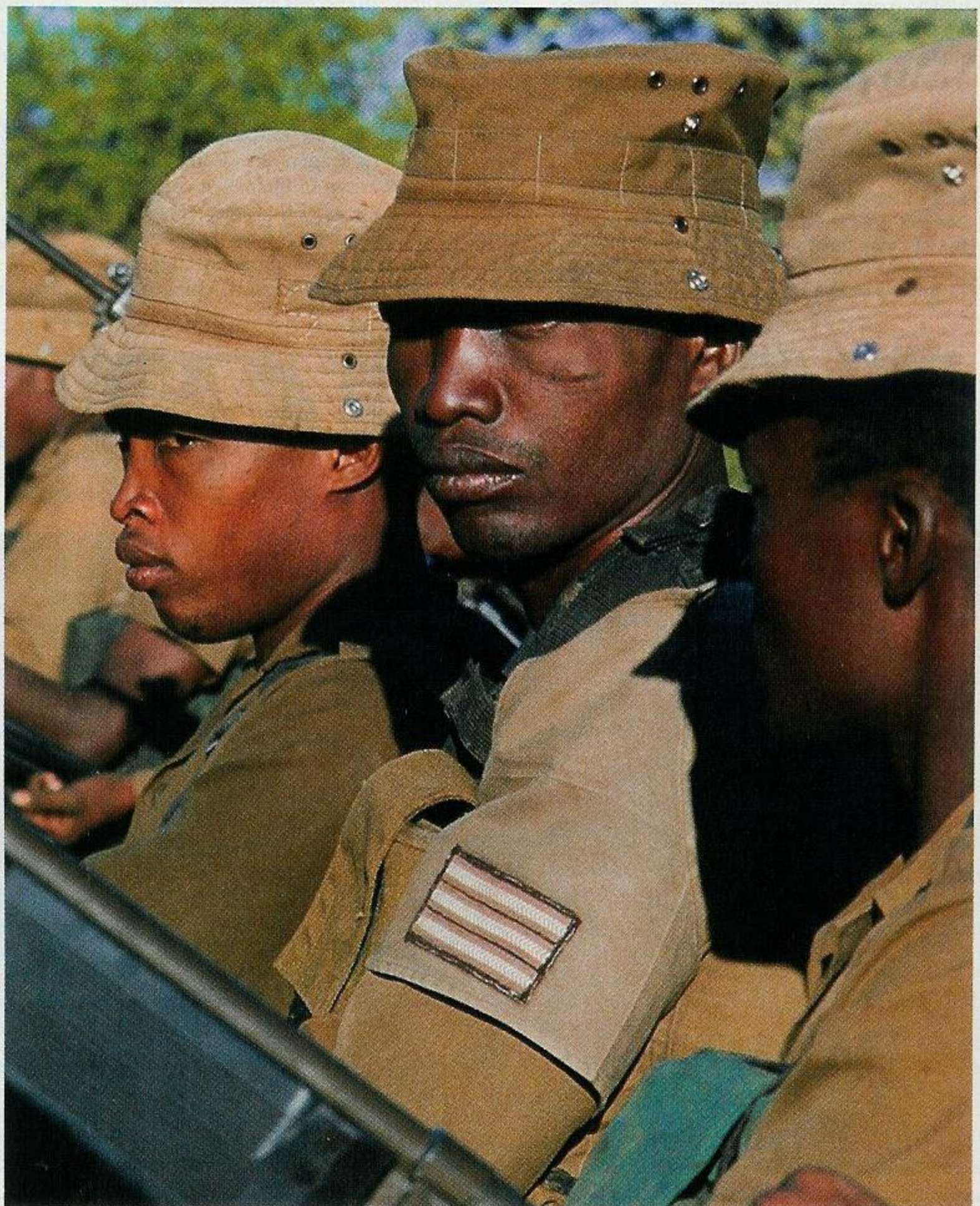
Text & Photos by David Mills

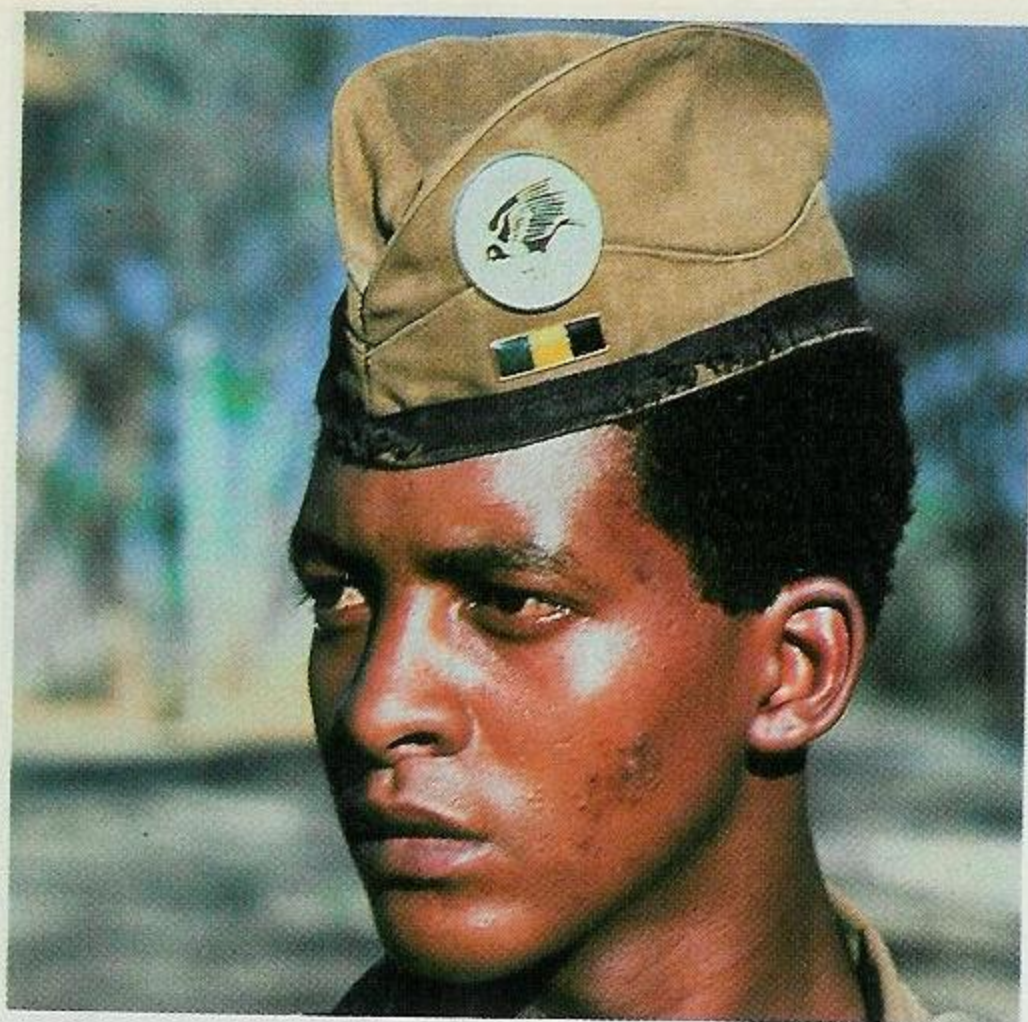
Bushmen now operate as a homogeneous unit. Earlier attempts to form composite forces resulted in cultural and language difficulties.

**T**HERE'S a definite parallel between Vietnam of 1975 and Angola of 1974. When the United States pulled the plug in Saigon, it left thousands of Vietnamese who had assisted the U.S. effort to the not-so-tender mercies of the victorious communist armies. Their fate? Exile or political "re-education" if they were lucky; death — or worse — if they weren't.

Cut to the southwest African country of Angola, just a year or so earlier. Portugal had recently changed political hands during a bloodless coup in Lisbon and its dwindling African colonial empire, including Angola, was cut loose to fend for itself. Portuguese troops began drifting home, leaving in their wake hundreds of primitive Bushmen who for years had faithfully served the colonial cause.

The Portuguese called the Bushmen who worked for them as trackers and security police *Fleches*, or arrows, because of the poison shafts they used on their quarry — both human and animal.



