

In World War I, two weapons apparently spelled doom for the horse cavalry: the machine gun and the tank.

Old traditions, however, die slowly, and the cavalry didn't bow out of modern warfare until the Polish cavalry died in a last futile charge against the Germans in 1939.

Although most of the world's military organizations have relegated the cavalry to either the museum or a small ceremonial detachment (like those prancing around Buckingham Palace), not everybody has gotten rid of their horses.

The cavalry is alive and well in southern Africa. Here in thick bush, mounted soldiers have become an important element in the ongoing war against the Marxist terrorists of the South West Africa's Peoples Organization (SWAPO).

There are basically four reasons why the old cavalry concept has been revived, minus the sabres, in the terrorists' war in South West Africa: visibility, range, speed, and the ability to operate in difficult terrain where it is impossible to use mechanized vehicles.

The bush covering most operational areas in South West Africa is both high and thick. But a trooper mounted on a horse, riding tall in the saddle, has a better, often unhampered, view of the situation.

A man on foot in battle kit can track through the bush for about 15 kilometers before becoming less attentive and thus less effective. On a horse, that same man can stay on the track for about 35 kilometers, longer than a chased terr can run. It sure beats walking.

A horse is also faster than a man on

foot, so mounted troopers run down terrors quickly — and literally. Some terrors die from being trampled, not from gunfire.

And in an ambush, mounted troopers can spur their mounts more quickly from the killing ground to cover.

Bush bashing (chasing terrorists through the wilds where no roads exist) is normally done in the mechanized, mine-proofed Buffels and Caspir vehicles. These are able, widely-used, and effective bush bashers which carry the infantry into battle. But chasing terrors by knocking the scrub bush flat with your vehicle is no way to sneak up on your enemy. Horses can do it much quieter, and a horse can go places a Buffel or Caspir can't, places that are often terrorist hide-outs.

I recently went out on a patrol with

The Cavalry Rides Again

Serious Soldiers In South Africa

Aren't Horsing Around

by Morgan Norval



Water! Nothing beats it on a hot, dry, sweaty operation. Both man and beast enjoy a cool drink of water during the search for the terrorists.

the South West African Territorial Army's cavalry unit. Actually, its correct *nom de plume* is 1 SWA Specialist Unit. The unit, headquartered at Otavi, is tasked out to other units in the operational area. The patrol I was with was tasked to 53 Battalion for administrative purposes, but actually operated out of the Okatope base in central Ovamboland. /

Okatope is located a few clicks away from a power line that runs from the Ruacana power complex on the Cunene River down to the agriculture and mining areas of Grootfontein and Tsumeb.

The power line, in addition to being a sabotage target, also happens to be an infiltration route for SWAPO terrorists coming from their bases in Angola, who slip across the border and follow the line south to their target area.

The security forces know this and take countermeasures to foil their efforts. Part of these countermeasures involve using the company-sized contingent of 1 SWA Specialist Unit based at Okatope, which consists of three platoons of horse-mounted infantry, or cavalry, and one platoon of motorcycle-mounted infantry.

The 500cc Honda motorcycles patrol the roads and the power line, and can be used for high-speed, cross-country sweeps and searches.

The chief assets of the motorbikes are speed and operating range. The bikes can roar through the flat bush at speeds, depending on the terrain, well in excess of horses or other mechanical ground transport vehicles. Their operating range is over 85 kilometers per day.

