

The Battle of Bridge 14



(Operation Savannah - Angola 1975)

by Richard Allport

The Battle of Bridge 14 took place in December 1975 during Operation Savannah in Angola and is little-known outside of South Africa, although it represented a major defeat of the communist forces in Angola - the MPLA and the Cubans - by South African troops. Part of the reason is that the only detailed histories of this operation to be published to date have been written in Afrikaans and none have as yet been translated into English. During this battle many South African soldiers earned the *Honoris Crux* ⁽¹⁾.

Bridge 14 was located on the Nhia river, on the route from Cela to Quibala. In November Battle Group Foxbat had routed an MPLA force, which retreated across this bridge and then blew it up. The advance of the South African forces along the only tarred road to Quibala was brought to a halt at the Nhia river - due to heavy rainfall in the area and swampy terrain, the bridge was the only means of crossing with heavy vehicles.

At the time of the battle, the South African Government had already made the decision to withdraw its forces from Angola in view of the lack of support South Africa and Unita were receiving from the West. However, as the decision was being made, renewed fighting broke out in Angola.

Colonel Swart, CO of Task Force Zulu, wanted to know what the enemy was doing at the bridge and so Cdt Breytenbach sent Sergeant Danny Roxo with a platoon of infantry and a couple of armoured cars to the bridge area to reconnoitre.

Shortly afterwards the main force heard the sound of battle, including mortar fire. In the distance the two armoured cars were observed returning to the main force at full speed, closely followed by exploding mortar shells. Breytenbach ordered the cars to return to assist Roxo and the infantry, but the commanders refused, saying the barrage was too heavy.

Then the infantry appeared on the road and a few minutes later Roxo and his men had climbed onto the armoured cars and returned to the main force's positions. Roxo reported that the bridge was down, and mentioned offhand that a few enemy soldiers had been killed during his reconnaissance.

Later Breytenbach heard the full story from two escaped prisoners who had overheard the Cubans discussing the encounter with Roxo with some awe. As Roxo had moved forward to check the bridge he had seen a Cuban on the far side and shot him. Roxo began to move back and more enemy troops then emerged from cover and began shooting at him. He returned fire from the hip, killing eleven of the enemy, four of them Cubans. He was later awarded the Honoris Crux for this encounter.⁽²⁾

Foxbat's advance towards Quibala was now also checked at the Nhia river by a strong force of artillery, which included Stalin Organs, and a combined force of Cuban and Fapla infantry. It was necessary therefore not only to restore the bridge -their only means of crossing - but at the same time to eliminate a superior enemy force.

Observers were sent to a nearby hill named Top Hat, and set up an OP from which they could see the bridge. They were also able to observe the enemy setting up mortar positions in a nearby kraal and called in South African artillery fire, which soon eliminated the position. The observers were also able to direct fire onto an armoured car and against a "Red Eye" ⁽³⁾ rocket position, both of which were destroyed.

Later, from this vantage point, the South Africans were able to watch Fapla and Cuban troops wading in the river near the site of the bridge. Again they called in artillery fire, creating havoc amongst the surprised enemy, the continuously exploding shells killing many of them. Two Fapla helicopters were sent out to scour the hill for the OP, which the enemy by now knew must be in that area, but it was not discovered. The observer, Corporal Andre Diederichs, remained there for almost a week before returning to the South African lines. Diederichs was a member of the elite Recce commando, but had little experience as an artillery observer, and had to be coached on the spot by radio on the correct procedure.

Reinforcements arrived for the Cuban/Fapla force in the first week of December and set up an HQ and ammunition dump just north of the river. A patrol from "1 Recce Commando" tried to reach the site on foot, but was unable to cross the river, now swollen by heavy rain. Two nights later, on 7 December, they were landed on the north side by helicopter, but soon after passing a cattle kraal they were spotted by the enemy and fired on with machine-guns. Sergeant Frederick Wannenburg, their leader, was unable to return fire from his position, so moved from cover to cover, firing continuously. Caught eventually in a cross-fire he was wounded in the stomach and several other places. Sgt. Major Johannes Conradie then took over command, regrouped the men and sent out a flanking party which closed with the enemy and, although under heavy fire at close range, forced them to retreat. By the time a helicopter could be called in to evacuate the patrol Wannenburg had died. Both he and Conradie were awarded the Honoris Crux.

By 9 December the enemy had withdrawn to positions further back from the river and had abandoned attempts to hold the bridge, mainly because of the devastatingly accurate South African artillery fire.

