

## BAIXA DO CASSANGE

John P. Cann

On 4 January 1961 in Baixa do Cassange, in the north of Angola, the blacks who worked in the cotton fields began a strike and launched what became known as “Maria’s War” after one of its instigators, António Mariano. Protest in the old kingdom of Kasanje had its origins in the resistance to colonial rule that prolonged pacification until the autumn of 1911, when the population capitulated, and opposition “finally fell like a ripe pear,” according to René Pélissier.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, from that point on resentment was never far below the surface, and as General Fernando Pinto de Resende, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Region in Angola, observed regarding the obtuseness of the government to such feelings, “the unawareness was such that no consideration was given to the dominating and war-like characteristics of the Maholo people, inhabitants of Baixa do Cassange, who during the Portuguese pacification of the last century showed themselves as difficult conquests and extremely dangerous. We made them cotton farmers, clearly by force, and now we are bombing them from the sky.”<sup>2</sup>

Compulsory cotton growing was introduced into Angola in March 1947, when the Companhia Geral dos Algodões de Angola, a Luso-Belgian company founded in 1926 and commonly known as Cotonang, was granted a concession in the vast cotton zone east and west of Malange covering some 80,000 square kilometres.<sup>3</sup> Another, more recent firm, Lagos & Irmão, was also a concessionaire in the area, which extends over a wide plain along the Cuango River and is known to the

---

<sup>1</sup> René Pélissier, *Les Guerres Grises: Résistance et Revoltes en Angola (1845–1941)* (Orgeval: Pélissier, 1977), p. 298.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando Pinto de Resende (Brigadeiro), Commander, 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Region, to João Faustino de Albuquerque de Freitas (General), Chief of Staff Portuguese Air Force, 8 February 1961, personal correspondence regarding the “cotton war,” personal papers archive, Vol. II, No. Prov. 323, Arquivo Histórico de Força Aérea Portuguesa, Alfragide.

<sup>3</sup> Francisco Camacho, “Baixa do Cassange: O Massacre que Veio do Ceu”, *Grande Reportagem* 137 (August 2002): p. 64.

Portuguese as Baixa do Cassange. Resende calls these the “two great ‘trusts’ of the cotton feudal lords,” *os senhores feudais*.<sup>4</sup> The profitable cotton economy in the area was based on compulsive cultivation that was organized on the basis of an impressment system and yielded a harvest of about 5,000 tons per year.<sup>5</sup> African villagers, some 150,000 people in 35,000 families, were hauled from their homes and forced to grow cotton on designated patches of land.<sup>6</sup> There were no wages for this work, and when the crop was harvested at the end of the season, the Africans were forced to sell it to Cotonang and Lagos & Irmão at fixed, below-market prices, a value between five and six times less than the world price.<sup>7</sup> The crop risk was assumed involuntarily by the impressed workers, who simply starved if there were crop failure and barely survived if it were a success. The concession companies thus took no commodity risk and purchased the crop from the growers with a certain built-in and generous profit margin, a near riskless arbitrage. As with other similar enterprises, such as Companhia de Diamantes de Angola (Diamang), the diamond mining concession, the labourers earned a below-subsistence income, and the shareholders received an extraordinary return on their investment. Many of those profiting could not even identify Angola on a map.<sup>8</sup> As Resende writes, “The culture of cotton is an inflammatory exploitation of the indigenous people and, moreover, a major antagonism to them, for this type of obligatory work (400\$00 escudos per year in the worst areas...for the farmer, when he has the misfortune to lose his complete crop — cases that can be verified — he then receives zero for a year of work). This is but one example of the many villainies that the white tribe perpetrates on the black tribe.”<sup>9</sup>

Uniformed Africans who were recruited from the army were used as enforcers to ensure that the conscripted labourers worked their plots and grew only cotton.<sup>10</sup> They were not allowed to grow food for their families on these plots, and when the land was exhausted, they were forced to move further and further from their

---

<sup>4</sup> Resende to Albuquerque de Freitas, 8 February 1961, personal correspondence. A trust in this sense is a combination of firms holding a monopoly.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Pereira da Costa Cardoso, *Presença da Força Aérea em Angola* (Lisbon: Secretaria de Estado de Aeronáutica, 1963), p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Camacho, “Baixa do Cassange”, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Basil Davidson, *In the Eye of the Storm: Angola's People* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Fernando Pinto de Resende (Brigadeiro), Commander, 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Region, to João Faustino de Albuquerque de Freitas (General), Chief of Staff Portuguese Air Force, 2 February 1961, personal correspondence regarding the “cotton war,” personal papers archive, Vol. II, No. Prov. 323, Arquivo Histórico de Força Aérea Portuguesa, Alfragide.

