Forthcoming in
THE JOURNAL OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA*, vol. 5, no. 2*

Book Review

***The Flechas: Insurgent Hunting in Eastern Angola, 1965–1974.* By John P. Cann. Africa@War 11. West Midlands, England: Helion, 2014. 72 pp. $29.95 paperback.**

While President Obama's reorientation of U.S. foreign policy toward Asia, the so-called "Pivot to the Pacific," received widespread attention when it was announced in 2011, America's military has quietly been ramping up its engagement with a different part of the world as well. With the winding down of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the Marines and Army have available personnel to send to other regions that have thus far been neglected: Africa beckons.

The geographic command responsible for operations in Africa, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), became operational in 2008, but with only about 2,000 assigned personnel, it is somewhat a younger brother to the other combatant commands. But the military's increased interest in the continent has resulted in AFRICOM's operational tempo noticeably quickening. In 2011, the Marine Corps established in Italy a dedicated Africa unit and then in 2013 stood up (and later expanded) a different unit based out of Spain to respond to crises of the kind that erupted in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012. Post-Benghazi, the Army established its own crisis response unit, the East Africa Response Force, which along with the Marines deployed earlier this year to South Sudan to usher U.S. citizens out of the violence.[1] Special Forces operators are currently pursuing rebels through the jungles of the Central African Republic with the Ugandan army while other teams have struck at terrorist targets in Libya and Somalia and the Air Force and Navy have also been recently involved in operations on the continent.

But the great majority of the military's increased efforts in Africa have been expended on short-term deployments to train allied African forces. In 2013, the Army was expected to launch more

[1] For a look at the U.S. Marine Corps units and the East Africa Response Team, see Sgt. Ed Galo, "Marines start new rotation of Special-Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Africa," United States Africa Command, January 28, 2014, accessed April 4, 2014, at http://www.africom.mil/Newsroom/Article/11685/marines-start-new-rotation-of-special-purpose-marine-air-ground-task-force-africa; and Jon Harper, "DOD deploys troops to South Sudan indefinitely," *Stars and Stripes*, December 20, 2013, accessed April, 4, 2014, at http://www.stripes.com/news/dod-deploys-troops-to-south-sudan-indefinitely-1.258632.

than 100 such missions, while the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (SP-MAGTF) based out of Italy embarked on a similarly heavy training schedule immediately after its creation.

One of the core goals of such training courses is to enable African allies to better meet their various security challenges, which in the African context inevitably means nontraditional violent actors. History offers a few examples of conventional, state-versus-state engagements in Africa in the last several decades, but most conflicts on the continent, including all current ones, have featured nonstate groups. There is not a single active, traditional war being waged between two countries, Eritrea and Ethiopia's frosty border stalemate notwithstanding.

A survey of many African countries suggests that this trend will continue. Enablers of revolution are widespread, including poverty, disease, and festering instability. Weak governments that struggle to control their territory abound, and the continent is global ground zero for the "youth bulge" phenomenon that, when combined with another African scourge, high unemployment, is linked to violent unrest.[2]

Given the trends, it is worth turning to history to explore how governments have confronted nontraditional threats in the past. John P. Cann, in his latest book *The Flechas: Insurgent Hunting in Eastern Angola, 1965–1974*, has thus rendered readers a service by illuminating one of the most unique and successful counterinsurgency units in all of African history, but one that is surprisingly underexplored. The Flechas of Angola were responsible for 60 percent of all insurgents killed in Portugal's nearly decade-long struggle against three different insurgent groups battling the colonial government in Luanda. By the end of the conflict in 1974, the military capabilities of all three armed movements had been virtually destroyed, and the Flechas were seen as so integral to that outcome that similar units were constituted to fight the insurgencies being waged in Portugal's other African colonies.

Cann's exploration of this remarkable unit begins with a helpful sketch of the Portuguese political context of the 1960s, which is critical to understanding the country's determination to fight the insurgencies in its African colonies even as other colonial powers were rapidly granting independence to African states throughout the continent. The autocratic prime minister of Portugal, António de Oliveira Salazar, saw Portugal's African colonies as a chance to restore its lost glory and affluence, and their defense as a helpful distraction from domestic discontent (12). Portugal's colonies would not be prised from his grasp without a fight.

Cann moves quickly through Portugal's initial counterinsurgency efforts in Angola, beginning in 1965. He recounts the Portuguese forces' largely successful campaign against insurgent incursions in northern Angola, then moves to their subsequent inability to root out rebels in the

[2] *Global Terrorism Index: Capturing the Impact of Terrorism for the Last Decade* (Sydney, Australia: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012), 41.

harsh environs of southeastern Angola, dubbed the "lands at the end of the earth" (27). Small bands of insurgents, armed with Soviet-bloc weapons and granted safe passage through Tanzania and Zambia, were able to elude Portuguese forces uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the vastness of eastern Angola.

