



Dragões link up with a helicopter for supply and liaison on a long mission.

Dragões de Angola

Fighting Insurgency from Horseback

by Captain Miguel Freire

Introduction

While Portugal itself is a small country, it for many years possessed the world's third largest empire. It was the first and the last of Europe's colonial powers, and its involvement in Africa lasted almost five centuries.

The Portuguese armed forces also have a long and proud history, which is relatively little known outside Portugal. Portugal drove out the Moors during the Middle Ages, defeated the Spaniards to restore their country's independence during the 17th century, and fought valiantly and effectively with British General Wellington against Napoleon's troops during the Peninsular War in the early 1800's.

Portugal saw action in three different continents, Africa, Asia, and South-America, with the last combat action occurring in Africa. During 1961-1974, and in three different theaters of operation — Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau — Portuguese armed forces fought against liberation movements.

The Portuguese cavalry had always been a part of these conflicts and has written proud pages in Portuguese military history. Most of the decorations fly-

ing from the standards of some cavalry units were earned in Africa during WWI, when Germany invaded northern Mozambique and southern Angola.

During the 1961-1974 period, and in each of the three different theaters of operation, Portuguese cavalry were employed in four different ways: as light infantry in battalion-size units (*Batalhão de Cavalaria*); as armored reconnaissance units of company size (*Esquadrão de Reconhecimento*); as military police¹ in company-size units (*Companhia de Polícia Militar*); and as horse cavalry units of battalion size in Angola (*Grupo de Dragões*).

This article is about the *Dragões de Angola*,² one of the last horse cavalry units in the world to see action.

General Overview

The Angolan insurgency, an unsuccessful bid for independence, began in 1961, followed by unrest in Guinea-Bissau in 1963 and Mozambique in 1964.

Angola covers 1,246,314 square kilometers, an area about 14 times the size of Portugal, or as large as the combined areas of Spain, France, and Italy. It borders with the former Belgian Congo (now Zaire), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and South-West Africa (now Namibia), extend 4,837 kilometers. Par-

ticularly important was the vulnerable frontier between Angola and the Belgian Congo to the north, over 2,000 kilometers of mountain, swamp, jungle and elephant grass. The Congo River, which comprises part of the border, flows around many thickly wooded islands that provided excellent cover for guerrillas. They could make crossings undetected at virtually any point they chose. The few roads were beaten earth, and were little better than tracks in a limitless ocean of elephant grass; in short, it was an ideal environment for guerrillas and a difficult one for security forces.

Angola's soil composition varies from clay soil in the northern regions to soft and sandy soils in the south and southeast. Forest cover also varies, with thick woods in the northern Cabinda and Dembos regions, medium vegetation south of Luanda, and very light forestation in the south.

The best terrain for horse cavalry units is as soft as possible, allowing the horses to be used without horseshoes, which represents a great logistical advantage. The degree of forest cover also affects horse units; it should allow mobility and at the same time some concealment. According to the army's study of the Angolan terrain, horse cavalry units would best be employed on the central plain, given its soft soils and medium forest cover.

