

A Clash of

*CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
The number of Soviet military combat personnel in Angola was small, a few hundred at any one time. They acted in the capacity of military advisors and in training roles, and also in providing military communications*

Soviet military advisors (A Shishov on left) on the 'road of death' from Menongue to Cuito Cuanavale

Another image taken on the road between Menongue and Cuito Cuanavale with personnel on a BTR 60PB. The Union of Veterans of Angola (UVA) was established in Moscow in 2004 to preserve the memory of those that served in Angola

From left to right: adviser to the chief of artillery of the 10th Inf Brigade under the command of Y Yatsun, advisor to the commander of the 10th Inf Brigade under the command of V Sagatchko, advisor to the chief of air defence of the 8th Inf Brigade under the command of V Romanov. In the background is a destroyed FAPLA fuel truck ambushed by UNITA



Regular CMV correspondent **James Kinnear** earlier this year met with members of the Union of Veterans of Angola during a trip to Russia to find out more about the war in Angola from the Soviet perspective

The June 2021 edition of Classic Military Vehicle featured the article 'A Clash of Armour' which covered the Battle of Cuito

Cuanavale fought in Angola in late 1987 and early 1988. In addition to the Angolan Army and UNITA, an opposition military formation in the country, the Angolan conflict also involved South African and Cuban forces and Soviet advisors.

The story, written by South African military historian, Dr Dewald Venter, covered the conflict from the South African side. By coincidence, I was offered through personal connections in Russia, the opportunity to meet with former Soviet military advisors that had served in Angola, and to solicit their own viewpoint. The



chance to get the view from 'the other side' was a unique opportunity.

When CMV editor Andrew Stone first asked if we could track down Soviet personnel involved in Angola, I thought it highly unlikely, what with all things considered, not least the current strained relations between Great Britain and Russia.

However, a former work colleague, Alexander Morzhitsky had lived in Angola in his formative years, as his father Boris had served in Luanda as the combined Soviet (and latterly Russian Federation) military, air and naval attaché. The Union of Veterans of Angola (UVA) in Moscow was contacted, and a meeting was set up.

Armour II

A view from the other side



The Union of Veterans of Angola

The UVA was established in Moscow in 2004 as a central point for veterans, collecting and publishing information, and preserving the memory of those that served in Angola. The organisation has regular meetings and operates a small museum.

Our meeting began with a tour of the museum exhibits and a short introduction to the historical context from the Soviet perspective. I was then asked to go through CMV's list of pre-prepared questions, some of which are included with answers in the side panel alongside this article.

The formal meeting was open and frank and was followed by a relaxed and informal get together in a separate room where a wonderful spread of 'zakuski' (cold meats, pickles and cheeses) was waiting, washed down with some fine vodka and cognac. The meeting was another reminder that despite differences, retired military professionals, regardless of their uniform and nationality, have a common bond.

The Soviet Story

Angola gained independence from Portugal in 1975 but soon descended into a bitter civil war between three former anti-colonial liberation movements. The Soviet Union did not immediately send combat troops to the country, not least because the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) largely gained control without requiring any direct foreign assistance.

On November 11, 1975, the MPLA established the People's Republic of Angola, which was immediately recognised by most African states along with Brazil, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and some other countries. By this time Angola had already been invaded from both north and south by neighbouring countries.

Troops from Zaire entered from the north on September 25, 1975, while the South African Defence Force (SADF) invaded from the south on October 14, 1975. It was only after the declaration of independence that Angola turned to the Soviet Union and Cuba for military assistance.



The Cuban leadership (without requiring the formal consent of the USSR) initially sent volunteer formations, followed by regular military units. The Soviet Union meantime sent weapons and specialists for the newly formed Angolan Army. The People's Armed Forces of Liberation



Soviet military adviser Major V Gavrilov with a damaged BMP-1 after fighting in the province of Moshiko

‘South Africa had stronger long-range artillery and aviation support, but the arrival of Cuban forces partly redressed that balance’

of Angola (FAPLA), rather than being the armed wing of the MPLA party, were, by the time of the events described, the regular armed forces of the young Angolan state.

