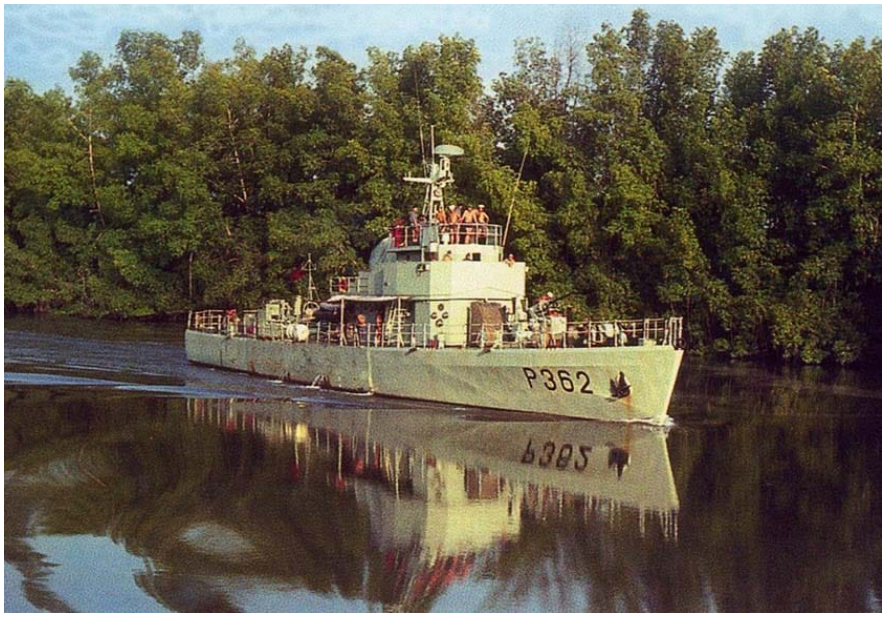
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Portugal's Colonial War in Guiné – the beginning of the end

In 1961, liberation movements in Portugal's African territories began an armed struggle against Salazar's dictatorship to achieve independence.



NRP Oríon

Portugal's five African territories in 1960 consisted of two miniature island groups (Cabo Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe); two immense areas of southern Africa (Angola and Mozambique); and the small west African overseas territory of Guiné.

Now Guiné Bissau, this country has an area of 36,125km^2, roughly 40% of the size of Portugal itself and it is one of the smallest countries in Africa. Yet, in the agony of the Colonial Wars of 1961-1974, it was tiny Guiné which provided the sternest test for Portugal's military establishment.

From the point of view of Portugal, it was unfortunate that both neighbouring Senegal and Guinea supported the independence fighters of Guiné, and the year of 1973 saw significant political and military developments which foreshadowed the end of the Portuguese colony.

The guerrillas – PAIGC

On January 8, Amílcar Cabral, the long-serving leader of the PAIGC (Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e de Cabo Verde), stated that, during 1973, he would proclaim the independence of the Republic of Guiné Bissau.

Twelve days later, Cabral was assassinated in Conakry, capital of neighbouring Guinea, but this loss seemed to have little effect on the growing strength of PAIGC, which also received surface-to-air missiles from the USSR.

The war in the air

The one major military advantage enjoyed by the Portuguese was mastery of the air through the Portuguese Air Force (FAP), and the arrival of the Soviet missiles threatened significant change.

A major task of the air force was to support troops with supplies; but its principal military effect was to interrupt enemy offensives against Portuguese troops. In situations where troops were under attack, or when they were ambushed, or when a position was being shelled, they could summon immediate air support to disrupt the attacking guerrillas with bombs or strafing, using Fiat fighters or helicopter gunships. For this reason, guerrilla day-time attacks tended to be brief.



A contemporary poster of the MFA

The air force also rescued wounded soldiers from the battlefield, transporting them to the military hospital in Bissau, the capital of Guiné. The certainty of rescue was an important factor in maintaining the morale of front-line troops, most of whom were conscripts.

