



# **Hunting Pictures of Wartime. Photographic Encounters in a Vernacular Archive from the Colonial War in Angola (1961-74)<sup>1</sup>**

By  
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## **Abstract**

What occurs when soldiers' private photographs enter the public domain? This article examines a digital vernacular repository and its collection of personal images from the Portuguese colonial war (1961-74). Drawing on archival analysis, interviews, and ethnographic research regarding the production, uses, and circulation of war photography, it discusses the transformation of photographs from objects of affect into objects of public scrutiny. By exploring the history of the self-named digital archive, this essay argues that its emergence, success, and longevity are inseparable from its vernacular character and the absence of consistent Portuguese politics of memory concerning the war. The archive's curatorial practices avoid questioning colonialism and the violence of the conflict, thereby providing an uncritical space for articulating unofficial representations of the past while sustaining the public narrative of the war years. Focusing on the archive's collection of photographs from Angola, the article addresses three significant encounters that conscripts experienced due to the war: their encounters with military life, Africa, and Africans. The relationship between photograph and caption proves crucial to understanding the colonial and warrior imaginaries that underpin the photographic gaze and its contemporary discursive reconfiguration.

**Keywords:** Photography, War, Portuguese colonialism, Vernacular archive, Angola

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## Introduction

The perceived transparency of the photographic image has long fuelled the desire to preserve visual tokens of things past. The camera's gaze has been used to capture "image remnants" of our private history and the public history we share with others: if something was caught on camera, it must have existed somewhere (Trachtenberg 2008). For the ordinary person, photography offers the possibility to document life: people, places, instants, and occasions can all be frozen by the mechanical eye of the camera for future remembrance. Since the technique's emergence, the association of photography and memory has captivated the popular imagination and scholarly and theoretical discussions (Barthes 1981, Batchen 2004, Langford 2001).

This article addresses ordinary people, extraordinary times, photographs, and their uses. It examines a self-titled digital archive, Aveiro e Cultura, along with its collection of soldiers' images from the colonial wars—three counterinsurgency conflicts that the authoritarian regime waged against liberation movements in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique between 1961 and 1974.<sup>2</sup> Decades after the war's end, the Internet afforded veterans unprecedented opportunities to articulate their narratives, countering the selective memorialisation and persistent amnesia surrounding Portugal's recent colonial past (Cardina 2024). Freed from the editorial mediation of publishing houses, they utilised digital technologies to create and share personal visions of wartime. A "vast archive of narratives and mnemonic artefacts in cyberspace" emerged following the Portuguese blogosphere revolution in 2003, opening up space for interaction among peers, which later expanded to Facebook and other social media (Ferreira 2024). This essay, however, focuses on an earlier venture that has managed to survive the rapid transformation of digital platforms: an online repository that has gathered thousands of photographs from nearly 200 veterans over the past two decades.

Based on research interviews with the digital archive's team, this essay explores the history and processes of Aveiro e Cultura, discussing the curatorial aspects that shape what is and is not displayed. It argues that Aveiro e Cultura's emergence and longevity as a vernacular repository of soldiers' photographs is inseparable from the colonial aphasia (Stoler 2011) that prevented the Portuguese colonial past from being addressed, formulated, and thoroughly discussed in the public sphere (Cardina 2024). Without public spaces and initiatives to share personal experiences, veterans have created alternative digital arenas where they can tell their unofficial narratives.

Focusing on the collection of photographs from wartime in Angola, which represents over 80% of all of the veterans' images in the archive, the essay examines the visual and textual presentation of three significant encounters experienced by the soldiers as a result of the war: their encounters with military life, with Africa

and with Africans. These were all photographable moments in the sense that the camera could capture them. Impromptu or staged, visual records were produced and collected by servicemen and later brought back to Portugal, where they were eventually digitised and made publicly available nearly four decades after military discharge.

The self-named digital archive will be examined from the visitor's perspective, meandering through its galleries and dead ends. The analysis will focus on the dyad of photo and caption, which forms the double-narrative thread the visitor encounters while browsing its pages. Detached from the "performative cord" that rendered photographs instruments of collective show and tell (Langford 2008), the images are left only with the textual clues provided by their captions. As Erving Goffman remarked, a picture "cannot be true or false in itself; these possibilities are reserved for the caption or label" (Goffman apud Gordon 1997, 5). The essay demonstrates that the photographs and their captions are neither ahistorical nor innocent: overlapping layers of curation have ensured that a visitor's journey through the digital archive follows marked trails.

Drawing on my earlier ethnographic research regarding veterans and their private photo collections (Antunes 2023), this article seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about the visual construction of the past. Photographs are, as anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards so aptly articulated, "visual incisions through time and space" that navigate various scales, bridging the "grand" and the "little" narratives of culture, history, and personal experience (Edwards 2001, 3). By intersecting different temporalities—from the moments when pictures were taken and collected to their transformation into digital objects that can be broadly disseminated—this essay aims to uncover the entanglements of expectations, memory, and storytelling surrounding military experiences in the colonies. What images did soldiers capture, preserve, and employ to craft their war narratives? And decades after their discharge, how do they engage with the opportunities presented by digital platforms?

## Private and public visions of the Portuguese colonial war

War and photography have a long history together. Images of troops preparing for action or resting after it, photographs of battlegrounds and landscapes of ruination abound in private and public archives. War has been one of the favourite photography subjects ever since the technique allowed for documenting warlike events in the mid-1850s. From the Crimean War to the trenches of World War I in Europe or the Vietnam War, the camera's memorialising gaze has turned conflicts that were photographed into scenes so familiar to many that they enjoy "a physical presence, a palpable cultural reality" (Trachtenberg 1985). Initially, war

photography was almost exclusively the domain of professional photographers seeking to visually document historical events. Later on, as technical developments progressed, amateurs joined in. The attraction of photography created armies of snapshotters who have produced an immense body of pictures over the last hundred years.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike war photographers, who captured some iconic images, soldiers' photographs tend to be more amateurish and formulaic.<sup>4</sup> They fall within the snapshot photography genre, which the art historian Geoffrey Batchen has provocatively labelled as boring pictures (Batchen 2008). Nevertheless, the lack of creativity and entrenched emotional emphasis in snapshots render them a revelatory medium: arising from the intimate act of shooting visual records of private lives, they reflect widespread ideologies, cultural imaginaries, and lived experiences (Zuromskis 2009).