The Angolan army was equipped with T-54s, T-55s, some PT-76 tanks and a few older T-34-85s. BTR-60PB wheeled and BMP-1 tracked infantry combat vehicles were common, and the BMD-1 airborne forces vehicle was also used in small numbers. Other military vehicles used were a mix of standard Soviet and Warsaw Pact manufacturer origin, with the Angolan Army being equipped with relatively modern armoured vehicles and support equipment for the time.

In addition to standard Soviet and Warsaw Pact vehicles, several modifications were built locally. Angolan forces under Soviet supervision built

mine-protected armoured vehicles similar to South African designs. These were based on the 6x6 Ural-375D and heavier KrAZ-255B chassis.

They were armoured with steel sheets with V-floor-shaped desant crew modules at the rear with firing ports allowing the crew to sit undercover inside the vehicles and fire out. The structure of the vehicles was like those used by the US in Vietnam and by the Soviet Army in Afghanistan.

A large-calibre machine gun or a paired 23mm ZU-23 anti-aircraft installation with 360° rotation was installed on these vehicles for ground and short-range air defence fire support. The vehicles were used for convoy escort on the Menongue to Cuito Cuanavale road in 1987-89 where they proved effective at repelling attacks.

UVA member Col Vadim Sagatchko, who

provided much of the information for this article, personally used these vehicles along this well-travelled road. Regarding the use of newer T-62 tanks in Angola, the Angolan veterans confirmed that these first arrived in Angola from Cuba as part of the 50th Tank Division of the armed forces of the Cuban Republic in late 1987 and early 1988.

They were deployed with Cuban tank brigades from March through June 1988 in the provinces of Cunene and Huila. At the end of the fighting and the withdrawal of the Cuban units in 1991-92, these T-62 tanks were transferred as a gift to the Angolan Army.

The Battle of Cuito Cuanavale

Cuito Cuanavale, located on the banks of the Cuito River in Angola, was a ‘kimba’ or

In addition to the general discussion, on behalf of CMV I asked some specific questions with regards to the war. The answers are paraphrased and not direct quotes.

Q. What Soviet and Cuban forces were deployed in Angola?

A. Overall, some 100,000 personnel were deployed in Angola, of whom 40,000 were military personnel. Up to 60,000 Cuban personnel were deployed, with around 55,000 Cuban troops in country at any one time. There were around 11,000 Soviet military advisors, personnel and civilians in the country at any given time, the latter civilian roles being by far the majority of the contingent, involved in civil engineering and

construction and the provision of medical, educational and administrative services.

The number of Soviet military combat personnel was small, a few hundred at any one time. They acted in the capacity of military advisors and in training roles, and also in providing military communications. Soviet advisors working in such roles with the Angolans wore uniforms with no badges of rank and carried no identifying documents.

Approximately 600 items of ‘tekhnika’ or military equipment, including tanks, AFVs, and artillery pieces were deployed and maintained under Soviet supervision. Cuban forces deployed included a combination of Special Forces, tank brigades, reconnaissance, advisors and instruction officers.

Q. What armour was used by Angolan forces?

A. Angolan military units were equipped by Soviet norms with more or less modern equipment for the time. Tanks were as mentioned a mix of T-54 and T-55 types. Wheeled AFVs included the BRDM-2, BTR-60PB, tracked AFVs included the BMP-1 MICV and also – less widely known – the BMD-1 airborne forces equivalent. There were also PT-76 tanks, air defence vehicles such as the ‘Strela-10’ (NATO: SA-13 ‘Gopher’) mounted on the MT-LB chassis, and some older vehicles such as BTR-152s and K-61 tracked amphibians. Four World War II-era T-34-85s remained in service, which were used as static airfield perimeter defence points. During one battle in September 1987, South African forces destroyed six Angolan

tanks with ATGMs at a range of 200m (albeit with 14 ATGMs launched in the effort), while one Ratel armoured car was destroyed in the engagement.