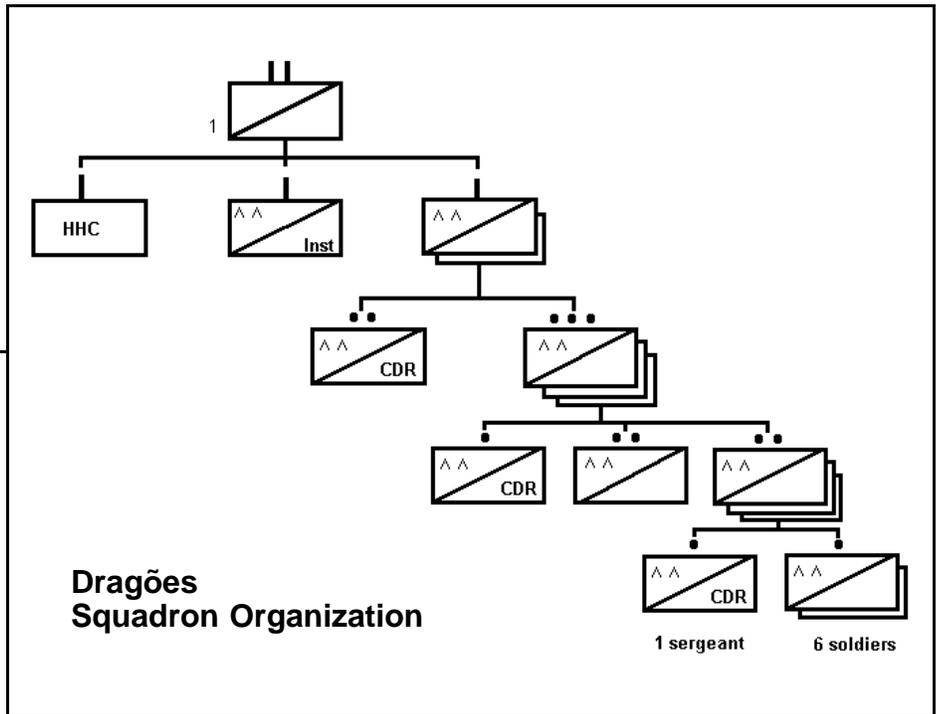
The Liberation Movements

The guerrillas belonged to the armed groups of the three main liberation movements:

- MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*) “was very much a movement of radical intellectuals, with its main strength divided between the urbanized Angolans and the Ovimbundu people.”³ MPLA units were small, and up to 1970 at least, equipped with a hodge-podge of weapons, many dating from WWII. The MPLA leader, Agostinho Neto, met Che Guevara in 1965, and subsequently the MPLA began to receive Cuban instructors and Soviet and East German help. It also received some Chinese aid after 1970. The MPLA guerrillas were present in all Angolan territory, but their main efforts were in the Dembos region near Luanda.

- FNLA (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola*, earlier UPA) “had begun life as a nationalist organization for the important Kongo people, who straddled the border between Angola and the Belgian Congo. When Congo became independent in 1960, its government began to give the movement leader practical assistance, including permission to set up a radio station and a training camp.”⁴ In addition to Congolese and Algerian support, it also received covert supplies of funds and arms from the Americans, who were anxious to encourage non-communist African nationalist movements as a counter-weight to the Marxists. FNLA’s main effort was also in the Dembos region.

- UNITA (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*). Disenchantment with FNLA’s leader had led his “foreign minister,” Jonas Savimbi, to leave and found his own movement in 1966. UNITA received some Chinese equipment and operated from Zambia until 1968. “Jonas Savimbi, who believed that a nationalist movement should operate from bases inside Angola, was soon isolated and by 1969 counted fewer than 1,500 followers. In order to survive in defeat, he and his force came to an accommodation with the Portu-



guese, and between 1971 and 1973 UNITA and its activities were restricted to a prescribed zone. In return, UNITA would cease operations against the Portuguese. As part of this understanding, UNITA also received arms and medical support. This development left primarily the MPLA to address.”⁵