Recent research on private collections of soldiers' photographs has examined several central and recurring pictorial themes: images of social occasions (soldiers resting, laughing, playing sports, or drinking), postcard-like pictures in touristy poses (in both militarised and civilian contexts), portraits of indigenous peoples, and snapshots of death and destruction during the war (Medeiros 2002, Nguyen & Belk 2007, Struk 2011). Created for private contemplation and circulation, soldiers' photographs often exhibit jarring combinations of mundane portrayals of military life alongside unexpected images of violence. Private pictures reveal the same dissonant blend of platitude and drama that literary scholar Samuel Hynes identified in war diaries and letters, which he noted existed to "subvert the notion that war can be both familiar and imaginable to persons who were not there" (Hynes 2000: 211). Soldiers' textual and visual documents commemorate the profound strangeness of war and the incongruous juxtaposition of triviality and extraordinariness (Batista 2000, Putney 2013, Sá 2003). Up-close and personal visions of war have the potential to open uncomfortable cracks in official narratives, for they follow different and contradictory logics: the former is guided by a desire to visually collect instants from personally memorable experiences, while the latter attempts to shape a favourable public image of events. The creation of national press bureaus has often enforced limits on what can and cannot be seen or pronounced, and censoring soldiers' photos is one of their key propaganda functions.<sup>5</sup>

The Portuguese colonial war was notable for the central role played by its visual representation; the production and circulation of photographs were heavily monitored and censored throughout its duration. At that time, Portugal was governed by the New State (Estado Novo), an authoritarian and conservative regime whose political and ideological apparatus utilised press censorship, political police, and numerous avenues of propaganda, all working to enforce

nationalism, corporatism, and traditional values (Alexandre 2017, Garcia et al. 2017).

One of the events that sparked this enduring conflict was the attacks on 15 March 1961 in Northern Angola by the UPA (Union of the Peoples of Angola). This incident became the focal point of an unprecedented official media campaign. Photographers, summoned by the Portuguese authorities, captured horrific images while embedded in the military convoy sent to contain the insurgents. Photographs depicting mutilated bodies and deceased infants were unabashedly published in the Portuguese media and distributed to international audiences; these images were ultimately presented at the UN Security Council meeting in June 1961 (see Ramos 2023 for a comprehensive analysis of the 1961 Portuguese media campaign). The war subsequently expanded to Guinea-Bissau (1963) and Mozambique (1964) as part of an extensive counterinsurgency campaign on three fronts, which only concluded with the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal and the subsequent decolonisation process.

The initial outburst of visual horror was followed by stringent control over the public representation of the war. After the 1961 attacks, the Ministry of Defence established a Public Information Service for the Armed Forces (*Serviço de Informação Pública das Forças Armadas – SIPFA*) aimed at shaping public opinion regarding military activities. Photographs were considered a dangerous breeding ground for enemy counterpropaganda, leading to a temporary ban on private cameras in operational areas (SIPFA 1961). From 1962 until the end of the war, all published images, whether still or moving, required prior approval from the military authorities. SIPFA's Portuguese press bureau collaborated with press censorship to ensure that all portrayals of destruction or violence were avoided. Visual and textual references to heavy weaponry (artillery, flamethrowers, and mines) or aviation (ground attacks or bombardments) were prohibited from the public sphere (Antunes 2023). For the Portuguese media, the war did not exist.

The official images depicting military presence in Africa showcased a close collaboration with local populations, visually reinforcing the Luso-tropical narrative of supposed multiracial harmony and colour-blindness that underpinned the Portuguese narrative of imperial exceptionalism (Cardão 2015, Castelo 1999, 2017, Pinto and Jerónimo 2015, Stucki 2019). Despite official propaganda, significant distinctions existed in treating individuals of differing skin tones. Furthermore, in the struggle against insurgency, racial markers could determine whether a person was considered trustworthy or suspicious. For clarity, I shall revise the terms used in this article to reflect that time's officially unspoken yet pervasive colour. I will, therefore, use the term "African" to refer to Angola's indigenous people and "Portuguese" to designate white Europeans.

Unlike the official photographs, those taken, purchased, or shared among soldiers did not adhere to the conventions that shaped public imagination. Even seemingly innocuous soldiers' photos were prone to provide unsanctioned glimpses from the front lines. In January 1962, the military press bureau intervened in a campaign by a women's magazine seeking female pen pals for troops abroad, known as war godmothers (madrinhas de guerra). SIPFA advised that magazines should avoid the pitfalls of using personal photographs. Beyond the risk of revealing operational details, published images could be used to mock the armed forces, as evidenced by a snapshot whose publication they obstructed, which depicted "two soldiers with machine guns, in combat positions, while a helmetless soldier appears to be cleaning his nails" (Antunes 2023). Private photographs of war took considerable time to surface in the public domain. However, by the turn of the century, images of veterans began to emerge from their previously restricted spheres. They gradually infiltrated blogs, books, and, more recently, social media. Freed from official surveillance, what stories do these images convey?

## The accidental war photography archive

The website *Aveiro & Cultura* offers an intriguing collection of materials, including teaching resources, various video games, transcriptions of books and periodicals, and photographs, all organised within a self-styled "digital archive" accessed via a somewhat old-fashioned and vintage-looking template. I first found it while searching for images of the Portuguese colonial war, only to realise it houses an unparalleled number of soldiers' photographs. It currently contains nearly 5,000 images credited to 180 contributors, spanning fourteen years, from the outbreak of the conflict in Angola in 1961 to the aftermath of independence for the African colonies in 1975.<sup>6</sup>

I browsed its numerous pages and struggled to find additional information. There is no 'About Us' page summarising its history, mission, and processes, so I sought out the people behind the scenes. Over the past few years, I have met and conducted several interviews with the archivist and his main assistant.<sup>7</sup>

During these interviews, I learned that *Aveiro e Cultura* is a digital venture established twenty years ago by Henrique Oliveira, a Portuguese teacher from Aveiro, a city in northern Portugal.<sup>8</sup>

The site was designed and launched in 2001 to share teaching materials with the local school community. Over time, *Aveiro e Cultura* expanded into unforeseen areas. In 2003, Oliveira posted the first batch of photographs from Angola, where he served as a conscript second lieutenant in the early 1970s. Oliveira was an amateur photographer, and military service allowed him to document the experience in detail. Soon after posting his wartime photos, Oliveira recalls that

visits to the site “exploded” and that dozens of messages from veterans offering to share their collections flooded his inbox. Somewhere along the way, Oliveira met Mário Silva, an industrial worker deployed in Angola in 1971, who contributed his substantial collection of snapshots. An amateur photographer, Silva was his unit’s unofficial cameraman in Angola.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, Silva has become highly active as a mediator between Aveiro e Cultura and other veterans’ communities—starting with his military unit, whose photographic collections were extensively digitised and displayed—and expanding to connect networks of social relations (local, familial, professional, etc.). Silva’s liaisons with fellow veterans also extend to virtual communities. After the turn of the century, blogs and social media introduced new forms of mediated social interaction and offered unprecedented tools for self-presentation (Caliandro 2017, Miller et al. 2016). Portuguese veterans took to social media to share their stories and create mnemonic communities, thereby circumventing the public scrutiny that continues to surround the colonial war (Ferreira 2020, 2024). Silva is the networking arm of Aveiro e Cultura: he connects with veterans and their families, assists in digitisation, and promotes the site on social media.