<sup>10</sup> John A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution, Vol. II, Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare (1962–1976)* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), p. 47.

homes to tend fresh plots. This distance could range up to fifty miles.<sup>11</sup> This form of serfdom created a virulent current of unrest, as indeed the people lived in conditions of absolute moral and material misery.<sup>12</sup> As Resende again writes, “The Governor [General Venâncio Augusto Deslandes] is the N° 1 enemy of this system, which he has not received consent to end yet. In Mozambique it is still worse!...The chief agitators understand all of this well and give priority to proselytizing the populations in these areas. Lunda must, moreover, also be one of the targeted objectives, just as the diamonds.”<sup>13</sup>

Local protest dated from 1927, and over the years there developed a number of fledgling protest movements. Prominent among these was the syncretic or composite religion known as Quimbanguismo, which was founded by Simão Quimbango (Simon Kimbangi) in 1921 in the Belgian Congo and took root in Baixa do Cassange in the late 1950s. According to John Marcum, it was an outlet for the repressed emotions of a subject people and a special blend of Christian and animist practice.<sup>14</sup> Its preachings were lifted principally from passages of the Bible teaching protest and revolt, and it was considered subversive and banned by the government.<sup>15</sup>

When Mariano left Malange in 1959, crossed the border into the Congo, and took a job as chauffeur to a local chief, Kizamba dos Maholos, he often drove to Léopoldville, where he came into contact with the UPA, the prominent Angolan nationalist group *União das Populações de Angola* or the Union of the Angolan People. He returned to Malange in December 1960, and with his personal charisma, a bit of Quimbanguismo, and the nationalist doctrine from the UPA, emerged as the leader of a new “prophet-protest” movement known simply as “Maria.” It was a sort of nationalist evangelism with the trappings of incense and the magic of “Maria water,” which, when sprinkled on Africans in a “miraculous baptism,” made them believe that they were impervious to Portuguese bullets.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> António Lopes Pires Nunes, *Angola 1961: Da Baixa do Cassange a Nambuangongo* (Lisbon: Prefácio, 2005), p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Resende to Albuquerque de Freitas, 2 February 1961, personal correspondence.

<sup>14</sup> António Luís Ferronha, “Sincretismos afro-cristãos”, *Grande Reportagem* (August 2002): p. 72. See also Marcum, pp. 47–48; and Estado-Maior do Exército, *Resenha Histórico-Militar das Campanhas de África, Vol. VI, Aspectos da Actividade Operacional, Tomo I – Angola, Livro 1* (Lisbon: Estado-Maior do Exército, 1998), pp. 103–107. Quimbanguismo is sometimes known as Kasonzola.

<sup>15</sup> Estado-Maior do Exército, *Resenha Histórico-Militar das Campanhas de África, Vol. II, Dispositivo das Nossas Forças Angola* (Lisbon: Estado-Maior do Exército, 1989), p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> Camacho, “Baixa do Cassange”, p. 67. This notion was not unique and was a characteristic of Congolese rebel mobilization. In July 1963, Pierre Mulele arrived in the Kwilu area of the Congo. He was a key revolutionary figure who had traveled widely in Eastern Europe before reaching China, where he received sustained training in guerrilla warfare. Upon arriving in Kwilu, Mulele

Alongside Mariano, there was also at play the activities of the PSA (*Partido de Solidariedade Africana, Parti Solidaire Africain*, or African Solidarity Party). This was a political movement founded in 1959 that advocated the independence of the Belgian Congo. It espoused a communist doctrine and was hostile to the West and to the presence of Europeans in Africa. It advocated violence and threats and through these means gained ascendancy over the other Congolese parties. When the Congo was granted its independence in June 1960, PSA agitation was directed across the Angolan border into the districts of Malange and Lunda, and particularly into the locales of Camaxilo, Lubalo, Milando, and Tembo Aluma adjacent to the Cuango River frontier. It was learned by the Portuguese authorities from captured documents and the interrogation of prisoners much later after the crisis had passed that the unrest had been planned through Maholo PSA agents, who were infiltrated into the frontier area and aided by their fellow Malholos on the Portuguese side.<sup>17</sup> The PSA advocated resistance to Portuguese rule through a refusal to work or pay taxes, among other things. Hence Mariano's proselytizing fell on prepared ground.<sup>18</sup>

There were two wedge issues that the PSA agents had used to generate animosity between the local population in Baixa do Cassange and the Portuguese government. The first was the division of the Maholo people, for as in many parts of Africa, the Maholos were divided by an international frontier, in this case by the border between Angola and the Belgian Congo. When the Congo became independent in 1960, some of the Maholos were "independent," and others were "dependent" of Portugal. This difference in status was promoted as a grievance by the PSA. The second was the longstanding notion that the ancient Congo Kingdom should be reestablished. This Maholo "dream" would involve annexing

---

recruited a solid phalanx of followers among members of his own ethnic group, the Mbunda, as well as among the Pende, both of whom had long been the target of government repression. The rebellion began in January 1964, when Mulelist insurgents attacked government outposts, mission stations, and company installations. Mulele's men, who called themselves *la Jeunesse*, were fired by a strange mixture of leftist dogma and African magic, which they used time and again to put the superstitious Congolese National Army to flight. With shouts of *Mulele mai* (Water of Mulele), they threw themselves into battle, convinced that they were impervious to bullets. The rebellion was subdued in December 1965. Similarly, in a concurrent eastern rebellion led by Gaston Soumialot, in January 1964, he was able to recruit thousands of dedicated supporters in eastern Kivu with backing from the Burundi. On 15 May, the town of Uvira fell to the rebels, and, shortly thereafter, Fizi. From then on, the rebels, who were now known as *Simbas* (lions in Swahili), made increasing use of magic to claim immunity to bullets. Panic-stricken, two heavily armed Congolese National Army battalions were routed by spear-toting *Simbas*, who believed that they had been rendered invincible by anti-bullet concoctions.

