

Igor Zhdarkin

«WE DID NOT SEE IT
EVEN IN AFGHANISTAN»

Memoirs of a participant
of the Angolan war (1986–1988)

Oral history of forgotten wars

Translated from Russian
by Tamara Reilly

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INTRODUCTION

These recollections will be published as part of a collection of memoirs in the series “Oral history of forgotten wars”.

They contain information little known not only to the broader public but also even to professional military historians.

And the difficult battles, of which the author was a direct participant in 1987–1988 (at that time as a Lieutenant and interpreter), sharply changed the geopolitical situation of at least three states – Angola, Namibia and South Africa.

The following historical events – the independence of Namibia in 1989, the transition to a non racial society in South Africa in 1994, and the conclusion of the twenty seven year civil war in Angola in 2002 are to a significant degree linked to the battles around Cuito-Cuanavale, which took place during 1987–1988 in the south of Angola.

The English edition of these recollections consists of two major parts – a diary, which the author kept from October 10 to December 3, 1987, in his capacity as military interpreter of the twenty first FAPLA brigade (a diary of the combat period) and also his own oral narratives.

Almost intentionally, in these recollections, the tape-recorded memories, of the Russian officer, Igor A. Zhdarkin, cruel and frightening in their candour, were almost not at all edited. They were produced at the Africa Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences on 28 October, 2000,

25 November, 2000 and 6 October, 2001, as well as during frequent meetings at his home during the period, 2000–2007.

One should add that many native and even more foreign academic and journalistic studies, not to mention articles dealing with the Angolan civil war and the events during 1987–1988 are, at best, full of “inaccuracies”, to put it mildly. Perhaps in this way these recollections should fill certain gaps in our knowledge dealing with the events which occurred within this country.

As far as concerns the author’s tales about his subsequent service in Mozambique during 1990–1991, in the UN forces in Angola during 1996–1998, and on extensive missions in various parts of the world, it is planned to publish these sometime in the future.

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About author

Zhdarkin Igor Anatolyevitch was born on August 15, 1965 in Byelorussia, in the City of Gomel.

His father came from local Byelorussian (Polesye) Old Believer Cossacks and mother from Urals Old Ritualist Cossacks.

At that time the parents of Igor Zhdarkin lived and worked in the City of Vyborg, Leningrad Region, so that the years of childhood and adolescence were spent in Leningrad Region, although every summer he usually spent in Gomel.

Upon graduation from school Igor Zhdarkin worked one year at the Confectionery Plant in the City of Vyborg and then in 1982 entered the History and Philology faculty of the Gomel State University (Byelorussia) from where in 1983 he was called to active military duty to the USSR Armed Forces.

Military service started in the engineer corps training unit in the City of Volzhskiy, where he was trained as driver of engineer underwater reconnaissance vehicle (**Article-78**) and then continued in the Siberian Military District, Shilovo garrison, close to Novosibirsk (**Leningrad-Pavlovskaya division** under the command of General Kormiltsev, future Commander-in-Chief of the Land Forces of Russia).

In 1985 Igor Zhdarkin entered the **Military Institute of Foreign Languages** (MIFL) for the one year course of

Portuguese language and in 1986 holding Second Lieutenant Grade was sent to the service assignment to Angola.

Service assignment to **Angola** took place precisely in the period of fierce battles against the UNITA antigovernment group and the troops of the South African Republic, which had invaded the territory of Angola. According to historians and witnesses it was one of the bloodiest periods of Angolan post-colonial history. As a remembrance of that time he keeps the Medal «**For Combat Merits**», as well as Cuban medal «**For the Heroic Defenders of Cuito-Cuanavale**», which was awarded to about ninety persons only in the former Soviet Union, who were direct participants of those events (fifteen among them were graduates of the **Military Institute of Foreign Languages**).

After that he was sent to the official assignment to **Mozambique** (1990–1991) where he served as Senior Air Force Interpreter in the **93rd Helicopter special operations detachment**. During nine months Igor Zhdarkin flew over 200 hours as aircraft interpreter in eight (out of ten) provinces of that country. Helicopters, delivering foodstuffs, clothes and military cargoes to difficult of access areas, were frequently attacked by fire by armed gang RENAMO (Mozambique National Resistance) despite the fact that the helicopters were bearing large lettered signs of «Aeroflot» and our pilots were wearing civilian pilots uniforms.

In 1993, upon graduation from the Military Institute of Foreign Languages, Igor Zhdarkin worked during about one year as a Senior Instructor (of English language) at the **Moscow Suvorov Military Academy** and was subsequently transferred to the new duty station at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages, English Language Department. In addition to teaching he was also continuously entrusted with the work with foreign military delegations.

Up to 1995 in the capacity of the interpreter he provided

the visits of high ranking foreign military commanders, among them Commander-in-Chief of U.K. Airborne Forces Troops, Commander-in-Chief of the U.K. Royal Navy, Head of the U.S. Air Force Institute of Technology, Deputy Defense Minister of Botswana and others. Russian delegations were headed by General **E. Podkolzin** - Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Federation Airborne Forces, Commanders-in-Chief of the Russian Federation Navy, General **V. Kovalyonok** - Head of the Air Force Academy named after Zhukovskiy (Pilot-Cosmonaut of the USSR, two times Hero of the Soviet Union), General **P. Klimuk**, Head of the Cosmonaut Training Center (Pilot-Cosmonaut of the USSR, two times Hero of the Soviet Union) and other high ranking military officials of Russia.

In the period from 1995 to 1998 Igor Zhdarkin was on service missions: in 1995 (from May to October) in the Republic of Bangladesh, in 1996 (from January to July) in Angola, from January 1997 to January 1998 in Angola. (In the period of official assignments he crossed the Equator Line twelve times).

In **Bangladesh** he worked with a group of specialists of **BMP-2** (armoured infantry vehicle). During five months of work in the country performance trials and waterborne tests of that infantry vehicle were conducted, as well as field firing, in addition to that, a group of local servicemen was trained as **BMP-2** drivers.

In Angola Major Zhdarkin served in the Russian Air Support Unit (Russian Helicopter Detachment) being part of the United Nations peacekeeping forces as aircraft interpreter (total time in the air on board of **MI-8** helicopter both in Mozambique and Angola completed about 500 hours), as well as liaison officer.

Serving as aircraft interpreter Igor Zhdarkin was flying with the air crew of Major **V. Alimov** (at present Colonel), famous Russian pilot, Hero of Russia.

Group of liaison officers, among which was Igor Zhdarkin, had a wide scope of duties for ensuring service and life support of Russian Air Support Unit as part of the United Nations peacekeeping forces (flight planning, UN troops manpower being transported by Russian helicopters, helicopter refilling points, food and lodging for Russian contingent, provision with necessary logistics assets, resolution of disputes and sometimes conflicts and many other things).

In addition to that it was necessary to prepare the visits of Russian high ranking military delegations (for instance, General **V. Pavlov**, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Army Aviation, Heads and Deputy Heads of the Main Directorate of International Military Cooperation), arrange their meetings and negotiations with the Command of the United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM), participate in them as interpreter, as well as organize the visits by the delegations to Angolan six regions, where Russian helicopters and their crews were located. The accumulated experience turned out to be very useful for Igor Zhdarkin in his subsequent service.

After coming back from Angola, Igor Zhdarkin continued the work with foreign delegations. Beginning from 1998 he constantly participated in the staff talks, joint exercises (for instance, such as **Sarex-Alfa** - Russian-American-Canadian joint exercise for rescue of space crews, «**Combined Endeavor**» - joint exercise of Signal Corps of Russia and NATO, etc.), worked at military technique and equipment expositions (MAKS Air Show in the City of Zhukovskiy, exhibitions of aircraft engines of new generation, dual-purpose motor vehicles in Bronnitsy, etc.), arranged negotiations of defense chiefs of various levels (Chief of Operations of the General Staff of the Swedish Armed Forces, Chief Signals Officer of the Greek Armed Forces, Commander-in-Chief of the United States Land Forces, Deputy Defense Minister of Philippines, Commander of NATO forces in Europe, in various

years with US Deputy Secretaries of Defense, etc.)

For a long time Igor Zhdarkin was working with the Russian highest level military leaders, such as General **N. Kormiltsev**, Commander-in-Chief of the RF Army of that time, General **A. Maslov**, former Commander-in-Chief of the RF Army and General **V. Mikhailov**, former Commander-in-Chief of the RF Air Force (up to now he provides translation of their annual meetings with military attaches of foreign countries), General **A. Mazurkevitch**, former Head of the Foreign Liaison Directorate of the RF Ministry of Defense (at present Head of the Main Directorate of International Military Cooperation of the RF Ministry of Defense), General **V. Fyodorov**, Head of Foreign Liaison Directorate (of the RF Ministry of Defense), General **E. Buzhinskiy**, Head of International Treaties Department, General **L. Ivashov**, former Head of the Main Directorate of International Military Cooperation of the RF Ministry of Defense, **V. Manilov**, First Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General of the Army **Yu. Baluyevskiy**, former First Deputy Chief of the General Staff (and later on Chief of General Staff), **L. Kudelina**, Deputy Defense Secretary, Financial Issues, USSR Marshall **I. Sergeyev**, former Defense Secretary.

On September 11, 2001 Igor Zhdarkin provided negotiations of **Yu. Baluyevskiy**, First Deputy Chief of the General Staff of RF Armed Forces with Mr. **Feit**, US Deputy Secretary of Defense on the problem of US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM). At that time they failed to convince the Americans, but upon completion of negotiations the news was spread about the terrorist attack against America...

Starting from 2000 until present time Igor Zhdarkin has been constantly working with the Military Attaches Association and Association of Air Force Attaches of Foreign States accredited in Moscow.

Igor Zhdarkin accompanied the delegations of the above-mentioned Associations to many military districts, garrisons, proving grounds and training centers of the RF Armed Forces, namely, North-Caucasian military district, Privolzhsko-Urals military district, **Mulino** proving ground (during military exercises), **Ashuluk** proving ground (missile launching of **S-300 Air-Defence System**), training center of the RF Air Force «**Savosleika**», long range aviation training center in Lipetsk (Head – General **A. Kharchevskiy**), training center of front-line aviation in Ryazan, training center «**Balabanovo**» and museum of the Missile Force Academy, Cosmonaut Training Center in **Zviodny**, Plesetsk cosmodrome (during launching of rocket, which put satellite «**Nadezhda**» into orbit) and other places.

From 2002 to 2005 Lieutenant Colonel Igor Zhdarkin was serving at the Institute of Military History of the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense (IMH RF MD), in the Department of International Military-Historical Cooperation. From 2005 to December 2006 he worked in the same Department as a civilian employee. During that period he has arranged 57 visits both of Russian delegations to various countries and foreign delegations being guests of the Institute of Military History.

Geography of military-historical contacts of the Institute of Military History of the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense is very extensive: Igor Zhdarkin arranged the visits and international meetings of our scientists with the representatives of such European countries as Austria, Belgium, United Kingdom, France, Norway, Greece, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Byelorussia, Ukraine, as well as such Asian states as Turkey, Syria, Israel, China, Vietnam, Mongolia, South Korea.

His duties included coordination of terms, conditions and programs of visits of foreign delegations, approval of the visits by Chief of the General Staff of the RF Armed Forces and

Minister of Defense of Russia, as well as organization of reception of foreign military delegations at the Institute of Military History. In addition to that, provision of passports, visas, tickets, money means for the delegations of the Institute of Military History of the RF Ministry of Defense travelling abroad. In many cases (during receptions of English speaking delegations) he also acted as interpreter facilitating the work of those delegations.

Starting from December 2006 after leaving the Institute of Military History Igor Zhdarkin has been working as interpreter for various companies and organizations, participating in international conferences and symposia being held in this country and abroad.

In particular in February 2007 he visited Israel with a group of Russian military historians, where he participated in Russian-Israeli scientific conference devoted to Arab-Israeli wars in the 20th century.

From March till June 2007 he worked with a group of specialists of the «**Kamov**» Helicopter Company in Portugal facilitating the training process for technical staff of Portuguese civil aviation for operation with the **Ka-32** Russian helicopter.

In July 2007 Igor Zhdarkin with a group of specialists of Russian Aircraft Corporation «**MiG**» visited Eritrea with the aim of training of that country's Air Force personnel for work with the Russian **MiG-29SMT** fighter.

In October and November 2007 Igor Zhdarkin worked in Germany with a group of specialists of Moscow Aviation Center headed by Colonel **Radik Asylbayev**, Chief of EMERCOM Aviation of the City of Moscow, facilitating the training process of flying personnel for work on **BK-117C2** helicopter manufactured by «Eurocopter» Company (ex-Messerschmitt-Bolkow-Blohm Company).

In December 2008 he worked with a group of experts of the «**Kamov**» Helicopter Company in India for investigation of the causes of flying accidents with **Ka-31** helicopters of the Indian Navy.

Igor Zhdarkin continues cooperation with the «**Eurocopter**» Company. From October 2007 to April 2010 he facilitated the process of training for various groups of pilots in the Training Center of the «**Eurocopter**» in Germany, in the City of Ingolstadt (pilots groups from EMERCOM of Russia, Ministry of State Security of Turkmenistan, «Yamal» Company, «GazPromAvia» airlines).

At present pieces out of the memoirs book by Igor Zhdarkin are published in the book entitled «Russia (USSR) in the Wars of the Second Half of the 20th Century» of the Institute of Military History (2002), memoirs by S. Kolomnin «Russian Special Forces in Africa» (2005), magazine «Soldier of Fortune», 2003 (Article entitled «We did not see it even in Afghanistan»).

Photos from personal archives of Lieutenant Colonel Igor Zhdarkin are used in the materials of Research and Practice Conference «40th Anniversary of the Beginning of Armed Struggle of Angolan People for National Independence and Soviet-Angolan Military and Political Cooperation» (2002), in the book entitled «Uneclipsed Fame: From Warriors-Internationalists to Peacekeepers» published by the Institute of Military History of the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense in 2004, as well as in a number of foreign publications devoted to war in Angola.

Important date of biography of Lieutenant Colonel
I.A. Zhdarkin

15 August, 1965 – born in the town of Gomel, Byelorussia.

1965–1982 – lived in the town of Vyborg, Leningrad region, in 1981 – finished secondary special school with a number of subjects taught in the English language, also located in the town of Vyborg;

1981–1982 – worked in a candy factory as a weigher-packer;

1982–1983 – studied at the Gomel State University, at the history-philological faculty;

1983–1985 – service in the Defence Forces of the USSR as a soldier, special intelligence subdivision of the Troops of Engineers, driver of the engineer reconnaissance vehi-

cle, then radio-telephone operator of an independent engineer battalion (North Caucasus and Siberian military districts);

1985–1986 – training in accelerated 10 month courses in the Portuguese language at the Military Institute of foreign languages leading, upon termination, to the acquisition of the military title of “second lieutenant”;

1986–1988 – service in Angola as a military interpreter, including serving in brigades directly participating in military operations;

1988 – obtained military rank of “lieutenant” during his service in Angola;

1988–1990 – continued training at the Military Institute of foreign languages, majoring as “interpreter-consultant of English and Portuguese languages”;

1990–1991 – service mission to the Republic of Mozambique, with service in the 93rd Independent Helicopter Detachment with special designation as Senior air force interpreter;

1991–1992 – resumption of training at the Military Institute of foreign languages, majoring as “interpreter-consultant of English and Portuguese languages”, and promotion to the rank of senior lieutenant;

1992–1993 – service at the Moscow Suvorov military college as senior instructor in English;

1993–1995 – service at the Red Banner Military Institute of the Ministry of Defence;

April – October, 1995 – service mission to the Republic of Bangladesh with a group of combat infantry vehicle (BMP-2) specialists;

January – June, 1996 – service mission to the Republic of Angola as liaison and coordinating officer with the Russian Air Force unit belonging to the UN peace-keeping forces in Angola (UNAVEM-III);

January, 1997 – January, 1998 – service mission to the Republic of Angola as liaison and coordinating officer with the

Russian Air Force unit belonging to the UN peace-keeping forces in Angola (UNAVEM-III and MONUA);

1998–2002 – service at the Military University of the Ministry of Defence (formerly, the Red Banner Military Institute of the Ministry of Defence);

September, 2002 – December 2006 – senior scientific research officer at the Institute of military history of the Ministry of Defence;

December 2006 – present – works as an interpreter (writing, oral and simultaneous translation) in various companies and organizations, including short-term service missions abroad.

Government awards and decorations:

- Medal «**For Combat Merits**»
- Medal of the Republic of Cuba «**To the Heroic Defenders of Cuito–Cuanavale**»
- Medal «**In the Service of Peace**» for 3 tours (UN Peace-keeping Forces)
- Medal «**For the Feat of Arms**»
- Medal «**To the Veteran of War**»
- Medal «**To the Veteran of Local Conflicts in Angola and Mozambique**»
- Medal «**To the Veteran-Internationalist**»
- Medal «**For Contribution in Strengthening of Friendly Combat Ties**»
- Medal «**15 Years of Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan**»

- Medal «**For honorable service**», First Class
- Medal «**For honorable service**», Second Class
- Medal «**For honorable service**», Third Class
- Medal «**70 Years of the Armed Forces of the USSR**»
- The honourable badge «**To the Warrior-Internationalist**» and Honorary Diploma of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR
- The honourable badge «**Veteran of War in Angola**»

NOTEBOOK – DIARY*

To warrant officer
Valentine Matveichuk
[Military district communications centre]

Dear Valentine!

When you receive this notebook, please contact me and let me know so that I don't get worried.

From behind the lines, I wrote a letter to the person to whom you should deliver everything. In the same notebook, there is a letter to Gomel. Send it, please, in Moscow! I wish you all the best on your journey and hope you reach Moscow successfully.

Until we meet again,
Igor

October 10, 1987

It is already the second month during which I find myself in the 6th district and ten days of this period – in Cuito Cuanavale.

Conditions here are very tense. On 20 August, a diversionary group from South Africa, consisting of eight people, blew up a bridge across the river Cuito.

In September, [we] succeeded in neutralizing a group which had been bombarding Cuito Cuanavale itself with mortar fire.

On October 1, advisors of the 21st and 25th brigades returned from an operation on the river Lomba. There, on the Lomba, misfortune had befallen them. They had been «covered» with shells from the rapid firing guns of the South Africans. As a result, their interpreter, Oleg Snitko had his leg broken and his hand torn off. He died within a day and a half. The others also had bad luck. Four of them were wounded and shell shocked.

* Thick school note book in diary form, written by hand.

On October 8, they were flown off to a hospital in Luanda.

Then on October 9, having replaced them, we departed on a military operation.

There are six people in our group – our team leader, Anatolii [Anatoly] Mikhailovich Artiomenko; the advisor to the chief of the brigade artillery, Yuri Pavlovich Sushchenko; the technician, Sasha Fatyanov; two specialists from “Osa-AK” (the anti aircraft missile system), Slava and Kostya, and myself.

The day before, we covered approximately 11 km and at 10:30 we reached the command post of the 25th brigade. We sat there the whole day, and waited uncertainly for something to turn up. We were in fact forced to spend the night there.

At around seven o'clock in the evening, I turned on the radio receiver. A concert of Soviet popular songs was being transmitted. The songs were, on the whole, both old and long known, yet all of us at once grew silent and pensive.

But today, on October 10, at five thirty in the morning, we hurriedly pushed off from our location and moved forward.

A military column, in general, moves very slowly. The point is that it is advisable not to travel on old, used roads, because they are constantly mined by UNITA.

Therefore, our men cut a new road through the forest. The tanks move forward, and behind them, the entire column goes. For some five hours, we moved all in all only 8 km.

During one of our usual stops, a group of UNITA soldiers bombarded us. It occurred at 11.10, nineteen miles from Cuito Cuanavale. Our column was bombarded by mortars and sub-machine guns. It was our first bombardment in this operation and it happened quite close to Cuito-Cuanavale.

Thus we moved forward: we moved at most 100 m before we had to stop and endure a tedious wait during which the tanks continued to push the road forward.

At 14:30, we achieved at last crossings over the river Shaminga.

But before this, at 13:30, we had stumbled upon a mined

field, set up by UNITA. We waited a long time until [our engineers] found a safe passage or detour.

At 16:10, we stopped in a little wood on the other bank of the Shaminga River. Here we will spend the night.

The crossing of the Shaminga River is quite uncomfortable. Sufficient to say that it is completely open on both its banks and moreover swampy. The Angolans call such a surface area, "shana", the same as "flood lands" in Russian. Only one single road, mined on each side, leads to the river through this "shana", so that nowhere can one turn around. If the enemy is able successfully get this road within his gun sights, and then it can become one of the seven circles of biblical hell.

In fact, here on the September 25 of last year, the leader of our group, Anatoly Mikhailovich [Artiomenko] was seriously wounded. They had been until then, for all of five days, not able to get across. A [shell] fragment had hit him in the head. But we, this one time, were able to cross without mishap.

October 11, 1987

The day today was rich with events.

At six in the morning, the column gathered in military formation for the day's march. We stood for half an hour, waiting for news from the head of our column as to where they were to pave the way. By six thirty, UNITA began to fire its mortars. This time, the majority of mortars were being discharged to release incendiary bombs with the exclusive aim to set our cars on fire.

Although the firing continued for thirty minutes, UNITA did not achieve its objectives. Thereupon, we pushed forward.

During the course of the day, South African planes appeared twice. The first time was at 11:10 and then at 14:30.

Our anti-aircraft missile system, "Osa-AK", tracked them but the two aircrafts were actually shot down in the region of the 21st brigade.

At 15:35, our column was once more attacked by UNITA forces. A ferocious battle broke out and continued almost 40

minutes. The men covering the flanks of the column performed well by discovering the bandits in time. The attack was successfully repulsed. Five UNITA soldiers were killed, and much booty was taken.

On that day, we had to have our dinner in the dark, inasmuch as we stopped at our night lodge quite late and it gets dark here around six in the evening.

October 12, 1987

Today, from 6:45 in the morning, our column once again ran into attacking UNITA forces. The shooting continued for twenty minutes. The column was again fired upon with incendiary mortar shells. But the return fire of our combat means (B-10 anti tank recoilless guns; 120-mm mortars; BM-21 forty-barrel 122 mm caliber volley fire fired from "Ural" trucks; Grad-P portable guns delivering 122 mm caliber volley fire) did not permit the UNITA forces to aim their guns accurately at us. Only one single mortar shell ever landed on one of the cars in our column while the rest were released without any impact.

At 10:40, the South African air force again appeared, bombing the location of the 21st brigade.

For the rest of the day, nothing of any particular importance happened except that now, on the R-123 radio station, we hear, quite clearly and precisely, South Africans discussing among themselves. Thank God that I still remember a little English.

And today, they suddenly began talking Polish on the air. I could make out clearly a few phrases in Polish: "What do you want?" "Very good." And then, "I am listening attentively." "Thank you." The answer of the second speaker was not audible.

For a long time we speculated as to what this signified, until we realized that in fact maybe these were Polish émigrés in the South African army.

October 13, 1987

Today at 5:10, four South African planes appeared in the area of the 21st and 59th brigades. The brigades opened up furi-

ous fire from all types of weaponry. The entire sky looked like a rainbow or a salute. As a result, one plane was put out of action, while a second was hit on the nozzle by a “Strela-3” type rocket, and although hit, managed to escape. The rest dropped their bombs in disorder and made off.

Our “Osa-AK” anti aircraft missile system had begun work already at 04:30.

On that day, there were three more South African air raids – at noon, at 15:00 and at 17:00, as if it was according to schedule. This day, we stayed at the night lodging near the old UNITA base. There we could see the huts which were still intact, communication trenches and so forth? A real fortress I would say.

I completely forgot that on this same day, at 14:30, we had discovered a large store house belonging to UNITA at the source of the Kunzumbia river. There, ammunition dumps of Chinese origin were found:

for 60-mm mortars –120 mortar shells;

for 81-mm mortars – 111 mortar shells;

for a modified manual antitank grenade launcher (RPG-7V) – 100 items;

cartridges for an updated Kalashnikov sub-machine gun (with a wooden butt), or “AKM” (1947 model)¹ – 15440 items.

¹ He meant AK-47. It's worth mentioning that AK-47, AKM and the newest Russian variant of AKM – AK-103 all named “sub-machine guns” in Russian, not “assault rifles” because its bullet (7.62x39 mm) is made for short range or middle-range combat (up to 500–600 m). Angolan FAPLA forces were firstly armed with obsolete Soviet-made AK-47 (production seized in the USSR in 1958) but by 1987 FAPLA forces were armed mostly with AKM. AKM (improved version of AK-47) was produced in the USSR from 1959 till 1974 and is still being produces without proper licences in many countries. Several dozen million copies of AKM are circulating in the whole world and are mistakenly named “AK-47 Russian assault rifle”. It would be more correct to name this famous light weaponry as well as its derivatives (AKM and AK-103) as “the long-barrelled sub-machine gun” (note by ed.-comp.).

October 14, 1987

Today, at 07:30 AM, we finally reached the Command Post of the 21st brigade and Operational Group. We met here advisors and specialists of the 47th brigade and of the “Osa-AK” anti aircraft missile system (nine people in all). So many «horrors» they recounted to us.

