

Days of Glory

The Final Defeat of South Africa in Angola.



Prize of War: Cuban officers stand with a captured Olifant Mk-1a tank in Cuito Cuanavale.

THIS IS A TRANSLATION OF OFFICIAL CUBAN GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS REGARDING THE AFRICAN WAR

"When in 1988, officers of the South African army and Namibian territorial forces, ran desperately to Ruanca, to the Cuban-Angolan headquarters, to establish peace talks, and put an end to the war, they were returning to the same place where, in 1976, the course was set with operation Carlota, but this time, their defeat had been sealed..."

"I was awakened by thunder, and brilliant flashes of lightning in the night sky. My tent shook furiously, whenever lightning crossed the clouds and inserted itself into the earth as if attracted by a magnet. How different was this night in Humbe from the one before, so clean and peaceful, with shooting stars and chirping insects. Unable to reconcile my sleep, I walked out of my tent and into the pouring rain, guided by the yelling of a comrade, summoning help to save his flooding trench..."

PRELUDE:

The first Cuban units had arrived at this place on the 14th of March of 1988. Their arrival was part of a greater plan, designed to confront the recent South African escalation. The antecedents to this event can be traced back to around the times of the Summit of non-aligned nations of 1986, in Harare, when FAPLA forces were undertaking a devastating offensive against UNITA.

Back then, the Cubans, with the experience of their previous confrontations with the South Africans, warned against taking direct, definitive action against the UNITA's principal strategic command, and their

bases on the extreme southeast of Angola, without first establishing the proper conditions to prevent the intervention of the racist neighbor.

During the Zimbabwe summit, Fidel had conversations with several African leaders, and explained the Cuban presence in the war, time after time to any friend who was interested in understanding it, since by that time, it had already been made known, as a result of a 1985 FAPLA offensive in the southeastern area of the country, which resulted in a complete disaster for them. In fact, such kind of measured action had been part of Cuban military thinking, since the groundwork of such, had was set down by the great General Maximo Gomez during the war of independence from Spain, over a hundred and fifty years ago. The main points of this strategy were: a) never fight any crucial battles in territory chosen by the enemy b) always avoid unfavorable combat situations and c) only attack the enemy on grounds carefully chosen and where he is at his most vulnerable.

Even though of the warnings, a major offensive was prepared and launched towards the area of Mavinga and thus the inevitable took place, the introduction of South African forces into battle. After several months of campaign and without having been able to reestablish their full combat capacity, several FAPLA units were at risk of been completely annihilated on the side of the Lomba River in October of 1987. It is a known fact that when an army's best units are defeated, the war is generally lost.

To aid UNITA, the South Africans had pulled all the stops. They attacked accross the border with everything they had: over 9000 men (including the so-called Namibian Territorial Forces), Olifant tanks (modernized WW2 vintage British tank), Eland and Rooikat armored personnel carriers, RATEL armored combat vehicles, Buffel and Casspir armored trucks, G-5 and G-6 artillery guns, Valkirie reactive artillery (poor copy of the Soviet BM-21 Grad), 140mm and 155mm long range artillery guns plus the support of their airforce with the Mirage F-1 and Impala.



Cuito before the war

The Angolans had decided to make a stand in an old air base from colonial times in the town of Cuito Cuanavale (named after the two rivers that meet nearby). The Cubans had left a force based in Menongue, but it was too small to be of any help, and also it was impossible to move it into Cuito without being blown apart by South African artillery and aviation. Without urgent help from Cuba, the Angolan Republic would be destroyed. The town was to the west of the river. Some Angolan brigades, the 21 and 25 of light infantry, and the 59 of motorized infantry, placed themselves in an arch some 18 or 20 kilometers to the east of the river. A bridge of 90 meters communicated them with the west bank and the village. Behind the village were the forces of the 13 and 66 brigades. Immediately, South African long-range artillery, their rocket launchers and aviation, commenced to bombard the Angolan positions, the

village and the bridge.

FORMULATING THE PLAN:

November 15, 1987:

Back in Havana, after returning from Moscow, Fidel received an urgent and confidential message from President Eduardo Dos Santos. He immediately summoned the political bureau, the high command of the armed forces, and several key officials of the Ministry of the Interior. Several coded messages and urgent wires that described the political situation and the immediate position of the Cuban forces had just been read. The lights would remain on in the FAR's central command throughout the night as a strategy was devised. All the actions that were taking place had been plotted on an Angolan map. Everything was discussed, possibilities, resources, necessities and even the international array.

