

THE CUBAN AIR CAMPAIGN IN ANGOLA 1988-1989

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Introduction

All of the Cuban military intervention campaign in Angola in 1988 has been the result of intense debate on the field of military history and international relations. The fierce operations to defend Cuito Cuanavale, and the troops displacement along Mavinga, beyond the war on land, the air campaign became an element of major importance that is highlighted as an object of deeper analysis. The air war waged on the skies of Southern Africa represented a turning point and convergence of Cuban military force projection on the region, and overall represented a rupture of South African preponderance over the region's skies.

The air campaign developed alongside the Cuban Revolutionary Air and Air Defense Force (DAAFAR) and the People's Air Force of Angola (FAPA) was also an object of analysis, many times conflicting and diverging. This article does not intend to analyze such debates, but rather to present a contribution towards understanding Cuban and Angolan success by exploring from a supporting historiography and recently declassified documentation what elements were vital and decisive to the victory of the Cuban/Angolan air component over the South African regime's air force.

The Cuban air campaign would be marked by three very clear results, first that the support guarantee given to the FAPLA was plainly secured and contributed to keep Cuito Cuanavale on Angolan control, second as an intimidating element of the South Africa Air Force (SAAF) stopping them from supporting their forces close to Cuito Cuanavale, and finally the reversion on the supremacy and control of the airspace over Angola taking that prerogative

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from South Africans, reversing a historical condition of the SAAF by the time that DAAFAR was able to project its fighter aviation against Namibia and, beyond that, into South African airspace. This story's narrative is the object of study and will be told along this article.

The background on Cuba's support to Angola

In March 1961, a national liberation war erupted in Angola. It was led by several organizations: People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA, in Portuguese), National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA, in Portuguese), National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA, in Portuguese) and Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) (George 2005, 1-10). However, the mismatch of objectives, the different social and ethnic bases from each movement and other factors that divided these organizations, many times caused armed clashes between them, preventing the unification of anti colonial forces.

The most progressive movement, that, unlike others, reflected national goals, was the MPLA, which defended the independence and the territorial integrity of the country, and the transparency of its riches to national control (Venter 2013, 82-317). The USSR, as well as China and Cuba, started to support the MPLA, given its marxist orientation, in 1958. The first Cuban experts in two units arrived in Angola on November 7, 1961, and immediately began to train partisan detachments. At the time, the Cubans were already in Algeria, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique.

Many Angolan rebels received military training both on socialist European countries, such as Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and African states, among which Algeria. The guerilla fight consisted mainly in organizing ambushes on roads and attacks against Portuguese garrisons (George 2005, 10-161).

China supported the MPLA with the supply of weapons, equipment and advisors, and together with military experts from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, began training FNLA rebel units starting in 1973. Between 1958 and 1974, the USSR also helped the MPLA's armed formations, whose main purpose was to supply weapons and equipment such as rifles, light mortars, and cannons.

The MPLA, together with the FNLA and UNITA, had won the colonial war of independence. However, after Portugal signed an agreement on the recognition of Angola's independence in January 1975, almost immediately

- starting in March - clashes between representatives of the three Angolan rebel groups began, transforming Angola's war of independence into a civil war (Saún et al. 1989).

Southern Angola was UNITA's operation site, and the South Africa's government nurtured a strategic concern which translated on securing the continuity of UNITA's control over the regions bordering Southwestern Africa, so as to prevent that South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) guerrilla fighters – a guerrilla movement which fought to liberate Namibia – received Angolan support and got a trampoline on Angola's South to launch attacks against Southwestern Africa. Its security strategy was shaped by preventive interventionism and counter revolutionary war doctrines, even with the participation of dissidents from the FNLA (Weigert 2011, 65).

In order to guarantee the Namibia-Angola border security, the South Africans launched a major military operation called *Protea* and, after its conclusion in August 1981, the South African Defense Force (SADF) temporarily occupied 50,000 square kilometers of the Cunene province. Right after, UNITA took over effective administrative control of most of the region in January 1982 (George 2005, 140-141).

The permanence of UNITA in the region was a great nuisance to the MPLA government, and their expulsion from the province became a matter of honor. Throughout the 1980s, the Angolan government tried to maintain total control of the south of the country, which was permanently in the hands of UNITA and its leader, Jonas Savimbi.

Luanda's government never managed to obtain command over the entire country, because UNITA controlled most of Southeastern Angola. Every time it was threatened by the central Angolan government, South Africa intervened in its favor. In the president of Angola's words, José Eduardo dos Santos, "As a military man, it really is a hard pill to swallow to admit that the enemy occupies a territory which we have to defend and cannot expel them" (Gleijeses 2016, 225, our translation)². South Africa kept all of the Southern Angola border and the Cunene province occupied and, from there, drove invasions and attacks to the State.

2 In the original: "*Como militar, é realmente uma pílula amarga admitir que o inimigo ocupa um território que devemos defender e não podemos expulsá-lo*" (Gleijeses 2016, 225).

