

The great, green Limpopo

ON THE LIMPOPO RIVER — I know it's a little far to go for a summer weekend, but I couldn't face another day in cottage country. Getting to the Limpopo, though, is not so easy, especially since it's on the South African Zimbabwe border.

Even getting to the Limpopo for me from where I was yesterday has been a chore. That happened to be Rundu, on the remote border between Namibia and Angola. Rundu is the main operational support base for the brigade of South Africa troops still in southern Angola, where they have been fighting Cuban and Marxist Angolan troops. I stayed up late at the officer's mess at Rundu listening to stories of tank battles, and South African pilots telling of dangerous night missions into Mavinga, the forward supply base for Jonas Savimbi's UNITA guerrillas.

I don't know why, but many pilots seem to be slim and have the same sort of clinical air about them that doctors project. The pilots at Rundu were also dead-tired and red-eyed after a round-the-clock airlift, flying the awesome, deadly G-5 155mm guns back from Mavinga to Rundu as part of the South African withdrawal from Angola.

It was good to be back among real fighting men and certainly a pleasant change from oily politicians. Trading combat reports and war yarns over good South African beer was a treat.

The next morning, I flew out of Rundu on a military C-160 Transall transport that was filled with white and black troops. Flying in a Transall, is like being baked in a submarine. We lurched, shook and cooked.

To paraphrase Dr. Jonson, all the joys of a Somali jail cell plus the chance to crash.

Next came hours on an antique 707 from Grootfontein in Namibia to far off Pretoria.

I then changed into my last set of clean bush gear and boarded a twin-engined Beechcraft for a 300-km trip to Pietersburg, in the farm belt of the

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central Transvaal. There, after a lot of coaxing, I managed to get the security-conscious South African Air Force to let me look over their new fighter, the Cheetah. Some time ago I suggested in a column that the Cheetah might actually be an Israeli Kfir, since the two aircraft are almost identical. I was mistaken. The Cheetah is certainly based on the Kfir, and uses Israeli technology, but the plane is in fact a remodeled Mirage III that dates from the 1960s.

I sat watching the Cheetahs take off in formation, their afterburners' roar seeming to tear open the air. Sleek, lovely and sexy, they seemed to be longing for MiGs.

Then followed a cheery lunch at the officer's mess that featured a rich, ruby red Nederberg Cabernet and a splendid, musky Shiraz from the Cape. Ended by shots of Miroela, made from flowers of a tree with the name which, I am reliably informed, elephants eat and then get happily loaded.

Another hour's flight, this time piloted by Big Nico, a one-eyed giant of a man who looked like a bear flying a toy airplane. Somehow we got up to Massina, an army base and small copper-mining town on the Limpopo border with Zimbabwe. I spent the night as a guest of the 116th Battalion, an all-black unit officered by whites and a few blacks. Their job was to guard the border and region against African National Congress infiltrators. I visited a white farm family named Fisher, whose modest house had been attacked on Feb. 14 by six ANC intruders. An RPG rocket barely missed the sleeping couple. The brave attackers, after blasting the house with gunfire and grenades, ran away. Last year the rains failed to come and Fisher's farm was just about bankrupt. His neighbors had to chip in to pay for having his blown-out windows replaced.

The following morning I spent with the 116th's soldiers, marching along with them as they sang tribal war songs. Almost 40% of South Africa's armed forces are blacks or coloreds. The 116th was tasked to take out the ANC's terrorists, as the South Africans call them. Canadians think of them as freedom fighters, but while I was in South Africa the sum total of "liberation freedom fighting," generously aided by Canadian support, consisted of planting bombs in two burger restaurants. Scores of civilians, black and white, were injured. ANC teams avoid hard targets that could shoot back, preferring soft targets instead.

Parts of the border, as I saw, have been fenced with electrified barbed wire. But vast open expanses remain along the borders with Mozambique, Botswana and Zimbabwe. The governments of all three black states try to stop the ANC to varying degrees, fearing South African retribution. Still, the infiltrators come, not enough to threaten the republic but enough to sow fear and terror. A depressing and grim scenario that will, I suspect, get worse.

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