Several of those present had confronted a similar dilemma on November 5th of 1975. This time with a difference of 12 years and 10 days, with the utmost serenity, the decision was taken to organize **Maniobra XXXI Aniversario de las FAR** (XXXI Anniversary Maneuver). The upcoming celebration of the "FAR's day", would be the perfect opportunity to mask the mobilization of extra men and materials, that would be utilized to change the course of the war in southern Angola. Division General Ramon Espinosa explained the benefits of using an armored brigade which had been proven in battle, and whose officers enjoyed considerable experience and prestige. Brigadier General Ruben Martinez, chief of the DAAFAR proposed sending self propelled antiaircraft missile batteries and to reinforce the Angolan Air Force with a contingent of our best pilots in order to ensure Cuban-Angolan air superiority during the upcoming engagement. Division General Ulises Rosales del Toro, head of the joint chiefs made sure to include at least one "fast response" unit of general subordination. Finally the Commander in Chief, Fidel Castro, ordered the inclusion into the expeditionary force of a Special Forces unit of the MININT.

The fundamental nucleus of the forces to be transported was set as follows: 3000 men with full combat gear, over 700 armored vehicles plus all the munitions and support equipment necessary for such a force. Five days after the end of that reunion, the first pilots were already in Luanda. They had been personally entrusted by the chief of the DAAFAR with stopping the South African onslaught long enough until the arrival of ground troops.

General Raul Castro, Chief of the Armed Forces, Minister of the FAR's, presented himself at Baragua and spoke with the men stationed there about the mission. After his speech he offered an opportunity to each man that had an impediment which made it impossible for him to leave Cuba, to sign out of the mission, but his offer was rejected by all.

November 23, 1987:

In that manner, 9 ships of the merchant marine, loaded with materials, began to leave for Angola. They were unloaded between the 10th and 24th of December in the ports of Luanda, Lobito and Benguela. The men were transported by 20 planes, which were allocated for the task.

Among the new commanders to arrive in the theater was Division General Leopoldo "Polo" Cintra Frias, with a previous experience of more than 6 years of service in Angola, plus the respect of thousands of his soldiers. He would perform the same job he was appointed in 1976, to take command of the Agrupacion de Tropas del Sur (ATS).



Division General Leopoldo "Polo" Cintras Frias.

At the risk of his life, he was seen traveling everywhere, even to the most dangerous places. That was an essential part of Cuban military tradition... no officer leads from an office. Those who have attempted to violate that rule have paid the price by losing the respect of those under their command. Therefore, hearing of colonels and generals getting blown up next to their men is not unheard of in Cuban history, it has happened a hundred times since the war of independence.

When the Commander in Chief, asked for an officer of the greatest prestige, to take command of the actions in Cuito Cuanavale, given the amount and strength of the forces around it and the importance of the position, he was inclined to trust the task to Brigadier General Gustavo Fleitas. From his position as substitute chief of the ATS, he could take charge of the situation.

On the very same day that Cuban troops began being transported to Africa, the UN passed resolution 602, of 1987, which condemned the South African invasion of Angola, and demanded the immediate withdrawal of South African troops by December 10, 1987.

Even though thousands of people in Cuba and Angola knew exactly what was going on, they went on with their lives normally, so much so that if Henry Kissinger had been asked, he would have had to repeat what he said in 1975.. "We did not know there were Cubans going to Angola until they were already there!"

Perhaps it was for that reason that, Chester Crocker, the then secretary of state for African affairs (responsible also for the Pretoria blunder) began trying to contact Cuban officials. Up to that moment Washington had planned to ignore Havana, in order to impose its own solution to the problem in Austral Africa.

One maneuver in Cuba and another one in Angola, masked the movement of the units. Comrade Chago and Colonel Da Silva Neto, members of Lobito's unified command gave their full support to the operation that was initiated in the ports, where 180 Angolan workers supported by 26 Cuban port specialists worked tirelessly in three shifts to unload all the material and equipment and ferry it out by barge, train and truck to their selected destinations.

Da Silva would later comment that it was due to the respect with which the Cubans acted, informing them of everything that was happening and not interfering with their orders to the native personnel, that the

operation was such a success.

While this was happening, several political officers left for Angola towards the end of December, among the tasks that had been assigned to them was to make sure that every Cuban in Angola had no doubts about why he was there. Simultaneously, a tactical group had been displaced from Huambo to Cuito Bie and from there, another one towards Menogue; meanwhile other units went down to Caconde. The Cuban defensive line, extended for over 700 kilometers, commenced to move slowly towards the south.