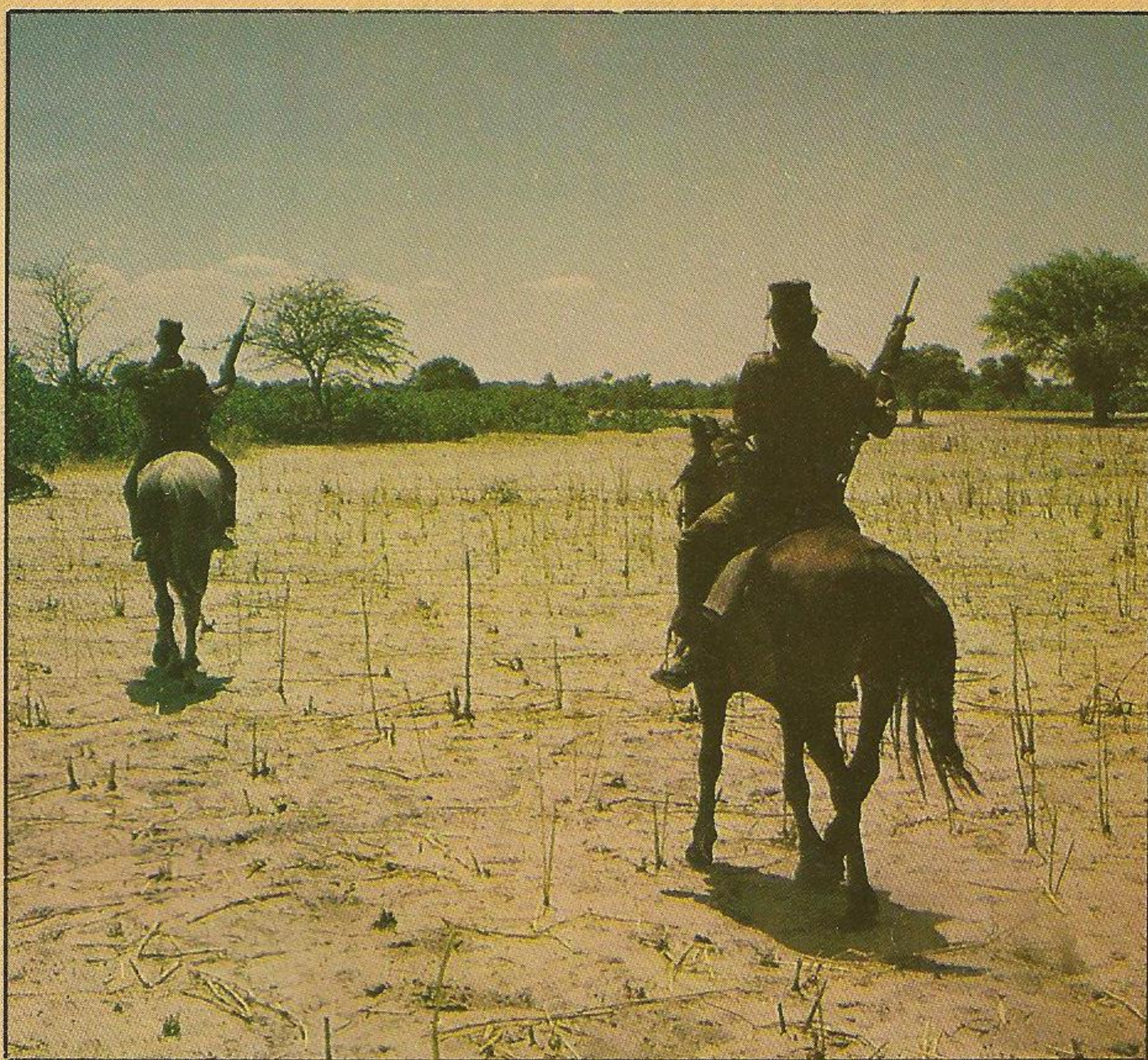
Their tires represent their most vulnerable point: long tough spikes of the thorn bush can easily puncture a motorbike tire. The motorbike troops are so well-trained, however, that they can change and fix a flat in a mere 12 minutes.

I arrived at Okatope bright and early one morning to find the base bustling with activity. It seems that the night before, SWAPO had blown down five telephone poles in a futile attempt to cut phone lines. (The terrors blew the poles but didn't bother to cut the lines.)