At the end of March, Portugal lost two of its Fiat-G91 fighter jets to the new missiles. On April 6, near the frontier with Senegal in the north, FAP also lost three personnel aircraft.

FAP immediately suspended further missions until it discovered how its aircraft were being targeted. Essentially, FAP had lost control of the air, and this change hindered the effectiveness of the Portuguese armed forces and forced them onto the defensive.

The war changes character

As FAP became more cautious, the guerrillas took advantage by subjecting Portuguese positions to more frequent artillery fire over longer periods. The guerrillas became more mobile, and their formations became larger, accompanied at times by armoured cars. The guerrilla war was becoming a conventional war.

As the FAP became paralysed, the new uncertainty of rescue fatally affected the morale of conscript soldiers, and their fighting capacity deteriorated, particularly in offensive roles. The burden and responsibility for military operations now fell to Portugal's crack regular troops, the commandos, marines and parachutists.

The success of the rebels in using the surface to air missiles in March and April encouraged the PAIGC to undertake a conventional attack on the garrison at Guidage, very close to the frontier with Senegal, and to do the same at Guileje, on the other side of the country on the border with Guinea.



A Portuguese Fiat G-19 at Fairford in 1993

The attack on Guidage

At dawn on May 8, 1973, the guerrillas began a siege of Guidage, and intensively mined its supply road from Binta. The Portuguese reinforcement column of 60 men on its way to Guidage from Binta was forced back, having lost four men dead and four heavy vehicles destroyed.

A second column of 15 vehicles succeeded in reaching Guidage. But this new column now found itself also under intensive attack, and had itself to be reinforced by a force of Special Marines, who also suffered many casualties.

General Spínola, the Portuguese C-in-C in Guiné, authorised an operation in which, on May 19, the Battalion of African Commandos entered Senegalese territory to destroy the PAIGC supply base.

This move relieved some pressure on Guidage itself, but the problem of the mined road between Binta and Guidage remained.

Seeking to open road communication, a motorised column made its way from Guidage towards Binta on May 20 but was forced to return to Guidage after it had expended all of its ammunition. Yet another reinforcement column set out from Binta two days later, and made slow progress along the extensively mined road. Most of the column was forced back, but the parachutist regulars fought their way through with the loss of four men.



Captain Salgueiro Maia in 1974

Critical position at Guidage

Without medical evacuations and with ammunition and food supplies running low, the Portuguese position at Guidage had become critical. Not only was the dressing station

overwhelmed with wounded, but the garrison buildings afforded little shelter. Nor were soldiers able to bury the dead, since any movement inside the perimeter was risky.

On May 29, a column of 500 men drove another road from Binta to Guidage parallel to the old, mined road. Captain Salgueiro Maia (the leading actor in the Carnation Revolution of April 24, 1974) wrote: “We arrived at Guidage at 19h00. The ground inside the camp was torn up by grenade explosions, all the buildings had been hit, and were mostly in ruins. The men were in fox-holes, and there was no power or water. On my visits down among the rubble, sheltered from artillery fire, I found four dead and three seriously wounded soldiers. The ground looked odd – it had a brown pool of blood, nearly an inch deep, and looked like dried clay.”

Relief to Guidage occurred only when the insurgents switched their attention to Guileje in the south.



Guiné Bissau

The siege of Guileje

The main purpose of the garrison at the town of Guileje, about 10km from the border, was to prevent the supply of munitions to guerrillas within Portuguese Guiné from their bases in neighbouring Guinea to the south.

Guileje in its turn depended for its supplies on Gadamael, a less well fortified town 14km to the southwest.

At Guileje, the Portuguese were in the process of upgrading their artillery, and its fresh supply of ammunition had not yet arrived when the guerrillas of PAIGC, supported by Cuban troops, made their attack.

Echoing their success in the north, PAIGC mined the road between Guileje and Gadamael. Having thoroughly reconnoitered the outpost of Guileje, they brought up their ground-to-air missiles; stationed their artillery and observers; and prepared the area for ambushes.

