

THE BATTLE OF CUITO CUANAVALE



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THE BATTLE OF CUITO CUANAVALÉ Cuba's Mythical Victory

In 1988 the Angolan Minister of Defence and other official Angolan and Cuban sources claimed that a South African offensive consisting of up to 9,000 troops with 500 tanks, 600 artillery field guns and scores of aircraft had attacked the town of Cuito Cuanavale in Angola. According to their version the attack had failed thanks to a valiant defence effort by Cuban and Angolan troops, and the South Africans had lost 50 aircraft, 47 tanks and hundreds of men.

The Cuban propaganda version of this “heroic battle” was widely believed in the west, and it was not until after the war had ended that the facts emerged. By the end of 1987, when the Cubans and Angolans were supposed to have achieved their great victory, they were already suing for peace in Angola, with their Soviet backers openly stating that the war there could not be won. In the negotiations that followed, one of the conditions of the Cubans was that they be allowed to make an honourable withdrawal from the war, an unusual demand to be made by a victorious army, to say the least. The fact is, the Cubans knew that they were losing but did not want to withdraw from Angola in disgrace. The South Africans, who had been the real victors in the Cuito campaign, realised that making the full facts known at that delicate stage in the peace negotiations would humiliate the Cubans and their Soviet backers and perhaps spur them into sending yet more troops to Angola in an effort to save their reputation. Making the Cubans look ridiculous would serve no useful purpose.

However, once the Cuban and Soviet involvement in the war had ended and the South Africans had withdrawn their troops, it did not take long for the real story of the battle to emerge.

Origin of the War

When Angola became independent from Portuguese rule in 1975 there was no elected government, and a pro-Communist guerrilla movement, the MPLA, became the de facto rulers, opposed by the smaller anti-Communist movements, the FNLA and Unita. When Cuban “advisers” began to enter the country to support the MPLA the South African Army responded by sending small combat groups into the war to assist the FNLA and Unita and at the same time eliminate the threat from SWAPO, a guerrilla group fighting to take over Namibia. During Operation Savannah in 1975 two small South African combat groups, with covert American backing, raced across Angola to the capital, Luanda, in a lightning blitzkrieg that was called off at the last moment when the Americans withdrew their political support.

In the years that followed the MPLA consolidated their hold on Angola, but at the same time Unita grew to a force of over 30,000 men which controlled most of Southern Angola and enjoyed the support of the local population. In order to counter the threat they posed to the MPLA more and more Cuban troops were brought into the country, along with Soviet advisers and huge supplies of armaments. Several offensives were attempted against Unita during the early 1980's without success. Both the Angolan Army and Air Force were expanded considerably, with more new weapons being delivered by the Soviets, including Mig-23s and Mi-25 combat helicopters.

In 1985 Fapla sent 20 brigades southwards in their largest offensive yet and the South African government decided that the threat of Cuban, Fapla and SWAPO forces reaching the South African borders was now too real to ignore, sent a small number of troops into Angola to assist Unita. To counter the air offensive the South African Air Force also flew a number of sorties, shooting down a Mig and several Soviet helicopters, one of which was ferrying the 10 Soviet officers in charge of the offensive to Cuito. The offensive finally ground to a halt, with large numbers of Faplan soldiers dead and a considerable number of Cubans killed, which prompted Castro to raise the Cuban troop strength in Angola to around 45,000 men.

During the first half of 1986 another offensive was attempted, considerably hampered and delayed after South African special forces units sank a Cuban cargo ship in Namibe Harbour and damaged two Soviet cargo ships and several oil tanks. In June, however, the offensive slowly got under way, but then was brought to an abrupt end when Unita troops, supported by South African troops, attacked and severely crippled the vital air base at Cuito Cuanavale. Without air support the offensive crumbled and the troops were pulled back.

The New Offensive

During late 1986 and early 1987 Cuban forces in Angola prepared for yet another full-scale offensive aimed at overrunning Unita and capturing its headquarters at Jamba. After their failure in both their 1985 and 1986 offensives in support of Fapla, the Cubans were now eager to gain the initiative and prove that they were a match for the South African Defence Force and establish themselves as the “liberators” of Southern Africa.

