

# A VIEW FROM CUBA: INTERNATIONALISTS AGAINST APARTHEID

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“In the south, Dr. Savimbi’s Unita denies much of central, eastern and southeastern Angola’s savannah and broken country from Neto’s nominal conquerors and governors of the ex-Portuguese colony ... And SWAPO? Best informed sources say that this loud mouthed organisation, so artlessly accepted by the United Nations as the sole mouthpiece of ‘Namibia’, has at best 5 000 and at worst 3 000 terrorists (*sic*) roaming the frontier.”

- *To the Point*, November 1976.

“But, after 20 years, I notice that history revisions are in place and being propagated assiduously by the Communist Propagandist.”

- Letter, *Sunday Independent*, 30 March 2008.

“Verhale van soldate uit Kuba wat ver van hul Moederland sterf bly in die gedagtes van dié mense en hul families vandag. En hul nasate is trots op die deel wat hul geliefdes help doen het om Angola vry te maak van kolonialisme en rassisme.”

- Kubaanse veteraan (vrye vertaling).

“Ons eerste en tweede bevrydingstryd? Vir ons in Angola is 1975/1976 en die Lomba-gevegte twee keerpunte.”

- E-pos uit Angola (vrye vertaling uit Portugees).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s many events took place that were to change the course of history. In northeastern Europe the Berlin Wall crumbled in what many believed signalled the end, not only of the so-called Cold War, but also of the ideology and praxis of socialism and thus guaranteed final victory for “Western Civilisation” and capitalism. For a decade or more the world would turn towards a one-polar entity with the United States of America (USA) seemingly an indisputable force. In Latin America many authoritarian military regimes sponsored by the USA made room for social democratic rule. In the East the economies of India and China slowly but surely emerged as global factors and Japan became a noticeable military power among the highly industrialised states. Latin American states such as Brazil were preparing to

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enter the “top ten” economies in the world with the economy of the USA entering a gradual decline. Several transitions to “democracy”, though slow and contradictory in nature, marked the African scene.

In southern Africa the apartheid regime by 1983 experienced its deepest crises since 1955 with mass political mobilisation inside the country, some international isolation, a low-profile armed struggle, a sluggish economy, large expenditure on military budgets and deepening differences between its opportunistic élite.

These developments serve as a broad backdrop to an evolving regime change in the southern tip of Africa. The outward projection of South African military power amidst rising internal resistance and destabilising military ventures in Angola (a country twice removed from South Africa) were to grind to an eventual halt in 1988 following years of conflicts in Angola and South West Africa (now Namibia) where the people of Angola were fighting their second war for liberation and South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) was waging a nationalist struggle for independence since the 1950s. In the 1960s a dozen years or so after apartheid had been imposed, SWAPO opted for an armed struggle.<sup>3</sup>

These military ventures by the South African government and the Republic of South Africa (RSA) sponsored UNITA of Jonas Savimbi (with intermittent covert USA support) came to an end after a series of battles around the Lomba River and Cuito Canavale.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of the “battle for Cuito Canavale”, the Angolan forces (FAPLA) claimed victory over the apartheid military forces despite appalling losses. Cuba could claim that their involvement speeded up, if not guaranteed, a timely withdrawal of apartheid’s forces and thus the Cuban forces achieved their strategic objective: the co-defence of the independence of Angola and the eventual withdrawal of the main aggressor, apartheid South Africa, as a proxy of western powers without the Cuban forces suffering any major defeat.

The South African militarists claimed that they also achieved their strategic goals. These were, amongst others, to prevent the spread of “Soviet neocolonialism”; to withhold “Soviet supported” Cuban forces and possibly inflict losses severe enough to demoralise the Cubans into withdrawal from their “aggressive” stance

<sup>3</sup> Ever since the Union of South Africa wrenched control of *Deutch West Afrika* (South West Africa) (Namibia) from the German colonisers on behalf of Britain, another colonial power, South Africa encroached on the League of Nations’ definition of “a mandate” in overseeing “Southwest Africa”. The apartheid regime of Malan, Strijdom, Verwoerd and Vorster applied the notion that Namibia is a “fifth province of South Africa”, much in the same way as those that ruled white South Africa between 1919 and 1947.

<sup>4</sup> South African securocrats with the full knowledge of the UK and USA leadership continued to supply military support to UNITA, some through air bases in South Africa even after 1990 - the year in which the De Klerk-regime unbanned the exiled ANC, PAC and the SACP and lifted severe restrictions on internal prodemocracy groups such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the National Forum (NF). The USA provided financial support and Stinger ground-to-air missiles to UNITA long after 1989.

in defence of an independent Angola; and lastly, to allow/facilitate a transition to a democratic dispensation negotiated among South Africans.<sup>5</sup>

Pertaining to Cuito and its aftermath, the South Africans claim that they never intended to take Cuito Canavale, which they argued had no real value to them except for being a holding action - yet battles reigned there for months. Furthermore, in a fascinating quirk of an ideological turn-around, they argued that the apartheid forces eventually guaranteed Namibia's independence, something they tried to prevent for years.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that the drifting smoke and dust of past ideological and military struggles and the static views then held, obscured "truth" and "fact".

## 2. NOT READING THE "OTHERS": A SAD STATE OF AFFAIRS

Twenty years later the main actors are still not reading "the other's" story and, even worse, they are not open to understand the development and escalation of the war from a different perspective. This is particularly true in the South African political and military arena. Soldiers again stride the battlefields of the past and the literature romanticise the role of the apartheid military in the Angolan War. Little is published in South Africa about the role of FAPLA and the Cuban forces or even the Soviet advisors and interpreters in this war, especially from their own perspective.

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<sup>5</sup> This argument, advocated by the securocrats in a militarised South Africa and even some military historians, remains an interesting exercise and case study in ideological spin doctoring until today.

<sup>6</sup> According to Leopold Scholtz (1998:31) and based on information by Helmoed Römer Heitman, a working document written by the SADF Chief of Staff Operations in July 1987, took as a point of departure "plausible deniability", a concept used for covert operators, i.e. by the CIA since the 1950s. How anyone could think that SADF involvement in support of UNITA after 1976 could be "plausibly deniable" remains a mystery. The SADF Chief of Staff's document suggested four options on a scale of possible outcomes. The minimalist option implied the possible loss of Mavinga (UNITA headquarters and SADF logistic platform in southern [east] Angola) and on the outer scale - attacks on FAPLA and Cuban forces on Menogue and Lubango. Scholtz and Heitman do not refer to any resolution that (could) imply a further stage, i.e. taking Lubango, Menogue or Cuito Canavale. No talks about taking Cuito seemingly took place in security circles. On the other hand observers frequently argued that the idea may have been to take Cuito in the hope to establish a further platform in the area for UNITA in the longer run. A retired SADF officer once commented that "halfway things changed and people started to say that it was not the intention to take Cuito" (or presumably any other strategic town in the area - our insertion). Currently there is no archival material existing in the public domain to prove or disprove the Scholtz/Heitman suggestion. If the Cuito Canavale event was intended indeed as a holding action or as Campbell (1990) implies, a "siege", the attempt did not succeed, in the same way as the sieges of Mafikeng and Ladysmith 80 years ago during the Anglo-Boer War. Eventually the besieging forces had to depart, their initial mission unaccomplished.

There are reasons for this: Firstly, the literature on the role of FAPLA's liberation struggle was published mostly in Portuguese.<sup>7</sup> The large bulk of publications that appeared in Cuba are likewise not accessible to Afrikaans- and English-speaking South Africans.<sup>8</sup> For some or other reason South African publishing houses of which some are churning out new waves of past romanticism, do not rise to the challenge of translating such works into English or African languages (including Afrikaans) and thus negating - if not subverting - the need for a greater understanding of the Angolan War.<sup>9</sup> The opportunity to let multiple voices speak and opposing perspectives appear in writing for the sake of greater clarity and informed discussion is missed again by retreating into one-sided historical prisons where static interpretations of the past rule supreme.

The majority of South African publishers sell only one side of the story due to their ideological attachment to a worldview locked in the past, or because they find it impossible to understand an "African War" outside a "Cold War" and "Total Onslaught" perspective. Perhaps some fear that if they publish something different from yesteryear they would not find a "market". In the process they forget that two decades passed since the withdrawal of the South African Defence Force (SADF) from Angola and SWA/Namibia and the transition to a liberal democratic constitution and hence a new readership emerged. A younger and broader-minded non-racial

