

SOF Interviews Chris Dempster

by John Howard

While in London just after Christmas 1978, browsing through a downtown bookstore, my eye fell on an AK-47 outline on a thick paperback entitled *Firepower*. I immediately began leafing through it and soon knew I'd found my kind of book. I started reading in the cab on the way back to my hotel and read on without pause until the early morning hours. I finished the book the next day but found myself unable to put it down. I started rereading it — a few pages in the middle, a few in the front, some in the back. I knew then that this was one of the best books ever — in any category.

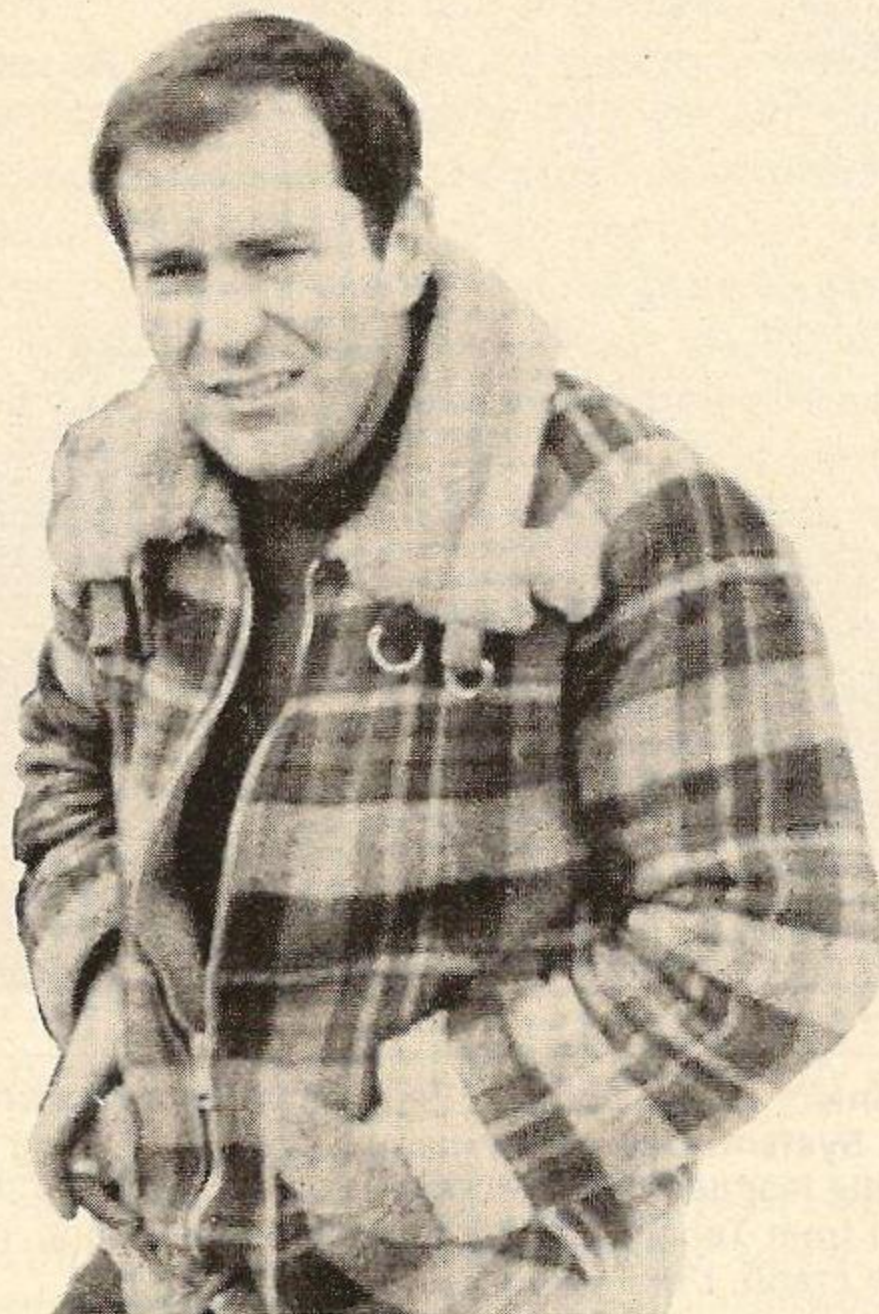
Firepower tells the true account of Chris Dempster and Dave Tomkins, two adventurous Englishmen who were recruited and transported to Angola in 1976 to fight as mercenaries for Holden Roberto's FNLA. The book describes Angola's merc war so accurately that you know each man's weapon, ambush sites, rations, personal equipment, and accommodations on a day-to-day basis. *Firepower* also describes the mercs' views, impressions, feelings, fears, feuds, fights, and grab-ass. *Firepower* has many levels — not only about mercs and weapons but about how people operate. If you've ever considered taking a contract somewhere, *Firepower* can both answer a lot of questions and give you a strong taste of what it will be like.

Because the book would interest SOF readers, I called its publishers. They put me in touch with Chris Dempster, who agreed to an interview, and gave me permission to quote at length from the book itself. (See the passages in italics in the interview below.)

Firepower is not on sale in the U.S. and will not be available here until U.S. rights are bought by an American publishing company — which means a lapse of at least a year before U.S. bookstores will stock it.

Firepower gives Dempster's pre-Angola background:

"Chris Dempster was a man who found it difficult to slot into an average nine-to-five existence. A restless nature — and a low boredom threshold — ensured that he seldom stayed in the same job very long. A short-fuse temper added to his employ-



To be a merc: "I'd want to see the color of his money ... Make sure that the guy has got the money to back his mouth up ... And when it's time to go, don't worry about everybody else, just go."
— Chris Dempster.

ment difficulties. As a boy of 16 he had fractured his skull in five places when he fell from some scaffolding; the accident left him quick-tempered and easily provoked, with an inclination to end disagreements with his fists ... On impulse he joined the army. ...

"His military service took him to Kenya, Sarawak and Hong Kong. In Kenya, at the tail-end of the Mau Mau troubles, he narrowly escaped death on three separate occasions when patrol vehicles he was travelling in were blown up by landmines; on the third occasion he was the only survivor out of four men in the jeep.

Dempster found that the Army offered him more than one outlet for his aggressive impulses: he represented the Army in middle-weight boxing championships against the other services. He applied to join the Army's elite force, the Special Air Service. One of the SAS suitability tests required candidates to run

repeatedly up and down a Welsh hillside while carrying a weighted knapsack; Chris was rejected when he hit another soldier with a rifle-butt for laughing at his exertions.

"After being severely wounded in Borneo — he was mentioned in dispatches for his part in repelling an attack on his patrol by Communist rebels — Chris was downgraded and put on a training course for cooks at Aldershot barracks. Not the kind of man ever to feel comfortable wearing an apron, he lost his temper one morning and hit an officer in the face with a pan of fried eggs. As punishment he was sentenced to 56 days detention in the military prison at Colchester. Before the sentence could be carried out, he went AWOL. His discharge from the Army followed. ...

"In June 1967, he took off again, this time to fight as a volunteer on the Israeli side in the Six Day War. Though not Jewish he strongly sympathized with the Israeli position and wanted to do all he could to help. And of course, the war offered a good opportunity to see action again. ...

"By the beginning of 1976, he was feeling thoroughly demoralized and increasingly anxious to find a new challenge in life. He began to seriously contemplate emigrating to Rhodesia — or else going off with Dave Tomkins to Australia to investigate the profitability of opal-mining. So when Dave phoned him with the offer of some exciting-sounding work in Africa, he was instantly receptive. ..."

