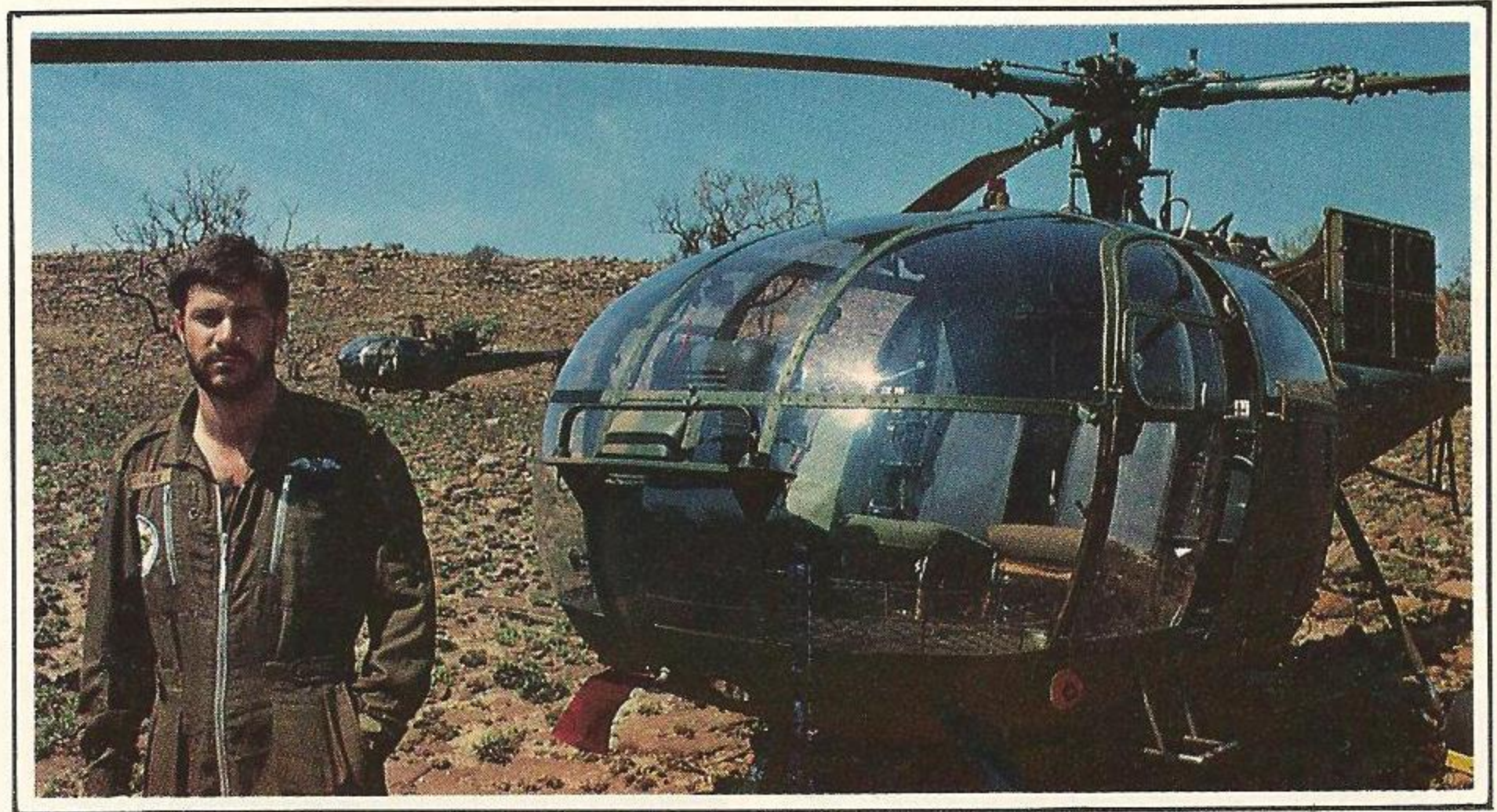


# ESCAPE AND EVADE

Text & Photos by  
Al J. Venter

LEFT: South African AF Capt. Tinus van Rensburg.