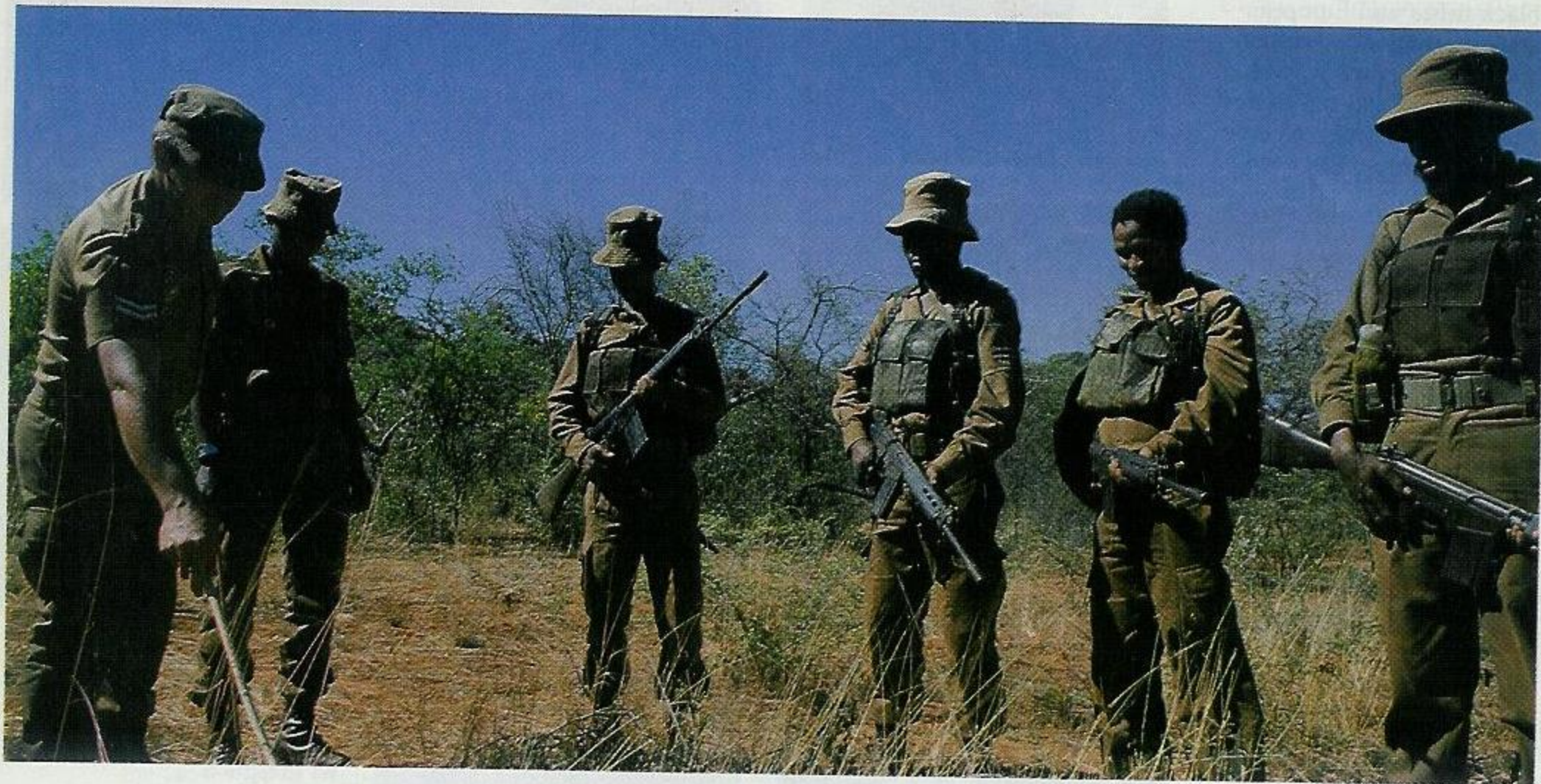


**Faces of the Bushmen.** Many nomadic bands have come together to form the battalion.

These little soldiers opted to become a form of security police for the Portuguese in their fight against black nationalist UNITA, FNLA and MPLA forces. Not only did they act as the eyes and ears of the Portuguese intelligence community inside Angola, they also organized into hunter-killer groups. Using their centuries-old knowledge of the Angolan bush, they tracked down and killed blacks who, in their time, had tracked down and killed the Bushmen.