Fighting the counterinsurgency war in Angola

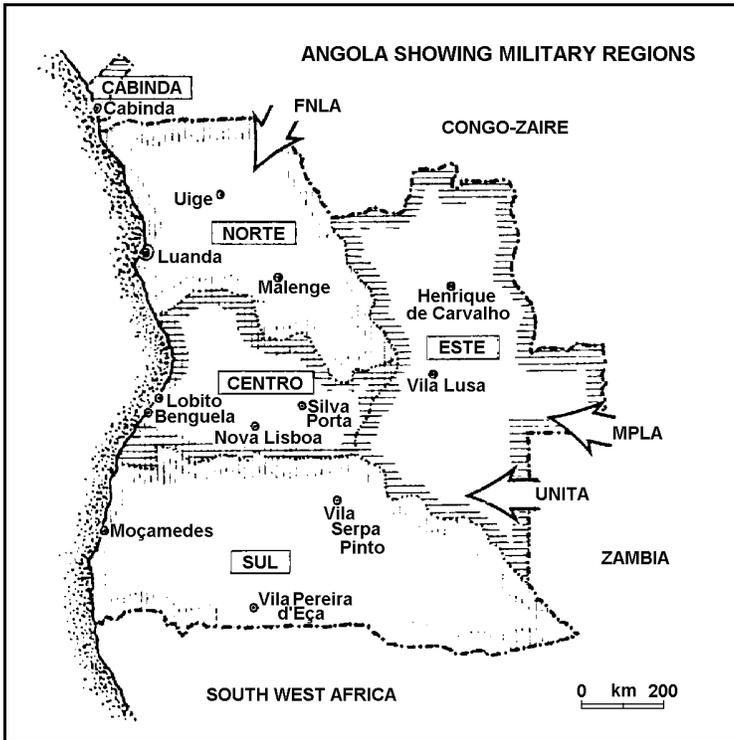
When the counterinsurgency war began in 1961, Portugal’s initial actions were accomplished without any experience, doctrine, or demonstrated competence in the field of either power projection or counterinsurgency warfare, and thus without the benefit of any instructors who were competent in these specialties. Then Portugal began to develop its own doctrine after having assiduously studied French and British experiences and gleaned the lessons that they held.

Foot-slogging by infantry was seen as the best method of addressing an insurgency, not only to hunt the enemy but also to keep contact with the population. This was a problem in Angola, however, because of the vast area and limited numbers of troops available. The expansive savanna of central Angola was too costly to patrol on foot, particularly with Portugal’s manpower limitations, and unsuited for wheeled vehicles, because of the tall elephant grass and frequent rivers. The helicopter was a possible solution, but they were in short supply and had operational limitations. They had a tendency to fly over the populations of those areas where it was vital to commu-

nicate with the people and secure their loyalty. In addition to their high initial cost, there was the extraordinarily high maintenance and operating expense, particularly in a tropical environment unfriendly to precision machinery. “Because of these limited resources, Portugal never fell into the trap of having its troops carried in helicopters so frequently that they lost contact with the population and lived in a different world from the enemy. Moreover, the use of armed helicopters was carefully controlled, so damage and casualties in the population were avoided through any indiscriminate use of firepower. Helicopter assault operations were executed away from populated areas.”⁶

In 1966, the MPLA opened its eastern front, which became a priority. The Portuguese needed a force that would combine mobility over rough terrain with the ability to engage insurgents and maintain strong links with the population. They also wanted to isolate the guerrillas in the area’s vast tracts of wilderness. The partial solution to this new challenge was found in history. In 1967, the Portuguese Army decided to create an experimental horse cavalry platoon around Silva Porto in Eastern Angola.

It was a small unit, and although the test was brief, it was enough to conclude that this specific region in Angola was suitable for horse cavalry units. The horses adapted well to the weather in the central plain as well as the south. They had better mobility than a foot unit; they were less expensive to operate than a mech unit. And finally, the army noted



A *Dragão* patrolling with his G3 rifle at the ready.

that the employment of horse cavalry units had great psychological effect.

After this successful experience, a larger unit was formed in 1968, the three-squadron⁷ *Grupo de Cavalaria N.1*. The term *DRAGÕES*, which was unofficial but widely used, indicated that the troopers could operate mounted or as infantry.