Q. Who undertook the maintenance and repairs of the armoured vehicles?

A. Specialists were sent from the Soviet Union and a repair battalion was tasked with the repair of Angolan and Cuban tanks and AFVs. They also trained local Angolan forces, who despite lack of formal technical education were quick learners. The repair base was originally located at Menongue, but later moved to Cuito Cuanavale.

Q. What tanks did the Cubans operate?

A. T-54 and T-55 tanks were delivered from Cuba and were

collection of mud huts with about 15 brick-built buildings, though its size has grown in 'collective memory' such that it is often described as if a village or town.

In January 1987, to defeat the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), FAPLA launched a major offensive named Operation *Saludando Octubre* (Salute October) and began consolidating its position at Cuito Cuanavale. The plan was to launch an assault against UNITA's stronghold at Mavinga, some 180km away.

According to the UVA members, at the time of the battle, which took place



Soviet military advisors of the Angolan Army's 25th brigade in the vicinity of Cuito Cuanavale

This T-34-85 is one of several that were embedded as fixed defence points



around the settlement between August 1987 and March 1988, FAPLA forces were armed with a total of 102 T-54 and T-55 tanks registered in the 6th Military District and deployed throughout the province of Cuando-Cubango.

In the initial period of operation, 80 tanks participated in the attack on Mavinga. No Soviet or Cuban forces were directly involved in the initial advance, only a handful of specialist Soviet advisors (the first Cubans arrived in the region only on December 5, 1987).

Of the 80 advancing tanks, a large number were destroyed or captured by South African forces. The main battles were fought directly with South African troops, rather than UNITA.

Col Sagatchko estimated that around 1,000 shells were fired in the direction of

Cuito Cuanavale during the engagement. Three Soviet nationals were killed during the battle, namely a colonel, an interpreter, and a private (the few Soviet Army privates embedded with the Angolan units were radio communications specialists).

On January 14, 1988, Angolan forces launched a counter-attack with around 10 tanks and on February 14, 1988, there was a three to four-hour battle, during which the Cubans lost seven tanks and a company commander. SA losses are not definitively known.

The battle of Cuito Cuanavale officially ended on March 23, 1988. South African forces eventually withdrew due to a combination of heavy Cuban long-range artillery fire support and also due to the extensive and successful use

generally operated by Cuban crews. The tanks were from the Cuban 50th Tank Division. Initially there was at best either a full Cuban tank crew or three Cubans and one Angolan in each, the latter usually being the loader.

Later there would be one or two Angolan crew in Cuban tanks as a maximum. Cubans later trained Angolan tank crews in all tank crew roles before leaving Angola. T-62 tanks first arrived from Cuba in late 1987 and early 1988. They were deployed with Cuban tank brigades from March through June 1988 in the provinces of Cunene and Huila.

Q. What can you tell us of the tank battles between South African and Cuban forces?

A. The only tank battle

involving South African forces directly engaging with the Cubans was on February 14, 1988. Sources are conflated, but as many as 14 Cuban tanks set off on the mission which also involved crossing a river, but not all made it, as some broke down or were flooded during the river crossing.

For whatever reason, only seven to eight tanks made it across and arrived in combat. South African forces attacked the Angolan 21st and 25th Brigades that day with a counter attack being carried out by Cuban tanks. The Soviet side believes 24 or 30 'Centurion' (as Soviet forces called the South African 'Olifant' variant of the British origin tank) tanks were involved, with the Cubans estimating the number at 40,

so there are differences in recollections even between allied participants. South Africa had 60 Ratel armoured cars armed with 90mm guns, some also armed with ATGMs, which were particularly effective.