SOF: What would you say are the lessons you learned from the war in Angola?

DEMPSTER: Never go into a war like that without communications. Because the arms don't really matter. You can have an FN or a Kalashnikov, but if you've got communications, that's everything.

SOF: What type of comms equipment did you have?

DEMPSTER: We had two Yamaha walkie-talkies with about a 100-meter range. That's all. When a convoy of six vehicles went up the road, you couldn't get the lead vehicle. Really incredible. We had



"We were white men in a black man's country there to help the black man but we didn't; we just killed them all." — Chris Dempster.

some British walkie-talkie equipment, standard sort of field pack but the valves [tubes] in some were blown and they didn't work.

SOF: You didn't have any sort of maintenance or supply organization?

DEMPSTER: Right, there was no organization. Callan [the psychotic mercenary commander] didn't have any tactical ability. I mean his idea of attacking the Cubans was to run screaming at them with fixed bayonets. And it worked with the ordinary Africans, but sooner or later you're going to get hit pretty bad.

SOF: What was wrong with Callan? Why did he kill so many of his own people, both white and black?

DEMPSTER: I don't think he liked people at all.

SOF: But he wanted to win, didn't he?

DEMPSTER: He did, yeah, but I really don't know why he blew away half our army and dismantled the rest. To this day I don't really know why because it didn't make sense. I really don't understand his way of thinking but at the time I wasn't prepared to argue with him. The man was a raging lunatic with a machine gun. He was in a position of absolute power and I think more than one British psychologist has called him a mad dog on a leash. And his leash was cut, you know, and that was it.

SOF: What could have won the war?

DEMPSTER: Common sense. Anybody in charge with any sort of military background, anyone with just sheer common sense could have gotten us there. Common sense and a bit of standing amongst the blokes, enough to command a bit of respect and he'd have got there. I mean rank didn't matter, either your previous rank or any superfluous rank that you gave yourself out there. It was just that anyone who had commanded a bit of respect could have easily welded us into a nice tight unit.

SOF: Do you feel that even with the limited resources available to you in Angola you could have made a good showing?

DEMPSTER: Absolutely. The LAW rockets we had were excellent for close combat. They stopped a few tanks. There's not a tank commander I know of who'll sit in his tank and fight it out with a track blown off. So with that accepted, you could very literally hit any tank in the world because a LAW rocket is very good for knocking off tracks. The FN is an excellent weapon. If the FNs had run out of ammunition, we could have used Kalashnikovs. We were using Kalashnikovs much of the time. We could have re-armed ourselves from the ammunition

supplies of those we killed. Yeah, we could have had a great war, and we could have won. We could have just gone on and on and on.

SOF: Your small band of less than 100 mercs could have beaten the 10,000-plus Cubans?

DEMPSTER: Yeah. Because their lines of communications were so stretched. They were refueling on a weekly basis from airplane drops at the various landing strips they captured. All we had to do was get a steam roller going as fast as theirs and batter them down and that would have been it. We would have just overrun them everywhere.

SOF: How much help were the local blacks on your side?

DEMPSTER: Well, when I got there they were completely demoralized so I really can't say, but the ones that I met in Maquela and used were all right. Given a bit of confidence and proper leadership, we'd have gone places. My suggestion to Callan was that we should have four black men with two white men. No brutalizing from the white men. You could learn topography and the African way from the black men and they could learn standing and courage from the white man, plus the use of his arm. I think that given the right bit of training, the right bit of guidance, they could now be in control of their country. And we could be out now, all finished. Of course, a lot richer, you know.

SOF: They were basically good material?

DEMPSTER: No, not good material, but they were material and that's what we were there for. We were white men in a black man's country, there to help the

"... I found the Cubans wanting ... I hit them twice from ambush situations ... They got hit, killed. The remainder turned and fled." — Chris Dempster.



black man, but we didn't, we just killed them all.

SOF: What was the reaction of the other black soldiers when Callan killed them for sport?

DEMPSTER: Terrified.

SOF: Did many of them desert because of the feat?

DEMPSTER: Oh, yeah. At the drop of a hat they would desert.

SOF: Other than communications, what other lack of equipment was critical?

DEMPSTER: Good anti-malaria and anti-dysentery medicine. We lost a few blokes due to malaria and dysentery. A good medical facility, that and communications. The arms we had were excellent. We could have just gone on and on and on.

I mean it's a terrain eminently suited to guerrilla warfare. Elephant grass covered the whole landscape, eight to 10 feet high. The roads were literally a bulldozer march through the grass. I mean a bulldozer simply went on a crow's path from point A to point B and cut a road out of the grass. And then on either side you have the elephant grass, so you couldn't fail to succeed as a guerrilla.

SOF: Was there any talk about going back in as guerrillas?

DEMPSTER: Well, it all got embarrassing with Mobutu of Zaire. He realized that he was on a losing side and he vetoed any suggestion of this. Peter McAleese, who was the commander at the end, was another one of the more mouth-than-do-anything brigade and that was it. Everything folded.

SOF: What sort of man was Holden Roberto [President of the FNLA and the actual employer of the merc force]?

DEMPSTER: Well, speaking as you find, and I must speak as I find, a very good man. I never met a president yet who would help you on with your boots but he helped me on with my boots. Good guy. He also went out of his way to try and give us a couple of creature comforts. He gave me a bottle of cream soda once which, when you're in the middle of black Africa and you haven't drunk anything but brackish water for two weeks and some guy comes up with a bottle of cream soda, I've got to tell you he's a bit good.

SOF: What did Holden Roberto think of Callan?

DEMPSTER: Originally, Callan had proved himself. Callan and Madeira [a Portuguese merc] ambushed and killed many thousands of MPLA and Cubans, just the two of them using LAW rockets like they were going out of style. They created panic, knocked out six tanks, and drove the enemy into confusion. At that time, Callan was the best thing that had hit northern Angola since the 14th century. And so Holden Roberto thought he'd found his savior and instantly made Callan — from hospital orderly to field marshal. And then he got the other white