RIGHT: Capt. Tinus van Rensburg, in borrowed flight suit, stands by SAAF Alouette III chopper.



## South African Scorpion Stings SWAPO's Pride

**C**APT. Tinus van Rensburg can't say exactly how it felt to have his chopper hit by a rocket in mid-flight, except that there was no apparent distinction between the blast and the explosion of his fuel tanks – both

happened simultaneously.

The way he describes it, he didn't even see the missile coming – apparently an RPG-7. One moment he was hovering at 30 feet – over a fairly large concentration of hostile SWAPO terrs in

Southern Angola — next he felt the heavy sensation of a bomb exploding, as he describes it, “somewhere next to my head.”

In fact, the rocket hit the chopper engine to the rear, which absorbed much of the blast.

“It all happened so fast.” A second later the cockpit of the South African Air Force Alouette III was full of smoke.

“I could feel searing heat at my neck and back through my helmet and flying jacket — it must have been intense.

“I looked out toward my right and saw billows of flame enveloping the entire aircraft.” As he remembers it, the blast had also shattered the canopy and there were bits of metal and perspex all over the place. But, more importantly, the Alouette wasn’t responding to her controls.

“I braced myself as I saw the earth rushing toward me; there was no time to execute emergency procedures. I just prepared for impact and took it for granted that the engineer was doing the same,” van Rensburg says. He points out that he somehow managed to get the chopper to hit tail first, which absorbed some of the shock. “I can thank the Lord for that much,” he adds seriously.

The terrorist group responsible for his crash was part of a force that the South Africans had followed from South West African territory — a force that had spent days terrorizing locals, attacking minor targets and laying landmines. A South

African patrol caught up with them shortly after they recrossed the Angolan border; choppers from 17 Squadron SAAF took over the chase not long afterward. Van Rensburg explains that the group they had followed in a “hot-pursuit operation” must have numbered about 100 men and included several vehicles painted in light camouflage.

“There was no mistaking who they were,” van Rensburg recounts. “We were still beyond range of normal gunfire when they started firing; they let rip with everything they had.

“Then it happened. Everything this war had represented for me in the past suddenly became a nightmare; I was in the middle of it.”

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### Thrown Clear — In A Hail Of Fire

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Although Capt. van Rensburg’s chopper fell a relatively short distance, other helicopters circling the area were convinced that no one could have emerged alive from that mass of twisted metal, smoke and exploding flame.

They watched for movement in the immediate area of the crash and saw none.

What they didn’t know was that van Rensburg had been thrown clear on impact and landed in the middle of an entire SWAPO section which had taken

up a defensive position against the pursuers.

When he came to seconds later, he was lying to one side of the burning chopper, his back contorted in pain and with nothing for defense but his hands. He was without his flight jacket or the 9mm Parabellum pistol he normally carried in a holster on his belt — it had apparently fallen out in the crash. There was also no hope of getting the automatic rifle he usually packed in the aircraft; it, too, had gone up in flames.