The Soviet Union was shipping heavy armaments into Angola daily, some of it the most modern Soviet weaponry ever seen outside the Soviet Union itself – jet fighters, tanks, helicopter-gunships, air defence missiles, radar and numerous vehicles. Most of it was delivered to Menongue, from where it was then moved on to the base at Cuito Cuanavale. This base had been chosen as the starting point for the new offensive.

Both the South Africans and Unita were left in no doubt that this enormous build-up of weapons and troops constituted preparations for the largest offensive yet attempted by the Cubans and the Angolan Army. General Magnus Malan of the SADF publicly warned that the offensive was imminent, and a Washington Post correspondent – William Claiborne – confirmed Malan’s warnings after he had been allowed to see the huge Soviet arms build-up in person.

During July 1986 the South Africans implemented a limited operation designed to assist Unita to develop an anti-tank capability. At the same time the American Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, was involved in peace negotiations with the Cubans and

Angolans, but returned to Washington near the end of July disappointed and angry at their refusal to talk seriously about peace. Having failed in all their previous offensives, they were now obviously determined to make an all-out effort to force a military solution to the Angolan problem.

By the end of July small-scale clashes between SADF and Faplan units were increasing, and by early August the offensive had commenced. The main Cuban/Faplan force, consisting of 16, 21, 47 and 59 Brigades of the Angolan Army, advanced towards a town called Tumpo, east of Cuito Cuanavale, while several more brigades advanced from Lucasse, supported by ground-attack aircraft, in an effort to form a two-pronged attack across the Lomba River.

One force moved westwards, intending to capture the towns of Cangamba and Lumbala, but was stopped by Unita without South African assistance, and neither town was captured.

The second force, however, was more determined, with 16 and 21 Brigades moving eastwards and intending to swing south and advance on Mavinga, while 47 and 59 Brigades moved south in the direction of Mavinga.

A small number of South African officers were attached to the Unita forces to observe the enemy and work out a strategy for countering their offensive. When it became obvious that the offensive had begun the SADF moved a battery of 127mm multiple rocket launchers and a battery of 120mm mortars, each accompanied by an infantry company from 32 "Buffalo" Battalion, up to the front to support Unita. The size of the offensive was so great, however, that after some careful rethinking by the SADF commanders, a G-5 heavy artillery battery was sent to Mavinga for support, causing great excitement and awe among the Unita troops, who had never seen such huge guns before. A short time later 61 Mechanized Battalion Group, using Ratel armoured cars, was sent to Mavinga as a reserve.

32 “Buffalo” Battalion

South Africa’s 32 Battalion was formed in 1975 from former Angolan FNLA insurgents during the struggle for control of newly-independent Angola. The FNLA was a ragtag group of guerrillas which opposed the larger, pro-Communist MPLA. Colonel Jan Breytenbach, South African Para and commander of several elite units in his career, was sent to Angola to train and organize the FNLA group. The men were formed into a new unit – 32 Battalion – officered by South Africans, and in a very short time, re-equipped with uniforms and modern weapons, were undergoing training as a COIN unit. Most of their training took place on the battlefield as they were immediately sent into action against the MPLA, SWAPO and the Cubans. The unit soon proved its worth and developed a reputation for aggressiveness on the battlefield, often engaging and defeating numerically superior enemy forces. The existence of this battalion of the South African Army was kept secret for many years while it fought in the thick Angolan bush, a constant problem for the Angolan Army which all their Soviet and Cuban advisers were unable to solve. 32 Battalion was to provide the main infantry force of the SADF during the 1986 campaign.

61 Mechanised Battalion

61 Mech was the only conventional SADF unit to be used during this campaign and consisted of infantry with a total of 55 Ratel armoured cars of different types. The battalion had no tanks, but had been engaged in the border war for the past 10 years and had acquired a formidable reputation.