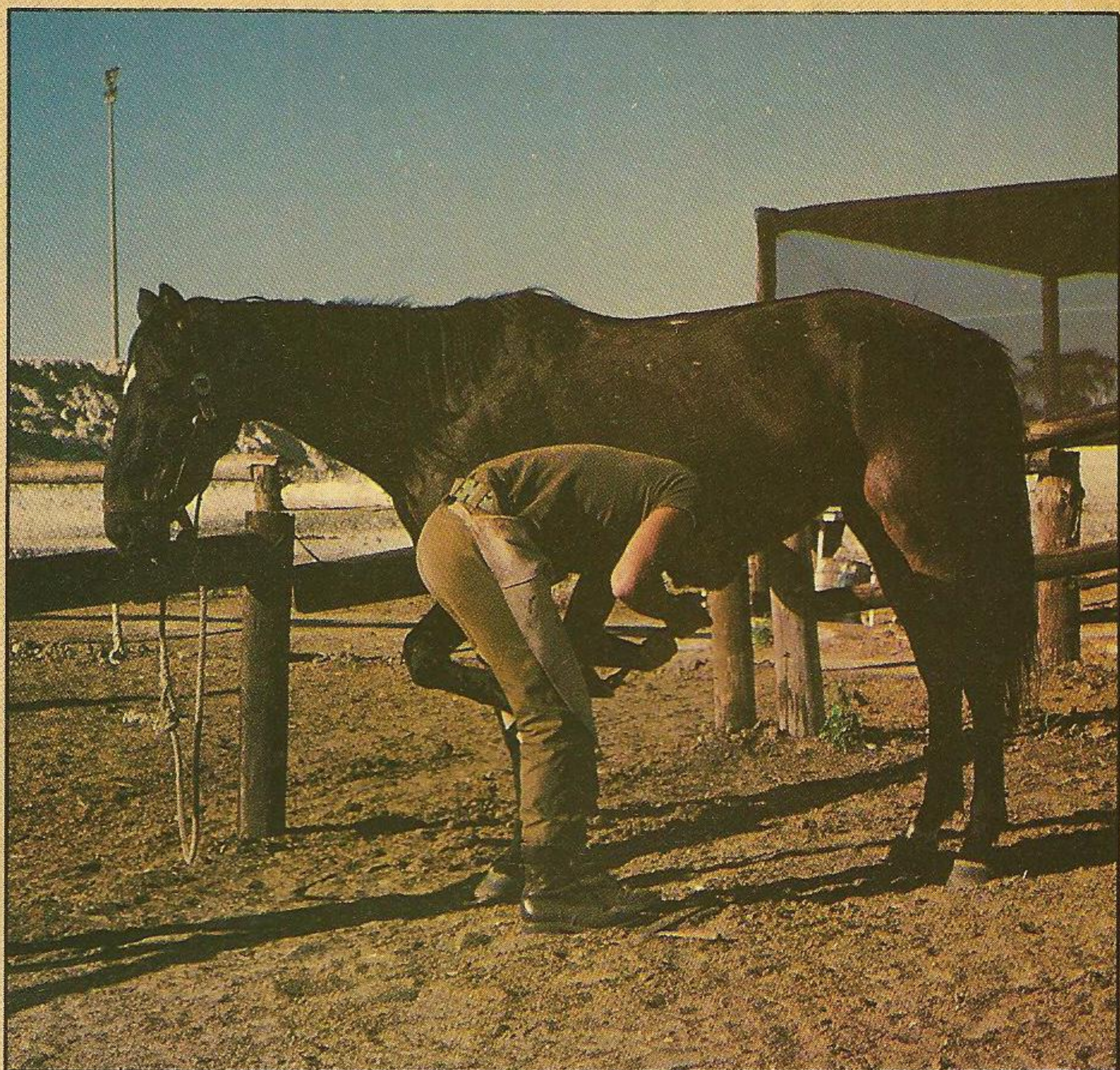
The first investigators on the scene picked up spoor, now several hours old, of five terrorists who had been involved in the incident.