The Portuguese recognized their limited ability to gather intelligence and track insurgents in that environment, and adopted a necessary innovation: the creation of an indigenous intelligence-gathering unit from a marginalized minority community in the southeast, the Bushmen. These extraordinary hunter-gatherers were ideally suited for the task, as they had lived in that region for thousands of years and were "hardy and tough" people who "could even detect a human scent *. . .* find and follow a seemingly invisible track and do so at a rapid pace and at times at a run" (29). Bushmen required only the barest necessities in terms of food and water, and, once trained, proved excellent shots with a rifle. They also had historically suffered mightily at the hands of the invading Bantu tribes from which the insurgents were drawn and so bore an intense animosity toward them.

All of this made the Bushmen, who were formed into the Flechas unit, unparalleled counterinsurgents; after the Portuguese converted them from an intelligence to an armed unit, they became the most feared of all the rebels' adversaries. Cann dedicates an entire chapter to relating the exploits of the Flechas, and it is intriguing reading. The unit was responsible for the killing or capture of numerous insurgents, including high-ranking leaders; the liberation of hundreds of prisoners; the destruction of insurgent bases; and the capture of large stocks of insurgent war materiel, despite the fact that there were only just over 2,000 Flechas at the end of the war.

The story of the Flechas is full of relevant lessons, but one stands out. The unit's history is nothing so much as a testament to the essentialness of local knowledge in a counterinsurgency campaign. The Bushmen's intimate familiarity with the people and the terrain in their areas of operation enabled them to effectively gather intelligence on insurgent activity from the local community, track their quarry through the bush, and then use the terrain to tactical advantage during battle. The insurgents were unable to overcome their disadvantages in these areas and suffered mightily for it.

More to the point for the U.S. military today is the role of the Portuguese in forming the Flechas. The Portuguese likely would never have known of the Bushmen and their unique history and skill set had it not been for Manuel Pontes, a Portuguese administrator who had lived most of his life in the bush and had a "profound" knowledge of Eastern Angola. Because of his tenure in the remote reaches of the country, he was admired by the Bushmen, who were willing to listen to his appeals to join the fight against the insurgents, something these deeply reticent people would otherwise have been unlikely to do (27).

U.S. personnel spearheading their country's engagements often lack the level of insight into their host countries that Pontes, not to mention the Bushmen, had regarding Angola. The diplomatic corps serve relatively short, somewhat-cloistered deployments in a country before rotating out,

perhaps never to return. Members of the military can venture into more remote areas yet normally serve even shorter terms than do the diplomats, and have to overcome the alienating effect that being armed and in uniform has on local populations. There are few “lifers” of Pontes’s sort, embedded for decades in a given country.

Yet the internal dynamics of many African states have not become any less complex since Pontes came to know the Bushmen of Angola. Tribe, race, and religion remain powerful and overlapping sources of identity on the continent, and when entangled with violent extremism, political violence, or criminal networks, the results can be mind-numbingly difficult to understand, particularly to foreigners not steeped in the local context.

The United States has no intention of directly fighting an insurgency on the ground in Africa—policymakers are stinging from the arduous campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the traumatizing Black Hawk Down episode in Somalia. But predicting where the United States will find itself embroiled in conflict is fraught; as Robert Gates famously quipped, “Our record of predicting where we will use military force since Vietnam is perfect—we have never once gotten it right.”[3] And even a seemingly simply humanitarian intervention can go disastrously wrong, ensnaring forces in a deadly conflict for which they are unprepared, as happened to the United States in Mogadishu in 1994.

Allies can help navigate the tumultuous political, social, and cultural landscapes that will challenge servicemen and women even on short deployments (though allies can have their own malign agendas). And the U.S. military is working to develop area expertise among its personnel. Army Reserves and National Guard units have long-term partnerships with specific African countries, Special Operations Forces operators go through language and culture training, and the Army is in the process of assigning certain units to geographic combatant commands to lend continuity to its engagement with specific regions.

But Africa is simply too vast and diverse for U.S. military personnel to develop an intimate understanding of a specific area. So as the military spends more time on the continent, the chances increase that its handicaps will lead to mistakes, some deadly. In lieu of a Pontes’s profound knowledge of an area, the story of the Flechas should reinforce in the military and the policymakers who direct them a sense of profound caution as it expands its engagement on the continent.

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[3] Charley Keyes, “U.S. military needs flexibility due to poor predictions, Gates says,” CNN, May 24, 2011, accessed April 3, 2014, at http://edition.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/05/24/gates.speech/.