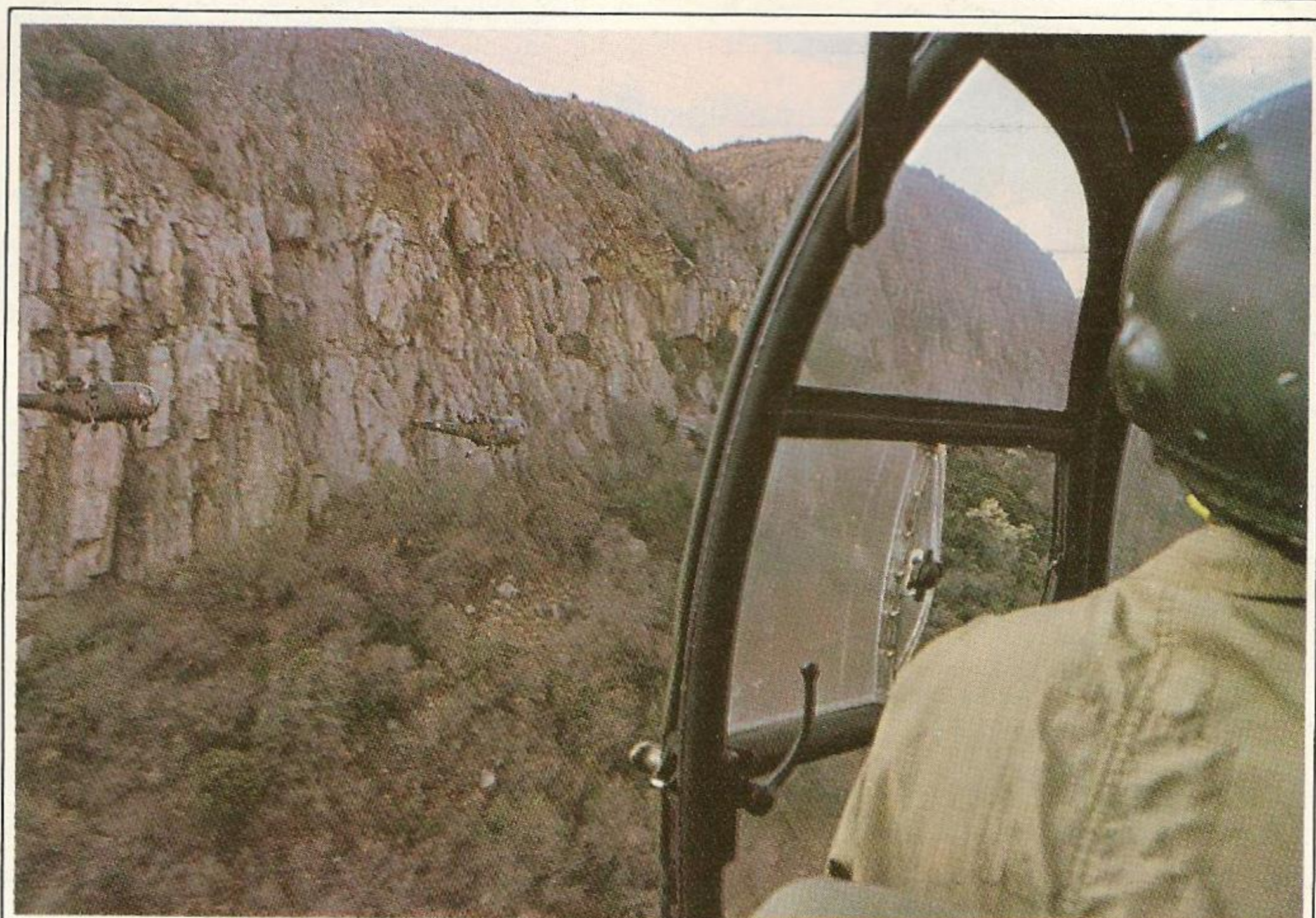
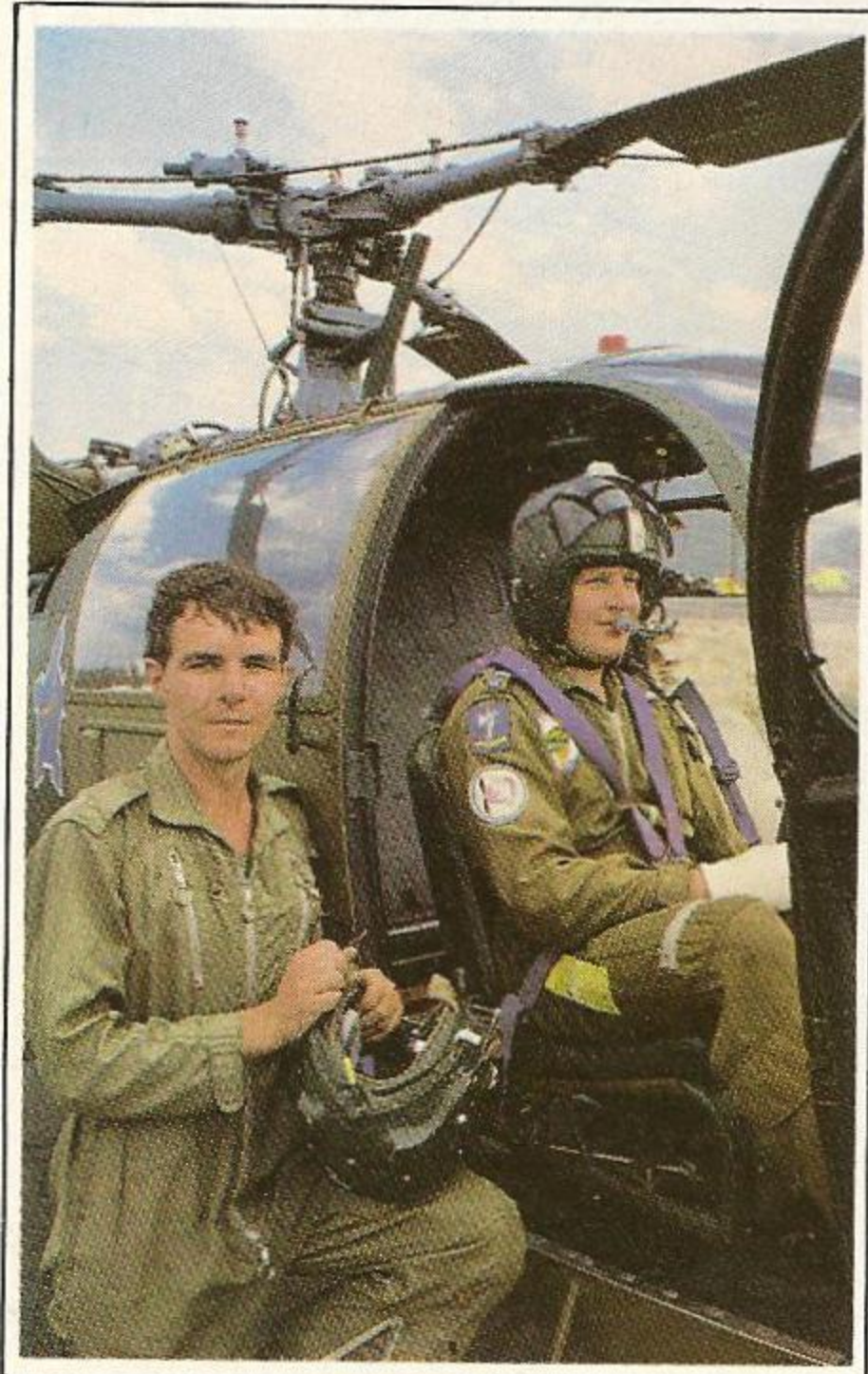
“I looked around me quickly. People were firing from a position close by and, noticing a truck about 10 yards to my left, I headed for it on my hands and knees, dodging the bullets that were thudding into the dry white Angolan sand around me.”

