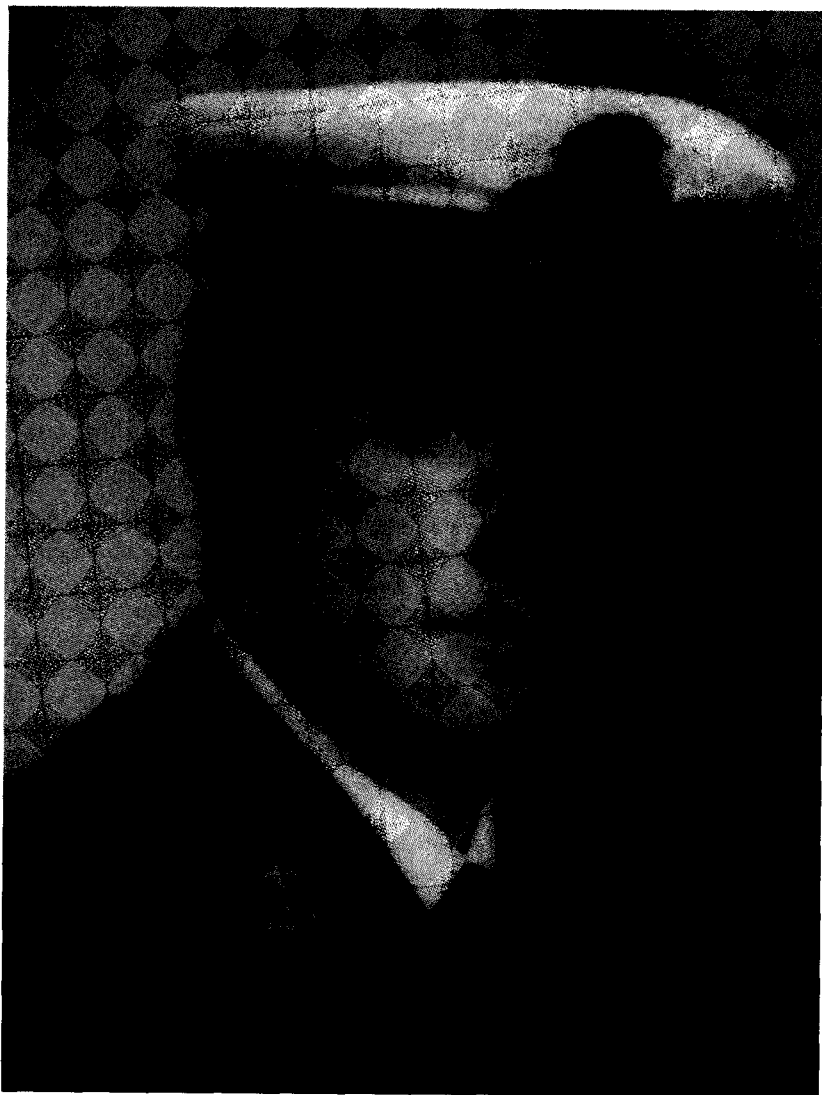


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Paulo Henriques Lowndes Marques (1941–2011)

PAULO LOWNDES MARQUES ON THE ZAIRE RIVER

John P. Cann

In 1482 King João II revived the earlier interest for a sea route around Africa to India, and the first of his newly commissioned and ambitious voyages was the expedition of Diogo Cão. Cão was an experienced naval captain who had made a name for himself fighting privateers along the coast of West Africa. He departed Lisbon, it is thought, in May or June of 1482 and followed the coast of West Africa as far as Fort São Jorge da Mina (Elmina) in present-day Ghana, formerly the Gold Coast. Here he reprovisioned and continued along the Central African coast through the Bights of Benin and Biafra and across the equator to Cape Santa Catarina, where he probably arrived in early August and anchored in the Bay of Loango. From this point onward Cão's seamanship was tested, as he was moving through uncharted waters further south than any European had ventured. The current and winds were against him, so he slowly tacked along the continental shelf taking advantage of the convection breezes. As August wore on, Cão came upon what appeared to be a bay or inlet with two spits of land 12 to 15 miles apart arcing into the Atlantic. The sea, however, had turned into a thick, muddy-red hue, and the water tasted sweet rather than salt, indicating its freshness. The waves breaking on the surrounding beaches were a brownish-yellow. As Cão sailed toward the apparent bay, he encountered an increasingly strong and powerful current reaching seven knots. As he got closer to shore, he saw floating islands moving with the current out to sea. Clearly he was entering the mouth of a silt-filled river. As a reflection of its great power, modern oceanographers have charted "a hundred-mile-long canyon, in places four thousand feet deep, that it has carved out of the sea floor".¹ Paulo Lowndes

¹-Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 8.