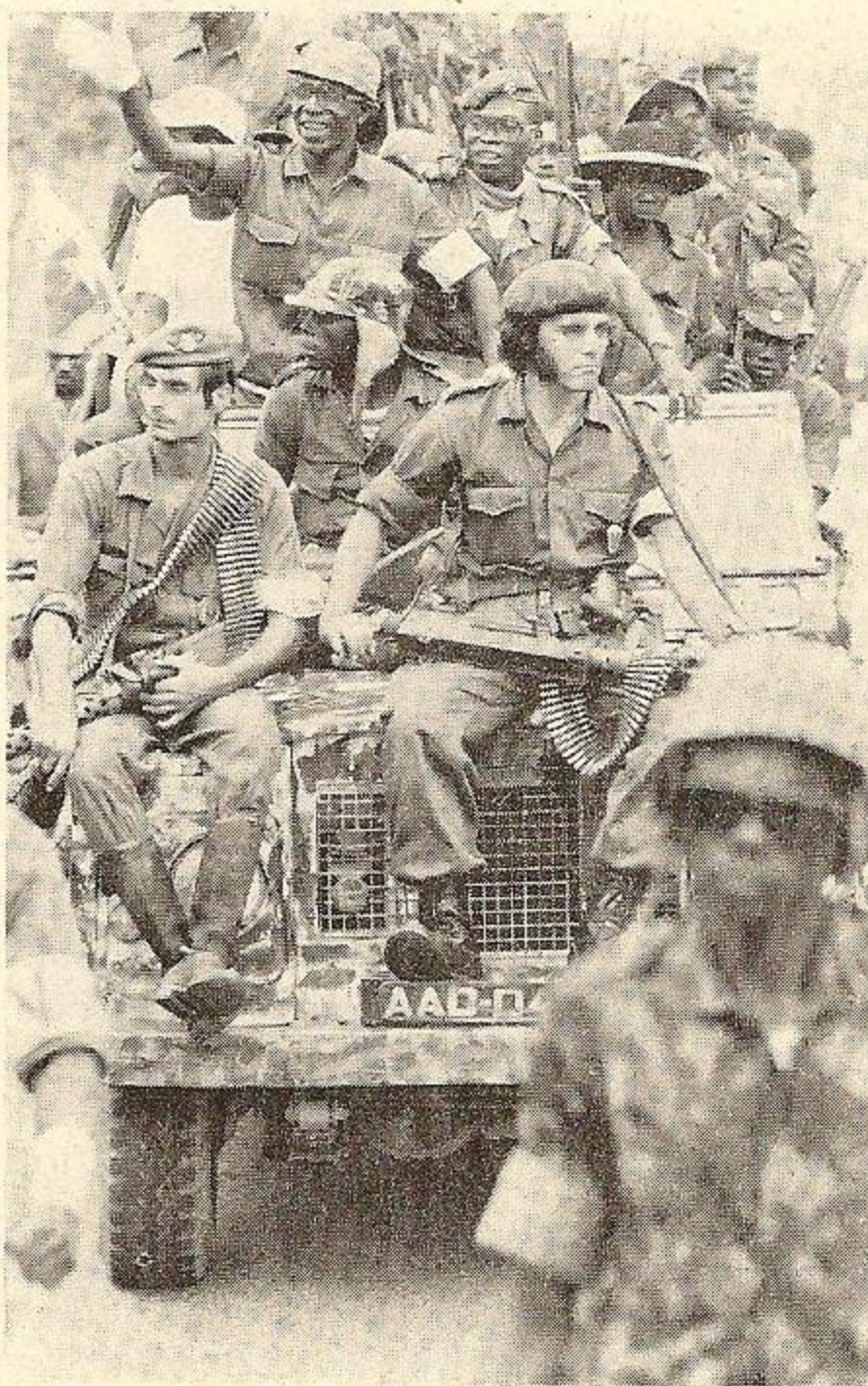
mercenaries and put them all under Callan's command.

SOF: But didn't Roberto know that Callan had gone mad? Didn't Callan kill Roberto's own cousin for fun?

DEMPSTER: His cousin, yeah. But, well, you can look at a lion in a cage, you see, and you can poke it and it's all right. But when the lion's out of the cage you don't poke it anymore; you go and hide. And that's exactly the situation the President found himself in.

SOF: Roberto was both afraid of Callan and dependent upon him?

DEMPSTER: Yeah, it was sort of a love-hate relationship. But then again, there were some Special Air Service blokes who were no mean guys, Jamie McAndless,



"We had two Yamaha walkie-talkies with about a 100-meter range . . . When a convoy of six vehicles went up the road, you couldn't get the lead vehicle." — Chris Dempster.

Peter McAleese. And Callan brought them up short. I mean you mustn't just put him down as a lunatic; he was one hard, pretty incredible guy. He had a knack for making people take a long hard look at themselves in the mirror and sometimes what they saw was not what they always believed they'd see. And that broke a few people up. I think it did with Peter McAleese and Jamie McAndless.

You see, everybody's got their little photo-kit idea of what they are and then suddenly you get out into the blackest of Africa and you've been a roughie-toughie soldier all your life, and you meet a 24-year-old Greek Cypriot waving a gun at you and you look at yourself and you realize that you're not going to do anything about it. And that's where the rub

comes. It reduced a few men to a shade smaller size than they thought they were before.

SOF: Why didn't one of the mercs kill Callan?

DEMPSTER: You must remember that Callan was there before us. And our original party of 18 guys, when we got there we found that there was like 40 or 50 Caucasian Portuguese there, and they had the very best of what there was; they had all the .30 and .50 calibers, the armored cars, the one and only tank, they had the anti-tank guns, and they were all armed with pretty good things.

When we got there we were armed with M-1 carbines. It wasn't until day three that we got our FNs and of course by then the rot had set in. No one had a Kalashnikov except Callan and under those circumstances you just sort of sit back and take stock and shut your mouth.

SOF: Have you ever heard from Holden Roberto since you left Angola?

DEMPSTER: Yeah, I got a message. He wished us all well and he asked about David [Tomkins] and he said that when he got some money, he'd send for us all again.

SOF: Would you go back to Angola?

DEMPSTER: Yeah, I'd go back. In the right situation and with the right arms and with the right people, certainly. I don't think a Callan situation could happen again. I think a lot of lessons have been learned about Angola by the British mercenaries. You see, the unfortunate part about Callan is that in a situation like that, it rubs off. It rubbed off on Sammy Copeland. It rubbed off on Jamie McAndless. And it damn near rubbed off on me. And it was sheer, raving madness. I mean, you become kill-crazy — consciously. Not a moment of bloodlust when you're charging across a field with a bayonet in your hand and seeing your mates get chopped down and suddenly you're in it, slashing for the sake of your life. It's just killing for the moment. When you're angry, normally, you might use a four-letter word: instead you give the guy four bullets.

SOF: The book describes your challenging Callan during his first briefing:

"After an embarrassed silence, during which most of the men avoided Callan's eye, Chris haltingly told Callan that he and the other Britons were worried he might start killing them for the same sorts of reasons he had been killing the Angolan troops — in a fit of temper, for a dirty weapon, or just to arouse fear in the rest of the men. After Chris had said his piece, an uncomfortable silence prevailed. Callan stared at him in shocked disbelief. Finally he looked around at the rest of the group and asked if anybody else felt the same way.

"No, of course not, sir," Copeland replied quickly, and there was a chorus of 'No' from the other men. Some were

vigorously shaking their heads, as if amazed by Chris' suggestion. Even Dave Tomkins, never in a hurry to give himself away, seemed reluctant to back Chris up.

"Callan looked back at Chris and from the expression in his flat black eyes, Chris knew the incident was being filed away in Callan's memory for future reference and retribution. Callan stalked out, and the men relaxed. All of them made awkward excuses to Chris and promised to back him up if the going got rough. But Chris was sure now he could count on no one but himself."

SOF: What do you think would have happened if the other mercs had backed you up?

DEMPSTER: Had the men backed me up? Well, I think the Maquela massacre [in which 14 British mercs were executed on Callan's orders] would never have occurred. Callan would have been stopped a bit short there. You know, whenever he talked to me, he ran a Kalashnikov up my nose. I mean he stuck it literally into my face. One up the spout, the thing on automatic. You don't argue when a man does that. I don't care who you are....

SOF: Did he act that way to prove that he was tough?

DEMPSTER: Yeah, I think he felt totally and utterly inadequate in the situation and his only way of proving his adequacy was to try and subdue everybody around him, bring them to a state of terror.

