

## **CHAPTER 20      The Border War – background to a complex conflict**

The next arena of Cold War military action after Korea occurred in Vietnam, but no Old Muirites were known to have become casualties in that conflict, if any had taken part at all. The Cold War came much closer to South Africa in 1975, however, after a socialist government came into power in Portugal. Within a very short space of time the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique were granted independence. It came as no surprise that both countries soon became theatres of conflict between rival parties in these regions. Two former anti-colonial groups, the communist-inspired MPLA (the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) whose leader was José Eduardo Dos Santos, and Jonas Savimbi's anti-communist UNITA (the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) embarked on hostilities that escalated into a civil war in Angola from as early as November 1975.

As was the case in Korea and Vietnam, the Soviet Union backed the communist movement in Angola, which became the de facto government under Dos Santos, while the opposition under Jonas Savimbi had the support of the west. Angola effectively became a theatre of surrogate warfare between east and west, involving the Soviet Union and Cuba on the one hand, and the United States of America and South Africa on the other. It was understood in some quarters that The United States viewed South Africa as a bulwark against communism in the region, with its proximity to the Cape sea route. The US did not send troops to Angola to give direct support to UNITA, but was said to have given tacit support to South Africa to do so. Likewise, the Soviet Union supported the MPLA via the direct involvement of Cuban military forces in the region. In a sense then, the United States and Russia were squaring up to each other through surrogate agencies in a regional conflict that had wider implications globally.

At the time, South Africa was still adhering to its mandate to administer the former German colony of South West Africa (Namibia), originally granted by the League of Nations after the First World War. From 1925, limited self-government had been introduced in the territory by South Africa, but this had in no way addressed the aspirations of the majority of the population. The country was occupied by South Africa's Union Defence Force troops during the Second World War, after which the United Nations made a number of proposals to the South African government designed to lead eventually to the independence of Namibia. This all happened through a series of phases, and from the early 1960s especially, the Apartheid government was increasingly isolated as countries in Africa achieved independence and the attention of the world focused more and more on South Africa's domestic policies.

In 1975 the government of South Africa had a strategic interest in what happened across the Kunene River, the border between Namibia and Angola. As the policies of the National Party government in South Africa drew increasing attention and criticism from abroad, South Africa's continuing occupation of Namibia was condemned by various countries in Africa and further afield. At the same time the liberation group SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation, led by Sam Nujoma) were conducting insurgency operations in the territory, thereby meeting resistance from the South African military. SWAPO bases in Angola were targeted on numerous occasions by South African forces.

Many South African school leavers were conscripted to serve in South West Africa in order to deal with SWAPO insurgencies. Although the South African authorities denied it for a considerable time, troops were sent into Angola and came into conflict not only with SWAPO forces there, but with Cuban soldiers sent to the country to bolster the MPLA. South Africa's aim was to drive the Cubans out of southern Angola and to support UNITA in its quest to defeat the MPLA and to become the government of Angola.

After the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union soon after, South Africa's perceived strategic importance as a bulwark against communism in southern Africa was severely diminished. Although South African forces withdrew from this theatre of conflict and Namibia gained its independence late in 1990, the civil war in Angola dragged on, with interludes of fragile peace, until 2002. But Namibian independence and the new direction in which South Africa was heading from 1990 meant a final end to its military involvement in the region.