<sup>17</sup> Luís Artur Carvalho Teixeira de Morais, correspondence with the author, 11 October 2010, Paço d'Arcos.

<sup>18</sup> Pires Nunes, *Angola 1961*, pp. 63–64.

Baixa do Cassange and parts of the Malange District into this new “independent” entity, essentially a subterfuge for annexation by the new independent Republic of the Congo.<sup>19</sup>

The early months of Congo independence were chaotic, and Portuguese authorities believed that rogue elements of the PSA were pursuing agitation in Baixa do Cassange, as it was unlikely that the fragile government of President Joseph Kasavubu would officially court overt hostility with its neighbours, even if he disagreed with their politics. Agents of the PSA, apparently acting independently, saw an opportunity for anti-colonial gain and the potential to annex a portion of Angola for their newly-independent country by taking advantage of the historical unrest in Baixa do Cassange. The source of the grievances lay in the obligatory cotton cultivation, the scandalous abuse of the labour laws, and their exploitation by the concession companies. Promising these people a tempting and easy life, much as PSA agents had done in the Belgian Congo, they now agitated for revolt and expulsion of the European population and Portuguese authorities to achieve PSA aims.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, the local people destroyed their plantations and killed their cattle, as they would no longer be needed. After “independence” a person would only have to scratch himself to have all that he wanted. Likewise, PSA agents in the region, known colloquially as *pessis*, encouraged the people to destroy all of their official Portuguese identity documents, to disobey any order given by the Portuguese, and to obey only Kasavubu. It is unlikely that Kasavubu had any knowledge of developments in Baixa do Cassange or that his name was being invoked by the *pessis*.<sup>21</sup>

Overt unrest began in the late months of 1960, and as the January planting time arrived, many of the workers burned their seed, heaped their farm tools along roadsides, and joined a near-religious crusade for their vision of independence. This protest against their Cotonang, Lagos & Irmão, and government oppressors was manifested in the destruction of barges at river crossings on the Cambo, Lui, and Cuango Rivers and bridges over the Luando and Lui Rivers; the barricading of various roads; the slaughter of livestock; breaking and entering of shops and Catholic missions; and the harassment of Europeans.<sup>22</sup> The protest originated around the village of Tempo Aluma next to the *posto* or government outpost at Mangando and spread from this remote border area to the heart of the Malange district. As the protest gained momentum, Cotonang and Lagos & Irmão pressured the government in Luanda to send troops with the objective of pacifying the

---

<sup>19</sup> Teixeira de Morais correspondence.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution*, p. 125.

region and opening its major roads to traffic.<sup>23</sup> Because the rainy season that runs from October to March had softened the roads to mud in many areas, this last request was academic. Accordingly, it was decided to send some platoons of the 4<sup>th</sup> Company of *Caçadores Especiais* (CCE) to augment the 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE at Malange, and these were to be supported by elements of the Portuguese Air Force (*Força Aérea Portuguesa* or FAP), which would provide air support and reconnaissance to the ground force.