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- 7 Even earlier works on the liberation of Angola are not known here due to a lack of knowledge of Portuguese. Historical works reflecting the Angolan liberation struggle against colonialism among others are: L Lara, *Um amplo movimento Itenerario do MPLA através de documentos e anotações* (Luanda, 1998); and two works by Edmundo Rocha entitled *Angola Contribuição ao Estudo de Nacionalismo Moderno Angolano* (Volumes 1 and 2) that covers the era 1950 - 1964 (Luanda, 2002). A more recent work, albeit propagandistic, tells the story of Angola's second war of liberation: *FAPLA Baluarte de paz em Angola (FAPLA Bulwark of peace in Angola)* (Luanda 1996). Several works in Spanish appeared in Cuba among which are those of G Risquet, P Gleijesus and F Ramirez, *Cuba y Africa Historia Comün Lucha y Sangre* (Havana, 2007), that addresses the period 1975 – 1988 and MR Cabrera *et al.*, 1989, *La Guerra de Angola* (Havana, 1989). Another noteworthy work by an air force veteran, Humberto Trujilo Hernandez, is entitled *Trueno Justiciero Mis campañas en cielo angolano* (Havana s.a.). In this work Hernandez tells the story of Cuban fighter pilots in Angola with ample reference to the battles around Cuito. In a sense this book is the Cuban story of their jet pilots ("Vlamgatte" in South African air force jargon). Another work published in Cuba deals with the battles around Cuito and the Lomba: Editora Política, *Paz de Cuito Cuanavale* (Habana, 1989).
- 8 At the risk of an overstatement, it is our impression that in Angolan and Cuban circles of contemporaries that are able to read English (in some cases even Afrikaans) are exposing themselves more to South African publications on the Angolan War than South Africans are prepared to do by reading their counterparts from Angola and Cuba's versions.
- 9 In Russia an initiative is taking place where memoirs of veterans of the Angolan War are published (some of them in English). Unfortunately none of these are published here or translated into indigenous languages such as Afrikaans. A recent example is *The oral history of forgotten wars The memoirs of veterans of the war in Angola* (Moscow, 2007), compiled by Gennady Shubin *et al.*, Centre for Southern African Studies, Moscow. Russian and later Soviet historians and academics ever since the Anglo-Boer War have had an intense interest in South Africa and dozens of well-researched works appeared over many years. An interest in the South African military, its composition, arms, arms acquisition and technology (1912 – 2007) is reflected for example in the following recent publication: G Shubin and I Maidanov, *South African armed forces and military industry* (Moscow, 2008): ISAS/AI. (Russian: Шубин, Г.В. & Майданов, И.И. 2008. ВООРУЖЕННЫЕ СИЛЫ И ВОЕННАЯ ПРОМЫШЛЕННОСТЬ ЮАР (Vooruzhennyye sily i voennaya promyshlennost' UAR).

readership seeks an understanding of what transpired 20 years ago; a readership that wants to read beyond the gridlocks of the past.<sup>10</sup>

In South Africa there remains a strong ideological resistance to really “step into the views” of others. The chosen way is to view the war through the glasses of a Cold War - an eternal struggle against evil communist forces and to cling to the notion that there was a total onslaught waged against (Christian [white]) South Africa by the Soviet Union and its willing Marxist-Leninist proxies such as “Communist” Angola and the Republic of Cuba.

Why this contribution? Often people refuse to deal with and get rid of the past. Perhaps for those historical prisons provide a comfort zone against critical reflection or existential questions. This article is also influenced by the authors’ shared legacy and aims to address a different angular optic, another side to a story of possible historical significance. The authors, of which one is a Cuban, deliberately step into Cuban shoes and present the perspective of the Cubans, the reasons for their involvement, some of the battles and military actions and the Cuban views on the outcomes of the war for Angola that eventually led to the defeat of Savimbi’s marauding UNITA bands in Angola a decade later. The end of the apartheid aggression in Angola in 1989 also invoked the independence of occupied Namibia and put an end to more than 100 years of colonialist occupation in the southwest of Africa. In this sense this article is deliberately subjective; an approach born from the belief that bringing up subjective past experiences may lead to a greater understanding of shared experiences. Readers may dispute both facts and perspectives held by the authors in this article - some will dispute a date or dates, or used concepts, or the numbers of losses, while others may be of the opinion that constituted strategic moves were mere tactics or *vica versa*, and there may be others that will point out that the SADF entered and moved out of Angola victoriously. An article like this invites a closer debate on what happened at the time and the views held by romanticists. And until more information on South African soldiers that participated in the “Bush War” / “Grensoorlog” / “Border War” / “Angolan War” and that represented conscripts and the lower ranks, is published, such one-sidedness is inevitable. Currently ex-permanent force members and special force members dominate the debate on the Angolan War as if their particular perspective holds all answers to everything from the past.

Archival material from the apartheid times are released slowly but surely. Unfortunately much of these materials or then relevant data was deliberately destroyed. Some role-players still withhold evidence and will not release it while

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<sup>10</sup> In our interaction with students in Cuba and South Africa we find that many of them do not want simplistic answers; they are not interested in “who won” or just statistics, but in “what happened” on the ground and what set off the scenario as it unfolded in military terms. The same apply to many others that are not students *per se* but that are interested in the past for the sake of seeing a broader picture. These also include the families of those that fought, got wounded, were missing in action, died or were forced into being refugees on and outside the continent.

they are in service of well-paid foreign forces in yet another resource war waged against the “Third World”.

Despite the odds, the reader of this contribution is invited to walk with the authors and to step into the Cuban perspective and reflect on it in this time of commemoration of the battles around the Lomba and Cuito Canavale. For all it would be a long march, dusty, fly-ridden and sweating against a torrent rain to arrive perhaps not at the full truth, but at a view on waterholes partially filled with less than clear water. But, such is the nature of finding truth in the aftermath of armed conflict ...

### 3. INTO THE SHOES OF HAVANA AND THE CUBAN PEOPLE

“Defence is a stronger form of warfare than offence, because it is easier to hold ground than to take it.” (Von Clausewitz, quoted by Campbell 1990:2) As a subtext (perhaps on a metalevel?) this statement is worth reflecting upon in the perspective offered here. The Cuban perspective, like those of the apartheid politicians and generals, provide a valuable angle for discussion:

The blows that Cuban troops dealt to Pretoria’s armed forces during the years 1975-1976 and 1987-1988 helped to preserve Angola’s independence, opened the doors to independence for Namibia and spurred the collapse of the structures on which apartheid was based ... A small country, blockaded economically since the 1960s by the United States and which had outdated aircraft and a modest merchant navy by 1975, was responding to its principles of internationalism and transported in a short period and on two separate occasions (late 1975 and early 1988) — thousands of men and a considerable amount of equipment and armaments over a distance greater than that between Cuba and St Petersburg or Washington and Tel Aviv (or Baghdad for that matter).<sup>11</sup> In 1975 and 1976 the old Britannia transport aircraft carrying Cuban forces had to travel 14 hours to Luanda, and no less than 15 hours to southern Angola (Blanch 2007) – seemingly with sheer wits and Lady Luck on their side. Unexpected delays and setbacks during such airlifts were not uncommon and the unpredictable nature of logistics and air transport calls for unexpected delays were part of the pilots’ day-to-day job and the soldiers flying with them.

Relations between Cuba and the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), led by Agostinho Neto, began in January of 1965, when Ernesto Guevara carried out an extensive tour of several countries, including Congo-Brazzaville, where he met, among others, with Angolan guerrilla leaders.<sup>12</sup> The events of April 1974 in Portugal with the overthrow of the Marcelo Caetano dictatorship opened the

<sup>11</sup> Cubans refer to the "First War in Angola" (1975 – 1976) and the "Second War in Angola" (1987 – 1988). The period between 1977 and 1986 is seen as qualitatively different, namely Cuban forces deployed in a state of defence rather than one of offence.

<sup>12</sup> More about the Cuban activities at the time can be read in *El segundo frente del Che in el Congo Historia del batallón Patricio Lumumba* by Jorge Risquet Valdés (Havana, 2006).

way to future independence of Portugal's African colonies, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique.<sup>13</sup>

The MPLA represented one Angolan nationalist movement. The MPLA (undecided at the time on its stance on either capitalism or socialism but hoping for a national independent state) was dealing with the ambitions of two opposing groups supported by the United States, South Africa and Zaire. These groups were the Angolan National Liberation Front (FNLA) led by Holden Roberto, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) collaborator, and the National Union for the Independence of Angola (UNITA) led by Jonas Savimbi, a collaborator of the Portuguese secret services and later of the CIA and of the white minority government of South Africa.<sup>14</sup> This means that at least one of the movements opposing the MPLA, namely the FNLA, at the time of the Alvor Agreements, was effectively playing for the CIA.

The Alvor Agreements was an attempt to prevent conflict between the contending liberation movements and were signed on 15 January 1975. This happened after six days of negotiations between the Lisbon government and the MPLA, UNITA and the FNLA with the purpose of guiding a peaceful Angolan decolonisation process. The official date set for the country's independence was 11 November 1975. However, the FNLA, supported by the CIA and with South African advisors deployed earlier (with the full knowledge of the USA political leadership at the time), began heavy attacks against the MPLA in the north of Angola.<sup>15</sup>

In Luanda conflict erupted. Trades people, unionists, teachers, students, taxi drivers, men and women uninitiated in warfare and MPLA cadres less than well-armed clashed with newly armed FNLA forces. In the conflict the latter were driven from Luanda. By May/June/July/August of 1975 (some sources propose probably earlier), the FNLA

<sup>13</sup> The peaceful coup in Lisbon was seen as a betrayal of the Portuguese colonists in Angola and Mozambique. The coup followed as a result of a controversial book published by General De Spínola, a highly decorated soldier and war veteran (compare G Coccia, *Mozambique The scorpion sting* (Johannesburg, 1976)).