Q. What was the Soviet view on Angolan, Cuban and South African forces?

A. There were genuinely friendly relations with Angolans. Some were highly educated, speaking several languages, trained in Moscow military academies and schools. The majority of soldiers were not well or technically educated, as in any country, but were quick and willing learners, including on technical subjects.

The Cuban and Soviet contingents, meanwhile, were 'brothers in arms'. The Cubans

were immensely capable and well trained, the result of having always maintained a high state of readiness for defence of their own country. Relationships were close and genuine.

South Africa had stronger long-range artillery and aviation support, but the arrival of Cuban forces partly redressed that balance. The 'Centurion' (Olifant) tanks were an equal match for Soviet-supplied tanks operated by Angolan crews. The South African use of ATGMs was also effective, albeit with significant expenditure in rockets per target. One 'take-away' from Soviet service in Angola was appreciation for the design of the mine-protection vehicles used by South Africa, which many years later would become more generally adopted in the modern Russian armed forces.

of minefields. Two South African Olifant tanks were lost in a minefield during one engagement, a third being abandoned, which was recovered by Cuban forces, but its subsequent fate is unknown.

The 94 T-55s quoted in the original CMV article as having being lost during the battle exceeds the total tank park deployed in Angola that was operational at any time, while the MiG fighter-aircraft losses quoted were also noted as being incorrect.

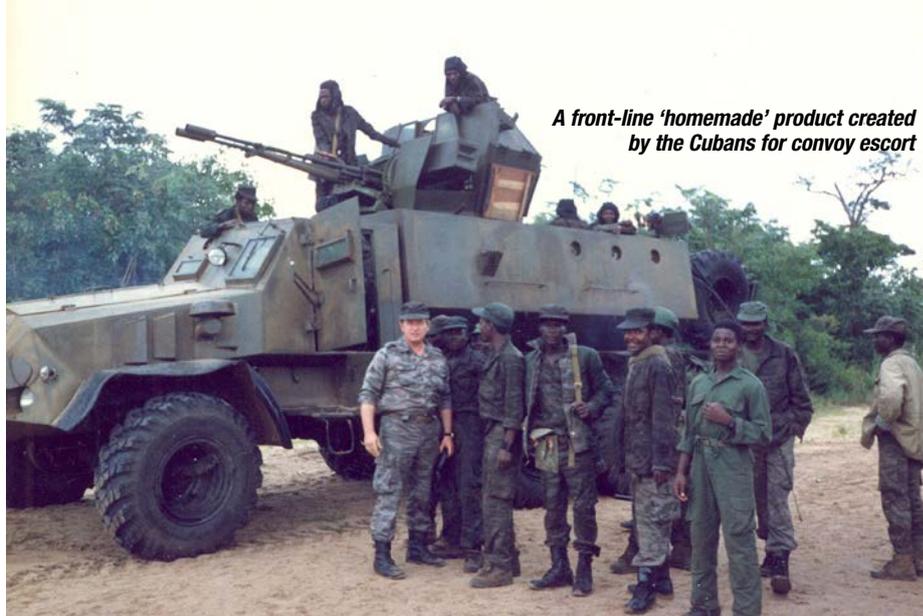
UVA members also noted that the four FAPLA brigades (16th, 21st, 47th and 59th) described in the original article as launching the offensive on Mavinga, which precipitated the South African intervention, were also far short of the 30,000 men quoted. They advised that full brigade strength, which was based on Soviet norms, would have been 2,500 men per brigade, for a total strength of around 10,000 troops.

However, these Angolan brigades were consistently only at about 60% strength, and in reality had about 1,500 men each, giving a maximum force of 6,000 troops for the four brigades quoted.

A commemorative medal for all participants was struck in Russia on the 30th anniversary of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Meantime, the Angolan Veteran's Union also told of a curious Soviet tank connection to a South African medal dating from the same conflict.

The South African Defence Medal was struck with a symbolic quantity of copper in the nickel-silver content stripped from a T-34-85 tank in the manner of the Victoria Cross being cast from Russian cannon captured during the Crimean war of 1853-56.