How a *Dragão* was born

The cavalry squadrons were, for the most part, local troops, except for the officers and sergeants. The troopers would come from local recruitment in Angola to do their compulsory two year military service. There were few horses in Angola, so it was very difficult for many of the early recruits to adapt to an animal that they had never seen before. Because of this, the recruiting effort focused on certain native people in Southwestern Angola who were very fierce and had a history of cattle-raising. Familiar with cattle, they adapted easily and quickly to the horse and proved to be excellent riders. Officers who led these men in combat noticed the affectionate relationship that developed between the men and their horses. Although the horse was not native to the soldiers' habitat and culture, they adopted it as a fellow brother-in-arms for whom they would take great care and concern. Many incidents testified to this, including one of a young soldier who was wounded in action. One of his first worries was his horse. After knowing the horse was fine, he asked his commander not to let it be ridden by

anyone but the commander. In another incident, some soldiers almost got killed trying to save their horses from a straw fire in a stable.

It took three months to make a recruit combat-ready. The first six weeks were basic military instruction and riding lessons. The following six weeks focused on horsemanship and ended with a 80-100 km battle course to test and also to improve the skills of both horse and rider. This battle course took one week, presenting all the major situations that

were likely to develop during operations. The Portuguese dragoons were trained equally for cavalry or infantry service, just like their historical predecessors.

The dragoon's basic armament was the Walther P-38 pistol and the G-3 rifle, a license-built copy of the Bundeswehr's G-3. Early doctrine called for using the rifle both on horseback and on foot, but later, in order to get a faster response capability, the pistols were drawn and carried, ready to be used. At the first shots of an ambush, they would charge in full gallop, attacking with drawn pistols.

Organization and tactics of *Dragões*

The dragoons' basic organization was the platoon, consisting of three sections of 13 mounted troops each, plus a support section of one machine gunner and three rifle grenadiers, an orderly, a bugler, and a farrier (blacksmith).⁸ Three platoons comprised a squadron, and

Forces Comparison

Type of Unit	Advantages	Disadvantages
Light infantry (foot and truck transported)	-Least expensive.	-High possibility of being ambushed or stepping on a mine. -Poor flexibility to concentrate or disperse forces.
Heliborne	-Fastest way to reach the area of operation. -Surprise. -Good observation of the area of operations. -Good concentration of fire (helicopter gunship with a 20mm cannon).	-No contact with the populations. -Very expensive. -Require high level of maintenance. -When on the ground, the troops move as slowly as light infantry.
<i>Dragões</i>	-Less possibility of encountering mines. ¹² -Keep the contact with the population. -Good mobility over rough terrain.	-Restricted to tsetse-free areas. -Low accurate fire when mounted. -Big target. -Incapable of operating during the night.

"Tests found that horses were a confusing target, and difficult to hit when charging head-on. These observations were not new, but only confirmed the consistent durability of horses in combat over the centuries...."

three squadrons a group. At the beginning, each section was divided into two three-man squads, with one man to guard the three horses and the other two free to maneuver on foot as light infantry when the situation required it. Later, the basic concept changed and six-man squads were adopted, with one guarding the horses and the other five forming a team.

In a typical cavalry patrol, a platoon advanced in a double echelon or in a wedge formation that could be between 200 and 500 meters wide. The wedge could be changed to a single echelon, a line abreast, or a rank formation, depending on the terrain.

When operating as a squadron (with two platoons, the third would be resting), the preferred formation was a wedge with the platoons abreast. The headquarters section was to the back and in the center maintaining visual contact within the squadron. Another well-used movement technique had one platoon forward traveling and another platoon a few kilometers back, patrolling in detail, and prepared to surprise those insurgents who were pursuing the platoon in the front.

The *Dragões* could see over the vegetation and undergrowth and identify insurgents readily from this vantage point. It was very difficult for the insurgents to ambush a patrol, as they were on foot and unable to see the horsemen well enough through the tall elephant grass. If the patrol was ambushed, the formation would execute a wheeling movement toward the attack and surround the insurgents.

A normal operation would take four to five days, and the normal speed of advance would be eight to thirteen kilometers per hour, or about fifty kilometers per day. The cavalry squadron could be transported in trucks or by train to the patrol area prior to beginning the actual patrol.