Now, in the vacuum created by the departure of their colonial protectors, the African status quo had returned — with a killing vengeance. Bushmen became targets not only of the ruling MPLA government, but of the two locked-out pretenders to the throne, Savimbi's UNITA and Roberto's FNLA, as well.

This hatred of these diminutive, nomadic hunter-gatherers stemmed in part from their temporary alliance with the Portuguese,



**ABOVE:** Tracking instructor makes a point to Bushmen students. After the advanced course, it's assumed that trackers will *never* lose enemy spoor.

**FAR LEFT:** Bushmen operated in Angola as hunter-killer teams for the Portuguese, but became targets themselves when the black MPLA government took power in the mid-1970s.

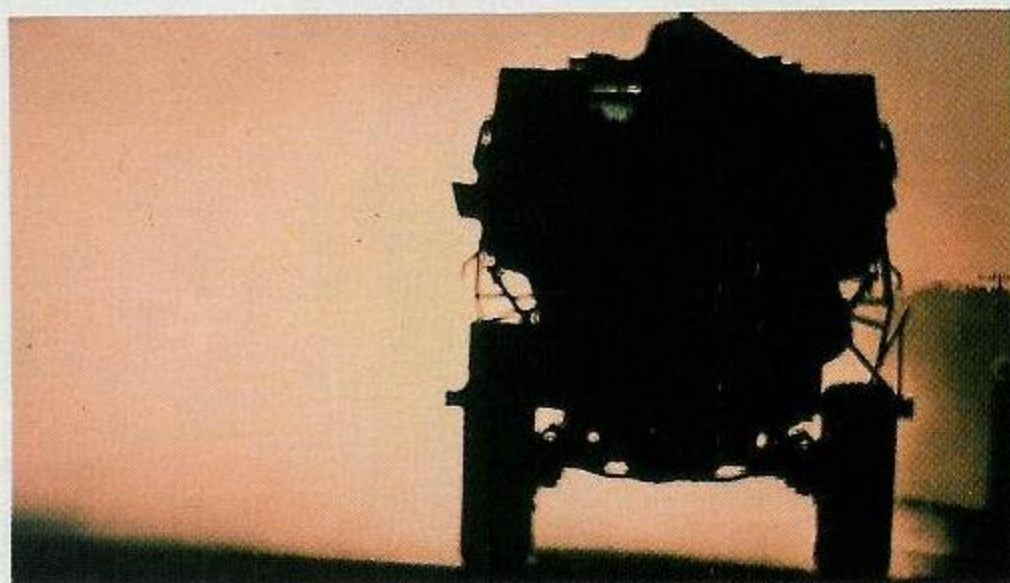
