

**2004****Peter Gusev, 'Search for Your Destiny' (excerpts)****Citation:**

"Peter Gusev, 'Search for Your Destiny' (excerpts)", 2004, Wilson Center Digital Archive, (Izhevsk: Udmurtia Publishing House, 2004). Translated from Russian and included in "Southern Africa in the Cold War, Post-1974," edited by Sue Onslow and Anna-Mart Van Wyk. <https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/118173>

**Summary:**

The recollection of a Soviet General who was stationed in Angola during the 1987-88 operation against UNITA around Cuito-Cuanavale. Offers his perspective on the operation, including Cuban involvement, experiencing South African artillery bombardment, and his impression of Angolan fears of white South Africans.

**Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

**Original Language:**

Russian

**Contents:**

Translation - English

Of ten combat operations conducted during my stay in Angola the largest in scale and infamous one was the operation on elimination of UNITA band formations in the area of Cuito-Cuanavale in September 1987-March 1988. While planning this operation we took into account that South African troops could interfere in case of our success (and indeed, this happened).

The aim of the operation was destruction of UNITA main forces, capture of Savimbi's headquarters in the area of Mavinga and installation of the lawful government's authority in the South-East of the country. In case of the interference of the South African troops we in co-operation with Cuban troops had to do away with intruders. The Angolan president gave his approval and the preparation of this operation began. I and all my advisors got fully involved in planning and preparation.

The plan of the operation:

by aggressive actions of a tank battalion, a motorized infantry brigade on infantry combat vehicles, and an anti-aircraft missile battery with reserves of ammunition and food to make during the 30 days a maneuver through the rear of the enemy main grouping, destroy rear bases and depots, do away with its reserves, capture the UNITA HQ in Mavinga and reach the Angolan-Namibian border;

to form an offensive grouping on the southern bank of the Cuito river, which in co-operation with the maneuver grouping will deliver a dashing blow and confirm the overthrow of the whole South-Eastern grouping of UNITA.

The operation began in the last days of September by actions of the mobile maneuver group (MMG) in the enemy's rear. Initially it almost was not meeting an active enemy resistance and was successfully advancing along the Lomba river valley. On the seventh day, having advanced 80-90 km, it was suddenly attacked by the SAAF, however this attack was rebuffed without any losses due to the anti-aircraft missile battery which shot down several South African aircraft. Then the situation became more complicated: the SAAF delivered blows against the MMG several times a day, then the shelling by missile artillery and under this cover UNITA units delivered several attacks, but they were rebuffed by the MMG. Finally, the South African Army tank units went into action.

The MMG passed on to a stiff defence, but suffered heavy losses. Some of Angolan crews, having seen "white" South African crews, left their tanks and run away. Getting use of their panic South African units delivered a counter-attack into the flank of the Angolan troops and the MMG, including five Soviet advisors and specialists, turned to be half-encircled. The situation towards Cuito-Cuanavale also became more complicated; South African tank units went into action there as well.

Having taken a decision to come out of the semi-encirclement, the MMG command did not make a proper reconnaissance of the Lomba floodplain and did not organize the control at the river-crossing. The MMG columns came under the aiming bomb attack of the SAAF. The group suffered a complete defeat, just several tanks, infantry combat vehicles and five anti-aircraft missile systems with our specialists came out of the semi-encirclement.

After the South African tank units went into action in the Mavinga-Cuito-Cuanavale direction, one Angolan brigade got encircled, our interpreter [Lieutenant Oleg Snitko] was heavily wounded. His urgent evacuation from the battlefield was needed and this was skillfully done by our [Cuban] helicopter pilots. Very unfortunately, the interpreter died due to heavy bleeding.

The situation was getting aggravated daily; the Angolan troops could really lose an

important strategic region. After the Angolan President's appeal to Fidel Castro the Cuban troops went into action on the Angolan side. After mighty firepower preparation, Cuban units pressed a counter-attack against South African tank units, which suffered heavy losses and were obliged to retreat, having dropped several damaged tanks and dead soldiers on the battlefield. The Cubans captured them as a "material evidence" of South Africa's participation in actions. The situation at Cuito-Cuanavale got stabilized, However, the South African long-range artillery continued firing at the locality where the Front HQ and over 30 our advisors and specialists were stationed. As a result of exhausting three-month shelling one of our advisors [Colonel Andrey Gorb] was killed and several officers were shell-shocked.

The operation did not reach its aim and the stated tasks were not fulfilled. The Angolan troops suffered big losses in armament and equipment. The enemy captured anti-aircraft missile installations, tanks and a big number of automobile vehicles, which with relevant comments were demonstrated by Savimbi to foreign journalists from the USA, South Africa and other countries.

The results of the operation did not satisfy Moscow, nor Luanda. The main responsibility for a failed operation was naturally put on the GVS [Chief Military Advisor]. A commission from "Desyatka" [Chief Tenth Department of the General Staff] headed by Colonel-General Kurochkin flew in from Moscow. It worked for ten days and did not find criminal deficiencies, while nobody of us can work ideally, without slightest deficiencies. I personally reported the results of the operation to Akhromeev [Chief of the General Staff]. But the most difficult in moral respect was my report to President of Angola, whom in the beginning of the operation I, as a military specialist, was convincing, that the operation would be successful and that Savimbi would be routed.

And here I am in the office of the President, reporting the situation with a map in my hands. By that time the situation, taking into account the defeat of South African troops, which tried to capture Cuito-Cuanavale, was stable. But we both understood that the main role in the victory was played by the Cuban troops, which more than once rescued FAPLA in its fighting with UNITA band formations, and he asks me the main question: why have not we fulfilled the stated mission? I answer him, as I can. I do not know, whether he was satisfied with my answer. For myself, it seems to me, I found the answer why such thoroughly prepared operation failed. I think the Angolan students had no sufficient force of spirit, apparently at the genetic level they fear a white man. And, if it so, equipment will help! Indeed, at the Lomba River, having met the white tank crews, Angolan crews were abandoned their intact tanks with ammunition!... Of course, I could not say this to President. This was the most difficult operation during three and a half years I sent in Angola.

Comments by Vitaly Mozolev, who served at Cuito-Cuanavale from September 1986 to December 1988:

I have not read more accurate account of the events. But I do not agree with the assessments. The cause of encirclement (not of the defeat) at Cuito-Cuanavale was not a "genetic fear of the whites". FAPLA was not ready to confront South African regular troops. These are the stages of formation of any army. Indeed, the initial stage of the operation was correct and successful, but the forces were not sufficient for South African troops... The defence of Cuito-Cuanavale is the VICTORY of the young Angolan army, and not the defeat.

Comments by Danial Gukov, who served as a battalion commander's advisor at Cuito-Cuanavale for two years:

I agree with Valentin Mozolev. General Gusev underestimated the role of an Angolan soldier at that time.