A platoon of Capt. Bariss Barnard's (the CO of Okatope) mounted troopies was going to sweep the bush in the vicinity of the incident, to see if they could find more evidence and perhaps flush out the terrors.

Capt. Barnard's cavalry would



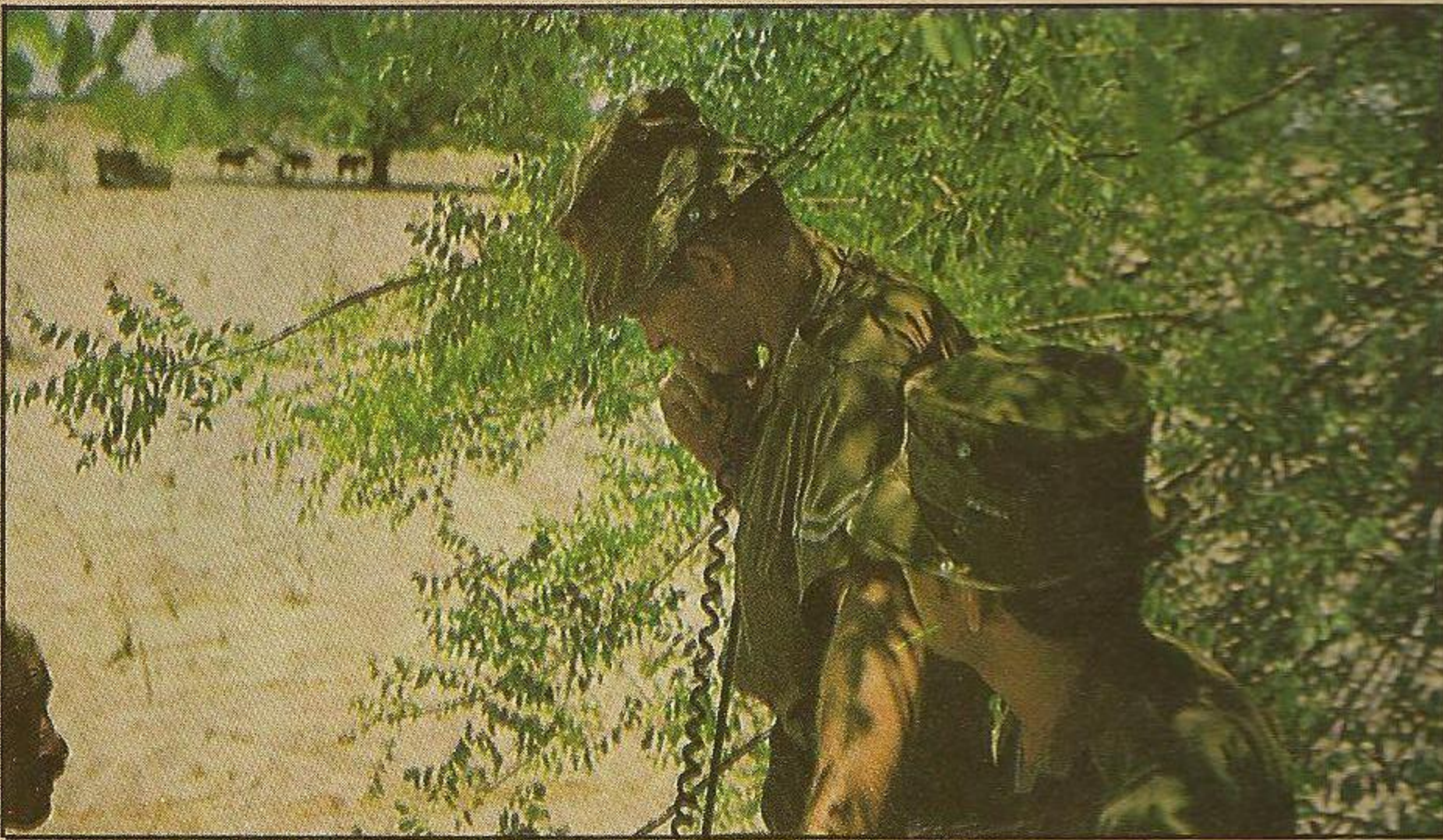
Mounted infantry of 1 SWA Specialist Unit sweeping the bush search for signs of SWAPO terrorists that tried to blow up the telephone line near Okatope in central Ovamboland.