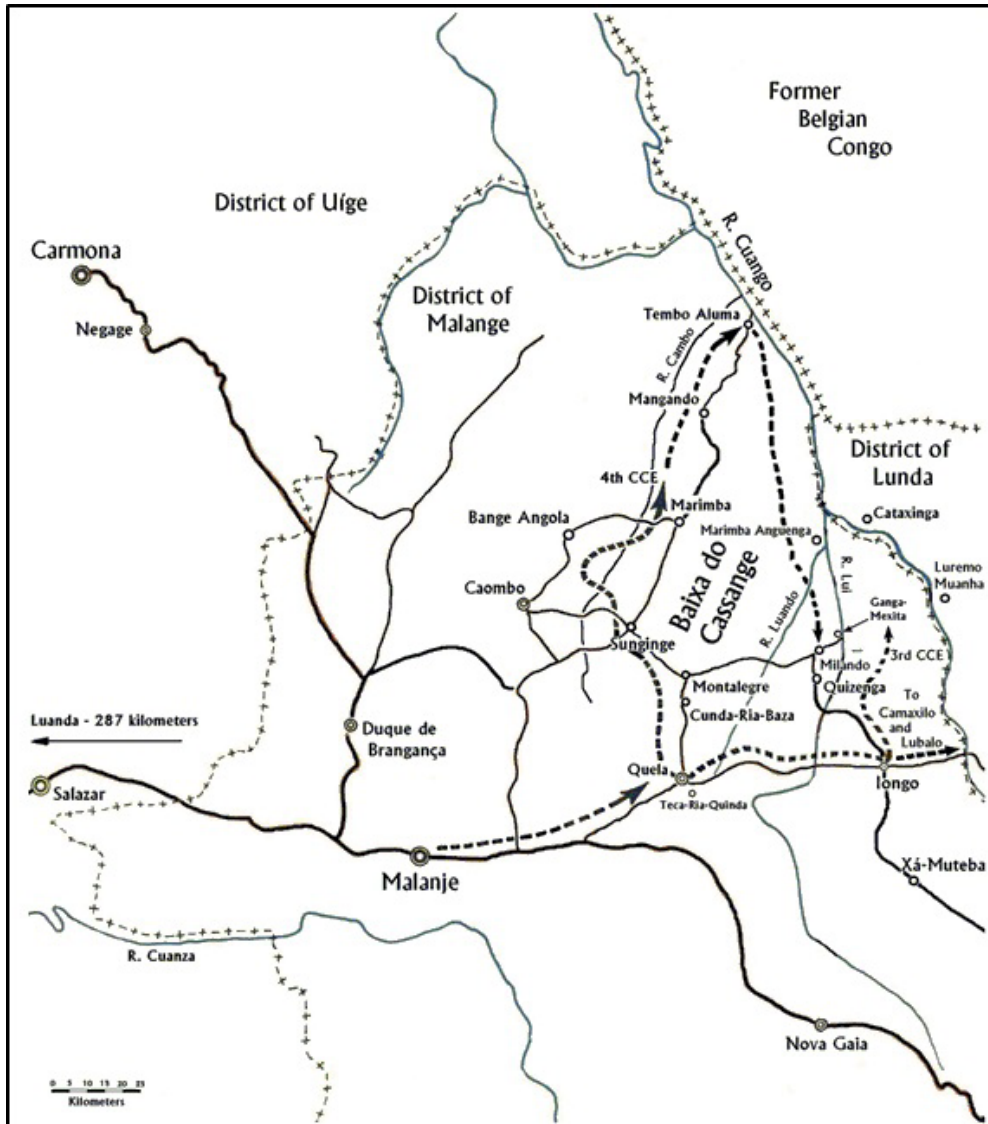
On 11 January 1961, the 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE under the command of Captain Manuel Augusto Teixeira Teles Grílio sent a patrol from its headquarters at Malange towards Milando, where it arrived at dawn on the 12<sup>th</sup>. As it moved through Milando and towards the settlement of Ganga-Mexita, some 5 kilometres from Milando, the patrol encountered about 200 natives armed with *catanas* and *canbangulos*.<sup>24</sup> Once the peaceful intentions of the force were made known to the mutineers, three of them spoke with the officer leading the patrol and explained their situation. On the following morning when the patrol returned with a representative from Cotonang, they found the settlement abandoned. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, identical rebellions occurred in Tembo Aluma, and then in Cunda-Ria-Baza, Quela, Marimba, Iongo, and Xá-Muteba, as shown on the nearby map. The revolt now included both the Bângala and Maholo peoples, who were heavily influenced by the PSA.<sup>25</sup> Although calm appeared to reign in Milando, a section of riflemen was installed there, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE began extensive patrols in the border area extending eastward into Lunda as far as Camaxilo to determine more clearly the extent of the rebellion.

---

<sup>23</sup> José Manuel Correia, “A Guerra do Algodão”, *Mais Alto* (January–February 2006), p. 43. See also Fernando Pinto de Resende (Brigadeiro), Commander, 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Region, to João Faustino de Albuquerque de Freitas (General), Chief of Staff Portuguese Air Force, 17 February 1961, personal correspondence regarding the “cotton war,” personal papers archive, Vol. II, No. Prov. 323, Arquivo Histórico de Força Aérea Portuguesa, Alfragide.

<sup>24</sup> *Catanas* are bush knives used for clearing dense vegetation, and *canbangulos* are home-made muzzle-loading hunting guns, at times a length of water pipe mounted on a rough stock and loaded with metal scrap.

<sup>25</sup> Pires Nunes, *Angola 1961*, p. 68.



**Map – Advance of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Companies, Caçadores Especiais, Baixa do Cassange (Drawn by the author)**

The situation in Baixa do Cassange worsened day by day. On 1 February more than a thousand Africans concentrated in the area of Cunda-Ria-Baza, and on the next day the Europeans fled to Malanje. The 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE was unable to prevent expansion of the revolt or bring peace to the area, and was clearly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the disturbance. Consequently, a larger force was assembled in the form of a Contingent Battalion (*Batalhão Eventual* or BE) with its headquarters in Malanje and comprising the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> CCEs.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

The battalion commander, Major Camilo Augusto Mitanda Rebocho Vaz, arrived in Malange on 3<sup>rd</sup> February; the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE commanded by Captain Luís Artur Carvalho Teixeira de Morais, on the 4<sup>th</sup>; and the 5<sup>th</sup> CCE, on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Rebocho Vaz's plan to restore public order was known as Operation *Cassange* and was aimed at suppressing the disturbance in Cunda-Ria-Baza just beyond Quela, disarming the groups there, rounding up the ringleaders, and discrediting them in the eyes of the population. This was the first military operation in several decades for Portuguese forces, so all was quite new to the troops.