G-5 Guns

Undoubtedly one of the most effective elements of the SADF involvement in Angola was the use made of the South African-built G-5 guns. Acknowledged to be the best long-range artillery in the world at that time, the G-5s with their range of 40 kilometres were able to cover a large area of the battlefield. Not yet in full production, only 16 were taken into

Angola, but their high accuracy and 155mm base-bleed shells made them the most potent weapon in the South African armoury.

The Offensive Begins

10 September 1987

On 10 September 21 Brigade sent 2 battalions with 5 T-55 tanks across the river, using a mobile bridge-layer. South African observers, watching the crossing, were amazed at the over-confident behaviour of the enemy, with infantrymen standing around casually, hands in pockets, watching the crossing. The South African reconnaissance force consisted of 4 Ratel-90 anti-tank armoured cars and 240 infantrymen in 30 Casspir infantry combat vehicles.

The South Africans were ordered to wait and see what Fapla would do. When an armoured car began to roll over the bridge, the South Africans went into action.

An anti-tank missile destroyed the armoured car and killed the infantrymen around it. A second missile destroyed the giant Soviet GAZ bridge-layer. The South Africans then concentrated on the T-55 tanks which were beginning to move westwards, and knocked out 3 of them within minutes. The remaining 2 immediately retreated. Artillery fire was called in from the South African G-5 guns situated some distance behind the South African lines, and by the end of the day 1 Fapla battalion had been completely destroyed, leaving the remainder of the enemy force to retreat back across the river in confusion.

13 September 1987

Three days later, on 13 September, Fapla sent 2 battalions of 59 Brigade with T-55 tanks across the river in a second attempt to establish a bridgehead. The South Africans and Unita again attacked immediately, the Ratel-90s firing anti-personnel shells which cut a swathe of destruction through the massed enemy infantry. From the Casspirs infantrymen poured machine-gun and rifle fire into the exposed enemy. The Angolans

started to retreat, but were exposed on open ground, with a stretch of marshland hampering their path back to the river. Within a short space of time over 200 Fapla soldiers lay dead.

The SADF/Unita force started mopping up the last groups of men left when the tanks suddenly joined in, causing chaos and sending the lightly-armoured Ratels and Casspirs fleeing in all directions. Once the South Africans had found cover in the bush, however, they began to fire anti-tank (HEAT) shells at the tanks, which were at a disadvantage with their long gun barrels in the bush. The Ratels, realising they had the advantages of speed and manoeuvrability, began to circle round the tanks, enticing them into chasing the armoured cars in ever-smaller circles until the Ratels were able to come in behind the tanks and fire. By the end of the engagement 5 tanks had been destroyed and over 250 Fapla soldiers killed, for the loss of 8 dead and 3 destroyed armoured cars on the SADF side.

The South Africans, after their initial shock at encountering the tanks, had adapted their tactics and proved that their armoured cars could cope with tanks by a combination of fast movement and accurate shooting, tactics reminiscent of those used by the Boers against the British over 80 years earlier.

14 to 23 September 1987

After the first series of clashes had taken place the South Africans were ordered not to cross the Lomba River, but to establish a line behind it to block the Angolan advance. The G5 heavy guns continued to pound the Angolans mercilessly, while the South African Air Force flew missions over the enemy to eliminate their anti-aircraft installations. At the same time Fapla artillery was bombarding the South African positions with mortars and heavy artillery.

21 Brigade continued to pile up supplies on their side of the Lomba, but the South African bombardments hampered them severely in their efforts to resume their advance. South African Recces (Special Forces, the SADF equivalent of SAS or Green Berets) kept the enemy under constant observation from hidden vantage points in the bush, often no more than

50 yards from the enemy positions. Throughout the campaign these Recces sat for days and even weeks in their observation posts, guiding the G5 artillery fire onto Fapla positions. The enemy knew they were close by, but were never able to locate them.

47 Brigade had also been slowed down in its advance by the South African artillery and air strikes. It was barely moving a kilometre per day, and the South Africans were slowly drawing it into a “killing ground” of their choice.