Much hope had been placed, during the offensive action, on the 2nd Tactical Group (Force) to which the 47th air-assault brigade belonged. The 47th brigade was reinforced with a tank battalion, artillery and with the “Osa-AK” anti aircraft missile system. The Group’s mission was to secure the right flank of the general offensive. It was commanded by Major Tobiash, Chief of Staff of the 6th Military District.

But the Group was not up to task. According to what was said, the commanding officers drank too much during the operation. The offensive was conducted sluggishly, without enthusiasm, although there was practically no serious resistance in its path.

In the end, to be sure, “there appeared to be a so-called clap of thunder in a clear sky”. The offensive of other brigades was conducted more or less successfully, and UNITA suffered defeat after defeat. It appeared as if victory was already close.

But, as it usually had happened many times before, the South Africans, seeing this process, did not permit UNITA to be completely destroyed. Skillfully exploiting the mistakes and miscalculations of FAPLA, they openly penetrated the territory of the People’s Republic of Angola. Now they publicly declared that the South African army was in Angola with the aim of preventing the complete destruction of UNITA.

This was the beginning of the operation’s downfall, the beginning of a tragedy.

First of all, we received news of the wounding of Soviet advisors of the 21st brigade and then about the death of the interpreter, Oleg Snitko. Afterwards, when we encountered our comrades from the 47th brigade, we heard from them details about their brigade’s route.

The brigade suffered three attacks from the South African regular forces. The flight which began after the second attack, turned into panic with the launching of the third.

There were many reasons for this: the running out of ammunition, as well as the cowardliness of the officers, the absence of precise instructions to the troops engaged, their terror of facing the South Africans, and, finally, the fact that on the bank where the brigade stood, across the river Lomba, there was a passage (bridge for crossing). Everybody quickly found out about it, and, if it had not existed, perhaps no one would have tried to flee.

Many Soviet specialists serving here in the district combat brigades earlier had been in Afghanistan. According to their opinion, "in Afghanistan, we never experienced such horrors as here. One said that "when the South African artillery began to fire, I felt particularly terrified. However, then came the South African air force and we had very little room on the ground. But the most horrible was when the Angolans turned to flight and began to throw away their equipment..."

This was just what happened with the 47th brigade. As long as the brigade commander maintained radio contact with the commander of the tank battalion, everything to be sure remained relatively normal. But then the tank battalion commander was hit and being wounded, he moved to another tank which too was hit and from which he then could not crawl out. Meanwhile the tank platoon commander who was next to him fled. The tank battalion commander (his name is Silva) thereupon was taken prisoner by the South Africans.

At the time of its flight during the crossing of the river Lomba, the 47th brigade lost 18 tanks, 20 armored troop carriers, 4 D-30 (122 mm) guns, 3 BM-21s valley fire, 4 Osa-AK anti-aircraft [mobile] rocket launchers, 2 Osa-AKs transport cars, one P-19 radar station, heavy automobiles, broadcasting stations, mortars, grenade throwers, approximately 200 pieces of small arms, etc., etc.

The loudly proclaimed words about the safety of Soviet

advisors and specialists were forgotten. The armored troop carrier of the Soviet advisors exited, last but not one, over the bridge, and without cover, by order of the brigade commander, and protected only by 11 people. Within 15 minutes, the position where it had stayed before was burst upon by a South African AML-90 (armoured troop carrier).

There was terrible panic and confusion all around. The South Africans were shooting all over the place, not sparing ammunition. No one clearly knew whither to run and what to do. The one thing which everyone wanted was to get across to the other bank as quickly as possible. The so-called "commission" for organizing the crossing was one of the first to escape.

However, only three Strela-10 anti aircraft system, two armored troop carriers, two EE-25 vehicles and one Land Rover got across to the other side of the Lomba. Nothing more they were able to save. And if the South Africans had sent over only one company to the other bank and opened fire against the Angolans on the river bank, the entire 47th brigade would have landed at the bottom of the Lomba.

The Soviet "advisors" had to set on fire and abandon their armored troop carrier and then crawl, hugging the ground for 1.5 km along the "shana" to the other bank of the Lomba. They crawled under fire, throwing away everything except for their weapons, while the South Africans struck direct laying fire against them. Then the swamps began. Our men overcame this too and there remained only a short distance to the bank. Completely exhausted, they decided to pause for breath. The South Africans, estimating, by the length of time, that they had already gotten across, began to shoot along the shore. Shells were exploding 10 to 20 m from them while three fell into the swamp 5 m from them. What saved them was that the shells and mines fell into the swamp and on the "shana" (which was also sticky and swampy), sank and only then exploded. Only for this reason, no one was wounded, not taking small fragments into account.

The crushing defeat of the 47th brigade seriously affected the 16th, 21st, and 59th brigades as well as the military situation as a whole. Now the brigades were positioned on the line formed by the Cunzumbia river. Such was the state of affairs when we arrived.

October 15, 1987

Yesterday and today we settled down in our new positions, making the acquaintance with the Commander of our 21st brigade and Major Batista, the Group Commander, and, at brigade headquarters, we familiarized ourselves with the situation. The day passed quietly. South African planes flew by and from the direction of the 16th and 59th brigades, the rumble of cannon fire was heard. There was shelling there and our brigade gave them support with artillery fire.

October 16, 1987

In the morning, Major Batista drove off to the command post of the First Tactical Group, took leave of us, thanked us for everything, and asked us to provide help to the brigade commander.

The order came from the District Command: brigades must take defensive positions in those places where they already find themselves, and assume responsibility for each allotted zone where it is necessary constantly to provide thorough searches in order not to permit enemy infiltration and to hinder any enemy activities. This was so to speak a series of local operations which were conducted with the forces of up to two battalions led by brigade commanders.

This afternoon, we moved our mission to a new position, closer to the Brigade Command Post.

October 17, 1987

This morning, as we were sitting at the table, all of a sudden, at 06:50, a South African plane swooped down towards us. Our troops did not evidently succeed in taking note of it in time.

The fire was opened with much delay only. The aircraft hit the forward positions of our brigade's first infantry battalion. Luckily, there were no losses.

The second such incident was at 8:15. In both cases, our anti-aircraft gunners were not able to react in time. The problem was that the South Africans, for their part, had become resourceful. They are well aware that an anti-aircraft missile system is located here and therefore, they proceed at a low altitude along the bank of the Cunzumbia, so as not to be seen by the missile system and then, making a U-turn, they fly over the target they intended to bomb.

The third incident occurred at 10:10. Four "Mirage" aircraft struck on brigade at the area of the 3rd battalion. This time, our anti-aircraft gunners performed wonderfully well. Two planes were shot down – one by a Strela-10 anti aircraft missile system and the other by a ZU-23-2 (automatic two-barrel anti-aircraft cannon). Both fell very close to us. The Angolans, indeed, insist that they brought down a third airplane as well but that it allegedly fell onto the far bank of the Cunzumbia River. The brigade commander sent task forces to the two downed planes. For the moment, we are still awaiting the results.

In the evening, the task forces returned. As often occurs with the Angolans, they claimed not to have found the planes, they don't know where they are, etc., etc. The explanation, of course is simple: they were afraid to run into UNITA.

October 18, 1987

Today is Sunday and we have decided to spend the day resting in the hope that there won't be any airplanes and that the South Africans are also taking the day off. The day passed quietly and only at 19:05 did the alarm announcing the enemy aviation suddenly ring.

Indeed, as it subsequently was made clear, the South Africans began to bombard the 59th brigade (15 km away from us) from a jet propelled "Kentron" system. Its missiles shone and therefore we clearly saw them.

October 19, 1987

Today at 4 a.m., the brigade commander, N'Geleka, received an order: to depart and to go to the source of the river Cuzizi, in the area where the 59th brigade was situated, and to be ready to launch a counter attack. After putting into effect a preliminary artillery bombardment, we departed from our place at 11:30. We covered 16 km that day dodging a lot. We were not fired upon.

October 20, 1987

We continued to move. During the day, we covered 26 km. The column was shelled during a day. Fortunately, many shells fell short of their targets so that we suffered no losses. The brigade commander and the artillery captain dealt all day with two «global problems»: our exact location and the location from where the enemy artillery was shelling us. The problem was very complicated: they had to work out all the shell calibers, the range of the shells, the possible locations where the enemy was situated, but did not succeed to come to consensus of opinion.

We settled down for the night. There was artillery fire in the direction of our brigade, but once again, everything turned out safely.

October 21, 1987

We sent reconnaissance groups to find the river and determine more precisely where we are situated. We stayed put all day, waiting for them. The whole day, a 107-mm gun on the «Land Rover» bombarded us. It was located somewhere between us and the 59th brigade and was firing alternately upon us and upon the 59th brigade. As a result, until now, we have not figured out where we are. Surrounding us is forest and nothing else.

October 22, 1987

From morning, we formed a column and advanced. At 15:30, we reached our destination at the Cuzizi River.

The enemy's artillery bombards almost non stop but so far without any direct hits against us. It would seem that we so confused the enemy that they are unable to locate us and instead are just trying to find us haphazardly. The shells fall quite near our brigade, but our artillery doesn't respond.

October 23, 1987

The enemy shelled us all night. Shells with a very disgusting «howl» and whistling flew both past us and near us. A whole row of them fell very close, on the other bank of the Cuzizi.

In the morning, we have urged the brigade commander to make clear to us where we are. He showed us the wreckage of the air plane hit over the Cunzumbia. According to him, the pilot's corpse had been so badly burned that it was not possible to find any documents on it.

At 8:30 AM, our brigade's artillery discharged several salvos at previously planned targets. We fired BM-21s and D-30 122 mm howitzers from temporary positions, and thereupon quickly left our positions. Within less than an hour the South Africans began to fire upon those positions, evidently in order to locate our brigade. While they were firing, generally at random, we attentively listened to where the shells were flying and fairly often were forced to fall to the ground or "greet our Mother Earth," as our artillery advisor likes to call it.

That evening, we received an order from the Tactical Group Commander, Major Batista, to fire upon a South African column in the region of the 59th brigade. Our BM-21 ("Katyusha") could fire 34 shells. In fact, this very much enraged the South Africans because they, almost immediately began shooting back at us from 107-mm recoilless guns which could not be silenced until midnight. The BM-21 could just barely move away. Our wretched armored troop carrier shook and we felt very uncomfortable, particularly in view of the howling and whistling of the shells, flying over our heads. They exploded 300 m away from us. Luckily, the South Africans apparently still had not worked out our brigade's exact location.

October 24, 1987

This morning, we received an order to depart and go to the 59th brigade, located on the river Mianei. At 11 o'clock, we formed a column and set off. After 3 km, we heard explosions behind us. It was the South Africans shelling who, assuming that we were still there, had begun to bombard our previous positions.

During the day we advanced altogether 6 km. During the march, our water carrier collided with a log and overturned. This pressed down on the leg of one of our guards. With difficulty, we nonetheless managed to set the water carrier back on its wheels.

At 14:20, the column on our left flank was attacked by the enemy and artillery bombardment began. The battle lasted twenty minutes.

At 15:40, the enemy once again bombarded our column with gunfire and mortar fire. One of these mortar shells exploded 20 m away from our armored troop carrier, between two cars of the "Engesa" model. The wheels of both cars were pierced with fragments. One Angolan perished and several people were wounded.

Around 17:00, I went to the communications platoon of our brigade in order to transmit information to Cuito via radio station "Racal". No sooner had I gotten ready to transmit when the firing of sub-machine guns began, and then mortar fire. Several bullets whizzed past, and I only just succeeded in jumping off the armored troop carrier and to creep under it, next to several members of the Angolan signal corps who were already there. Even the dog of the brigade commander was hiding there and timidly whined after every shell burst.

When the shooting had stopped, I went back to our (advisor's) armored troop carrier, deciding to transmit information by our R-123 radio station. I had only just climbed aboard when the firing of shells began again and continued without interruption during the 20 minutes I was transmitting.

Night passed quietly. Only around 22:00 did they begin shooting at us several times.

October 25, 1987

In the morning, we resumed our march. From 7:40 to 10:20, we marched under constant bombardment from 81-mm mortars. On a number of times, we had to stop because groups of the enemy were attacking our column and fighting was breaking out.

Around 15:00, we made contact with subdivisions of our First Tactical Group. We refueled them and replenished them with oil.

Nearby, several kilometers away, the 59th brigade is located. Around 17:00, they were being bombed by enemy planes. The South Africans had worked out a new tactic. At first they would launch an artillery bombardment and all the Angolans would run for cover, including the anti aircraft gunners. And then, unexpectedly, their planes would appear, beginning to strike and then flies off more quickly than the anti aircraft gunners could come out of their hiding places.

We had just sat down to eat when the «mumbling» of a “Kentron” system was heard. It was a South African anti personnel jet system, of directional effect and with range of fire of 17 km. Its projectiles are filled with small balls possessing big destructive power.

We had already worked out clearly the norms for bombardment: in a fraction of a second no one remained at the table. The South Africans shot a little bit from their “Kentron” and then from 120-mm mortars and at last «quieted down». Probably, they simply decided to wish us good appetite, the rascals.

October 26, 1987

This morning, we took leave of our Tactical Group and pushed forward. The South Africans were again late with their shelling and began to fire upon our positions after we had already left. After two days of this shelling, our brigade had lost four men killed and twenty-two wounded. Today, towards evening we finally reached our destination. We set up camp and dug ourselves in the ground. No one knows how much time shall we remain here.

October 27, 1987

Last night and the whole of today, we were enveloped by an unceasing din of cannon fire. The South Africans shelled the 59th brigade, the crossing over the Shambinga river and our Tactical Group. As yet, they did not disturb us, perhaps because they still did not realize where we are.

For dinner, the Angolans had caught a goat. As a gift, they brought us a whole leg. We left it to stew with potatoes for supper. We found it so tasty that we licked the whole pot.

I began to compose songs about how we now live in Angola. Our men listened, and then approved and some of them also began to compose. Of course, as regards the style of our songs... We cannot do them «cultural» and «smooth», they are full of «bad language», especially when we recall the South Africans and UNITA. They got on our nerves with their bombardments and even do not permit us to eat in peace.

October 28, 1987

Today, from morning to night, there was enemy artillery fire from all sides and in every direction. It is easier to calculate how much time we were outside than hiding.

During the day, the brigade chief of staff, accompanied by two infantry battalions, merged to the Tactical Group so as to get supplies brought for us by the 25th brigade, they did not reach our location. On their way, they were to make contact with the 59th brigade so as also to join them.

October 29, 1987

Last night, the enemy hit the 59th brigade with 148 shells. In the morning, we found out that as a result one officer, one sergeant and four soldiers from our brigade had been killed. There were many wounded and one officer and one soldier were missing.

At 6 o'clock, the enemy decided to bid us «good morning» and «good appetite». We were having breakfast when sudden-

ly, not far off as usual, there was a shot. Through habit, we cocked our ears to hear in which direction the shot was flying. And then our Air Defense specialist Slava shouted, «Lie down!» Right after, a powerful explosion reverberated and I fell from my chair, hitting the ground. I immediately felt a sharp pain in my left shoulder, maybe I had either bruised or dislocated it. But then, in the next second, I leaped up under our armored troop carrier. Everybody ran off in every direction too.

As it then turned out, the enemy had bombarded us from a 120-mm. mortar and one shell exploded 20 m from us during breakfast. My shoulder now hurts very much and I am unable to raise my arm.

But at 14:00, we received frightening news. At 13:10, the enemy had bombarded the 59th brigade, situated in our vicinity, with chemical weapons containing poison gas. As a result, many people had been poisoned. Four had lost consciousness and the brigade commander was coughing blood. The Soviet advisors in the brigade were also affected. The wind was blowing nearby and everyone was complaining of violent headaches and nausea. This news greatly disturbed us since, you see, we didn't have any gas masks whatsoever.

And so ended today's events.

October 30, 1987

At night, the enemy continued to strike at us by means of large caliber heavy artillery, launching shell after shell past our heads.

Our brigade's artillery reconnaissance simply cannot not locate this battery. The scouts have problems constantly. Either they do not receive any radio signals or they lack the appliances, themselves, or they cannot operate them. And it is like that the whole time. An evident reluctance to do anything is to the fore and, of course fear of the South Africans, particularly after they had used poison gas.

As of this morning, it was much quieter, with the exception

of two air raids and the enemy's intermittent shooting here and there. Could it be that we were already getting used to this pattern? And yet what a dangerous habit...

We have inquired the Military District Command to send us gas masks, and also to provide all our brigade with means of self defense. So far, there has been no reaction.

October 31, 1987

Yesterday, between 18:40 and 21:00, the enemy launched intensive artillery-mortar fire, but today it was quiet the whole day! What might this well signify? Perhaps this is the last day of the month for the enemy and therefore either devoted to room cleaning or to stock taking? Such quiet is not a good sign.

I recalled a film about the Great Patriotic War (World War II)². There our soldier tosses and turns on a plank bed in a dugout and finally speaks out with disappointment «If they would only shoot, otherwise we can't sleep at all!» Such is the situation with us, roughly speaking – we too have already gotten used to falling asleep during a cannonade. But right now there is such a silence.

November 1, 1987

During the night the silence continued. And today is the birthday of our group leader, Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko. He is 40 years old. The day was fine and not too hot, but the South Africans managed to spoil our fun. At noon, planes flew over the 59th brigade, located nearby, and they dropped over them more than ten 500-kilogram bombs. So far we still don't know the extent of the casualties.

Then our artillery decided to put out of action the enemy's

² The Soviet Union's part in the Second World War during 1941–1945 is called the Great Patriotic War. The USSR destroyed 74% of war planes and more than 75% of ground forces of Nazi Germany and its satellites (note by ed.-comp.).

155-mm howitzer³, which had been constantly bombarding us. The Angolans fired once from a BM-21 but then contact with the launcher was broken off. In response, the embittered South Africans opened fire from their own howitzers. They fired very accurately and at small intervals. During one of these intervals, we moved, together with our group leader, to the Brigade Commander to find out what new task he had received.

We were sitting in his so called «study» when suddenly the shooting again began, and this time they were shooting up the Command Post where we were, with a 155-mm howitzer. One of the shells landed in a tree near the dug-out – the Brigade Commander's «study» where we were situated. At first, I didn't understand what had happened. The dug-out had crumbled, and because of the dust, we couldn't see anything.

My ears rang as at Easter. Just at that moment, a soldier flew in and, as he stood in the ditch near the dugout a fragment of the shell cut his hand. The brigade command ordered him to hurry over to the clinic. When I finally got out of the dug-out, my clothes and right hand were stained with the blood of this soldier. Apparently, during the confusion, he had smeared me.

As the group leader said later, at that moment, we were reborn. I had been sitting straight in front of the entrance and it was remarkable that not a single shell fragment had hit me. Then we noticed that, within a radius of 30 m from the explosion, all the shrubbery and small saplings had been completely cut down and broken into pieces by the shell fragments. And all of a sudden, I could hardly hear with my right ear. In our leader's head, is an awful small noise. This is the way the South Africans send us birthday greetings. My shoulder hurts – it has been hit.

November 2, 1987

This morning, our group, consisting of the first and third

³ This refers to the G-5 caliber 155 mm South African howitzer with a range of up to 47 km.

infantry battalions of our brigade, a tank battalion, air-assault companies attached to it from the Tactical Group, and subdivisions of the 59th brigade, launched an operation on «combing» through the area. The operation will take 4 days. The brigade's chief of staff heads our two battalions. So far we have not received any news about them.

At 15:30, as we subsequently found out, the 3rd battalion of our brigade got into conflict with the enemy, UNITA. The results of that battle: 4 UNITA soldiers were killed, while our men captured a 60-mm mortar, one AK machine gun and 4 cartridges belonging to it. Our losses: 1 soldier killed, 3 – severely wounded and 6 – lightly wounded.

November 3, 1987

The day today began with two South African air raids, at 5 a.m., consisting of 7 planes. At 13:20, our brigade's first battalion, which is continuing the «combing» operation, discovered a UNITA base. As a result of the battle, 7 UNITA soldiers were killed, including also the capture of 1 radio station, 13 automatic rifles and one anti tank rocket. From our own side, there were no losses.

November 4, 1987

Yesterday evening at 21 hours, the enemy subjected our brigade's third battalion to a powerful bombardment from its «Kentrons» and 106-mm guns. The results were: our battalion commander and chief of staff were seriously wounded, the chief-logistic officer and chief of the special section were killed, not including another two soldiers killed as well as seven wounded.

I entered the radio contact with Cuito-Cuanavale with our advisors there. They informed us that they too had been bombarded but that everything had turned out well.

On November 2, at the UNITA base, our troops had captured copies of «Quacha», the official UNITA magazine. Here we saw a photo of the former chief of staff of the 16th brigade,

Captain Luis Antonio Mango, who had gone over to the side of UNITA. Our Team Leader, Anatoly Mikhailovich [Artiomenko] knew him well and in fact worked with him last year when Luis Mango was still «one of ours». But in April of this year, he defected to UNITA. Of all the things to happen!

From 14:00 to 16:00, the enemy launched a particularly intensive bombardment. From each of two «Kentrons» 6–7 allowances of ammunition were fired against the defensive areas of our brigade and 59th brigade as well.

Also at 14:00, the 1st infantry battalion of our brigade engaged UNITA south of the Lomba. The results: we captured 6 grenades, 1 flare, 1 anti tank missile and 1 operational map.

Today at 17 hours, the First Tactical Group reached our brigade. They received from us 200 liters of diesel fuel, benzene, and they carted away the seriously wounded.

November 5, 1987

Today, at midday, the first battalion returned. It brought yet another radio station, captured at the same base. At the same time, documents of UNITA's 4th regular battalion, which operates in that district, were also taken from that base. Among these documents there is a diary of military activity from June 1986 to September, 1987. In it, all groups of our forces are listed, including also its leadership, the results of the 4th regular battalion battles, its victories and its losses. There is a map of the Cunjamba district, made in Lisbon according to aerial photographs, and an outline of Cuito-Cuanavale district, drawn by hand. Letters and other miscellaneous pieces of paper were captured too.

November 6, 1987

During the night, between 21.00 and 23.00, the enemy once again bombarded us from his «Kentrons» and from recoilless guns. As a result, two men were killed and one wounded.

Today the Soviet Senior Advisor to the Military District

Command congratulated us with the coming holiday⁴, and sent a telegram from Cuito. In response, we also congratulated all of them.

And today, our Brigade Artillery Commander told us that the coordinates of that gun battery which was constantly bombarding us had finally been determined and should it again begin to fire on us, then our own artillery would be in a position to retaliate. Let us wait and see.

At 17 hours, the enemy's reconnaissance group stumbled upon our own forces in the district of our first infantry battalion. There was powerful crossfire but no serious results.

November 7, 1987

During the night, from 22.00 to 23.30, the enemy bombarded us from 155-mm cannons, and also from «Kentrons», from the source of the river Lomba. Our own forces retaliated by firing against the Kentrons from BM-21s and D-30s. So far, the results are still unknown. Our advanced battalion posts send us news about cars moving from the source of the river Lomba across the Lukaia and the area between the rivers Mianei and Colui.

The enemy has twice launched attacks against the 1st battalion. The first time was at 12.30 and the second time was at 14.00.

The point is that the 1st battalion is occupying the heights from which the enemy earlier on shelled Cuito-Cuanavale with 155-mm long-range guns. Therefore the enemy is right now doing all he can to recapture these heights.

Around 15:00, the enemy began to shell us with time fuses. The air is full of exploding shit which doesn't land on the ground but showers fragments upon everyone below. This is something quite new!

⁴ This refers to the holiday of November 7 – the anniversary of the October revolution (according to the old calendar, October 25, and according to the new, November 7). Nowadays, this date symbolizes harmony and reconciliation.

The enemy once again attacked the 1st battalion. Total losses from all attacks – 2 men killed and 7 men wounded. Nothing is known about the enemy's own losses.

At 16:30, a column from the 25th brigade reached us. They brought food products to our brigade and letters for us (Soviet advisors). As they were approaching us, the enemy began to shell them but everything finished well.

November 8, 1987

All night, the enemy was disturbed that the column had reached us, but he could not hit it. The sons-of-bitches (enemy) launched mortar mines and shells all the time!

Following a directive received yesterday, we set off this morning in the direction of the river Vimpulo, situated in the area of the 1st Tactical Group. The 25th brigade occupied our place. Also the first battalion of our brigade remained in its positions. The 59th brigade which stood next to us was to move out a little later after us and go directly to Cuito-Cuanavale.

The whole day, we moved forward through a dense forest, advanced 16 km, and finally reached the limits of that river Vimpulo. Strangely, we were not ever attacked nor fired upon. It was simply amazing!

Indeed, later on, the 59th brigade reported that at 10:00 our positions had been subjected to a powerful bombardment but by then we were no longer there. Verily, success has until now remained with us!

In our new location, we have taken positions in the hills. At this point, there is nothing very clear: from where are they shooting and what are they shooting at. From all sides, we hear explosions, for the moment more or less far from us.

November 9, 1987

All night, we heard the rumble of engines and nearby explosions. It was the 59th brigade approaching us but the South Africans were «escorting» them with their artillery.