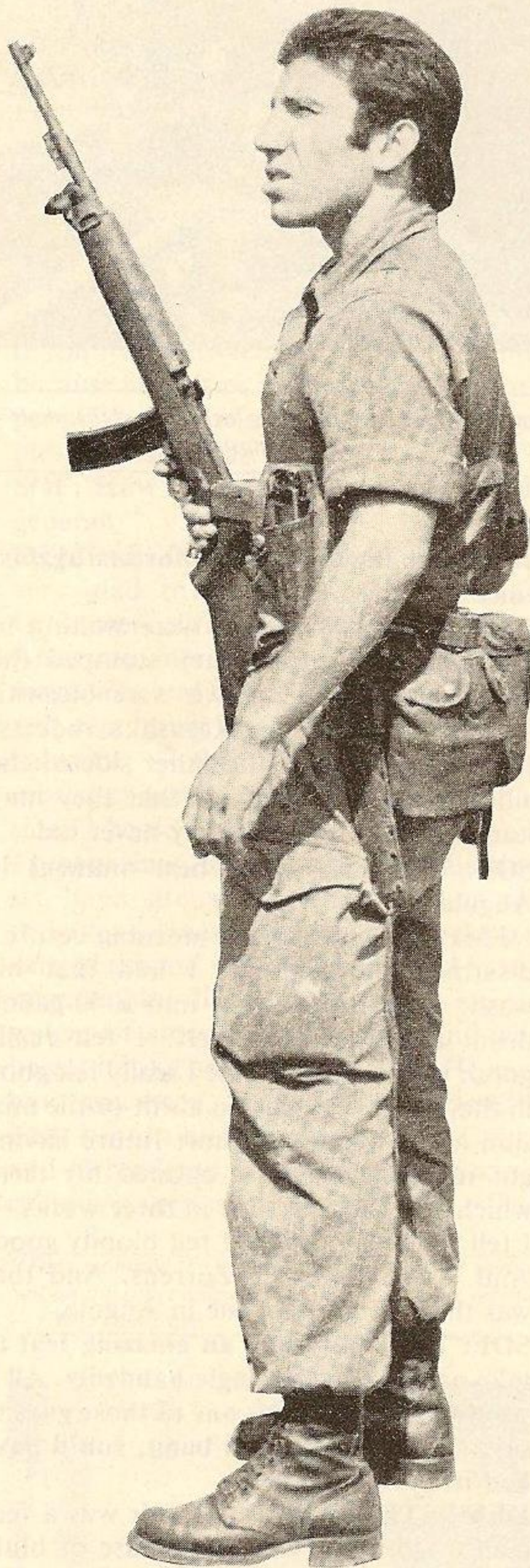
SOF: In your experience, how do discipline and authority evolve in a mercenary unit when men are thrown together who don't know each other and have never worked together? Do you have to kill somebody to get respect like Callan did?

DEMPSTER: No, not at all. It's just on mutual respect. You're all there to do a job and that's it. A mercenary is totally divorced from any regular-army-unit way of getting to know a guy's capabilities — because you've fought with him in the gym or you've run faster than him on the running course or he can lift bigger guys than you, because you've seen him perform in a pub at night. This is how reputations are built in a regular mob, but in a mercenary army, there's no reputation to either build up or defend — you are what you are. You're completely alone and isolated. You know that if it ever came to the crunch, there's only one person who's ever going to take care of you and that's you. And that's really it. You're all together in the same boat.

SOF: How would you establish discipline in a group of hastily recruited mercs?

DEMPSTER: You simply put the wheat with the chaff and back them out together. I'm a great believer in discomfort and hardship as breeding very strong camaraderie. Put them all up there together, and don't take any weakling as a weakling. They've all come out and they've all got their dough.

I'd take a quick look around and see the ones who are doing the bleating and I'd mix them in with the harder elements. And then with the hardship, the individual guys would have sorted the weaklings out and welded the thing together. Instead, what Callan did was that he isolated them and by isolating



"No one had a Kalashnikov except Callan and under those circumstances you just sort of sit back ... and shut your mouth." — Chris Dempster. In this picture, Callan carries M-2 carbine.

them [the loudmouths and whiners] he created another unit which festered. [This unit ambushed Dempster and his men, took all their ammunition and supplies, and deserted towards the Zaire border].

SOF: Although the execution of the 14 white mercs received enormous press coverage as evidence of the "inherent

savagery" of mercenaries in general, these men did more than just desert or refuse to fight; they tried hard to kill you and your group. It could be said that they had it coming.

DEMPSTER: I agree to a certain extent. They knew exactly where they were, but they were frightened that Callan was going to kill them. They had already realized that he was quite a force to be reckoned with. They also feared the white Portuguese Angolans who held all the armament, the armored cars. They were totally loyal to Callan. And so they responded to the commands of the two authoritarian people amongst them, Aiken and Butcher, the big, fat "Os"; what we call the quartermasters. You know, typical quartermasters.

SOF: Supply sergeants?

DEMPSTER: That's it, supply sergeants. You know the typical sort of guys who know all the answers. So when Aiken and Butcher gave them the orders, they responded to A) the authority, and B) the easy way out. I do believe that all of them were guilty of trying to kill me and my little bunch of guys, but I don't believe that they were all guilty of desertion. They were all certainly guilty of cowardice. My first reaction when we got ambushed and I fully realized the following morning what had happened was to go out and kill them all. But of course in the heat of the moment these things come out. I would have liked to see the two fat ones get killed. I would have taken great delight in blowing them both away. But as it turned out we killed a lot of lads. But that was that; we had no choice in it.

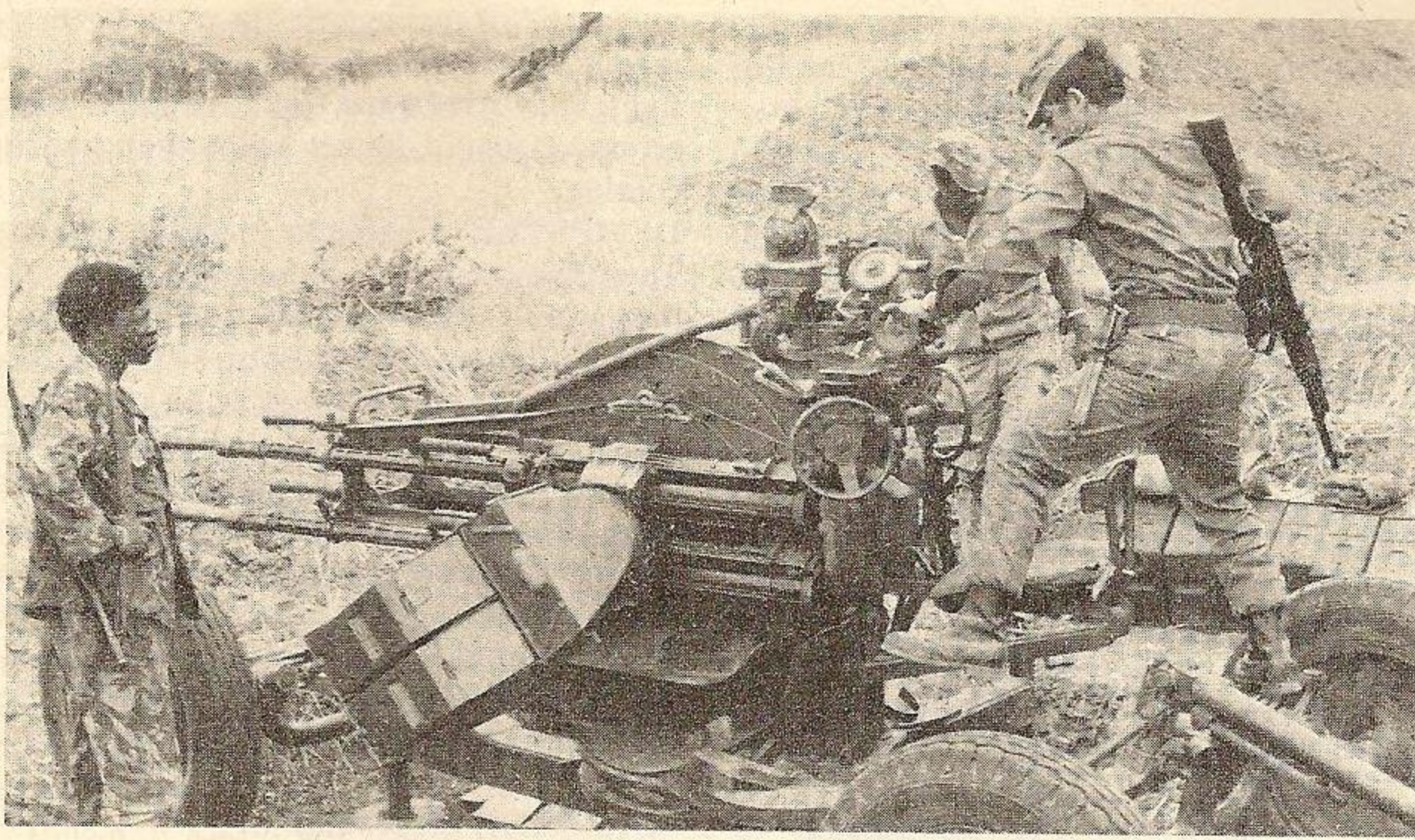
SOF: What about the local blacks who were trying to do a good job and were killed by Callan for no reason?