December 5, 1987:

The first thing in the Cuban agenda was to hold Cuito Cuanavale at all cost so teams of special forces were deployed by helicopters. Their mission was to make sure that the defenses of Cuito Cuanavale were optimal, a number of Cuban advisors, who specialized in artillery and tank strategy, were also deployed. A veteran, Colonel Alvaro Lopez Miera, went down with the first advisors, that crossed the Cuatir and Longa rivers, towards where the UNITA bandits were camping, in order to give support to the FAPLA infantry brigades, which had been mobilized to defend



Angolan Mi-8 helicopter in Cuito

the town of Cuito Cuanavale from the racist onslaught. The new defensive strategy introduced by the Cuban advisors would force the South Africans to overdeploy themselves, which meant falling into minefields and become easy targets for artillery, tanks and air strikes.

January 1988:

The situation around Cuito Cuanavale was still extremely complicated. Our men were not giving up one inch of terrain. Artillery battles were furious, each side trying to blow each other off the map. Our scouts continuously patrolled the perimeter, to prevent being caught by surprise by a major enemy offensive. Our Mig-23, having obtained air superiority, hit the enemy forces round the clock. South African "mirages" headed south as soon as they learned that there were Mig-23 in the air, so we did not need to worry about them anymore.

Silently, the 40th Armored Brigade, led by Brigadier General Enrique Acevedo, and integrated by units from Palanca and Hulla in the region of Lubango and Chibembe, began its displacement towards the south. Chibembe, almost 200 Kilometers away from the Namibian border. This came to be the most forward point of all our positions on November 11th 1988.

The units heading the advance were scouts that had graduated in February of 1987 from the instruction center at Funda, one of the first schools that the Cubans had set up for the FAPLAS. Their feet, aching and swollen, were testament to the infinite kilometers traveled in the Chivia region and Caine Canyon which was used by South African pilots to penetrate into Luango without been observed by Angolan radar. These were incredibly hot days, and just one canteen of water was not enough for the entire day.

The skin would overdry and in the white Cubans it would crack and welt, the blacks would turn an ash tone.

The displacements were mostly done at night, under the astonished eyes of gazelles among all kinds of animals, which at that time came out of their lairs to find water. The anti-aircraft operators had the privilege of observing each day the glorious Angolan dawn, as they guarded the troops against any air strikes from the racist enemy.

January 12:

Having observed the movements of the South African troops for some time now, on the 12th, the chief of the Cuban military mission in Luanda, informed that it was his opinion that the South Africans were starting to retreat, and advised to shift the role of the mission to other duties. That very same day, Commander Fidel Castro, with an acute perception of the problem, responded: The situation in Cuito Cuanavale has not yet been resolved, even though of your optimistic opinions... If the 58th and 10th brigades (Angolans) are moved from Menongue, to the Kwanza River, there will only be Cubans left in Menongue to make their way towards Cuito, in case the 8th brigade encounters some serious problem in its supply functions. Until we know for sure what the South African intentions are, we should not think of moving the 58th and 10th from their present positions. Sometime later, from Havana, some 10,000 Kilometers away, Fidel would say: "We cannot participate with the tactical group towards Cuamba, that would force us to place another tactical group at the crossing of the bridge, and a third in Bie; there would be none left in Huambo, we would be compromising the southern troops in two flanks, on top of the situation that had presented itself in Luena (another difficult situation had developed there), which aggravates itself if the two FAPLA brigades are moved from Menongue. We have to watch all our steps so that we don't destabilize the situation that we have created in the south."

THE SOUTH AFRICAN PUSH

Commander Castro's foresight was proven exactly right. On the 13 of that month, the South Africans launched a major attack against the brigades to the east of the river in Cuito Cuanavale, which formed the right edge of the defense towards that direction, which were 5 Kilometers apart from each other. The Cubans attached to the 59 Brigade had assessed that the unit was extremely war weary and its armament was incomplete, which could develop into a potentially dangerous situation given the enemy we were fighting. The conditions of other brigades was no better. Given the sheer force of the attack, the enemy dislodged the 21 Angolan brigade from its position and put in grave danger the other two. Our aviation responded as fast as possible and helped to halt the enemy onslaught by destroying many armored vehicles, the high command in Havana made the decision to send from Menongue, on the 17 of January, a tactical group with tanks, artillery and other arms, which would be supported by the 10th Angolan brigade. By that time the road had already been secured to prevent enemy attacks. It was also asked of the Angolan high command to allow Cuban troops to take responsibility for the defense of Cuito Cuanavale.