In the morning, we went down to meet them. We saw our

Soviet advisors. They felt that everything for them was under control. After the South Africans had attacked them with poison gas on the 29 of October, they had more or less regained consciousness. Their faces were happy – after all, they were returning «home», to Cuito. They had been in the forest for almost 4 months. It is difficult to imagine such a life – one must have personally have lived through it. We, for example, have been in the forest exactly one month, today, yet I have the feeling that already half my life has slipped by, and that all the days have merged into one, that each day is one and the same. If it is suddenly quiet, then you begin to go crazy, they say, wondering why they do not shoot, and what they still have in mind to do there. When the shooting starts, you wait for when it will finally end. And so on and so forth every day.

Around 8 o'clock, we got information that the 16th brigade (which is located in the area of the Shambinga River, 20 km away from us) had been subject since 3 o'clock in the morning to heavy fire and attacks from the regular South African battalions. The Shambinga area lies right next to Cuito-Cuanavale, and already the South Africans had arrived there, but after all, they were anyway on the river Lomba not long ago.

During the afternoon, the advisors attached to the 25th brigade, located on our old positions, informed us that at around one in the morning, the enemy had attempted to penetrate their defense line. When that failed, he began to «throw» everything he had and then another several times tried to break through and has been continuing all this commotion up till now. The position of the 25th brigade is precarious. After all, it remains practically alone there, if we do not take our battalion staying with them into account.

November 10, 1987

Yesterday night passed more or less peacefully. However, the next morning, the Brigade Commander came and he said he had received a telegram from District Headquarters with

the following order: stay on constant alert inasmuch as the enemy can always attack, employing the strategy of sudden surprise.

And that was exactly what happened. At 7 o'clock, artillery and mortar fire suddenly broke out. At that moment I was exactly in radio contact with our Military District. For more than an hour and a half, South Africans keep on bombarding us from 106-mm guns and 120-mm mortars.

Shells fly past our heads. What saves us is that we are standing on a hill and therefore they either fell short of or else fly over us. And yet a number of pieces got within 50 m of us and immediately the fragments began to scream in a horrible way.

The advisors of the 16th brigade now gave us their coordinates. We glanced at the map and sighed: saving themselves from yesterday's South African attack, they had covered not less than 20 km and are now located 4–5 km from the ford across the river Shaminga (15 km from Cuito-Cuanavale). They let us know that the number of their technique and equipment had dropped to less than half.

During the afternoon, I intercepted a telegram stating that two tanks of the 16th brigade had reached by tugboat the area where the 66th brigade was located, together with 100 men from two battalions of the 16th brigade. Thereupon, they had set off for Cuito-Cuanavale. In such a way, the South Africans did «wear out» the 16th brigade.

Then once again, I communicated with the 16th brigade and ascertained that they had passed not 20 km but 30 km or more, fleeing from the South Africans. Afterwards, I once again intercepted their telegram in which they mentioned how much materiel they still had available. They had at their disposal: one BM-21, seven Grad-Ps, one 82-mm mortar, one RPG-7 grenade launcher and one AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher and some ammunition.

The 59th brigade sent a message about crossing the Shaminga River. The South Africans were subjecting them to heavy fire from 155-mm long-range howitzers.

November 11, 1987

Today, during the morning, the air force paid us a visit. Evidently, they simply wished to greet us on the occasion of the 12 years of Angolan independence and well, of course they brought some «gifts».

But yesterday, we spent the whole evening watching shells from South African 155-mm howitzers flying through the air. They are jet propelled and shine during the jet part of the flight. The South Africans subjected to gunfire the area where the 59th brigade was situated on the other bank of the Shambinga River. We were even able to calculate the distance to the howitzers and to measure their approximate coordinates. As of this morning we were able to communicate these to our Military District Command. At 6.00, I entered communication and found out that the Military District Command had restrained the 59th brigade, ordered it to occupy the defence on the bank on the Shambinga River and given it a pile of tasks to carry out. And to think that they had so wanted to go home!

Something quite incomprehensible is happening now: the Angolan troops are almost completely demoralized; the brigades are on average at 45% strength. For every 10–15 shells launched by the enemy, Angolans are able to send only one, if even that much; our reconnaissance operates poorly; and our enemy knows everything about us. The Angolans fear the South Africans like fire and if they hear that “Buffalo” is part of an attack, they throw away all their equipment in panic and flee.

“Buffalo” – this is a battalion of mercenaries and bandits, distinguished for its horrible brutalities throughout much of the territory of Angola. It consists of 12 companies, each comprising 100 men. Each company has its own name (“Lion” “Fox”, “Wolf”, etc.). They are allocated in one or two individual companies between regular South African units. Sometimes they would operate independently.

Such are the conditions of the war. UNITA is conducting partisan activities, wanders all over the place, attacks and bom-

bards from all directions. The South Africans, for their part, do not hesitate to attack frontally, and strike along our flanks and rear. The South African artillery and aviation move with impunity at all times, while our own aviation is afraid to show itself and if it does so at all, does so only at a high altitude⁵.

And despite all of this, from the District Military Command, orders and instructions continue to come out: to occupy a defensive position, to create a strong reserve (but out of what?) for confronting the flanks and rear of the attacking enemy, etc., etc.

This morning a prisoner was captured in the area of the third battalion. He turned out to be an artillery reconnaissance scout from the artillery battery attached to UNITA's 4th regular battalion. He himself was an African, named Eugene Kayumba, who had served UNITA for 3 years, born in the province of Huambo. In his battery they had 2 106.7-mm guns and 2 120 mm mortars set up on "Land Rovers." According to his information, the battery is situated at the source of the Kuzizi River while the 4th regular battalion is between the Colui and the Myanei rivers. He had been sent in a group of 3 men (a scout, a radio operator and a guard) with the mission of spotting our fire and making a reconnaissance of our positions. Their batteries are constantly changing firing positions, they are supplied with ammunition at night, and they move around on "Unimog" vehicles. A battery consists of 20 men. Together with him, we captured a broadcasting station, SR A-84, of English production.

According to him, the South Africans are constantly moving in the second echelon, while the UNITA troops are moving in front of them. If UNITA gets into a tight spot, the regular South African forces move there, open artillery fire and send

⁵ Angolan military aircraft pilots feared to fly at low altitudes, not only because of fear of their South African counterparts, but also, in particular, because of poor nutrition, resulting in their not being able to endure excess loads during air combat. The Cuban pilots, for their part, fought well at any altitude against the South Africans (note by ed.-comp.).

out the air force. In important military sectors, the South Africans themselves enter the battle, as this in fact occurred with the 16th brigade on the 9th of November.

At the source of the river Lomba some bases are situated from where ammunition would be brought up. That place is settled by South Africans.

The prisoner constantly gets confused and tries to get out of answering, plays the fool, although it is clear that he knows much. He said that he had long wished to desert, but could not find the opportunity. He related that he had been forcibly taken away by UNITA to their “capital”, Jamba, and there sent to Tikra, UNITA’s artillery center, 20 km away. There, the UNITA personnel were trained by their South African advisors.

November 12, 1987

Today in the morning, I turned on the radio and found out that Cuito-Cuanavale had been shelled during the night by long-range guns. Fortunately there were no casualties among us and the landing strip area (runway) was not damaged.

During the day, it was relatively quiet but towards evening, the Chief Advisor of the 59th brigade told us that, at the crossing of the Shaminga River, groups of soldiers from the 16th brigade, including those from Tactical Group were running with and without materiel, with weapons and without weapons, in a great panic and with “square eyes.” The 59th brigade fishes them out and collects them in one place. There they met with those «runners», shout slogans to them, appeal to them to calm down, but without getting any sense into them. They think of only how to “pick up their hands and feet” and clear out.

The Chief Advisor of the 59th brigade reported all this to the District Military Command who in turn promised to take appropriate measures. The 59th brigade also reported that one of its tanks had gotten stuck in the mud and had by now become buried up to its turret.

At 22.00, instructions were sent to us and to the 25th brigade that at this moment was standing at the Mianei River at our old location. The 25th brigade was to effect a raid in the area on the river Ube, whereas we should monitor the district of Viposhto where we are currently.

November 13, 1987

Today, I woke up and there had been less than five hours in the morning because the water began pouring on me. Our technician officer and me sleep under our armored troop carrier inasmuch it is more comfortable and not stuffy here, and there is more room, than in the carrier itself. During the night, it rained, and water collected in the bottom of the troop carrier and then it began to run out through the holes.

Our Team Leader (Lieutenant-Colonel Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko) sent a telegram to the Military District Command with the proposal to change the area of the brigade's defensive positions and to occupy the heights of the Viposhto area (5 km away from us), to cover the area between the Ube river and the Vimpulo with two our battalions, while keeping the third battalion in the second echelon as a reserve on the west bank of the Vimpulo.

In response, came an order to move to the source of the river Ube and to occupy defensive positions. The brigade commander resolved to leave there one company with its radio station. We (the Soviets) were in the meantime to move to Viposhto district to be with the military advisors of the tactical group while waiting for the arrival of the entire brigade. One battalion had already left for the source of the Ube.

November 14, 1987

Today we departed at 6:00 AM. We wandered the whole day, covering altogether 13.5 km instead of 5 planned km before we found the Tactical Group. At one point we were shot at. In the evening, the enemy launched a heavy fire at the cross-

ing across the river Shambinga and at the 59th brigade. They requested the coordinates.

November 15, 1987

This morning, a military directive came ordering us to launch an offensive into the area of the source of the Ube River and to start it at 10 AM. Everything in this directive was beautifully outlined – where each group should advance and with what forces, the requirement to use tanks available in the Tactical Group (but none of them have operable planetary steering mechanism, so that they can only move directly forwards or backwards), and that only one tank runs on a storage battery.

The brigade itself is still on march. One battalion of our brigade is located God knows where and now we have this order to advance?!... What are they thinking about in the Military District Command?

Our Team Leader told the Brigade Commander that it would be better in fact to begin the offensive today, while the enemy was still not able to find us, and that all would be well if he didn't reconnoiter the area or send spotters. To this, the Brigade Commander responded that everything was held up by those cars that remained on the road. They are allegedly out of order and he would send people there to help. In other words, we understood by this that today we would be unable advance anywhere.

November 18, 1987

It is difficult to write about what occurred during the past two days (November 16 and 17) since one must have experienced all this directly to understand it. Right now, we ourselves don't yet understand how we stayed alive and broke out of this hell.

What happened was exactly what we warned the Brigade Commander against. During the night from the 15th to the 16th the enemy had made a thorough reconnaissance, had

sent out spotters, and had managed to make adjustments of our brigade column. Also he had prepared an assault position (lines of attack). In short, he had done everything necessary.

On the 16th of November, at 6 AM, we had formed a column and stood awaiting the beginning of our march. At that moment, the fuel servicing truck arrived and we set out to refuel our armored troop carrier. Our Team Leader (Lieutenant-Colonel Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko) was standing outside our armored troop carrier when all this began.

The first shell exploded 10 m away from our armored troop carrier. How our Team Leader survived, in fact only God knows. We were sitting with the artillery adviser on the back of the seat when we were struck in the face by a wave of air mixed with sand. The artillery adviser sprang out and began to call our Team Leader being afraid that he had been killed. But Anatoly Mikhailovich had already found cover in the armored troop carrier.

And thereupon began such a bombardment which we, in truth, had as yet never experienced. Shells exploded "in packets". Everyone became confused, panic ensued and everyone tried to run anywhere they could. But the South Africans beat them black and blue. We began to get out from under the bombardment. From the impact of the shells, our armored troop carrier rocked from side to side. In fact the South Africans bombarded a very large area because we were able to escape the zone of fire only after 40 minutes.

During the first few minutes, a shell fragment penetrated right through the leg of one of our guards. We dragged him and another soldier inside the armored troop carrier. They were gripped by fever, while their eyes were full of terror. I gave them bandages to bind the leg of that soldier but they could not do it themselves. Then I bandaged his leg myself.

When we, finally, came out from under the bombardment, we could see only a part of the brigade column with us left led by the Brigade Logistic Officer. His face was very terrified and

confused. He could not give intelligible answers to any of our questions and spoke with a pronounced stutter. The wheels, the bodies and the inside compartments of the vehicles were gaping with holes from fragments.

At last, our Brigade Commander, himself, appeared and began to restore order: he determined the assembly point and gave out instructions. With great difficulty, we assembled the column and marched to the river Ube. And there and then the South Africans attacked us from prepared positions. As we had assumed, the South Africans had prepared themselves well: our brigade suddenly appeared pinned down into the “shana” (as I already explained, the “shana” is a swampy flood-land area of the river). In front of us, the enemy was situated in a half circle while to our rear was this cursed “shana” – cars could not drive through it so that it would have been necessary first to lay out over it a road of brushwood. Panic broke out, the enemy launched an intensive bombardment and the Angolans fled on foot through the “shana” to the other shore.

Only the appearance of the Brigade Commander made them to stop. The Commander rushed around along the whole brigade: from front to rear, shouted, cursed, made demands and gave out orders. The battle continued in front: a small group of Angolans pressed back an enraged onslaught of South Africans while the entire brigade stood practically in the swamp with eyes “squared” by fear and with trembling hands. They crowded onto the bank, ready at any moment to throw away everything and run.

The commander ordered the men to make a temporary brushwood road (log-path road). This took up their attention because it still provided them with something to think about and do. On the other side, a small detachment was sent to the other bank so as to be covered from possible enemy attack.

The bombardment and the attacks persisted with only short interruptions. We were prepared for the very worst. We collected our knapsacks and burned a number of secret documents and papers. It was resolved, in case of the South Africans break-

ing through, to burn our armored troop carrier and our armored patrol car, our two cars, and to go by foot through the “shana” on to Cuito-Cuanavale.

Of course, we still had a faint hope in the 25th brigade which was coming to us with help. However, this hope too collapsed when, on the radio station, we heard the voice of the senior advisor to the 25th brigade. He swore with abuse and cried out, almost weeping: “Running away, scums... They abandon everything: materiel, weapons... bloody vermins!” Evidently, the South Africans, without hesitation, had turned round and cut into the 25th brigade and it was sufficient for Angolans to hear that they were being attacked by “Buffalo” for them to flee.

When our log-path road was already almost ready, the enemy began to fire at it, while then the soldiers from our covering force crushed by the enemy appeared on the other bank. The trap, in this way, snapped shut.

The vehicles of our brigade began “to go in circles”, evading the shells. We sat in our armored troop carrier, wet like small puppies from the terrible heat and stress...

For us too, nothing was left than to recover from the shelling. We only knew that wherever a shell or a mine exploded, we would rush there because we knew that for the next few minutes, no shell would again fall there.

Those Angolans who did not succeed in getting into the armored troop carrier, the armored patrol car or still some other such place, rushed about, hiding behind anything that was possible to find. The cries of the wounded and the screaming of horror were heard everywhere, and it was all covered by the explosion of shells and the whistling of splinters.

At last, indeed, we discovered a weak spot in the ranks of the enemy and everyone scrambled in that direction. But the reason for this perhaps was simply that the South Africans had gotten finally tired of playing around with us. That was just what we asked ourselves. But this was hardly likely to be the case since during this period we had already been studying their tactics. They prefer to hit FAPLA in parts (one by one)

and destroy them completely so as no longer to be burdened by them. And they had particular scores to settle with our brigade.

Be it as it may, around 15:00, we were finally able to break out of this hell. Our vehicles gathered together in a heap while our exhausted soldiers collapsed on the grass.

Nearby, 20 m away, a knocked out tank from our brigade was burning. Shells and cartridges still inside it, exploded for almost an hour.

At 16:00, we made radio contact with the advisors of the 25th brigade and heard from them that like us they had also succeeded to break away from the South African chase and they were on route to joining us.

Just at this time, the soldiers of the reconnaissance company of our brigade brought over a prisoner from UNITA. a captain by rank who had been serving in the rear, supplying the fighting units. He told us that in this battle the 1st brigade of regular South African troops, together with "Buffalo" and a regular battalion of UNITA had participated against us.

By this time, the 25th brigade was approaching us. When the soldiers caught sight of the UNITA prisoner, both brigades at once gathered together. Their eyes were burning bright and they were all crying: "Finish him off! Don't just stand there, kill him!" Order was restored only with much difficulty. It was now resolved to bring the prisoner to Cuito.

The author commentaries, made
on October 28, 2000

[I want in particular to cite the name of Lieutenant Colonel Yuri Pavlovich Sushchenko. The soldiers of the reconnaissance company of our brigade captured the UNITA officer and brought him right to our armored troop carrier. At that time, we heard the shouts of our soldiers: they wanted to kill that UNITA prisoner, many soldiers of both brigades gathered near our armored troop carrier. Both Yuri Pavlovich and I jumped out of our armored troop carrier, we were fierce and dirty-faced

after the battle and he was the one with the beard and with his submachine gun. He jumped out and said to me – Igor, tell them that I'll allow no one to approach here, to the prisoner. So, we climbed out of the armored personnel carrier – and there was everyone who had escaped from the encirclement, with arms and yelling. I began shouting them in Portuguese and they stopped – but when Yuri Pavlovich began to bawl (with his sub-machine gun ready to fire) – Get out! I'll kill everybody! – The Angolans shrank back from him in horror.

But, although this was ten years ago, I can still repeat to you just how it was. He really was ready to kill anybody. I respect him as a man. In any case, that's how it was.

I said to him – Palych!⁶ Calm down! OK – everything back to normal, everything is fine, everything is normal.

That UNITA captain within two months gave an interview in Luanda. And the entire brigade was sitting and listening to it.]

Around 17:00, it was decided to move in the direction of the passage over the river Shambinga. At the same time we could see the results of the firing of our BM-21... Next to the road stood a knocked-out South African AML-90 armored troop transport, and a tractor for the evacuation of materiel (a South African Samil-100 six-wheel heavy 10-ton truck). Both were on fire.

Just as we had passed through this area, the enemy began to bombard us anew, but this time we were able to get out of this particular danger zone fairly quickly.

It began to get dark. Our Brigade Commander approached us and raised the question of what we should do next: move ahead or stop for overnight rest. We urged him to go forward in order to get out of this place as quickly as possible. The Brigade Commander, however, objected that ahead of us there

⁶ Palych (colloquial) – Pavlovich (patronymic) – Lt.-Colonel Yuri Pavlovich Sushchenko (note by ed.-comp.).

might be mined fields. In answer to this, our Team Leader (Mikhalych)⁷ suggested organizing the entire brigade into one single column and in front to allow one single tank and an infantry platoon to pave the way. It was agreed to do just that.

We marched the whole night without closing our eyes. Our column moved very slowly inasmuch as there were no stars or moon visible in the sky, but nonetheless we did move and that was the most important. Our nerves were on edge.

The armored troop carrier with the advisers of the Tactical Group, moving behind us, landed into a ditch. We had to pull it out. No sooner had we pulled them out then our armored troop carrier flew into another ditch. At this point, a bombardment began. The Angolans pushed car next to car, jumped out of them and took refuge. We covered with sweat, in our mud stained clothes cursed and yanked out the Angolans who were hiding in order to get them to move their cars and not stand in our way while we pulled out our armored troop carrier. The Angolans' hands and feet trembled from terror and from the whizzing of splinters, so that their cars could not start and we had to jostle them back.

Finally, we were able to pull out our armored troop carrier and moved on. Towards morning, we reached the passage over the river. This was at four o'clock. But we could not cross because a truck had overturned on the bridge and we could in no way drag it off.

November 17, 1987

And so until eleven o'clock, we languished under the bombardment, waiting to cross, without sleep, hungry, and angry like the devil. We suffered from the foulest sensations: how much did we have to put up with so as finally a stray shell could «cover» us and thus finish our lives.

⁷ Mikhalych (colloquial) – Mikhailovich (patronymic). Unofficially in Soviet and Russian Army all officers are named by patronymic but not by military rank or by surname. Lt.-Colonel Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko (Artyomenko) is named Mikhailovich (Mikhalych) (note by ed.-comp.).

Finally, around eleven o'clock we were able to push the truck off the bridge, and the entire brigade column rushed to the crossing. We succeeded in being among the first to get to it.

The enemy at first fired at the approaches to the crossing, then at the tail end of the column, then shifted his fire to its head. He was strafing from "Valkiria" reactive fire installation in order to smash the wheels, knock out the lead car, thus stop the column, and then, without any particular difficulty, shoot it to pieces.

In front of us a tank was dragging the out-of-order armored troop carrier. It was constantly coming to a halt and because of this, the column was stalled. The shells were exploding from all directions. The enemy fired with everything he could: with mortars, recoilless guns, 155-mm howitzers, and from his "Valkiria". Even when the column began to withdraw from the crossing, the enemy pursued it with its barrage of fire.

At last we were able to escape from the danger zone and immediately set off towards the advisors of the 59th and 16th brigades who were situated 3 km from the crossing. There we embraced for a long time, not believing that it was all over and sharing impressions with each other.

At 12:00, we went out to the assembly point, several kilometers from the crossing, in order to collect personnel and materiel. Much of this materiel is damaged, and some of the cars were lost on the other bank, the vehicles that remained with us have their wheels and radiators pierced by the "Valkiria". All three "OCA-AK" anti aircraft missile systems had had their equipment disabled from being hit by the "Valkiria".

Today, i.e. November 18, we continued to collect our personnel and materiel and count up our losses. On November 16, from ground fighting and from bombardment, we lost 17 men killed and 86 wounded. But also: 1 tank, 2 E-25 motor vehicles, 2 B-10 antitank guns, 1 ZU 23-2 anti aircraft automatic coaxial gun. On November 17, we lost: 5 men killed and 31 wounded.

Today at 14:00, we once again hit the road. This time, we got the task to occupy defensive positions in the area of the Cuatir River.

This is just a pale, dry description, so to speak, of what happened. Is there something still to come or to happen?

The author commentaris made
on October 6, 2001⁸

[Turning back to the battle of 16–17 November, 1987, when our 21st brigade, became encircled, there are simply a number of additional pieces of information which should be inserted – that is to say, as I already mentioned in my diary, in more or less detail. As far as my first impressions are concerned.

Naturally, I must right away make my own kind of resume: I think everything happened in the way as happened because of confusion, because of something misunderstood, because of the good, competent and precise actions of the South African army and the UNITA troops led by them. That is to say, as I already wrote in my diary, South Africans prepared all their positions ahead of time, and worked out everything beforehand so that we in fact fell into an earlier prearranged trap, i.e. into this encirclement. In addition, the 25th brigade that advanced behind us could not come to our support because the South Africans, as I already wrote, swung around and struck at the 25th brigade.

Here I must add that leader of our advisers' group, Lieutenant Colonel Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko was of course a very balanced and sober person. So, when the brigade commander, Captain N'Geleka, came to him with the question, "What should we do? What have we gotten into?", and so forth, Anatoly Mikhailovich very calmly led all the process in a

⁸ Lieutenant Zhdarkin was afraid that his diary, sooner or later, would fall into the hands of his mother, living in Gomel, which later on is just what happened) and as a result described in his diary the battle of November 16–17

fully clear-cut way as is indicated by everything he did. And it is only thanks to him in my view that we got out of the encirclement and out of this dangerous situation.

Because of his intervention, the Angolans put six ZU-23-2s in one line and began firing against attacking South Africans (ZU-23-2 – it was anti aircraft defense means with 23-mm shells – i. e. they could pierce South African AML-60 and AML-90 armored troop carriers, if they hit a person, they simply tore a man in pieces). And thanks to those six ZU-23-2 put in one line, so to speak, four South African attacks were repulsed. But I wish here to point out that the only units in the brigade capable of military action at that moment were the reconnaissance company of the brigade and the curfew platoon (commandant platoon).

It was namely those who were positioned at the ZU-23-2s, who repulsed the South African attacks. The entire rest of the brigade, as I already wrote in my diary was in «shana» – in this swampy ground, near the crossing, with eyes haunted by fear, with trembling hands and with no comprehension whatsoever – in other words, a crazed horde, which wished only to stay alive, threw away everything which could be gotten rid of, etc. Those who really fought were only the reconnaissance company and the commandant platoon.

– How many people?

– I can't say it correctly. You see, our troops, one battalion after another were dispatched in different directions with various missions. That day, on the whole, we had in our disposal only combat support units of our brigade. That is, the [only] real combat units were the reconnaissance company and the curfew patrol (commandant platoon). All this was told to me later on by the commander of the reconnaissance company who himself had personally witnessed the attack of the "Buffaloes" and he himself saw their dead bodies later.

– How many did he actually count?

– Well, he personally counted twelve (killed), but this was only in that sector in which he actually saw them physically.

Clearly, as I already stated, the “Buffalo” battalion split itself up into companies, into every UNITA and South African combat unit – that is to say, it never operated as a single entire battalion, but instead simply spread out into 12 company units to other South African units and sub-units.

Well, unambiguously, one “Buffalo” company fought there against us. And of course they were beaten off thanks to those Angolans from the reconnaissance company and the curfew patrol (commandant platoon). Thanks to them only.]

November 19, 1987

This morning, our Osa-AK anti aircraft specialists departed, together with a battery, for Cuito-Cuanavale. We are only four now.