Research interviews were essential for understanding the history of the digital archive and clarifying aspects that might otherwise have remained perplexing, such as its vintage appearance and basic functionalities. *Aveiro e Cultura* appears to be caught in a time warp, which, in a sense, it is. It is managed by a pair of elderly amateur archivists who rely more on personal engagement and voluntarism than on IT expertise. There is no search engine, and visitors must navigate the archive as if perusing an analogue catalogue. Although there are digital resources that could help with cross-referencing data and metadata, the archivist, nonetheless, adheres to the logic of an analogue archive and the rationale of a repository: documents are stored with basic information deemed relevant, and downloading is permitted.

Whether recruited online or face-to-face, veterans are invited to engage in this collaborative effort to preserve and exhibit personal visions of wartime. Images are digitised, and veterans are asked to provide basic information about each donated piece. Photographs are displayed with a brief caption and the holder’s name, and each is attributed a date and location (some pictures have the contributor’s initials and date stamped on their bottom edge; see Figures 4 and 5). Aveiro e Cultura uses the term “author” to refer to the individual who kept it in their collection but was not necessarily the photographer. By favouring the social gesture of appropriation (holder/photograph) over the technical act of composing a picture (photographer/photograph), it unintentionally echoes current debates about authorship and ownership (to whom does a photograph belong?), swelling the ranks of those who argue that it is shared and diffused among the photographers, those who were photographed, and those who share the photo and use it to imagine places, events,

time, and people (Azoulay 2008, Hevia 2014). Although *Aveiro e Cultura* was not designed initially to archive war photographs, it has become an unparalleled digital source of soldiers' pictures. However, over the years, no adjustments have been made to meet the exponential growth of veterans' photographs received. Their pictures have not been given an autonomous section, so they are still mixed in among dozens of the archive's numerous collections under generic folder titles such as "Angola in images", "Guinea in images", and "Mozambique (Images)" (Figure 1). Navigating the Angola, Guinea and Mozambique sections, one wanders through predominantly geographically based subcollections (Figure 2).

"Angola in Images" features the most extensive collection of digitised photographs of soldiers. With over 3,500 images, it represents 85% of all wartime pictures. Credited to 132 contributors, the photographs from Angola are organised into more than 200 sub-folders, showcasing online galleries that vary significantly in the number of pictures. The images include aerial views, snapshots of servicemen in both their daily lives and at remarkable moments, depictions of African exoticism (covering landscapes, wildlife, traditional villages, and contemporary Angolan towns), as well as portraits of Africans, with or without Portuguese servicemen included in the composition.

Inseparable from veterans' will of memory, *Aveiro e Cultura*'s amateur assembly line of wartime photographs has spawned several levels of offline and online curation. Those who collaborate in locating contributors, sharing their pictures, and the site's archivist all participate – albeit at different times and with varying curatorial freedoms – in selecting the images for public display and drafting captions to assist in interpreting the pictures. The final decision rests with the archivist, who possesses editorial and veto power over the contents. Oliveira adheres to a common-sense criterion of general appeal: images should engage and interest the public, not merely their holders. Photographs of soldiers that do not provide glimpses of the original settings and circumstances (natural or built landscapes, fellow soldiers, civilian populations, military materials, and scenes) are excluded from the digital archive. Due to these overlapping layers of curation, *Aveiro e Cultura*'s assemblage of photographs starkly contrasts with private collections where the holders/protagonists are meticulously depicted throughout their military service. In this digital vernacular archive, by contrast, one cannot trace individual trajectories from a multi-centred visual narrative composed by numerous contributors.

Archives are neither apolitical nor unbiased repositories of documents and objects. On the contrary, they are "cultural artefacts of fact production" (Stoler 2002), actively shaping knowledge, categories, and perspectives on the world (Burton 2005, Stoler 2009, Trundle & Kaplonski 2011). Therefore, the seemingly apolitical *Aveiro e Cultura* archive is fundamentally political: it never explicitly

references war. Furthermore, it does not present images of violence—although a visitor may occasionally come across snapshots that suggest past violence, such as pictures of helicopter evacuations of wounded soldiers. In an interview for this study, Oliveira elucidated the guiding principle behind his actions as an archivist:

MJ: Did you ever say, “I don’t want to publish this” or “I can’t publish this”?

HO: Yes, that has happened. I remember a colleague of mine once brought me his photographic collection. He had been in Angola when war broke out and witnessed horrific scenes. He showed me his photos. There were lots of gruesome pictures, and I said to him, “I’m sorry, I cannot publish this”. Our troops were violent, too. This man had documented everything in photographs. I decided to only publish photos from his collection that did not show violence. How could I post images of severed corpses and entrails gushing out? All that barbarism should be forgotten. (Interview with Henrique Oliveira, 10 October 2019)

By refusing to make public images of brutality, Aveiro e Cultura’s archivist was not swayed by contemporary debates surrounding the mass digitisation of documents and the risks of perpetuating colonial oppression. Had he been, he would have focused more on the best way to acknowledge the “violated bodies and biographies without replicating historical patterns of abuse” (Odumosu 2020, 7). Rather than advocating for an ethics of care towards former subjects of colonisation, the archivist chose to avert his gaze from the violence of the war, thereby preserving a generally benign portrayal of the Portuguese military presence in Africa. Justified by the supposed benefits of amnesia (“all that barbarism should be forgotten”), this curatorial stance stems from Oliveira’s ambiguous relationship with the war and the decline of the Portuguese empire. This ambiguity reflects large segments of contemporary Portuguese society. Inextricably linked to the ongoing prevalence of the discourse of Portuguese exceptionalism (Pinto and Jerónimo 2015), this ambiguity fails to engage critically with the thirteen-year conflict and the regime that sustained it. All archivists indelibly shape the scope and reach of archives by mediating between archived materials and their users, “between conceptions of the past and extant documentation” (Blouin 1999, Marquis 2007). In the case of Aveiro e Cultura’s war photography collection, curatorial actions prioritised documenting soldiers, their daily lives, and the surrounding environment (civilians, natural and built landscapes, wildlife) while distancing itself from the legacy of violence associated with the war. By favouring

personal portrayals of wartime, the archivist avoided a critical examination of late Portuguese colonialism and limited the archive's contribution to collecting, preserving, and showcasing private glimpses into the past.

