

2007**Vyacheslav Aleksandrovich Mityaev, 'The Oral History of Forgotten Wars: Memories of the War in Angola' (excerpts)****Citation:**

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Summary:

Soviet soldier describes realities of war in Angola, including the powerful South African counter-offenses that he experienced.

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When I arrived in Luanda from Moscow, the chief military adviser General Kuzmenko told me: "Vyacheslav Aleksandrovich, you are assigned to Huambo. I am not going to insist but I would like you to be sent to the south, to the 6th military district. I would like to have my own representative there. I have one lieutenant-colonel but he's not really what I'm looking for..."

And I served (instead of Huambo) in the 6th district in Menonge, in Cuito-Cuanavale. From Menonge a road went to Longo and then went to Cuito-Cuanavale. I drove down this road many times...

Near Cuito-Cuanavale stood the Pechora, Kvadrat and Osa-AK air defence missile systems, and there was an untarred airstrip there. A radio-radar reconnaissance company was deployed in the area surrounding the airfield [36]. The town itself is located on the junction of the Cuito and Cuanavale rivers...

And as for events around Cuito-Cuanavale... the main event happened in 1987. When arrived in 6th district in 1986, the first district Commander was "Vietnam", a member of the Central Committee MPLA, and then when he left it was "Batista" who became the district Commander. These are their alias, they like them, for them they are like a second name. They don't even use their real names...

The moment I flew into Megonge, the adviser to district Commander, the lieutenant-colonel I mentioned, was leaving. I introduced myself to him, then looked around Megonge, a small place-kind of like a provincial town, more of a village really. I with him drove to the staff office, I introduced myself to "Vietnam", the district Commander then and to the head of reconnaissance. Next I went to have a look at the Angolan reconnaissance battalion. It was formed out of military reconnaissance companies, armed with AKs and Kalashnikov machine guns (AK-47, AKM and RPK).

The reconnaissance men lived in a "refugè", a large dug-out, 2m deep. It had concrete walls, a light sloping roof on top and about a metre gap between the walls and the roof so it's always windy. There's no glass in the windows for the light, air... and mosquitos to get in. There are no beds, everyone sleeps on the floor laying cardboard from broken-up under themselves (like the homeless) and covering themselves with a light duvet. They would put the assault rifle underneath their heads.

They carry around grenades with them too. The grenades mainly weren't ours but there were some Soviet F-1s.

The UNITA soldiers had our assault rifles and the hand grenades were small, round, American-made I think.

I began to work with the reconnaissance battalion, helped them to organise training. Taught them how to set up ambushes, carry out raids, how to move about, how to sneak up on somebody, take out the watchmen, transport the prisoners.

Was there any hand-held night vision equipment?

Only night sights for the assault rifles and machine guns. One sight per squad. All the instruments would break down quickly because of the severe climate and negligent treatment.

The only things that held together well were Kalashnikov assault rifles and Kalashnikov machine guns...

Once I went and asked the fighters: "Show me your weapon. When did you last clean it?" "We never cleaned them. They shoot fine as they are! (Laughter)" they never cleaned their guns, never greased them with oil...

When did the "Salute October" offensive begin?

We always advanced during the dry season, which begins in May. We began the offensive around July. Three Angolan brigades took part in the advance. We went on foot with BTR-60PB APCs and small Engesa[41] trucks with supplies of food, ammunition and fuel. The tanks remained in their positions in front of Cuito-Cuanavale. Then the brigades went each in a separate direction.

We didn't reach Jamba. We went up to the Lomba River... For three months we gradually moved forwards, with skirmishes, checking for fields as well. As soon as the Angolan troops reached the river, straight away the South African army would come into action, especially the Buffalo battalion. The SAAF would begin its attacks-the Mirage F1 fighter-bombers and the Impala attack aircraft. Pilotless reconnaissance planes were used as well. One such reconnaissance plane, which was reconnoitering the brigades' positions, was found in the area around the bridge in Cuito-Cuanavale.

They wouldn't allow beyond the Lomba River. The South Africans would counter-attack using AML-60 and AML-90 APCs, Elephant tanks.

...I didn't go in the leading groups. Substantial firefights took place there. One of our translators, Oleg Snitko, lost an arm. The Cubans evacuated him on a helicopter with a doctor but sadly he died.

The Cubans didn't take part in this offensive. They remained in the positions near Cuito-Cuanavale.

... Sometime in October 1987 the Angolans crossed the Lomba River but the South Africans launched a powerful counteroffensive and our forces were forced to retreat. The South Africans didn't chase the Angolans for long. They didn't cross the Lomba River. I was there during all of that period from around May 1986 till 1989. The Command post of our "advisees" (the Angolans) was in Cuito-Cuanavale. We had a small site there: canopy, sauna with eucalyptus branches, a small hiding-place-a trench covered with the metal floor from an Engesa truck on top.

South African artillery fired on us with 155 mm shells (G-5 gun and the G-6 SP gun, with a range of 39-47km), whereas our artillery BM-21 (20km range) couldn't reach them.

...While the brigades made their advance we were in Command post in Cuito-Cuanavale. And the South Africans fired using 155mm shells, of course mainly on the airfield which was their primary target. The whole of Cuito-Cuanavale was blitzed. All the houses were battered because of the minus and plus rounds.