<sup>14</sup> Gleijeses, quoting Briggs, suggested that the MPLA "commanded the allegiance of the most people in Angola" and became an "Angolan-wide organization" (Gleijeses 2002:237). Savimbi was caught in the 1960s colluding with Portuguese security agencies. Holden Roberto (FNLA) was seldom seen in the field with his soldiers, but had a relationship with the CIA that earned him a yearly subsidy of \$ 6 000 a year, later to be increased to \$ 10 000. In retrospect it is quite clear that the USA and the apartheid state alliance chose to support two very corrupt men and present them to the world as "liberation fighters". The MPLA at the time did receive little Soviet support (Gleijeses, 2002, pp. 238-239,279, 281). In fact by 1974 relations that had been cordial reached its "lowest ebb". In the years preceding the *coup* in Portugal, Soviet assistance became negligible (Shubin and Tokarev 2001:612).

<sup>15</sup> By the 18th of July USA President Ford approved covert aid to Roberto (FNLA) and Savimbi (UNITA). Apart from financial support the hardware was delivered mostly through Kinshasa (Gleijeses 2002:258) with other points of arrival based on "plausible denial". By 1985 support to the "rebels" (read: UNITA) peaked at \$ 60 000 000 per year under President Ronald Reagan (read: "constructive engagement") ... "The British secret service, MI6, French and German intelligence agencies also poured in support. (Western) Intelligence officers used to boast that Savimbi had enough weapons to fight a world war ..." (Russel 2000:110). By 1985 UNITA had a budget of US\$ 600 000 to promote its image facilitated by USA (and possibly other European states). See in this regard Campbell (1990:20).

received support from the Mobutu Sese Seko regime, the Republic of South Africa and the United States with the latter sending weapons and supplies to Kinshasa from where they were transported to Angola with among others South African aircraft. From Pretoria a team arrived with artillery to bolster the combined FNLA/Zaire forces and CIA advisers to fight the battle for Luanda.

In August, two battalions of Zairian infantry joined the FNLA to launch an offensive against northern Angola, while South African troops penetrated the south on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, taking over the Calueque and Ruacana dams some 30 kilometers inside Angolan territory as a prelude to an invasion.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of September the FNLA and the Zairians were north of Quifangondo, but FAPLA's (the military wing/armed forces of the MPLA) Ninth Brigade (there was actually only one brigade, but it was so named to confuse the enemy) with the majority of members trained for some weeks in the Soviet Union, in a hurry launched a counterattack, and the aggressors retreated from Luanda in a stampede, leaving cases of ammunition, infantry rifles such as FNs, R1s, M-16s, European-made rifle grenades and 60mm/81mm mortars and US-made military equipment such as land mines and hand grenades in their wake. In the same month the Ninth Brigade repelled another attack by the FNLA in Morro de Cal, five kilometers from Quifangondo. In September, at the request of Neto and the leadership of the MPLA, a number of Cuban instructors flew in to Luanda in order to train MPLA soldiers. But in the north aggression was not to stop. The invaders regrouped.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October the FNLA attacked Morro de Cal with 3 500 men, including approximately a thousand Zairian troops. The Angolans, together with 40 recently-arrived Cuban instructors from the Revolutionary Instruction Centre (CIR) in N'Dalatando, engaged with the enemy. In the face of the latter's numerical superiority and weapons, MPLA/Cuban soldiers were forced to retreat to Quifangondo. On 6 November, MPLA/Cuban soldiers repelled a further attack on Morro de Cal.

Back in South Africa very few people within the white community knew that their husbands and sons were deployed deep inside the territory of a country twice removed from the RSA. The reported deaths of South African soldiers were disguised as casualties in the "operational area" (northern Namibia). However, news in civil communities spread quickly. In South West Africa/Namibia people living in towns like Karasburg, Keetmanshoop, Rehoboth and closer home, in towns between Pretoria and the SWA/Namibian border such as Upington, Vryburg and Kuruman, were talking in hushed tones about the military convoys passing "up north" and some knew about large quantities of severely damaged vehicles and armoured cars returning by train to Pretoria.

The last attempt to take over Quifangondo was on 10 November, just one day before Angola declared its independence. The aggressors prepared an attack with

a group comprising FNLA soldiers, 120 Portuguese mercenaries,<sup>16</sup> two infantry battalions and several armoured units of regular Zairian troops. To these 25 advisors from Pretoria led by Brigadier Ben Roos and equipped with artillery (apart from heavy mortars supplied by the USA), brought by air from South Africa, and several CIA agents were added. South Africa also supplied aeroplanes for reconnoitring the FAPLA's positions and three aircraft (Zairian and/or South African) attacked Angolan-Cuban positions around the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1975.<sup>17</sup>

Three days earlier, on November 7, six BM-21 (multiple rocket-launchers), mortars and guns from the Soviet Union were unloaded in the port of Luanda.<sup>18</sup> They were ordered to Quifangondo for use by the Cuban instructors who had arrived by air the same day.<sup>19</sup>

With the help of these artillery pieces the capital was saved. The enemy was scattered and perhaps hundreds of attackers were killed or injured while armoured and other transport vehicles were destroyed. The FNLA officially revealed that more than 300 of its troops were killed, without counting the Zairians. As the combat turned into a free-for-all for survival, Roos ordered his artillerymen to retreat. On 28 November a South African frigate lifted the last of the South Africans via the port of Ambrizete. In the meantime most of the CIA agents left discreetly. They helped to get the Angolan pot cooking and were now more than prepared to let the South Africans sweat it out while the poison was simmering ...

This engagement was the first big setback for the joint forces of the FNLA, Zaire, Portuguese mercenaries and South Africa. In response to the apparently uncontrollable escalation of conflict Portuguese Admiral, Leonel Cardoso, who was heading his country's government in the African nation, announced on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November that in the name of the colonial power's president, sovereignty was being transferred to the Angolan people (without mentioning the MPLA or any other organization), and at 6:00 he lowered the Portuguese flag and left with the rest of

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<sup>16</sup> The numbers of mercenaries are difficult to pinpoint - even with the available intelligence at the time; some were ex-Portuguese soldiers that remained behind, some were flown in or chose to fly in from elsewhere, some came from other countries and others were perhaps soldiers/officers that served (or were serving, but on "leave") from the armed forces of South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) or western countries such as France, Belgium, the USA and the UK. A lesser known fact is that a number of (white) Portuguese born in Angola or those choosing to remain in Angola for patriotic reasons, joined MPLA forces to repulse foreign aggression once they heard that Zaire and South Africa were involved in the aggression. (One of the authors interviewed one of these members in Luanda in 2004.)

<sup>17</sup> Fifteen days later an SAAF Cessna 185 was shot down on a *reccie* for Battle Group Foxbat. In December, three days before Christmas, FAPLA/Cuban forces shot down a French-made SAAF Puma helicopter. No survivors were found and the crew presumably escaped from becoming POWs.

<sup>18</sup> Tito, it was said, supplied 12 obsolete T 34/85 tanks to Angola, some of which had seen operational deployment in 1976 and afterwards served mostly in a defensive role.

<sup>19</sup> The USA media and apartheid propaganda suggested that Cuba got involved in the Angolan War on Soviet orders. Even today this myth is perpetuated by conservatives and neo-conservatives in South Africa and the USA. In reality a large scale intervention by Cuba was not envisaged and the Soviet leadership experienced the deployment of Cuban troops to a theatre in Africa as a surprise.

his troops for Lisbon. The Portuguese completely abandoned the colony where they caused so much hardship to Angolans.

Hours later, at midnight on 11 November, Augustino Neto announced the former colony's independence to the world, and the People's Republic of Angola was born amidst conflict and foreign intervention. The "Second War for the liberation of Angola" started at the exact moment when the First War for liberation was to be concluded with the rise of the flag of an independent and sovereign republic.

#### **4. DOWN SOUTH: SOUTH AFRICA ENTERS ANGOLA AND A NEW FRONT OPENS UP**

With South African forces deployed at Calueque and Ruacana Battle Group Zulu moved into Angolan territory on 14 October 1975 from the then-occupied SWA/Namibia. They advanced more than 60 kilometres daily, destroying much in their path. On 19 October the SADF forces took over the town of Pereira de Eca and a day later, Rocadas. Given the real possibility that the MPLA would form a progressive government on 11 November, Pretoria, with the blessing of the United States, invaded southern Angola with the goal of destroying Agostinho Neto's movement and paving the way for a pro-western puppet regime comprising FNLA and UNITA elements.

The Zulu column consisted of about a 1 000 black Angolans who were FNLA guerrilla fighters trained by Pretoria and members of Flechas, a special unit of Angolans who had fought for the Portuguese regime, Portuguese mercenaries (and other) plus South African soldiers and officers. It seems that a (small) number of South African conscripts were deployed also. Soon another group known as Foxbat was formed. It consisted of about 100 South African soldiers with 22 Eland armoured cars and other war material transported by South African aircraft to Silva Porto.<sup>20</sup> Savimbi had his "headquarters" in central Angola and absorbed (UNITA) members trained by the apartheid military forces in the Caprivi.<sup>21</sup> Within a few days, human and material reinforcements began arriving for Foxbat. At the time the media speculated that more than a 1 000 South Africans had penetrated Angola and

<sup>20</sup> The Eland 60 and 90 was, with some modifications, patterned on the French Panhard 60 and Panhard 90 design and built under license in South Africa. Close military cooperation, established under Gaullist rule despite sanctions, existed between South Africa and France from 1960 to the 1980s (Moukambi 2008). Reasons for adapting the Panhard to African conditions are explained by among others Beneke (1996: 17).