One permanent target of the South African artillery was the bridge that united the east bank of the river with the town and it was in constant danger of being destroyed. In fact, on the 3rd of January it had been severely damaged and it had to be hastily repaired by Cuban engineers with rope and wood to at least ensure the passage of personnel. To cover a severely damaged section of the bridge, a MTU-20 portable bridge was brought and it was put in place under enemy artillery fire from their G-5 and G-6 guns. Given the scarce resources to cross the river, we started using PTS amphibious transports; the destruction of the bridge was an ever-present danger in case the enemy was able to mount a successful attack.



January 17:

Message from Havana... Fidel sent the following orders to the leaders of the southern front:

"The defensive perimeter to the east of the river must be reduced, withdraw brigades 59 and 25 to more fortified positions closer to the river. These two brigades must cover the entire eastern sector, so that the 8th can reassume its supply mission. At the present time they are too exposed to attacks that may come from the area that the 21st was defending. Given the situation, such risks are unacceptable, and must be corrected as soon as possible."

Even though the orders from Havana were direct, they met some resistance with the Angolans, who thought that giving up the land was falling back in the face of the enemy, and were criticized by the Soviet advisors who disagreed with the Cuban strategy, but it was nevertheless slowly followed. Meanwhile, more and more Cuban troops arrived at Cuito Cuanavale, the town and the whole area was becoming a fortress. Unfortunately, the delay in the readjustment of the line would create the most bitter moment of the entire Cuito

Cuanavale episode.

February 14:

On this date, the South Africans launched the most powerful attack yet. For this offensive they employed a total of 90 armored vehicles. The blunt of the force was directed to the gap between the 59 and 21 brigades. The enemy hit the line and widened the gap, through which it crossed at full speed and began surrounding the first brigade. Many Cubans had been attached to these Angolan troops, and now they were fighting desperately side by side to push back the racist enemy. The South Africans would have been able to reach the bridge, had it not been for a desperate counterattack by a company of T-55 tanks with mixed Cuban-Angolan crews, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Ciro Gómez Betancourt, that went out to fight against 40 armored vehicles that had penetrated the defensive lines. The violence of the clash is shown by the fact that, of the seven T-55 that made up the company, only one returned to base. Fourteen Cuban tank crewmen made the ultimate sacrifice on that heroic battle, that gave enough time for the Angolan brigades to retreat and keep the situation from becoming an irreversible disaster for the entire campaign.

February 15:

Message from Havana: Commander Fidel Castro sent the following message to the chief of the Cuban mission: *"I won't hide the fact that we are extremely saddened by the events... but time after time we warned of the danger, you should have acted promptly to correct it."*

Even though we did everything we could to protect it, the South Africans finally managed to destroy the bridge, but all our troops had already been evacuated from the east bank. The readjustment of the line, directed personally by General Cintra Frías, present in Cuito Cuanavale since the 21 of February, was performed following the criteria stated by Commander Fidel Castro: A strong series of defensive lines set up in waves, with all available armor in the rearguard.

From that moment on, all South African attacks crashed directly into Cuito Cuanavale citadel itself. The last three took place on February 25, March 1, and also between the 21 and 23 of that same month... all were fully repelled. From the moment that they started making their approach, they fell under our artillery fire. They kept marching into our minefields, where they were trapped and cut apart by our Mig-23 units. Before retreating, the Cubans and Angolans had placed thousands of mines. Even the Cuban tanks on the

west bank were used as artillery.

March 6:

The Cuban high command had sent General Miguel A. Llorente León to take command of the defenses at Cuito Cuanavale, so that the General Cintra Frías could direct from Lubango the entire Southern front.

General Llorente León would later narrate the way in which the actions developed between the 21 to 23 of March.



March 21:

"It began at three in the morning, with a heavy artillery strike by the South Africans, for this attack they employed their G-5, G-6 and 140 mm, 106 mm recoilless guns mounted on Land Rover Jeeps, the Valkirie reactive artillery system and they even used a few airplanes. Although extremely heavy, the artillery barrage caused us very few losses as a result of the solid concrete refuges our engineers had prepared. On the afternoon they sent out their infantry and armor, the spearhead of this attack were the UNITA and the Namibian Territorial Forces, against the 36 Angolan Brigade and Cuban forces that were based in Dangome, guarding the left flank. The enemy, having achieved none of it's objectives, was forced to retreat."



FAPLAS returning fire with a recoilless gun

March 22:

"On the following day, by the Cuito area, on the opposing flank, they attacked with one battalion of the 13th brigade, by doing this they wanted to distract attention from where they would later launch their main attack."