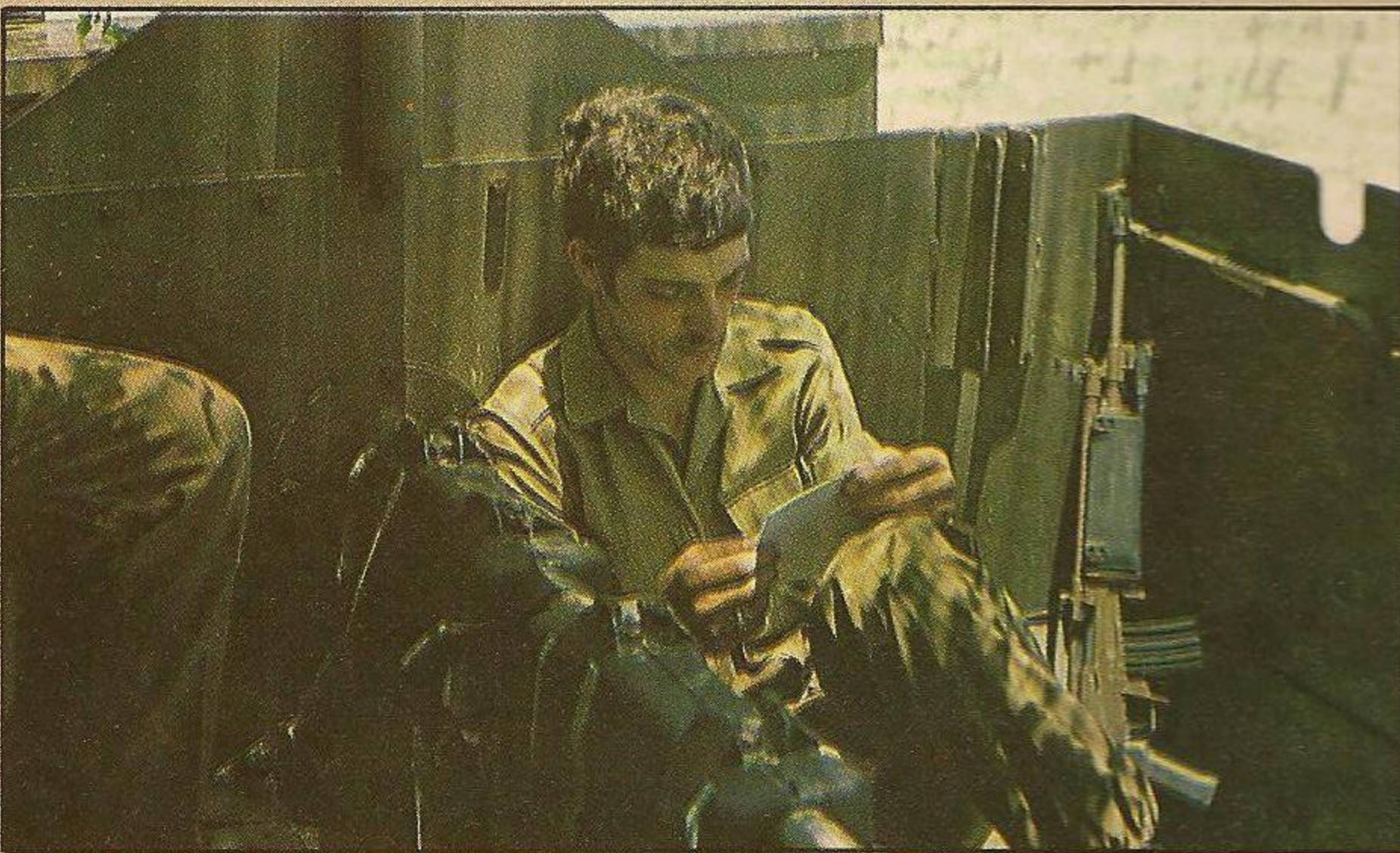
The blacksmith trims a horse's hoof prior to putting on a new shoe.