There was a brief interlude in the fighting when South Africa and Angola finally agreed to exchange prisoners – a South African Recce, Captain Wynand du Toit, captured by Fapla in 1985, was exchanged for 170 Fapla soldiers captured by the SADF and Unita. A couple of Dutch arms smugglers, captured in South Africa, were included in the trade. According to Amnesty International sources, the 170 Faplan soldiers were taken to the Angolan capital, Luanda, where they were all executed by the Angolans for having failed in their duty...

In view of this it was not surprising to the South African troops to find that many captured Fapla soldiers expressed an interest in joining Unita, or asked about the possibility of enlisting in the SADF!

47 Brigade, by now unable to retreat and desperate to join up with the other brigades, made an attempt to link up with 59 Brigade. The South Africans sent their Ratels in again to attack the enemy from the West. They had 250 men available to attack a force of over 1000 men with heavy weapons. The SAAF dropped fragmentation bombs on the Fapla positions and then 61 Mech manoeuvred behind them. The going was rough in the bush and they ended up on the enemy's flank instead of directly behind them. After a sharp engagement in the bush, the Ratels withdrew again because they simply could not see the enemy and were drawing a lot of artillery fire.

59 Brigade began to dig in and received welcome supplies and reinforcements from 21 Brigade, which had now succeeded in laying a mobile bridge over the Cunzumbia River. The SADF, worried now that 47 Brigade would manage to escape back across the river while 59 Brigade

pushed forward against the thin South African defence line, decided it was time to close the trap they had been preparing.

3 October 1987 – the Decisive Battle

On 2 October the South African Recces reported that 47 Brigade had managed to construct a wooden road across the marshes which were blocking their retreat to the Lomba River. Trucks, missile carriers, armoured cars and tanks were busy assembling at the treeline, preparing to make an orderly retreat across the road.

The Recces watched from their vantage points in nearby trees and called in artillery fire on Fapla while the SADF combat groups worked furiously to get ready and into position.

The first Fapla vehicles to try to cross were Soviet Sam-9s. One crossed to safety but the Recces guided artillery fire onto the second as it tried to cross, destroying it and effectively blocking the bridge. The Fapla troops sent a T-55 tank to try and move it out of the way, but without success. Every time Fapla tried to make a move the Recces would call in highly accurate artillery salvos. For 48 hours without sleep or rest the Recces stood guard over Fapla's escape route, calling in artillery fire at the slightest movement, until at last they heard the distant rumble that announced the arrival of the armoured cars of 61 Mechanised Battalion.

The Ratels of 61 Mech had a variety of armaments, from infantry carriers with 20mm guns to the tank-busting 90mm gun. Unita troops had by now positioned themselves to the south-east of 47 Brigade in case they tried to break away in that direction.

Fapla artillery began to bombard the approaching Ratels and Migs flew overhead to lend support and cover 47 Brigade's escape. The Ratels went in to attack. Fapla, accustomed to seeing Unita beat a hasty retreat whenever their tanks appeared, tried the same tactic and sent their tanks towards the SADF positions. To their dismay the South Africans' reaction was the exact opposite – they attacked. The Ratels raced for the tanks, surrounding them and dodging back and forth until they could get behind them and shoot at the comparatively vulnerable rear ends of the tanks.

Major Laurence Maree, second-in-command of 61 Mech, later told the British journalist and author, Fred Bridgland:

“I can’t tell you how much courage it takes in a Ratel driver and gunner when a tank is charging towards them to summon up the will to stop still for long enough to stabilise their firing platform and get their round off. [Unlike a T54/55 tank, which has built-in stabilisers and can fire on the move, a Ratel, like other armoured cars, can only fire from a static position]. Of course, as soon as they’d fired, off they sprinted like Turbo-charged hares. One of our guys died that afternoon facing down a T-55 in his Ratel. A 100mm shell from the tank skipped up from the sandy ground and went right through the turret. The Ratel commander, Lieutenant Hind, was terribly wounded and he died later. We had two others very seriously wounded that day, and another three with light wounds. The medics just pulled the shrapnel out of those who were slightly hurt, cleaned up the wounds, and they went straight back into combat.” (1)

The Fapla troops, although outgunning the South Africans and outnumbering them 4 to 1, began to lose their nerve and one of the battalions suddenly made a break towards the river. They streamed across the open grassland towards the river in an undisciplined mob and the South Africans brought down MRL fire and high-explosive mortar shells on them. A second battalion also broke and ran for the river, with the Ratels chasing them. Approximately 100 vehicles were now jostling to try and reach the bridge by way of the wooden road. Recces directed artillery fire from the G-5s onto them, causing havoc. The area was now a wasteland of shattered trees and burnt grass from the shells and shrapnel from both sides.