Van Rensburg suddenly remembered his engineer, Koos Cilliers. He looked about him and spotted a cammie-clad figure in the dust a short distance away. He shouted at the man twice, then crawled to him, but the figure was lifeless. “There was a huge wound in his leg and I felt for a pulse — there was none.” Cilliers was dead.

“Fire picked up around me and several rounds glanced off the body of the truck,” van Rensburg continues. “I decided that the vehicle offered the best shelter until I could decide what to do. Twice I felt bullets rip through my flying suit, and once a tracer singed my forehead. I knew then that what I had

**While waiting for liftoff to pursue his story, author Venter photographs SAAF Engineer Heinz Katzke at controls and crewman of Alouette III.**

**Magaliesburg in perspective alongside two Alouettes in formation. The French-made choppers have proven themselves time and again to be as rugged and versatile as the country they patrol and defend.**





always dreaded was happening.”

A tracer ripped into one of the truck tires alongside him and he smelled burning rubber.

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## AK Round Stopped By Book

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Capt. van Rensburg didn't know it at that moment, but the small paperback novel that he had earlier zipped into one of the trouser-leg pockets of his flying suit had taken a direct hit from an AK round. Only later, when he reached safety, did he discover his luck. Had the book not been there, the round would have probably blown his calf away, making any escape attempt impossible.

By now his nose was bleeding profusely. He felt pain, but was not aware of the implications — in the crash his spine was injured — a double-compression fracture of the two lowest vertebrae.

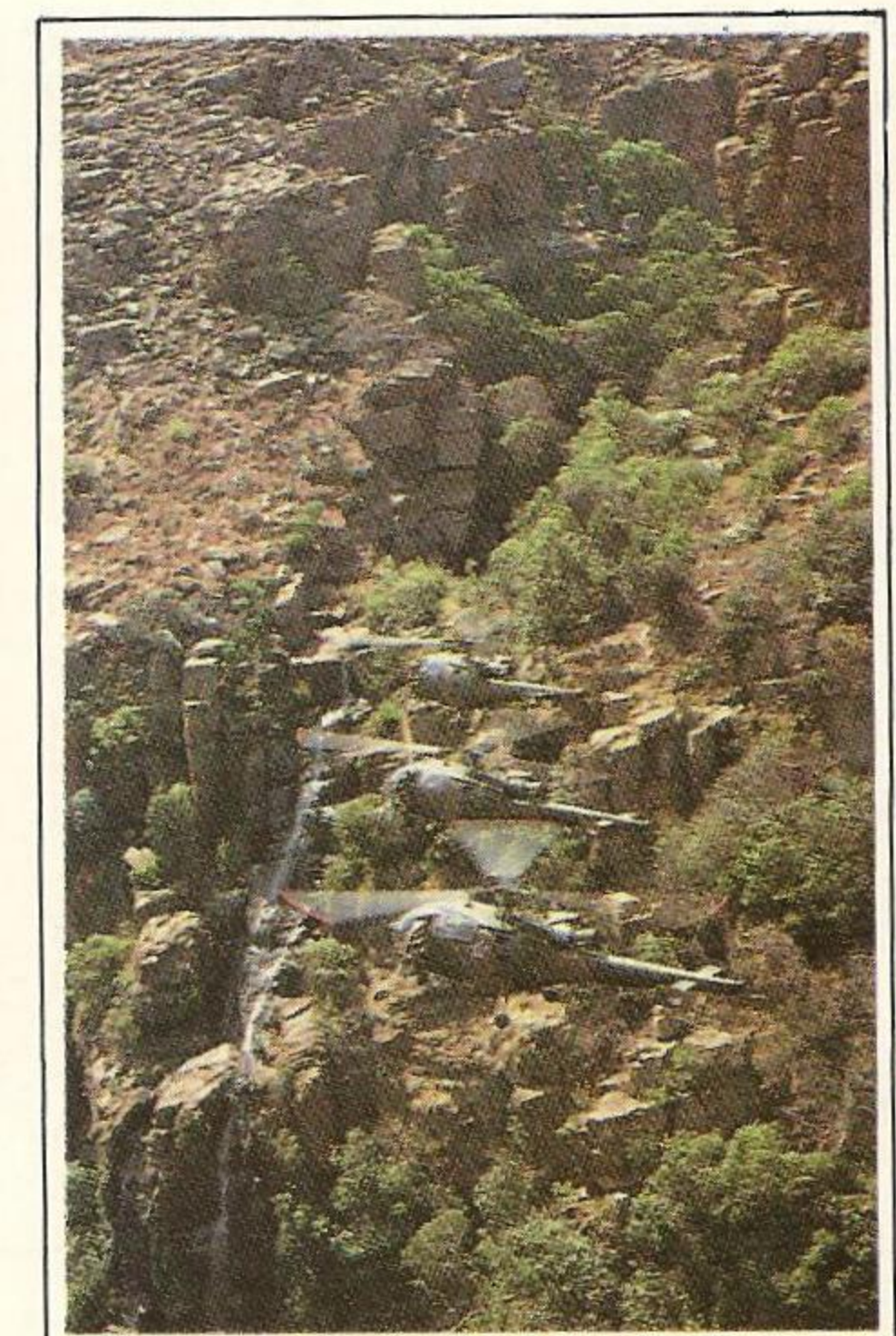
For a second or two the fire let up. Van Rensburg had to make an immediate decision.