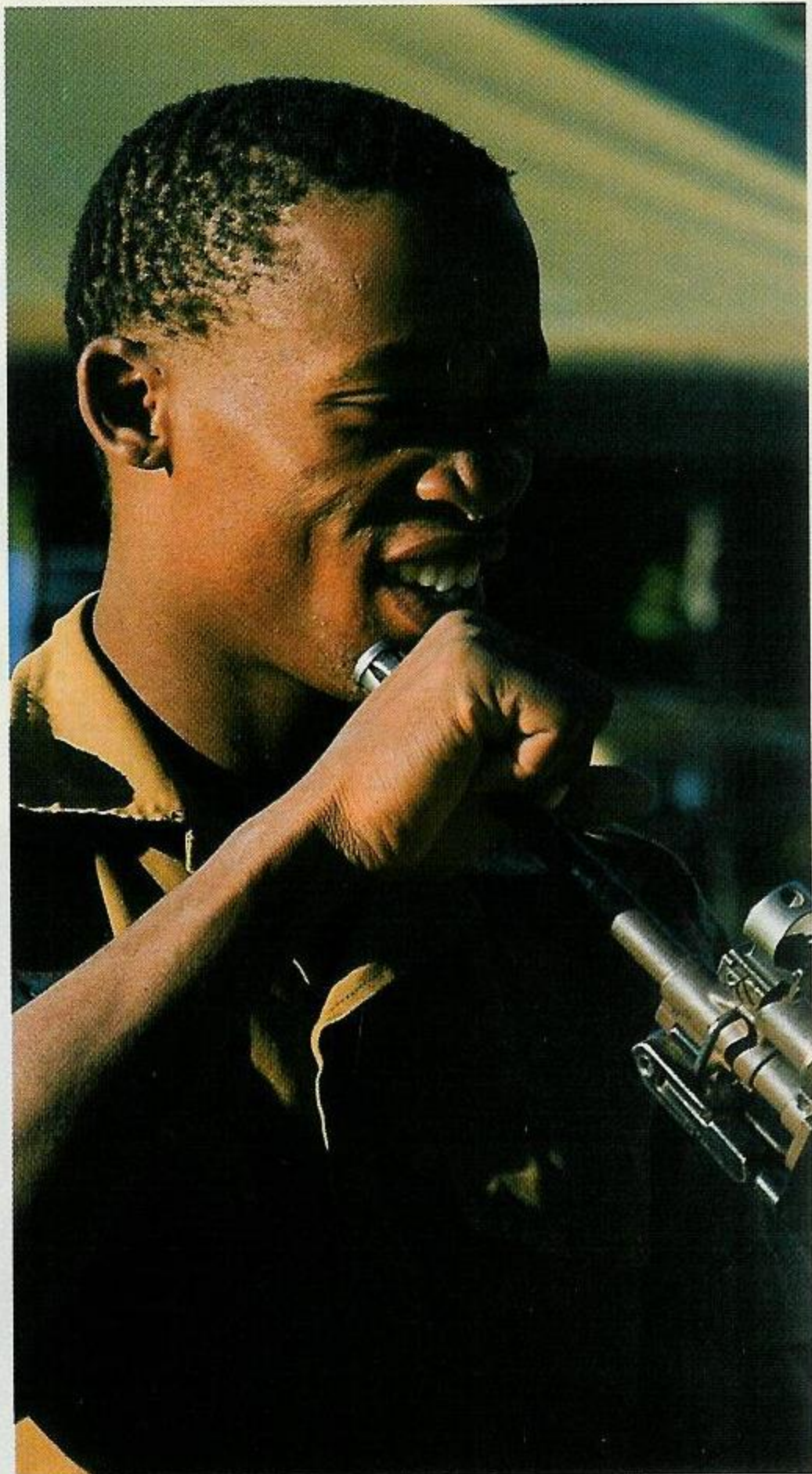
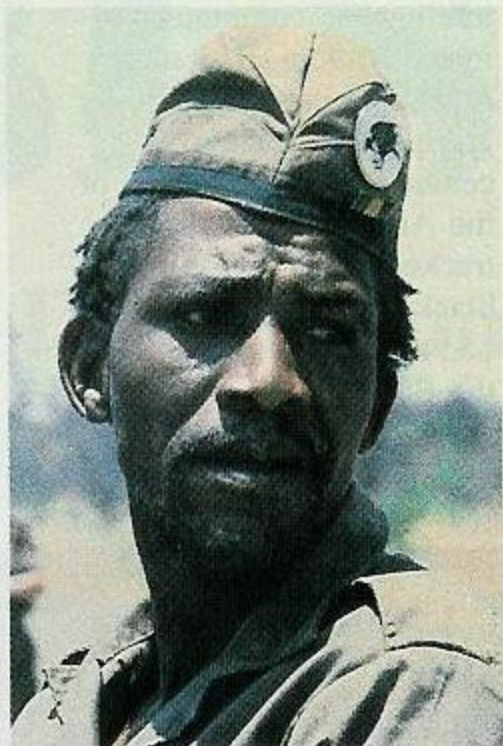
**LEFT:** White member of the Bushmen Battalion hits the road. Extended follow-up operations against SWAPO demand physical fitness as a critical element of success.



but its roots trace back into unrecorded history. Bushmen, who at one stage inhabited the hunting grounds of tropical East Africa, eventually drifted west and south until they roamed all over the territory south of the Zambezi River. Encroachment from the pastoral Hottentots and other black tribes from the north, and European influx from the south eventually pushed them into an enclave bounded by Angola in the north, Botswana's Kalahari Desert on the east, and the lower regions of South-West Africa in the south.