<sup>21</sup> In the months preceding the intended date for independence for Angola, UNITA (an ineffectual movement by all standards and boasting perhaps 900 insurgents) was resuscitated by South African military forces funded by the CIA. South Africa provided material assistance for "recruitment drives" as well as military training in the Caprivi/southeastern Angola. UNITA, thanks to covert funding, remained a destabilising factor long after South African forces left Angolan and SWA/Namibian territory by waging a virtual scorched earth campaign against "unfriendly" areas and the civil population that seemed inclined to the MPLA.

that their numbers were probably growing.<sup>22</sup> South of the Angolan border (northern Namibia) more troop movement was reported. How many others, when and whether to be deployed, remained unclear to the media and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) that were closely observing an apparent escalation of conflict in a country that was to become independent in two weeks since the southern incursions.

Operation Savannah,<sup>23</sup> approved by Prime Minister Vorster in late September 1974, had four phases: The first three were attempts to eliminate the FAPLA (MPLA) from the border areas and then from the southwest and central regions. Phase four was aimed at capturing Luanda, the ultimate military objective.

## 5. THE CUBAN PRESENCE

In early August 1975, a Cuban mission led by First Commander Raúl Díaz Argüelles arrived in Luanda where it was received by President Neto. Neto requested 100 advisors to train MPLA forces. After the talks, the mission returned to Havana. Not much happened immediately thereafter and large-scale involvement was not contemplated by the Cuban leadership.

After evaluating the mission's report, the Cuban government authorised a sizeable group of advisors to be sent to train Angolans soldiers over a period of six months. In mid-August, Díaz Argüelles returned to Luanda to inform Neto that instead of the 100 men requested, Cuba would send 480 staff members who would be stationed in four "Revolutionary Instruction Centres" (CIRs). Another group would remain in Luanda. Díaz Argüelles was to function as the head of the Cuban Military Mission in Angola (MMCA). Neto and his advisors agreed to this offer but there were some delays.

By late September only 50 of the MMCA's members had arrived in Angola. Between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, two Cuban planes took 142 instructors to Angola. Between 16 September and the 20<sup>th</sup> the ships, *Vietnam*, *La Plata* and *Coral Island*, had set sail from the port of Havana with almost 300 men, equipment and provisions for the four instructors' groups that would be established in Cabinda, N'Dalatando, Benguela and Saurimo, and the Operations Group heading the Military Mission in Luanda.

The *Vietnam* arrived on 5 October and the *Coral Island* on 8 October. Both landed on an uninhabited beach near the port of Amboim, while the *La Plata* docked in Punta Negra, Congo-Brazzaville, on 11 October. By 20 October the CIRs were ready to begin their work. However, the training of MPLA soldiers was interrupted

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<sup>22</sup> These numbers are disputed and to the knowledge of the authors no classified information on exact numbers has been released by South African authorities. SADF veterans contended that force numbers were far less but no archival evidence has come to the fore to prove these suggestions.

<sup>23</sup> Sometimes it was spelled *Savanna* (Afrikaans phonetic translation) in the media down south.

by the offensive actions of the other actors already aggressively engaged in Angola from earlier on.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of November FAPLA forces of just more than 100 plus 40 Cuban instructors in Benguela, tried to stop the advance of the South African Zulu column around the town of Catengue. In face of the enemy's numerical superiority in troops and armaments it was impossible to do so. The invaders' casualties included four armoured vehicles (and one captured) and numerous deaths and injuries, the number until now not been revealed. In these clashes four Cubans died, seven were injured and 13 declared missing in action (MIA).

## 6. THE CLASHES IN CABINDA

The Angolan and Cuban command at the time believed that the greatest threat was the Zairian Army and the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) and that they were poised to take over a region with oilfields that could be severed from an independent Angola. The Cuban contingent (CIR) on order of the command structures was reinforced with almost 200 men.

Before 11 November an unusual movement of regular Zairian troops and FLEC had been detected which included forces trained in Zairian bases in Quitona and Techela. These troops were joined by foreign mercenaries. In addition, the United States was sending weapons to Mobutu Sese Seko for his invasion and later control of Cabinda.<sup>24</sup> The objective of the Cuban instructors was to train four FAPLA battalions. Scarcely one battalion completed training in haste.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November attacks began against positions defended by a 1 000 FAPLA troops and 232 Cubans. The defending forces resisted the attacks and on 12 November they went on the offensive. In the numerous engagements that followed, they repulsed more than 1 600 FLEC troops organised into three battalions and led by

<sup>24</sup> The fact that Zaire had earlier received French supplied Mirage aircraft, thus providing air superiority in a case of aggression, must also be considered. France as a previous coloniser with economic interests in Africa was known for supplying modern fighting aircraft to pro-western countries. Another case in point was apartheid South Africa. The French exported Mirage aircraft to South Africa since 1963. By 1975, apart from various models of the Mirage Mk III (at least seven variants according to some sources), the Mirage FI was imported. The numbers exported from France differ from source to source. One author mentions 50 or more Mk IIIs and 48 Mark FIs (Becker 2008:40). Some sources suggest that Mirages were also imported from Switzerland. In total thus about 100 aircraft. By own admission South Africa claimed in December 1976 that they had 300 or more aircraft (*To the Point* 5(50), 1976, p. 9). This figure, however, included transport and light aircraft. It also included Italian Aeromacchi's or MB 326Ms and MB 326KC (Impala Mk I and II), subsonic jet aircraft used for training, yet with the capacity to be armed. This figure most likely also included obsolete propeller driven Harvards used for training and perhaps some Sabres that may not have been taken out of the inventory after they had been withdrawn from use during the 1960s onwards. At the time the SAAF had more aircraft in their arsenal than all the Frontline States plus what quite a few other African states could muster together. With such a projection of force South Africa was seen as a regional power with aggressive intentions by many. The military invasion of Angola proved to non-aligned sceptics in Africa and the southern hemisphere that the RSA was not shy of aggression and regional violence.

150 mercenaries, plus a battalion from Zaire comprising about 200 men backed by armoured cars and light tanks. The invading forces fled across the border to Zaire.

## 7. SOME BACKGROUND ON OPERATION CARLOTA

Informed about the South African/Zairian invasion and following an MPLA request, the Cuban political leadership finally decided on a day and night long meeting held from 3–4 November to send units of its Special Troops to confront the FNLA/CIA/Zairean/South African aggression.<sup>25</sup>

The now well-known Operation Carlota began.<sup>26</sup> In its initial stages Carlota had to its disposal about 650 men from the Special Troops of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) and an artillery regiment from the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) to bolster the limited numbers of Cubans that were deployed.

On 9 November the first company arrived in Luanda by air. They reinforced the battalion of MININT Special Troops. In their support they had 82-mm mortar platoons from the Cuban FAR along with antitank equipment. After participating in the actions at Quifangondo, the company left in haste for the southern Front on 11 November to face an enemy that was perceived to be far more forceful than the available Angolan forces and advancing at a considerable distance per day in a northerly direction. At least a three to one ratio of available forces had been envisaged. However, the Angolan forces and Cuban command knew that they had little air capacity compared to South Africa and possibly, only possibly, equal numbers of artillery. Ground forces at the risk of losses were “upped” as far as possible.

Cuban reinforcements arrived on Cubana Aviation’s old Britannia airplanes flown by intrepid Cuban pilots who had to make three fuelling stops on the route. A FAR artillery regiment travelled there by ship in increasingly frequent trips due to the urgency of the situation. Finally it became a long convoy of merchant ships of all ages and sorts that transported armaments and men in sufficient numbers to stop the enemy advance and if need be, win the war on Angolan territory.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> It remains a debate whether South Africa at the time (1975–1988) was a mere proxy force of the United States of America. Some sources argue that it was a simple matter of own interests on both sides without the one or the other accepting the role of a proxy. Recognised authors such as Piero Gleijeses, argue that it was an amicable agreement on shared interests (interview with Gleijeses, December 2007, Pretoria). However, the proxy element remains as far as the role that South Africa and Zaire played for US interests is concerned.

<sup>26</sup> The operation was named after a slave woman who had led one of the early revolts in Cuba while under Spanish colonial heel. This in itself testifies that the Cuban leadership saw their involvement more as a struggle against colonialism and in solidarity with Africa than colonising territory or spreading Marxism-Leninism in Africa.

<sup>27</sup> At no point Angolan or Cuban leadership at the time considered aggression other than to defend Angolan territory. This would have been outside any reasonable guidelines in a case of conflict as viewed by the United Nations (UN).

The spirited fight put up by the MPLA/Cuban detachments at Quifangondo left the FNLA aggressors, Zairians, white mercenaries and South African advisors punch drunk for the moment. On 5 December the defending forces moved into the offensive on the North Front.

On 26 February the joint Cuban-Angolan forces reached the border with Zaire. In the north the enemy was repulsed effectively after months of fighting. At least on one front the situation stabilised – more or less ...