Missions of *Dragões*

- Screening and interdiction of the border.
- Area reconnaissance with the purpose of preventing the seduction and coercion of the population by the insurgents.
- Guaranteeing the Portuguese presence even in remote and inaccessible areas.

- Escorting and protecting the population avoiding the insurgent coercion.

- Scouting in areas where the enemy was seen temporarily.

- Conducting an exploitation to pursue enemy forces spotted by other forces (usually heliborne).

Horses

As noted, horses are not native to Angola, so the first and second remount came from South Africa and the third from Argentina. When the horse cavalry units were first formed, some officers feared that the cavalryman and his horse would become a large target vulnerable in a firefight. But tests found that horses were a confusing target, and difficult to hit when charging head-on. These observations were not new, but only confirmed the consistent durability of horses in combat over the centuries. "During the final campaigns of the American Civil War, Union Cavalry was extremely employed; the horses were ridden hard and afforded little or no shelter. Medical attention was rudimentary in those days, but, in spite of that, and the rigors of combat, official records show a rather high survival rate on horse battle casualties."⁹ In 1864, a captain of the British 15th Hussars wrote "saddles will be emptied, horses killed and wounded, but no horse, unless he is shot through the brain, or his legs broken, will fall; though stricken to the death, he will struggle through the charge."¹⁰ According to a former Commander of *Grupo de Dragões de Angola* between 1973 and 1974, the normal loss rate of a cavalry squadron of 130 to 150 mounted troops was one horse per month.

Through research (with a lot of help from South Africa) and experience, feeding was reduced to a formula of 4.5 kilograms of ground corn and oats per day. As the normal patrol was four to five days, each horse carried 18 to 22.5 kilograms of feed packed in individual plastic ration sacks. The horses were able to eat local fodder as well.¹¹

Operation "Eolo" (December 1972)

Operation "Eolo" depicts a successful combined arms operation. The mission was to attack known enemy bases in order to destroy them and capture guerrillas and equipment. It was a combined arms operation between the *Dragões* (a squadron of two-platoon strength) and

the paratroopers carried by helicopter. The area of operation was separated into different slices. The paratroopers conducted an air assault in a specific slice, while the *Dragões* waited in the other closest slice. While the paratroopers conducted the air assault, that zone was considered red. As soon as the slice was secure, it was considered green and the *Dragões* conducted a pursuit in order to capture those guerrillas that were able to escape. This was a 35-day long operation. The cavalry squadron took one day to rest for each five days of operation. As mentioned before, the normal speed of advance was 8 to 13 kilometers per hour or about 50 kilometers per day. This meant almost 1,400 kilometers at the end of the operation. The cavalry squadron was resupplied on each day of rest — every five days — by helicopter or by truck.

Lessons Learned

There were a lot of lessons learned at platoon and company level. The doctrine of this special unit was developed in combat. For the purposes of this article, we'll consider those lessons learned that are timeless:

Creativeness. All possible solutions to a military problem must be considered, even those that at first sight look out of time. For many officers, the military use of the horse looked useless, not to say silly. But when people made a reasonable study about what specific things could be done by the horse cavalry units, when they were aware of their vulnerabilities but employed the unit in a way to reduce the disadvantages and maximize the advantages, things began to make sense. What seemed a useless, out-of-date tool became a worthwhile investment.¹³

Combined arms spirit. It is well known today that two or more different types of units, employed together, can add up to more than the sum of their parts. When well-led and organized, the advantages of one can reduce the disadvantages of the others. This is what happened with the *Dragões*, who filled a gap in fighting a counterinsurgency war. They could accomplish tasks that the light infantry and the heliborne units could not.

Surprise. By rapidly advancing, using the terrain to provide the best concealment, the *Dragões* could take the enemy

totally by surprise, or at least quickly enough to prevent him from reacting effectively.

