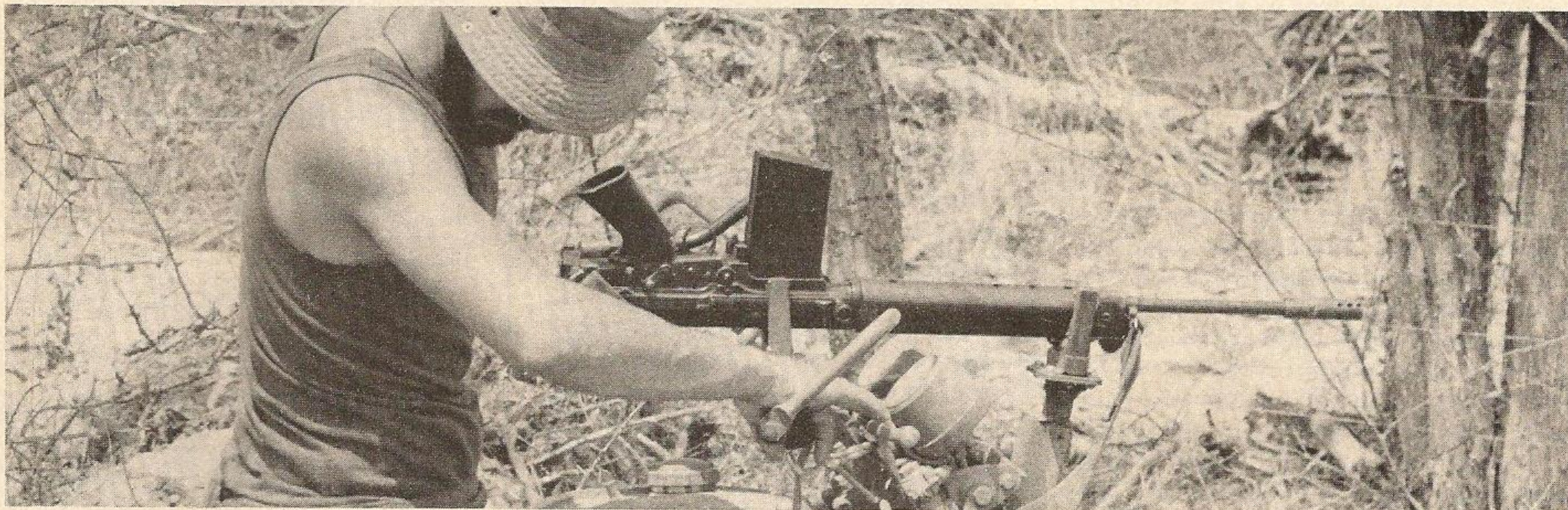


HELL ON WHEELS

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BIKES IN SOUTHWEST AFRICA'S WAR

by Al J. Venter



"We heard them coming before we saw them, snaking their way through the long grass and growling like demons. Then they were on us. A man next to me was hit.

"Then I saw another comrade drop. After that, nothing. I dropped my gun and ran for my life."

The man spoke quietly, his black skin glistening under the hot Ovambo sun as he recalled the contact that separated him from his SWAPO colleagues. He was picked up by a South African security force patrol a few hours later.

"They were like lions at a kill."

"They were like lions at a kill. They were everywhere." The man whom I knew only as "Timoteo" gesticulated with one hand, passing it quickly across his chest.

"I knew they were motorcycles. I had seen them in Windhoek before I was recruited and went north into Angola. But this time it was different because these were soldiers riding them and they were shooting at us." Timoteo's eyes narrowed as he spoke.

The contact referred to by this SWAPO militant — he spoke with surprising erudition for one who had received only a rudimentary education — took place earlier this year during an extended counter-insurgency operation to the east of Oshikati, the region's capital. A group of about 20 terrorists had been on the run

for four days; on their tracks were elements of South West Africa's crack specialist unit, more colloquially known as SWA Specialist Unit (Spes Ops).