## 8. THE STRUGGLE ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT

Fidel Castro in his memoirs would later recall: “While the Zaire army and mercenary troops backed by heavy arms and [bolstered] by South African military advisers were getting ready to launch new attacks from northern Angola, and in fact were already in the vicinity of the capital Luanda, the greatest danger was in the south ... columns of South African troops had crossed the southern border [of Angola] and were advancing quickly into the heart of the country. The objective was for racist South African forces coming up from the south to meet up with Mobutu’s mercenaries (funded by the CIA – our insertion) from the north and occupy Luanda before independence, which was scheduled for the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, was declared. Those were difficult days!” (Castro and Ramonet 2007: 318).<sup>28</sup>

On the southern Front the Zulu column advanced from Lobito to Novo Redondo with the goal of quickly penetrating Angolan territory towards Luanda. On 11 November Cuban instructors from the Benguela CIR set an ambush for the advancing South Africans 24 kilometers south of Novo Redondo. This resulted in several casualties for the enemy and temporarily slowed down their march, while the Cuban instructors and FAPLA troops retreated to Novo Redondo. Around Nova Redondo heavy combat followed until the Zulu forces finally occupied the town on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November.

The Queve River which runs between the cities of Novo Redondo and Porto Amboim was the chosen area to stop the advance of Battle group Zulu. On finding the bridges over it destroyed, the South Africans left a small part of their forces in Novo Redondo and the group headed east, looking for routes that would take

<sup>28</sup> The South African regime at the time, and in recent publications by the then apartheid military leaders, denied that Luanda was ever to be taken as a strategic objective. If this is true the only other reason for their encirclement/siege of Luanda was to empower and install a pro-South African/USA government in independent Luanda. In that case they would have “taken” Luanda albeit by proxy forces (read: plausible denial). Whether they intended to take Luanda together with the US-backed FNLA and the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire’s forces, or simply to intimidate the MPLA and the population of Luanda into a social implosion by the operation which included the destruction of water and sanitation networks and structures of fuel provision which would have led to the fall of Luanda, seems to be immaterial. Recent television documentaries in South Africa admitted that special force elements were active in and around Luanda with the aim to destroy vital parts of the infrastructure and even contemplated bomb attacks in Luanda itself.

them to Luanda.<sup>29</sup> Just six kilometres from Ebo where the South African forces were trying to get to Gabela *via* one of the embankments, First Commander Díaz Argüelles organised a strategic ambush on a small but very high bridge that crossed the Mabassa River.

Casualties on the side of the invading contingent were estimated at 90 with 30 dead and up to 60 injured and eight armoured vehicles lost. In the clashes the Cubans suffered one dead and five injured, while FAPLA forces were in the echelons behind ready for any rearguard action but they did not enter combat.<sup>30</sup>

In early December the South Africans began an offensive in the direction of Santa Comba-Casamba-Catofe-Quibala and were able to take over the strategic Morros de Tongo, later deploying from there. Meeting resistance, Pretoria's troops moved further east and took over the towns of Cariango, Gungo and Tari. In this instance the South Africans seriously threatened the road from Quibala to Dondo. After more clashes, they were stopped along the Longa and Pombuige rivers. Another South African force plus UNITA troops occupied Luso, a strategic location on the railway line to Benguela, with the goal of controlling the line from Luso to Zaire. Eventually they were unable to do so being halted halfway up there.

## **9. SOUTH AFRICA'S PRESENCE IN ANGOLA BECOMES KNOWN TO THE WORLD**

By now four South African prisoners of war had been captured inside Angola. On 16 December the Angolan government presented these prisoners of war to the international media. The South African soldiers/conscripts were captured on 13 December when they were travelling in a truck on the road between Cela and Quibala. In front of foreign reporters the South Africans admitted that a large number of South African troops (and conscripts) equipped with modern light and heavier armament was participating directly in the aggression against the Angolan people. Two of the POWs were taken to Lagos, and presented to the media there. They were also taken to Addis Ababa, where the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was holding its summit. The knowledge that South Africa had invaded Angola with CIA support caused an international stir. It also influenced the mood in the OAU. Two days after the summit had ended the People's Republic of Angola was recognised by the OAU.

<sup>29</sup> One of the authors interviewed a combatant who was then a junior MPLA officer. Angolan forces destroyed bridges during their retreat sometimes barely a few kilometers ahead of the fast approaching enemy forces in the south. During the South African advance small groups of anti-South African forces retreated into the extreme south southwest of Angola and only later met up with Angolan/Cuban forces advancing to the south. Suffering a total lack of equipment and resources they abided time considering the options of returning to irregular warfare (Interview, November 2004, Luanda).

<sup>30</sup> Some South African veterans that were involved at Ebo refer to the hasty retreat as the "Ebo gallop".

## 10. FROM THE DEFENSIVE TO THE OFFENSIVE

One of the oldest dictums of defensive warfare is that when defence is successful, one may consider following up the successful defence with an offensive as effective and well-planned as possible and with as many force numbers that can be released without unsettling the gains achieved by the defensive action.

As mentioned, the situation became controllable in the north. With the two fronts relatively stabilised and the continuous arrival of Cuban troops totalling more than 4 000 at the time, FAPLA moved into the offensive. On 26 December FAPLA forces launched a powerful artillery attack from Sanga, Mussende and Cambumbo. Their objective was to encircle the South African forces in Cariango. On 6 January a Cuban-FAPLA column attacked a battalion of South African and UNITA forces, wounding and killing several, some being white South Africans. In the village of Gungo about 70 kilometers from Coerama three more South African soldiers were taken prisoner. This was to embarrass the apartheid regime and its CIA sponsors further.<sup>31</sup>

The Angolan-Cuban forces liberated the city of Huambo on 8 February 1976. This was followed by Lobito and Benguela on the 10<sup>th</sup>, Sá de Bandeira on the 16<sup>th</sup> and Mozamedes on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February. Reinforcements continued arriving from Havana and now totalled close to 27 000 (support elements included; the “sharp end” thus much less), with artillery, armoured vehicles and eventually some aircraft.<sup>32</sup> Any further attempt by South African and/or Zairian aggression, whether proxies for the USA or not, was forestalled for the moment.

By now most white South Africans, having suspected so, knew about the involvement of their forces in Angola. Despite government censorship it became known through some having access to international media, but mostly through stories told by returning soldiers.<sup>33</sup> Large numbers of logistic vehicles and armoured cars moved by road and/or train via towns like De Aar, Potchefstroom, Upington and Keetmanshoop towards the north. Damaged hardware passed by rail through Windhoek, Ariamsvlei and Upington *en route* to Pretoria for repairs or to be

<sup>31</sup> The fact that the South African regime and its military were to an extent mere proxies for USA interests was not realised by the South African military. Only long after the war many reflected on this and realised to what extent they had also become another frontline and foot soldiers for US interests. This realisation remains cause for embarrassment even today.

<sup>32</sup> One of the pilots that arrived in 1976 to help stem the South African invasion, Humberto Trujillo Hernández, also saw deployment in 1987/1988 in Angola. We refer to his book in this article (see Source List).

<sup>33</sup> Books that appeared shortly afterwards told some parts of the story. For obvious reasons the full story was withheld from the public. Yet these works provide a partial indication (even if romanticised) of what was happening and what was to come (Steenkamp 1976). Less so the South African military and political leaders realised that 1975/1976 should be a lesson for the future. With a large measure of confidence they continued to destabilise Angola until the withdrawal of 1976 was repeated in 1988 – this time only on a larger scale and with positive outcomes in terms of peace creation in Angola and Namibia on the longer term.

“scrapped”. Instinctively many local people knew that these arms were not only to fight SWAPO incursions in northern Namibia.

On 25 March Defence Minister, PW Botha, announced to the white Parliament that the government had decided that all of its troops would get out of Angola by Saturday, 27 March 1976. Almost 3 000 South African soldiers and 60 military vehicles controlling the area around the dam on the Cunene River and in Ruacaná retreated from Angolan territory apart from others that returned through other means from Angola and Kinshasa.

At the end of March Angolan-Cuban troops arrived at the border post and on 1 April a meeting was held with a South African delegation. First Commander (a Cuban rank of the time) Leopoldo Cintra Frías (Polo), in the name of the MPLA, signed an agreement with the South African military forces aimed at establishing respect for the borders violated by Pretoria. The agreement from the side of South Africa was signed unfortunately without the intent to keep to it and was violated more or less immediately after that.

## **11. PRESERVING ANGOLA’S INDEPENDENCE**

In the following years contingents of more than 20 000 internationalist Cuban combatants deployed along a 600-kilometer line between Mozamedes on the Atlantic coast to Menongue more than 270 kilometers from the SWA/Namibian border. These forces constituted an impassable barrier in order to prevent a new South African invasion into the heart of Angola. Pretoria continued to carry out actions in the south, destroying infrastructure, pursuing SWAPO guerrillas and even FAPLA units from occupied SWA/Namibia.

Following the early days of Operation Carlota and in conclusion of the agreement signed by the South Africans after Operation Savannah, the Cuban leadership and Angolan political leaders discussed the gradual withdrawal of Cuban forces. In their view the strategic objective had been achieved. A full withdrawal, however, was not to happen. Other developments made that impossible.