Men, horses, and machine take a break during the search for SWAPO terrorists. These men are part of 1SWA Specialist Unit tasked to 53 Battalion for operational use in the sector 10 area. This area, Ovamboland, is where the bulk of the anti-terrorist war is going on.



Radio contact is made with other elements serving as stopper groups. Their reports were negative; no terrors were flushed out by this sweep.



Rest in the shade. A troopie in a Buffel is oblivious to everything but the words from his loved one. The rifle is a South African R-4; actually it is an Israeli Galil under license for manufacture by South Africa. It is intended to totally replace the R-1 (FAL) rifle.

sweep from the site of the incident eastward towards the power line and infiltration route. Other elements of 53 Battalion would set up ambushes and stopper groups on the flanks of the sweep and a force of infantry mounted in Buffels would sweep down the power line, wait, form a blocking unit, and scoop up anything fleeing from the cavalry approaching from the other end.

Due to the size of the forces involved (about a company of troops) and the area being swept, it was impossible to blanket the entire area. It was hoped that if the terrors had gone to ground in that area, the movement of the troops would stir them up and force them to move. Then their spoor could be picked up and they'd be hunted down.

I started out riding in the Buffel that goes along behind the mounted troops sweeping the area. The noise of the Buffel is not a factor, as the cavalry, depending upon the terrain and thickness of the bush, is normally moving anywhere from 500 meters to a kilometer ahead. Any terrors lurking in the bush would be stirred up by the horses long before the sound of the Buffel would carry to any terrors hidden in front of the sweep.

A word about the Buffel. It is a mine-resistant armored personnel carrier developed by the South Africans, which sits on a truck chassis. This is its main weakness, as encounters with a mine, while giving an amazing amount of protection to the humans it carries, usually ends up bending the vehicle's frame. This puts it out of action until extensive repairs are carried out.

The newer anti-mine vehicle, the Caspir, is an improvement on the Buffel, because its chassis is part of the main body of the vehicle. When it strikes a mine, a wheel assembly is often blown off. But this can be replaced in the bush in a matter of hours.

But the Caspir is new and expensive, so the Buffel is still being used in the anti-terrorist war.

Both vehicles have one thing in common: riding in them is a bouncing, jolting experience. Half the time is spent hanging on for dear life to prevent limb and gear from bouncing out into the dirt. This in spite of being strapped in via a shoulder harness. The rest of the time is spent dodging branches that tend to sweep back into the passenger's face while bashing through the bush.

A routine quickly developed. The cavalry would move ahead in a skirmish line, look for signs of the terrorists, and the Buffel would follow.

The route would weave around as

kraals were checked out. Kraals in the bush were not laid out in neat geometrical patterns, so the lines would move back and forth to get them all in the sweep. When kraals were close to one another, two riders would split off from the skirmish line and check them out.

It was routine and sometimes boring work, especially when the sun beat unmercifully as you toil through the seemingly endless bush, breathing dust from the ever-present sand tossed into the air by your passage. Boredom was resisted by the realization that contact could come at any time, especially for the horsemen. They resisted boredom easily — their necks were on the line.

Back and forth we swept, although steadily pressing eastward towards the power line, looking for signs of our pole-blasting SWAPOs, making periodic stops to rest the horses and the troops, and to maintain a slow, consistent search of the area.