The rest of the troops of the South African combat group were brought forward to take up positions near the south side of the bridge.

On 10 December engineers started to rebuild the bridge, using Bluegum logs from the bush nearby, but the enemy soon began to concentrate their fire on the bridge area. Two of the South African engineers were killed during the heavy bombardment and all efforts to repair the bridge were temporarily abandoned.

A patrol of infantrymen and sappers crossed over the bridge early the next morning to lift the mines from the road on the north side. A patrol of Cubans attacked them, killing an infantryman and wounding one of the sappers. The Cubans were driven off, but then a Fapla patrol appeared. In the fighting that ensued all were killed, but by that time it was too dark for the South Africans to find their way back to the bridge through the enemy positions in its vicinity.

They made their way to the river, and, since they had a wounded man, Lt. Heyns swam the river three times during the night to get help and medical supplies. The soldier was too badly wounded, however, and finally a doctor was taken across the fast-flowing river with the help of a rope and guided through the swamp to the patrol. Several Recces accompanied him, and when Fapla began to fire on them, they drew the enemy away from the stranded patrol. Lt. Heyns and the doctor carried the wounded man back on a stretcher, taking cover whenever they were fired on. A helicopter later evacuated the casualty to Cela, where he died later that night.

By 11 December the South African artillery bombardment of the enemy positions had made the area safe enough for the engineers to continue their efforts to repair the bridge, although "Red Eye" rockets continued to fall close to them. Observers who could see the salvos being fired in the distance would quickly warn the men who then took shelter until the explosions were over and they could continue with their work.

During the afternoon of 11 December the CO of Task Force Zulu, Col. Blackie Swart, paid a visit to the Foxbat positions and the two COs made a quick reconnaissance of the enemy positions. Swart pointed out that it was imperative that his force get moving again, and Kruys agreed to try and complete the work for a crossing that night or next day.

The sappers sweated to get the bridge ready in time and at first light on December 12 the South African artillery prepared for a supreme effort. The morning was misty and the artillery was delayed in starting its bombardment until the enemy targets became visible to the observers.

The attack by the infantrymen and armoured cars was scheduled to take place in three phases:

1. A central attack by the Eland armoured cars and a company of infantry to drive the enemy back towards Bridge 15 near Cassamba.
2. An attack by a company of infantry to take the "Kraal".
3. An attack by a company of infantry on the hill positions to capture the high ground and then link up with the armoured cars of phase 1.

Ranged against them was a battalion of over 1,000 infantry, many of them Cuban troops. Further back were anti-tank weapons, including Sagger missiles, deployed to cover the road that Foxbat would have to advance along. In their second defence line Fapla had several 120mm Cuban-manned mortars, 75mm cannons, and an entire battery of 14,7mm anti-aircraft guns together with 122mm rocket launchers.

Most of the enemy positions had been carefully pinpointed during the preceding days by the observers and when the South Africans started with the heaviest artillery barrage of the battle, the enemy was taken by surprise. Some of Fapla's ammunition trucks were hit and exploded. Enemy artillery positions were hit and wiped out, the Cuban mortars receiving direct hits, killing most of the crews, and within a few hours the South African artillery commanded the battlefield.

At 07:00 phase 1 of the attack was set in motion, with phase 2 following almost immediately.

The armoured cars rolled over the bridge and after advancing about 500 yards engaged the enemy, firing continuously. The cars deployed 100 metres to the sides of the road, confusing the enemy Sagger crews who were positioned to fire on the road. The enemy infantry began to retreat, and one of the armoured cars surprised a mortar position, destroying six mortars with one of its 90mm shells. When they ran out of ammunition a further three Elands were sent in to take their place. 2/Lt. van Vuuren, in command of the second unit, rolled past the first group and then received a warning that Cuban tanks were approaching from the north. Enemy artillery fire was still exploding around the cars when a retreating Russian truck full of Cuban troops drove up behind the Elands. At first van Vuuren thought they were his own troops in a captured vehicle (many were used by the South Africans), but a quick radio message confirmed that they had to be the enemy. The truck's occupants were apparently also confused. They didn't fire, but tried to drive past the Elands, using the truck's indicator lights to signal their intention. Van Vuuren waited until it had overtaken his Eland and then slammed a 90mm shell into the rear of the truck, killing all of its 20 Cuban occupants.