We are sitting in expectation of the beginning of the march. Yesterday evening at 20:00, one car from our brigade blew up upon contact with an anti tank mine, and two people were wounded.

At 13:00, we set off. At 14:00, we were shot at from 60-mm mortars, as well as small arms, by a group of UNITA combatants.

At 18:00, the first battalion was attacked by a group of UNITA. Two our soldiers were killed and five wounded. We killed four from UNITA and captured one submachine gun. Our soldiers lost somehow two RPG-7 grenade throwers.

We stayed at a night’s lodging on the heights not far from the Cuatir River.

November 20, 1987

Today we moved to a new place. The whole day, we made arrangements in order to make our stop, if only from afar, resemble a dwelling more or less for civilized people. We put down stakes and set up an awning in order to protect ourselves from rain and sun. We knocked little tables together for crockery and the preparation of food.

In general, it is now more or less comfortable. Today, the whole day was calm, but from our Military District

Headquarters we got the news that the South Africans were regrouping and evidently had something in mind. We were told to be on alert.

November 21, 1987

Yesterday, we communicated our coordinates to the District (in fact the Angolans communicated them with our help) and already today we received the result: the South Africans began to strike with precision at our brigade headquarters command post. We have dug an exposed hole under our armored troop carrier where one could protect oneself from bombardment, so that the whole day we were busy with «cross-country race», i.e. ran back and forth hiding from shells. We didn't even get enough time to eat. Only towards evening did things quiet down. However strange this may sound, but when we don't inform our location to the Military District, nobody shells us. But as soon as we transmit our location, the enemy there and then begins to strike over and over again and with great precision.

November 22, 1987

The night passed peacefully (for us at least) but the enemy constantly bombarded the brigades allied with us.

From daybreak, he attacked first one and then the other brigade. So far he hasn't touched us. Evidently, he is going to «make probes» of our defenses, looking for weak places.

During this period, the enemy is constantly bombarding Cuito-Cuanavale from 155-mm howitzers. For them it is also unpleasant as they too are occupied with «cross-country race» as we joke sadly.

The surrounding conditions are very disturbed: our reconnaissance and soldiers waiting in ambush are constantly reporting the movement of enemy columns, small UNITA groups and so forth. The enemy in turn bombards our three brigades and Cuito-Cuanavale. Evidently, they are preparing for an attack.

We have the distinct impression that our lifeless and hapless

brigades once again are falling into a «mouse trap» and it will be considerably more serious than before.

November 23, 1987

Yesterday evening, we listened to the radio and completely by accident heard the news in Portuguese. It wasn't clear which radio station but it resembled the BBC. They were reporting about the aggression of the South Africans in Angola, i. e. about us.

It was mentioned just the following: "South Africa was continuing to launch aggressive actions against Angola. In the north of Namibia, on the border of the Angolan province of Cuando-Cubango (this is just the place where we are located), 30 000 military personnel, 400 guns of various caliber, and more than 80 airplanes are concentrated. The 8th Armored Attack Battalion had entered the territory of the province of Cuando-Cubango. Several South African brigades, together with the "Buffalo" battalion were operating on the Angolan territory. The remaining troops found themselves on combat alert, ready to cross the border at the first order".

We reported all this to our District Command. In response, we got a telegram back ordering us to mine the sectors vulnerable to enemy tanks and to create anti-tank defense in depth of five pieces per kilometer. How cheerful this made us! We practically have no mines at our disposal, our anti-tank defenses are nothing to speak of: 1 B-10 anti-tank gun, 1 BM-21 40-barrel gun fired from a truck, 2 Grad 1-P 122-mm portable guns, 2 tanks, not to mention company anti tank grenade launchers. And with this we have to beat off tanks!

During the evening, they fired at us, as if unintentionally, lazily – apparently they wished to frighten us. But they constantly cut up Cuito and all the time attempt to damage the landing strip area (runway of Cuito-Cuanavale).

November 24, 1987

Yesterday, at 20:00 we heard a helicopter. As the Angolans told us, clearly the enemy was facilitating the landing of scouts

or diversionary groups. During the whole day, except for the “obligatory” bombardment, nothing happened. But then at 17:00, the South African air force swooped down and fired with non-guided rockets against the Brigade’s Command Post. They approached from the direction of the source of the Cuatir River so that our «Strela-10» anti aircraft missile system could not catch sight of them.

In the afternoon news, the Angolan radio announced that the Angolan foreign minister, appearing at the UN, accused South Africa of employing chemical warfare against the Angolan army. This had occurred on October 29 at the Miane River, when the South Africans had used these chemicals against the 59th brigade positioned next to us. I have already written about the effects of this “use”.

November 25, 1987

During the night we again heard the helicopter. As the reconnaissance of our brigade has announced, South Africans are concentrated 20 km to the east of us. There the noise of engines is constantly heard, helicopters are flying, and from there their artillery is shelling us. Today, after dinner, we were bombarded by their 120-mm mortars. At 17:00 our first battalion was engaged in heavy fighting. So far the results are unknown.

November 26, 1987

Last night I awoke from the earth rumbling. Inasmuch as we sleep under the armored personnel carrier, this rumble was easy to hear. Evidently it was the armed column of the enemy.

From 12:00, the enemy launched a powerful bombardment from 196.7-mm recoilless guns. He fired against the location of the 1st and 2nd battalions of our brigade. Luckily for them, they had already moved to the next line of defense.

Around 15:00, the chief of the 59th brigade, standing to our right, informed the Military District Command that the enemy column had revealed itself at his right flank, adjoining the 25th

brigade: enemy armored personnel carriers and its infantry. They had begun to fire at this column from anything at their disposal.

On the radio we heard that the UN had taken a resolution obliging South Africa to withdraw all its troops from Angola by December 10. We think South Africans heap scorn at this resolution and also at the fact that the UN General Secretary himself is to come to Angola in order to supervise the withdrawal of their troops. Then we stumbled upon a transmission from South Africa whereby they were translating the speech of Peter Botha, their Minister of Foreign Affairs. The essence of this speech was that South Africa would not permit the extension of communism in the south of Africa, would tend to its own security interests, and would withdraw its troops from Angola only after the withdrawal of Cubans and Russians.

During the evening, the Brigade Commander arrived and declared that he had received a telegram about the end to the operation on November 26, i.e. today and that this was, allegedly, an order from the Minister of Defense. I don't know how and for whom, but for us it has yet to end, the devil knows when.

Today a telegram was sent to the Military District Command with a request for my replacement. I have not been able to shake off the consequences of a shell-shock incurred on November 1 when we were «covered» by a shell from a 155-mm howitzer: my right ear hurts, my left shoulder, clearly, has been dislocated and my headaches and dizziness have become more frequent.

The first time I injured this aching left shoulder was October 29, but by the following day everything was already normal, but on November 1, I evidently dislocated it, having hit it by something hard at the time of the explosion.

November 27, 1987

Today differs little from previous days. In the same way, they bombarded us and nearby they also bombarded our adjacent brigades. On Soviet radio, there is a deathly silence

about Angola. We try to catch this news every day and we get nothing.

The enemy continues to bombard Cuito. At 18:00, he fired salvos from his “Kentrons”. During this time, I was in contact with Cuito, and for a long time, I couldn’t reach anybody. Finally they told me that the shells had exploded directly on the territory of the Soviet mission. So far, they have not communicated any consequences.

November 28, 1987

All night and to the morning, there was an exhausting, protracted silence: not a shot was to be heard, nor the sounds of an engine – nothing. And we couldn’t fall sleep because of it.

Moreover, we were very agitated, not knowing what was happening there in Cuito.

At 6:00, we learned that as a result of the bombardment, Colonel Andrew Gorb⁹, mobilization officer, already advanced in years, a very calm, good and accommodating person, had perished. Usually, they say, one does not speak evil about the dead. About him and about his life, one can immediately say only good things. Everyone respectfully called him “Uncle.” He had spent only a year in Angola. How all this happened there, we don’t know. We know only one thing: a very good man «left our lines». As in the verses of Vysotsky¹⁰: “Death selects the best and pulls them out one by one”.

November 29, 1987

Today at 8:00 in the morning, according to our Brigade Commander, a group of the enemy, situated in the area not far from the defense positions of our 1st battalion, ran into our ambush or, perhaps, FAPLA ran into the enemy’s ambush. In

⁹ About the bombardment and the death of Colonel Gorb see “The oral history of forgotten wars. Memories of the war in Angola”. M.: Memories, 2007. P. 39-40 (note by ed.-comp.).

¹⁰ Vladimir Semenovich Vysotskiy (Vysotsky) (1938–1980) – actor, poet, writer, bard. One of the greatest Russian poets and bards of the XX century.

any case, it was a serious battle. As a result: one of ours was wounded, two were declared missing, and one sub-machine gun was lost.

It is not known what was the fate of the two – that is whether they deserted or perished...

November 30, 1987

Night passed quietly. Our technician officer Sasha Fatyanov and I left our usual place of sleeping under armored personnel carrier and went to sleep in our new-built dugout, acquiring, so to speak, a new home. It is sufficiently large and spacious, we made the roof in three layers, we covered the walls with sticks, we built bunks upon which we placed mattresses, and we hung up mosquito nets. Terrific!

At 6:00, our Brigade Commander dispatched 60 men under the commander of the 1st battalion to search for those two missing men and also to check the area once more, and to set the ambush there.

In the evening, they returned, having found nothing, but they had set the ambush. Our reconnaissance constantly reports about the movement of the columns of motor vehicles of the enemy from the sources of the Ube and Shambinga rivers to the source of the Cuatir and about the flights of their helicopters also. What are they preparing there?

From evening, a heavy rain began, although till then it had already rained the whole day.

December 1, 1987

The rain which began yesterday evening, poured on all night. As a result, our dugout leaked and at 3 AM, water began to trickle right into our beds, or, more accurately, between them. We put a bucket on the floor and moved the beds apart as much as possible. The rain continued the entire day, albeit with interruptions. The wet season had begun.

Today is the first of December, which means the beginning of winter in the USSR, but here is summer. In fact, it doesn't

bring any change whatever! Here we have lost count of the days. We have been rushing about the forests for almost two months and it no longer makes any difference to us whether it is Wednesday or Thursday. On Sunday, in truth, we wash ourselves and do our laundry, but in fact it is an ordinary day.

Yesterday we received a telegram: to prepare a helicopter landing strip (helipad). At first we supposed that the high command was flying to us. But today I succeeded in finding out that this was rather for supplying us with food products.

In the evening, our 25th brigade reported that from 16:00 to 17:30, the enemy had bombarded their command post with 155-mm guns, and that at 19:00 they had heard the noise of a helicopter in the area at the source of the Ube River.

December 2, 1987

Today at 15 hours, a Higher Commission headed by a major of the FAPLA General Staff arrived for an assessment of the existing situation and for the checking of the organizing of our defenses. The chiefs of the Military District services came together with that commission.

At first there was the hearing (report) of the brigade commander and his decision on the defensive combat order formation. Tomorrow we shall visit the defensive battle areas of our battalions.

This Commission already visited the 25th and 59th brigades situated next to us. It was reported that the South Africans there had already made attempts at breaching the defensive positions, but that the 25th and 59th brigades were able to beat them back. The 59th brigade shot two AML-90, while the 25th brigade inflicted great losses upon the enemy.

December 3, 1987

Today, from morning to lunch, we accompanied the commission along the defensive positions. The defects were revealed, as well as their causes.

At 14:00, we had the meeting devoted to the summary of the

results of the commission's work. The chiefs of the district services presented their reports. But before the summary of the results, we heard by radio a press conference in Luanda, set up for Angolan and foreign journalists. At that press conference, appeared the very same UNITA captain whom our brigade had taken prisoner on the river Ube, on November 16.

As I already said, he had been in charge of supplies for all South African grouping active in our area. He said much of interest: about the activities of the South Africans against the 16th brigade, Tactical Group, and the 21st brigade (i.e. against us). He told that in one of the airplanes shot down by Angolans, a South African Colonel and instructor, one of the South African aces, perished.

On this point, I end my manuscript. While for the moment it is quiet, our brigade is in its positions in the forest, we are awaiting a possible enemy attack, and we have no idea of what will happen next. We haven't received any letters from home in six weeks.

Valeriy Vasilevich!

Please, this notebook is only meant for your eyes. Don't show it to anyone else, in particular, to my mom. Valentin Matveychik is to give you a letter along with this notebook.

As far as me, so far everything is normal, if you do not count my shell shock, concussion and dislocated shoulder. But that will pass in any case. Please tell to everyone that I am in Menongue, because the conditions here leave much to be desired. However, Valentin will tell you everything. Still another request: take checks from my mom and buy me one of those small tape recorders, like the one I had but which already broke down. This is all for now.

Goodbye.

Regards to everyone.

Igor

The song written by Igor Zhdarkin in December 1987,
in Cuito-Cuanavale (translation from Russian)

Cuito, Lomba – that's where we fought,
Often risking our lives.
The shells were flying, the mines exploding...
For us it was dangerous but we weren't afraid.

We knew only one thing – we had to survive,
For all of us to return home, to embrace our loved ones.
We believed that there we were awaited and loved,
And that if something were to happen, we would not
be forgotten.

UNITA cut into us, to our left and to our right,
And don't turn, here's a pit, there's a ditch.
And the planes from South Africa flew
And dropped bombs over our heads.

10.10. The first bombardment, 19 km from Cuito
11¹⁰ – 4 minutes of firing
10.10. 13³⁰ – we approached the minefield
11.10. 6³⁰ – bombardment of incendiary bombs
11¹⁰ – 2 air targets;
14³⁰ – air targets;
15³⁵ – bombardment of our column and fighting
12.10. 6⁴⁵ – bombardment of our column;
10⁴⁰ – Aviation
13.10. 5¹⁰, 12, 15, 17 – air raids
14.10. 8¹⁵ – Aviation
25.10. 14²⁰ – bombardment while we are on the march

Composition of the group of advisors attached to the 21st
infantry brigade as of October 1:

1. Lieutenant Colonel Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko –
Chief advisor to the brigade.

2. Lieutenant Colonel Yuri Pavlovich Sushchenko – advisor to the Chief of artillery
3. Second Lieutenant Igor Anatolyevich Zhdarkin – interpreter
4. Sergeant-Major Alexander Mikhailovich Fatyanov – technical specialist

Additions from October 9:

1. Major Constantin Rashidovich Divyeyev
2. Captain Vyacheslav Vislobokov (specialists attached to the Osa-AK anti-aircraft missile complex, who departed on November 18, 1987 to Cuito-Cuanavale)

Losses of the 21 infantry brigade during the operation (data as of Dec. 18, 1987)

	Officers	Sergeants	Soldiers	Total
Killed	15	13	107	135
Wounded	55	50	365	469
Missing	2	4	19	25
Deserted	2	15	95	112

Material and weaponry.

Knocked out and destroyed by the enemy:

4 T-54B tanks, 5 EE-25 vehicles (trucks), 1 heavy mechanized bridge support, 1 Osa-AK transport and loading machine, 1 Strela-10 anti aircraft complex operating from a top a light-armored multi-purpose tractor, 1 ZU-23-2 anti aircraft automatic coaxial gun, 2 B-10 anti-tank guns, 5 Grad-P portable guns, 7 RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers, 8 PKT armored machine guns for tanks, 29 RPK Kalashnikov light

machine guns, 34 AKM modernized Kalashnikovs, 500 kg of ammunition, 1 mortar (81-mm).

Seized by the enemy or lost:

41 AKMs, 11 RPKs, 1 AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher, 8 RPG-7s, 3 mortars (82-mm).

Losses of UNITA:

	Officers	Sergeants	Soldiers	Total
Killed	10	1	42	53
Wounded	50	–	118	168

4 prisoners were captured, among whom a captain – in charge of supplying the rear of the South African group in Cuando-Cubango province.

Captured from the enemy: 15 AKMs, 1 RPG-9 (grenade launcher), 3 60-mm mortars, 2 G-3 rifles, 170 anti-tank rockets, 30 tons of ammunition, 6.5 tons of mines.

Destroyed: 3 AML-90, AML-60, (armored personnel carriers of the South African army), 3 “Landrover”, cars, 1 “Samil” (a tractor (truck) for the evacuation of materiel).

The composition of the active enemy’s forces (South African and UNITA) on the territory of the 6th military district (Cuando-Cubango province)

On the border of the Angolan province of Cuando-Cubango are concentrated 30 thousand personnel, 400 barrels of firearms (guns and cannons) of different calibers, 80 airplanes, and the 8th tank division.

On the territory of the province of Cuando-Cubango, in

the area of the town of Cuito-Cuanavale, the following are active:

a motorized South African brigade, the 61st and 62nd South African battalions, the 32nd battalion of the “Buffalo” bandit-mercenaries (in a battalion, there are 12 companies, each with 100 soldiers), 4th regular UNITA battalion, 5th regular UNITA battalion, 18, 118 and 275 battalions of UNITA with 450 men in each.

Materiel and weaponry:

250 armored personnel carriers of the AML-90 type (60 units), AML-60, “Paniarte”, “Kasspir”, “Ratel”, “Samil”, (tractors for the evacuation of materiel).

Artillery:

106-mm guns, 107-mm guns, G-5 and G-6 155-mm howitzers, “Kentron” and “Valkiria” (“Valkiri”) jet installations; 60-mm, 81-mm, and 120-mm mortars; tanks with 100-mm and 105-mm guns.

Aviation:

“Mirage” and “Impala” (aircraft). “Alouette” and “Puma” (helicopters).

At the time of the operation beginning October 9, the 21st brigade covered 300 km. During that time, the brigade was very badly supplied with materiel. In particular, with ammunition for the BM-21, foodstuffs for the personnel were frequently interrupted.

The losses of the Soviet military advisors and specialists in the 6 military district (between July and December)

1. July – an advisor to the commander of the 59th brigade approached a mine (his foot was blown to pieces).
2. 26 of September – the interpreter of the 21st infantry

brigade, Oleg Snitko perished. Wounded were: the advisor to the brigade commander, Khramov; the advisor to the brigade Chief political officer, Aragelyan, and advisor to the battalion commander, Deykin.

3. 1 of November – the advisor to the brigade commander of the 21st infantry brigade, Artiomenko and the interpreter, Zhdarkin were shell-shocked.

4. 26 of November – colonel A.I. Gorb was mortally wounded from the bombardment of the «Valkirya», in the town of Cuito Cuanavale.

5. 29 of October – Advisors and specialists of the 59th infantry brigade (6 people) suffered from poison gas at the Miane River.

6. 4 of December – A.T. Gorbach, advisor to the 59th infantry brigade commander, was wounded from shelling. Two others suffered from concussions (were shell-shocked).

7. 19 of December – Lieutenant colonel Kuptsov, advisor to the Commander of the District Political Administration was seriously wounded from a bombardment at Cuito-Cuanavale (his foot was blown to pieces).

The author commentaries made on October 28, 2000,
November 25, 2000 and October 6, 2001

– How the training and preparation for the service in Angola was organized?

– I should like now to stop at a very important and sometimes not very easy moment – how the preparation of our people for service in Angola originally came into being. Men came, it would seem, from all parts of the former Soviet Union, from all regions, beginning with Kaliningrad, Murmansk, Koushka and ending with Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands.

All kinds of orders came to each region. So many men were needed to be sent to this or that country, for service mission. At that time, there were so many countries where our specialists

served! Simply, what was needed were a given number of specialists – artillerymen, staff officers, infantry, interpreters etc. – their knowledge was important in those countries.

So to say, the «selection» was very careful and «painstaking». It was organized in several phases – beginning from the military districts (where those candidates for the service mission served) and the last step was in the General Staff in Moscow.

And of course one must give our General Staff its due because they made serious attempts to prepare people in some fashion or other for service in tropical countries. Naturally they tried to select people who were in satisfactory physical condition because as is well known, service in such countries is not a piece of cake – there are all sorts of diseases present, not to mention war.

The diseases in question are the most varied – malaria, yellow fever, hepatitis and amoebic dysentery, too many to enumerate, especially if one had to go through the entire list. And people had to put up with all this.

And what had to be taken most into consideration was the hot and humid climate. There were seasons which were completely lacking elsewhere, such as, for example, in the Soviet Union – today, Russia. In fact, the General Staff organized studies in this respect.

For example: people go to Angola. What was told to them – Angola, is situated in the Southern Hemisphere, bordering with Namibia, Zambia and other countries, obtained its independence in 1975. Population is ... The State language – Portuguese, etc., etc.

It should, moreover, be pointed out that despite all these studies, despite all these endeavors, and despite the fact that serious efforts were made to somehow prepare people, nonetheless, these went to Angola somehow not well prepared. What I mean, I'll try to explain.

I, myself, was personally convinced about this, and I must say that I realized this, already being myself in the country. That is

to say, to know only that Angola is situated in such a way and in such a hemisphere and is washed by such and such an ocean – these are but the most ordinary, widely known concepts.

It is simply that you need to know also the traditions and the customs of the people and how they generally view themselves. For example, what type of person is an Angolan? How does he feel in his country and how does he conceptualize reality? They do not at all think the way we do – that is to say, not in the manner we have become accustomed.

And mistakes here were committed. However, of course not only from our Soviet side – these mistakes were allowed also by the English and by the Americans and French and Belgians and by whosoever.

This was because everybody tried to construct everything in their own image and manner. After all, for example we live in France, don't we! So, you people will likewise live as in France.

And the Soviets did approximately the same in Angola – after all, we reasoned, we have the Soviet system, and the Soviet people and community. We sought to recreate in Angola exactly the same as we had at home in order for things to turn out well here. Our attitude was “Just as you have become a state of socialist orientation, become whatever else we advise you to be”.

And the way things worked out was that when high level specialists in the field, who had long studied the country, who had investigated its traditions and customs in detail, were able to advise our General Secretary or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs how to proceed, everything was clearly understood. But just imagine a simple officer, armour-, infantry- or artilleryman, a paratrooper, who is doing his military service somewhere in Siberia. And suddenly he is transferred to Angola...

What does he know about these people? It is after all not his fault that in fact he knows practically nothing about them. What is it to him after all if something is mentioned about them? It is highly possible that until this moment, he couldn't even have found this country

on a map. Where is this Angola located or, for that matter, this Algeria or any other such country?

And lo and behold, he arrives in Angola – and he begins to think of these Angolans as if they were our own ordinary Soviet soldiers. That is to say, for him Soviet soldiers are normal, everything works out because this type of soldier both speaks Russian and understands everything. And he shares the same ideology and lifestyle with him, and so on. But, in fact, there, in Angola, everything is completely different.

And yet I should add that the Angolans, for example, related very well to our interpreters.

– Why?

– For the very reason that the interpreters knew the language, the customs and the traditions of the country they worked in. And it was very easy to talk with the interpreters about the things interesting to Angolans, and simply about the life itself.

Likewise, the same Angolans greatly respected our advisors and specialists who were not only the experts – “good workmen” – but could speak Portuguese. That is to say, in whatever way and however little they were able to communicate with these same Angolans, it made a marked difference in the relationships between them.

As to the knowledge of local traditions and personal relations – the most important means of achieving this knowledge was familiarity with the local language. That is to say, a person who did not know the language felt themselves just horrible abroad.

But what can I say in respect of our advisors and specialists – the great majority of them by the end of their stay were reasonably fluent in Portuguese – at least enough to meet the requirements of their work.

That is to say, they could work sometimes without the need of interpreters and were able to explain to the Angolans what they wanted them to do, etc., etc. On the other hand, for serious major problems, the interpreter could be simply indispensable.

But once again, let me point out that the Angolans treated our specialists and advisors with respect, and these, moreover, understood this – the Angolans, after all, were not blind and in fact they saw that our advisors and specialists understood what it was all about and also could explain themselves in Portuguese. In fact, this elevated, so to speak, their profile and image.

I was acquainted with more than ten of our specialists who spoke Portuguese very fluently. Indeed, it would seem that, however much they might mix up their declensions and conjugations, they were basically fluent.

Why have I stopped so long on this topic? – because when we had just come to Angola – we had there interpreters who had already been there for one or two years – we were given several evenings devoted to “clarifying the international situation for us”, as they put it jokingly. We gathered, drank beer or lemonade – in other words, we had a typical evening party. And we were acquainted with how and what we would have to do.

The most important thing was the contact between an interpreter and the local population. Because if there would not be any contact between the interpreter and the local people and with the Angolan military, nothing could be done. It was essential for the interpreter to obtain their respect. For if, indeed, he gained their respect, then he could iron out any tight situations or unpleasant moments, etc., etc. After all, such moments sprang up all the time.

First of all, these situations arose because of our well known Russian swear-words (foul language). After all, not a few Angolans were acquainted with Russian pejoratives. They knew them either because they had learned them somewhere or other in the Soviet Union or again because the Soviets had taught them, etc. But more importantly, what was still worse was that they knew the meanings of our curse words and this could well lead to conflicts.

Now I had the case of an advisor who had come to work, summoned the head of the operations department and began to

yell at him that he had not made any maps. Well, of course, I translated this, to the best of my ability, although obviously the black sensed something anyhow, just from the advisor's shouting at him. But I made it a point to emphasize that he, the Angolan, was not in the right, that he was a scoundrel, a good-for-nothing, etc. I did my best to make all this politely, although it was anyhow perfectly understandable what the advisor thought of him, if only through the emotions he had conveyed.