General Spínola made a visit to Guileje on May 11. He warned the garrison of impending attacks. Despite the losses of aircraft, he promised air support – the aircraft would fly high, out of range of the missiles, and use heavier bombs. And of course, the evacuation of wounded troops would continue.

Portugal under increased pressure

On May 18, a Portuguese column on its way from Guileje towards Gadamael was attacked, and suffered casualties; they radioed for air cover, but FAP could not oblige because of low cloud. At Guileje, the commander requested air support for the removal of his wounded, but no aircraft arrived.

Now Guileje was more severely attacked, many grenades and shells falling within the garrison building area. This attack continued over the next days, and the promised air support never arrived, since FAP was occupied in the north in the defence of Guidage.

The commander at Guileje, Major Coutinho e Lima, made his way to Bissau, where he begged General Spínola to allocate reinforcements to his garrison. Spínola refused, and ordered the major back to his post. On his return, he found even greater devastation. The communication centre had been destroyed along with the kitchen and food stores; water supplies were exhausted; and the command building and troop quarters were reduced to rubble.

The withdrawal from Guileje

Faced with these overwhelming difficulties, the major decided to evacuate the position. After all the moveable equipment had been destroyed, the soldiers and the local population left the town on May 22 on local pathways. By avoiding the main road and its mines, the column arrived safely in Gadamael.

The evacuation of Guileje demonstrated that, without command of the air, the Portuguese High Command could not cope with coordinated attacks in both the north and south of the country.

The siege of Gadamael

The barrack at Gadamael was much smaller than that at Guileje, and was badly protected. The arrival of 200 troops and 600 civilians from Guileje overcrowded the space, and there was little hope of providing protection against attack.

On May 31, PAIGC moved up their artillery and began to bombard Gadamael. The troops had hurriedly dug trenches, but could not dig fast enough to shelter so many people.

In the confusion, troop commanders were injured and withdrawn, and the radio post was hit and put out of action. Most people fled to the riverbank, leaving only 30 men to hold the position.

As the number of dead mounted, those remaining sprayed creosote over the corpses to neutralise the smell of decomposition.

Now that the second town had also been lost, General Spínola considered the fugitives from Gadamael to be cowards, and refused to assist them, despite their pleas for help.

The navy to the rescue

On the coast, the Portuguese patrol ship NRP Orion was under orders to ferry a company of parachutists. During the evening of June 1, however, the captain of the Orion heard of the desperate situation at Gadamael, and decided to ignore his orders, and go instead to the aid of the fugitives on the riverbank.

At risk were the lives of 300 Portuguese soldiers and 500 civilians, and only the Orion was in a position to help. The captain commandeered two landing craft and a number of smaller boats.

Over the next few days, this small armada rescued around a thousand soldiers and civilians, many wounded and others so demoralised that they abandoned their rifles when they eventually disembarked.

The outcome

Over the month of May 1973, Portuguese forces in Guiné suffered 63 dead and 122 seriously wounded and lost six vehicles and three aircraft. As expected, on September 24, 1973, PAIGC announced that Guiné Bissau was now independent.

In the middle of September 1973, the first meetings of the Movimento dos Capitães took place (these were the captains who eventually led the Carnation Revolution). Many of these junior officers had experienced service in Guiné, and they had concluded that the Colonial Wars could never be won, and that they and the army would be blamed for losing it.

And if the army were at fault, the political regime which had prevented the search for a solution to a war already 12 years old would be blameless. These junior officers determined to use their military experience to make political changes in Portugal itself.

It was these captains, including Captain Salgueiro Maia, in the Movimento das Forças Armadas (Armed Forces Movement) who overthrew the dictatorial regime on April 24, 1974 (The Carnation Revolution) and, in less than two years, the five African colonies became independent.

The experience and drive of those officers who had served in Guiné ensured that the reactionary Portuguese government would fall.

This article is based on the personal reminiscence of a Portuguese naval officer, Pedro Lauret, who served as second in command in the Orion.

Read more from **Peter Booker** about the **Three women, Tavira and the Carnation Revolution** or **Opposition to the Colonial Wars – the Vigil at Capela do Rato**.

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