## **12. CASSINGA HALTS A CUBAN WITHDRAWAL**

On 4 May 1978 (Ascension Day) a camp at Cassinga approximately 250 kilometer from the SWA/Namibian border in Angolan territory was attacked. The camp hosted 3 068 Namibians (refugees/exiles/SWAPO members).<sup>34</sup> The camp was strafed by

<sup>34</sup> The numbers mentioned above in all likelihood included SWAPO educational and medical staff, a defence component and some guerrillas passing through to training camps and/or the SWA/Namibian front. In one estimate the defence component at Cassinga was relatively small compared to the civilians. It could have been any number between 100 and 250 SWAPO guerrillas with as much as 80 being fresh recruits and two anti-aircraft guns. Some of the guerrillas in the area may have been in transit for southern operations or returning. South African sources dispute these numbers.

waves of bombers.<sup>35</sup> About 500 paratroopers were dropped from US-made Hercules C-130s and C-160s.<sup>36</sup> It was a slaughter. Cuban troops stationed in Chamutete about 15 kilometers away, went to the refugees' aid, but were delayed by numerous landmines and bombings by South African aircraft, which killed 16 of their forces and injured 76. The South Africans were extracted by helicopters, leaving hundreds of Namibians dead in their wake, including 300 minors.<sup>37</sup>

The views held on Cassinga (Operatoin Reindeer) then and now, differ totally. The following quotes will suffice in illustrating that:

"Operation Reindeer inaugurated a new South African policy of launching attacks into neighbouring territories which harboured insurgents planning to infiltrate South Africa or SWA/Namibia ... These attacks, all part of an operation nicknamed 'Reindeer' aroused great ire worldwide and particularly in Africa, so much so that their true significance has long been obscured" (Steenkamp 1983: i).

"The Battle of Cassinga on 4 May 1978, whichever way one chooses to look at it, was one of the most controversial clashes during the course of the Border War fought in northern South West Africa (SWA) and Southern Angola during the years 1966 – 1989" (Barnard 2006:131).

Pastor Hendrik Witbooi *inter alia* added:

"This is one day that should be engraved on the hearts of every true Namibian – our youth and their mothers shot down in their prime" (quoted in Barnard 2006:141).

"For those men (the paratroopers) the experience would always be something totally unique – a famous battle that would go down in the annals of paratrooper history as a great event" (Barnard 2006:159).

"A massacre it certainly was" (Interview, *circa* February 2003).

"The only indisputable result of Cassinga was the escalation of the Bush War. The introduction of fighter aircraft (by South Africa) into what was a helicopter-supported counter-insurgency struggle raised the tempo and sophistication of the war" (Lord 2000:44).

"It suited SWAPO to claim that they (the Cassinga victims) were all civilian refugees... equally it suited the old SADF (and surviving paratrooper veterans) to claim that they were all combatants. In a sense they are both right and they are both wrong!" (E-mail correspondence, 5 May 2008).

<sup>35</sup> In the attack Buccaneers, Canberras and Mirages bombed the old mining town where the refugee camp was situated and surroundings in several waves while ground forces attacked targets in the surrounding areas.

<sup>36</sup> Note: South African sources mention 370 paratroopers. One source mentioned 377 paratroopers (Becker 1989:217). Another source mentioned "more than 250 paratroopers" (Lord 2000:44). Probably the Cuban estimates took into account the South African ground forces involved in the battle in the surroundings as Cassinga was but one target.

<sup>37</sup> Sources differed deeply. Personally we found amongst sources currently available, *The Cassinga event* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition) by Annemarie Heywood the most informative when it comes to civilian casualties – 298 children, 147 elderly, 170 women, over 1 000 wounded (Heywood 1996:39). Most other sources are rather vague and contradictory on the Cassinga event, one has to add. Heywood suggests that some prisoners/captives were taken from Cassinga. It is more likely that if any captives were taken and returned to SWA/Namibia, that took place during the land based operations and not during the helicopter extraction of the South African airborne attackers.

Heywood quotes South Africans saying that only four South Africans were killed and a few wounded, while more than a 1 000 SWAPO terrorists died in the battle for Cassinga. One South African source in the SWATF publication *Pergamus* suggested that “(w)e were only just over 300 soldiers against 4 500 heavily armed terrorists ...” (Heywood 1996:39).<sup>38</sup>

Steenkamp, in turn, mentioned that there is little official South African material available for research and even less from SWAPO for this era (Steenkamp 1983:iii).<sup>39</sup> This statement by Steenkamp is to an extent confirmed in more recent research (Alexander 2003). However, Alexander also points out that on some levels he found ample sources in his research (Alexander 2003). In Alexander’s research the South African Directorate of Documentation Services yielded a wealth of resources and a monograph by Nothling that, despite shortcomings, summarised the operation (Alexander 2003:18ff). Alexander suggests that files related to the raid by the Military Intelligence Division seem to be/are apparently missing (Alexander 2003:18-19).

Without doubt, the Ascension Day attack played a major role in the Angolan-Cuban consultations that led to the decision to maintain a Cuban presence in Angola. Cassinga, whether intended or not by the South Africans, contributed to the escalation of the Angolan War and was seen by the international community as an act to destabilise southern Africa in favour of an increasingly praetorian regime.

South African operations Rekstok and Saffraan also followed in March 1979 in southern Angola and the southwestern part of Zambia. The South African Air Force had a regular presence by now. Impala Mk IIs, Mirage Mk IIIEZs and other aircraft were more or less ever present. During the course of Rekstok and Saffraan (14 March), South African forces lost a Canberra B from 12<sup>th</sup> squadron. The two crew members were killed (Becker 1989:217). Operations Sceptic, Protea, Daisy and Meebos brought further losses of aircraft for the South Africans.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> As in all wars propaganda plays a role. The paratroopers that were called up may well have been informed by their superiors that they are up to immeasurable odds in order to increase their performance. Psyching up combatants and soldiers against "the enemy" forms the basis of the mentality of war in a politics of power – more so in an authoritarian state.

<sup>39</sup> Some may suggest that Steenkamp had privileged information but did not make use of it. Others may argue that he was to an extent an embedded journalist with the said limitations. Whatever the case, it seems that by 1983 not all data was available or release agreed upon by higher authorities for public consumption.

<sup>40</sup> Sceptic: 1 x Alouette; Meebos: 2 x Puma's or possibly more lost (at least 19 casualties estimated between the three incidents); Phoenix/Askari: 1 x Impala Mk II damaged (no loss of life). In this period one, possibly two MG-21's, of the Angolan forces were shot down. South Africans also claimed shooting down some enemy "choppers". For the SAAF 1981/1982 brought also some losses. At least two Pumas, one Alouette and one Impala went down (Lord 2000:264,265). One of the authors interviewed a FAPLA brigade commander present at the time. If indeed at the particular time this incident did occur the commander and his staff were not sure that the Impala was indeed downed; they only suspected it. However, it is possible that separate incidents are at stake here.

### 13. THE BATTLES OF CANGAMBA AND SUMBE

Cuban troops and even civilian personnel had to confront and repel numerous attacks and ambushes by the enemy. In July 1983, after consolidating logistical support bases in the Cuando Cubango region, the UNITA forces attacked the village of Cangamba where there was a group of 818 Angolans and 92 Cuban advisors who resisted all of the enemy's attacks. On 11 August the aggressors were repulsed. Another attack took place against the city of Sumbe in March 1983, and that, too, was beaten off.

### 14. CUITO CUANAVALÉ

In July 1987 the Angolans began an offensive called Operation Saluting October towards the southeast to take over UNITA bases in Mavinga on the border with SWA/Namibia. The distance, the region's isolation and an incursion by South Africa — which launched Operation Moduler with about 5 000 men<sup>41</sup> — caused the Angolan operation to fail, with large numbers of Angolan combatants killed through the support of South African artillery and air attacks.<sup>42</sup> Cuito Cuanavale was 200 kilometer southeast of Menongue, the last point on the Cuban line, and from there to Mavinga it was more than 250 kilometer, which made it impossible for the Cuban forces to provide any help to the FAPLA forces.

Cuban command had repeatedly stated that if an operation was to be carried out, the forces would be separated from their supply lines and both men and equipment would be worn out allowing the enemy to gain an advantage.<sup>43</sup> After the Angolan-Cuban victory of 1976, it had been agreed that the Soviet Union would deliver weapons to the FAPLA and that its personnel would advise the Angolan general staff while the Cubans would train the African nation's officers and soldiers

<sup>41</sup> Presumably this number includes the UNITA forces deployed in conjunction with the South African forces. South African sources deny that large numbers were involved and few official records have been released so far – if indeed they still exist - on the exact number of people deployed on the side of the SADF, Special Forces and/or units and South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF).

<sup>42</sup> Some sources seem to suggest that advice given by the Soviet Union's representatives in Angola was partly responsible for the failure of Saluting October. Other sources during various interviews strongly suggest that the reasons were indeed complex and manifold and not to be tracked down to one simple issue and the implied blame. The amount of support from and the training of UNITA by South Africans were certainly underestimated. Covert aid and the extent of it from the USA are likewise seldom mentioned. Such support bolstered UNITA as proxy for the RSA and the USA in furthering their own interests – it also increased the stakes for the Angolan defenders, which formed a crucial part of the USA/RSA strategy.

<sup>43</sup> Different views are held as to the causes for the failure of this operation by the different actors involved. We do not want to enter the debate here. Scholtz suggests differences between the tactical approaches of Cuban, Angolan and USSR tacticians (Scholtz 1998:46ff,55). On the side of the SADF Scholtz also criticises repeated South African frontal attacks (Scholtz 1998:55). A Russian veteran from the battles at the Lomba interviewed by Gennady Shubin concurs with Scholtz in this critique of South African strategy (Shubin 2007).

and, with its troops reduced to about 20 000, safeguard the extensive southern border against any far-reaching and large scale aggression by South Africa. In essence the Cubans saw their role as defensive, to protect Angola from aggression and not to take the offensive or escalate the conflict as far as humanly possible. In a sense the role of the Cuban security forces could be described as *containment of South African aggression and those supporting it*.

