

We shot this young girl. She must have been about five... GN 29/1/81

TREVOR Edwards was leading his platoon through a patch of scrubland in southern Angola last October tracking a small group of Swapo guerrillas. Suddenly two children jumped up from behind some bush and began to run.

"I said: 'Don't shoot them.' There was one of our boys who started shouting to them in the local language. Then these other kids popped up and started to run as well so obviously I said: 'Put them out.' We started shooting.

"More and more of them kept jumping up and running. Some of them were completely naked. They'd taken their clothes off to show they weren't armed. We shot this young girl. She must have been about five. And we shot her father. We shot about nine in all.

"I don't know how, but somehow this girl's mother and her sister didn't get shot. Well, we left them there and carried on with our patrol moving on to the formation. She followed us: this mother and her little kid.

"She followed us all day, just walked along about 100 metres behind us. She didn't cry or say anything. Every time we stopped, she stopped. We went back and tried to shoo her away, but she just came back and followed us. This freaked me out. Every time you turned round, she was there. It started me thinking.

Apart from its effect on Trevor Edwards, the incident was pure routine for the men from 32 Battalion. It is an explicit part of the strategy of their secret war against Angola that civilians must be killed and their villages destroyed.

"Our main job is to take an area and clear it. We sweep through it and we kill everything in front of us, cattle, goats, people, everything. We are out to stop Swapo and so we stop them getting into the villages for food and water.

"But half the time the locals don't know what's going on. We're just fucking

them up and it gets out of hand. Some of the guys get a bit carried away. And Swapo still get by us and cross the cut-line between Angola and Namibia. It's not as if we're stopping them."

By Christmas Eve, the doubts that had set in when his platoon was followed by the bereaved mother had grown much stronger. He set out from his base at Buffalo on the Okavango River in northern Namibia for four weeks' leave.

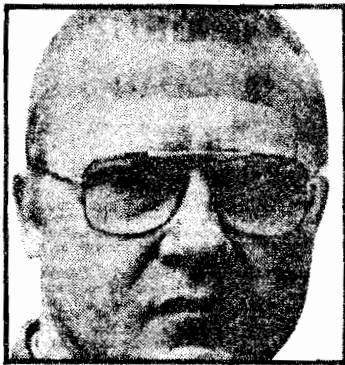
But instead of staying in Cape Town, he got on a plane to London. "I had had enough of it and I just thought people ought to know what we have been doing out there."

32 Battalion of the South African Defence Force is a military conjuring trick, formed by 200 soldiers who were supplied to be killed by the Cubans in 1975, led by mystery officers from a base which officially does not exist.

It was formed by South African military units in box in late 1975 as Cuban soldiers and Russian weapons began to turn the tide of the Angolan civil war against the pro-Western guerrilla armies, the FNLA and Unita.

The FNLA, which had fought its way to within 18 miles of the Angolan capital Luanda, was pushed northwards into Zaïre where President Mobutu offered them aid and shelter. The FNLA was led by President Mobutu's brother-in-law, Holden Roberto.

The South Africans plunged into the Angolan civil war in the summer of that year, sending South African-led columns whose troops included Unita soldiers and Portuguese mercenaries far into the country. But the two columns had to retreat when the MPLA, the eventual winner, defeated an FNLA force north of the capital and turned the tide of the war. But although the columns came out, South Africa had by no means given up. Pretoria produced its first sleight of hand the following winter, while the world's attention was focused



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Trevor Edwards

on the retreating FNLA in the north and on the fate of the blundering band of British mercenary soldiers who have been flown out to try to save the day.

The demoralised FNLA guerrillas had little choice but to take up the offer. The South Africans offered them a home where they could take their families, and a chance to fight the war again. They were marched south through Zaïre and then into South-east Angola and finally the Caprivi Strip, the desolate northern corridor of Namibia.

They built themselves huts and houses by the river, retained and rearmed. Some of them got their families down from Angola. The world could see that the FNLA had been destroyed but, secretly, life for 32 Battalion was just beginning.

Finding the right white officers for the unit was not so easy and it remained in the control of South African intelligence officers until last year, when Robert Mugabe's election victory in Zimbabwe gave them the material for their next piece of conjuring. When Mugabe won power hundreds of mercenaries were suddenly looking for work. The South African mission in Salisbury was busy

all days as disenfranchised citizens queued up to see the military attaché. Trevor Edwards was there. Like his colleagues, he wanted to join a combat unit. That was why he had abandoned his steak bar in Kent in 1978. "I was getting into a rut, getting fat and I'd always wanted to join an army. I just got on a plane and flew out to Salisbury."