I have yet to find any comparable digital archive of soldiers' photographs.<sup>10</sup> Aveiro e Cultura's vernacular character makes it an exceptional case, as it simultaneously showcases soldiers' war images while being maintained and enriched by the original custodians of the photographs. Its two decades of existence are noteworthy amid the impermanence of most internet sites. Aveiro e Cultura has survived the loss of its original hosting domain and, shortly after its inception, was included in the central Portuguese web archive, thereby ensuring the preservation of the site's contents.<sup>11</sup>

Unconnected to formal organisations, whether state- or privately funded, it continues with its amateur and collaborative structure. Stories and photographs are transferred from donors to the digital archive through interpersonal relationships: flexibility, not bureaucracy, governs the archival processes. Managed by amateur archivists who were once involved in central historical events, it aims to preserve and present visual documents that might otherwise vanish. In this respect, Aveiro e Cultura follows and extends the archive-as-hospice model (Zeitlyn 2012). Not only are documents safeguarded, but they find a home in a hospice run by peers. War, as it was lived, experienced, and captured on camera by ordinary soldiers, is granted a safe space to share and exhibit it.

## Picturing soldiers

Nearly one million men were conscripted for thirteen years. Uprooted from their civilian lives, these young men were armed, given expedited training, and deployed to combat insurgencies in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. This marked their first significant encounter with the colonial war: being thrust into military life. Regardless of their military vocation or personal support for the cause, thousands of draftees were swiftly instructed to behave like soldiers. The fundamental symbolic distinction between civilian and military, regarded by anthropologist Celso Castro as an invention of the army, is crucial for acquiring a new identity. This distinction instils conformity, discipline, and obedience while establishing that the ideal conduct is "not to be a civilian" (Castro 2013). Although this concept may have seemed imprecise to many conscripts, it aimed to shape internal dimensions (subjection to a hierarchy, adherence to military values) and external dimensions (representing Portuguese authority and the armed forces).

The encounter with military life also marked the socially recognised transition from boyhood to manhood. Previous ethnographic research on veterans and their photo collections has highlighted the importance of capturing, preserving,

and revisiting visual traces of military experiences (Antunes 2024). The recruits' newly acquired status reinforced their belief that the camera should document everything. And that is precisely what soldiers did: they hunted for pictures of war. Those who owned cameras became amateur reporters and often took hundreds of photographs; many who lacked a camera assembled their collections with images purchased from fellow servicemen. Negatives and prints circulated between barracks and photographic labs in African cities – whether in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, or Mozambique – fuelling the informal trade of visual records of wartime. Photographs were sent across the Atlantic via post to families, friends, and sweethearts as proof of life at war on the African continent (Pontes 2019).

The visual certification of military experience inspired numerous photographs. However, authorities restricted these images by controlling the public narrative of the war. Unlike other conflicts, there were no official cameramen assigned to document the progress and victories of the troops (Bijl 2015, Gerster 2015). In contrast to their Portuguese counterparts, Vietnam War veterans amassed an extensive collection of combat snapshots, capturing everything from bombings to attacks on enemy bases. These were eagerly shared and displayed, providing evidence of soldiers' presence during pivotal moments of the war (Nguyen & Belk 2007). Based on the *Aveiro e Cultura* collection, a visitor might assume that the Portuguese colonial war was militarily uneventful. However, data from my previous research indicate otherwise: Portuguese soldiers took and collected snapshots of violence and destruction. Nevertheless, these images have remained out of the public's sight; the decision to publish private photographs in books or online is typically preceded by careful curation, which restricts the disclosure of visual traces of violence (Antunes, 2023).

A succession of curatorial gestures filters soldiers' photographs in *Aveiro e Cultura*, primarily showcasing moments before or after combat: troops moving, pausing, or waiting (Figures 6, 7, and 8) – combat itself is visually absent. Eliminating visual evidence of violence does not erase it but makes it more discreet. One can see it in images of material damage, such as buildings or vehicles – traces that survive the curatorial ban on more explicit depictions of brutality. Soldiers sometimes used such materials as photographic props, staging images in which they appeared like tourists in hell. Captions also reinforce this staged intent. For instance, Figure 5 combines a dual inscription of past destruction: the photograph holder is shown entering a destroyed car, while the caption refers to the 1961 UPA attacks that prompted Portugal's mobilisation against what was then termed "terrorism". The caption reads, "In an abandoned vehicle that once belonged to farmers", suggesting that the car is a quasi-archaeological trace of the destruction that triggered the war in Angola. The image depicts a soldier holding the door as if unaware of the vehicle's evident ruin: the car's bonnet is

smashed, the wheels and headlights are missing, and the door bears inscriptions carved into the metal. Beyond the façade of normality (a soldier getting into a car), the image occupies a space between a visual evocation of past destruction and a humorous appropriation of the remnants of violence, thereby offering an unsettling photo-memorial of past terror and devastation.

Historian Joanna Bourke argues that popular combat literature and martial films represent the most democratic form of basic training, conveying a repertoire of images that shape soldiers' prospective and retrospective narratives about their war experiences (Bourke 1999).<sup>12</sup> The ideals of male strength and heroic patriotism, the allure of firearms, and the exaltation of the pleasures of combat converge to interpret one's war experience through an imaginary camera lens. In the absence of reportages, Portuguese servicemen posed and gestured in ways made familiar by popular culture. Numerous images showcase the re-enactment of martial moments: servicemen aiming weapons, utilising military devices, or driving in armoured vehicles, revealing the attraction of weaponised imagery.

The Portuguese authorities would likely have censored every single one of these images for both evoking bellicose imagery and displaying an undesired air of relaxation. The contrived nature of this type of picture is frequently revealed by its general setting and by the protagonists' smiles, clothing, or laid-back postures, which contradict the apparent belligerence of their poses. However, the more recent captions often reinforce the warrior fantasy by providing literal descriptions of the scenes depicted, failing to acknowledge their performative nature. Some images prolong the original scenic pact by textually asserting what the images deny. The smiling artilleryman was probably unfamiliar with the heavy weapon on which he was seated, relaxed and bare-chested (Figure 9). The soldier using a radio transceiver as if under enemy fire is contradicted by the scenery behind him – the wall, likely part of a military building, the 200-litre water drum on the left, and the wet clothes drying background – all indicating that it was an intentional re-enactment of a warlike scene within the safety of military walls (Figure 10).

Although they are somewhat rare, visual representations of hand-to-hand combat illustrate the playfulness surrounding photographic practices among soldiers. For instance, Figure 11 conveys multiple meanings. Two soldiers mimic a fight: the one facing the camera raises his gun above his head as if about to strike his opponent, while the second soldier, whose back is turned to the camera, appears unarmed and waits for the blow. The photograph vividly depicts a highly improbable situation: in a counter-insurgency conflict, the enemy was typically indistinguishable from the civilian population, from which precise, swift, and primarily invisible attacks were launched. Although the second soldier's face is not fully visible, he is African, a detail that renders the composition exceptionally

provocative as it plays with the racial boundaries that marked the Portuguese colonial war. This African serviceman was likely Angolan and a fellow soldier from the same unit, one of many Africans conscripted as the war progressed. In 1971, the year this photograph was taken, 42% of the troops mobilised for Angola were locally recruited (Estado-Maior do Exército 1988, Coelho 2002). The photograph's caption explicitly mentions the playful nature of the situation and identifies the African soldier as a friend; however, it does not provide his name (was it forgotten?); instead, it directs attention to the vegetation behind the pair, as if the blooming coffee flowers were more significant than the performance staged for the camera.