At the briefing held on the night of the arrival of the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE in Malange, the battalion commander identified the air support as being Austers from Malange for reconnaissance and light emergency non-parachute supply drops, and PV-2 *Harpoons* flying from Luanda for armed support and more robust emergency non-parachute supply drops.<sup>27</sup> The *Harpoons*, originally open-ocean reconnaissance aircraft, had been adapted as “bombers” with 12.7mm machine guns. The shocking part of the brief occurred when the major informed the assembly that neither type of aircraft would be able to contact the ground forces, as the radios were incompatible. Hence communication between air and ground elements, such as it was to be, would be made through messages written on white cloth banners, by coded signals, or as in World War I, by hand-written paper messages tied to rocks and dropped into the midst of the ground elements. Captain Teixeira de Morais recalls that he could hardly believe his ears, but in fact this was the procedure used when the first *Harpoon* appeared. Several days afterward the *Harpoons* were able to correct the problem; however, throughout the operation, the Austers continued to use the World War I system.<sup>28</sup>

As the operation began, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE passed through Quela and advanced towards the Cuango River on 9 February, it encountered a group of 300 to 400 armed natives who had cut the road and various bridges. It was first necessary to repair the road damage and then the bridges, as the line of communications back to Malange needed to be preserved, and, moreover, no advance could be made without passable roads. Always the reason for the hostility and destruction was “Maria.” When the crowd refused to disperse at the sound of the shots being fired

---

<sup>27</sup> These were Auster D.5/160 aircraft manufactured by the British firm Auster Aircraft Co., later the Beagle Aircraft Co. Twenty-eight were manufactured in Great Britain, and eleven of these were delivered to Portugal in July 1960. These were shipped to Angola, and four of them participated in the action around Baixa do Cassange. Beginning in 1962, Beagle-Auster shipped 147 Austers in kit form to be assembled at Oficinas Gerais de Material Aeronautico (OGMA) in Alverca, and these were completed and delivered between the years 1962 and 1966. See Mário Canongia Lopes, *Os Aviões da Cruz de Cristo* [The Aircraft of the Cross of Christ] (Lisbon: Dinalivro, 2001), pp. 333–337.

<sup>28</sup> Teixeira de Morais correspondence.



in the air and severely threatened the small element of troops, aim was adjusted in self-defence, resulting in the deaths of 8 mutineers and 42 wounded. The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> were spent repairing the damage and then continuing the advance along the route to Cataxinga and Luremo Muanha through Iongo. By 23 February the operation for the 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE was completed, and the troops remained in the field until mid-March, providing support to the now-vulnerable population. After the insane act of destroying their cattle, the people began to starve following the pacification, and this situation forced the Portuguese government to supply them with many tons of food. This humanitarian operation, which would have been complicated under normal conditions, was made even more difficult by the weather and the destroyed infrastructure.

During the advance on Quela by the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE, the troops were constantly taunted by the mob with insults and disruptive demonstrations in the path of the vehicles. The situation required rigorous discipline and steady nerves, as the vehicles frequently became bogged in mud, and the immobilized force was vulnerable. This was the risk of conducting operations in the rainy season. As with the 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE, the natives destroyed the bridges and pontoon crossings over the numerous rivers, thereby isolating the force. Resupply became a serious problem and was resolved through air drops. The 4<sup>th</sup> CCE continued to encounter large concentrations of hostile natives who understandably had little respect for government authority and less for that of Cotonang and Lagos & Irmão. The acts of violence now extended to the destruction of Cotonang and Lagos & Irmão facilities, commercial enterprises, and government administrative posts.<sup>29</sup>

The troops initially made firing demonstrations to discourage the strikers, but such displays whether from ground troops or from aircraft only served to provoke the crowd, many of whose members still believed they were immune to bullets. On 6 February in Teca-Ria-Quinda, on the road just beyond Quela, the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE was confronted with a “frontier” protected by a formidable guard armed with *canbangulos*. Portuguese troops would only be allowed to pass with the “authorization of Kasavubu.” Immediately following this confrontation, the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE intercepted a vast crowd of several thousand men armed with *canbangulos*, cutlasses, and other primitive weapons and headed to Quela to expel or kill the European population and Portuguese authorities. Following that, its plans were to visit the mayhem on the town of Malange. Unfortunately, it was necessary to use force in stopping the mob, and casualties were taken on both sides.<sup>30</sup> In the exchange, the company suffered one killed and four wounded, while the protesters

---

<sup>29</sup> Pires Nunes, *Angola 1961*, pp. 70–74.

<sup>30</sup> Teixeira de Morais correspondence.

suffered 71 dead and 41 wounded.<sup>31</sup> The natives were disarmed and convinced to return to their villages, where they were to remain, and this they did.

Also on the 6<sup>th</sup> for the first time, the FAP intervened with a PV-2 *Harpoon* in bombing the settlements opposing passage of the CCE on the road north from Quela towards Montalegre. These aircraft came from Air Base N° 9 (*Base Aérea N° 9* or BA 9) in Luanda. Lieutenant Carlos Alves flew the first *Harpoon* fire-support mission, and this and subsequent missions along the 64-kilometer Quela-Cunda-Ria-Baza route supported the slow advance of the ground forces. On 9 February Alves, in attacking a hostile concentration in the vicinity of Marimba in a PV-2, released a 100-pound general purpose (GP) bomb at 500 feet of altitude, apparently with a no-delay contact fuse, for he returned to base with the left wing and engine perforated with shrapnel in many places.<sup>32</sup> As Resende noted, the PV-2 crews were not trained for this air support mission, so if they saw “a large concentration of rebels identified as such, they may have the luck of a hit.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the PV-2 crews, with little or no experience outside of the anti-submarine warfare and open-ocean reconnaissance missions for which they were trained, adapted well to land reconnaissance and low altitude aerial bombardment. There were some teething difficulties. Frequently the bombs buried themselves in mud when dropped and often failed to explode, to the frustration of the pilots.