Migs piloted by Cubans flew some 60 sorties that day, dropping bombs and trying to strafe the South African positions, but they were wildly inaccurate and had little effect.

Fapla tanks made an effort to recover some of the abandoned vehicles, but were themselves destroyed by the pinpoint accuracy of the G-5 artillery fire. When the firing finally stopped at the end of the day over 600 Fapla soldiers lay dead on that stretch of open ground and 127 Fapla vehicles stood destroyed or abandoned near the river.

On the morning of 4 October the South Africans were able to survey the remnants on the battlefield. Recovery teams were sent in to salvage whatever was still usable and the SADF generals were delighted to hear that their troops were able to salvage intact one of the Sam-8 missile systems, complete with missiles, radar and logistics vehicles, the first example of this highly-effective Soviet weapon ever to be captured by a western country.

The remnants of 21 and 59 Brigades had joined forces and were trying to reorganize. A few firefights broke out as the SADF and Unita troops moved across the battlefield to salvage equipment. A few inexperienced Unita soldiers almost caused havoc as they attempted to drive off the undamaged tanks.

The South Africans intercepted messages from Russian commanders ordering the Fapla Migs and troops to make an all-out effort to destroy the abandoned equipment, but by then the South Africans had moved the Sam-8 system back behind their positions and had it well camouflaged. Unita later tried to claim the Sam-8 for itself with a view to passing it on to the Americans, but South Africa, recalling the way America had abandoned its allies in Angola, refused and retained the missile system for its own arms research.

October to December 1987 – The Last Phase

After the battle was over mopping up operations continued on both sides. South African observers watched in disgust as Fapla soldiers shot many of their own wounded where they lay because they were unable to evacuate them or give them medical care. At the end of the day the South African commander, Deon Ferreira, sent a message to HQ that their mission had been accomplished and that the Angolan/Cuban advance on Mavinga had been stopped. His new orders were to clear all remnants of the enemy forces from the eastern side of the River Cuito and establish positions from which they would be able to prevent any further crossings into Unita territory. No mention was made of capturing Cuito Cuanavale itself. The SADF did, however, want to be in a position from which they could shell the airfield and neutralise the base as a starting point for a new offensive. Cuito allowed the Cuban Migs easy access to Unita territory

and if it was destroyed the Migs would have to move 175 kilometres to the west.

The G5 artillery groups were moved up and commenced bombarding Cuito. The SAAF sent in 4 Mirages as a decoy and while the Migs were being rolled out of their reinforced concrete hangars the G-5s pounded the runway with shells. Within a short space of time the airfield was destroyed and the remaining Migs were forced to move back to Menongue.

Stinger missiles were also used to good effect by Unita and two Cuban pilots were taken prisoner after their Mig had been shot down.

The Cuban/Faplan offensive had failed. Later the Cubans tried to save face and boost their demoralized troops by claiming loudly that they had won the “Battle for Cuito Cuanavale”, which they claimed to have successfully defended against all South African attacks!

Throughout the campaign the South Africans, mindful of the fact that they were involved in an undeclared war and without allies in the west, refrained from making any public statements on the progress of the war. This gave the Cubans and Angolans the advantage in the propaganda war. The SADF could not reveal that it only had a small combat force of less than 3000 lightly-armed troops in Angola, as this would have revealed their weaknesses to the enemy. The superior training and tactics of the SADF had convinced the Cubans and Angolans that they were facing a large, heavily-armed force.