## Hunters and hunted

For Portuguese conscripts, wartime was both a source of anxiety and a youthful adventure. Military service abroad radically expanded the horizons of young men from a peripheral nation long governed by an authoritarian regime. When the war erupted in 1961, 45% of Portuguese labour was concentrated in agriculture, nearly 40% of the population was illiterate, and the country was characterised by a profound rural-urban sociological asymmetry (Nunes 1964). During the war years, draftees were mostly poorly educated, unskilled, and had limited expectations for social mobility. Their arrival in Africa marked a significant moment in their lives; not only were soldiers embarking on a full-scale military life, but they were also doing so in an unfamiliar context. The second important encounter they faced due to the colonial war was their engagement with the African territory to which they were conscripted. The climate, the people, and the landscape all combined to signify a dramatically different new world. For example, the exotic nature of Angola's flora and fauna is a significant motif in the photographs exhibited in Aveiro e Cultura. Soldiers transformed African landscapes into memorable mise-en-scènes for portraits. Numerous images depict tropical fruits (bunches of bananas being the most popular, followed by pineapples) and snapshots of small monkeys, generally referred to as military unit mascots. However, photographs featuring hunting trophies are perhaps the most revealing of the exotic Africa genre.

The imperial enterprise is closely linked to hunting and exhibiting wild specimens. Tales of European hunters have long stirred the imagination with notions of conquest and control over colonised territories' natural environments and human populations (Ryan 2000, Storey 1991). With the rise of photography as a portable technology, a new hunt began for exotic subjects captured with a camera that produced and propagated stereotypical illustrations of majestic African landscapes, vibrant wildlife, and extraordinary racial diversity (Direito

2023, Ryan 2013). Furthermore, apparent similarities exist between hunters and warriors: both depend on skill with firearms to take down their quarry, and both embody qualities of resilience, precision, courage, and perseverance (Bourke 1999, Ryan 2000). Hunting features prominently in the repertoire of tales veterans share about their military service in Africa, as colonial and warrior narratives intersect in the last European wars of decolonisation. Both in published memoirs (Gouveia 2002, Niza 2012) and oral storytelling (Antunes 2015, Campos 2017), accounts of chasing and shooting animals are prevalent in the stories of Portuguese veterans.

Images of hunting trophies in the *Aveiro e Cultura* online collection exhibit a consistent visual pattern: servicemen pose alongside one or more dead animals, primarily African buffaloes and antelopes, referred to respectively as *pacaças* and *palancas* (felines and reptiles appear less frequently in private collections, likely due to the local fauna in the regions where the military was deployed). Occasionally, soldiers hold the animals' horns or tails, mimicking bullfighting gestures demonstrating human mastery over the creatures. There is always an atmosphere of joyous celebration, yet it remains unclear whether death is being commemorated or if it signals a welcome deviation from the monotony of military rations. Africans are typically absent from these images (Figure 12) despite their likely fundamental roles as guides or skilled hunters. The omission of Africans from the pictorial history of hunting practices, which echoes in other colonial contexts (Rizzo 2005, Ryan 2000), is contradicted by contemporary discursive revisits of the past. Interestingly, while the visual mementoes of Portuguese soldiers' hunting escapades during wartime generally exclude Africans, anecdotes from veterans, both oral and written, frequently highlight the remarkable expertise of Africans –for instance, the detailed account of a local guide who mimicked an African buffalo calf's cry to lure a herd within the range of Portuguese troops (Gouveia 2002: 18-20; see also Niza 2012). This dissonance between imagery and storytelling underscores the malleability of memory: unlike photographs, which freeze moments into a fixed composition, memory constitutes a relational and mutable construct of the past in the present and is thus subject to continual reconfiguration (see, for example, the selection of writings in Ollick et al. 2011).

Amongst the many formulaic depictions of hunting trophies in *Aveiro e Cultura*, one photograph offers an extraordinary inversion of the usual imagery (Figure 13). A uniformed white soldier and two African civilians stand around a dead animal. The soldier is unarmed and gazes at the prey while the African men hold rifles. The man on the right rests his foot on the trophy, signalling power and ownership over the carcass, whereas the one on the left points his gun at the dead animal and frowns at the camera. The caption reads, “*Resultado de uma caçada*”, which can be translated as “Result of a hunt”. This choice of words dissociates the picture from whatever might have happened prior as if only the trophy mattered.

It overlooks the three men portrayed and their agency. Observing the image, one is struck by the soldier's apparent passivity and the active postures of the Africans, which starkly contrast with numerous comparable photographs depicting similar hunting events. Following Odumosu's proposal for a speculative ethics of care (Odumosu 2020), I endeavoured to return to the instant Figure 13 imaginatively was taken and produce an alternative narrative. "Africans teaching a Portuguese soldier how to hunt" seems a more equitable caption. Guided by this, an observer could easily envision the African men imparting lessons on tracking and slaying prey, thereby introducing the white soldier to wildlife he had previously been unable to comprehend.

The photographic encounter with African civilians also includes a troubling image that I call warrior trophies. Similar to the hunting trophies discussed earlier, this type of image involves composing visuals that testify to a mastery in capturing prey. As there are no traces of violence and death in *Aveiro e Cultura*, the warrior trophies depicted are living and unscathed civilians captured during military operations. Numerous photographs in the Angolan section are accompanied by captions that typically read along the lines of "natives retrieved from the bush." The notion of "retrieval" serves as a euphemism for what, in practice, amounted to the imprisonment of civilians by the military. The Portuguese counter-insurgency doctrine dictated that local civilians found outside the areas secured by the authorities should be rounded up, thereby diminishing the likelihood of popular support for the liberation movements. Captured civilians were subsequently handed over to colonial authorities or the political police of the *Estado Novo*, the PIDE/DGS, for further interrogation regarding guerrilla activity (Afonso & Gomes 2010).

The four photographs comprising the collage "Fear the Colonial Soldiers" (Figure 15) originate from various parts of the Quixico gallery, specifically within the section "Angola in Images." The similarities among these photographs became evident while analysing the data from the digital archive, leading to the creation of the collage through a speculative arrangement of different moments from the same events. Attributed to three holders, these four images depict a group of civilians—four women and a child—surrounded by Portuguese soldiers. Various domestic items (mats, blankets, containers) are scattered across the floor, likely representing the personal belongings they were permitted to bring to the Portuguese barracks. A stark contrast is observable between the demeanour of the Africans (tense postures, downcast eyes, and a child seeking refuge in a woman's lap) and the relaxed, smiling disposition of the soldiers. This disparity highlights the asymmetry between colonised civilians and colonial soldiers. Unarmed and unable to resist the military's actions and orders, the civilians succumbed to a final act: being photographed as a living testament to military efficacy. Among the

dozens of photographs of warrior trophies, these four images stand out: civilians remain resignedly motionless as Portuguese soldiers move in and out of the frame (some squatting down, an officer attempting to speak to a frightened child, and a soldier inching closer to one of the women, pretending to touch her breast). In a research interview with Mário Silva, the archivist's assistant, I discovered he was the photographer behind the camera despite these images being credited to their respective holders. As was the case each time "natives were brought in from the bush," Silva was asked to take photographs before the civilians were transported to the Battalion headquarters.