Consequently, the following was literally conveyed – the advisor, alternating with “curl yourself up with of your own prick” told “fuck your mother” after which the black leaped up, and completely flew into a rage, shouting, “You don't have to disturb my mother – she's already dead,” and ran off.

But in fact it just so happened that a black piece of cloth was fastened with a pin to his uniform to indicate that he was in mourning. For his mother had indeed recently died, and he knew the meaning, word for word of “fuck your mother”.

Well, he got up and ran away, shouting everything he said. The advisor asked me what he was saying. I answered – “you offended him, so to speak. His mother only recently died.” Of course, the surprised advisor answered, “What mother, is there also a mother?” Well, of course, he did not even notice what he had said; it was said just for copula of the words. And as a result, of course, the interpreter was blamed, as usually happened. It was subsequently alleged that Igor had not translated something correctly.

Although in many cases Russian swear words helped when one was short of Portuguese words, there were only five Russian swear words available, although these could be combined in different ways. The Angolans understood them all and our advisors and specialists socialized well with them. That is to say, such a type of swear words combination together with some Portuguese words nonetheless played a helpful role.

And then interpreters who had already served for a long time would tell us – children, first of all, if you notice a conflict

coming to a head, basically it amounts to the fact that our advisors and specialists are beating up Angolans – a jab here, a kick there and so forth and so on, so put that in your pipe and smoke it! – But you can do this only after you first have morally abused the Angolan.

– What does all this signify?

– It is necessary to show the Angolan from the outset that he is wrong. As we knew the language, we as interpreters were able to achieve this. «You are wrong, they told you – you did not do it. They told you again – you did not do it. They asked you – and you didn't do it – you are a good-for-nothing, a son of a bitch, a piece of shit, etc. , and only after this when he finally realizes that he is really in the wrong, that he is a son of a bitch and a shit – only after this, should he be beaten up», but only in case if it was really necessary!

But our advisor sometimes quickly moved on to the second phase – not explaining anything to the Angolan, yelling at him in Russian, of course something he could not understand – he understood only the terms of abuse. And after this – the jabs, the socks on the jaw, etc., etc. began.

Of course, immediately after this, the complaints began, that this or that advisor permitted himself this or that, and so on, and so forth. One must not do this under any circumstances.

And what was of particular interest to me was that an Angolan himself confirmed all this to me in my first year of service – a battalion commander who told me –“it is necessary from the beginning to convince our soldiers that they are only scum and good-for-nothings. And only after this has been achieved, should they be beaten”.

I asked him surprisingly – do you, yourself beat your soldiers?

– But what should I otherwise do with them? They are just a bunch of pigs. You give them an order and they don't carry it out. Well, bring them some «political training» – they loved that – and bring them some political consciousness by making them aware that they are shit. Insist that you gave him a task

and he did not fulfill it or fulfilled it badly or yet something else of this kind. Only after this, can you hit him in the face. This was told to me by this Angolan himself, so that I am not inventing anything.

That's how things were. I want to emphasize that this is of course a very interesting moment, when, after all, you are still not acquainted with such things – for then the conflicts can really break out and in the most varied way.

– Why?

– Because, of course, it is necessary not only to operate some kind of machine or to write some sort of staff document. Most Angolans wanted simply to know what the specialist, the advisor or the interpreter was thinking about concerning this or that question. It was a question of pure human contact.

And of course this was a very important point. In fact I might add, very many advisors and specialists failed to take account of just such moments during the course of their work. That is to say, they did everything correctly, helped Angolans in their work and struggle, and honestly fulfilled their duties, but generally not familiar with the peculiarities of the black, Angolan mentality, they found it often very difficult to obtain results.

And this affected in turn the conditions of their service – all the more so inasmuch as the training of our interpreters, advisors and specialists very strongly varied from one another.

We as interpreters learning our craft in our Military Institute of foreign languages – we comprehended not only Portuguese or Persian or some other language, but also had specialized training dealing with regional military studies. This was a significant subject, including in fact military geography and analysis of international affairs, not to mention also the study of traditions, customs, history of the state, what the state represents, and how to conduct oneself in such a state. But most of all, which is of course very important, we were taught both the language and regional military studies by teachers who had already been several times in the particular country of interest.

In other words, this experience of a so-called living person, a living witness to this or that event, which he transmits to his students, is the best form of instruction. No advisor, no specialist on his own could acquire such experience whereas the interpreters arrived already more or less trained. And in this way we were able to comprehend right away a lot of things about this country. But even in this case we (interpreters) had to learn a lot staying already in the country!

There was still one moment that is more very unpleasant – the Angolans very rapidly deciphered our system of complaints, very quickly indeed. For example, if they did not like the advisor or if his demands were too strict. (There were in fact some of our advisors, who really were eager to make improvements, and so naturally began to make demands on these lazy Angolans.)

Of course these in turn immediately complained (but through their own chain of command), that such an advisor or specialist was a good for nothing, a bastard, a shit. They loved to write that he drank vodka, and that he drank during working hours, although the fellow might be suffering from kidney or liver disease and in reality could not drink. He drinks vodka – he must be replaced. And our Command believed this unreservedly – that is, they sent for him and strongly criticized him – at a party or trade union meeting – wherever was more appropriate. But as far as expulsion was concerned, of course, things never got that far or almost never. To be sure, if there were a completely scandalous case, such as beating a child to death or smashing a pile of cars during a drinking bout, then he would be sent back to the Soviet Union within 24 hours – and without further ado.

– What were your first impressions of Angola?

– We came to Angola, the three of us – Piotr Ivanovski (Ivanovsky), Slava Barabulya and myself. We were all junior lieutenants who had arrived by plane on August 1, 1986. Of course, at the beginning, we were afraid of flying. Nonetheless, it was our first time in a foreign state. And what a foreign state

– in no ways, France, England or the USA but in Angola, of course it was more horrible.

And when we landed ... our first impressions were so stunning, completely unlike what we were used to at home, sometimes even different from what we had been previously told about this country.

First of all, when we landed at the Fourth of February airport, we saw this red earth, reddish-brown and dark brown earth, everything covered up with unbelievably twisted cars and spare parts, scraps of paper and debris. Just a lot of shit – you cannot call it by any other word.

Then, to leave the plane, they brought us a boarding bridge. That «ladder» was rusty, and unbelievably dirty. We stepped down into a bus to reach the airport. I came out with a bag – I had decided not to put it down on the floor of the bus and placed it on my feet. Thus, we rode to the airport – I likewise did not want to hold on to the handrails of the bus. Instead, we simply held on fast to Piotr Ivanovski and in this manner reached the airport.

I was somewhat shocked at the airport – a dirty floor, on which were sitting dirty, ragged women and children. There were trunks, some bags and in general, the devil knows what. And we somehow stepped by all this mess. We approached the conveyor belt which was supposed to deliver our baggage – I felt a little squeamish thinking of my suitcase traveling on this dirty conveyor belt. While they were moving, we frantically snatched our things in order to let them rest on the conveyor belt as little as possible.

Thank God, our people from the Soviet mission arrived and they drove the bus for our group. They were of course expecting us and reported about our arrival, and we set off on the Luanda road.

This, of course, was itself something to behold! That is, there was some sort of asphalt in which there were little holes, and along the sides of the main road, some sort of dirty awful looking walls. Garbage-filled dumps, puddles on the ground, some-

thing or other lying in them. Ragged, dirty people were walking around. Nothing but desolation.

For the first two weeks, we were with Piotr Ivanovski just outside Luanda in a Commando-Training Center. For his part, Slava Barabulya flew away, literally on the third day, to the north of the country, to the province of Uige...

– Why was it at first difficult to translate the thoughts of the Angolans?

– To say the truth, in our Military Institute, we learned the literary language, but the majority of Angolans spoke «calao» – slang, very different from Portuguese. But, at last we managed to learn it.

The other thing – when a person first speaks out freely, it is necessary then to spell out the basic concept of what he is trying to say and also to translate it. He can talk about whatever he likes, beginning with the struggle against colonialism or about the exploration of Angola, and then he would go over to asking for a cigarette. He would talk about how he fought in partisan detachments, how things were tough in Angola, how the Soviet Union helped them, etc. Well it was already something they learned to chatter about – our deputy political officers tried to their best to achieve this.

Actually, in the beginning, it was a little bit difficult. Because, for example, the Angolan would approach and begin to say something. Our specialist right away asked: what, what does he want? You begin to translate this gibberish for him. Our specialist stands up, looks blank and does not understand – what is this all about, and etc., etc. And then it turned out that the Angolan was just asking a cigarette from him.

Well, such moments in the commando training center were preparations where some sort of activities were organized for the Angolans – military rifle practice, driving of vehicles, etc., etc. And please excuse me, the simple necessities, where to go «to make water». I asked – how do you get to the toilet? To this, I heard – please, go wherever you want – the whole bloody country is a toilet... I was rather shocked.

So we worked there for two weeks. When we had finally finished the whole job, the most senior interpreter told: «Well then? I am sending you to the far south. You Piotr Ivanovski, you will go to the 19th brigade to Mulondo. As for you, Igor, you will serve in the “Kvadrat” Air Defence battalion, attached to this brigade». And we two departed and flew away to the south of Angola.

– What planes did you use?

– Well the following military models flew: the Iliushin-76s, Antonov-12s, Antonov-22s, Antonov-24s and the Antonov-26s, the so-called “truck.” As for the Antonov-24s and Antonov-26s, they had the special role of transporting certain bosses or still something else. And the Antonov-12s and Iliushin-76s flew similar missions.

And as for us, we flew to Lubango – the center of Uila province. We were met, of course, and taken to the Soviet mission. The surroundings were very beautiful – basin between hills. The climate was good. We were on a plateau 1700 m above sea level. It wasn't cold in winter – July/August was for them winter, with a temperature the same as ours at that time, while summers there were not very hot. This was because Lubango and its surrounding area were in this basin.

Of course, this climate was not the same throughout the entire province because literally only 100 km from Lubango, there was an entirely different climate. Our 19th brigade, for its part, was situated on the banks of the Cunene River, one of the largest rivers of Angola.

And another point, as we learned, was that during the Second World War, there was in this same Lubango, a sanatorium for fascist airmen – an interesting fact. In other words, this was a sanatorium for fascist aces of the Luftwaffe.

– Where were they actually fighting?

– What difference does it make where they actually fought if they were sent there to rest, maybe from Rommel's Africa Corps? Because Portugal was, although neutral, nonetheless a Fascist state, because Salazar ruled there as Franco did in

Spain. In any case, they offered their territory, their bases, etc. and the fascist aces spent their leave there. Therefore, Lubango was already then – when we came there, eleven years after independence, still a relatively clean little town. Of course, things there were not what they had been formerly under the Portuguese and were only the still visible traces of a formerly normal, decent life.

Thus under the Portuguese, the blacks washed the asphalt and the sidewalk with brush and soap. Moreover, they were allowed into the city between five and six in the morning, where they cleaned up, and swept these asphalt covered sidewalks. After all this, they would be obliged to leave.

At the Portuguese time, this was a place of rest both for the Portugueses themselves and for tourists from various European states. The Portuguese used their colonies for their own proper pleasure. That is to say, in contrast to the English, French, Spanish, Belgians, etc., they basically developed in their colonies only extractive and manufacturing industries using these countries for their own amusements.

For example, a Portuguese would live on his estate somewhere far away. He was sick and tired of flying in a helicopter and he suddenly laid a road through the jungle. Just like that. How often did I see this in Angola!

I repeat – the Portuguese built their state for their own pleasures, namely, for rest and relaxation. And, as the Angolans themselves told me, I must note that in contrast to all other colonies, there was no and there is no in Angola today such anger against the former colonists – although, of course, there were also bitter exceptions – and it is a historical fact that very many Portuguese were slaughtered in Angola (while in Mozambique, not very many). But there were no particularly bitter tirades against them. This was because the Portuguese had pursued a policy of «carrot and stick».

In short, they used the so-called «assimilado» policy. If an Angolan forgot his native language and his tribe and agreed to be a citizen of Portugal, they sent him to study in Portugal after

which he was supposed to support Portuguese policy, even back home in his own country. Both Angola's first president, Agostinho Neto and the current president, Jose Eduardo dos Santos came from such «assimilado».

...So, here we arrived in Lubango, together with one more interpreter Volodya Korolkov, who, subsequently, went to serve in the 2nd brigade in Kahama. The councillor to the head of the district political section met us. He was a completely unique character about whom one could talk and talk, and we considered him as a very greedy man. That is to say, during the three years and four months of their stay in Angola, he and his wife earned more than 100 000 coupons. But he tried to save his money not wasting it on food. Moreover, together with his wife, he managed to live on five dollars per month. He would go to Angolan warehouses, collecting the rotten fish, canned meat and other food there.

That colonel, the old deputy political officer sat us down and began to give us political orientation – what type of place we were in, and what we were allowed to do and not to do, etc., etc.

First of all, of course, watch out for diseases, said he. Obviously, there is a war here, the situation is very difficult, but this is somehow still bearable. On the other hand, malaria, amoebic dysentery, hepatitis are simply intolerable. However, of course we had heard all of this already in Luanda. He recommended a very specific prophylactic, Delagil. Drink it according to the prescribed rules but watch out. This past month, they took away two of our advisors with cerebral malaria – it is of course a horrible situation. As we joked: either you die or you become an idiot.

Also watch out for relations with women. For this, you'll be immediately sent back to the Soviet Union. But even this is not the worst – if you, God forbid, pick up some disease, then, of course, you will be far worse off.

And this had actually already happened because some time before our arrival, they had taken away two of our own men – one, an advisor, a Lieutenant Colonel, and the other, a soldier.

Their scrotums were swollen. They had had intercourse with local women and had picked up the so-called “Hong Kong Rose”. It is unbelievable what sort of combination of diseases they had – because although they were subjected to medical analyses, in hospitals both in Lubango and Luanda, no one could understand anything (now there would be symptoms of gonorrhoea, then these would disappear and symptoms of syphilis and other venereal diseases would appear). So they were sent to the Soviet Union without proper results! Unfortunately, I don't know what happened to them after this.

In general, the colonel spoke only about real, practical problems. And, told he, «conduct yourselves properly, don't swear, don't smoke in bed, and cross the road only at the green light». Well, on the whole, he vacuum-cleaned our brains for more than two hours. And yes, we would break out in a sweat and dry out a number of times.

As for Volodya Korolkov, he left us after some time because Kahama was not far away – the advisors from the 2nd brigade came over to direct him there.

As for us, together with Petro Ivanovski, we stayed another three days and at last the advisors from our own brigade arrived – Viktor Vladimirovich, councilor to the commander of the brigade rear units, who then perished (God save his Soul!). In addition, the interpreter arrived, whom Petya Ivanovski was supposed to change.

But in the “Kvadrat” battalion, there was no specifically appointed interpreter – so I was to go there, because before it only one interpreter worked both in the “Kvadrat” battalion and in the brigade and it was not so easy for him.

– The surname of Viktor Vladimirovich (who subsequently perished in car crash)?

– I do not remember it correctly, our beds stood next to each other. He enjoyed very much reading at bedtime. Nearby were our beds and there was a lamp under his mosquito net. However, the lamp was so strong that to sleep next to it was simply not possible. Therefore, although I usually hung a blan-

ket from my side, this lamp penetrated so that it lit up everything anyhow. But he read in a very peculiar way – he would have hardly read through a page and a half when he would start to snore.

I would speak out:

– Viktor Vladimirovich!

– Oh, yes!

– Are you reading or sleeping?

– Yes, I am reading such an interesting book. I just want to read a little and then I'll put out the light.

And within a minute or two, he was snoring again.

– How did you live?

– In a small house where our ordinary army beds stood. We had hung a mosquito net over each bed.

– Were there nets hung over the windows?

– There were nets over the windows – but what was the point? After all, if the doors were constantly open, the mosquitoes flew in anyhow.

All these sprays and ointments, our «veteran» interpreters told us – give a damn about them!

It doesn't help, all the more because in fact you don't notice how the mosquitoes are biting you. Here you've spent already several days in Angola – and you see that you have already been bitten. And now the malaria will simply wait for a favorable moment for the development of its incubation period – the symptoms which are just sniffing and a head cold. These are sufficient to indicate your first malaria.

Our dining room was the usual «quimbo» – a hut. It was rather big and covered with straw in the Angolan African manner, and the kitchen, also in the same manner, it contained the stove. Our previous advisors constructed it, themselves, which means that by now it was more or less in operation.

The bath was made with steam: the customary body of rocket – water was put there inside. There was a stove in the same bath – all this was heated up.

The premises for the bath were of course made of planks.

There were also eucalyptus «birch twigs». Not very far away from us – half way to Matala – one of the points which we passed on our way to Lubango, there was a Eucalyptus grove where «birch twigs» were collected and we brought them back to use for steam baths.

I mentioned Matala – the point is that we went to Lubango but not on a direct road. Using a straight road, it was approximately a little more than 100 km. Nevertheless, this straight road went through Biquar National Park where UNITA troops stayed. The road was mined and was frequented by UNITA gangs so that no one could drive through. Instead, we used a road going first to Matala, it covered 160 km from where we were.

There in Matala a Cuban tank battalion was deployed and hydroelectric powers station which it guarded and where our Soviet specialists were working. It was a most «remarkable battalion» (as we joked), consisting of 100 tanks. At first, there were only T-55s and then the more modern T-62 tanks were added.

The road we actually took from Matala to Lubango was more or less a normal, asphalted one, although, to be sure also covered by grooves, potholes, etc. And it was in these very grooves and potholes that UNITA usually placed their mines, so that we traveled over them as carefully as possible. And when it was not possible to skirt the holes – that is when there were too many holes in the asphalt, then people were blown up by the mines. Nonetheless, the road was more or less OK and we were able to reach Matala relatively quickly.

At the same time, from Matala to our own town of Mulondo, the road was terrible. It was hardly more than a cart track and rarely covered by asphalt. In addition, it took much longer to travel.

In Matala, of course we went to our Soviet specialists who worked in a hydroelectric power station. These were splendid fellows... And in fact we stayed with them, ate with them, after which we would go to a farm to buy vegetables. There we met some Portuguese we knew who had not fled the country during

the time immediately after the declaration of independence (in 1975).

At the time of our arrival in Angola (1986), there were some 60 thousand Portuguese and many mulattos. Those Portuguese lived like kings. I remember there a Portuguese named Ferazh. And he very much liked it when the Soviets called him “Borsch”, since, after all, “Ferazh” means “Borsch” in Portuguese. And he was simply thrilled when we called him “Borsch” instead of “Ferazh”.

We often visited him – he would snap his fingers and have us seated in the shade on stools and on wicker easy chairs. There, the servant would bring us beer, cold as spring water. And we sat there, enjoying the beer, and when our glasses were almost empty, he again would snap his fingers and more would be brought in. Next to us sat the local commissar of Matala, who, poor devil, would be sucking out of one single bottle for the entire evening, because they wouldn’t bring him more.

Borsch very much loved the Soviets. Moreover, what was most interesting was that he would sell us his vegetables and fruit at the official state prices. We were of course very grateful to him. To the commissar, he would sell at normal (market) prices whereas to us he would in contrast sell at state prices. So a few kilograms of tomatoes cost roughly 3 000 cuanzas at market prices whereas they sold for only 300 cuanzas at state prices.

Indeed, he sold us the produce at state prices without any problem. He always asked us to visit him more. Naturally, he treated us very well.

So, as I remember, we also drank beer at the Ferazh’s place the first time we went to the brigade. As for Petro Ivanovski, and me we were going for the first time into something quite unknown. Yet I felt somehow more or less at peace – well, I thought, people know why they are going and where.

What is more Petya Ivanovski was near me who was five years older than I was. Petya would sit so confidently – he was in fact already a family man and a former warrant officer – he had already seen quite a lot in his life.

So, first we had visited too long with our specialists (from the hydroelectric power station) and then we visited Ferazh. However, it was beginning to get dark. And I said, “Petya, what do you think, when should we leave?” “Well, I wouldn’t know”, he answered.

I looked around – they were sitting, drinking beer and discussing things in general. And, as I already mentioned, the councilor to the commander of our rear units, Viktor Vladimirovich arrived to pick us up from Lubango. And the driver of the car was our soldier (his name was Victor) who spoke Portuguese so well. That is to say, he had been in Angola for a year and a half and he chattered in Portuguese without interruption. Finally, it got very dark and at last we left.

And here we had to go on the road in full darkness. However, this soldier, Victor, was a very reliable driver. Yet in fact, it made no difference. For we with Piotr were sitting anyhow inside a GAZ-66 two-ton truck with sub-machine guns ready to fire and knowing nothing where we were going! Around us were forest after forest, road after road, jungle after jungle – and only the devil knew who might be lurking there.

To be sure, the road was protected by Angolan block stations. Nevertheless, the distances between them were very long! Therefore, our task was to drive through from one block station to the next.

The principal post was Shivakusi – it was the most important post for us to reach. For there our brigade’s area of responsibility began. Therefore, we drove on. I said, “Petro, couldn’t we have set off earlier? Petro thereupon began to swear, because he also did not have «good spirits». Nonetheless, we got there to our brigade, thank God!

I spent my first year in Angola in the province of Huila. It was just beyond Lubango in the south of Angola and in the 19th brigade. There, the hamlet of Mulondo was situated. This was where the 19th brigade and the “Kvadrat” anti aircraft battery stood.

As I have already said, there in the brigade, life was more or less worked out. In the beginning, another specialist worked with me in the “Kvadrat”, although in principle he was going to be replaced. In fact, he was very competent and the blacks greatly respected him.

And then Nikolai Nikolaevich Ovcharov arrived. I remained with him for nine months, working together until my furlough in 1987.

The brigade was on high alert and was responsible for its particular area, while all around it, the UNITA bandits were freely operating.

More generally, three separate brigades were covering three main arteries:

The first artery led towards Lubango and further to the capital, Luanda. This was the 2nd brigade, situated next to Kahama astride a road coming directly from Namibia.

Another road went from Namibia to Mulondo and Matala, covered by our 19th brigade.

The third road, where the 35th brigade was situated, covered Teshamutete.

So there were three brigades at full strength which served the fifth military district, each covering one of the main transport arteries.

Relatively nearby were camps for Namibian refugees which were constantly subjected to attacks by South African Special Forces which would come and burn down these camps. You could, for example, go by water to Matala and see the camps. And then, you could return there soon after and one would be in ruins.

Moreover, because of the existence of SWAPO bases and camps of Namibian refugees, there was always an “interesting” war going on in this fifth military district. That is to say, the commander of the South African forces would write letters to the Angolan commander in the district. A case in point: “Why are you supporting SWAPO? We know, after all, that in certain places in your own military district SWAPO bases exist.

And in fact, right near Lubango there was a large training camp for SWAPO recruits. It was just there that our advisors and specialists were busy.

Again, the South African commander would write to his Angolan counterpart, "Why are you supporting SWAPO? If you continue to support them, then I will in such and such a place, at such and such a time and with such and such forces, carry out such and such a type of terrorist action."

And what was most interesting was that this action was indeed subsequently committed in the very same place and at the very same time he had announced. One of the best known examples was when the road from Lubango to Namibia was blown up – the so-called "serpentine" or "hair-pin bend" mountain road.

This road went down from more than 3000 m above sea level overlooking the area between Lubango and the Namibia. This area includes splendid places – I have in fact photographs of them – including, for example, the so-called "coloured cliff". This coloured cliff is one of the most beautiful sights – you must look at it especially at sunrise. As a result, whenever we would set off for Namibia, we would do so naturally very early in the morning.

We departed, then stopped and looked – the sun appeared from over the mountains and lit up this "coloured" cliff. At that point, it would light up the rocks in various iridescent hues. The effect was simply spectacular.

The length of this road was about 17 km. And just at the most difficult section, where two vehicles could hardly pass each other by, the South Africans had placed land mines.

What was particularly strange was that precisely at one of those very moments, the Soviet colleague⁷ in military counter intelligence was himself traveling on this very same road. He was returning from Namibia to Lubango, and he was returning alone.

He looked around – some people in camouflage dress were moving about. Several were whites, the rest were blacks. However, they were dressed in rather strange camouflage. Well

he was driving up just as they were on the point of blowing up the road.

Well, they saw him in his open car and they showed him to pass. He passed through and suddenly – bang bang! They indeed let him pass through so to speak and right after that blew him up! These were interesting moments, typical of this kind of war.

All this of course may seem funny but the road from us to Matala was almost constantly disrupted by the UNITA guerrillas and units of the South African army. They moved at will through Angolan territory, and once, for example our brigade was cut off from Lubango for more than one month and remained in touch only by radio. Of course, all this was very unpleasant and disturbing to us, even though our 19th brigade was considered as a very strong one.

– Daily life? Sport?

– According to the doctors, sports in Angola, weight lifting of any kind and other things were not recommended. The reason was because as whites we had anyway already landed in a difficult climate. Also there were diseases to consider. So only such sports as swimming and jogging were recommended. Also sports such as football and volleyball were generally not very stressful.