This time the South Africans not only attacked the Angolan troops; they also went at it full throttle (Blanch 2007). If their assault were successful, the Republic of Angola's government would be left weakened and effectively destabilised.<sup>44</sup>

Angolan President José Eduardo Dos Santos asked the top Cuban leadership for help in repelling the operations in the south. On 15 November 1987 the Cuban government decided to reinforce its troops and help to deal with the increasing threat. Were the apartheid military and political leadership more future orientated and reflective on their situation they would have reminded themselves about the outcomes of their first invasion of Angola 11 years earlier and the withdrawal that followed. That did not happen ...

Against this background the operation known as the 31st Anniversary of the FAR Manoeuvre began. Its first objective was executed on 23 November. It was to transport, by sea and air, thousands of men, hundreds of tanks and artillery pieces and dozens of airplanes, to comprise a force that would eventually total some 50 000 troops in Angola.

An advance force of advisors and technical personnel for artillery, tanks and other Cuban weapons marched toward Cuito Cuanavale under cover of the Mig-21s and Mig-23s. Meanwhile South African and UNITA troops, in an integrated operation called Hooper (beginning on 15 December 1987) continued with their non-stop bombings of Cuito, a town they later claimed not to be a strategic or tactical objective.

<sup>44</sup> The 1987 and 1988 incursions can be seen as just another part of purposeful South African destabilisation with Angola bearing the brunt. Others were taking a beating. Since 1977 Zambia, Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho and other states were not left untouched. During the 1980s the destabilisation worsened. In the case of Mozambique the Rhodesia-inherited RENAMO were revitalised in order to destabilise Mozambique and South African special forces were deeply involved there, some using Malawi as a base and point of entrance. South African equipment, advisers and operatives continued their destabilising acts even after the much hailed Nkomati Accord signed between PW Botha, apartheid president, and President Samora Machel of Mozambique. Machel was later to die in a controversial air crash inside South African territory near the Kruger National Park. The inquest was superficial and despite later evidence rendered that implicated South African security forces and security forces the apartheid executioners were exonerated. If any decisions in this regard by the State Security Council or unilateral decisions were taken between the President of South Africa and his generals such documentation certainly did not survive the large scale destruction of documentation following the unbanning of the liberation movements in South Africa. It would not be unexpected if more information incriminating apartheid politicians and top military leadership is to appear in the near future.

On 13 January several Migs took off from Menongue, and together with artillery fire, they destroyed Olifant tanks, several armoured vehicles and a number of other soft and hard-skinned vehicles.<sup>45</sup> They dealt the opposing forces another blow on 16 January when two Mig-23ML reconnaissance planes discovered a group of tanks and infantry and attacked after having been reinforced by six more Mig-23MLs, inflicting disconcerting damage and causing dislocation of enemy forces.<sup>46</sup> After their first failures the enemy took nearly a month to regroup. On 14 February the South Africans unleashed a large-scale attack with three SADF battalions and six UNITA battalions, using more armoured vehicles, breaking through the defence east of the Cuito River. The 20<sup>th</sup> of February saw a Mirage F-1 SAAF-245 fighter plane piloted by Major Edward R Every (SAAF) downed.<sup>47</sup> This case was rather sad because the Mirage and its accompanying partner were picked up on Angolan radar shortly after take off and yet they boldly went on in an attempt to fulfil the mission required.

<sup>45</sup> The number of tanks destroyed is disputed. South Africans claimed that three Olifants were destroyed. Other oral sources claim up to 11. Others suggested three destroyed and one captured intact. In the process mine-clearing equipment attached to the Olifants was also left behind. At some stage in discussions during 2006 with the authors it was suggested that seven Olifant tanks were destroyed or/and damaged but that four were extracted/recovered by own forces. One has to note that terminological confusion in translating English to Spanish seems to be a problem when research on this topic is done. Any hard-skinned vehicle carrying armament, i.e. a Ratel 90 or armoured cars carrying 90mm guns, 81mm mortars, 60mm mortars or 20mm/23mm guns in the translation sometimes became "tanks". South African Ratels, armoured command vehicles (ACVs), Casspirs (including "Plofadders") and mobile light anti-aircraft vehicles (MAAVs) were lost in larger numbers in the course of Moduler, Hooper and Packer. In standard English translation these are not "tanks" but armoured personnel carriers (APCs), armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs) and armoured support vehicles (ASVs). In cases they were untracked slightly armoured vehicles based on Unimog or SAMIL chassis carrying 20mm or 23mm AA guns.

<sup>46</sup> The effects of air superiority even in limited battles are demonstrated by a study of the Battle of Longewala between Pakistan and Indian forces where the Pakistani 22<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry and 38<sup>th</sup> Cavalry were virtually wiped out by limited numbers of Indian aircraft with Pakistani aircraft not present with effect. (Consult Baweja 2008 and Singh 2008). The battles along the Lomba and that of Longewala hold one thing in common: Even if in limited numbers, air superiority makes up for ground forces that do not have comparable access to artillery versus their opponents.

<sup>47</sup> In the course of the "Bush/Border War" and the war in Angola South African forces lost several aircraft of different models that were irreplaceable while many others became unserviceable due to their continuous deployment and accidents. Lord suggests that during 15 years of Bush War (1974 – 1989) the SAAF lost 22 aircraft, among others seven Impala Mk IIs, one Canberra, two Mirages (Mk III and FIAZ), nine helicopters and three remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs). See Lord 2000:259-267. There is a small numerical in discrepancy in Lord's work. He describes seven Impala losses in Appendix 7 (pp. 259–266). In the summary (page 267), however, the number of Impalas became five. Aircraft losses as a result of "maintenance and aircrew errors" were 11 with Impalas, Pumas and Alouettes taking the brunt (Lord 2000:268). These numbers do not include losses incurred inside South Africa through accident or error. The number of aircraft that became unserviceable through lack of spare parts, obsolescence, fatigue and accidents inside South Africa *not incurring loss of life* is unknown, but must have put a strain on the SAAF. Humberto Trjilo's book in reference to "Cuito Cuanavale" (Operations Hooper, Moduler and Packer) mentions the loss of two Mirages and details the loss of three MiGs due to Stinger missiles. However, he lists the names of four Cuban pilots killed. The number of Angolan aircraft downed is not known. The authors did not have the funding to complete interviews in Angola or to scrutinise available Angolan archives. Not enough detail on this is available yet and more research is needed here.

Under the orders of General Cintra Frías, the Cuban command reorganised their lines of defence, and with great effort was able to move the majority of their forces toward the western region while maintaining a heavily fortified redoubt with a brigade east of the river, with a staggered line of defence and tanks and limited numbers of troops available for the rearguard.

The last South African attacks on the Cuito Cuanavale front occurred on 25 February and 1, 21 and 23 March but their troops were rebuffed with losses.

## 15. AN OFFENSIVE TOWARD THE SOUTHWEST

On 10 March, while the South Africans continued to be bogged down in Cuito, the Cuban command, which had 40 000 of its own troops in the south along with 30 000 Angolans and several thousand SWAPO combatants, began marching from the right flank toward the SWA/Namibian border.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the Cuban command decided on 22 March to turn the Cahama airstrip into an operations base for combat planes. Construction on this airstrip concluded in June with materials and equipment sent from Cuba. In a discussion (February 2007) with the authors George Risquet stated that the Cubans moved up to two thirds of their air defences used as national protection to Angola.

In response to intelligence reports that South Africa was considering the possibility of carrying out a massive air attack together with several nuclear bombs, it was proposed to divide the forces into tactical groups along with maintaining a maximum alert, protection of the troops and a superior utilisation of anti-aircraft resources at all times.<sup>49</sup>

The first combat in the southwestern direction occurred on 4 May when a reconnaissance company comprising 61 Cubans and 21 Angolans ambushed the Second Company of the 101 Battalion of the South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF). The company inflicted 30 casualties and took a prisoner, as well as destroyed five Casspir armoured vehicles and captured one. The SWATF company

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<sup>48</sup> Small numbers of ANC/MK guerrillas formed part of these forces while some were also integrated in other theatres.

<sup>49</sup> The possible use of the South African nuclear capacity was a grave concern for the Cubans whether perceived or real (Castro and Ramonet 2007:317ff). In a work a journalist seems to suggest that South Africa was indeed prepared to use its nuclear capability within and against Africa (*Sunday Argus*, 18 May 2008: 15). There is little surprise in this. South African leaders with volatile personalities such as PW Botha and his authoritarian cohorts obsessed with a total onslaught mythology were capable to consider and execute such action. In close cooperation with France, Israel and the USA since 1963 the apartheid state developed nuclear arms. Shortly before the democratic government came to power in South Africa these arms capabilities were unilaterally dismantled by the National Party apparatchik and securocrats. Interestingly enough the USA has since then unilaterally withdrawn from strategic arms limitation (read: reduction in nuclear proliferation) agreements. The USA at the same time also insists that a variety of sovereign countries desist from developing nuclear capacity for peaceful purposes without applying the same rules to say, for example, a rogue state such as Israel.

fled south, but was intercepted by a Mig-23ML that took off from Lubango and inflicted further losses. By June the theatre of operations scenario changed after the Cuban troops had advanced 200 kilometer and were just 50 kilometer away from the Namibian border.