The operation *Saudando Outubro* and its failure

In 1987, as part of the campaign against UNITA for control of South-eastern Angola, the Angolan army launched, with the support of Russian military advisors, a major military campaign called operation *Saudando Outubro*, with the objective to expel the forces of UNITA from its strongholds on the cities of Mavinga, a former Portuguese army base, and Jamba, on the country's Southeast, on North of Caprivi Strip (George 2005, 200). The strategic goal of the FAPLA was to destroy UNITA's operation base and to put an end to the civil war, taking complete control of the entire country. To this end, FAPLA troops advanced to the Southeast of Cuito Cuanavale to attack UNITA in Mavinga. The campaign's leadership and planning were taken over by Soviet officials who also held command of the higher echelons in front-line units. The command of the entire operation and the Angolan forces during the offensive was in charge of Major General Ivan Fyodorovich Ryabchenko (Jaster 1990, 17).

The Cuban forces stationed in Angola did not take part in the offensive. At first, they did not engage in combat and acted in support tasks and, allegedly, discouraged the Soviet command to go ahead with the operation (Gleijeses 2016, 393). The Soviets rejected the Cuban advice, as well as on former campaigns, when they warned that an operation would create yet another opportunity for a South African intervention (Vanneman 1990, 76).

The operation employed at least 10,000 soldiers and there was an additional cost of 1.5 billion USD in Soviet military equipment, among which 150 T-55 and T-62 tanks, "Hind" Mi-24 updated helicopters, and M-46 and D-30 cannons. The offensive sought to, once again, capture UNITA's advanced base in Mavinga before the final attack on Jamba (George 2005, 200). It was decided that the offensive would be initiated from Cuito Cuanavale.

In subsequent developments of the campaign, during the involvement of aviation and pilots, Cubans and Angolans would engage South African fighters in air combat, shooting them down for the first time. In any case, Soviet planes crewed by Soviets, Cubans and Angolans would constantly bomb and shoot UNITA's position in Mavinga (Vanneman 1990, 76).

South Africa learned of the huge military build-up and warned UNITA about the mobilization. Operation *Saudando Outubro* began in July 1987, being, at first, successful. There was a certain progression on its development with the FAPLA, obtaining considerable gains in Southeastern Angola. The South African government noted that UNITA was not able to resist the attack and intervened (George 2005, 201).

On August 4, 1987, SADF launched Operation *Moduler*, which should stop the Angolan advance in Mavinga to avoid an UNITA loss. On August 28, FAPLA had hit the Lomba river's bank further North, close to Mavinga, when it was secured by SADF forces. South Africans began a violent clash on September 9 which continued until October 7, 1987, preventing FAPLA from crossing the river and forcing them to interrupt the Angolan troops' offensive.

FAPLA suffered heavy losses and the Soviets withdrew their advisors from the operation, leaving FAPLA with no senior leadership. It was up to FAPLA to prepare a rescue of its troops, whose safety depended on the air capacity they could afford. At that point, they began to count on the support of DAAFAR from Cuba, which worked in collaboration with FAPA. According to the lieutenant Anatoly Eduardovich Alekseevsky's memories, one of the senior Russian officials who served as a military advisor at the time, he recalls that the SAAF sent its fighters, because

[...] SAAF Mirages appeared quite frequently. But in this region we had the opportunity to call on the Cubans. I mean their MiG-21s. There was no MiG-23 in our district. The Cuban MiG-21s operated successfully, the South African Mirages fled them all the time. We called the Cuban fighters a couple of times and by what they did mid-air it was clear who they were. They executed incredible things mid-air. When Cubans found the Mirages, they almost entered in air combat, but the South Africans simply went away, fled (Shubin 2007, 31, our translation)³.

On September 29, SADF launched an offensive aimed at destroying all FAPLA forces East to Cuito river. On October 3, 1987, SADF attacked FAPLA troops on the South bank of Lomba river and, two days later, FAPLA began to retreat to Cuito Cuanavale, that had as a resistance point the Cuito Cuanavale locality, exactly from where the offensive had begun, and from where they resisted until mid-1988.

In the field of diplomatic negotiation, Fidel Castro noticed the opportunity to reposition the focus of the military crisis from Southeast to South-

3 In the original: "Apareciam Mirages da SAAF com bastante frequência. Mas nesta região tínhamos a oportunidade de convocar os cubanos. Quero dizer seus MiG-21s. Não havia nenhum MiG-23 em nosso distrito. Os MiG-21 cubanos operaram com sucesso, os Mirages sul-africanos fugiam deles o tempo todo. Chamávamos os caças cubanos algumas vezes e pelas coisas que fizeram no ar ficou claro quem eram. Eles executavam coisas incríveis no ar. Quando os cubanos encontravam os Mirages, eles quase entravam em combate aéreo, mas os sul-africanos simplesmente iam embora, fugiam" (Shubin 2007, 31).

west Angola, setting up an alternative scenario to the US intermediated exit based on a strategy that accommodated the diplomatic and military requirements from Havana and Pretoria. In other words, the participation of Cuba in the negotiations was essential. In the meantime, Fidel Castro would respond to Angola's request for help. In the military field, the Cuban military had nullified the Angolan decision from late-1987 to abandon Cuito Cuanavale and withdraw to Menongue, and, under direct supervision from Fidel Castro, took command of the defense of Cuito Cuanavale in late January 1988.