March 23:

"At 3:40 in the morning, they began firing another artillery barrage... they fired over 2,000 rounds! When it

stopped, 10 tanks, more armored cars, and infantry began making their offensive against the 25th Angolan brigade and the Cuban troops attached to them. They had no idea of the surprise the Cubans had in store for them. Going by the book, without realizing that the antitank minefields had been placed ahead and the antipersonnel behind, the South Africans (since they were racist even with their own troops) allowed the UNITA infantry to advance into the mines... and seen no explosions, they continued their march. Suddenly, two of their tanks flew in pieces. Then the fight really got hot, at 14:00 hours the high command ordered the reserve troops to move into more advantageous positions. It was then when the battle reached its climax. While the reactive artillery, made up of our BM-21, made intense fire over the left flank, where the most enemy infantry was visible, the Cuban tanks, armed with armor piercing rounds, began cutting open the South African tanks. As a result the enemy force was paralyzed. Afterwards, it tried to regroup itself with the intention of restarting the attack, but that was no longer an option. By then,

Cuban aviation showed up and blasted away at the second wave and their reserve troops. Meanwhile, in the right flank, where they had tried to penetrate, they had achieved nothing. As a result, they began to lay down a curtain of smoke and started to retreat. But even this was costly for them, even as they ran we continued blasting them. At about 17:00 hours, the intensity of the battle decreased, and then it stopped. As trophies, the Cubans kept three perfectly good Olifant tanks that the cowards had left abandoned on the field. The battle of Cuito Cuanavale was the turning point of the war, now it was the South African's turn to retreat, and our turn to go after them."

April 6:

The first units had already crossed the Cunene river in Xangongo, while in Cahama, where a new military complex was been set up, the final considerations were discussed in order to accomplish one mission: To build a combat airfield in the shortest time possible.

As they advanced, our troops came across many abandoned camps in Xangongo (formerly Rocadas) and Mucupe among other places, which had been targeted by "Mirages" and "Impalas" of the South African Air Force. There were no mines, because the South Africans were roaming up and down the Pan-African road with impunity... some even in sport cars! But we could not see any people either, the tribes of the area, the Kwanyamas, Mumullas, Humbes, Ondbixas, and Donguenas had fled their ancestral homes, and only began to return when the Cubans showed up.



A Xangongo home bombed by "Mirages", testament to South African racism and genocide.

THE BATTLE OF DONGUENA

May 4:

Given those conditions, it is not unusual that in this war, most battles were fought between scouting parties. Perhaps the first engagement of any significance, in the days after Cuito, took place on May 4th, in Donguena, when a Cuban-Angolan scout platoon, clashed with 12 Casspir combat vehicles of Mechanized Company Bravo, of the 101 Battalion. The Casspir is a vehicle that seemed to have been built for a great safari to hunt black Africans: tall, voluminous, fast, comfortable and specially designed to

evade the effects of mines, but useless when confronted by those who are experienced enough to know that to kill it, one must run like crazy and get close to it, and attack it from below, since its guns cannot be angled down so low. The South Africans were lucky that the Cubans didn't know that the Casspir was hollow on top, if they had known, all those amateur baseball players would have pitched grenades over the top and as they say in Cuba... "Adios Lola!"

The Cubans were amazed by the completely careless attitude of the South Africans. They had been coming through the brush with rock & roll music blaring from a stereo. That was one of the factors that alerted the Cubans of their presence so early on. Perhaps some would argue that the South Africans fell victim of their own poor intel, and they thought there were no enemy troops in the area, but their attitude was reckless nonetheless.

With 5 vehicles less: 3 that escaped heavily damaged, 1 completely blown up, and one that was captured by the Cubans, plus dead, wounded and one prisoner the South Africans ran to London to establish peace talks.

The man taken prisoner during this battle, was Sergeant Johan Papenfus of the SADF. He was wounded when his Casspir took a direct hit by an RPG, but survived. He was taken to Havana and interned in the Hospital Hermanos Almejeiras, probably the best medical facility in the country, so his recuperation was swift and satisfactory. He was even interviewed by Cuban television from his hospital room. He said that at first he thought that the Cubans were going to kill him, but that now he realized how wrong he had been. We cannot say the same about the treatment obtained by our prisoners from the South Africans. After they had surrendered, they were systematically beaten... one of our men even had his hand broken during one of these beatings. Following his recovery, Papenfus was exchanged for the three Cuban privates and eighteen FAPLA that had fallen into racist claws in a previous engagement.



The man in the rectangle is Sergeant Papenfus during the prisoner exchange in Ruacana.