On the other hand, the view from the ground represents a contrasting perspective. The *Harpoon* sortie on the 6<sup>th</sup> represented the first opportunity that the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE had to talk with the *Harpoons* by radio, and it occurred as the force was approaching a large armed group with an apparently “peaceful aspect,” according to the *Harpoon* pilot’s observation. This aerial appraisal missed the mark widely, and it annoyed Captain Teixeira de Morais that the *Harpoons* refused to disperse the crowd with a nearby shooting demonstration in light of his request and observation of the hostile crowd. Unfortunately, there were predictable problems with this “peacefully armed” group, and as we have seen, blood was shed that could have been avoided.<sup>34</sup>

Captain Teixeira de Morais reported the incident to his superiors and requested that the *Harpoon* crews be briefed about events on the ground, as there seemed to be an ocean of ignorance and a considerable misunderstanding on this matter. He specifically requested that air support loiter away from the crowds, as aircraft flying over the various gatherings of natives aggravated the situation with their “pacific” posture. In fact, up to this point the aircraft had made only reconnaissance flights,

---

<sup>31</sup> Pires Nunes, *Angola 1961*, pp. 70–74.

<sup>32</sup> Cardoso, *Presença da Força Aérea em Angola*, pp. 80–81.

<sup>33</sup> Resende to Freitas, 17 February 1961, personal correspondence.

<sup>34</sup> Teixeira de Morais correspondence.

sometimes flying over large concentrations of people and reporting them as being “peaceful,” for they waved to the aircraft and threw bits of earth at them as a sign of friendship when the *Harpoons* swooped low over the crowds. What the pilots did not know was that the *pessis* had convinced the people that the planes were from Kasavubu and were coming to help them. After this situation became known to the *Harpoon* crews, they responded quite effectively in delivering nearby demonstrations of gunfire, bomb drops, and low-level passes to disperse the groups successfully. It should be noted that never was direct fire on a crowd requested or undertaken.<sup>35</sup>

From Quela the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE had turned north and rapidly moved through Montalegre, Sunginge, Caombo, Marimba, Mangando, and ultimately arrived at Tambo Aluma on the Congo border on 17 February. On reaching the Cuango River and the Congo frontier, the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE found the *sanzala* or settlement of Bumba, King of the Mahalos, to have been abandoned in haste, as the cooking fires were still burning, and the cooking pots and pans were still on the fires. The troops could see the last of the villagers on the far side of the river emerging from the water. King Bumba was the only chief in Baixa do Cassange to have managed to escape to the Congo.<sup>36</sup> On completing its missions, the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE received permission to proceed south along the Lui River to help the population in the area of Milando. Originally this task had been assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE; however, it was unable to cross the Lui River because of the destroyed bridges and ferries and was thus isolated to the east of the river, which was swollen with the rains.<sup>37</sup>

As the forces advanced across the land dominated by the “cottontocracy,” they were at a loss to understand the revolts and the profound grief that they witnessed. Troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> CCE tried to calm the thousands of natives by promising reforms to their chiefs and by putting an end to the extortions of certain venal *chefes do posto*, or outpost chiefs.<sup>38</sup> Equally the troops attempted to impress the protesters with traditional shows of force, such as low-flying aircraft and shots fired overhead, but the return of the authorities and concession company agents immediately behind the force made any promises or displays seem hollow.<sup>39</sup> The view of the rebels was that there had been little to lose in pressing forward, particularly as all believed that any bullets fired at them would turn into water. Further, the promises of the military leaders were thought to have meant little, as all knew that the significant

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> José Correia, FAP historian, correspondence with the author, 23 February 2010. Many of the *chefes de posto* were mulato (*mestiço*) Cape Verdians (*cabo-verdianos*) who had been imported. Being almost white, they were cruel to the black workers, who hated them.

<sup>39</sup> Pélissier, *Les Guerres Grises*, p. 417.

decisions would be made in Luanda or Lisbon.<sup>40</sup>

The *Harpoons* from Luanda had supported the advance of the ground forces, without the need to fire a shot, all the way to Tembo Aluma in the heart of the insurrection. As the crisis reached its height toward the middle of February, there had been a reduction in the number of PV-2 sorties from Luanda, and this had necessitated Austers filling the gap. Four Auster light reconnaissance aircraft had been operating from Carmona since 13 December and patrolling along the roads and border of the Congo District well to the north and west of Baixa do Cassange. Two of these were reassigned in support of the 3<sup>rd</sup> CCE and on 25 January began to fly reconnaissance missions from Malange over the troubled zones with army officers occupying the copilot's seat. These small, light aircraft dropped provisions and messages to the advancing ground force and served as its rather tentative backup communications link to the headquarters in Malange. In these missions the Austers flew in front of the columns and advised the troops of potential ambushes. The missions were long and exhausting in that they required nearly four hours of intense concentration.<sup>41</sup> This cycle was repeated more than twice a day, and indeed, the pilots flew until they were completely spent and there was no more daylight. Their only pause was to grab a quick drink and a sandwich during refuelling stops between missions.<sup>42</sup> As the confrontations between the troops and the mutineers became more frequent and intense, the Austers assumed a more aggressive role and began using army officers as “bombardiers” to disperse hostile crowds. The officer would fly with a box of grenades between his feet and, when required, drop one into the centre of a threatening mob from the open window of the aircraft as it swooped low. On three days in February, the 18<sup>th</sup>, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and the 24<sup>th</sup>, grenades were dropped, causing losses and panic in the bands of rebels.

