

War in Mozambique, The Star Weekly, Johannesburg, 7-11-70

(...) Mueda is an enclave of safe strolling in a wilderness of land mines, a threadbare village which doesn't justify the size of the dot the Portuguese give it on the map of Mozambique, right up in the northeast corner.

Years ago it must have had the bucolic life of a frontier trading station, but there is no sign of it now. It reeks of tension as Portugal's main fighting base in the hairiest part of the northern Mozambique war. Everyone, except a few officers' wives, is in uniform, mostly sloppy camouflage fatigues. The air is busy with fighters, helicopters, and big transports using the tarred airstrip, the only safe route in and out of here. Traffic is all military: bottle-green jeeps, armoured cars, troop carriers and heavy trucks spraying dust and mud according to season along the main drag. (...)

We leave at dawn with a supply convoy to Nacatari, which is only about 17 miles away, but takes two days to reach because we must move at the walking pace of the men with the mine detectors. We reach a shattered bridge and the troops fire a few mortar shells to scare off guerillas who may be hiding. Then they unship and assemble the electronic detectors. I step down from a Unimog and an officer grabs my arm and orders me not to step out of the track left by the lead and the soles of my feet tingle uncomfortably. The column moves off again -slowly. Twenty paces ahead the leaders walk steadily along the wheel tracks, swinging the detectors from side to side. They wear big earphone's but the sudden rat-like squeaking when the instrument spots a piece of metal is clearly audible, and eerie. The soldier bends and gently brushes away an area of sand the size of a dinner plate. He pauses and reveals the key-opener of a sardine tin.

It will be years yet before the legacy of mines planted and waiting have ceased taking their toll.