DEMPSTER: The guy whose death broke me up a bit was the baker. The thing was that Callan shot the man with his son standing there. That finished me with Angola right there. It was about then that I made my choice that the first opportunity that presented itself, I'd be gone. At that time I wanted to take Callan with me. It really got to me.

I mean this bread man, he walked 20 miles with his bloody hot tray on his head to give us bread, and then Callan shot this man in front of his son. It just — I don't know, it just seemed that enough is enough. The lad was only 5, 6 or 7 years old, that sort of indefinable age. The lad was hanging on my legs. I thought then that at the first opportunity, I'd take Callan out and go. But the opportunity didn't present itself.

SOF: How good were the Cubans in combat?

DEMPSTER: Well, you must speak as you find, and I found them wanting. I was told by the Portuguese Angolans that they were pretty good. I hit them twice from ambush situations and each time they must have known they were coming into



“... Angola’s a terrain eminently suited to guerrilla warfare. Elephant grass eight feet high covered the whole of the landscape ... So you couldn’t fail to succeed as a guerrilla.” — Chris Dempster.

ambush because they came right into our territory. They walked along with guns slung over their shoulders. They got hit, killed. The remainder turned and fled. Totally unsoldierlike conduct.

SOF: Did the Cubans ever put up a stiff fight?

DEMPSTER: Never. We drove into a prepared ambush position and I mean prepared — there were tanks around the corner, they were in a dug-in position and we inflicted 300 dead and three tanks knocked out and we came away. We went into this with Land Rovers, leaving four Land Rovers and we had four badly wounded. End of story.

SOF: How many were you?

DEMPSTER: 28.

SOF: And you killed 300?

DEMPSTER: And that figure didn’t come from us. We had claimed 150. The actual 300 figure came from Victor Carreras who was the commander of the Cubans.

SOF: And this was just small arms?

DEMPSTER: Small arms and your LAW rockets. They’re good anti-personnel weapons.

SOF: What sort of personal gear did the Cubans have?

DEMPSTER: Well they wore the standard MPLA kit which was forage cap, camouflage jacket, olive green trousers tucked into typical U.S. Army boots, Kalashnikovs, webbing belt which looked like British patent ’54 webbing, no harness, four ammunition pouches, and that was it.

SOF: No grenades?

DEMPSTER: No. I didn’t see any grenades.

SOF: You didn’t have mortars?

DEMPSTER: We had mortars. We had three-inch mortars and no ammunition and two-inch ammunition and no mortars. That was it.

SOF: Did they ever use mortars against you?

DEMPSTER: While we were waiting in the ambush position, they stomped the other side of the hill we were on with “Stalin Organs,” the Katushka rockets. They raised hell on the other side of the hill and we were terrified that they may start coming lower but they never did.

SOF: What was your best moment in Angola?

DEMPSTER: It was the morning before I disarmed the Zorrens. I had that big wash: I dived head-first into a 40-gallon drum and washed myself. I felt really good; it was the first time I really felt good in that country. I was on a shit-or-die mission and with such a short future having got myself clean — I cleaned my teeth which was the first time in three weeks — I felt really good. I just felt bloody good. And I went into the Zorrens. And that was the best part for me in Angola.

SOF: That was really an amazing feat to take on the Zorrens single-handedly. All it would have taken was one of those guys to say, “Screw this,” and bang, you’d have had it.

DEMPSTER: I don’t think it was a feat really. I think it was just a case of bluff and the bluff paid off. It wasn’t a feat really. I was faced with a dual possibility. I was either going to be very dead or very much alive and in a much firmer position than I had been in up to that point. By disarming the Zorrens, I sort of got one over on Callan to a great extent because he hadn’t dislodged them. And if I would have done it on my own

It was the sheer apprehension of Callan, being constantly on alert for him. Whenever you heard a Land Rover coming, you immediately had to get your FN. And then you had to remember if you had one up the spout or if you were going to cock one onto the floor, and then that

would be one less if it came to it. All of this was going on in the back of your mind, that you were going to need every bloody round you had, and you didn’t want to look the clown in front of the blacks by cocking rounds onto the floor, you know? And all this, it was a very unnecessary tension.

That morning was after I slept with a grenade in my hand. I mean that shows the state of mind I was getting into. Going to sleep with a grenade in my hand and then the pin falls out because I’d straightened the pin, and a loaded Browning “millie,” one up the spout and the hammer back, and an FN in the same situation leaning up against the bed. I mean you have to be half a lunatic to go to sleep like that, you know. But that just shows the sort of pressure the man was beginning to inflict on me mentally.

Then the Zorrens episode came up, and I’d have quite cheerfully gone and had a crack at them with an FN then to have this constant nagging pressure of having a lunatic CO who was backed by his own army which was your army. I just felt very good that morning. I felt very clean. I knew what I was going to do; I was going to end up very dead or very much in command of my own destiny. I was very lucky it turned out right.

SOF: The account in your book tells it like it was:

“Chris looked over the 147 bandits assembled before him. All of them were taller than he was and nearly all of them were staring at him with jaundiced, blood-shot eyes, radiating an almost tangible amount of hatred, the accumulated bitterness of years in Zairois jails, and in exile. He had the impression that they were waiting for an opportunity to rush him and tear him apart with their bare teeth. Although the operation had so far been surprisingly successful, Chris had good reason to remain apprehensive — most of the Zorrens still had their automatic weapons and were unlikely to part with them willingly.

“With Joseph acting as interpreter, Chris instructed the Commandant to order his men to drop their weapons. A few obeyed. The majority grinned contemptuously and gripped their weapons more tightly. Raising his FN, Chris fired some rounds just above their heads. The Zorrens ducked as ricochets whined from wall to wall of the square. One bullet passed an inch from Chris’ right ear but he willed himself to stay upright; any betrayal of fear or weakness would have been an invitation for the bandits to rush him en masse. The rebounding bullets did the trick — a small arsenal of side arms and rifles clattered to the ground.