Marques, a *fuzileiro* 2nd lieutenant on the Zaire in 1966, remarked in a letter to a friend that from the air the mouth of the river appeared like a large brown clog in the stomach of the South Atlantic.² Likewise Vice Admiral António Emílio Ferraz Sacchetti later remembered his experience on a midshipman cruise to South Africa when suddenly the blue ocean turned brown as his vessel entered the discharge from the Zaire some 50 miles from shore.³ Cão had indeed discovered a river larger and more dramatic than any European had seen to date.

Cão anchored about a mile upstream in a small cove on the left bank near the present-day town of Santo António do Zaire, where he went ashore and erected a stone pillar or *padrão* marking the disco-very in the name of King João II.⁴ Here he encountered and befriended the local Bakongo people and asked them the name of the mighty river. They called it *nzere* or *nzadi*, which in their language meant "the river that swallows all rivers".⁵ Cão was apparently unable to pronounce the word as the natives did and said *zaire* instead, and that is the name by which it became known to Westerners. Almost five centuries later this important waterway that in part now separated the rich, beautiful, and most Portuguese Congo District of Angola from its Belgian counterpart became a deep security concern.⁶ For the Portuguese Navy, this 80-mile riverine border was the center of activity during the initial years of the War in the Ultramar. While the navy began its action on the coast with a modest force, it soon moved into this grand river as rapidly as resources arrived.

2-Paulo Lowndes Marques, "Cartas Trocadas" [Antidotal Letters], AORN 12 (December 2000): 7-8, http://www.reserva-naval.com/revistaorn/revistaAORN_12.pdf (accessed 8 October 2011).

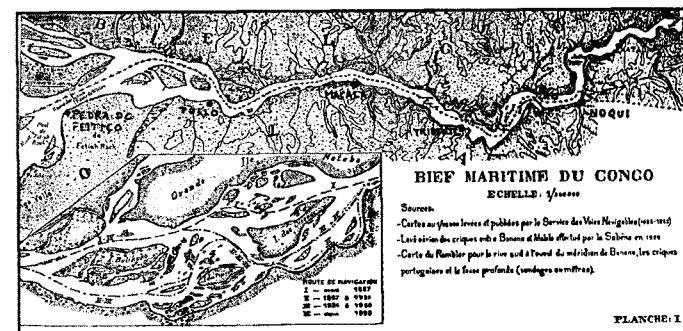
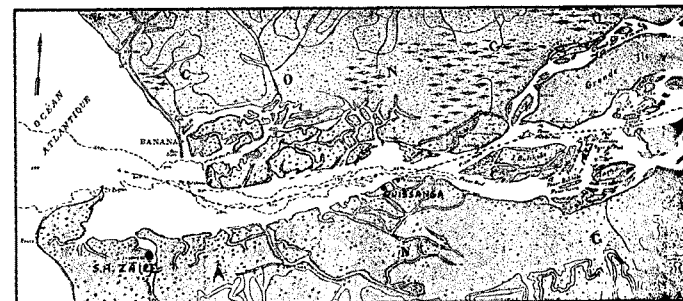
3-António Emílio Ferraz Sacchetti, interview by the author, 18 May 2006, Lisbon.

4-Robert Davezies, *Les Angolais* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965), 83.

5-Peter Forbath, *The River Congo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 74.

6-Hélio A. Esteves Felgas, *O Clima do Congo Português* [The Climate of Portuguese Congo] (Curitiba: Imprensa Angolana, 1959), 5.

Map 1 – Zaire River border with the Belgian Congo
(Chart in two sections)



Copies of Belgian charts of the Zaire River used by the Portuguese Navy from March 1961 and annotated by an unknown user to show the Naval Posts established during the initial years of the conflict.