From the start of their offensive, the goal of the South Africans was to deal the Angolans a heavy blow so that the latter would make significant concessions in informal talks between the United States and Angola. In July 1987 a meeting with the United States was held in Luanda. From 7 to 8 September another contact was made with equally fruitless results. A further meeting was set for 28 to 29 January 1988. Angolan delegates demanded Cuba's participation in the negotiations regarding troop withdrawal and a halt to US support for UNITA. For the first time, a Cuban delegation participated together with Angola in the discussions with the United States. This was needless to say a bitter pill to swallow for the South Africans and their US "mediator". However, given worldwide opinion and internal public pressures, they had little choice.

New tripartite discussions were held in Luanda from 9 to 11 and 17 to 18 March where Cuba proposed a comprehensive solution to the problem by implementing the UN resolution on SWA/Namibia and pulling back its units stationed south of the 13th parallel to the north. The South African-UNITA defeat in Cuito Cuanavale and the continuous arrival of Cuban troops in southern Angolan forced Washington and Pretoria to realise the need for negotiations. On 3 and 4 May the first quadripartite meeting was held with the interested parties: Angola and Cuba on one side; South Africa on the other, and the United States as mediator.<sup>50</sup> It was agreed that the South Africans would present a document at the following meeting. The South Africans did so in Cairo (24-25 June).

One day after the Cairo meeting the South Africans, after deploying large groups of troops toward the west, demonstrated their aggression and shot more than 200 rounds of artillery fire with their long-range cannons over Tchipa where the Angolan-Cuban troops were located. The order came from Havana to respond forcefully to the enemy attack and to hit them in their encampments and military facilities in Calueque and its surroundings.

On 17 June six Mig-23 MLs took off from Lubango and another two from Cahama. The attack destroyed the bridgehead and the sluice gates, engine room and crane engine of the Calueque dam. The SADF had an encampment at the base of a bridge that was targeted by the bombs, one of which squarely hit the encampment. Several losses occurred. One South African soldier wrote in Afrikaans on a Calueque

<sup>50</sup> A strange choice for "mediator" as the USA was one of the forces that assisted actors since 1974 that destabilised Angola causing widespread social and economic dislocation, a major refugee crisis and a legacy of future challenges, i.e. the scourge of landmines still waiting to kill thousands of people in Angola, thus delaying reconstruction.

wall before leaving: "The Mig-23s broke our hearts." In August 1988, the South Africans withdrew from Angolan territory.

## 16. CONCLUSION

The change from defensive to offensive tactics in 1987/1988 by the defenders of Angola facilitated a turning point in the negotiations aimed at achieving peace in southwestern Africa. *Ipsa facto* this action hastened the fall of the securocrats in South Africa.

Several subsequent meetings were held in cities around the world and on 22 December at the UN headquarters in New York the final accords were signed, opening the door to the implementation of Resolution 435/78 for Namibia's independence. At the same time the withdrawal of Cuban troops to the 15th and 13th parallels was established and the complete withdrawal was set for 1 July 1991.<sup>51</sup> On 21 March 1990, the process of Namibia's decolonisation culminated in SWAPO's electoral victory and the rise of Sam Nujoma to head of the new state. In the meantime, the last Cuban combatants returned to their homeland on 25 March 1991, 36 days before the agreed-upon date.

That was the end of Operation Carlota, which began on 5 November 1975 and lasted for 15 years and four months. During that period more than 300 000 Cuban combatants voluntarily served in Angola through personnel rotation and 2 077 lost their lives for diverse reasons (combat, missing in action, accidents and disease).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> An American ideologue recalls in his memoirs that "(t)his book tells the story of peacemaking in Africa in the 1980s. It is a record of an American diplomatic strategy which helped *us* to win the Cold War in the Third World (*sic*)". Two historians consequently remarked: "But such a 'victory' looks rather bizarre. After all what happened with Washington's protégés in the region? Who rules Namibia (at current): SWAPO or the DTA? Who becomes (after open elections) the President of Angola: Dos Santos or Savimbi? And who became the first President of democratic South Africa: Mandela or Buthelezi?" (Shubin and Tokarev 2001:609). Since then the USA has been "mediating peace" by toppling governments and destructing of civilian communities in an already fragile Middle East and one of their Democratic Party presidential candidates threatened to "destroy Iran" if she comes to power. And; the "constructive engagement" with the Israeli regime seems to be the same as with apartheid South Africa, one has to add.

<sup>52</sup> In the period 1972 to 1989 more than 500 000 conscripts and citizen force members went through the apartheid military machine. The majority of them never saw battle, yet many thousands did "border duties" ("border stunts") which included (deep) cross border operations. These included conscripts and citizen force members deployed in Angola. (In November 1976 South African sources claimed that they could muster 400 000 troops in an event of aggression, had "unquestionably the best air force in Africa ... minimum strength 200 combat aircraft, not including Impalas and at least 80 helicopters" (*To the Point* 5(50):7-8)). Part of this may have been propaganda. However, the SADF/SAAF was without doubt stronger than the combined air forces of all the Frontline States. The South African projection of military power triggered a small arms race in sub-Saharan Africa. The South African annual military budget expanded exponentially. A detailed breakdown of SADF losses, SWATF losses and UNITA losses is still elusive, especially with regard to the latter. It is unlikely that these statistics will become available in full detail at the anniversary of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. As a proxy force for the RSA (and at times the USA) UNITA's losses were of little interest to their masters. They were just foot soldiers in an ideological struggle to maintain white domination and further USA interests.

The South African state was to discover that as so often shown in history you can enter a country in aggression, destroy its infrastructure, dislocate its population and cripple its economy<sup>53</sup> but seldom you can maintain domination of a sovereign people. As the British had to head back home from Afghanistan in the previous century, the French and German armies from Russia, the Spanish colonisers from Latin America and the USA in Vietnam, the South Africans had to withdraw. The historical tide was turning and as ever in history relentlessly so ...

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<sup>53</sup> For more detail on the social and economic effects, including a refugee crisis as well as infrastructural damage and destruction of agricultural potential in Angola by RSA/UNITA aggression, see Zegeye *et al.* (1998), Ferreira and Liebenberg (2006) and Pritvorov and Liebenberg (2001).

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## NOTE

(1) Other than the above, sources of information for this article were the prologue by Jorge Risquet Valdés de Saldanha for the Spanish-language edition of Gleijesus's *Conflicting missions, Havana, Washington and Africa 1959-1976* entitled, *Misiones en Conflicto*, Editorial Ciencias Sociales, published in Havana in 2002 and several discussions and interviews. These include interviews with George Risquet who participated in Che's columns in Africa and the early phases of Operation Carlota and headed the Cuban delegation at the series of meetings that ended the South African aggression in Angola; discussions with the historian Piero Gleijesus during a November/December 2007 visit to South Africa; interviews with Angolan, Cuban and South African veterans, two MK members trained in Angola and a retired South African officer as well as some serving SANDF officers who fought at Cuito as young men. Several solicited and unsolicited e-mails between 2003 and 2008 also proved helpful. For obvious reasons these names will remain anonymous. *The outcomes of the article, any imperfections or perceived one-sided perspectives should not be attributed to them. We dedicate this article to all the soldiers and civilians that died in the Angolan War between 1954 and 2004, whatever their convictions may have been.*



Fig 1: 1975 MPLA and Cuban forces entrenching to resist

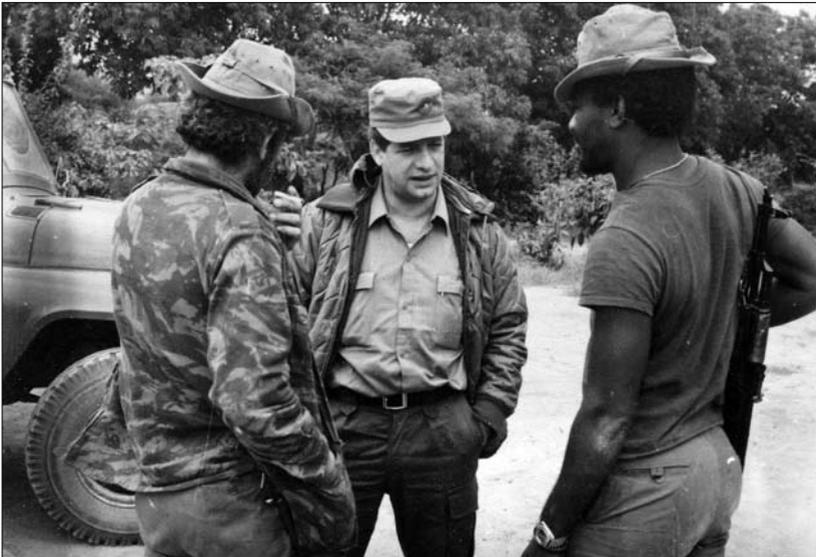


Fig 2: Beginnings of Operation Carlota – Cuban and MPLA officers



Fig 3: At Caxito civilians prepare to defend their territory



Fig 4: Softly on the tillers, a T-34 negotiates one of the bridges



Fig 5: Awaiting daily orders, female soldiers from Cuba



Fig 6: FAPLA and Cuban comrades in arms Cangamba



Fig 7: Cuito and the Lomba battles – Cuban and FAPLA pilots



Fig 8: Cuban pilots welcomed in Havana in 1988