“Chris noticed one defiant-eyed Zorren holding possessively on to his AK-47. He walked up to the man, who towered head and shoulders above him, and ordered him to throw down his weapon. The Zor-

ren stared moodily into space, ignoring his existence. Gripping his FN by the barrel, Chris clouted the bandit in the side of the head with the butt. The blow jarred Chris' arms to the marrow, yet the Zorren managed to stay on his feet, still clutching his Kalashnikov.

"Painfully aware that his defiance would soon spread to the rest, Chris drew his pistol and lashed the man's head and face with the grip. The Zorren calmly stood his ground. Realizing his failure to knock him down was making him look ineffectual, Chris gave up the attempt. Instead, he wrenched the AK-47 out of the man's hands, and stepped back quickly, covering him with his FN. Through Joseph, he ordered him to strip, then leave the fort — and Maquela — and not return. The naked bandit started for the gate, walking with a slow, buttock-swinging arrogance that delighted his fellow Zorrens. His arrogance vanished abruptly when a 9mm bullet from Chris' pistol passed between his legs, inches below his testicles. He disappeared out the gate in a hurry."

Did you go into the Zorren's camp accepting that either the Zorrens would kill you or Callan would? Did you say, the hell with it, I have nothing to lose, so let's do it?

DEMPSTER: That's it, yeah. The time I started to get my marbles back together was when I let the FN go and the bullet was ricocheting everywhere — I mean those FNs do ricochet a bullet — and it hummed quite near my head and all those blacks were diving every which way, you know. I wanted to duck, like you do, and I thought, you can't, because if you duck then that shows fallibility and every bit that you've gained up to now is going to be lost.

SOF: Were you afraid?

DEMPSTER: I just got angry. Going towards the gate, I just got angry, I just psyched myself up to get angry because I feel sure that if fright had crept in it would have funk'd everything out and I would get shot. I knew the only way out was to get angry, brutally angry, and to be brutal with them. I didn't do this consciously, you know, it was just the pent-up momentum of what had gone on before.

They could easily have shot me. The time it could all have come to pieces was when the last guy wouldn't give me his gun, his Kalashnikov. And then I beat him, and he stood there with his face bleeding from being whacked. I thought then, "Dempster, your bluff just ran out, son!" He was a big one; they were all bigger than I.

I mean it was weird, there were all these six-foot-plus guys standing around with straw in their hair, bloodshot eyes, a terrible stink of excretia and unwashed bodies, and this horrible feeling of hate from these 250 blokes. And all this was in a very confined space. The only thing you've got

to get you out of trouble is sheer rage, isn't it? You let any other emotion in and you're finished. It was just sheer hate that got me out.

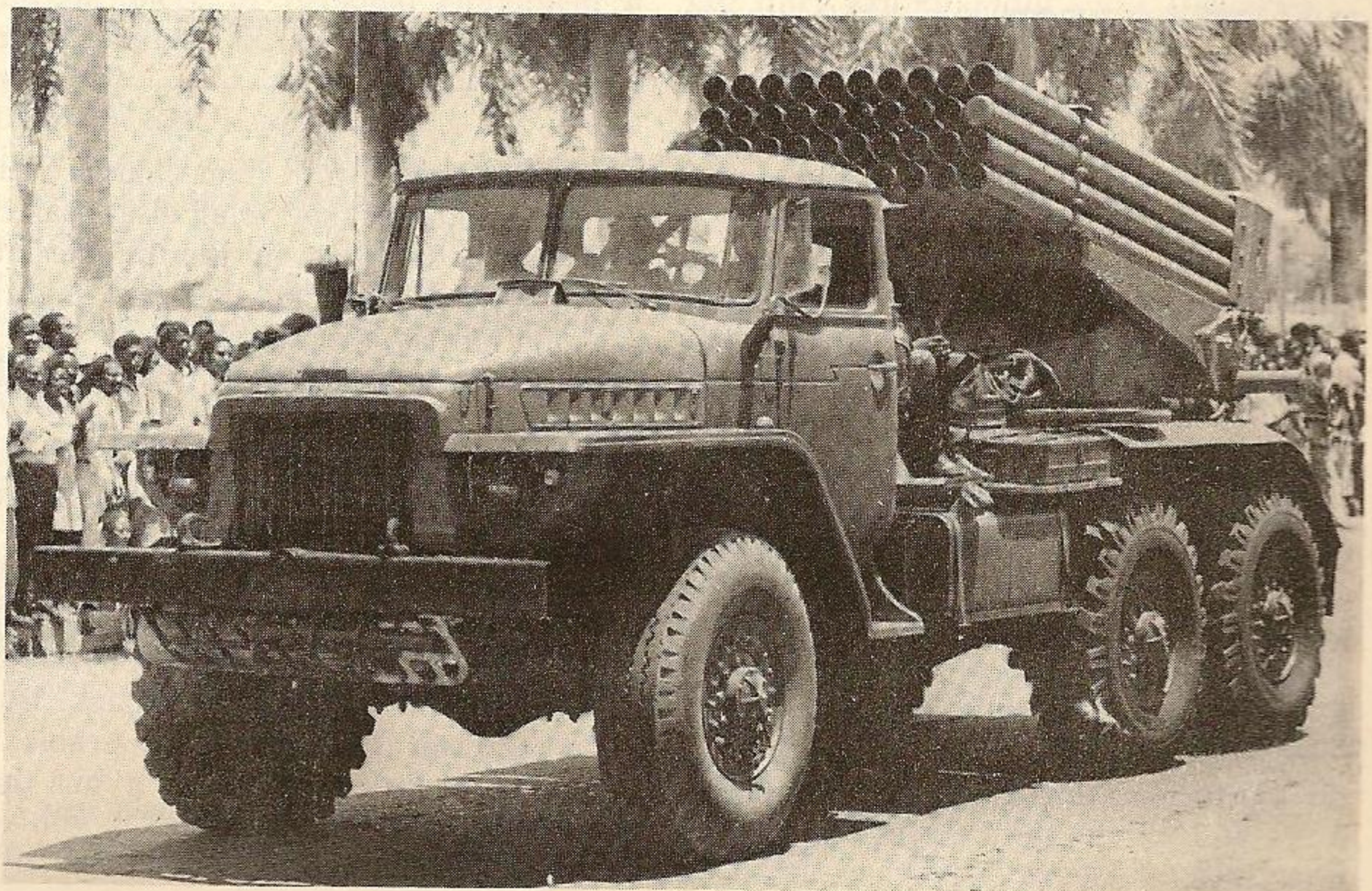
SOF: Why did they let you get away with it?

DEMPSTER: Well, you've never dealt with Africans. They're not like American Africans, completely different animal, completely different guy. American Negroes are American Negroes, Africans are Africans. They might have come from the same place but they're not the same, not at all. Yeah, the white man's old "Sanders of the River" touch still works in Africa. Particularly in that area. I mean look at the history of Angola and Zaire. If you've read Mike Hoare's book, *Mercenary*, that's exactly what Mike Hoare did. And if you read between the lines, as you must because he glosses over much of it, a lot of people died there and I mean a lot of people. And that was it.

SOF: How are American mercs regarded generally?