Paulo Lowndes Marques entered the Escola Naval on 9 October 1965 as a cadet *fuzileiro* of the 8th Special Course for Naval Reserve Officers (*Curso Especial de Oficiais da Reserva Naval or CEORN*). This program was designed to augment a navy undermanned for the developing conflict and was part of an effort to create a cadre of capable but temporary junior officers who would ably meet the requirements to man and lead the expanding navy. The Naval Reserve was established on 26

November 1957 through Decree Law N.º 41 399, and by May of the next year, its special course for reserve officers was prepared to graduate and commission its first class of 20 sub-lieutenants. From 1963 onwards, reserve officer commissions exceeded permanent commissions, and this surge expanded the junior officer ranks with much-needed talent. Most reserve officers viewed the experience as the initial phase of their mature lives and would remember their naval adventures with great fondness and loyalty when they left the service to pursue their familial and professional lives.⁷ Many of these officers were selected to command naval vessels in all parts of the *ultramar*, and still others proved themselves in successfully leading *fuzileiros* under the most adverse physical conditions against experienced and well-armed insurgents. These officers upheld the finest traditions of the navy and truly left a high water mark for their successors.

Naval Lookout Post at Quissanga on the Zaire River



Photograph courtesy Estado-Maior da Armada and Revista da Armada

7-A.B. Rodrigues da Costa and Manuel Pinto Machado, *O Anuário da Reserva Naval 1958-1975* [The Annual of the Naval Reserve 1958-1975] (Lisbon: Associação dos Oficiais da Reserva Naval, 1992), 27.

Paulo's class graduated 68 officers on 29 April 1966, and he was one of 20 commissioned as a *fuzileiro*. Subsequently, he was assigned to the Company of *Fuzileiros* No. 10 (CF 10) and promoted to 2nd lieutenant when he deployed to Angola. He arrived there on 27 May 1966 aboard the ship *Niassa* and had the honor of commanding the 2nd Platoon of the Company and led missions from the Lookout Posts of Quissanga, Puelo, Pedro do Feitiço, and Macala along the Zaire. As Paulo wrote to his friend and 8th CEORN classmate Augusto Athayde in March 1967,

I am in the midst of the Zaire River some 70 kilometers from the mouth of this great river. I am commanding a post called Macala on a narrow stretch of the river. Not only can you see the opposite bank clearly, but you can make out a small settlement (*aldeia*) and, indistinctly, the people moving about in it...I have about 35 men under my command...and orders that the post cannot be surrendered...If we are attacked, we must die gloriously in its defense. I have often thought of the dilemma of the young soldiers and their subaltern who were for six years on the frontier of Goa. During many weeks, the enemy increased the psychological pressure through radio broadcasts, the intimidating concentration of troops in front of the equivalent of this post, with the coming and going of trucks, the positioning of artillery, troop reinforcements increasing daily, and training with mortars. And here I am with my thirty or so men with clearly inferior armament.⁸

Paulo had reason to be worried, as the enemy had made good use of his Congo sanctuary across the river and now was better armed, more aggressive, and increasingly well organized. He was crossing the river and appearing in force in areas that were

8-Marques, "Cartas Trocadas".

thought to be pacified and making a concerted effort to expand his presence not only in the border areas but also in the interior of the country. His main lines of infiltration from the naval perspective were across the Zaire River first at Ponta Puelo approximately opposite the Congolese city of Boma, and next, near the more isolated Bulicoco Island and its islets further downstream.⁹ Both of these areas were characterized by a myriad of small islands and thick undergrowth that provided excellent cover for insurgents seeking to cross undetected. A sense of urgency consequently grew within the navy to develop a strategic plan for effective security on the Zaire and to deploy its expanding forces to achieve this end.

The original concept called for increased vigilance along the river supported by a series of five small forts or *fortins* located at judicious intervals to establish a strong barrier to insurgent infiltration. These fixed posts would be established at dominant points between Noqui and Fetish Rock. The logic in choosing these initial locations was that they would divide this stretch of river into approximately equal parts with an average of 7.5 miles between them. This division would facilitate the formation of patrol zones around each post and would equally apportion the potential surveillance workload. The final post was established on the Island of Quissanga, from which *fuzileiros* were at the time operating in their rubber boats and being billeted in an abandoned sawmill that was flooded by the river occasionally. The posts were designed as the static logistic skeleton on which would rest the dynamic muscle of the *fuzileiros* and patrol launches. The plan had the flexibility for expansion and was built on the assumption that additional troops, launches, and larger vessels would become available to tighten frontier security.¹⁰ Initially each post would have two sections of *fuzileiros*, or

9-Mexia Salema, 160.