As part of its anti-mine defense, the Buffel carries an enormous supply of water (which absorbs a lot of the force of a mine explosion). This water is available through a tap, so these stops allowed us to quench our thirsts and wash the dust off our faces. You didn't bother drying your face with a cloth; the sun dried it for you. But the process of evaporation would give you a few precious moments of coolness before the sun resumed its relentless assault.

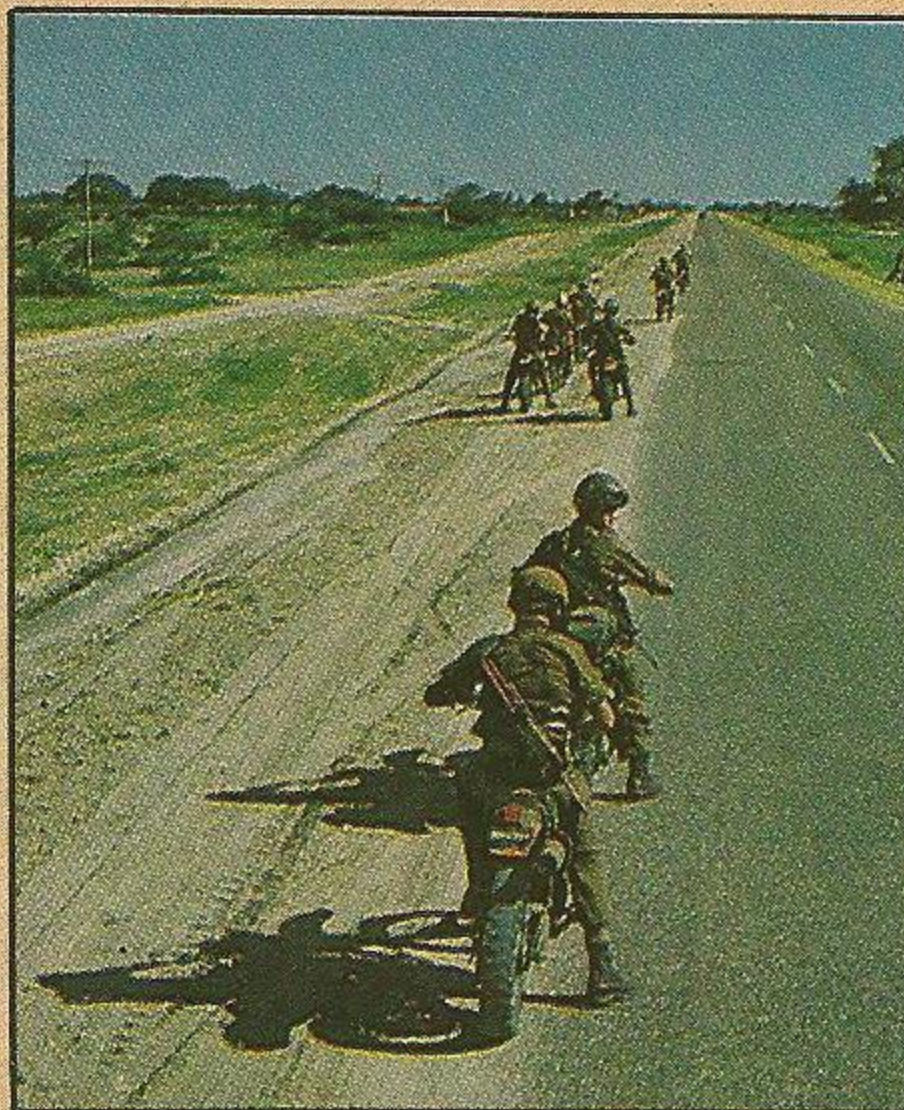
Finally, we came to the power line. The company commander and some of the mounted troops were sitting on the edge of the power-line clearing, waiting for us. We had reached the end of our sweep and had turned up nothing.