From November to March, Cuito Cuanavale remained in control of FAPLA, being under intermittent attack and siege. FAPLA, strengthened by Cuban troops, stubbornly maintained their positions on the East bank of the Cuito River. Due to the continuous air and land threat, FAPLA redistributed the Cuito aircrafts to a safer site, the air base in Menongue. The tactical command station was also relocated about 19 kilometers Northwest of Cuito.

On this device, the Cuban air force role would be decisive: with regard to air defense capabilities, in ensuring air supremacy and to provide air assets necessary to launch support attacks on the besieged Angolan and Cuban forces in Cuito Cuanavale. A more ambitious development, as a result of Cuban strategy to debilitate South African forces, was the implementation of the Cahama air base, which gave Cuban Revolutionary Air (FAR) the capacity to project air strikes inside Namibia and, even further, take from South Africa their ability to react. This maneuver aimed to involve South Africans in another front and alleviate the Angolan combatants' situation on Cuito Cuanavale. This is what we will talk about further on.

Operation *Maniobra XXXI Aniversario* and the Cuban/Angolan air action

After a series of severe losses with the failure of operation *Saudando Outubro*, the Angolan government, in November 1987, asked for help from the Cuban government. Fidel Castro promised to help president José Eduardo dos Santos, and soon Cuban MiG fighters, specially MiG-23, were sent to Angola. Their debut in operations was during the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. In action, the Cuban air force tried to retain the possibility of an advance by UNITA and SADF troops, attacking them.

In Cuito Cuanavale, the first major loss to South Africans in almost three months of combat occurred on February 19, 1988, and arose from the strong defense device established by FAPLA with the help of the Cuban army.

The attack began with heavy shelling and advancing armored vehicles that ended up entering minefields. The total failure of the SADF onslaught was due to the intense shelling of heavy artillery from FAPLA and MiG fighter action from DAAFAR, that did more than thirty airstrikes against South Africans, forcing them to withdraw without having been able to achieve FAPLA advanced posts. It was a discouraging outcome to South Africans, that made them reflect on the possibility of having much bigger casualties in the long run to complete the mission before the end of the month (George 2005, 225).

On February 25, 1988, the South Africans launched yet another attack, but in the days before it, South African casualties began to increase while the Cuban MiGs intensified their operations. The first win from the Cuban air defense happened on February 20, when a SAAF Mirage F1 was taken down (George 2005, 225), and, two days later, the MiG-23s bombed a South African column East to Cuito river, killing three South Africans and wounding another (Battersby 1988, 8).

The FAR and FAPA projection

The Cuban air force was structurally modeled on the Soviet Air Force itself, specifically the *Voyeno Vozdushinie Silly* (VVS), the Russian frontline air force, being able to project to Africa, during the Cold War.

In Angola, the Cuban aviators were led by Brigadier General Rubén Martínez Puente, but were aggregated to the 25th Regiment of Air Combat of the FAPA. The majority of which flew in MiG-23ML fighters, being considered as some of the best combat pilots of Cuba, the main fighter unit of the 25th Regiment of which they were a part was the 12th Fighter Squadron (Polack 2013 44, 261).

The main fighter aircrafts used by Cubans were MiG-21 and MiG-23 fighters, which represented a respectable force. On MiG command were Cubans brought from Havana, which represented a critical development in the conflict, because the Cuban fighter pilots were elite.

In that context, the loss of the military domain from South Africans would reflect favorably in the arena of air power to Cuba and Angola. The Cuban air power increased quantitatively to around 150 aircrafts. From these, 126 were fighters and fighter-bombers: 51 MiG-23s and 75 MiG-21s. Disposed against the Cubans, the South Africans had around 100 Mirage fighters (Campos Perales 2006, 150), of which the main model was the Mirage F1CZ.

The first squadron of MiG-23, under command of Colonel Armando Gonzalez, started operations from the runway at Menongue air base where MiG-21 fighters were already based. The objective of the Cuban pilots was to interrupt the SADF offensives and support the FAPLA. The air defense was composed by a sophisticated net of radars and ground-to-air missiles, from Russian origin.

Although there was a strong air force in Angola, it concentrated mainly on operations against UNITA, rarely challenging the South African forces. This only changed after 1987, when the recently delivered MiG-23s started to contest the South African air superiority, because their Mirage F1CZs did not have the range to take on Cuban and Angolan fighters on the battle area East to Cuito Cuanavale (Heitman 2006, 105).

The FAPA/DAA (People's Air Force of Angola/Air and Antiaircraft Defense) was under command of General Alberto Correia Neto, who was also Vice Minister of Defense (Polack 2013, 83-84). There was in his inventory MiG-21 fighters, Su-22 fighter-bombers and Su-25 attack aircrafts for interdiction and ground attack missions, and Pilatus PC-7 armed trainers, besides "Hind" Mi-24 and Mi-25 attack helicopters for close air support. Mi-8 and Mi-17 armed transport helicopters were also used for this matter, as well as their main roles of transport and air assault. Transport aircrafts, including Antonov-12 and Ilyushin-76, as well as Lockheed L-100 transport planes, who performed supply missions to remote bases in areas dominated or besieged by UNITA (Heitman 2006, 106).