As Chester Crocker later wrote:

“In early October the Soviet-Fapla offensive was smashed at the Lomba River near Mavinga. It turned into a headlong retreat over the 120 miles back to the primary launching point at Cuito Cuanavale. In some of the bloodiest battles of the entire civil war, a combined force of some 8,000 Unita fighters and 4,000 SADF troops destroyed one Fapla brigade and mauled several others out of a total Fapla force of some 18,000 engaged in the three-pronged offensive. Estimates of Fapla losses ranged upward of 4,000 killed and wounded. This offensive had been a Soviet concep-

tion from start to finish. Senior Soviet officers played a central role in its execution. Over a thousand Soviet advisers were assigned to Angola in 1987 to help with Moscow's largest logistical effort to date in Angola: roughly \$1.5 billion in military hardware was delivered that year. Huge quantities of Soviet equipment were destroyed or fell into Unita and SADF hands when Fapla broke into a disorganized retreat... The 1987 military campaign represented a stunning humiliation for the Soviet Union, its arms and its strategy. It would take Fapla a year, or maybe two, to recover and regroup. Moreover the Angolan military disaster threatened to go from bad to worse. As of mid-November, the Unita/SADF force had destroyed the Cuito Cuanavale airfield and pinned down thousands of Fapla's best remaining units clinging onto the town's defensive perimeters." (2)

The results of the campaign up to April 1988 were 4,785 killed on the Cuban/Faplan side, with 94 tanks and hundreds of combat vehicles destroyed, against 31 South Africans killed in action, 3 tanks destroyed (SADF tanks entered the war after the Lomba River campaign) and 11 SADF armoured cars and troop carriers lost. A total of 9 Migs were destroyed and only 1 SAAF Mirage shot down.

After 13 years in Angola the Cubans had still not achieved their aim of destroying Unita and marching into Namibia as "liberators". They had badly underestimated the South Africans and discovered to their cost that they were facing highly-trained, battle-hardened troops. If they had taken the trouble to examine South Africa's military history, they might perhaps have paused for thought at the fact that the forefathers of these troops, the Boers, had held the full might of the British Empire at bay during the Boer War, when 450,000 British troops took three years to subdue a force of little more than 20,000 Boers.

Notes

(1) THE WAR FOR AFRICA -Bridgland, pp145.

(2) HIGH NOON IN SOUTHERN AFRICA -Crocker, pp.360-361.

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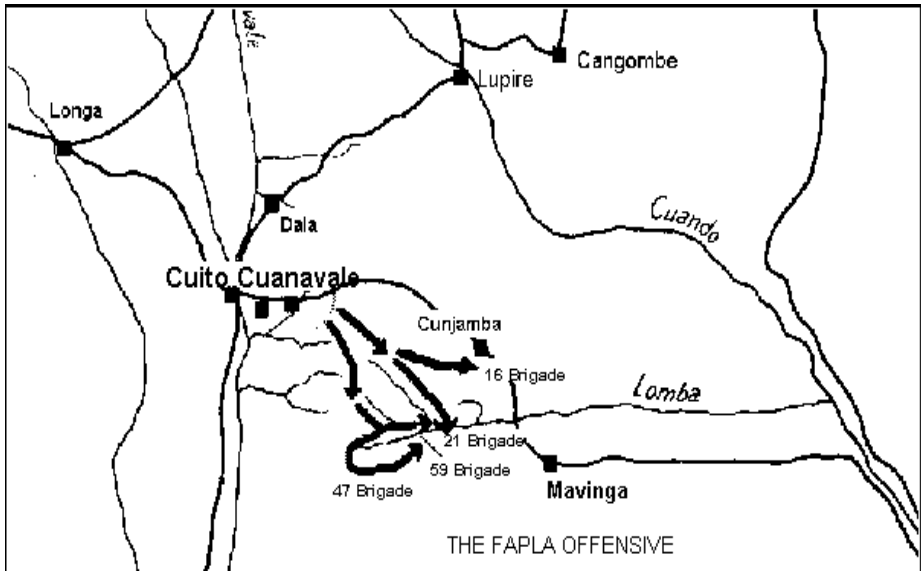
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