I acquired a habit from my stay in Africa – I tend to drink a lot of water – an awful lot. It was highly recommended there to drink as much liquid a day as possible in order to flush everything out, and sweat secretion, body lavage, etc.

And if you became sick with malaria, then it was necessary not to stop drinking water in order to get rid of the disease.

– What did you do after returning from your morning work in the brigade?

– Well, we would knock off around 12:30, and eat lunch until one, following which was the so-called “African hour”, a form of siesta. You would go to bed and sleep from one to 2:30 p.m. And again we would wash and go back to work. As for my-self, however, not being used to sleep at that time, I would busy myself with various domestic chores.

Life was of course interesting – my first time abroad, and knowing the language, I could make myself understood and understand what people were saying. Moreover, so much to become acquainted with, so much beauty, even splendour, plus jungles, mountains, plateau and the Cunene river itself.

At the Cunene River, we would wash our underclothes and fish. Everyone had his own fishing rod. However, when we got tired of all this, we would use a “sapper’s rod” – explosives were taken or a grenade thrown and we would then stand in the river and collect the fish, now floating on the water.

The so-called «donka» (a fish deafened by the noise of the explosion, but not usually surfacing up) made it difficult for us to drag it out – the Angolans, standing behind us, usually themselves collected them. They would dive and simply stand in the water and I was always amazed at the ease with which they saw the fish. Here you could stand and look, whereas I looked simply out of interest, but could not see anything, whereas the Angolan stood behind me and caught the fish. That is, their eyesight was so much better.

In addition, at night they could see very well – even on a moonless night. There were such moments, particularly at first, when one would be sitting on duty and it would be necessary to check the observation posts. And as you are stepping out, there might easily be no moon so that you can’t see them (the Angolans).

But you have a flashlight available, everything seems in order and you go to the area of the observation post you had in mind, where this African was supposed to be standing. Meanwhile, you were afraid to turn on the flashlight. In the light, after all, you could also be shot at.

And now you call out “Guarda”, the word for “sentry.” At that very moment, you hear the reply «Assessor!» from somewhere behind you. Your heart sinks – I had gone past him but, because he was black I couldn’t see him. Yet he in fact was standing, waiting to be called out to.

We had two watchdogs – Rex and Muneka. They were mongrels but very fit – especially Muneka, who had until now belonged to the Cubans (Muneka means in Spanish, little boy or dolly). Somehow, a Cuban sentry had wounded him accidentally. He had shot the dog in the belly.

And Muneka was already dying when our advisors came and took him away – but with our care, he got better although his belly was full of puss. Of course, he from then on brought order to all the territory under his control. They say he fought with Rex and they would sort out who was the more powerful.

And usually they were just lying around at the exit of our little house – we had two exits – the main one and the second one at the door of the store room where the guard or his assistant sat (that guard was performed by Soviet advisors). Usually Rex lay at the main exit and Muneka lay at the other one. Naturally, they always begged to go inside whenever hyenas were in the vicinity. They were very much afraid of hyenas because hyenas hate dogs and tear them to pieces. Therefore, they immediately would run inside.

Next to us was a company of military police. Therefore, here was our territory and there was theirs.

Moreover, Muneka taught those Angolans to respect order. They originally traveled freely throughout our territory. But the Cubans had in their time already trained Muneka to be a watch dog. In the beginning all this was of course very funny – an African would come by and Muneka would rush up to him and tear up his trouser leg from thigh to foot. After this, however, the Africans began to walk carefully around our territory.

Well, after this lunch break, we returned to work. As already mentioned, when Nikolay Nikolayevich Ovcharov arrived, he cancelled our post lunch trips to work (to the «Kvadrat» brigade) and for the most part, occupied him usefully in managing our legation. But if it was actually necessary to go to the brigade to face this or that sudden problem, then I would in fact go, accompanied by the brigade advisors.

Then there was our flock of goats and pigs, and also a mon-

key, Keshka, – a green South American marmoset who sat, tied to a chain.. . All these comprised our so-called “livestock”.

Nikolay Nikolayevich was a most remarkable person in every sense a specialist. Even if he didn't know something, he would solve it via trial and error. And whenever the Angolans talked about him, they would knowingly raise a finger, roll their eyes and repeat with awe, “His head is screwed on properly!” They would pronounce his name with great respect.

– What exactly was his specialty?

– He was an anti aircraft specialist, working at the Kvadrat anti-aircraft missile complex. At that time, he was a major. He was a native of Grodno and was at that time also doing his military service there. And Nikolay Nikolayevich's job in our legation was to service electric lights and motors. Together with Petya Ivanovski, they were always making things. Petya was working directly with the brigade while I was working at the “Kvadrat” anti-aircraft missile complex.

But of course, either officially or unofficially, we were going back and forth, working in both places. There was sufficient work, and sometimes even too much. Because this or that question would arise, necessitating us of course to go to the brigade, to participate at conferences, as well as in the preparation of operations aimed at cleaning out the area of enemy fighters, to do more translation of written texts, etc., etc. We, of course, helped each other. I, in fact, could not sit and watch as Petya would struggle with tons of translating, while I, for example, had no work at all.

Moreover Petya and I were fellow countrymen – he also was from Byelorussia. Moreover, we were both from the Gomel district. We even had the same birthday, August 15, except that he was five years older than me.

– What type of work was there in “Kvadrat”?

– It is a fact that from the time of Nikolai Nikolaevich's arrival careless behavior became rarer. In any case, as soon as he had arrived, he conducted the so-called inspection of the troops. At every installation, for example, he forced everyone to

inspect themselves regularly – that is, everyone should render a personal account of his duties.

He checked everything. He compelled both the division chief of staff and the division commander to repeat their work to the point at which this would become completely automatic for the personnel. I, myself, by translating, learned to exert control over this launcher.

Also it meant working with documents, including some degree of work, and naturally the elimination of errors. As for Nikolay Nikolayevich Ovcharov, he was a great specialist in all these matters and usually took out the system unit – from the beginning, he found careless errors and corrected them. In dealing with any particular unit, he would take this unit and begin to solder or unsolder or do something else in order to remove the error.

But this was when I was working directly with Nikolay Nikolayevich. But when, for example, he would travel with the brigade advisors, there was plenty of work, the drawing up of maps, military preparations, taking part in conferences, written and oral translations, well, in general, all this had to be done.

Then two specialists, Majors Butesku and Sasha Osmolovsky arrived, they were experts in a sound-tracking reconnaissance. At once, it was evident that they were important, capable people, knowledgeable about their work. Moreover, they were able to communicate all their knowledge to the Angolans. And not only were they able to communicate but also willing to do so. I managed several times to work with them, that is to be present at their jobs, and to translate all this. I saw how the Angolans at once reached out to them, asking them many questions, and tried to learn, and how our specialists patiently explained everything to them – how to do this and how to set up that.

Fortunately, among our Soviet military councilors and specialists, there was a preponderance of such people, although of course, there were also those who were indifferent or who were simply illiterate, but it was particularly interesting that the

Africans saw very clearly through these people. They perceived such a person as someone who had simply come to Angola to earn a little money. No one had anything to learn from him.

As for the others, on the other hand, especially the technical specialists, they reached out very much to other people because they wished to learn about this and the other. In this respect, it was very pleasant to work with such people. Most of all, besides an excellent knowledge of their own special fields, they tried to learn how to say it in Portuguese – that is, if they were not next to a translator. But they could explain to Angolans how to turn something off and on, how to adjust the system and so on.

Examples were Butesku, Osmolovsky [Osmolovskiy], Nikolay Nikolayevich Ovcharov, and Alexander Nikolayevich Zyemlyakov, our artillery expert. There were many Soviet staff officers (also advisors) who taught the Angolans how to draw maps, how to make decisions to go on the defensive as well as on the offensive, and other military tactics. I think the Angolans are grateful to them up until today for what they learned from them.

I, myself was very grateful that I landed in such a situation, because, it is one thing just to learn the language and to have a conversation in it, and quite another – to apply your knowledge directly to such stressful work. In fact during my first year in Angola I could apply my knowledge in practice.

Moreover, in our Military Institute in Moscow, during the courses covering the Portuguese language, we were forced to learn by heart a lot of awful military terms and things in tactics what we needed to know: the line of dismount, the line of going to the attack, the line of deploying the columns of a platoon or of a company... My God, there was so much rubbish of all sorts – it was some sort of quiet mess but otherwise our instructors told us: you will not be able to work without knowing all these things.

Indeed, I already within at most two weeks got to know all these terms – particularly by having practiced constantly with them. And we constantly carried with us notebooks and if we

didn't know something, then I would write it in Russian or asked the Angolans whether I could look it up in the dictionary – to see what was the Portuguese meaning for all this. What was more I had brought some useful notebooks from Russia with me on the different kinds of arms and services and they helped me greatly in my work.

However, it was very difficult to work with the two advisors – the artillery specialist and the deputy political officer. As for the artillery specialist, nobody, for love or money, could understand him, even when he spoke Russian – all these artillery terms and meanings... And to think that there still remained, on top of this, the job of translating it all into Portuguese! On the other hand, to our delight, the majority of Angolan artillery officers either had studied in the Soviet Union or had been trained in Angola by Soviet specialists so that they understood Russian.

If somebody were translated poorly, Alexander Nikolayevich Zyemlyakov (a first class specialist in his field) would give the Russian equivalent and try to explain himself as far as he could. The Angolans related to him with great respect. I too respected him greatly, as well as Nikolay Nikolayevich for their know-how, their skill and their erudition.

With the deputy political officer, it was all too difficult, because it was necessary to translate an avalanche of excess words. Five minutes of his talking would take in fact only two minutes of translation.

“And why did you talk so little, while I spoke so much?”, he would ask the translator. And how were we to explain this to him? For example, for a number of words in Russian denoting “courage,” there was only one word, “coragem” and so on.

And thus, all the rest things were on the whole normal.

Well of course, all these moments were employed for military use and battalions were sent out to clear out the territory and so forth. Constant raids by our brigade were conducted in all the directions. We too helped prepare them but, thank God, did not participate in them.

Overall, my first year passed very fruitfully, in terms of dealing with the language, as well as in terms of contact with people, and acquiring experience, both militarily and more generally.

– What did the “Kvadrat” complex represent?

– It was an exported, transplanted version of our Soviet “Cub” complex. It comprised a control station and four missile installations (launchers). Each missile installation had its own autonomous administration and all four were linked together with the central control station.

– What was the radius?

– Unfortunately, I have already forgotten the radius. I can only say that South African pilots preferred to avoid the “Kvadrat” area. “Kvadrat”, “Pechora”, “Volga” – all were like a thorn in the flesh for the South African pilots. They feared it because they saw them as in fact very effective complexes. And also “Osa” – the “automatic” complex.

– And what did “Osa” – the automatic complex, represent?

– As we used to joke, it was the same as “Kvadrat”, an “all in one” – the control station together with the rockets, themselves.

– What about your service at Cuito Cuanavale?

– I came to Cuito-Cuanavale on October 10, 1987. As far as concerns the first bombardment, it occurred 19 km away from Cuito-Cuanavale. We were driving, then the column stopped and the bombardment began. What were my impressions? The most foul, frankly speaking.

– And what did the column consist of?

– The column consisted of the brigade technique (cars, armoured vehicles), was formed usually with sub units which moved along newly constructed roads, right behind the tanks.

In front of our very eyes, indeed five times, the tanks exploded into the air. This was UNITA’s tactic. They had placed, just in the woods, an anti tank mine with two boxes of TNT under it. Why? Because they knew approximately where we would be moving. That is, the tanks were moving, knocking into the trees

by the side of the road. But that was just were the mine and the two boxes of TNT stood.

– And how many kilograms per box?

– The devil only knows! (Maybe 20 kilograms). In front of my very eyes, the tank's turret flew into the air and turned round and round, as in a slow motion picture.

– What's the difference between a T-55 tank and a T-54?

– Well in principle, no difference at all, except that the barrel of the T-55 contains a pipe serving to drain off any gases. In contrast, when the T-54 fires, then whoever is sitting inside the tank cabin can choke, figuratively at least (although our own soldiers, in contrast to the Angolans, can stand anything). When, on the other hand, the T-55 or the T-62 fires, the pipe inside the barrel serves to drain off the gas. This is a great improvement. Why? Because you can fire as much as you want, but you will never choke. Of course, it goes without saying, you should also ask the experts about all this.

And thus, at a distance of 19 km away from Cuito-Cuanavale, there was the first bombardment. I must honestly say that I do not consider myself either a particularly cowardly or brave person, but it was always a very unpleasant sensation. Why? – because we went away only 19 km away from our base (Cuito-Cuanavale) and at such small distance from it were attacked.

– What did they use to hit you?

– They used whatever they could.

As for the minefield which we had to face, I was climbing out of my BTR-60PB armored troop carrier and was about to jump to the ground. Our brigade was moving in two columns. And a black from the other vehicle suddenly cried out to me, “don't go down”.

“But what is the matter?” I said.

“We've stumbled on a mine field!” he answered.

“But where is this mine field?” I persisted.

“Everywhere, so don't go”, he answered, adding “And what do you want, anyway?”

“Well, sorry but I want to take a piss,” I said.

“So just piss straight out from the top of your armored carrier,” was the reply.

Meanwhile, Yuri Sushchenko, our artilleryman, appeared from our armored carrier and said, “Igor, do as in Afghanistan we used to – piss on the wheel as they say, or piss straight from your troop carrier”.

“I understand”, I said. We stood there for 40 minutes. From there it was practically nothing to get to the Shaminga River, a very small distance. And all our traffic set off in that direction.

– What else did your column consist of?

– It consisted of tanks, armored troop carriers, lorries with supplies. The Angolans did not venture forth without all this to have plenty of food to eat. There were GAZ-66 (two ton lorries with a high payload capacity), Brazilian Engesa-50 (lorries with a high mileage capacity). Practically some 70% of the column in fact consisted of such Engesas. They transported food, clothing, and ammunition of course, etc.

In any case, the traffic was literally as follows: we moved for five minutes and then we stopped for a half an hour. What was particularly awful that the South African aircraft accompanied us on low altitude flights and if possible strafed us. This occurred everywhere and it was something to see!

– And was anti-aircraft systems Strela-1 and Strela-2M useless against these low-level flights?

– I’ll tell you about this. On our advisor’s armoured troop carrier several Angolans sat with protective goggles and “Strelas” over their shoulders – Strela-1 and Strela-2M. They were very proud of themselves.

The first time I caught sight of that anti aircraft personnel on our advisor’s armoured troop carrier, I asked them why in hell they were sitting there and whether they needed anything.

“We will give you protection!” – was their answer. And they looked very brave and gallant.

All right. But after some time, when South African fighter

aircraft flew by – either Mirages or Impalas (Mirages-I and Mirages-III – low-flying fighter aircraft, and Impalas – ground support attack aircraft; they constantly escorted our column), I looked around and wondered where were those anti aircraft brave men (the Angolans). They were nowhere in sight! Then, thank God, the air raids stopped, and I crawled out of my troop carrier.

But we did not close the hatches in our armoured troop carriers.

– Why?

– If the hatches were closed when a mine or a shell should fall, then it would simply «smear» all people inside along the interior of the armoured troop carrier. In other words, you could conceal it but you could not close it. Because if you batten down the hatch, in case of a direct hit by a mine, it would flatten out everybody inside.

– And if you leave the hatches open?

– If they are left open, then you will get only shell-shock and wounds from shrapnel.

– Does a heavy mine penetrate tank armour?

– Definitely – as much as 120-millimetres, in fact. I'll go even further and say that the South African armoured troop carriers – the AML-60 and the AML-90 – (the latter equipped with 90-mm calibre gun would penetrate many of our tanks as if they were made of plywood!) On the other hand, as far as machine guns are concerned, our 14.5-mm calibre KVPTs would penetrate their AML-60 and AML-90 armoured troop carriers, treating them as plywood! Because even the 14.5-mm KVPT would pierce them through and through, it would be easy to defeat them in battle.

– What exactly do you mean by KVPT?

– I mean a heavy caliber 14.5-mm machine gun installed on the turret of an armored personnel carrier (BTR-60PB) or armored reconnaissance car (BRDM-2). An ordinary machine gun, in fact.

Yet even the South Africans feared it.

Also note that although our T-55 tanks, themselves were equipped with 100-mm guns, the South African armoured troop carriers would pierce them through.

– So the Angolan “Strela” personnel did not fulfil their duty.

– As a matter of fact, I crawled out after the air raid.

“But where were all of you?”

They replied – “Here is the shrapnel and here is where we jumped off, and this is how it turned out.”

I then said, “Lads, I still don’t understand one thing – why the devil are you are just sitting here – in order to protect us, maybe? But you do nothing!”

And then, after all this nonsense, I just chased them away – Air raid once, twice, three time... nobody is fighting... Oh sure! Instead of shooting against the enemy planes, they used to run away!

– Was it possible to fire at low-level aircraft?

– Why not? The Strela-1 and Strela-2 portable anti aircraft kits were all-purpose. They had a striking range of 3200 m. They were better than the “Stinger” version, as well as cheaper. These, as well as the Strela-10 included four rockets each. Then there were also the Igla-1, Igla-2 and Igla-4 with ranges of up to 3000 m. So they had the capability of bringing down any aircraft we wished.

– And why didn’t the Angolans then hit South Africans?

– They were just kids and they were afraid to use such spectacular weapons. I recently showed photographs to some South African journalists – what was in effect the graveyard for Soviet military materiel. They were simply amazed to see such attitude of Angolans to our technique.

– And with such a high standard of weaponry, wasn’t it possible to win?

– Indeed, the South African journalists raised such a question. After all, our Russian or Soviet (it doesn’t really matter which) has been the best weaponry in the whole world.

– And what else do I want to add about Cuito-Cuanavale?

In Portuguese, and within the Angolan context, this town was known as “ponto de resistencia” or point of resistance. I just want to bow my head in respect for those of our Soviet military personnel which were there. They were the ones who did everything they could to achieve something, to somehow improve the situation. But perhaps, regrettably, we always ran up against a «blank wall» concerning the attitude of Angolans towards all happening there. You simply «beat your head against a wall». And nothing more.

– For example?

– Well, there were some Angolans, who wanted to change the situation. One in particular, whose name I forgot – but it was a great pity that such person could go missing, and go missing he did. I don't remember whether he was a Lieutenant Colonel or a Major.

He came to us and all the time he complained: “You know – nobody wants to do anything”. It is feeling of absolute indifference to everything from the part of Angolans as he said. “Todo o tempo sabotagen!” (All the time, sabotage). “I want to do something but all I see is sabotage”.

And within a couple of days, he literally, at the head of a column of Angolan soldiers, ran into the South Africans. He, as a very brave, even remarkably brave fellow, dashed off to war. And his armoured car was destroyed by a direct hit from a shell. His case was a great pity. Why? – because, unfortunately, of course, such people are the exception to the rule.

I had several such exceptions.

From 1986 to 1987 the «**Quadrat**» battery commander in the 19th Brigade near Lubango, where I served, was captain João. He was really wonderful man. All the time he tried to do something useful for us. Frankly speaking – who were we for him? But, just imagine, he brought us food very often,

sometimes hot drinks. One day even he brought some women to us. He told us: «Listen, guys – here are beautiful girls ...» We told him: «no, no, calm, please – it is not allowed for us» and all the rest bullshit. He even got upset a little bit.

I asked him once: «Listen, João, why do you take so much care on us?»

– Only because I really respect you and I like you. You, Soviets, you actually want to make something for us, for our country.

And at the same time his chief operational officer was complete bastard! Oh, my Lord! Forgive me! I cannot even explain it. João advised me: «Igor, contact him as less as possible, maybe it would be better for you not to meet him at all. He is not the man to have relationship with».

– All right, João, I'll go and have a talk with him – perhaps I have a fair chance.

So I came to him, I began a conversation. Do you know what he told me: «You Russians are bastards; I hate you, and so on, and everything like this. I'd better never meet you, if not our common policy, if not the armament and technique you deliver to us, if not military experts you send to us...

– Wait a minute, please, – I asked him. – Maybe you

have any personal animosity towards us.

– I can't explain it...

Well, one word led to another... I tried to smooth over contradictions as far as possible, sometimes even assented to him... But he became excited more and more, took out his knife and put it against my throat. I stupefied.

Oh dear! – I told myself. – Very good result of our conversation!

So, nothing to do – I beat off his knife, knocked him down on the floor, took away his knife and threw it off.

After it I told him: «You see? As far as I don't want you to show off here a lot and make silly remarks off the point – I'll kill you right now. If you want – I'll do it without any arms. I'm fed up with you! So, I'll liquidate you now «hands down» (with no trouble at all).

He was very scared, I saw it. He spoke very politely to me after that, what is more he became very polite with all other our advisers. Within some time he left (I think he left for Luanda), and the other officer came to his post.

João asked me later on, laughing: «What a hell you did with him? Why did he become so polite with you?»

– Nothing special, João, – I answered, – we just had a very sincere talk... about the sense of life, you know...

– Where did you stay when were in Cuito-Cuanavale?

– This was in the south of Angola and we lived in fact 13 kilometres outside Cuito, in the jungle.

– Why?

– Because, as I already said, the town, itself, was continually subject to bombardment. That was why the Soviet group moved to the dugout camp to the 13th kilometer from Cuito-Cuanavale.

– What type of bombardment?

– We were bombarded from mortars (81- and 120-mm) and from 155-mm guns. The shell of that gun was approximately

one meter long and flied a distance of 47 km. Sometimes, in order to use it as effectively as possible, the South Africans simply would transport their artillery batteries, the G-5 and the G-6, very close to the Angolan positions.

The G-5 is simply a gun. But the G-6 was also a self propelled vehicle.

Every time that they used their G-5, the Cubans in «Pechora» were able to determine the trajectory of the projectile. They would then send their MIG-23s to destroy the battery¹¹.

As a result, the South Africans began to use their G-6. It was, after all, mobile: it fired a few volleys and moved off. Just like that!

We found ourselves under bombardment many times. After that, Vladimir Nikolayevich Zinoviev (the leader of our «Pechora» group) gathered us specialists together and said, "Lads, we didn't come here in order to lay down our lives but in order to fulfill our international duty and to earn some money too. Therefore, let us find refuge in the brigade, if it's really urgent.

This was a very wise piece of advice since the South African artillery and sound tracking reconnaissance operated first class, and one must give it its due.

On the other side of the river Cuito, on a hill the South African observer sat whose job it was to relay the coordinates of the disclosed target to his artillery battery, after which the South Africans would begin to fire. They could locate these targets very fast and then and there could open fire.

But as far as concerned the «Pechora» complex in Cuito-Cuanavale, it significantly interfered with the South African aircraft which as a result could not fulfill its normal tasks of

¹¹ By the Cuban advance toward Namibia, the G5 are urgently removed from the Cuito-Cuanavale zone, and send to the zone of Calueque, near the border. They try to attacking the Cuban troops the days 20, 24 and 26 of June of 1988. But then is produced the Cuban answer with the devastator strike to Calueque by the MiG-23ML, after which South Africa asks for the peace. (Article by Ryben in internet).

providing support for its own ground forces. That was why the South Africans bombarded «Pechora» positions persistently.

– And how did you travel in Cuito-Cuanavale?

– By two-ton truck, or microbus, or jeep. Also by armored personnel carrier and armored patrol cars.

We had a «village» of dug-out houses. My own personal dug-out house appears in a photograph. Jokingly it was named “Rezervado” – it was reserved especially for us. There were three of us who lived there. At the same time, the cold weather set in. Meanwhile, I had made a door in this dug-out and we hung a blanket over it. Yet there was still air circulating through the chimney. We sealed this off, slept under three blankets and thus did not mind the cold. The temperature during my first year in Angola sank as far down as -1 degree centigrade.

– Were there high mountains?

– We were actually on a plateau 1700–1800 m above sea level. We moved around in winter jackets (Angolan winter, that is). The Angolans usually wore our Soviet military fur caps and tied the ribbons under their chin. It was a remarkable sight – black faces wearing Soviet fur caps, tied just in this way. We were all indeed dressed for winter. But this type of climate existed usually only in the evening and early morning. In the middle of the day, the temperature would climb to between +25 and +30 degrees, indicating great swings of temperature.

In the morning, we were obliged to go out wearing jackets. We wore the standard Angolan soldier’s jacket and underneath a vest with cartridges (if necessary).

What saved us from cold were those jackets we wore and the fact that during the day both the land was warmed up by sun. And in the evening, usually, if we could, we would have some drinking (hot drinks), followed by going to bed, but we slept under three blankets.

– What were your duties, besides being an interpreter?

– As an interpreter, I became in fact a logistics officer in “Pechora” (C-125). I supplied food products and if possible,

something relatively sweet and tasty. I provided our specialists with uniform and boots, with all kinds of toiletries etc. I hope that somehow I could alleviate our life there.

What can I further say? Well, I want to say that the Angolans were so unsuitable for war that I do not even want to speak about it. That not only they were afraid to take part in combat actions, but they did not want to follow the reasonable advices of our councilors. Everybody is afraid! It is understandable; we all are people, not robots! However, please, fulfill the orders of your chiefs, follow the advices of the councilors, and what is more – the requirements of the field manuals. But the Angolans had no desire to do it.