The Angolan pilots were formed by Soviet instructors in Lubango, and continuously demonstrated ability to challenge the South African air superiority. Along with the Cubans, they had already started to fly the first missions in late-1987, just as Soviet pilots had also participated in some combats (Vanneman 1990, 76). In terms of air combat, this would be the first time South Africa admitted defeat against Angolan forces.

A more concentrated effort was made during the combats of 1987 and 1988 East to Cuito Cuanavale. In this airspace, The MiGS had double radar control advantage and the fact that they were close to their bases, giving them more operation time, while the SAAF Mirage F1 was too far North to have radar support, giving them only a few minutes of combat time. The Angolan Air Force MiG-23 had more power and speed than the Mirage F1 and, just like the FAR fighters, were armed with R60 missiles guided by radar, which was a big advantage against the F1CZ, which had only infrared guided missiles (Heitman 2006, 106). During late-1987 until mid-1988 – time of the Cuito Cuanavale battles – the MiG-23ML started to be used also as an interceptor

against the South African Air Force. With the intensification of the conflict at the end of 1987, some air combat with the MiG-23s happened.

In the SADF and SAAF operations there was no real opposition, but, throughout 1987 and 1988, the fight moved North and the South African Mirages had fuel for only some combat minutes. The Cuban/Angolan MiG-23 opponents operated from air bases relatively close and had radar guidance, support and fuel enough to maintain their patrols. They also had a missile with the ability to strike frontal targets (Heitman 2006, 102).

Supported by ground radars, the Angolan and Cuban MiG-23s have proven to be superior to SAAF aircrafts. With its air force grounded and its tanks stopped by mines in difficult terrains, the South African besieging force was conditioned to bomb Cuito Cuanavale from long distance, what was done for three months. So, the South Africans were unable to carry out the major land battles that took place in January, February and March (Campbell 2013). Instead, they began to have their artillery positions subject to FAPA and FAR air strikes.

One of the major successes from the South Africans throughout the air campaign might have been the ability to neutralize with the long range artillery the airfield located in Cuito Cuanavale, during operation *Hooper*, because “The powerful artillery threat to Cuito Cuanavale forced aircraft piloted by Cubans and Angolans to abandon the local air base and relocate to Menongue, significantly diminishing the capacity of the Angolan Air Force in that moment to detain the counter offensive from SADF/UNITA” (Weigert 2011, 87, our translation)⁴. On the other hand, almost half of the South African fleet needed repairs, being unable to fly.

The impossibility of South Africans to maintain air dominance against Cuban-Angolan aviation was recognised by South Africa’s politicians, mainly by those of the opposition, like Ronnie Kasrils, one of the African National Congress (ANC) leaders, who wrote about the latter war phase and attested that “The Soviet MiG-23s demonstrated their superiority over the old South African Mirage fighters, and now that they had command of the skies at the SADF network bases in Northern Namibia, they were at their mercy”

4 In the original: “A potente ameaça de artilharia a Cuito Cuanavale forçou aeronaves pilotadas por cubanos e angolanos a abandonarem a base aérea local e se realocarem em Menongue, diminuindo significativamente a capacidade da Força Aérea Angolana naquele momento de deter a contra ofensiva da SADF/UNITA” (Weigert 2011, 87).

(Scholtz 2016, 84, our translation)⁵. This was a reality that would completely reverse the direction of the war in favor of Angola.

The first Cuban and Angolan air successes in Cuito Cuanavale airspace

On November 27, 1987, a pair of MiG-23ML took off to provide cover for a helicopter rescue mission in the area of Cuito Cuanavale. They received a ground-based radar alert about two South African SAAF 3th squadron F1CZ Mirage fighters that had crossed the Angolan airspace northward. The MiG-23MLs followed the radar instructions to intercept the Mirage and approached them head-on.

The two pairs of fighters crossed each other and maneuvered to try and stay behind each other. The MiG-23MLs, however, had a clear maneuver advantage over the Mirage F1. Within a few seconds, one of the pilots managed to get behind one of the SAAF Mirage F1CZs and fired at a distance of 300m an infrared R-60MK guided air-to-air missile that exploded in the Mirage's tail (Polack 2013, 211).

The other Mirage, seeing the fate of his partner, immediately dived and left the combat, flying low towards Namibia. The MiG-23ML Cuban pilots considered that the first Mirage was shot down and tried to pursue the other fleeing fighter, but they had already hit the fuel limit and had to go back to base. Considering that South African planes were shot down, it can be said that air superiority had become pending to one of the sides (Vanneman 1990, 76).

On January 2, 1988, the operation named *Hooper* by the South Africans began, with artillery bombing and South African aviation air strikes and a UNITA infantry attack that ended up failing, receiving heavy casualties among their troops close to Cuatir river. The sole South African success was the destruction of a bridge – that was rebuilt by the Cubans – by an intelligent bomb (George 2005, 216).

On January 13, an UNITA and SADF forces attack was repelled with a counter attack from the Cuban forces in defense of FAPLA units. The Cuban forces were supported by their air force MiG-21BIS and MiG-23ML planes, who dropped at least one ton of bombs in South African positions.