10-Mexia Salema, 166.

about 24 men, 2 sergeants, and an officer; however, these numbers would change as conditions changed.¹¹

Each post consisted of a small headquarters building that was prefabricated from wood. It was constructed in the form of a pavilion and contained a command post, a mess, a radio station, officer quarters, and enlisted barracks. There was also separately on each post a kitchen, sanitary facilities, a small magazine and armory, a lookout tower, a pier, and a shelter for the rubber boats and their motors. Vegetable gardens were traditionally planted, and sources of potable water located. All of this was surrounded with concertinas of barbed wire for security.¹² These bases were carved from the riverbank, and in each case, the *fuzileiro* was everything: combatant, carpenter, mason, and farmer. He did it all.¹³

The Post of Macala was lovely, according to Paulo, with beautifully tended climbing flowers, bougainvilleas, and panoramic vistas. We have a great deal of time on our hands, Paulo noted. According to military reasoning, from a platoon of thirty men, I have only ten on patrol at any one time. The rest are employed as sentries, cooks, boat repairmen, and so on, and these tasks consume our work day. Paulo observed that apparently war is mostly long periods of leisure and drudgery interrupted by moments of great intensity, with no pattern or logic. "If this is war, then I have properly experienced it."¹⁴

11-A. de Roboredo (*vice almirante*), "Unidades de Fuzileiros em Angola" [*Fuzileiro Units in Angola*], commentary (despacho), Lisbon, 16 December 1965, Colorado Box 224/2093, Arquivo Central da Marinha, Antiga Fabrica Nacional de Cordoaria, Rua da Junqueira, Lisbon.

12-Turibio Abreu, "Infraestruturas Navis no Ultramar" [Naval Infrastructure in the *Ultramar*], *Anais do Clube Militar Naval* (April-June 1967): 427-436.

13-A. Pimentel Saraiva, "Postais do Ultramar: Angola-Postal ? 2" [Postcards from the *Ultramar*: Angola - Postcard N° 2], *Anais do Clube Militar Naval* (April-June 1968): 310.

14-Marques, "Cartas Trocadas".

The fuzileiros in their fragile rubber boats and the crews of the launches had to overcome an adverse operating environment and address not only a human enemy but also a natural one. Paulo remembered the river as one of enormous force, for in the rainy season its current could reach seven knots.¹⁵ He often contemplated the epic of Diogo Cão and his men in braving what Cão called the "Massive River", truly massive, and deeper in places than the Mediterranean.¹⁶ The Zaire itself was full of whirlpools, particularly opposite the post of Trident, giant tree trunks and branches, floating islands of grass and mud, and sharp rocks. Because of the flow and consequent change in the river, charts were rarely accurate. Nights on the river were opaquely black, and unannounced and violent rainstorms would drastically reduce the effectiveness of patrols.¹⁷ Radar was a help, but vigilant lookouts were more useful in spotting floating obstacles and guiding vessels during shoreline operations. Further, the river contained a vast region of canals along an eleven-mile stretch between Bulicoco Island just east of Quissanga and Fetish Rock, the most dangerous part of its length. This complex covers an area of approximately 6,000 square meters and remains the most complicated of any on the Zaire.¹⁸ Quite naturally it attracted the enemy, as it provided excellent concealment and served as an ideal night-time launching site for his canoes to cross into Angola. Its interior was a labyrinth of narrow canals, whose estimated 800 miles of waterway held twists, turns, forks, and sandy shoals that could easily swallow troops. It was so complicated that even with a chart it was easy to be lost. Its canals were also so shallow and narrow that only the rubber boats of the fuzileiros could penetrate them

15-Ibidem.

