The long wars of national liberation in the former Portuguese African territories (Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau) during 1961-1974 have evoked a voluminous literature, mostly by Africanists sympathetic to the cause of liberation. Portugal, after all, was an easy target for sharp academic pens. It was the first European colonial power to seize African territory and the last to leave. Its stubborn efforts to hold on by fighting three long wars far from home were costly and anachronistic. Lisbon was fighting more than anticolonial revolts; it was fighting the tide of history, which by the 1960s had brought independence to virtually all other European colonies.

Now John P. Cann, a retired U.S. navy captain who earned a doctorate in War Studies at Kings College (London) and has published articles on counterinsurgency, tells the story of Portugal's African campaigns "from the perspective of the Portuguese military" (p. xiii). The emphasis is added to underscore both the uniqueness of the author's focus and the analytical difficulties it entails. As he asserts at the outset:

The Portuguese military achieved outright military victory in Angola, a credible stalemate in Guinea, and, with additional resources and spirited leadership, could have regained control of northern Mozambique. Unfortunately, Portugal's political leaders remained shortsighted and removed from reality, and the military and social successes were squandered through political intransigence. When victory was within Portugal's grasp, political inflexibility created a frustrated military and a revolution in 1974 (p. xiii).

To be sure, from the military standpoint alone, for a small, relatively poor country to wage three protracted, widely-separated counterinsurgency campaigns so far from the metropole, each with its own peculiar conditions, without any prior experience or doctrine, was, as the title of the first chapter denotes, "A Remarkable Feat of Arms." In elaborating this thesis, Cann systematically examines these three African wars, highlighting the following major elements: the strategic challenges to the metropole; the nature of Portugal's deeply political, ideological, almost existential attachment to its overseas territories, which solidified in the face of nationalist resistance; the origin and development of Portuguese counterinsurgency doctrine, and how it compared with contemporary British, French, and American military thinking; the reorganization of the Portuguese armed forces, education and training for the new counterinsurgencies; the Africanization of the wars and its crucial political and military contributions to Lisbon's ability to sustain the wars; the role of intelligence networks and operations; Portuguese tactical innovations to enhance mobility, especially the employment of helicopters and horse cavalry; socioeconomic operations to gain popular support, and large-scale resettlement schemes to isolate the civilian population in protected villages (aldeamentos); and lastly, selected imaginative solutions to logistical problems and field operations.

In many respects Portugal's approach to colonial warfare made a virtue of necessity, but it was more than that. By carefully and cleverly calibrating its resources to the requirements of three diverse political-military contests thousands of miles from home, Lisbon managed to maintain its military position on the ground until a revolution at home rather than defeat on
the battlefield brought an end to the Portuguese empire in Africa. Indeed, Cann argues that Portugal’s innovative military strategy, tactics, and practical adaptations constituted a unique response to the challenges of modern counterinsurgency — a low-key, low-tempo, low-cost, low-casualty campaign that he dubs the “Portuguese way of war.”

Cann’s careful description and analysis of the Portuguese way of war make an important contribution to our understanding of this neglected facet of modern military history. Not only did scholarly interest in the military dimension of the liberation struggles in Lusophone Africa wane since independence in the mid-1970s, but it shifted immediately to the ensuing civil and regional wars that engulfed Angola and Mozambique, conflicts that surpassed the anticolonial struggles in duration and devastation. Moreover, given the predominantly Afrocentric and anti-Portuguese treatments of the liberation struggles, Lisbon’s side of these dramatic stories needed to be told, however belatedly. This study of the development of the Portuguese army’s official counterinsurgency doctrine from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s does just that. Drawing lessons from the French wars in Indochina and Algeria, and British experiences in Malaya, Kenya, and Cyprus, Portugal formally issued its doctrine in 1963; thereafter it continued to elaborate, experiment, and adapt it, with considerable success, according to Cann. Indeed, his frequent comparisons between the Portuguese way of war and contemporary French, British, and American counterinsurgency campaigns are both interesting and instructive. Additionally, his investigation of the roles of intelligence and logistics, which are often ignored in military histories in general and in African wars in particular, provides useful insights into these essential elements of Portugal’s war efforts. Likewise, his examination of the use of helicopters and horses as distinctive features of Lisbon’s counterinsurgency effort illuminates not only their tactical value but also establishes their integral role in the Portuguese way of war.

On the other hand, Cann’s sharp Lusitanian focus poses real analytical problems. It is clear from the start that the author has genuine sympathy for his subject, which apparently dates to his military service on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief Iberian Atlantic Area at NATO headquarters in Oeiras, Portugal, during 1987-1992, where every Portuguese officer he encountered was a veteran of the African wars. Unfortunately, the author’s sympathy goes beyond scholarly appreciation of his subject. While explicitly recognizing that “[T]here are invariably two sides to the story of every war” (p. xiii), Cann accords exaggerated respect to the Portuguese side. It may be fair to speak of a specific “Portuguese way of war,” but consistent references to Portugal’s “African Campaigns” or just “the Campaigns,” always capitalized, conjure up epic or heroic images no less subtle than “Wars of National Liberation” or “Wars of Independence.” Similarly, Cann refers to Dr. Antonio Salazar, Portugal’s Prime Minister and chief architect of its colonial policy, as “Dr. Salazar” in virtually every instance in which his name appears in the text, while African leaders are generally called only by their surnames or without honorifics, even Mozambique’s Dr. Eduard Mondlane.

Selection and exploitation of source material also manifest a distinctly Lusophile inclination. Cann’s reliance on Portuguese military sources and research institutes, including interviews and correspondence with Portuguese veterans, yielded invaluable information and first-hand observations upon which to construct much of the volume. However, his use of these sources is generally uncritical, and his presentation and evaluation of Portuguese policies, strategy, tactics, and doctrine are characteristically complimentary. The nine-page