These are the weapons captured from the South Africans on the engagement of May 4th. From left to right: the Casspir armored vehicle, infantry weapons of all kinds plus munitions and communications equipment (...and even the stereo!).



The heroes of the battle of Donguena.

With the start of May, the austral winter began to set in. Even though in the day, the heat was mild and comfortable, the nights were freezing. The Cuban and Angolan workers heated themselves up and celebrated the end of their project, around the raging furnaces used to cast "hormigon" the material used to build the airstrip. Our troops were making friends with the native tribes of the area. Many Cuban soldiers began sporting necklaces made with colorful beads, a skill they had learned from the locals

While on May 4th, Lieutenant Giomar Fernandez's "RPGers" (because of their heavy use of RPG rockets) were battling the Casspirs; South African Mirage jets bombarded the first Cuban forces arriving at Tchipa. The Cubans returned the favor with an incursion into Iabo Grande, in the outskirts of Ruanca, next to the Namibian border. A then soldier, now sergeant, was prompted to say: "The battles around Cuito Cuanavale, have enticed us to getting our tank tracks wet at the Cunane River."

We had just barley started trying to reestablished talks, this time in Geneva, right after leaving London, when South Africans demonstrated again how uncommitted they were to peace.

May 21:

In Onimonganga, another Cuban-Angolan patrol clashed with a company on UNIMOG vehicles. The Cubans took heavy casualties, loosing both their first and second commanders, such an event would have demoralized troops of any other nationality, but our boys held out until the arrival of reinforcements. The

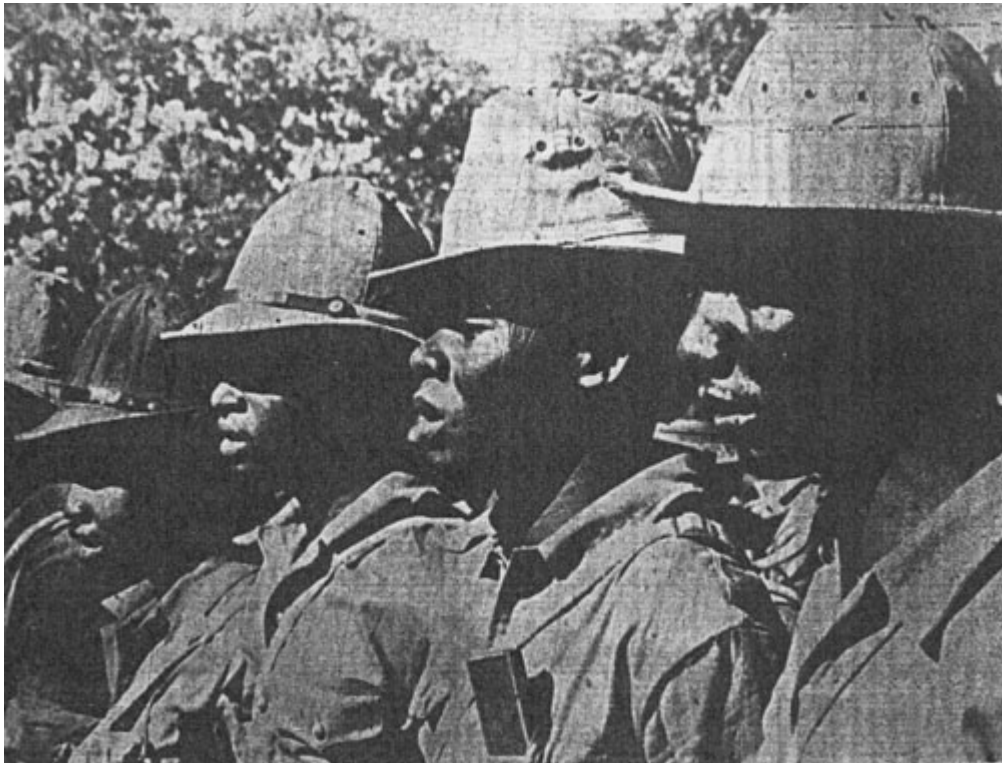
next day the Cubans set out to find the aggressors, and when they did, justice was served, with a vengeance. The racists lost 3 vehicles, many weapons and important military documents.

The men that made up these patrols were a mixture of FAR regulars, reservists and Special Forces of the MININT. Now they wore long beards due to the many days in the field without rest. The natives had taught the Cubans how to manipulate bows and arrows and spears. Many went home with those trophies and still regard them among their best memories of the war.



Cuban scout patrol. These soldiers are riding on a BRDM armored car, an excellent vehicle for this kind of terrain and environment.