⁵ In the original: “MiG-23s soviéticos demonstraram sua superioridade sobre os velhos caças Mirage da África do Sul, e agora que comandavam os céus a rede de bases da SADF no norte da Namíbia, estavam à mercê deles.” (Scholtz 2016, 84).

On January 16, two MiG-23ML spotter planes discovered a group of tanks and infantry, attacking them after being strengthened to six more MiG-23MLs, causing great damage to the South Africans (Blanch 2015, 61). The FAR MiG fighters carried out 22 more combat missions in the course of that phase of the fight.

The Cuban FAPA and FAR operations limited, but did not hinder the SADF artillery operation and the movement of its troops, but caused them to expend much greater effort to conceal themselves in order to avoid MiG attacks. Besides the Cuito Cuanavale perimeter stalemate, the Cuban air dominance was one of the most significant considerations for the possible withdraw of South African forces to the South in 1988 (Polack 2013, 46).

On land, the situation in Cuito Cuanavale got worse around February 14, 1988, because the evolution of the South Africans offensive made the combats more and more intense with “the heavy artillery fire preceding the advancing of South African forces against the 59th FAPLA Brigade, whose troops, in a bloody and mismatched clash, saw their front line penetrated” (Hernández 2018, 1, our translation)⁶. The Cuban forces reacted.

However, the Cuban and Angolan aviation constant bombings forced the South Africans to interrupt their operations and take cover. Mike Muller, the commanding officer of the 61th, stated that “the enemy aircrafts were permanently on air, dropping thousands of tons of bombs all over the theater [...] throughout hundreds of attacks” (Bridgland 2017, 201, our translation)⁷.

For part of February 14, the SADF managed to avoid attacks and, therefore, avoid casualties. However, the South Africans did not escape unharmed. Mid-morning, the Cuban MiG-23s, based in Menongue, began a series of attacks (Puente 1989, 168). And, for the rest of February, the Angolan MiG fighters bombed the areas of Gimbe and Bambi three or four times a day (Bridgland 2017, 207). The unfoldings followed with the failed attacks from the South Africans because they were “determined to have their goals [achieved] until the end, [...] the [South African] enemy repeated the attacks on February 19th and 20th, this time with a ground offensive, [...] that had as a main goal the FAPLA 25th Brigade” (Hernández 2018, 1, our translation)⁸.

6 In the original: “Os disparos de artilharia pesada precedendo o avanço das forças sul-africanas contra a 59ª Brigada das FAPLA, cujas tropas, em um confronto sangrento e desigual, viram sua linha de frente ser penetrada” (Hernández 2018).

7 In the original: “os aviões inimigos estavam permanentemente no ar, lançando milhares de toneladas de bombas por todo o teatro [...] ao decorrer de centenas de ataques” (Bridgland 2017, 201).

8 In the original: “Determinados a ter seus objetivos [alcançados] até o fim, [...] o inimigo [sul-africano] repetiu os ataques nos dias 19 e 20 de fevereiro, desta vez com uma ofensiva terrestre, [...] que tinha como alvo principal a 25ª Brigada das FAPLA” (Hernández 2018, 1).

The air support provided by the Cuban DAAFAR restated that the presence of their air force was starting to make a difference, because “[...] they received a smashing answer: while the multiple attacks were repelled by the trenches, from the air the MiG-23 aircrafts were doing their jobs, reducing several South African tanks and armored personnel transport vehicles to scrap” (Hernández 2018, 1, our translation)⁹. In the sequence, the South Africans started the operation *Packer*, which was a development to the previous operation. The SADF’s objective was still to eliminate Angolan forces on the Eastern bank of the river, in order to ensure that they would no longer be a threat to UNITA in the Southeast. As to the objective of the Cubans and Angolans, it was still to protect the city of Cuito Cuanavale from being captured West of the river. Once again, the air factor weighed in favor of the Cubans, because on March 9 the DAAFAR MiG fighters had bombed the SADF fueling lines around Lomba river with the objective to neutralize them (George 2005, 232). The Cubans had, hence, managed to establish an air superiority over the area with the modern arsenal of aircrafts, and the troops on the ground had managed to secure a bridgehead East of the city, with the help of extensive minefields.

The offensive in Southwest Angola and the Cuban and Angolan air victory

In the beginning of February 1988, around 3,500 Cuban soldiers had moved to the Cunene province. Additional forces arrived throughout the next three months, and, at the end of May, between 11,000 and 12,000 Cuban combatants were deployed along a front of four hundred kilometers in several positions located close to the border of Namibia.

In order for the strategy to work, it was essential that the Cuban air power, which had proved so effective East to Cuito river, was extended until the border with Namibia. Thus, on March 22, Castro ordered General Ochoa to expand the runway at the Cahama airfield to receive fighter aircrafts, all of which should also operate from Lubango and Matala, 185 kilometers to the North (George 2005, 236).

A considerable number of Cuban combatants was brought, besides a building brigade to erect the airfield at Cahama. This was done to launch air strikes with MiG-23ML bomber-fighters against targets in Namibia. In the

9 In the original: “[...] eles receberam uma resposta esmagadora: enquanto os múltiplos ataques eram repelidos das trincheiras, do ar as aeronaves MiG-23 faziam seu trabalho, reduzindo vários tanques sul-africanos e veículos blindados de transporte de pessoal à sucata” (Hernández 2018, 1).

beginning, they prepared an area three kilometers wide, leveled and covered with concrete (Shubin and Tokarev 2011, 186).