There, Bushmen found themselves caught in the middle of the growing and violent clashes between black tribes and European settlers. Both sides viewed these desert nomads, with their hit-raid-and-run tactics against cattle herds, as little more than vermin in need of

**BELOW: Soldiers in the Bushmen Battalion are proud of their unit, and morale is uniformly high.**



**ABOVE: On patrol: Bushmen use a variety of vehicles to cover the vast expanse comprising their sector of the operational area.**

extermination. So for the Angolan Bushmen an uneasy alliance with the Portuguese became a necessary measure for simple survival — until 1974.

Enter the South Africans. For years they had maintained a close relationship with the Portuguese inside Angola, and had carefully noted the effective use of Bushmen during military operations. And the military attachés were not unaware of the fact that a valuable asset to the South African Defense Force



**ABOVE: Weapons inspections help form the core of every disciplined military unit — and the Bushmen Battalion is no exception.**

**LEFT: Break time. Even Bushmen, known for their endurance across rugged veldt, take five on occasion.**



Although they've been Westernized to a degree through their contact with the Portuguese in Angola and the South Africans, Bushmen troops still feel at home in the veldt.

(SADF) would be literally killed off and lost forever unless quick action was taken to save the outcast Bushmen. (One Bushman sergeant stated that at least one quarter of his band was killed off by Angolan blacks in retribution for their work with the Portuguese.)

In coordination with the Red Cross, hundreds of Bushmen and their families were moved to the then-neutral western Caprivi Strip, a salient of South-West Africa which juts between Angola, Zambia and Botswana, under what was known as the Alpha Project. There, Alpha Camp, which provided security and protection for the Bushmen, was established; it also gave SADF a focal point to begin basic military training for their new charges.

Bushman troops, called Alpha Group, went back into Angola in 1975 with the SADF on Operation Savannah, an attempt to help UNITA and FNLA forces overthrow the socialist MPLA government. Withdrawal of Central Intelligence Agency support and other political constraints aborted Operation Savannah, but Bushmen did spread the word about the hospitality they'd received from the South Africans.

By 1976 the influx of Bushmen was so great that a new camp, Omega Camp, had to be set up to accommodate them all. Today, Omega Camp is the home of the Bushmen Battalion, comprising some 1,000 soldiers and 4,000-5,000 family members.

## ON TRACK

Tracking is not a born skill. It's an art which must be learned and finely honed. And in the context of a bush war, it can be a life-saving ally. Trackers who lose the spoor, or forget their job for even one moment, run the risk of coming off second best in a face-to-face encounter with a terrorist's AK-47.

Troops of the Bushmen Battalion are perhaps the best indigenous trackers in southern Africa today. Much of their skill comes from the Bushmen's inherent tie with the land, their nomadic hunter-gatherer heritage which ensured that only those with the sharpest eyes, best hearing and most empathetic feel of the bush survived.

But Bushmen aren't at war with nature — they live with it. And the animals they traditionally track don't carry guns or know how to actively evade trackers. Even their contacts with other men, both black and white, have been sporadic and rarely on any kind of permanent basis. That is, until recent years, when modern war came to settle on their land. Their new role as warriors demands that the Bushmen add a new twist to their tracking skills. Now, like it or not, their bush skills have been employed by the South Africans in their fight against SWAPO. And, to survive the type of war where bullets replace poison-tipped arrows, diminutive Bushmen now learn techniques one step beyond those taught by their fathers: the art of modern combat survival.

The basic tracking course run by the Bushmen Battalion generally lasts 3-4 weeks, depending upon the skill level of the students, and its purpose is to make the Bushmen aware of SWAPO combat techniques and tactics. To bring students more on line with current

SADF military practices, they also receive fundamental training on navigation, map reading, communications, basic tactics and medical aid.

The emphasis of the course, though, is to help the Bushmen improve on their own ability to track. Beginning around 0900, students take off on spoor laid by other members of the course and will keep on the track for 50-70 kilometers. Bushmen and white instructors accompany the trackers, using the exercise to sink home lessons that may keep their charges alive in the operational area.