DEMPSTER: Americans. Well, we were very glad to see them. Guys like Gus Grillo were, I felt, a bit of a bad advert for American mercenaries. He came full of magazines and books filled with every arm and everything else. When he was in San Salvador — this is secondhand so you must put what you like on it — but the story I heard was that he had an FN with 12 magazines, an UZI with six magazines, six hand grenades, two handguns with three magazines each, and this is what he carried around with him. So you'd have to start looking like King Kong to lug that weight of ammo about, right? And when he got hit, he only got wounded. He could have got away. He wasn't wounded that bad. I mean he walked up to the Cubans and surrendered. I don't think that sort of thing is a very good advert.

"They stomped the other side of the hill we were on with Stalin organs, the Katushka rockets. They raised hell on the other side of the hill and we were terrified that they may start coming lower but they never did."
— Chris Dempster.



SOF: But within your crowd of merc types, how are Americans now regarded?

DEMPSTER: They're all right. They're good guys, I mean we tend to look on them as being a softer element than Europeans. They will be looking more for the comfort than to get in amongst it and stay amongst it and to live switched on. But they are well respected. They are good guys. They know far more than the average European about demolitions, about basic navigation in and out of a place like Angola — they're competent, you know, very, very competent. The only thing that can be said against them is that they do like the creature comforts, which can count for an awful lot. But very good, competent guys otherwise.

SOF: If you were putting together a mercenary force, what types would you look for?

DEMPSTER: Well, obviously I'd look for guys with military backgrounds between the ages of 23 and 35. Reasonably fit. Preferably coming from broken marriages.

SOF: You think it's best if they don't have a wife waiting?

DEMPSTER: Well, not just a wife but any ties.

SOF: Whom would you reject? Anyone without a military background?

DEMPSTER: No, you don't have to come from a military background. Take Angola. Two guys there proved themselves to be quite fit and quite able, two civvies who had never done a day's service in their lives, so it's not a necessity. The big mouths I'd keep away from — you know, the people who just shoot their mouths off. They're always trouble — you can do without any other aggravation. The barrack room lawyers — I don't know what you call them in the States.

SOF: What other contracts can you tell us about?

DEMPSTER: Well, I visited Beirut with Danny Chamoun's outfit, the Christian Phalangists.

SOF: Don't they have enough of their own people?

DEMPSTER: They've got nobody. No money either.

SOF: What was your mission over there?

DEMPSTER: We simply were fighting with them against the PLO. And that's a hard war because everybody looks the same; there's no lines. A skyscraper today that's yours could within an hour's time house some PLOs. It's a very weird war.

SOF: How long were you there?

DEMPSTER: 17 weeks.

SOF: What were the financial terms?

DEMPSTER: I came out of there with about \$9,000.

SOF: Was that based on a weekly salary?

DEMPSTER: No, I just took it. There was an agreement to pay me a certain amount but you couldn't find the guys half the time. It got to be very personal business getting out. Half the time you found the guys but then when you went back to the area that was supposed to be your rest area or food area or water area — there was no such thing as a real rest area because the Syrians were in there at the time lobbing at you all day and night — when you got back there, everybody had moved off. And there you were, an Englishman alone in the middle of a very wonkie war and it's very weird because the guys that you were fighting with, you know, they didn't wear divisional flashies saying Danny Chamoun's boys — I mean they were all dressed the bloody same.

And if you saw an Arab, you shot him and half the time you were bumping off your own guys because you didn't know who was who. And they didn't know you. The only three guys I knew — two of them got dead and I never saw the other guy again. I eventually found headquarters or what was supposed to be the headquarters and I took some money and went....

SOF: It sounds very disorganized.

DEMPSTER: Yes, it is. They're crying out for people but it's very weird because the only guy who's purely in command is Danny Chamoun and half the time he's fighting a political battle in various other countries trying to drum up support.

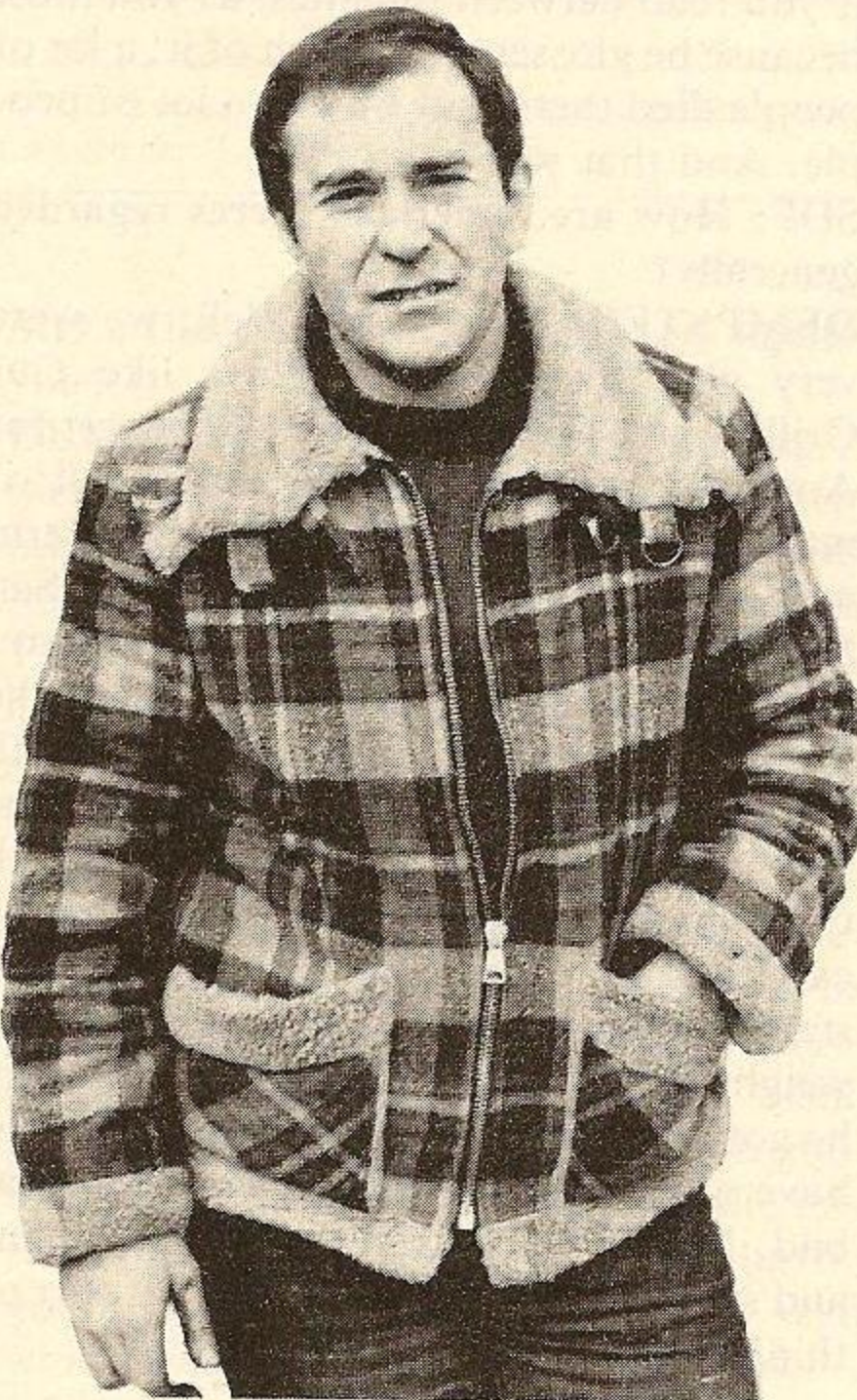
And you go to fight for him, you get a big handful of dollars when you meet the guy: "Get over there son, we need you!" You meet his representative in Cyprus and get going on the little boat out there. You get there and the representative disappears to go back and dig up more volunteers. And you're left with guys who can't speak English and you can't speak Arabic but they're all smiling at you, offering you this Arab stuff made of crushed goat's livers and lemon juice — hummel. It's what they all eat, it's wrapped up in a

bloody leaf. It's all right, it's very good and refreshing and it keeps you going.