Cuban engineering units modernized the Angolan airfield of Xangongo, allowing them to support the MiG-23s and attack helicopters. Two hundred tanks and additional artillery batteries also increased Havana's front-line forces in the Southwest (Weigert 2011, 89).

A wide radar network covering all of South Angola was also installed, linking 150 batteries of SAM-8 missiles, which effectively put an end to the South African air superiority. With the air bases of Cahama and Xangongo built, the Cuban air power could be projected inside of Namibia. Just before the beginning of the advance into Southwestern Angola, president Fidel Castro ordered general Ochoa to prepare an air strike against SAAF bases in Namibia, in case the Cuban forces suffered a surprise attack (George 2005, 237). The air bases were finished in time to support the Cuban plan of crossing the border with Namibia via flank attacks in clamps, and, later, proceed to Windhoek and even further South to South Africa.

The MiG-23s could then take off from the air base until more than half of Namibia's territory to provide air cover for the Cuban forces. To launch an attack straight to the South Africans, the Cubans mounted an offensive with T-54 and T-55 tanks. There was also a relatively small number of T-62 tanks; altogether the Cubans would have at least 600 tanks ready to enter Namibia (Shubin and Tokarev 2011, 186). In March 1988, DAAFAR's air activity had increased with the MiG-21s and MiG-23s flying freely by South Africa's airspace, aware that the Pretoria's defense forces did not have the necessary radar or air defense missiles to intercept their high-altitude incursions (Debay 1995, 20-23, 41).

Even the Americans were surprised by the size and nature of the Cuban development. In a meeting of South African officials in Cairo in late June 1988, the advisor of the National Security Council of the United States, James Woods, said menacingly in the meeting – on the presence of the South African generals Magnus Malan and Jannie Geldenhuys – that:

[These] were the best units Cuba had, armed with advanced equipment, were much more resistant and with a bigger caliber than any other Angolan troops seen before. The troops involved in the movement to the South were prepared to assume advanced combat positions and were building aviation camps in Cahama and other places. The main threat

in Southwest Angola was the complete MiG-23 squadron, which had an aggressive posture and ability (Scholtz 2011, 90, our translation)¹⁰.

Woods said that the Cuban units carried 800 heavy tanks, 400 light tanks, 300 pieces of artillery and rocket launchers, 250 area defense weapons, 80 missile launchers, 60-70 fixed-wing aircrafts and 20-30 combat helicopters. “What were your intentions?” asked Woods, and then gave his assessment:

It did not seem to be only a block force to stop the movement of South African troops in Angola. Initially, the United States had estimated that this was a political buildup to improve the conversational posture in the negotiations. However, the force had become too large for that to be the only reason and now it seemed to be an offensive force looking for a fight (Scholtz 2011, 90, our translation)¹¹.

Thus, on June 7, 1988, Castro indicated to the Cuban command in Angola that, according to the intelligence, SAAF was planning a surprise attack and ordered that the MiG-23s were prepared to bomb South African bases in Namibia and other goals in case such an attack occurs. On March 10, 1988, the defense of Cuito Cuanavale, after three failed SADF attacks, was safe. While the negotiations happened, FAPLA and SWAPO Cuban units under the command of general Cintras Frías, opened a second front West to Lubango with a force of 40,000 Cuban soldiers and 30,000 Angolans (Gleijeses 2007), who advanced from Lubango to Southwest with the support of MiG-23 bomber-fighters. Several fights happened in the next three months, starting close to Calueque on March 15, 1988.

This was the first South African resistance found by Cubans and Angolans, who went on to fight bloody battles while their troops advanced

10 In the original: “[estas] eram as melhores unidades que Cuba tinha, estavam armadas com equipamento avançado, eram muito mais resistentes e de maior calibre do que quaisquer tropas vistas em Angola antes. As tropas envolvidas no movimento para o sul estavam preparadas para assumir posições de combate avançadas e estavam construindo campos de aviação em Cahama e em outros lugares. A principal ameaça no sudoeste de Angola era o esquadrão completo de Mig-23, que tinha uma postura agressiva e capacidade” (Scholtz 2011, 90).

11 In the original: “Não parecia ser apenas uma força de bloqueio para impedir o movimento de tropas sul-africanas em Angola. Inicialmente, os Estados Unidos haviam estimado que se tratava de um acúmulo político para melhorar a postura de conversação nas negociações. No entanto, a força havia se tornado muito grande para que esse fosse o único motivo e agora parecia ser uma força ofensiva procurando uma luta” (Scholtz 2011, 90).

towards the border with Namibia. In late May, Cuba had two divisions on Southwest Angola (George 2005, 236-237).

The forces of Cuba prepared to advance against Calueque from Xangongo and Tchipa and, on June 24, 1988, the joint force clashed with the SADF on its way to Cuamato. The SADF troops were expelled, but the FAPLA and FAR forces did not pursue and retreated to their territory in Angola.