When the South Africans started to find the targets, the Angolans were the first to get out the way of the artillery bombardment and relocated the Command post to a forest near Cuito-Cuanavale. They fitted out some dugouts there. Then the Cubans also left for the forest, whereas we continued to stay in Cuito-Cuanavale. No one organized anything for us. All we had was our little hiding-place.

I remember that once a shell hit the Angolan staff office, next to it was our hut. And shrapnel from the remains of the shell pierced the wall of our hut. It was made out of light wooden structures like all the houses in Cuito-Cuanavale. The shrapnel pierced

the wall of the dining room where all of us were resting and the troop service adviser Colonel Gorb was sitting at the table writing a report. The fragment hit the fridge, don't know it managed to miss him.

Colonel Gorb was killed a month later. An artillery strike began; all of us go into the hide-out, start playing dominoes. We took it in turns to keep watch but the guards were Angolan. Andrey Invanovich Gorb was meant to go out on watch to instruct the guards. He was sitting next to our sauna under the canopy, where we carried out political lessons, did sport-the sports' equipment stood there. All of this was in a confined space, no fence around it though. The guards came on duty at night; they weren't there during the day. We all went into the hide-out, tell him: "Let's go". He said: "I'll must instruct the guards and come in then". Then suddenly a Valkiri shell exploded nearby! It flew in through the roof of the canopy. We get out of the hide-out straight away, a GAZ-66 stood just outside it. I look under the truck and see a man lying there. I run up to him. Colonel Gorb looked perfectly fine but one of the balls[43] hit him in the throat, in the carotid artery. We carried him into the hut, the doctor immediately began to help but he died in front of my very eyes. Then I closed his eyes.

Shells landed around our hut so many times. Once a shell landed when I was running into the hide-out and a small, spent piece of shrapnel hit me on the leg. And nothing-just a small scratch.

I remember the bombardment like they were today. Once we were driving from the area where dugouts were to the Command post, still in Cuito-Cuanavale. We are driving in on the BMP-1 into the zone of the Command post and then a shell hits all of a sudden. The Command platoon was to the right of me, 22 people were killed. But in my BMP-1 I just heard bits of shrapnel rattling against the armour.

I parked the BMP-1 and went to the Command post; the artillery bombardment continued. In the car park an Engesa truck with an Angolan soldier inside stood next to the BMP-1. One shell hit the corner of the Command post dugout, but didn't really damage anything. I finished my work, come outside but the BMP-1 isn't there-the Angolan driver drove off somewhere. And where I had left the BMP-1 I see a destroyed Engesa with the dead Angolan driver inside; his stomach mangled by the shrapnel. Had the driver-mechanic of the BMP-1 not driven off the shell could've hit it and nothing would've saved it.

This was how everyday day work, frequent shelling. The South Africans watched when we drove out to the Command post; they had a visual and acoustic surveillance.

We noted that when we left for the Command post the shelling would begin. Our "zampolit" [Deputy Commander for political affairs] was wounded in his leg. And my reconnaissance battalion was frequently shelled. Once a shell hit us and two men were killed.

The South Africans pounded us using G-5 and G-6s for days on end! You had the double shell bursts. When there was a minus or a plus round as the shell flies over your head you hear the first rumble and then the second as the shell hits the ground. When the two coincide, then it's "your" hit; it must've exploded over your head or somewhere nearby. Awful noise! So many shells and every day.

...When the Command post moved to the forest they constantly bombarded the three remaining installations: the airfield, the radar reconnaissance company and the anti-aircraft defence systems.

...Then we left for the forest and built some dugouts there, but the South Africans

pounded us there as well.

...Initially they [Cubans] stayed on the other Western side of Cuito-Cuanavale, on the other side of the Cuito River relative to us. They had defensive positions fitted there. And since Cuito-Cuanavale lies on a hill we could see very well how they were being shelled.

Moreover the Angolans occupied the front positions whereas the Cuban T-55 stood, buried turret-deep in the ground deep in the defensive positions.

...I have a film somewhere, which shows that column of [Cuban] T-62s arriving. They were brought on trailers from the nearest port...There was a tank battalion there. The Cubans didn't have any reserves in the rear and all the Cuban troops stood in defence in front of Cuito-Cuanavale...

...When I was there they [SADF and UNITA] didn't occupy Cuito-Cuanavale, in my time, 1986-1989, there wasn't any occupation of the town. They advanced but they couldn't get through the Angolan-Cuban defence.

...When the South African tanks were put out of action by the mines, the Cubans took one of them and afterwards everyone was taking photographs of themselves against it in the background. It's a massive thing that tank, very tall.

...The South Africans kept firing on us. The shelling only began to stop sometime in the end of 1988. Actions of small enemy groups and armed engagements continued. Fire fights and bombardments using mortars still arose. UNITA later used the Valkiris. As well as the South Africans shelled us from far away, the artillery bombardments from 155 mm G-6 howitzers continued...

Constantly, every day, I went to exchange information with the Cubans. They had much better information than the Angolans. They sent out own reconnaissance units.