First, horses had followed the insurgents' tracks after members of the gang had murdered a local headman. It was claimed in leaflets left behind at the scene of the crime that the dead man had close ties with the "racist Boer regime." What SWAPO did not say was that the headman had visited Oshikati a month before to inquire about getting his son into the local high school next year.

However, the trail disappeared after cattle and goats had been used to obliterate tracks — local tribesmen had apparently been coerced at gunpoint to follow instructions.

Once it was picked up again about 35 kilometers to the north of the original position, South West Africa Command lost no time in bringing another element of the Specialist Unit into play — the recently formed motorcycle detachment.

When the unit set out on the new trail with a tracker support-unit shortly after breakfast, the spoor was already 12 hours old. Before the sun had reached its apogee, they had narrowed that gap to less than 90 minutes. At this stage the fleeing terrorists bumped into security forces which were deployed previously.

The terrorists turned and doubled back the way they had come; specially-adapted 350cc motorcycles were on them before

they were able to prepare themselves against this new threat.

While actual casualties suffered by this SWAPO strike force is unknown, SWA Specialist Unit members were satisfied with their own results. They were also happy that not one of their own had been injured in the fire-fight which followed. Nor, touch wood, has the unit suffered any other casualties in action with the enemy since that incident; there have been more contacts and more kills.

South Africa's Boys On Bikes

Southern Africa's latest contribution to the war — the boys on their bikes — is a totally new concept in this African terrorist campaign being fought along its northernmost frontiers.

It is not the first time that two-wheelers have been used in modern conflicts, but the Specialist Unit has revolutionized their combat role.

Motorcycles were seen on the battlefronts of both World War I and II. During the Great War, both Germans and their adversaries allocated more than 300 machines to each division at the front. This figure was cut by 90 percent during World War II.

On both occasions — and during Korea — these vehicles were used primarily in communications and control roles, deliv-

ering messages between various units or assisting in traffic movement, especially on the West European front. There were also motorcycles with Soviet fighting units.

In contrast, however, South Africa is the first nation to use motorcycles in a fully combatant role.

But only just. It is significant that a month after the first motorcycle evaluation tests were started in the Republic, United States Military Command began its own two-wheeled program. Tests were conducted by the First Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, supported by CDC Infantry Agency at the famous Special Forces training establishment at Fort Benning, North Carolina.

Like the South Africans, the Americans are reported to be happy with preliminary results of their tests; the Vietnam War ended before they were able to deploy their military motorcycle combat elements for real.

Instructors attached to the South West African specialist units maintain that while they favor applicants who have experience in motocross or off-road motorcycle riding, this is not an essential aspect of a man's ability.

"We can train a man from scratch, but obviously, if a fellow has been spending every weekend for the past year racing at Saringa Spa, he is going to have an edge on anyone who prefers to spend his free time on the golf course. It's as simple as that," says a unit NCO who has been with the unit on all its operational ventures to date.

"We want aggression — a man has got to be aggressive..."

The one characteristic he and others in charge looked for in drivers was perseverance. "We also want aggression — a man has got to be aggressive if he's going to survive in this game."

"Put it this way," the NCO said. "This is about the toughest course of this type there is. We had 400 applicants enter the unit last year, but only 40 were successful. Most aspiring bike riders fell out because the going was too tough. They just weren't up to it."

Those who have survived the course come from all corners of South Africa. Cpl. Pieter Olivier was born and brought up on a Kalahari farm; Rfn. Bruce Allen comes from Cape Town, as does his friend and associate Peter Holt of Fish Hoek. Another of their buddies, Ian Grant, is an Empangeni resident, while Cpl. Hans Duvenhage is from Krugersdorp. The men are about equally divided between English and Afrikaans speakers.

Conditions to which the motorcycle unit is subjected can be awesome to the uninitiated.

A three-day bike ride across some of the most difficult bush country in Africa, on the move from sunrise to sunset, is the



Bikers are intimately familiar with their machines, capable of feats world-class moto riders would admire.