He became aware that the light wasn't as bright as it had been earlier, and he figured it must have been close to 1700 hours. Also, he was in an area covered with thick bush, which gave him a slight advantage. If he were to get out of his predicament, it would have to be along a route through the undergrowth. He decided to wait for darkness to make his escape.

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## Three Alouette IIIs hover below mountain waterfall during routine maneuvers.

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**Super Frelon chopper from sister squadron based at Swartkops during brush-fire operations.**

Van Rensburg was also aware that he was inside Angolan territory, some distance from the South West African border. He would have to make it all the way back behind his own lines on foot.

The young South African pilot wasted no time. Scrambling on hands and knees, he edged toward a thicket of trees behind the truck. A minute later he was on his feet heading west.

He recalled having seen a road in the immediate vicinity before he crashed, and knew that if he were to head back to base, he would have to go south — but that meant crossing the road which was obviously being patrolled. For a while he kept moving westward, hoping desperately that the enemy would deploy to the south and away from him in their search.

It was obvious that SWAPO knew he was alive, and that he was a potential South African POW they had no intention of letting go free.

The pain from his back injury was excruciating, but van Rensburg pushed on. He had walked about a mile when he spotted a tall anthill (which in that part of Africa sometimes reach heights exceeding 20 feet).

"I went around it, regarding it as something of a landmark, then unexpectedly came upon a small branch lean-to. I spotted movement. I went cold. I knew that if I had detected the presence of someone else, they must have seen me, too."

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## Instinct: Survive!

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Van Rensburg spun around and saw a man in SWAPO's distinctive tiger-stripe camouflage sitting on the ground, an AK carbine slung across his knees. He was trying to get up as he shouted to someone nearby.

"It could have been my basic instinct for survival or a spur-of-the-moment decision — I don't know which — but I rushed him."

The young air force captain remembers nothing more of the event (even though I questioned him closely for several minutes about it) except that when he got to his feet again, he had managed to wrest the gun from the terr and shoot him. The shouting and the shots attracted the kind of attention that van Rensburg was desperately trying to avoid, so, with his new-found weapon, he ducked out the rear of the structure into the dense bush.

By then, several of the dead man's "compadres" were firing wildly in his direction, but they didn't follow him, undoubtedly fearing an ambush.

Van Rensburg remembers that during the next few hours, his escape to safety was punctuated by spasms of pain that

left him breathless. Several times he tried to rest by sitting or lying down. Once he tried to sleep for a couple of hours in a desperate bid for strength. But his back would take no pressure whatsoever.

He had to stay on his feet. He was also thirstier than he had ever been in his life — the cannister of water onboard the chopper had been destroyed in the crash.

Several times that evening van Rensburg had to avoid SWAPO patrols. Once he accidentally walked through the middle of a tiny village and was spotted by a local African — both men made hasty tracks in opposite directions. He knew that the alarm would be raised afresh.

By now the pilot's back was hurting so badly that he could no longer carry the AK, even though it weighed only a few pounds. He decided to stash it in a clump of tall grass.

This gesture, alone, was indicative of the incredible pain Capt. van Rensburg suffered. He abandoned the only means he had to protect his life.