On June 26, South African troops regrouped and counter-attacked close to Tchipa. The fight lasted more than an hour, but with the news that a large Cuban tank force was on its way to Tchipa, the South Africans decided to retreat before they were crushed. Their troops immediately withdrew towards Calueque under Cuban MiG-23 bombing and, at the end of the afternoon, their artillery and tanks crossed Cunene to Namibia (George 2005, 244). On the same day, June 26, the Cuban FAR MiG-23s were operating over Namibia's airspace, with the air supremacy in the hands of Cuba. The advance until Calueque was guaranteed.

On June 27, eleven Cuban MiG-23MLs with demolition bombs attacked the hydroelectric dam of Ruacana-Calueque, on Namibia, that was protected by the South African Army and provided electricity to most of Namibia and South Africa. The air strike was also projected against South African positions in Calueque. For this operation, a more advanced MiG-23 force of the BN model arrived in Cuba, on June 22. They could carry heavier bombs and were equipped with more precise targeting instruments (Gomez 2009, 790).

At 12:30pm, six MiG-23s from Lubango and two from Cahama took off with the mission to bomb the Calueque Dam. The eight aircrafts separated into two groups, to avoid detection by the South African radar. Major Jorge Rodriguez Marquetti, one of the pilots, said that the MiG-23s flew less than 30 meters above tree level (Gomez 2009, 791).

Just before 1pm, they were spotted by a South African patrol on the hills above Ruacan , but, due to the speed of the attack, it was not possible to warn Calueque in time. The first wave of attacks headed for the dam, with a pair of MiG providing cover for the second (George 2005, 245).

Ten tons of bombs would be dropped, specifically projected to demolition and fragmentation (Gomez 2009, 792). At 1pm, the first squad destroyed the section of the bridge near the dam gates, the SADF engine room and a crane. This was followed by the attack of the second squad, who dropped six bombs delayed by parachute, severely damaging the bridge and the dam gates near. A second pair bombed the power plant and the engine room, while a seventh MiG avoided the main group and launched eight bombs on a pipeline, exploding it to pieces and setting fire to the adjacent power plant. The last

bomb fell between parked army vehicles (George 2005, 245), inflicting more damages. With the hydroelectric installations involved in fires and smoke, all of the Cuban MiG-23 returned to base with no loss¹².

The attack was an absolute success, the South Africans abandoned the complex, the surprise was general. When the Cuban troops arrived, several days later, they found all the signs of a disaster: fired armored vehicles, equipment and central installations destroyed or damaged. The SADF officials described the Cuban attack as “very well planned” (Bridgland 2017, 268).

There were always difficulties in coordinating operations, many of them lived by the Cuban combat pilots. In their memories, Eduardo Sarria, fighter pilot, remembered that his “[...] squadron was formed by MiG-23ML planes, [...]” and even “[...] far from home, we accomplished the mission, proud of the squadron, it was the best of the MiG-23 that was in Angola” (Blanco 2018, 1, our translation)¹³. The attack on Calueque was an example of efficient coordination.

During the Cuban intervention, their actions in the air crystallized in the memory of Russian personnel on ground, who largely relied on the military capabilities of their colleagues. The ability with which they used the equipment and the high degree of professionalism were noted during the campaign in Cuito Cuanavale and in the movement that had been started in the South to expel UNITA and involve SADF.

According to a Russian official, “the South African Air Force did not manage to overcome our – more precisely the Cuban – reinforced anti-air defense. The Cubans also started to use MiG-23 and SU-22 fighters, last generation aircrafts for these conditions” (Shubin and Tokarev 2011, 152, our translation)¹⁴. Humberto Trujillo Hernández, fighter pilot who took part in the Cuban air campaign in Angola, takes into consideration that the outcome of the air campaign around the battle of Cuito Cuanavale had been decisive because of the loss of the South African air power (Hernández 2005).

There are some controversies created by the South Africans that try to minimize the idea that the advance of Cuba, in the beginning of 1988 on Southwest Angola – represented a bold movement which gave Havana air

¹² Some authors state that at least one of the MiG-23s was hit by anti-aircraft fire.

¹³ In the original: “[...] esquadrão era formado por aviões MIG-23 ML, [...]” e que mesmo “[...] longe da pátria, cumpríamos a missão, orgulhosos daquele esquadrão, era o melhor do MIG-23 que estava em Angola” (González Sarria 2003).

¹⁴ In the original: “A Força Aérea da África do Sul não conseguiu superar nossas – mais precisamente as cubanas – de defesa antiaérea reforçada. Os cubanos também começaram a usar caças MiG-23 e SU-22, aeronaves de última geração para essas condições” (Shubin and Tokarev 2011, 152).

superiority throughout the border. Reportedly, the combat planes piloted by Cubans and Angolans did brief missions, generally from a high altitude, on the airspace of Namibia on Southwest Africa, and that the SADF personnel was not equipped with ground-to-air missiles capable of stopping these flights. In the end, the South Africans confirmed that their Mirages could be intercepted by the MiG-23s.

SAAF planners also tried to offer a different interpretation of cross-border overflights by highlighting the importance of the improved Angolan/Cuban air defense network. A SAAF study from the end of 1988 tried to distinguish the “freedom in the airspace”, which they thought they still had, from “dominance of the airspace”, over Southern Angola, which in fact they did not have anymore (Weigert 2011, 91). Passed on to defend the idea that when needed, their planes supported their troops, without necessarily dominating the airspace or engaging in air combat to do so.