Then there were the men of the SWAPO. This was a great opportunity to learn from them, as soldiers, individuals, and nation. There is an anecdote that truly portrays the nature of this people. One night, after several exchanges of gunfire, and many days of endless marching without eating or sleeping, the Namibian guide fell asleep, and thus the entire column got lost. One SWAPO, without losing his calm, got up on the turret of one of the combat vehicles, and after meditating for a few moments, he pointed to the horizon and said: This way! He was proven to be exactly correct, the Cubans were extremely astounded by what this man had done, without a map even.



The men of SWAPO: wonderful soldiers.

The Cuban high command began to explore the possibilities of launching a massive strike that would serve as a warning to the South Africans not to launch any more punitive attacks against our troops that would undermined the mutual understanding agreements signed in New York and Brazzaville.

Neil Van Heerden, principal assessor to Chancellor Pik Botha probed into Cuban resolve during the Cairo conference toward mid and late June. Looking out from his hotel room in the Valley of the Kings towards the sphinx, he would have loved to receive a revelation from it before his government launched its bombing campaign against Tchipa.

June 26

For one hour and seven minutes, over 200 artillery rounds landed on Cuban defensive positions and some into the town itself where severe civilian losses were recorded. Our commitment had been put to the test once again and a response was warranted.

"Polo" had just arrived in Tchipa a few hours before, and began moving around ordering adjustments to reinforce the strategy that had been planed for such an eventuality. One of the soldiers who had left that night on patrol looking for the enemy was Mario Perdomo. He had used his rockets to destroy the first South African armored vehicle that crossed his path. The battle was so furious that an entire company of tanks was moved on the 27th from Tchipa as reinforcement.

Mario returned euphoric from the mission, but found his commander writing a poem with tears in his eyes:

"Su muerte no fue en vano
Pues nosotros sus hermanos
Lucharemos sin cuartel
Para del mundo borrar
Al cruel invasor tirano"

"His death was not in vain
For we, his brothers
Shall fight without rest
from the world to erase
the cruel tyrannical invader"

The verses had been written to honor Mawila and two other fallen SWAPO comrades. He was so saddened that he didn't know how to show his commander what he had found inside one of the RATEL armored vehicles that were destroyed. It was a diary, whose author said that he had been awarded a medal for his involvement in Cuito Cuanavale. Anyway he showed his trophy to the Lieutenant, who exclaimed... "So, this was one of the ones that showed up for the Cuito Carnival."

After that, the scouts briefed their commander on how they had observed barrages of surface-to-air missiles fired at helicopter and airplane formations towards Xangongo and an area some 30Km south of Tchipa from deep behind the Cuban lines. There was a huge shoot-out until about 22:50 on June 26, and they confirmed that several enemy aircraft were destroyed during the engagement.

As these men were speaking, one South African column, which was racing to aid the badly mauled 61 Mechanized Battalion, was successfully engaged, stopped and forced into disorganized retreat by our air force. The racist commanders were panicking in their bases at Ondagua and Ruacana, both right on the border. "Polo" ordered the execution of a mission, which had previously been approved by both Fidel and Dos Santos, and was brought about by the events of the previous night.

THE ATTACK AGAINST THE CUNENE RIVER DAM

June 27,1988:

At 13:00, 12 Cuban fighter-bombers were deployed to attack the South African forces entrenched in the Cunene River Dam in Calueque.

The order arrived simultaneously at the air bases of Lubango and Cahama: "*Launch a resounding strike against Calueque!*" There was a lot of commotion as the "hour" approached. Our technicians fueled and armed the Migs that would take part in the attack, other planes were also left fully armed, and with the pilots waiting in the cockpits. There was absolute radio silence. All of the anti-aircraft batteries in southern Angola went into "position one", as the Migs warmed up their engines. All Cuban-Angolan units, south of the 15 parallel took refuge underground. Colonel Pedro Perez, chief of the DAAFAR, who was present in Lubango, climbed into the cockpit of a two-seater, to make sure that the operation went according to plan.



Our T-62 tanks advance on Calueque. The banner reads: "to be internationalists is our duty to humanity... Victory or Death!"