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## Home After A Painful Walk

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An hour before dawn, the young chopper pilot crossed South African lines. There was no perceptible change in the terrain; the country was still arid, the bush thick. The narrow outline, which lay straight as an arrow in an east-west direction, told him he had reached the border.

Most of the way out he had followed — at a distance — the same north-south road he had used as a marker on the way into Angola. He knew it was dangerous to walk on the road itself — it could have been mined or possibly had enemy stop groups waiting in ambush.

Once back on South West African soil, he had to beware of his "own" forces. They had no knowledge of his presence and, in the bad light, he could easily have been mistaken for a SWAPO member.

Then, at first light, he heard talking. These weren't enemy; they spoke his language — Afrikaans.

He shouted to alert them of his presence. The group was a patrol on routine ops. An hour later, Capt. Tinus van Rensburg was back at the same base from which he had lifted off almost 18 hours before. He was airlifted to a hospital at Oshakati under heavy sedation that same morning.

To date he has undergone three months' treatment for his back. Last reports state that he passed his flying physical and will be on active service once more by the time his story appears in print.

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## Distinguished Service

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Today, 17 Squadron, composed entirely of Alouette support choppers, has a history that extends beyond the lives of most of its present members. The unit was founded early in WWII as a general reconnaissance squadron. At the time — December 1940 — its component aircraft were largely Blenheims.

In 1942, the unit saw active service in Aden, North Africa and Italy — flying with British, American and other Allied squadrons and distinguishing itself in various major operations in and around the Mediterranean. Like other South African squadrons active during WWII, its flyers achieved their share of honors and decorations.

After the war, in 1947, 17 Squadron was reformed in South Africa as a maritime air-sea rescue unit operating with Venturas from Cape Town. Much of this work was of a practical nature — the Cape Sea route was almost as active then as it is today.

Then, in 1954, the wing was allocated its first chopper, a Sikorsky S51, and two years later they were given S55s. The first Alouettes were taken into service in 1960 and the more advanced Alouette III was introduced two years later.

Much of their early post-war activity was uneventful — the Squadron's major role was providing civil authorities with help when needed. And that's the way it remained — until the first SWAPO terrorist incursions into South West Africa from Angola occurred in 1966.

After a hiatus of more than two decades in military activities, 17 Squadron went to the task with gusto.