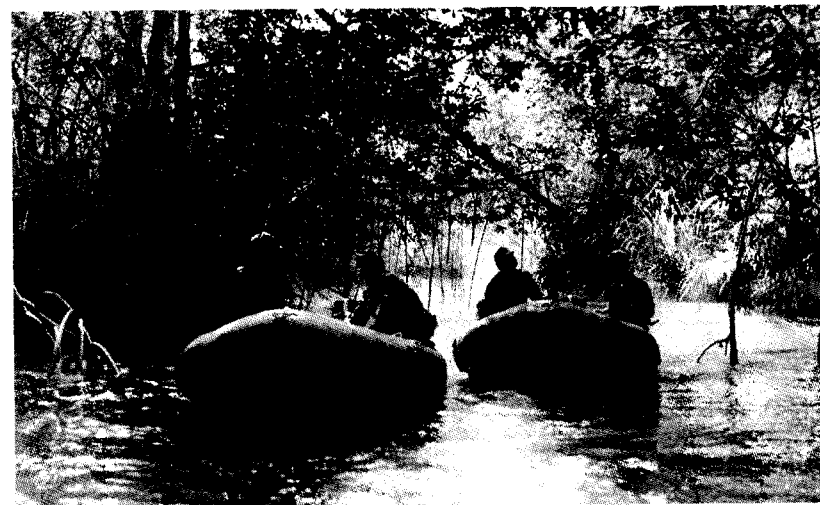
16-Ibidem.

17-Abílio Freire da Cruz Júnior, "Evolução das Infra-estruturas da Armada no Ultramar" [Evolution of Naval Infrastructure in the *Ultramar*], in the unpublished collection *Participação da Armada na Defesa das Províncias Ultramarinas* [Participation of the Navy in the Defense of the Overseas Provinces], photocopied manuscript, 1972, 13.

18-Ibidem, 68.

and negotiate the dense undergrowth along their banks, the foliage overhanging the water, and the vines drooping from the verdant canopy. Even in daylight these canals could be dark and often had the appearance of a tunnel or the interior of a ruined cathedral with the high jungle cover.¹⁹ The other islands with their interesting animal names of hippopotamus, egret, duck, fish hawk, turtle, hummingbird, iguana, tsetse, and so on also concealed the enemy in their thick brush. Despite these difficulties, the *fuzileiros* prevailed, but it took time to learn the river and the likely patterns of effective insurgent evasion.²⁰ This necessitated the exhausting and inglorious night patrolling of the canal and river system, the gathering of intelligence, and the collective accumulation of knowledge on and experience with the Zairian environment and its people.

***Fuzileiros conducting an operation from Quissanga,
April 1967***



Photograph courtesy Estado-Maior da Armada and Revista da Armada

19-Pereira Bastos, 51.

20-Mexia Salema, 167.

In 1966, when Paulo was assigned to Fetish Rock, or simply "the Rock", he remembered that he and his *fuzileiros* witnessed across the river a country run down and destroyed through misgovernment and corruption.²¹ He recalled the history of the area and the fact that in 1879 the river margins were a no-man's land politically. There was a commercial Portuguese presence there, and Portuguese was the common spoken language on both banks. Portuguese merchants were established in Boma and Banana, which had become small Congolese cities by 1966.

In patrolling the river, each launch operated on the average 22 days per month, and missions lasted between three and five days each. This operational tempo produced a constant presence that eventually made the land route the preferred one for the enemy. Mexia Salema quotes a crewmember of the Norwegian cargo vessel Irma, which had recently transited the river, as observing that no ship could unload matériel anywhere without being detected by the constant patrols or by the lookout posts.²² Such security not only safeguarded the fluvial border but also made the waterway free from insurgent attacks on commercial shipping and military transport.

The crews became skilled marksmen with their weapons, as each launch "adopted" a small, deserted island and put its name on it in the form of a large sign. The signs were perhaps 60 x 60 centimeters and were routinely destroyed by launch gunners from 600 meters range while traveling at full speed.²³ The friendly competition between the crews became a boost to morale and engendered great pride within the launch community on the Zaire, which self-styled itself humorously with the

21-Paulo Lowndes Marques, "Meditações acerca da Pedra do Feitiço" [Thoughts Regarding Fetish Rock], AORN 4 (April-June 1997): 8-9, http://www.reserva-naval.com/revistaorn/revistaAORN_04.pdf (accessed 8 October 2011).

