

Algerian Force Apparently Wiped Out At Desolate Oasis in Spanish Sahara

By Malcolm W. Browne; Special to
The New York Times. Feb. 2, 1976



AMGALA, Spanish Sahara, Jan. 31 — A two-day skirmish between Moroccan and Algerian troops here has apparently ended with the liquidation of an Algerian unit of several hundred men and with the Moroccans in complete control.

Moroccan soldiers were trying today to make themselves comfortable in the cold, sandladen air, and were jubilant about a large cache of weapons, ammunition and supplies they said they had captured.

Amgala Is an oasis where up to 3,000 nomadic tribesmen live during the driest part of the year, but it is now unpopulated. It is 40 miles north of the border of Mauritania and 190 miles from the Algerian frontier, in Spanish Sahara — a territory Spain has ceded to Morocco and Mauritania.

It is one of the most desolate, inaccessible places in the world.

Today the Moroccan Government, using a transport plane, helicopters and scout cars, brought a group of reporters to the site—the first time outsiders have been allowed into the area since the fighting began.

Supply Base Established

The Moroccan commander of the operation, dubbed “Operation Disinfection,” said that Algerian forces and their local, supporters, the Polisario Front, established a major supply base here a month ago.

The commander, Col. Ahmed Dlimi, said the base was discovered only a short time ago, presumably by reconnaissance planes.

He said Moroccan troops moved in carefully from their base at Smara, 25 miles to the west, and executed an encircling movement last Monday night. In the fighting on Tuesday and Wednesday, he said, 109 of the enemy—nearly all Algerian regular troops—had been captured and about 200 killed.

He gave his own losses as two killed and 14 wounded.

He explained the enormous disparity in casualties by saying that the encirclement movement had put his men in a very favorable position.

The battleground, such as it is, showed few signs today that any significant fighting had occurred.

A huge stock of weapons and supplies, as well as four captured trucks, showed no trace of battle damage. A cluster of huts made from shale and mud at the center of the Algerian position bore no bullet marks and window glass was intact.

The debris usually left on a battlefield—spent shell casings and cartridges, abandoned field equipment, bloody bandages and the like—was entirely absent, as were shell craters.

Colonel Dlimi said that the action had been slowed by shelling from Algerian forces entrenched on a rock mesa about three miles to the southeast.

The captured arms displayed to correspondents included Chinese antitank guns, Soviet SU-7 heat-seeking anti-aircraft missiles, and crates of TNT military charges marked “Kankakee Unit, Joliet Arsenal” from the United States.

All the captured weapons were of the type normally used by infantry.

Asked what had happened to the Algerian prisoners, the colonel said they had all been taken to Rabat, the Moroccan capital. In Rabat today, the Government published the names of 95 of the captives, including two officers.

Four prisoners, their hands tied behind their backs, were flown to Rabat tonight.

Officers said that no strafing or bombing attacks by any aircraft had been involved in the clash, although a Moroccan F-5 reconnaissance fighter was brought down near here on Jan. 21, presumably by one of the heat-seeking missiles.

While the character of the fighting remains in doubt, it seems nevertheless that the Moroccans have demonstrated, that a significant Algerian force was operating deep within Spanish Sahara, which Morocco now considers its own territory.

For most of the tribesmen of the area, whose ways have changed little over the centuries, it probably makes little difference what national authority nominally controls the widely scattered oases.

In the 10 or more square miles of drifting sand and sharp shale in the Amgala vicinity, ‘there was not the slightest sign of civilian inhabitant or domestic animal today.

Spain will formally transfer sovereignty to Morocco and Mauritania one month from now, but all Spanish troops and most civilians have already left. Street signs, the names of stores and so forth in the larger communities are still in Spanish.

In Amgala, widely dispersed Moroccan troops have set up a battery of five howitzers and have put machine guns and antitank weapons into position.

But neither here nor in the base at Smara was there any real sense of impending battle. Troops here occupied part of the day improvising a banquet table in the open desert for their visitors, at which they served stewed goat, fruit and soda pop.

Not a shot was heard all day, and Colonel Dlimi said there; had been no contact with the enemy since the end of the clash Wednesday.