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# 'Rambo' at the End of the World

## *A Clandestine Trip Into Tightly Controlled Rebel Territory*

**T**he path to Jonas Savimbi's domain has become well worn in this year of renewed U.S. aid to his guerrilla cause.

The bush pilot who flew a Washington Post reporter clandestinely to Savimbi's rebel headquarters early this month said he is having his busiest year. His American passengers have included conservative fund raiser Howard Phillips, three staff members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and assorted journalists.

Savimbi's representatives and public relations counselors in Washington prefer to use Zaire as the jumping off point into Savimbi's Angola, as opposed to the route through South Africa, whose imagery of association Savimbi likes to avoid where he can.

But the southern route is the quickest and safest, a three-hour air cruise from Windhoek, Namibia, north over the homelands of the Herero and Bushman peoples to the final South African military checkpoint at Amiga in the Caprivi Strip. From the border it is just 20 minutes to Jamba, and the pilot dives to treetop level for the last 10 minutes, safer in case someone is down there in the bush who would like to hasten our return to earth.

When the Portuguese ruled Angola, this corner of the country was a game preserve, which explains why there are so many elephants in residence. Our low-flying aircraft spooks a herd that has congregated at a watering hole.

As the plane touches down and taxis to a halt, men with Kalashnikov automatic rifles step out of the bush. From this point on, and for the duration of a 10-day visit, Savimbi's UNITA exercises very tight control over its visitor.

Every activity is programmed. There is no opportunity to stroll around Jamba without an escort. There are places that are off limits, like the antiaircraft towers Savimbi is building in the treetops. Visitor compounds are segregated from the main residential camps and also from other visitor compounds.

One morning, just after dawn, a reporter out for an unauthorized walk saw a white man in Nikes jogging down a road, but when the reporter tried to catch up with the jogger as he passed through the gate to another compound, a UNITA guard with a machine gun stepped forward to block the way.

The Portuguese called this part of Angola the land at the end of the world. The savannahs and lightly forested bush country are seemingly endless and the scale of the landscape is like that of the American West.

The only way to travel north into the interior is in the back of a large, Soviet-made truck. Smaller vehicles bog down too easily in the sandy ruts that serve as roads.

Savimbi sends his visitors north guarded by a heavily armed special forces platoon. We leave for Mavinga, the site of last year's offensive, at 2 in the morning on July 11. There are 29 men packed into the open-bed truck. They are armed with assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and wooden crates of ammunition. We are a rolling, bucking incendiary.

The truck roars northward through the night. Above us is a moving latticework of treetops set against the Milky Way. First light comes early, and there is pain in the faces of the boy guerrillas who have spent the night sitting upright trying to hold their balance, their weapons and the blankets that serve as a shield against the 40-degree chill of the morning.

At Mavinga, there is little left of the town, just a few bombed-out shells and the strategically located airstrip. The Angolan Army would like to capture it to launch bombers against Jamba.

In the adjoining bush in all directions, Savimbi's guerrillas are digging in for the government onslaught they are sure will come this year, along with the Soviet-supplied MiG fighter-bombers of the Angolan Air Force.

"Yeah, the people they now know what a MiG is," says Pedro Baptiste, pointing in the direction where the bombs fell during weeks of fierce fighting in late 1985.

"That's why the people dig a hole and put their house in it this year," he said.

After another all-night ride on our bucking transport, the vista of the Cambambi River valley opens up to the north. It is hard to believe there is a war going on in this paradise.

The platoon dismounts to wash in the river and grab a few hours' sleep under the protection of the trees. A visitor trying to find his way toward the water is warned not to walk on the footpaths. "Land mines," says Baptiste knowingly. He explains that this entire valley was mined by UNITA forces in the late 1970s to drive the Angolan Army back to its fortress encampment at Cuito Cuanavale, 50 miles to the west.

"How long will the mines be there?" a visitor asks.

"Maybe 20 years," Baptiste replies.

Back in Jamba at the grass-walled recreation hall, "Rambo" has become the summer film favorite. There are no vacant seats on Saturday, which is movie night. The recreation program here consists of video tapes, Sunday soccer and patriotic singing around the campfires. The soccer match this Sunday is between the "Martyrs for Liberty" and the "Commandante Monteiros," named for a fallen UNITA commander. Here at the end of the earth, life suddenly seems exceedingly normal.

But with Monday returns the reality that this has been a long war, and there is no end in sight.

— Patrick E. Tyler