The copper was taken from the T-34-85, which was knocked out in Angola during Operation Protea, presumably from fuel or hydraulic lines. The 'donor' tank can today be found at the Fort Klapperkop military museum in Pretoria. There is also today a war memorial located in Luanda, Angola commemorating participants in the Cuito Cuanavale battle.



A front-line 'homemade' product created by the Cubans for convoy escort

'The meeting was another reminder that despite differences, retired military professionals, regardless of their uniform and nationality, have a common bond'

Naval presence

The Soviet naval presence in Angola has always been underrated in foreign accounts. The Russian Navy operated the 877 PMTO (materials and technical support base) at Luanda, providing in addition to direct naval facilities a range of long-range communications, with the Russian Navy having a significant intel presence. The base operated as a military administration mission, headed by a navy captain, with a small group of attached naval staff also responsible for the maintenance of missile boats. The main supply base was on the peninsula at Luanda, with other bases located at airfields. Due to distances and poor communications links, long-range communications to Moscow were via submarines based in the Atlantic Ocean direct to Soviet GenShtab (General Staff). The Soviet base was closed and the remaining naval personnel returned

to Severomorsk on the hospital ship Svir in 1992.

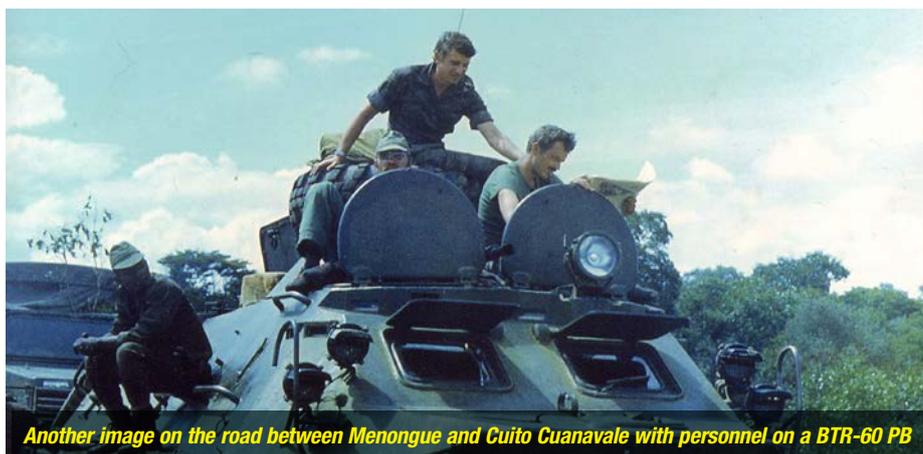
Cuito Cuanavale in retrospect

UVA members recollected that South Africa eventually withdrew due to the strength of Cuban forces and the likelihood that its forces could be encircled. There was also fear of a major international escalation, hence the agreed 'break-off. Soviet and Cuban assistance is ultimately regarded as having been successful, and relations with Angola remain excellent, with Russia today still providing the Angolan armed forces with 50% of all training and 90% of its military equipment supplies.

Several of today's well-known Russian business personalities and politicians started their careers in Angola. The head of Rosneft (the main Russian State oil company) and former deputy prime minister, Igor Sechin, served in Angola. Alexander Fomin, the deputy defence minister also served in the country, as did the television personality Dr Myasnikov, who is well known on Russian television for his shows providing practical medical advice to viewers.

In conclusion, the veterans emphasised that they were employed in Angola on a military mission, and all involved in the conflict fulfilled their respective obligations, whether Angolan, Soviet, Cuban or South African.

- Thanks to Colonels (retired) Sergei A Kolomnin and Vadim A Sagatchko for the interview and to Capt (Russian Navy, retired) Boris I Morzhitsky; and Alexander B Morzhitsky for kindly arranging the meeting in Moscow. ◀



Another image on the road between Menongue and Cuito Cuanavale with personnel on a BTR-60 PB