Why do I speak this way? Because all the Angolans of the military mission in Cuito Cuanavale had known me during half a year – and knew who was this “Senor Geronimo”. I had «nome de combate» (such a fighting name) as “Geronimo”, and everyone knew this.

I’ll tell you why they all knew me. The first time, when I mounted the assistant guard for the whole our «dugout camp» of Cuito-Cuanavale, I went to check up on the sentries (this was at the time of the battle of Cuito-Cuanavale). What disturbed me most of all was that it was night, and the moon was shining brightly, illuminating the land. The time was roughly 2 a.m.

A black was standing at his post with a sub-machine gun. They didn’t have a strap for their sub-machine guns, and as a result held them in their hands. This guard, therefore, was standing there, holding his Kalashnikov. He was just standing there asleep, not leaning against a tree. I at first wondered, “Well, can it be that I am a fool, that there is something I don’t understand. I shouted to him, as was customary: “Guarda!” (Guard!). To this, he was supposed to reply, “Assessor? “Sim, pronto” (Major? Yes, I am ready). Instead, there was no answer. I thought to myself, well, alright, I’m coming closer. “Guarda!” Again, no answer. Therefore, I came directly in front of him, as close as I am to you right now. I seized with one hand

his Kalashnikov and struck his jaw with its butt. He fell down; his Kalashnikov remained in my hands. I asked him, "Are you perhaps asleep?" Then he answered, "No, I am not asleep." I called him a bloody swine and just kicked him in the foot.

That is why everybody instantly remembered me and remembered who this Senor Geronimo was. When I originally became assistant guard, everybody asked, "Is this or isn't this Geronimo?" If yes, well then "we are finished, the end of the world!"

After some time, when I went to check up on the sentries, all appeared normal, everybody replied freshly. There were three sentry-posts. The one stood just near us, near the anti aircraft defense camp. The second stood near that place where the Chief-Advisor of the Commander of the 6th Military District lived; and the third, at the exit of our camp. Every one of these sentries was supposed to be checked.

I then made an agreement with Colonel Zinoviev (Chief-Advisor of our "Pechora" group) that I would cease to be an assistant guard, because I was at the same time a logistics officer, and in charge of the kitchen. I composed all the menus for our "kitchen" for our group of ten people, at the "Pechora" group Soviet specialists (anti aircraft brigade).

Colonel Velichko, the Chief-Advisor of the Commander of the 6th Military District, said to Colonel Zinoviev – that interpreter of yours, Zhdarkin, struck the face of our guard who then lodged a complaint. So then I asked Zinoviev to go to Velichko, and subsequently they relieved me of that duty.

I told him that I would not accept that duty any longer. Why? I simply didn't want to. "But if you wish me to continue to strike their faces, please be assured that I am quite ready to continue – without any doubt."

"No, Igor, it's not allowed", he answered.

"Not allowed? Well I'll strike them anyhow. Why? Because these Angolans don't carry out even the simplest of our directives, and violate the most elementary army regulations demands. What do you expect our relations to be with such an

undisciplined, cheeky lot? As they say, I am not usually all that warlike between my buttocks, even if something troubles me, even if I feel hurt. Isn't that right? And I hope you won't want more such problems. ”

I added, “Vladimir Nikolayevich [Zinoviev], don't be upset. I will take care of any remaining problems. You won't have to worry about anything. There should not be any problems. I will provide our group with all necessary things but you must help release me from of all this shit –from these stupid and senseless orders”. And indeed, he did release me.

Now I want to talk about still another noteworthy event. We ate tinned stew for a very long time. It was the most diverse type of stew. It had been supplied by airplane and helicopter. There were various jars, from very small to very large. There were also jars that we called “dogs' pleasure”. We would open the packages and feel their disgusting smell. We refused to eat such muck and gave it to our dogs. I suspect that our dogs thought at that time: «What good guys are these people! They do not eat meat themselves but give it to us, they take care on us!»

Sometimes we gave that stew to the blacks, if they asked us about it. It was ridiculous, because for their part, the Angolans winced, and said, “No, we won't eat this shit but rather give it to our women”. It was most peculiar that they gave the food to their women. In fact, I know all this first hand, having witnessed the whole thing.

One of the Angolans guarding us had an attractive woman in a nearby village. At that time, we had just received the set of stew. It was in long jars, several kilograms in each jar. It was pork, produced in France. I opened one jar containing the pork and there was a terrible smell. I didn't know whether the pork was supposed to smell that way or whether it had simply gone bad.

I called our guard: «Antonio come here». He took one whiff and groaned – he felt nauseated.

“What can we do with this?” I said. He answered that he would just take it to his “mulher” (his woman).

“And she’ll take it?”

“Yes, what shit” he added, “Bring the car and let’s go!”

We took with us some 12 jars. I in fact told him that we had received 12 jars. But to this he replied, “No, no! Not like this.”

“What do you mean – not like this?” I asked.

“There should be only half or 6 jars. Nevertheless, O.K. Put all of them in the car, and I will then simply take away 6 of them.

Within a short time, we came in our UAZ (car) to that village. It was 25 kilometres from Cuito-Cuanavale. There had just now been some bombardment there. The South Africans had brought their G-6s (155-calibre artillery) and had begun to fire.

“Well what are we going to do?” I asked. “I’m not going anywhere!”

“What rubbish!” he exclaimed. “Just sit here in our dug-out, and I’ll go look for her.”

And indeed, what type of dugout was there in this village? A name, a pit, and otherwise, nothing! I crawled into the dugout and there I found a few blacks sitting and speaking unintelligibly.

They asked me, “Hey! Do you want a drink?” I answered, “No! I would not drink anything you have. “No, no”, they pleaded. “Come on!” And they offered me their local “canioma” or “caporote”, a homemade Angolan liquor.

For how long did Antonio go with six jars of stew which he had put in a bag – 1-1/2 or 2 hours, during which the bombardment continued!

And the remaining 6 jars lay in the car.

While I was sitting in this dugout, the blacks asked me “Did you come with meat?”

“I don’t understand”, I said.

“Well, did you come with six jars of meat – don’t you have six jars of stew there?”

I answered, “No”.

But they insisted that indeed these were lying in the car. I

sat so surprised and said that I didn't understand and asked them what they needed". The blacks answered, "We need a snack." And as sure as I'm telling you now, they insisted, "No problem, we'll do everything right away".

I said, "What will you do right away?"

"We will be your assistants right away – your friend doesn't know that his woman went to another village – he is right now running through all the villages but can't find her. So we will simply tell him the place where she actually is, and in exchange you will give us so and so many jars".

I answered: "Like hell I will! Who I really need is Antonio who right now is running through the villages". But they countered by saying that "Otherwise, you won't be able to make your way out of here".

I felt bloody horrible. Of course, I had my sub-machine gun with me, as well as the cartridge cases (with the cartridges inside). And at the same time, I kept repeating to myself, "Otherwise, you won't be able to make your way out of here". By the way, when I later on decided to find out all those things, I understood – after all, they had been right.

– What did you find out?

Because, although they were not subordinate to UNITA, they, nonetheless depended on it, and for everything. The situation was thus roughly as follows: If UNITA didn't come into the area, then FAPLA would.

– That means, they tried to be neutral?

– Yes, in the sense of cooperating with both sides. No problem. For example, if UNITA came around, they would say, "Here's food for you, eat by all means".

Then, when FAPLA would arrive, they would say to them, "And you supplied UNITA yesterday!"

"No, no", the locals would answer, "we didn't supply them. But here, please eat now".

Well, I sit and think, "Ain't that something!" And, anyway, what's all this to me? To analyze all this, what has it all been for?"

So I said to them, "Fine, what do you need?" And they answered, "There, in your car, are six jars of stew".

"And what of it?" I exclaimed.

"Give them to us", was the answer.

Knowing how much they loved to bargain with us, I offered them "two or three jars at the most." But they stood their ground, answering "six". Again, I insisted, "Two to three jars, nothing more". And we continued to haggle with them. As for how I went about it, I can't even remember.

Finally, they said, "Well O.K., three jars, and you can go wherever you want".

"And where's the fellow with whom I came, eh?", I asked.

"That shouldn't be of any concern to you since he's anyhow arriving", they shot back.

Then I gave them three jars, saying "that's the lot".

They reacted by saying, "You're a splendid fellow. We know you, you are Geronimo and we admire you. And therefore we will see to it that no one disturbs you in your travels around here".

"And who indeed could disturb me!" I exclaimed.

"Well, our block stations", was the answer.

Those belonging to UNITA!

And I thought, "To hell with you!" Basically, what's going on around here! Get it?"

As I indeed found out, very often small UNITA columns were moving around in the territory around Cuito Cuanavale, inside the zone controlled by FAPLA, approached the FAPLA blockhouses, met with them, took food from them and gave them food as well. Why not? People want to eat and life is life!

Moreover, on both sides of the trenches, people had many relatives, how could they kill each other, so to speak. As the deputy political officers (both the Angolans and our own) told me, there were frequent situations in which, within the same family, one son served in UNITA and the other in FAPLA – just as in Russia in our post 1917 Civil war. (The main difference was that the Angolans, in contrast to us, were not as sen-

sitive to these divided loyalties.) As they say, “It happened so, nothing to do!”

– Body armours – what kind were they.

– We were all given bulletproof vests and we were instructed to keep them safe. Not that they should protect us but rather that we should protect them. Why? Because the loss of every bulletproof vest entailed a cost of an extra \$250. Although they were very expensive to whoever needed them, if they killed you with shrapnel hitting your head, for example, what for do you wear a bulletproof vest!

Therefore, everyone who participated in a military operation, even if he, of course, was dressed in a bullet-proof vest, all buttoned up according to plan, but believed very little in its utility. Our advisors of the 47th brigade, during a retreat, carried with them the bulletproof vests simply not to have to pay \$250. Our lads of course wanted to save their lives, but ... had to carry their bulletproof vests with them. Is it OK? Well, that is just how it was.

– Did it happen that some people had «lost their heads» during the war?

– Of course, it happened sometimes.

We were at the time young interpreters, unmarried and we committed stupid blunders. On the other side of the Cuito river, the 25th brigade occupied its defensive positions. From time to time, our officers would arrive – to wash themselves, to shave, to wash clothes, etc. Later, they would return to their positions. Then they would be transported back.

For our part, we did something very stupid, by moving along a small river until we reached the crossing while it was still night in order to escape the bombardment. In fact, we went there to show off. Why? Because we knew that on that side of the river was the South African aircraft spotter who would now and then provide the coordinates enabling the bombardment to begin.

One evening Sasha Sergeyev, the interpreter, came to me. Well then, he invited me to go to the bridge. “Wait a minute

while I take my sub-machinegun”, I said. I set out for my dugout, but something told me not to go, a sort of inner gut feeling.

Well, I stood still for awhile and thought. I thought, “The God only knows! Something isn’t right”. I approached him. And he was already swearing – “One always has to wait for you”! But then I turned to him and said “I’m not going.” He asked, “Why, Igor?” What could I say to answer him? To speak according to my inner voice, “I simply don’t want to, that’s all”.

He looked at me attentively and said. “Then don’t go”. And he left alone.

They set off. On the bridge, at first everything was good, they took our people across the river... But in the meantime, they sat in the dugouts – their car suffered a direct hit by 155-mm shell.

– What type of car?

– An «Engesa» – a Brazilian car.

After returning from the bridge, Sasha came to me.

Oh hell! Do you know what happened?

“Well, what of it!”

Then he said: “You didn’t go as if you had had a presentiment of something...”

– There was one man in our team there, his name was “Pasha” – a warrant officer (a service engineer). He had just spent two years in Afghanistan.

If he got drunk, he would simply shoot the Angolans between their legs. Overall, his was a classic performance. He would come out of his dugout carrying his sub-machinegun in one hand and shouting, “Antonio, come here quickly – there is something to do out there”. If Antonio didn’t carry out his orders, Pasha would shoot directly between his legs – without further ado. And they all knew that he was a crack shot. He never actually hit anyone. Yet all Angolans ran past him in terror. As a result, if he felt it was necessary to do something right away, he always knew that it would be done.

We somehow came to him to have a party. As long as I was in

charge of the kitchen, I brought some food. I told him, “Pasha, we have nothing to drink!” Pasha answered, “There will be right away”. I said, “The night outdoors? How will that be?”

He went out – shot from his Kalashnikov into the air: “Antonio – caporote (local liquor)!”

Antonio: “no, assessor”.

“What a hell of «no!» go and find!”.

And Antonio found and brought liquor and we had some drinks.

How many times did I see when we would go to fetch water, we would go on a watercarrier, on «Engesa». We would arrive there, I sat and watched from above the water cistern while Pasha would give a burst of machinegun fire and the Angolans would begin to run. After all, they all knew Pasha. What kind of person was Pasha and they knew: once Pasha had spoken, there were no questions – they did everything and filled up everything.

For all that, the Angolans respected him and loved him very much: he was master at all trades, a real professional and also in case of necessity he defended Angolans with might and main!

–Were there many snakes there?

– I personally killed 12 snakes in two years...

– With what?

– With whatever was appropriate. With a knife, a sub-machinegun, a pistol, anything appropriate.

*[I killed my first snake during my service in the 19th Brigade, in Mulondo. She crept into the house where we lived and hid her behind one of our beds, near the wall. Practically by chance it was found by our technical specialist **Ivan Nesterovich**. He gave a shout immediately: «Igor, come here with your knife, there is a snake here!»*

By the way, before it I found in the Angolan Brigade depot a very good big knife (American production), 45 centimetres length. What is more I made it as sharp as a razor. All the time it was with me.

*Having heard the shouts of **Nesterovich**, I draw my knife and ran up to him. He pressed the snake to the wall with the stick, and I, let's say, «sawed» her head with my knife. That creature was rather long, more than one meter and black.*

At that very moment the Angolans came running, everybody with «Kalashnikovs» or with spades. They stared at the snake and then at me standing with the knife in my hand, but I could see the real horror in their eyes.

«How did you kill her?» – They asked me.

«You see, I cut off her head with this knife».

«Lord, have mercy upon us! You know, this snake hits the victim with its tail!», and they pointed me at the white ring with poison right on the tail of that snake...

Everything grew cold with terror inside me: why didn't she hit me by her tail when I cut her head?...]

– With what did you travel there?

– We travelled either by UAZ or by «ambulance car» (a military version of RAF-2203 in camouflage colour and of ordinary cross-country ability), or by GAZ-66 two ton truck.

– How did the Angolans produce their hooch?

– For the local hooch, there grew such a completely remarkable tree, producing the local «maboko» fruit. What was it? It

was the size of two large apples. When it is green, nothing can break it open, not even an axe. But when it ripens, it is possible to open it and to eat its seed and become drunk.

And especially in the 5th Military District, in the province of Cunene, there were very large groves, called “Mabokairo”. As for the local name, the drink was called “canioma” or “caporote” depending on the province where it was produced. Therefore, if you wish to obtain really normal canioma or caporota, you must come at the time when they are ripe.

How did we look for that canioma during my first year in Angola, 1986–1987, in the Huila Province. We sat down in a car, in UAZ, with sub-machineguns and grenades and went forward, looking for that local spirit. There it was known as canioma.

We arrived at the village. There the elder of the village was coming towards us, armed with a spear. He was covered with feathers. We were, for our part, accompanied by a person who was Portuguese-speaking and who could translate into the local language because the inhabitants there spoke no Portuguese. In other words, I would translate from Russian into Portuguese and he would further translate this into the local language.

He said, “Aha, canioma –well, just drive in that direction there. We drove on literally for ten minutes, to the following village where everybody already knew that we were about to arrive.

– How did they find out?

– I do not really know. Maybe by tom-tom. As we arrived, they were already coming out to greet us. So you are looking for canioma?

Here we arrived in one village and one of our Russian specialists was a great expert in all those drinks. He wanted to obtain first class spirit.

“No, not here would we take anything because the canioma here is poor”.

So we drove on to the following village and then from one village to another. I then spoke to our Senior Adviser:” Excuse me, but doesn’t it seem to you that we are being followed?” “Huh? What a load of shit!” But I persisted: “Excuse me please,

but I want to stay alive. I want just to survive". I continued: "We have already visited several villages, and everywhere we were met. They knew already everything. From where?"

The main thing is that the Angolans greeted me first and only then other our specialists.

One time, the following occurred. We had arrived at the next village. The Angolan who translated from Portuguese into the local language was with us as usual. I again became suspicious – "And no one right now is going to kill us?" And he said to me, "With you, Geronimo, no one will kill you. By now, everybody knows you." I was, however, frightened.

They simply knew me here, they had already seen me more than once, and they knew that I spoke Portuguese and that I was an interpreter. "Ah, this is "Geronimo", let him go! In principle, they treated most of the interpreters this way and sometimes the specialists, particularly those who could speak Portuguese.

I asked him – excuse me but how is the situation around here?

"Is there something disturbing you? It is possible that they may kill the others (he meant the advisors), but not you, Geronimo", he said. My mouth immediately opened wide.

"You understand", I said, that it is in fact not necessary to kill them".

"Its fine, if you say they won't kill them, but in any case the fact remains that you have only 20 minutes to get out of here," was the answer."

"Well", I exclaimed, "does that mean that until that time we'll manage to get drink?"

"Yes, he said, we'll do it"

When we returned, after this discussion, I got drunk like a pig. They told me openly that as often as I would visit this place, all would be normal and I shouldn't worry – that I was, after all, Geronimo. Despite such reassurances, my balls dropped in terror.

"And what else?" I exclaimed. "Nothing. They know you

after all, you speak Portuguese, you behave normally with the locals” – and, in fact, I was able somehow to get along with them.

That is how to explain: “Here I am, a so-called so-and-so, I would tell them, but you will behave courteously with me”. The Angolans simply could see that if I punished them, then it was for something they did and not simply out of personal whim. Moreover, as I have already made clear, I made serious efforts to take care of them – their general way-of-life, their food – and, in fact, none of them in my care ever went hungry. And, fairly often, I would simply sit and chat with them about this and that. And they were, after all interested in my company.

– How was the work and the way of life in “Pechora”?

– Our way of life, of course, was more or less regulated. We lived in dug-outs, three or four people in each. During the Angolan winter (between June and August), it was very cold and the temperature would fall to only one or two degrees above zero. We would walk around in Angolan parkas.

There was a canteen (also in the pit in the ground), and a small bath house was constructed, even equipped with a steam room. The food was so-so, basically tinned food from all countries of the world. Some on the whole could not eat that food (after all, only tinned food during two years in Angola!), but others got used to it.

For example, Captain Sergei Rymar, he was a specialist at the anti-aircraft C-125 “Pechora” complex. He was unique in that he could (as we joked) with his eyes shut both put together and dismantle the P-18 and P-19 – tracker stations against the enemy aircraft. Angolans were very glad to work with him and waited for him very much. He could adjust and repair everything! Moreover, he could speak Portuguese a little bit...

In terms of eating, he was a glutton. He would go through breakfast, lunch and dinner, and within an hour and a half Sergei would get a tin of food, open it and begin eating out of it. I would usually ask him, “Sergei, there is something I don’t

understand – just now you had lunch, so why are you again feeding yourself? “You know”, was his answer – “I need to eat”.

Colonel Vladimir Nikolaevich Zinoviev. I have only good remembrance about him. He was very kind and responsive man, and as a chief, he was strict but «square shooter». What is more, he knew how to work with interpreter: he was not fast in his speech, always repeated his phrase if something was not clear to me. It was a great pleasure to work with him.

Every morning, he began by strapping his pistol to his side and then completed his daily run. In other words, he busied himself with physical exercise.

Not only him, some other our specialists went in for sports and physical training. Of course, when it was possible, because the war continued...

But these habits would end once the cheap local homemade rice vodka had matured, and our people began to drink and make merry.

I want to say some words about the homemade rice vodka and more about the so-called drunkenness. In fact, as I became persuaded during two years in Angola, if we hadn't gotten drunk from time to time, we would have simply gone crazy – without a doubt. Some peoples' nerves would have simply given in and no wonder: a foreign country, a strange environment, the war and the bombardments (“25 hours in day and night”, as we joked bitterly)... You give the task to the Angolans, but they can fulfill it or not... The supply system simply does not work; many times the letters from our homes did not reach us and so on... Of course, nobody ever said that things would be easy. Therefore, a lessening of personal stress was in any case necessary.

– And what does rice vodka mean?

– We had rice after it was taken for consumption, was fermented. Of course, sugar was added. And if there was vodka, it too was added. Afterwards we took an ordinary army canister, about nine litres, filled it with that liquid, corked it up and placed on the top of the dug-out in which we were living. It

would ferment three to four days under the sun after which it would be drunk.

– How hot was it?

– Over 40 degrees. One time, while I was working in the “Pechora” complex, the Luanda Higher Command began to provide us with grape juice. Well, we drank this grape juice once and again we drank it, but then Sergey Rymar spoke up “But what are we doing?” Let’s distil home made hooch from this”. Well, we all fixed our gaze on him, wondering just how he proposed to do this.

“Well, these are grapes, after all! What are we talking about? Hand over the canister of grape juice, the sugar and the yeast. Don’t worry, everything will be all right!”

In fact, the first attempt was unsuccessful. And why? Because the canister exploded. It was made of plastic. And Sergey said, “Indeed, I was wrong about something. It should have been done another way. And the second time, when we used a metal canister, we said, “Sergey, you are on the whole a master.

– And how strong was it?

– Likewise more than 40 degrees.

– About decorations.

– And now, as they say, to go smoothly to another topic, what was the prize for the efforts of our specialists? Our specialists not only instructed the Angolans but themselves participated on Angolan territory in military activities against the UNITA bandits and against the South African army. And it was a very interesting approach – how to appraise this feat accomplished by our comrades-in-arms under such and such circumstances?

And how, for example, to appraise the feat of one of our Senior Lieutenants (who would receive his Captaincy at Cuito Cuanavale)? He was a maintenance specialist – tanks, armoured personnel carriers, armoured cars, and armoured reconnaissance patrol cars. He was a quiet, unassuming fellow. His name was Valentin Mozolev.

The Angolans were simply crazy about him, war or no war, bombardment or no bombardment. If it was necessary to repair tanks, he went to repair them. He would crawl inside the tank. The bombardment begins, the shells explode, shrapnel cracks and pops, but he sits and continues to repair the tank. Those Angolans, gazing at him also began to repair. More than half of the technique repaired at Cuito Cuanavale was his, Mozolev's merit¹².

Indeed, he did not hurl missiles from an embrasure, nor did he rush forward with a flag, nor did he summon his troops to the attack, he simply repaired equipment. Our Regional Command decided to request for decoration to him, "In the service of the Fatherland" was the name of that decoration. In my opinion, he deserved it – he sat and repaired under any circumstances whatsoever.

The standard answer to this, however, was "Describe a heroic deed, committed by the comrade". But how in fact can one describe this deed?" After all, just what type of heroic deed did he commit? What nonsense, you can imagine – he repaired the materiel with which people subsequently moved and fought.

"Describe in more detail the deed committed by this comrade!" – Nonsense!

Such answers came from Moscow. And it was from there that such a formal reply now came.

And, moreover, very many times our Command in Angola received a questionnaire from Moscow with the instruction, "What for he should be decorated?" concerning the people – direct participants in a given operation, participants in military activities. After all, he didn't blow up three South African tanks, for example. "Describe this alleged deed which he is supposed to have committed, and in more detail".

And people simply spread their hands and said, "OK, let others carry our decorations.

¹² Memoirs of retired Major Valentin Fyodorovich Mozolev will be published in Russian and in English (note by ed.-comp.).

Although people sitting in the rear: in Luanda and the military districts' headquarters got their awards and decorations, as we joked for «bravery and courage in the fierce rear battles». It is always happening like this, as I have already said, those who sit at staff headquarters and at the home front – they usually wear decorations. This is in fact the misfortune of all armies, all states, all wars and all centuries. As for those in the front lines, they are forgotten. And perhaps this is not due to their lack of achievement but even rather that at the time of their achievements, they did not shout about it.

And it usually those who are in the front lines, who are just the ones not to shout about or expand on their heroic deeds, who just do their work and fulfil their duties.

And another point is that they can't always talk about their deeds, or write down their deeds on paper. If you didn't draw in colours your "heroic deed" on paper – go away, you are not a hero...

«Without paper you are nothing, and only with paper you are somebody! » says a well-known proverb.

If you received a document proving your participation in the war, isn't that enough? Don't you already have your official daily privileges that go with this document?

Orders? Medals? What orders and what medals? There is nothing about your "heroic deed" on paper – no medals to you!

I had a similar experience with my own decorations. The Chief Advisor of our brigade recommended me for the decoration, "Order of the Red Star" – nothing! Then he recommended me for the medal, "For Combat Merits" – it too was unsuccessful. Only then, thanks to Viktor Aleksandrovich Belyukin, our Chief Interpreter in Luanda, did I receive this medal.

Petro Ivanovsky also did not receive his decorations. He was recommended for the "Order of the Red Star" and then for the medal, "For Combat Merits." No result at all!