This was the result of one of my company's operations. The terrorists fled, and the women and children were left behind. They called me, and I took the photos. Afterwards, I sold them to anyone who wanted them. I don't have any of those photos now. (Interview with Mário Silva, 17 September 2020)

These photographs and their narratives reveal that African detainees served as valuable props, as everyone wished to have their picture taken with them. They were used to create images that became commodities. Numerous copies were printed, sold, and preserved for decades before being digitised and exhibited in *Aveiro e Cultura*. Frozen in the moment they were captured by the camera and subjected to the perpetual gaze of all who encounter the images over time, the Angolan civilians are seen but not heard. We do not know who they are or how they defined themselves. We overlook what happened before and after they were transformed into portraits of themselves, stripped of any existence beyond their photographic presence. The asymmetric nature of the photographic event—an asymmetry that persists even in circumstances where consent is unequivocally given by the person who presses the shutter and the individual who agrees to authorise the image (Azoulay 2008)—is heightened by the cumulative conditions of colonialism and war. The right to see, exhibit, and touch colonised bodies resurfaced in numerous photographs of African civilians, rendering them silent actors who were compelled to become part of the scenery.

## Conclusion

Captured with a camera and kept as mementoes, the photographs of Portuguese soldiers from wartime draw on visual repertoires that are staged, mimicked, and repeatedly performed: at the moment a photographic image is composed, and at every subsequent viewing when the photographs are narratively enacted. The soldiers use these images to encapsulate and inscribe their personal

experiences into history. In these photographs, the soldiers are more than mere uniformed men posing for the camera; they are individuals summoned to arms by a collective cause, deployed to fulfil a specific mission in a distinct setting. None of this is apparent in the images; their generic context and unseen details mean they can only be understood through discursive data, accessible via verbal storytelling or textual insertions. Both offer clues to comprehend otherwise puzzling images.

Focusing on a digital archive containing private photographs from the Portuguese colonial war, the essay explored the transformation of visual and affective mementoes into records of history. Drawing on ethnographic research regarding the production, circulation, and uses of war photographs, it excavated the visible contents of the archive along with its hidden dynamics, concluding that its vernacular character is crucial for understanding its success and longevity: it offers safe custody for personal documents at risk of vanishing and opens a digital arena where unofficial narratives can be presented. Soldiers' photographs are incorporated into a multi-faceted visual story from below, comprising a patchwork of glimpses into military life in Africa. The captions provide a textual counterpart to the visible images, which is essential for their interpretation. Guided by the narrative thread established by the dyad of photograph and caption, visitors to the archive are offered visions of war produced by ordinary soldiers. Even though the pictures are no longer subject to the ideological control that once constrained the public imagination of the war, they are shaped by several layers of curation that present a benign vision of wartime, prolonging a propagandistic view of the final years of the Portuguese colonial regime. The archivist has actively avoided publishing any traces of violence, concentrating instead on displaying an assortment of images from the daily lives of hundreds of ordinary soldiers.

Separated from the narratives that usually recount the contexts of photographs and their meanings, images dissolve into the indistinctness of generalised visual patterns. Soldiers used the camera to document the extraordinary times to which they were conscripted, capturing and producing a vast volume of wartime imagery. The documentary purposes and the playful re-enactment of visual repertoires converged to record significant encounters with military life, Africa, and its people. A discernible pattern emerges of soldiers adopting warrior poses, both by staging bellicose re-enactments and by showcasing their prowess in capturing prey, posing for the camera alongside both human and non-human trophies. The captions underpin this visual fiction, subsequently added to the photographs, prolonging the original theatrical artifice while avoiding problematic formulations. Sanitised by seemingly innocuous interpretations, the images are stripped of their original contexts, becoming visual tableaux open to varied interpretations.

## Author

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## Endnotes

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2 Seen from the Portuguese side, this conflict may be referred to as a guerra do ultramar (overseas war), a term that denotes political proximity to the former regime, or it can be described as a colonial war, an epithet that recognizes the colonial historical circumstances. For the sake of simplification, and since the article focuses on the war in Angola, I will henceforth use the term colonial war in its singular form

3 During the Great War, for instance, images from the front were popularized and reached a wide public through their transformation into illustrated postcards (Vries 2016, Mayhew 2019).

4 There are numerous examples of iconic pictures of war captured by professional photographers. Interestingly, some of these photographs have brought up questions about authenticity and documentary purpose. See, for instance, Renn (2015) on the photo of the flag being raised on Iwo Jima, or Lavoie (2017) on Capa's falling soldier. On the public impact of iconic war pictures, see Hagopian 2006, Sontag 2005.

5 See, for instance, the British Official Press Bureau, created in 1914, that reviewed every photograph before its publication (Struk 2011).

6 Numbers of photographs and contributors were collected in March 2025 and may change in the near future, as new images are regularly added to the digital archive. This digital archive also features photographs from military personnel deployed in East Timor (then, Portuguese Timor) and in Goa in India, but they make up a comparatively small fragment of the archive's war photos.

7 Research interviews with Henrique Oliveira took place in the Aveiro e Cultura office at the secondary school where he taught for more than three decades. Interviews with Mário Silva, the archivist's assistant, took place at his home in a village near Aveiro. Occasional electronic communication with Oliveira and Silva have also complemented information for this article.

8 Oliveira created Aveiro e Cultura after attending an IT training programme (Prof2000) promoted by the Portuguese Ministry of Education. For seventeen years, the site was hosted on the programme's domain. Oliveira claims that hosting was cancelled without prior notice in early 2018. Archived material was lost and Oliveira was forced to reassemble it on a local school domain whose servers frequently malfunctioned. Both data and functionalities were lost with this unforeseen change.

9 The collaboration between the archivist and his assistant resulted in an edited volume about veterans from Cacia, Silva's hometown in northern Portugal, which was published by the local parish council (Junta de Freguesia). See Silva & Oliveira 2010.

10 For coeval conflicts, and specifically the Vietnam war, I located both state-sponsored and commercial online initiatives, that regard soldiers' pictures as either historical documents or valuable commodities. See the site Personal Snapshots – Picturing the Vietnam War (<https://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/ex-war-snapshots-vietnam.html?loclr=blogflt>), part of the wider Library of Congress Veterans History Project that gathers soldiers' photographs, audio recordings and manuscripts. As for vernacular images from the Algerian war of independence, excluding published books (Mauss-Copeau 2003, Quemeneur and Zeghidor 2011), I found no references to digital archives.