He was given a trial in the Rhodesian Light Infantry, the all-white unit which led the assault on the guerrilla armies. He survived the training and became a corporal. "It was a good life. The contacts were good. The kills were good. I enjoyed it."

"We told the military attaché that we wanted 32 and he wanted to know how we had heard about it. Anyway, he said we couldn't have it. They decided to sign up all the same and try again for 32 in Pretoria."

Trevor Edwards and 15 colleagues signed one-year contracts with the South African Defence Force last March. They waited a few weeks in Rhodesia before being sent in a mini-van, stealing some weapons and going absent without leave across the border.

Then they badgered their officers in Pretoria into con-

tacting 32's administrative headquarters in Rundu in northern Namibia. The officers at 32 took their chance and agreed to take the mercenaries. They spent their first week at 32's Buffalo base finding their way around and learning pidgin Portuguese: Please, Thank You, Stand Up, Don't Shoot.

On May 20, they set out for their first operation, at Savate, 60 kilometres inside Angola.

With a total force of 300 men, broken down into two companies and one mortar platoon, they drove in South African-made Sammels from their reconnaissance base at Onati over the border and stopped 15 kilometres before Savate. The next morning, the white officers blacked up their faces and led their men on to Savate. Each man was carrying about 80lb of equipment, including six mortar shells. As they approached the town, two platoons peeled off, one to the north and one to the south to deal with possible reinforcements or anyone trying to escape.

"The trouble was that our intelligence was crap. We were expecting them to have a few companies in the town, but they had a full battalion. The assault force only got through on the third attack

and it took us all that day and most of the next to clear the place up. We had 16 dead, six of them white."

While 32 was taking Savate, two representatives of Unita were waiting at the tactical HQ down the road: one white intelligence officer and one black soldier. When the battle was over, they came up to claim the town for Unita.

"The point is that Unita are a lot of crap. They hang around in the South-east where their tribe is and they can probably defend themselves, but they can't go out and take somewhere like Savate. We do it for them because it improves their bargaining position, gives them more talking power."

The South Africans could not use their regular troops at Savate. They have been able to justify incursions in the past only when they could show that they were pursuing Swapo. "There were no Swapo at Savate. It was a base for Angolan government soldiers and we knew that when we went in there."

It was after this battle that the troops had to turn back from their journey home to return to the scene of the battle and retrieve a white body, which might otherwise have disclosed their presence.

A week later the Angolan Government protested to the Secretary General of the United Nations. Dr Kurt Waldheim, and blamed South Africa for the attack on Savate. South Africa denied having anything to do with it.

The attack on Savate was unusual in that it involved a specific objective. 32's regular job is to go into the Angolan bush with a couple of companies and spend four or five weeks clearing a designated area.

"Some of it is pretty heavy. Sometimes we take the locals for questioning. It's rough. We just beat them, cut them, burn them. As soon as we're finished with them, we kill them. We've got Angolan government soldiers and taken

them back to base for proper questioning.

"Sometimes you have to do it to the children to make the adults talk. There was a 12-year-old boy. We wanted to know what was going on. We wanted his mother to talk, so we tied him up like a chicken with his wrists up behind his back, strapped to his ankles.

"Then we played water polo with him, put him in this kind of dam and pushed him about, let him sink. Every so often we took him out. He wouldn't cry. He just wet himself. The mother didn't tell us anything. In the end we just left him in the water and he drowned. I just don't like that sort of thing."

"Some of our guys get very involved inwardly, talk about it all afterwards and keep going on about it. You get used to wasting people. That's part of soldiering. But they're going too far and I don't enjoy it."

The troops are allowed to take bicycles, sewing machines or anything which catches their eye in an Angolan village, including wives. "They've also taken back young kids and adopted them. A couple of times they've even come across members of their own fam-

ilies and taken them back with them."

The strongest opposition to 32 comes from the Angolan government troops of the MPLA. "In my last operation, in December, they really fucked us up, pushed us right out of the area. We had a lot of casualties."

Thirty-two's response was to call South African helicopters and beat a tactical retreat to Onati. There they spent a day relaxing and drinking while a South African paratroop company was called to reinforce them.

"We changed into regular SADF uniforms and went back in with this extra company. We swept through the area but we couldn't find them. They'd gone back to base in Cuamato." That was in mid-December. Four weeks later, while Trevor Edwards was in London, Cuamato was taken.

Edwards speaks affectionately of some of his colleagues. But: "When it comes to killing women, hanging them and things, there are some of them who laugh about it. They love killing. They take photographs of themselves with bodies. They don't see them as people, just as things that are there."

Nick Davies