The armoured cars then moved forward towards a farmhouse, where another 20 Cubans stood outside, apparently in conference. Van Vuuren had by now also run out of ammunition for the Elands, and ordered his commanders to close hatches. The Cubans swarmed over the Elands and began firing. Van Vuuren returned their fire with a pistol, shooting through a turret hatch and killing eleven of the Cubans as they tried to climb onto the armoured cars. It later transpired that the Cubans had been smoking marijuana at the farmhouse, which explained their reckless attack on the Elands.

The armoured cars had advanced so rapidly that the infantry had been unable to keep up with them. Phase 2 of the attack had been carried out according to plan, with little resistance being offered at the kraal, which had been abandoned by the enemy after the South African artillery shells began to land on it. They left their heavy weapons and ammunition behind.

Phase 3 had been delayed after the commander of the Unita infantry had been slightly wounded and his men refused to continue without armoured car support. Their attack was therefore taken over and completed by the troops of phase 2.

Battle Group Foxbat did not, as originally envisaged, stop at Cassamba, but continued fighting and advancing until they reached Bridge 15. The enemy fought hard to stay in possession of the area, but their armour had retreated after one of their armoured cars had been hit by artillery fire.

By 12:00 the attack had been completed and the troops began to consolidate their positions.

By 13:00 it had begun to rain heavily and troop movement was severely hindered, although the engineers continued to work on the bridge. The area between the hills and Almeida was now secured and patrols of South African troops and armoured cars began to clear the area of the remaining pockets of enemy troops.

The road to Quibala was now open and the South Africans moved forward to about 6 kilometres north of Almeida, although mined areas and bombardments by "Red Eye" rockets slowed the advance of Task Force Zulu.

When news of Foxbat's successful attack was received at HQ the staff officers were surprised. In view of South Africa's decision to withdraw from Angola, a message had been sent to Cella cancelling the operation to capture Bridge 14, but it only reached Colonel Swart after the battle had already taken place!

The victory at Bridge 14 was so complete that the CO of Foxbat, Brig. George Kruys, had to restrain his armoured car commanders from chasing even further after the retreating enemy, an order which they accepted with some reluctance. Kruys knew that his force was too small to be able to transform the retreat into a full-scale rout.

During the battle the South Africans lost four men killed. The Cubans and MPLA lost over 400 men, although the exact number was difficult to ascertain since, as the BBC later reported, truckloads of corpses were constantly driving out of the area towards the north. Among the Cuban dead was the commander of the Cuban expeditionary force, Commandant Raul Diaz Arguelles.

Although the South Africans had decided to pull out of Angola by January, Lt.Gen. Magnus Malan visited the front on 15 December and told all the commanders that although they would receive no further reinforcements, they were to capture and hold as much territory as possible with the troops

available.

For the South Africans the battle for Bridge 14 was a highly successful operation and proved that speed, surprise and an aggressive offence could tip the balance in favour of a numerically weaker force with fewer heavy weapons. The accuracy of the South African artillery played a key role in capturing the bridge and enabling both Zulu and Foxbat to continue to advance northwards. The enemy made the grave mistake of using permanent positions for its own artillery, switching the guns from site to site at regular intervals, rather than finding new positions as the South Africans did. The observers were able to register all their sites as targets and simply wait for the enemy's artillery to arrive at each site before calling fire down on them.

Sources

Brug 14 - article by Brig. G.P.H. Kruys, Paratus, May 1993.

Cross of Honour - Ian Uys

Avontuur in Angola - S. du Preez

They Live by the Sword - Col. J. Breytenbach

Angola, Operasie Savannah 1975-1976 - F.J. du T. Spies

Notes

1. Cross of Honour - South Africa's premier gallantry decoration.

2. Roxo's exceptional courage is evidenced by the manner of his death some months later. During a patrol near the Okavango river, his Wolf hit a landmine and was tipped over, killing one man and crushing Roxo beneath it. The rest of the crew tried to lift it free, but it was too heavy. Breytenbach wrote:

Danny Roxo, in keeping with his dauntless character, decided to make the best of things, lighting a cigarette and smoking it calmly until it was finished, then he died - still pinned beneath the Wolf. He had not complained once, nor uttered a single groan or moan, although the pain must have been excruciating.

Thus Sergeant Danny Roxo died, a man who had become a legend in the Portuguese Security Forces in Mozambique, and who had rapidly become another one in the South African Special Forces. (They Live by the Sword, pp. 105)

3. "Rooi Oog" in Afrikaans - the troopers' nickname for the Stalin Organs, Russian-built BM21 multiple rocket launchers.

[Return to Main Page](#)