The SAAF high command claimed that their aircrafts had the freedom they needed to operate against all of the important military targets inside of Angola. The size of the country, however, always made it impractical to consider total dominance. Since the beginning of the 1980s, SAAF officials had concentrated on planning missions that would minimize the possibility of contact with hostile aircrafts and air defenses (Weigert 2011, 91). However, this evasive behavior before the combat did not avoid aircraft losses suffered by the SAAF during the campaign of 1987-88. These included three Mirage F-1s and a Bosbok light attack and observation aircraft, as well as a Mirage F-1 damaged in air combat that attempted to return to its base and crashed. Regarding the air defenses, reportedly, the ground forces based in Angola fired 111 confirmed ground-to-air missiles against SAAF aircrafts (Weigert 2011, 91).

One can understand that the South Africans always declined the combat when it in fact represented a challenge or a bigger risk to their pilots, most likely to their strategists. Relativizing the meaning of having freedom to act in the airspace, contrary to dominate it, seemed to be a plausible justification to its real inability to confront Cuban aviation.

In the course of the conflict, in July 1988, MiG-23BN fighter-bombers with more fuel capacity and range were sent from Cuba to Angola on board of the Cuban ship *Las Coloradas*. The fighters took off from Menongue and took part in an incursion against the SAAF base in Grootfontein, in Namibia, most likely this represented a decisive impact factor on future peace negotiations. These long-range aircrafts were sent to the operation theater after the soviets refused to supply a batch of auxiliary fuel tanks for the MiGs already in Angola (Polack 2013, 46).

The Cuban MiG-23 fleet suffered losses, the majority of which due to ground-to-air Stinger missiles (SAM) shoulder-fired that were provided to the insurgents by the USA. UNITA shot down a MiG-23ML and a MiG-23UB, the latter on December 9, 1985. Well before the operation *Saudando Outubro*, three MiG-23 were lost during combat in Angola.

Only from January to March of 1988, the MiG-21 and MiG-23 fighters accomplished 1,283 flight missions over Cuito Cuanavale, realizing 722 bombing missions and 561 air cover missions, dropping 358 tons of bombs and 4,000 C-5 rockets, as well as other ammunition (Hernández 2005, 102-105). When the Cuban forces withdrew, in 1989, the MiG-23MLs that had taken part in the campaign were incorporated into FAR's 23rd Regimiento de Caza at San Julián.

Conclusion

The campaign waged by Angolans and Cubans against South Africans, from late-1987 to mid-1988, revealed, beyond the results, the enhanced capacity with which they made use of their air power. At the time, the MiG-21 was FAPA's most advanced aircraft. The arrival of the MiG-23s increased significantly the air power organized against the SADF, capacity that would be expanded with the arrival of the same fighter models in service of Cuba, since they were superior to the Mirage F1CZ, considered the South African Air Force's most advanced war planes.

The former supremacy that the South African air force enjoyed for so long had been lost in the face of the expansion of the Angolan-Cuban military capacity, that was attested not only by the best equipment and best ability from the pilots, but also by the implementation of a sophisticated radar system and ground-to-air missiles, that made the Cuito Cuanavale defense strategy possible and the expulsion of the South Africans from Southern Angola. Overall, the outcome of the land battle on the banks of the Cuito river and the developments Southwest of the border between Angola and Namibia had medium and long-term military implications, and beyond the theater where they took place, reverberating as far as Washington. The triumph of joint Angolan and Cuban forces forced South Africa and the United States to sign the New York tripartite agreements in 1988, which led to the independence of Namibia. Such agreements can be considered positive, as they provided a solution to a long-standing regional conflict. In this story, the air component organized by Cuba and Angola proved to be of fundamental importance, if not decisive. The

confrontations on the ground can be seen as vital, but the air action represented a high point of a dispute that decisively influenced the course of the conflict.

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ABSTRACT

In mid 1988, FAPLA launched a major offensive to destabilize UNITA in the border region between Angola and Namibia, supported by Russian advisors and military equipment. When the operation *Saudando Outubro* was launched, FAPLA were not able to achieve success, leading to its collapse and a counter offensive by UNITA supported by the SADF. Since 1975, Cuba always kept military advisors in the country and intervened in 1988 in defense of the Cuito Cuanavale region, by the time that the offensive to expel SADF and UNITA from Southern Angola started. In this campaign, the Cuban and Angolan aviation's action was decisive for South Africa's defeat. The present article intends to analyze how the process of the conquest of Cuban and Angolan air supremacy against the South African air force took place. It is understood that the DAAFAR, by denying SAAF's action, deprived the latter of the historic air superiority enjoyed for years, and that the action of Cuban air power combined with Angola was a decisive condition for the success of the ground offensive by Angolan and Cuban armies on the border with Namibia.

KEYWORDS

Air War. Cold War on Africa. Fuerza Aérea Cubana. Angolan Air Force. South African Air Force.

Received on February 4, 2022

Accepted on February 7, 2022

Translated by Gerson Carlos Soares da Silva Filho