The Migs took to the air in pairs. The planned aerial corridor took the planes at the treetop level of 20-30 meters, to the delta of the Cunene River. At 12:59 the first pair was over Ruacana, at 13:00, Major Mauricio Lopez was going into a dive, followed by his wingman, Captain Orlando Carbo at a speed of 1000 Km/h. They dropped their bombs, and the first one exploded at the head of the bridge, raising a huge cloud of earth, fire and smoke, that was seen by the second pair of planes, piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Jorge Rodriguez Marquetti and Captain Gustavo Clavijo, who proceeded to drop their bombs on the targets bellow wreaking even more havoc, destroying the machinery room and the cranes. By the time Captain Carlos Palacio was over the target area, the smoke and fire was so thick, that hardly anything was distinguishable. The water pump to Namibia had been pounded into dust, and the transformers from the electric plant were giving up so much sparks that it looked as if they were shooting fireworks. He aimed, pressed the trigger, and eight bombs dropped. He then turned back north, slashing the earth with his jetwash. It was 13:04, and the last pair of Migs was taking off from Lubango.

AFTERMATH

Marquetti was the first to land his plane. After taxing out of the runway and turning off the engines, an army of technicians and fellow pilots ran out to greet him. He was extremely exited about the success of the mission and gladly told everyone all the details from takeoff to landing. The dam had been effectively destroyed without the loss of a single Mig.



Reminders of mortality: This bloody beret belonged to a member of the 101 Mechanized Battalion of the SADF.

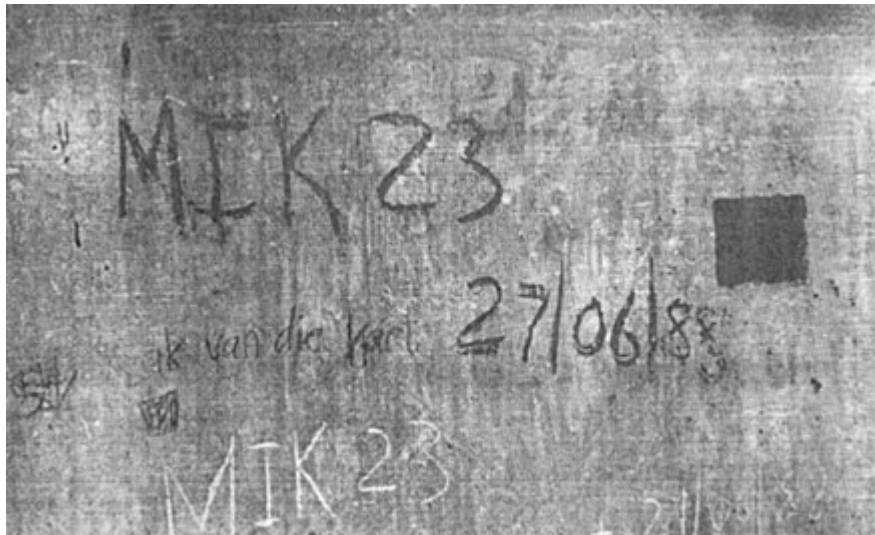
During several days there was extreme vigilance along the southern front. The South Africans gave accounts to the international press of fictitious victories in which they had allegedly killed many Cubans. Barely a week after the successful strike had been launched, our T-62 were already inside Calueque. It was hard to tell just how much damage the racists had suffered, because of their practice of taking all destroyed equipment whenever possible. Nevertheless we found a sizable amount of human remains amongst the rubble and bomb craters. The huge motors for the flood gates had been blown away as if they were toys, and on the side of the river there was a cemetery of Casspir armored vehicles.



Cemetery of Casspir armored vehicles on the side of the Cunene River.

SOUTH AFRICAN RESOLVE CRUMBLES

On the night of June 27th, Chester Crocker tried to communicate urgently with Havana and Luanda. It was necessary to reestablish talks with the outmost urgency. The racists had gotten the message. They had lost Calueque, and Ruacana with it's dam which provided electricity to the entire north of Namibia and Oshakati and three aerial bases, was a tempting target... and from there who knows what could happen. One Afrikaner soldier, probably wounded, left a message on a wall at Calueque: "the migs-23 broke our spirits".



"The MIG-23 broke our spirits."

We were only 177 days and 17 hours away from seeing 9 Cuban generals entering the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, to put an end to all the racist lies told by Roelof "Pik" Botha and his henchmen. Victory was returning to Havana on flight 435 of Cubana de Aviacion, having ensured Namibian independence and Angolan national security.



A Cuban soldier stands guard atop the wrecked floodgates of the dam.

From November 1975 to May 27, 1991, no less than 377 000 Cubans sustained the fight for Angolan independence. The South Africans claim to have killed about 10 000 Cubans, the real figure is 2077... a high price nevertheless, but acceptable given the huge victories that were obtained. Failure in the battlefield gave way for a political crisis that brought about the end of apartheid, and the first true democratic government of South Africa headed by Nelson Mandela.