22-Mexia Salema, 168.

23-Pereira Bastos, 56-57.

motto "Steel men in plastic boats."²⁴ This was, of course, a parody of the traditional phrase "Iron men in wooden ships" used to describe strong men withstanding the rigors of tempestuous seas and the other hardships and perils of naval service in the Age of Sail. Such romanticism abounded in the imagination of the youthful crews. Paulo, for instance, initially saw his assignment to the post of Fetish Rock as one of continuing the epic of Diogo Cão's discovery and pacification of the Zaire, however illogical. He later learned to his astonishment that the great Fetish Rock was only decisively occupied by the Portuguese in August 1915, and the entire left bank to Noqui, in January 1916.²⁵ The security posts associated with this occupation were subsequently abandoned, and Paulo and his *fuzileiros* in reoccupying the left bank often came upon the remnants of earlier fortifications.

By 1966 the enemy had moved eastward, and the river had become relatively quiet. Paulo observed that the patrols were routine. There were occasional incidents with clandestine fishermen, but nothing more. The crocodiles were far more dangerous, but they were more afraid of us than we of them.²⁶ Indeed, life on the spartan posts passed with the rhythm of a micro-society created by the practical autonomy of semi-isolation. Post routines were ordered by the scheduled launching and recovery of the boats that each supported. The monotony of the missions, the sleepless nights on constant alert, the isolation, the meager living conditions on board both the launches and the posts, and the harshness of the climate tried everyone. Despite all of the vicissitudes and difficulties, the sailors and *fuzileiros* exhibited an enormous courage and patriotism in the execution of their dangerous duties.

24-Ibidem.

25-Marques, "Meditações acerca da Pedra do Feitiço".

26-Marques, "Cartas Trocadas".

Leisure time was plentiful, and the men found many constructive pursuits. They read a great deal. Paulo notes that he finally read *War and Peace* cover to cover.²⁷ Fishing was a popular sport, as excellent fish swam in the river, and their catch provided a welcomed enrichment to the normal fare of field rations. Hunting expeditions were also a great favorite, and game was often added to the menu. The occasional hippopotamus and elephant were also found. Overall life on the river despite its isolation and danger was not an extreme hardship. The men fell into a comfortable work routine governed by the social closeness that a small post of this nature brings. The rhythm was broken only by the arrival of mail, the monthly relief with the new personnel that it brought, and contact with the enemy.

In the 26 months that Paulo spent on the Zaire, he writes that it is difficult to underestimate the importance of correspondence.²⁸ Today our children rarely write, and even honoring the social conventions of gentle society are performed with reluctance. On the Zaire there was no telephone or e-mail. Paulo observed that during his 26 months in Angola, he spoke to his father only once on the telephone.²⁹ Fortunately, his experiences were recorded in the correspondence with his father and mother. These letters are filled with his impressions of the enormity and massiveness of the Zaire, the magnificent dawns, the surface of the river marked by a hippopotamus swimming, the strange noises of animals in the night, the thunderous rainstorms...all of these impressions captured in the letters to his parents. Even the frustrations with the heat and mosquitoes are there. A trip to

27-Marques, "Cartas Trocadas".

28-Paulo Lowndes Marques, "Epístolas a seus Pais de um Fuzileiro em Angola" [Letters to his Father from a Fuzileiro], in *A Guerra do Ultramar, realidade e ficção*, ed. Rui de Azevedo Teixeira (Lisbon: Notícias, 2002), 279-283.

29-Ibidem.

Luanda was remembered as if it were to Paris. The lovely beaches, the lines of women, the restaurants, the convivial companions, all contrasted markedly to the lonely life in the elephant grass beside the Zaire. Paulo's correspondence was always his great link with sanity.³⁰ His shared experience as a *fuzileiro* bound him in a fraternity of those who had served on the Zaire, and throughout his life he was a proud member of this company.

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30-Paulo Lowndes Marques, "Epístolas a seus Pais de um Fuzileiro em Angola" [Letters to his Father from a Fuzileiro], in *A Guerra do Ultramar, realidade e ficção*, ed. Rui de Azevedo Teixeira (Lisbon: Notícias, 2002), 279-283.