11 Arquivo.pt grew out of a research project of the University of Lisbon with the aim of preserving information published online from 1996 onwards. Aveiro e Cultura has been archived in Arquivo.pt since January 2002. Oliveira learned about the web archive through the author, and was thrilled to thoroughly explore Aveiro e Cultura's past.

12 Kristof Titeca's book on photographs from inside the Lord's Resistance Army offers interesting insights on the power of the action-film heroes of the 1980s and 1990s in the construction of visual narratives of life among former Ugandan rebels (Titeca 2019). See also Richards (1994) on how Rambo and Kung Fu films were regarded as formative among Sierra Leone's RUF rebels.

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Páscoa de 2018, com o Prof2000, apagando o valioso espólio recolhido ao longo de 17 anos de trabalho. Diversas funçõ

Figure 1: Two pages from Aveiro e Cultura: the digital archive's home page and its main index. War photos can be found in the hyperlinks "Angola in images", "Guiné in Images", "Mozambique (images)", highlighted in purple.

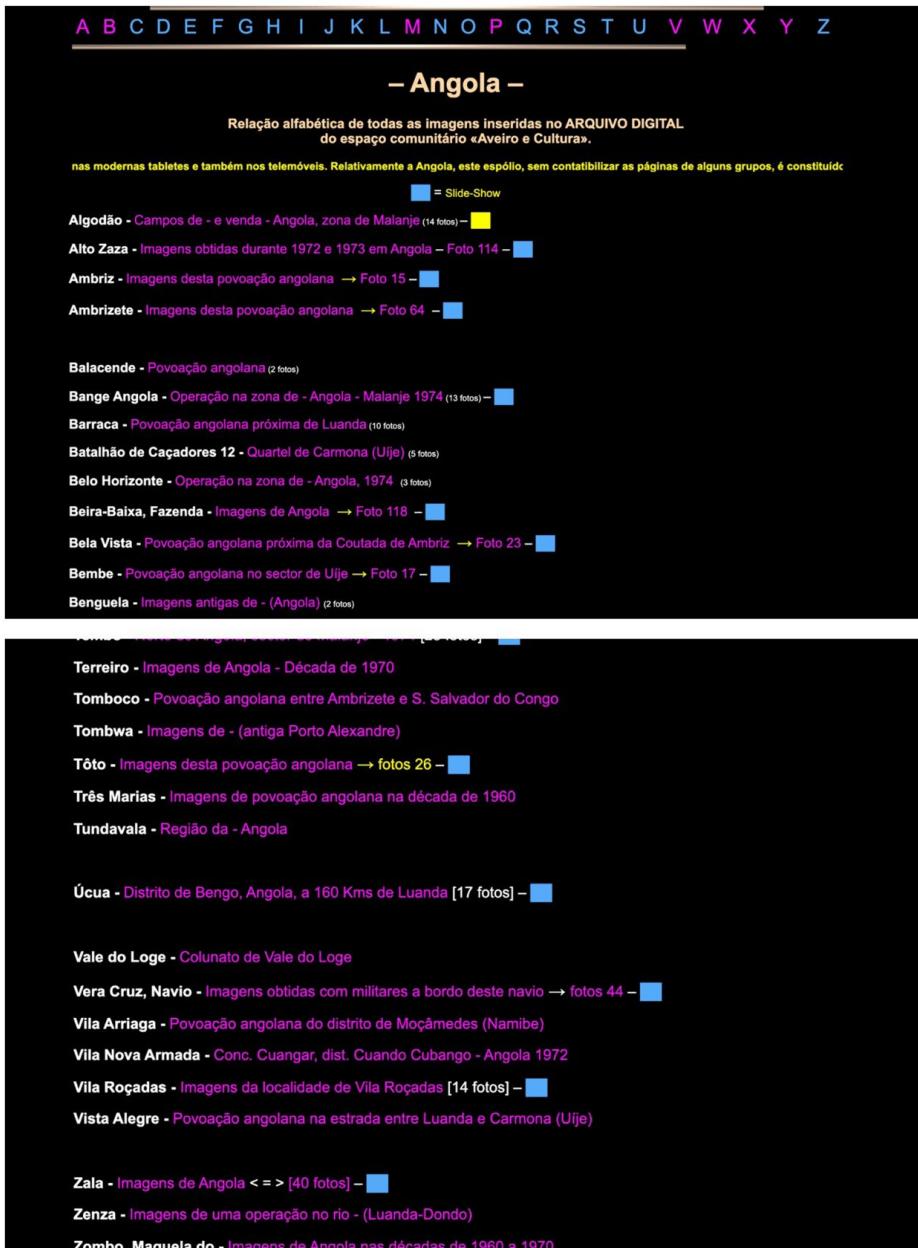


Figure 2: Collage of the initial and final segments of the table of contents for the "Angola in Images" section. These two segments contain mostly geographical-ly-based galleries and two thematic galleries: algodão [cotton] and the Vera Cruz, the vessel that transported troops from Portugal to Africa.

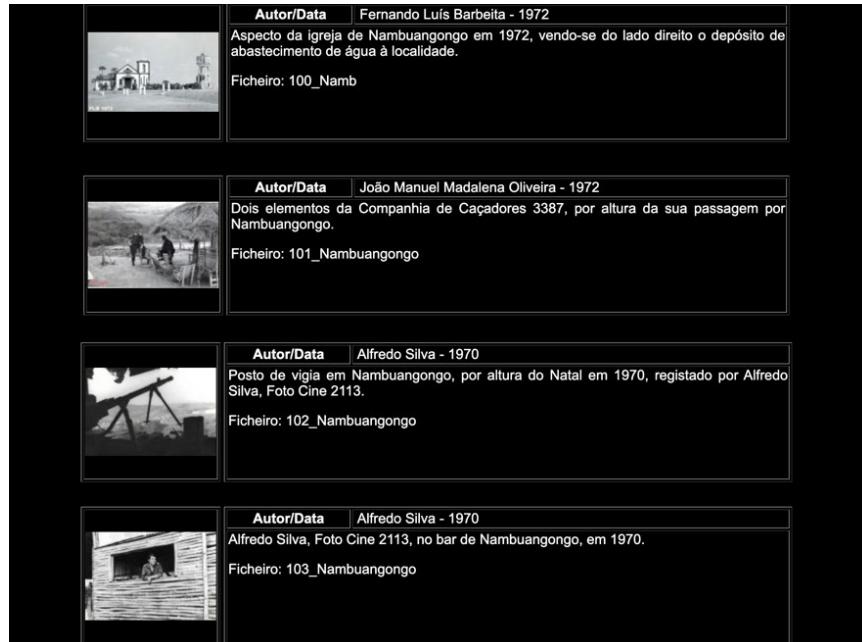


Figure 3: Fragment of a page from the Nambuangongo gallery from the “Angola in Images” section of the Aveiro e Cultura archive.