Again from the ground perspective, this “bombing” had not been requested and proved counterproductive, as it caused many unwanted casualties. On the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup>, for example, the “inoffensive” Austers swooped low over the large armed crowd that for many days had surrounded the European and African populations of Milando, which had taken refuge in the *posto*. The grenades that they dropped had had the arming pins removed and were then inserted into a glass jar to retain the safety lever in place. When the glass jar hit the ground and broke apart, the safety lever was released and the grenade exploded. This makeshift delay fusing allowed the relatively slow aircraft to escape the blast, but not the people in the crowd. The wounds suffered by them were quite grave and required extensive medical care, which was administered by army medical personnel.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> José Correia, FAP historian, correspondence with the author, 22 February 2010.

Captain Teixeira de Moraes noted that never did the army leave a wounded person without treatment in the field or fail to evacuate the more seriously wounded to the hospital in Malange, and these actions greatly helped progress in quelling the rebellion and in improving government relations with the population.<sup>43</sup>

Although rebel activity ceased shortly afterwards, the FAP continued to conduct reconnaissance throughout the zone until operations were concluded.<sup>44</sup> The Austers at Malange rotated periodically with the other two at Carmona, and the selfless pilots of the four Austers, Lieutenant Colonel Augusto Soares de Moura, Lieutenants Corte Real Negrão and Elio Mesquita, and Sergeant Pedro Carvahão, flew dozens of missions in marginal conditions without incident until the conclusion of air operations on 2 March.<sup>45</sup>

Indicative of Auster operations is the experience of Negrão in reconnoitering the primary road that runs east some 210 kilometres between Malange and Xá-Muteba. His timely and bold action at Xá-Muteba resulted in the calming of an excited crowd and the consequent saving of many lives. Originally his mission was to deliver the mail by air drop, making an initial low pass over the village to alert the people and then in the second pass making the drop directly into the small village square and the hands of the villagers. On this day no villagers appeared on Negrão's initial pass, and as he looked down, he noticed a large red stain of fresh blood in the square. Glancing astern following his pass, he saw a group of natives fleeing into the grass "like a band of antelopes."<sup>46</sup> In the road there was a prisoner held by two armed men, his arms tied. This raised the Auster crew's curiosity, so on the protective wrapping of the mail package Negrão wrote: "We are going to land."<sup>47</sup>

There was in Xá-Muteba a long strip of terrain that was described as an "airfield" by the administration, but it was primitive. From the air it appeared clear and smooth and seemed to be suitable for landing and disembarking. The cleared field had been usable before the rains; however, the land was now a veritable sea. The Auster after a brief touchdown came to a stop in a mass of wet vegetation concluding in a bog. It became immediately obvious that there was an insurrection afoot in Xá-Muteba, as the men quickly surrounded the Auster in a rude and rebellious display. Negrão told them that there was a military force advancing on the village that would arrive in the morning, if they could not be persuaded to

<sup>43</sup> Teixeira de Moraes correspondence.

<sup>44</sup> Correia, "A Guerra do Algodão", p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.; José Correia, FAP historian, correspondence with the author, 23 February 2010; "Aeródromo Base 3 – Negage, Súmula Histórica", <http://aerodino.no.sapo.pt/negage1.html> (accessed 24 February 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Cardoso, *Presença da Força Aérea em Angola*, p. 85.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

disband. The crowd still assumed an aggressive attitude, gripped their *catanas*, and awaited a signal. Apparently that day Negrão's words and manner were persuasive, for there would be only a single victim. The crowd eventually dispersed, and calm reigned. The casualty was buried, and only the blood remained. The rains delayed Negrão's departure, but eventually the sun came out, and with the help and "advice" of the villagers, the Auster was dragged to the edge of the field for a successful takeoff.<sup>48</sup>