Economy of force. Using a small unit like the *Dragões de Angola* accomplished the tasks in a specific large portion of Angola, allowing other units to be used in the most effective way where they were best suited.

Epilogue I

Dragões de Angola was one of the last horse cavalry units in combat. But there were others. In Rhodesia, the horse-mounted Grey's Scouts, formed in 1976, fought a counterinsurgency campaign using horse cavalry as a solution to mobility requirements in the same way that the Portuguese did. The South African Defense Forces also used horse cavalry (and scrambler motorcycles) to pursue guerrillas in its border war with SWAPO (the South-West African People's Organization).¹⁴ "Another good example of the military use of the horse occurred in the final battle of Dien Bien Phu, when the guerrillas moved large amounts of artillery in pieces on the backs of horses to unassailable positions. The same thing happened when the Americans were fighting in Vietnam. Their elusive and rarely seen enemy made great use of horse transport to bring supplies through dense jungle where no machine could go."¹⁵

As Frederick Hooper says in his book, *The Military Horse*, "Horses can still be used all over the world in a military context, principally in situations where the terrain is too difficult to allow machines to make their way. Machines do not have the adaptability of horses. In this respect, the horse will never be really eclipsed."

The five hundred years that the Portuguese lived together with Angolans were much stronger than the last thirteen years of counterinsurgency war. The insurgents stated that they were not fighting the Portuguese, they were fighting the Portuguese colonial system. Today, Portugal and Angola have a very good relationship and Portugal did a great effort to end the civil war in Angola. Now may the Angolans live in peace.¹⁶

Notes

¹As in other armies, the cavalry had been converted to armor, but the Lancers had been turned into military police in 1953, and still are.

²This article is dedicated to Col. Cav (ret) Ferrand d'Almeida, a former Commander of Grupo de Cavalaria N.1 and a truly cavalryman at heart. Cor Ferrand d'Almeida passed away last October, losing a battle with cancer.

³Peter Abbot and Manuel Ribeiro Rodrigues, *Modern African Wars (2): Angola and Moçambique 1961-1974*, (London:Osprey, 1988), 8.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵John P. Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa, The Portuguese Way of War, 1961-1974*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 135.

⁶*Ibid.*, 133.

⁷Squadron (*esquadrão*) is the military term for a company of a cavalry unit, and group (*grupo*) the same as battalion.

⁸The horses did not use horseshoes but a farrier was needed to keep the horses' feet in good shape.

⁹Maj. L. McCoskey, "Horsepower for Vietnam," *Military Review*, (May 1969), 91.

¹⁰Cap. L. E. Nolan, *Cavalry: Its History and Tactics* (Columbia, S.C.: Evans and Cogswell, 1864), 173.

¹¹Ferrand d'Almeida, *Recordações de um Dragão de Angola*, *Revista Militar* (Oct-Nov 85), 705.

¹²When a horse did step on a mine, it was inevitably killed, although the rider generally survived.

¹³There is an interesting article about the possible use of horse cavalry by the Americans in Vietnam in *Military Magazine*, May 1969.

¹⁴John P. Cann, 139.

¹⁵Frederick Hooper, *The Military Horse*, (New Jersey: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1976), 102.

¹⁶The author wishes to thank Col. Cav (ret) Faia (a former squadron commander of Grupo de Cavalaria N.1) for their helpful support and patient answering of my curious questions, Mark Casey, Maj. (USMC) Williams and Cpt. (USMC) McLean for their assistance reading the article.

Captain Miguel Freire, a graduate of the Portuguese Military Academy, served as a tank platoon leader, scout platoon leader, tank company XO, recruit company commander, and commander of an M60A3 tank company, his current assignment. He is a graduate of the AOAC (97-4), and has previously published articles in "Jornal do Exército," the Portuguese Army magazine.



At left, during a training exercise, a Dragão descends into a gully.

Above, a horse is being extricated from a swamp. Swampy areas were the most serious challenges to the horse's mobility in Angola's central zone.