Students who display proficiency during the basic drill are then sent along to the advanced tracking course. Here, a high degree of tracking prowess is assumed, and students are introduced to various techniques to help them regain spoor if it's lost and to overcome the methods SWAPO uses to anti-track. A week-long survival phase is also built into the course, and graduates are of such caliber that it's assumed that they will *never* lose spoor once they're on it.

Once qualified, a Bushman student can advance to become an assistant instructor on the tracking courses. He will AI two basic and two advanced courses, during which time he must convince the chief instructor that he has the capability to run courses on his own. Under the CI's watchful eye, the fledgling Bushman instructor will oversee two courses, and if it's deemed that he's met all the requirements of bush knowledge and survivability, he will then become a full-fledged instructor.

Think the requirements are tough? You bet. At present, there are only 11 men in the entire defense force qualified to wear the red badge of an army tracking instructor.

In their earliest deployments, Bushmen were used as a highly mobile light infantry force tasked with locating and destroying SWAPO/PLAN (South West Africa People's Organization and their military arm, People's Liberation Army of Namibia) targets. This evolved into company-sized operations which gained a fair degree of success, and further evolved into what was termed the reaction force concept.

**RIGHT:** Mobility and quick reaction form the basis for present-day Bushmen Battalion operations.

**BELOW:** The Bushmen have lived with the land for centuries and they know its every secret.



**RIGHT:** FNs are a far cry from the Bushmen's traditional bow and poisoned arrow.

**CENTER:** Bushmen boat operations along parts of the Angolan border with South-West Africa help deter infiltrating SWAPO forces.

Under the reaction force, elements of the Bushmen Battalion, 101 (Ovambo) Battalion and the Paras were combined to create a composite force. In essence, Bushmen would act as the eyes and ears of the force while the Paras would supply the firepower. Ovambo Battalion troops, because of their familiarity with both languages, basically acted as the link between the groups. But this ethnically-diverse composite force raised a series of insurmountable problems.





Ethnic and cultural differences proved to be the major obstacle, levels of training another, and effective leadership a third. White Para commanders didn't understand — or trust — the asset they had in the Bushmen; conversely, the Bushmen didn't understand or trust officers they hadn't trained with or come to know.

After a critical look at the situation, SADF opted to allow the Bushmen to operate as a homogeneous unit — a wise choice considering that the Bushmen Battalion was one of the most successful units in the defense forces in 1983.

The battalion is organized into two operational groups, each commanded by a major with a captain as second in command. Each group is further broken down into three companies,

**BELOW: Ownership of South-West Africa/Namibia is still hotly contested on both the military and political battlefields. Along with other SADF units, troops of the Bushmen Battalion operate along the Angolan border — and occasionally inside Angola, when the mission calls for it.**

commanded by a captain or lieutenant, of about 100 men each; each company having three platoons. Depending on the mission, company commanders can deploy platoons separately; if there's a requirement for semi-conventional operations against a SWAPO/PLAN base camp, 81mm mortars and air support can be attached to the company for the attack.

To round out the battalion's op area capability, a Recce (reconnaissance) Wing was formed to act as the eyes and ears of the unit. Totally integrated with Bushmen as well as whites, the Wing usually operates in five-man teams on internal or external detailed reconnaissance missions. Or, depending on tactical requirements, they may become the follow-up group which runs SWAPO insurgents to ground.

Today, the Bushmen Battalion again finds itself pulling *Reaksie Mag*, or reaction force, work along the border of Angola. This time, however, they deploy as their own unit and generally work independently under guidelines from their sector's commanding brigadier. Given the heritage which has set them apart from other tribes on the continent for centuries, it's a method of operation these bush nomads no doubt prefer. ☒

## COMBAT PHOTOGRAPH

David Mills is a 12-year veteran of the British Army. He is currently a free-lance photo-journalist, specializing in military operations. His work for SOF has taken him to such diverse areas as Northern Ireland, Belize, Angola, Germany, Thailand and Cambodia.

Mills spent nine months with the SADF and traveled the entire length of Namibia.