That's the way it often is on ops in Ovamboland. You cover miles and miles of hot, dusty bush, often to find no signs of terrs. But they are there, if only in small numbers, and the security forces can't relax their vigilance. If they do, that's when the terrs will plant their mines or murder innocents.

After a short rest we turned around and swept back through the same area to the horsetrailer assembly point, where we loaded up the animals and returned to Okatope.

Next afternoon, there was a flurry of activity at Okatope as the motorbike troops got ready to hit the trail.

Captain Barnard said that two of his Ovambo troopies had just returned from a little R&R at a local cuca. (These are small, privately-owned shops operated by local Ovambos that dispense goods, including beer. The shops are named after a beer brewed in southern Angola while it was still a Portuguese



Our column moves out down the road.

colony. One might consider a cuca as Ovamboland's answer to a neighborhood bar.) It seems that a couple of terrs were patrons of this particular cuca and were bragging about their SWAPO affiliation to the assembled patrons.

Capt. Barnard decided upon immediate action and was preparing to lead his motorbike troops to the cuca in hopes of bagging the two boastful terrs. He asked me along, so I grabbed the camera bag and one of Samuel Colt's great equalizers.

We rode north up the tarred road toward Ondangwa for about eight clicks, then turned off the road and plunged into the bush. The cuca was located some 12 kilometers west of the road, across table-flat sandy bush country, near an old mission and a school run by a master suspected to be a SWAPO sympathizer.

When we roared up to the cuca, riders peeled off to right and left, encircling the cuca and cutting off anyone trying to flee. Capt. Barnard and a dozen of his men entered the cuca, ready for action. But the troops had been seen as they rode across the flat terrain, and the two SWAPO terrs had fled towards the school, so Capt. Barnard ordered a remount and headed for the school.

Bigger, and with about 400 students from about the fourth grade through high school, the school buildings proved a little more difficult to surround. The line of troops stretched a little thinner.

Capt. Barnard talked to the head school master and told him it was necessary to search the school and to clear all the classrooms. That proved easy because most of the students had poured from the classrooms to stare curiously at the armed men.

The remaining kids trooped out

and joined their classmates. As they did so, they were scrutinized closely by Capt. Barnard and the two Ovambos who could identify the terrs if they tried to sneak out with the kids.

The kids enjoyed the spectacle because it gave them an unexpected break, but their teachers didn't like it one bit. Many of them didn't even try to keep looks of hostility off their faces as they sullenly watched the troops searching their classrooms.

One by one the classrooms were searched. Then, as the troops were preparing to move to another building, one man noticed a small trapdoor in the corner of a classroom.

"Check that out," ordered Capt. Barnard. A troopie was given a boost up by two others and pounded open the trapdoor.

A loud crash was heard at the other end of the building, and a great shout went up from the milling school kids outside as two frightened terrs burst out through a door and ran through the crowd.

Apparently panicking when the trapdoor was raised, the terrs evacuated their hide-out by simply crashing through the ceiling and bolting out the classroom door.

No fusillade of shots followed them, as the security forces didn't want to risk hitting any of the kids, many of whom had wandered from the immediate vicinity of the school to goof off and play. Thus they were strung out all over the area, and the terrs used them as a buffer to get away.

Off went the troops in hot pursuit, following the fresh spoor. But the terrs, running literally for their lives, didn't lose their wits. They hit a couple of the many scattered kraals in the area and played hide-and-seek among them with the security of forces. At one kraal they delayed the biker patrol many precious minutes by forcing the kraal occupants to drive their herd of cows over their tracks, obliterating them.

By using such tactics they got away, managing to hitch a ride in a truck before being tracked and trapped by a koevoet patrol (police anti-terrorist tracking unit) not far from the cuca and school. Both were killed trying to shoot it out with the koevoets.

Needless to say, it was a long, frustrating ride back to Okatope. Some days, it seems, it doesn't pay to get out of bed.