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## Perseverance

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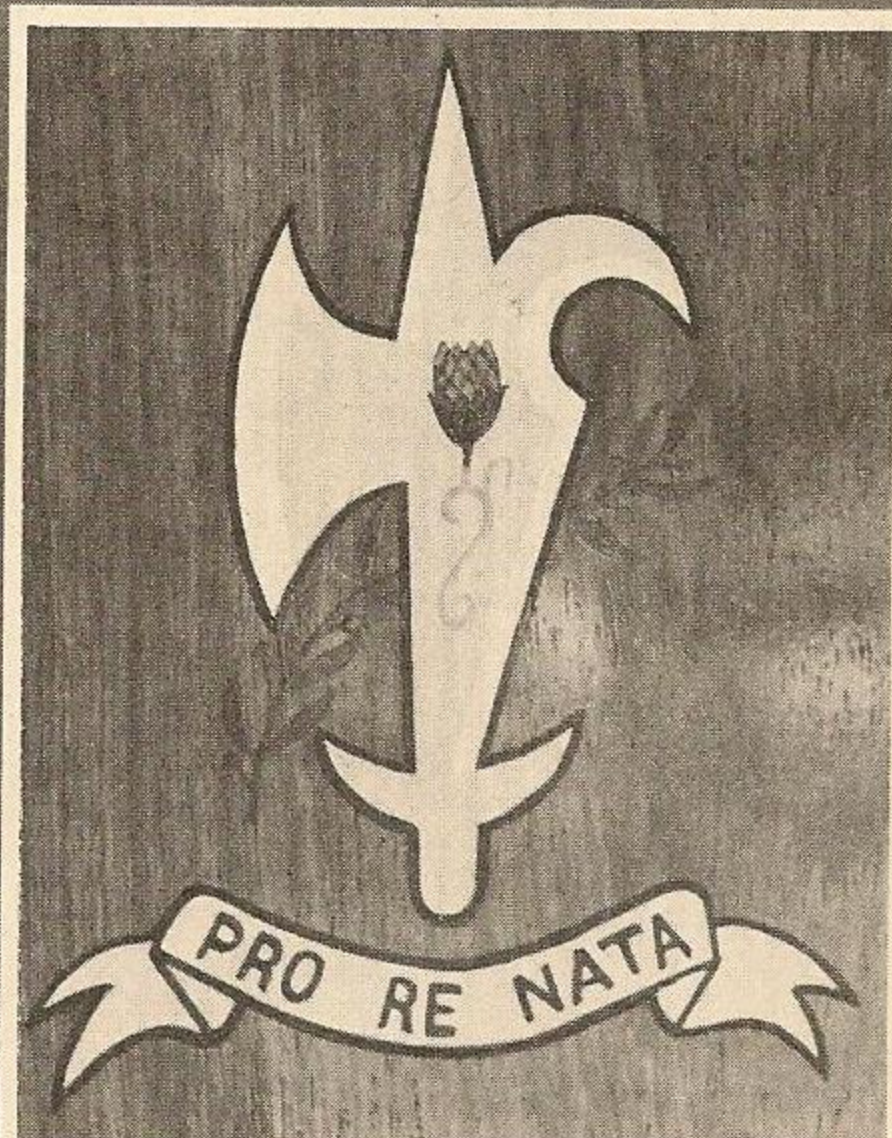
Today, the Squadron is one of the most highly rated in South Africa. Its Honors Role lists almost 20 names, all of whom distinguished themselves in the face of the enemy. A large portion achieved merit during the Angolan civil war period when South Africa, virtually alone, helped stem Soviet and Cuban aggression in that vast, ungovernable territory to the north.

The unit has lost eight men — the majority in the kind of routine accidents which could occur in any helicopter squadron.

The record is a good one. Capt. Tinus van Rensburg's perseverance against terrifying odds testifies to that.



Ominous cutline through bush that separates Angola and South West Africa. Country is similar to that through which Capt. van Rensburg made his grueling escape back to his own lines.



Official insignia of 17 Squadron dating back to WWII.

## THE ALOUETTE III

The Alouette III helicopter is the offspring of the Alouette II, but with a larger cabin and a higher level of performance. On 28 February 1959, the first prototype was flown and, since then, 1,406 Alouette IIIs have been produced in France and sold to at least 73 different countries.

This turbine-driven, general-purpose chopper accommodates six persons plus pilot. It is usually equipped with a 7.62mm AA52 machine gun, mounted behind the pilot, firing to the starboard. Alternatively, a 20mm MG 151/20 cannon can be mounted on an open turret on the cabin's port side.

The Alouette III can be equipped with four AS.11 or two AS.12 wire-guided missiles on external, jettisonable launching rails, with an APX-Bezu 260 gyro-stabilized sight, or 68mm rocket pods.

It can accommodate two Mk44

homing torpedoes beneath the fuselage, or one torpedo and magnetic-anomaly-detection gear (MAD) in a container towed behind the chopper on a 150-foot cable.

For air-sea rescue operations, the Alouette III is equipped with a quick-mooring harpoon to ensure automatic mooring on landing and before take-off, a nosewheel locking device and folding rotor-blades. For search-and-destroy small-craft detection, it can be equipped with a SFENA three-axis stabilization system and OMER A ORB 31 radar.

In 1977, an Alouette III was involved in a hoist rescue mission in Canada. The chopper picked a stranded climber off a mountain at 13,900 feet. It is believed to be the greatest height at which a helicopter has effectively executed a rescue operation of this type.

—John Metzger