During Operation *Cassange* the *Harpoons* flew 28 missions from BA9 in Luanda, and the Austers flew countless more from Malange. In reflecting on the operation, Resende observed how much more effective the missions of the four fragile Austers were in ending the revolt compared to those flown by the worn-out *Harpoons*.<sup>49</sup> While any casualties are unfortunate, in the case of the "cotton war" they were relatively light, two dead and four wounded among the army troops. For the mutineers there were 243 deaths.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Correia, "A Guerra do Algodão", p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> Camacho, "Baixa do Cassange", p. 73; and Estado-Maior do Exército, *Resenha Histórico-Militar das Campanhas de África, Vol. VI, Aspectos da Actividade Operacional, Tomo I – Angola, Livro 1* [Historical-Military Report on the African Campaigns, Vol. VI, Aspects of Operational Activity, Tome I – Angola, Book 1] (Lisbon: Estado-Maior do Exército, 1998), 150. There are many overblown casualty figures, principally the 10,000 native dead offered by the UPA after it initially asserted 7,000. As the UPA was not involved, the credibility of its estimates is suspect. Others include 5,000 by José Ervedosa, of whom we will hear more in a moment, and "hundreds, perhaps thousands dead" by Pélissier, who vividly describes mass graves dug by bulldozers, of which there were none operating in Baixa do Cassange in the rainy season. There are also accusations that the FAP used napalm against the population, incinerating villages with women and children trapped in their huts. The origin of this falsehood is the February 1970 article by José Ervedosa in the French journal *Africasia*, page 31. It alleges that 17 villages were destroyed and that 5,000 men, women, and children were burned alive. This article also asserts, for instance, that on 8 February 1961 Captain Teixeira de Morais requested a *Harpoon* flown by Ervedosa bomb the *sanzala* Cunda-Ria-Base. On that day it rained torrentially, and the *Harpoons* did not fly, so Ervedosa's account is suspect in many ways. This inaccurate story was picked up René Pélissier in his book *La Colonie du Minotaure: Nationalismes et Revoltes en Angola (1926–1961)* (Orgeval:Pélissier, 1978), page 418, and repeated by Pélissier and Douglas L. Wheeler in their collaborative book *Angola* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1971), page 174. More recently there was an exposé of the "atrocities" in an article by the journalist Francisco Camacho, "Baixa do Cassange: O Massacre que Veio do Ceu", *Grande Reportagem* 137 (August 2002): pages 63–77. The charge is without merit and a complete fabrication. Napalm was used in Angola; however, it was not present in the theatre until after the uprising in Baixa do Cassange and came in late April, 1961, after the 15 March attacks. Further, a review of the log books of the small number of pilots involved in the "cotton war" indicates that no napalm ordnance loads were carried on any missions in Baixa do Cassange in February 1961. There were no NAP (napalm) entries but plenty of MET (*metralhamento* or machinegun) and BOP (*bombardeamento em picada* or low-angle attack bombing). Lastly, the source of the fabrication, José Ervedosa, was a former naval aviator who had come

The population throughout the entire Baixo do Cassange was now vulnerable and needed food badly, as the partial destruction of its crops, the death of its cattle and dogs, and the seizure of its hunting arms had created a crisis. The misery was enormous, and the army would work diligently to feed them and alleviate their distress. While Operation *Cassange* would conclude on a humanitarian note, the situation would also have a decisive psychological effect on the people who had been reduced to this situation by the agitators, the concession company agents, and the government authorities. In fact, as the people became aware of the hollow promises of the *pessis* and understood that the army was attentively listening to their complaints and attempting to resolve them, they began to ask that the Maholos, the “cause of all of their suffering,” be punished, and that the troops remain in the region to protect them from further attacks.<sup>51</sup> This was done.

The corrective legislation that lifted the native obligation to cultivate cotton and dealt a blow to the concession companies came four months too late, but the injustice was corrected.<sup>52</sup> Hence Resende’s letters to Lisbon may have finally affected thinking at the highest levels of government. Certainly the experience portended events to come, both in further colonial unrest and in a radical, humanistic, and positive change in Portuguese native policy. Indicative of the spontaneous and localized nature of the uprising, no African nationalist movement claimed credit or publicized it at the time.

In this case, airpower was simply one of the resources available to Portugal in tackling the uprising. In such a situation, all the elements of national power, the entire political, economic and military mix, was used to achieve success. Although the Portuguese Air Force made a significant contribution in Baixa do Cassange, it was but a single component in the artful use of national power. Deslandes and Resende ultimately brought together the other, non-military elements in combination with the military to achieve a more lasting solution.

---

to the FAP at its inception; his behaviour was inappropriate and questionable, particularly for an officer, and he was consequently subjected to regular disciplinary measures. His difficulties are ably recorded by his squadron commanding officer, António Silva Cardoso, in his book *Angola: Anatomia de uma tragédia* (Lisbon: Oficina do Livro, 2000), pages 38, 47, 191, 206, 208, and 209. Ervedosa exercised poor judgment, was involved in a number of dodgy dealings, and ultimately was relieved of his duties and dismissed from the squadron by Silva Cardoso on the occasion when he returned from Lisbon to find Ervedosa playing cards with the mechanics and his duties unperformed. Ervedosa subsequently deserted to Algeria and generated the fabrication from his new anti-colonial home.

<sup>51</sup> Teixeira de Moraes correspondence.

<sup>52</sup> Decree Law N.º43 639 of 2 May 1961.

## **JOHN P. CANN**

Capitão de Mar e Guerra da Marinha dos EUA na situação de reforma, com a especialidade de Navegador. Doutor em Estudos da Guerra pelo King's College, em Londres e um dos mais prolixos autores sobre conflitos de baixa intensidade, que inclui a Guerra de África Portuguesa. Desempenhou comissão de serviço na NATO Cinciberlant, em Oeiras.



### **Citar este texto:**

CANN, John P. – Baixa do Cassange. Revista Portuguesa de História Militar - Dossier: Início da Guerra de África 1961-1965. Lisboa. ISSN 2795-4323. Ano I, n.º 1 (Dezembro 2021), <https://doi.org/10.56092/MFMY7496>