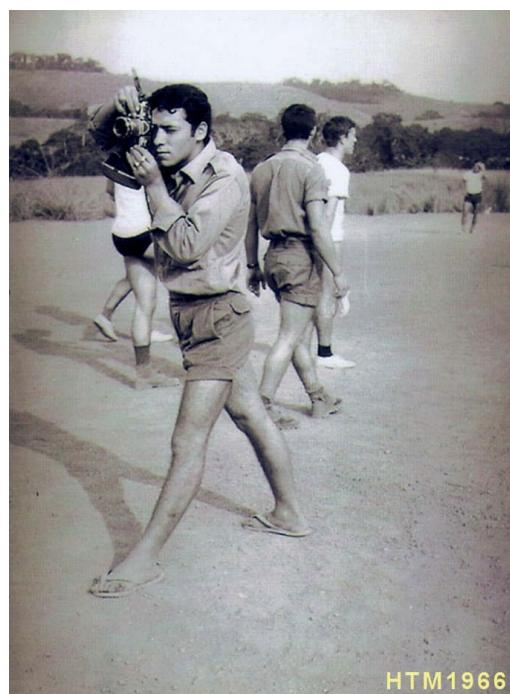


Figure 4: Staging the photographer. Original caption reads “Horácio Tavares recording images for posterity.” Source: Horácio Tavares, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.



Figure 5: Staging normality amidst ruins. Original caption: "In an abandoned vehicle that once belonged to farmers." Source: Amadeu Alpoim, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.



Figure 6: Marching in the bush. Original caption: "Members of Cavalry Company 1773 in operation, area of Canacassala." Source: Vitor Abreu. Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.



Figure 7: The warriors' rest. Original caption: "Members of 2nd company of Battalion 4614 in the bush, refueling with field rations." Source: José Pinto, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.



Figure 8: Journey to a war. Original caption: "Rookies on their way to the Dembos region." Source: Raul Mesquita, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive



Figure 9: The smiling artillery-man. Original caption: "Manuel Costa in the anti-aircraft "nest""." Source: Manuel Costa, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.

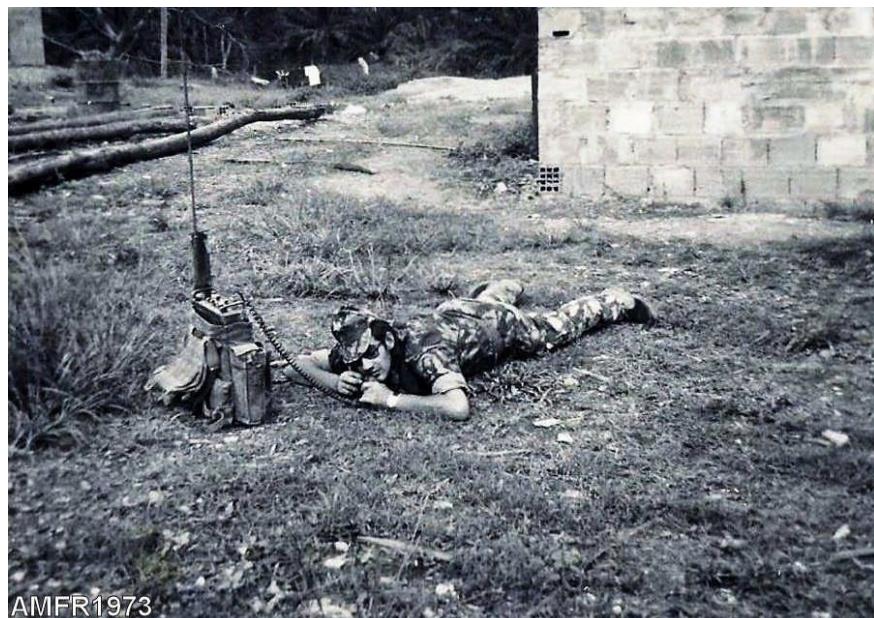


Figure 10: Mimicking combat transmissions. Original caption "Using one of the radio transceivers." Source: Adriano Rodrigues, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive



Figure 11: Friend or foe. Original caption: "Playing around with a friend. In the background, coffee flowers in bloom" Source: João Fernandes, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.

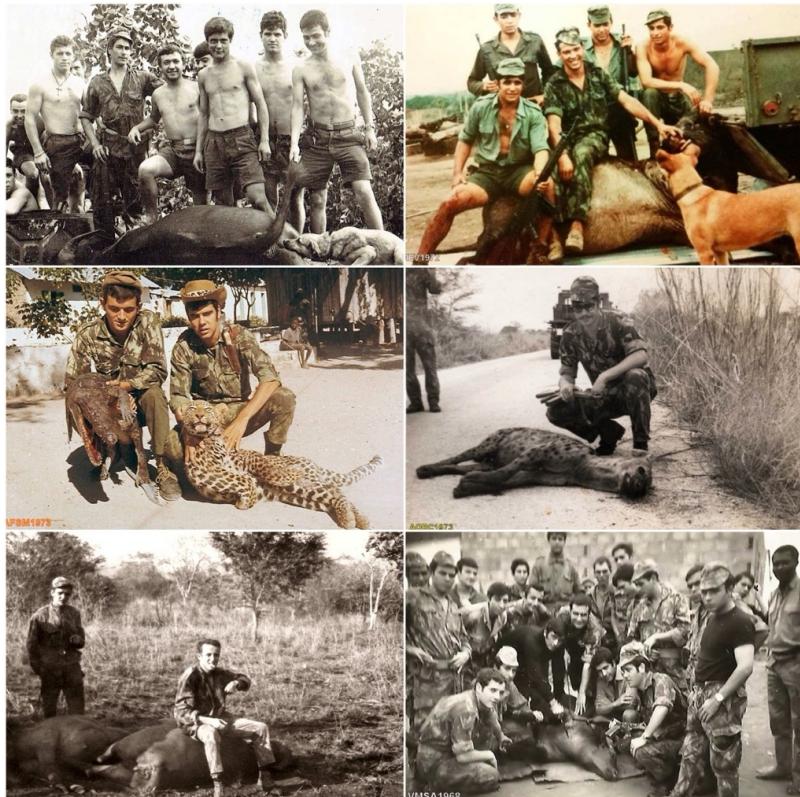


Figure 12: The joys of hunting at war. Collage made by the author with photographs from the Angola in Images section, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.



Figure 13: Africans teaching a Portuguese soldier how to hunt. Original caption "Result of a Hunt." Source: António Cardoso, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.



Figure 14: Fear the colonial soldiers. Collage made by the author with photographs from the Angola in Images section, Aveiro e Cultura Digital Archive.