And they all beckon to you, so off you go down the road and they all call me a "Kalashnikov Engineer." They all stand there grinning at you and then somebody starts firing at you and you start firing back and then you drift away and then a bit later you all drift back together. Very weird.

SOF: There was no established objective?

DEMPSTER: No, it was totally disorganized. *Totally* disorganized. You get one little guy in a red sort of hat and mask, you know, the old sort of thing with a band on it. He'll suddenly stand up and give you a load of Arabic and they'll all go



To be a merc: "The only rule is the gun, and if you're the man with the trigger, then it's your gun, so you must know what sort of arms you're getting hold of and be thoroughly competent with them."
— Chris Dempster.

charging over the top. You charge over next and find that they've all disappeared and you're standing in the middle of nowhere firing at a 1001 flashes at night. It's all a bit iffy, you know.

SOF: I assume you wouldn't recommend that war?

DEMPSTER: Well, only if you're fluent in Arabic. Then you've got half a chance there.

SOF: Were there other Americans or British there?

DEMPSTER: I never saw anybody. Two of us went and we both came back. But it's a good war if you can speak Arabic. I can speak a little tiny bit of it but the dialects are very peculiar and if you've been studying textbook Arabic, which I

had been, it doesn't work too good. It's rather like a Cockney talking to a New Yorker. You both look at each other and that's it. But they do need guys there because the Palestinians and the Syrians are trying to kill all the Lebanese.

SOF: But there were no lines or areas to hold?

DEMPSTER: Yeah, there was an area we were holding but it was getting rapidly smaller. I figured that out because every time I grinned at somebody, he shot at me, so I thought, well, very dirty, and legged it a bit further back to the area I started from and that was deserted and so I kept going backwards until I ended up on the dockside area. It was there that I found the base camp or what was supposed to be the base camp with one of the grinning faces — he was the only one that was left.

SOF: How were the PLO as a foe?

DEMPSTER: They're a bit good. I mean they can shoot their weapons and they're not intimidated. Good fighters. Lunatics, but good. They haven't got a country to defend, they're fighting hoping to get somewhere — you can't get any more desperate than those people. I've seen what was left of Tel Azatar and if that's where they live, then fighting is the only thing they've got left ... An interesting technical fact is that the Kalashnikovs over there all are stamped with "Tel Azatar" — because they had a plant there to make them.

SOF: As you might imagine, many SOF readers are interested in getting involved in mercenary activities. What advice can you give them about what to look out for and should they demand before they commit themselves?

DEMPSTER: Well, A) If somebody came up to me or contacted me and said that he wanted me to go to Humi-Gumi land, before I even moved from my telephone to wherever the point of contact was, I'd want to see the color of his money. Because you can get into some awful deep water on somebody else's big open mouth and dreams. So, if you get contacted and you want to get into something, just remember that it's your life you're putting on the line and make sure that the guy has got the money to back his mouth up.

And then having established that, really you're going into a very dirty business where all the vestiges of law and order are gone. Invariably the only rule is the gun; and if you're the man with the trigger then it's your gun. So you must know what sort of arms you're getting hold of and be thoroughly competent with them.

And B) you must have enough moral fortitude within yourself to know that you are the only man there as far as you're concerned. To think that there's the old camaraderie that you get in the forces, that you're all mates together in a bad job — it doesn't wash in the mercenary business. I've been in six mercenary wars and

it's never washed in any of them — any of them. You know, you must just be your own man. And when it's time to go, don't worry about everybody else, just go. Because when you know within yourself that it's time to go, then you must go.

SOF: When you say "go," do you mean quit?

DEMPSTER: Yeah. Because you are only paid by the pound or by the dollar or the franc or the deutschmark or the lire or whatever it is, and that's your paymaster. And all the loyalties that you have when you're saluting Queen and country or in your case the flag and the American people, as a mercenary you're not doing that. You're being paid for a job and all the time you're doing it, you get shot very easily. You can get killed wherever you are, you can get very dead. I'm saying be very thoroughly sure where you're at and when it's time to go, then go.

SOF: Are there certain times when you should just get out of a situation, just pick up and leave?

DEMPSTER: Absolutely, yeah. I'm a great believer in the old sixth sense. I mean when you know that it's bad, and I've had it that way several times, you're only getting paid by the pound or the dollar and if your life is only worth a few hundred dollars, then stay, but if you know in yourself that it's time to go — if you're on the losing side or something like that, then get out. You know I state quite categorically my position in the book: when it was time for me to go, I got in a truck and legged it.

As it turned out, "Major" Nicholas Hall, who presided at Sammy Copeland's court-martial, came to my flat about two years ago and we talked because it was all over and done with. And I asked him what would have happened had I been in Maquela when they came there — which was incidentally about six hours after I'd left in the truck.

And he said, "You'd have been killed, executed for your part in the Maquela massacre."

I merely look to my own laurels for having enough common sense to say so what to what everybody else thinks of me, it's time to go, get out. I saved my life a few times like that....

And I'd say to anybody who's thinking about being a mercenary — I've talked to lots and lots of guys and we've discussed this several times and if everybody's quite honest, they'll say, yeah, it's happened to them and when it was time to go they got. And I feel that there's lots of blokes that are dead who should have got but didn't because of what people might think of them — and they're dead.

SOF: What would you say are the most important skills someone should have before they get into the mercenary business?

DEMPSTER: Get fit. Because when you're physically fit, you're really in tune



Portuguese merc leads FNLA troops: "When our party of 18 guys got there, we found that there was 40 or 50 Portuguese there and they had the very best of what there was ... They were all armed with pretty good things." — Chris Dempster.

with the thing mentally. When you're physically fit, you're mentally fit and when you're mentally fit you can think that much quicker — you can be that much quicker. Your thinking's not that affected by the tiredness of the body and you can usually snatch hold of things a bit quicker.

SOF: What would you say is the most important piece of personal equipment a merc should have — other than a weapon?

DEMPSTER: If you're going any where there's malaria or bad water, you should always have anti-malarial tablets — we used palidrine. I don't know what they use in America but anti-malaria tablets and water purification tablets — I would put those two as high on the list as a weapon. At least as high if not higher, because you can always get out without a weapon but you can't get out if you've got dysentery or malaria. If you've got those two then you've got no chance, brother, no chance.

SOF: Any thing else?

DEMPSTER: No, that's it. You can rip off everything else you need.

I saw Dempster several times after the interview. We shared war stories and

became "mates." Between contracts he works as a strike-breaking construction foreman. I visited his site one morning and found him directing the entire installation of an enormous heating and cooling system. Dempster is a man of many abilities and a man of action. His life of adventure is far from over and you can be sure that Firepower won't be the last story written about Chris Dempster.



EDITOR'S NOTE: SOF correspondent John Howard brought back about 100 copies of *Firepower*. As a courtesy to SOF readers, these copies are available on a first-come basis for \$5.00 each postpaid from:

THE ANITE COMPANY
P.O. Box 375
Pinole, CA 94564.

You must send a money order or personal check (10 days clearing) as they will not accept COD or credit card orders for the book.