It was the same with Slava Barabulya: they recommended him several times for this medal, and again, only thanks to Viktor Aleksandrovich Belyukin, he finally received it.

Anatoly Alekseevski – he saw a lot of “pile of shit”, got into a great number of war scrapes, broke out of encirclement ... just the same – not worthy of decoration ...

Serguey Demidchik (“two-year officer”, graduate of the Minsk Institute of foreign languages) – he served in Cuito-Cuanavale, got into a pretty mess of the «hell events» of the year 1986 – not worthy ...

– **Well, do you want to say that not only «purely» military interpreters serve in Angola, I mean not only the graduates of the Military Institute of Foreign Languages of the USSR Ministry of Defence?**

– Of course. A lot of so called «two-year» officers (graduates of the civilian institutes of foreign languages) served in Angola as military interpreters. They were from Moscow and Leningrad, Minsk and Kiev and other cities.

According to the Law of the USSR they were called to active military duty for two years and then retired (if they did not want to continue their military career).

They were good fellows and in their majority qualified and skilled interpreters. I would like to name such people as **Maxim Gladkov, Andrey Sobolev, Alexander Shapkin, Alexander Tikhomirov.**

Oleg Gritsuk, Serguey Demidchik, Andrey Khatkevitch, Serguey Eroshov, Alexander Shtookin came

to Angola from the **Minsk Institute of Foreign Languages (Belarus)**.

I was happy to work and serve with such people!

These obstacles existed because General Gusev, the Chief Military Advisor to the Minister of Defence of Angola, cut to pieces any lists of decorations referring to the interpreters. If it concerned a young lieutenant, an interpreter, then it would mean that they were not worthy of decorations, even though they were only boys who had been on active military operations, had sat through sieges, had been without food and had narrowly missed getting seriously sick. And his point of view was his alone.

To me, for example, they said that, according to the instructions of General Gusev's those Soviets, who had received a Cuban medal for participation in the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, were not allowed to get any Soviet military decorations. Therefore, this included advisors and specialists as well as interpreters.

Nor did they give any decorations to my friend Oleg Gritsuk who had also completed civil institution of higher education, even though he too had wasted two years in jungle. What happened to him also happened to me. He was recommended twice for the "Order of the Red Star" and then for the medal "For Combat Merits." Again nothing!

"You received a Cuban medal for the defense of Cuito Cuanavale. Well, everything is good and this is enough for you. Go home, thank you!"

After such words we simply raised our palms in a gesture of helplessness and set off for home. What an interesting system for awarding decorations, don't you think!

Now I still want to refer to the system of payment. People actually, except for fulfilling their international

obligations, and transmitting their knowledge and provid-

ing a training of the Angolan side, apparently still expected to earn money.

I consider that this was fair, because, if you please, to live in such circumstances which were completely alien to us, both in terms of climate, disease, war, etc. and to do all this for virtually no particular reason – well, this was of course unrealistic! After all, the Americans and Europeans received good payment for this same type of conditions, and in terms of the exchange rate at that time, we knew that these same western specialists earned five to six times as much as we did.

On the other hand, in comparison with the USSR, we received of course a lot and were considered to be rich by Soviet standards, by those people who never went abroad and stayed in the USSR... And there was an interesting point: if you came without a wife, you would receive 80% of your salary in basic pay, and 20% in so-called road chits (traveller's cheques).

– What in fact were these road chits (traveller's cheques)?

– Well, you had to sign each cheque but you didn't have the right to use them up. For this, you had to take them back to Moscow and somewhere, for example, in the office of the hotel Ukraine, to convert them into Soviet rubles on a one-to-one basis.

– And how many chits did they pay you in Angola?

– Well, I earned per month some 1500–1600 chits. This was a lot of money in Soviet times. Our advisors received up to two thousand chits. But the rule was that if you came without a wife, then you received only 80% of this. As they said jokingly about women, they also worked – they earned another 20% for their husbands. This meant that if you were in a given military district without a wife, you received 80%, but if you served in an actually fighting brigade, then you received the full 100%, but only if you were an advisor or a specialist.

Interpreters serving in the same fighting brigade received in any case only 80% in accordance with some mythical order,

D-54. That was all we could find out. According to an annex to D-54, if you were an interpreter, then you received only 80%, even if you had during this period participated more than 300 times in battle.

– Returning again to decorations, when Cubans began to distribute medals for Cuito-Cuanavale, our leaders came from Luanda and took for themselves 17 medals, allegedly for those who had long served in Cuito but had been transferred to other districts. Yet they nonetheless gave out these medals to those four who had also beaten the table with their fists, shouting “give us our decorations!”

They also received (according to my rough estimate) still other medals that they might otherwise have received. Moreover, there was still another Cuban medal, “Servicio Distinguido” (For distinguished service), Cuban medal for having fulfilled one’s internationalist duty, as well as Angolan medals of the category, “For outstanding service”. Attached to small ribbons, such little medals resembled our own Soviet five-kopek piece.

And again we failed to understand why they decorated with Angolan medals some people in Cuito-Cuanavale, and we asked, “What for?” And strangest of all, the people decorated, themselves, did not understand why.

And General Ryabchenko, covering his chest with all this large quantity of decorations, appeared in this manner at the General Staff, during his furlough in Moscow. The populace was stunned with surprise. The operation, “Greeting October” (1987) had been messed up. After so many losses, and such devastation (among the Angolans), suddenly this chap appeared with his chest full of decorations and medals.

Why, strictly speaking, did such a bias begin – describe in greater detail the heroic deed committed by the comrades. In other words, what does “aid” mean in this situation? Ryabchenko, in my opinion, received the order of Lenin for Angola, for having planned the operation, an operation that ultimately had failed. (Likewise, they said that he had sat for

two years in Kabul during the war in Afghanistan, and had received the order of Lenin for having planned the operation¹³.)

– And what about the medals for Cuito-Cuanavale?

– It was just a big «presentation».

The Cubans made medals for Cuito-Cuanavale, in order to decorate their own authentic participants of the defence of Cuito-Cuanavale, as well as Soviet and Angolan participants.

How was all this done? The Cubans, in this scheme, were of course great guys. The airplane carrying these medals arrived in Luanda. In Luanda, however, no one from among Soviet advisors was alerted to this. The airplane thereupon set off on a direct route towards Cuito-Cuanavale. It was the year 1988. Then the plane arrived in Cuito-Cuanavale.

The Cubans phoned us via our special line, and Lieutenant Vyacheslav Barabula, my friend, talked with them. They told him word for word the following – “We brought the medals and it is necessary to decorate people. If possible, please give us your own list, and introduce the real participants of the defence of Cuito-Cuanavale. Although they have been in Cuito one month only, they have a right to be decorated. They have been under bombardment, and so forth, and so on.

Slava came over to me and asked, “Igor, how shall we do all this?”

“Well, I don’t know”, I said. “Lets go to the ‘Cubashi’, as we call them, and discuss everything with them”. (We usually called them the “Cubashi”).

He replied, “Well, OK, fine. I’ll come back soon”.

¹³ This is incorrect. After serving in Angola, he served in the ground forces in the Leningrad military district. The former commander of the 103rd Guard airborne division, hero of the war in Afghanistan, veteran of the war in Angola, the chairman of the city’s veterans’ association, retired Lieutenant-General Ivan Fyodorovich Ryabchenko died in St. Petersburg in August 1997 See more in “The oral history of forgotten wars. Memories of the war in Angola”. M.: Memories, 2007 (note by ed.-comp.).

And Slava went to his chief. We lived in one camp – our dugouts were all together. I served at that time in the in the «Pechora» brigade, and infantry dugouts were situated directly next to us.

His chief was Colonel Velichko – Chief Military Advisor of the Commander of the 6th Military District. Velichko had been here one and a half months. Under him was deputy, Colonel Mityayev, a paratrooper, and he (Mityayev)¹⁴ had actually participated in the events at Cuito Cuanavale.

But at that time there were many new people in our camp who had not participated in combats. Well, they simply at that moment lived and worked in this camp. They would visit, advise and teach the Angolans, and would say that it was necessary to do something in this way, etc., etc.

Yet in all these operations, in fact it was other people who had actually participated – there stood the 36th brigade, the 21st, the 25th, the 59th, the 16th, etc. And these people (advisors, specialists and interpreters) were the people who really participated. But at that moment, a minimum of 50% had already departed.

This was because the military activities had supposedly ended. In fact, they had not stopped anywhere and continued. But in any case, the South Africans solemnly announced the beginning of the withdrawal of their forces from Angola.

They, by the way, being remarkable gentlemen, bombarded only the Angolan brigades. In other words, the bombardment of our camp, I think, was not envisioned in their plans. Perhaps they didn't want to risk international complications, or complications with the Soviet Union, or something else again. But this evidently was a motive only as far as concerned our own camp, whereas in the case of all the others, it was war as usual. In other words, if the Soviet advisor goes to

¹⁴ Memoirs of retired Colonel of paratroops Vyacheslav Aleksandrovich Mityaev (Mityayev) were published in English (see “The oral history of forgotten wars. Memories of the war in Angola”. M.: Memories, 2007. P. 6–47).

his brigade and suffers there from bombardment – nothing to do – war is war!

Although they sent us an ultimatum before the 11th of March, 1988 – “Soviets, leave Cuito Cuanavale, we don’t want to touch you.” The leaflets were in English. The Angolans brought these leaflets to us and said “these are written in English so we don’t understand them.”

– How did they scatter them?

– From hollow shells, most likely agitation propaganda. They sent us this ultimatum – it was precise, concrete and clearly written – “Soviets, we don’t want to touch you. You – our so-called white brothers. Go away. That is, leave, please. We want right now to cut up these Angolans.”

And from Luanda, an order arrived – “Look after your own security.” But how? In what way if the road to Menongue was cut off? In fact, the road from Cuito Cuanavale to Menongue – 180 km long – was controlled by UNITA. We were encircled. How could we look after our own security! In what way?

But let’s return to the medals. Slava reported to Colonel Velichko about the conversation with the Cubans. Velichko now telegraphed to Luanda that the medals had reached Cuito-Cuanavale. In Luanda, they were immediately surprised. Because, in fact, the Cubans had not told them anything about this. And literally within 40 minutes came the list of the “brightest” participants in the defence of Cuito Cuanavale.

The list began with Lieutenant-General Gusev and then Major General Ryabchenko, followed by Colonel Mishchenko, secretary of the party organisations for all of Angola. He received the order of the Red Star, as well as the order of “For service to the Fatherland.” As we joked, subsequently, these were awarded to him firstly in acknowledgement of his flying to Cuito-Cuanavale from Menongue without a parachute, and secondly for his active participation in an anti alcohol propaganda campaign. He declared at a meeting in

Luanda that our specialists in war-torn districts should not receive beer because it sharply diminished their ability to fight.

I will talk about him word for word. I don't want to defame the man – after all, perhaps for him, all this was heroism.

He flew into Cuito Cuanavale, at the time of the initial launching of military operations, in September, 1987. UNITA soldiers were just beginning to use 81-mm mortars to bombard Cuito-Cuanavale. The strangest sight was to see how UNITA was using these mortars. They placed two sticks at right angles to each other (cross-wise) and placed a pipe over them, but did not place a slab under the mortar. Thereupon, the shelling began. The shells flew and exploded over the airport district. As a result, the remaining parts of Cuito Cuanavale were not hit. So everybody was left undisturbed to look after his own affairs.

Colonel Mishchenko sat the whole day in his dugout. Our people spoke to him, "Comrade Colonel, don't get agitated – you are going out. Well, the shells have shot over the target for God's sake.". He answered, "No, no, I have work still to do here". He sat down, as if to write something. "Well, alright, sit down and write". Towards evening, the shelling quieted down.

Colonel Mishchenko went out and at this time there was standing there our Soviet warrant officer who gave a task to Angolan. But since our warrant officer didn't speak Portuguese very well, he expressed all the things in mixed foul and Portuguese language. So the task was presented in approximately this way and the Angolan stood, nodded his assent – yes, all is normal, he has no further questions and understands everything. At that moment, Colonel Mishchenko went out.

He ran up to the warrant officer and cried – how can you? How dare you give a task of this kind to our Angolan brothers? The warrant officer stands up straight, very surprised, and the Angolan does the same, saying that everything is normal – that they told him in a clearly understandable way what he had to do. Wasn't that correct? This warrant officer in fact had explained everything to him and very clearly, and what remained was just to go and do it. There was nothing left to ask. He had already decid-

ed to go. At this moment, some bespectacled colonel ran up and began to say something.

And something happened the following day at the obligatory daily morning political briefing, dealing with the situation in Angola and in the world at large. Inasmuch as Mishchenko had arrived, he naturally took over the proceedings. He declared, "Some of our comrades still have not fully realised the full seriousness of the situation. They use foul language with our Angolan brothers".

Thereupon, a voice came from the hall, "But, after all, how else can one talk to them?" An explosion of indignation broke out — "Who said this? How dare you!", etc.

This is just a lot of gibberish. The point is not whether or not the Angolans are our brothers, but that we are fighting together against a common enemy and that we are all working together and fulfilling common tasks, and not according to nationality or race. If you have received a task — accept it and endorse it!

So when Slava arrived with Velichko the Cubans began to look at the list of those Luanda Soviets to be decorated.

"Well, who among us is here?"

"Lieutenant General Gusev".

"Who is he?"

"He is our Chief Military Advisor in Angola".

"And how was he able to participate here?"

"Well, he arrived and "stuck his leg out of the helicopter". He gave out orders and basically took charge."

"No. Strike him out!"

"Secondly, Major General Ryabchenko". "And how did he take part?"

"Well, he also flew in and commanded something there".

"And how did he command?"

"From morning to midday".

"No!"

"Colonel Mishchenko". "And who is he?"

"He is the secretary of the party organisation of all of Angola."

“And on which flank did he take part in the defence of Cuito-Cuanavale?”

“Well, he arrived, contemplated the warlike atmosphere and made a speech.”

“Unnecessary!”

Our Command from Luanda sent a list of 17 people to the Cubans. From this list, the Cubans authorised 5. Among these, by the way, were two of our translators – Oleg Kozak and Sasha Kalan. The remaining three were former advisors in the 59th and 25th brigades. That was all – out of 17 persons!

What happened later? General Gusev arrived (flew in), himself personally, as well as General Ryabchenko and Colonel Mishchenko. Together, they brought away 17 decorations. They made speeches. They said, “Guys, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.” You are a bunch of great guys... and have departed. The Cubans stayed, with open mouths in surprise.

– Did they insolently take these decorations for themselves or had they made a prior agreement with the Cubans?

– This is not at all clear. They took the decorations because they were generals. That is all there was to it. The fourth of April, 1988, was specifically devoted to the decoration of the Soviet specialists and these skilled cadres were later shown in a Cuban film about the defence of Cuito Cuanavale. (But the Soviet specialists were depicted as if they too were Cubans, although the Cubans always wore shoulder straps denoting particular ranks. We only wore our identification tags).

All these generals came to the decoration ceremony, which then took place. But who were we after all? I for instance was a young Lieutenant. So what could I yell about? – “who are you and what did you do to achieve all this?” Could I really cry out? No, of course. I don’t even know how to call all this or how to describe it.

– But did they decorate at Cuito-Cuanavale also those specialists who had participated in the battle but had already left?

– It would seem indeed as if they took those 17 decorations for them. And yet I know that two of them – Oleg Kozak, and Sasha Kalan – didn't receive any. Sasha Kalan, my colleague at the training course, got nothing at all. Later on, when we began to study together in the officers' training courses, I asked him about this.

I said, "Sash, did you receive a decoration?"

"What decoration?"

I said, "Well, for Cuito Cuanavale."

He had, after all, been in the 16th brigade that had been cut to pieces during the battle. Out of this encounter, only 2 tanks and 100 men out of the whole brigade returned after their passage through Shaminga. For this, Sanya received just nothing.

– And what was this so-called "Pechora"?

– It was the Soviet system of anti-aircraft defence, established throughout Angola by our specialists.

– And who sat next to the computer screen?

– Well, our own men, of course, sat there whenever it was necessary to shoot down something. "Pechora" operated at a height of between 50 and 25000 m.

These Angolans, you see, had one major problem – they could in no way fulfil the capture of the target. The target would flash on the screen. My God! To think that I was only an interpreter, and had not well studied how to do all this but I managed to do it (our specialists had shown me everything, both how and what to do).

One would press the buttons, then capture of the target. The missile is self-guided with heating device in the warhead. That is, after this – four rockets would strike at this target – something relatively simple.

First of all, the Angolans were not able to operate the computer screen. Secondly, they couldn't operate the buttons so as to activate the four rockets, one after the other. Moreover, there was even the possibility that the rocket might actually reach its goal and hit the plane, if indeed it ever reached it. It would all be visible on the computer screen. But in any case you

could press this button and destroy the rocket. The fragments, themselves would then destroy the airplane.

– Our anti-aircraft defence system was the best in the world. I'll give you an example.

Around this time, I returned to Cuito-Cuanavale, on March 11, 1988, after a two and a half months absence in Lobito. I can not say why indeed I returned to Cuito-Cuanavale. But I was summoned there. And when I arrived there, the lads told me, "Well, Igor, you fine fellow, you have returned". That is to say, when I left (for the first time), they told me, "Igor, you know – you will return". I said, OK, but you are talking rubbish. But they insisted – "you will return". And indeed in March, 1988, I returned – as they had told me I would.

Returning to our narrative, the president of Botswana arrived in his two-engine airplane, escorted by a fighter-airplane. At that time, we were not at work – it was either on Saturday or on Sunday, I don't remember exactly, but it was in June or July, 1988, after the conclusion of the truce. And suddenly we saw the plane flying over us. Already one and a half years earlier, this route had been ruled out of bounds for the flights of civilian airplanes because of military activities. But he was flying for the summit meeting in Luanda.

A report was sent to him – "friend-or-foe". On the whole, he did not answer anything. We saw the descent of the four rockets – one after another. But again the same thing happened – the idiots just sat at the screen – goodbye, Angolans. Not one of the four rockets found its target, because they did not press the necessary button, or else did not press the correct one. Subsequently when we drove up and it was recorded on the screen, they told us, "well, we looked at the screen and saw that the rocket reached the airplane – the first, second, third and fourth. But for some reason, they didn't strike the target.

The fighter escort of the president executed its anti-rocket manoeuvre but was not able to get away – it fell.

– And what is this anti-rocket manoeuvre?

– Well, the rocket moves towards the airplane and falls on the half-roll – goes sharply down. He is able to get out of a spin – good show! If not, excuse me. That guy could not.

– Why could not he get out?

– Because the Botswanian who sat in it was, it would seem, insufficiently trained. He fell and that was it. It happened in front of our very eyes. As for the president of Botswana, he just flew further on his own. We jumped into our car and came to our brigade.

They showed us the spot right away on the computer screen– how it all happened. It was all recorded. Our leader Colonel Maslov asked them – “why didn’t you press the button? “Well, we forgot”, answer the Angolans. Well OK – what can one do about it?

Our leader sends a message as follows to Luanda: “The airplane moved and we shot at it but didn’t bring it down.

But what does it matter that the Angolans did not bring it down? And you, where were you, boys, during this time? No day-off for you – you should have been there on a 24 hour basis. Who is responsible – the Angolans? Why curse them? The Soviets, after all, did not advise them. So who are the fools? The Soviets, of course.

By the way, I wish to say one thing – it was a clear rule and a constant one in Angola that if there was any failure, the guilty were the Soviets. And if there was any success, the Angolans got the credit.

– How many people altogether were in the Angolan 21st brigade?

– About 2000. There were no Cubans there. There were six of our Soviet specialists, and among these, one interpreter – myself.

– When did you leave the 21st Brigade?

– Our group of advisers (headed by Lieutenant-Colonel **Artiomenko**) left the 21st Brigade for Cuito-Cuanavale in the early morning of the 27 of December 1987.

Before it a new group of advisers (headed by Lieutenant-Colonel **Khramov**) came to substitute us in that Brigade.

We waited for confirmation for our trip to Cuito-Cuanavale from our higher Command and at last got it at night on the 26 of December.

So we started very early in the morning on our **BTR** (APC), though our Brigade was located not so far from Cuito-Cuanavale. But we knew that our way could be very difficult and dangerous due to the South African shelling and bombardments and activity of UNITA in our rear zones.

And the most dangerous could become crossing of the bridge over the Cuito River right near the town of Cuito-Cuanavale. When we at last came to that bridge we understood all the gravity of the situation: the bridge was shelled by the South African 155-mm guns.

Not far from the bridge there was a hill covered with forest. Usually South African or UNITA artillery reconnaissance scout (artillery spotter) sat on the top of that hill: in case of any movement near the bridge or in Cuito-Cuanavale area he informed immediately South Africans about it (transmitted appropriate coordinates to the artillery battery) and the shelling began. The same situation was when we approached to the bridge.

Fortunately we hid in the forest area, our Senior Adviser **Artiomenko** decided to calculate our rush to the bridge. We had had already a good experience of war in Angola and especially of the bombardments and shellings, so we stood and watched. At first the projectiles fell one after another within two minutes, then – within three minutes, and at last – within five minutes. It was a good chance for us to rush to the bridge and cross it.

So Artiomenko ordered to **Sasha Fatianov** (our technician who was a driver at that time): «Forward, quickly!»

We sent our prayers to the Almighty that no Angolans would decide to cross the bridge from the other side of the river, but... When we came nearer to the bridge we saw the Angolan tank crawling on it...

Artiomenko cursed and commanded **Fatianov** to drive under a bridge in order to have some sort of cover against South African projectiles. At the same time one of our Angolan guards (they rode on our APC) ran to the other side of the river to say those tank crew members to make the road clear and let us cross the bridge. He returned after some time saying that the driver in that tank was badly wounded but Angolans had promised to find a new driver and remove that tank out of the bridge (God, save us!!!)

Of course the South African artillery spotter noticed us and the shelling began again: they tried to hit us and the projectiles began to fall down closer and closer and in great number...

...I do not know how much time we spent under that bridge – for us it seemed as the eternity! As it is usually written in the novels – all the life passed in front of my eyes and there was only small and delusive hope to survive...

I was only 22 years old, I cannot say that I was very afraid, but to tell the truth – there was no strong desire to die...

Suddenly, thanks God, we saw the tank moving away from the bridge, again the command came from **Artiomenko**: «Forward, rush!» It was our last hope! We practically «flew over» the bridge to the other side of the Cuito River and rushed in the direction of Cuito-Cuanavale.

Later on one of our Angolan guards told me that two projectiles had fallen down right on the place where we had stayed some minutes before (under the bridge)...

So we followed for some time the road to Cuito-Cuanavale, I stood in the hatch of our APC. Suddenly one of our guards sitting in front (on the top of our APC) began showing me at something behind us. I glanced back and saw a car with a white man inside: he waved his hand asking us to stop.

We stopped and he approached to us, jumped out of the car and crawled on our APC. That was **Pasha** (one more Soviet technician), he was a good friend of our technician **Sasha Fatianov**, before Angola they served together in Afghanistan. They hugged one another and cried. I saw such scene first time in my life: two robust fellows (what is more – veterans of Afghanistan) cried with joy being happy that they had survived...

– And what about the South Africans?

– I don't want to say anything bad about the South Africans because they fought well and competently, because they were whites, because I myself am white and because South Africans related to us as whites to whites (I already talked about the

ultimatum. Strangest of all, the white Cubans would say – «We, as they say, are ready to shake hands with the white South Africans». This could have been ascribed also to racism. But, after all, the blacks from both sides also related to each other as well. Besides, we were also soldiers and fulfilled each of us fulfilled his obligations.

In Angola, there were 65000 Cubans, while in the south alone, there were approximately 25000. They (the Cubans, Namibians and Angolans) concentrated technicians and troops and in the district of Cunene deployed 1500¹⁵ T-54, T-55 and T-62 tanks, more than in the Kursk grasslands (in June, 1943, there had been only 1200 tanks from both sides together). By comparison, the South Africans had only 175 tanks, but almost all of them during this time were destroyed [damaged] by the Cubans from «Katyusha» lorry-mounted multiple rocket launchers. After this, the South Africans sued for peace (after March¹⁶ 1988)¹⁷.

– What about their airplanes?

– They could not overcome our reinforced – more precisely the Cuban anti aircraft defences.

– The Cubans began to use MIG-23 fighter aircraft SU-22, very much state-of-the-art for those conditions?

– Yes.

– And the agreement was signed?

– Yes, at the end of 1988.

What can I tell to you? In the first place, I wouldn't be sitting here if it weren't for the Cubans. Secondly, I wouldn't be

¹⁵ 600 [800] Cuban tanks (note by ed.-comp.).

¹⁶ On 12th and 21st of March 1988 the heaviest of battles took place between the South African army and the Cuban and Angolan troops near Cutio-Cuanavale. The South Africans were forced to retreat, because of the danger of their units being encircled by the Cuban troops who has landed in the ports of southern Angola. The battle could be classed to have finished as a draw, but in reality South Africa had lost (note by ed.-comp.).

¹⁷ In 1988 there were 55000 Cuban servicemen in Angola, out of these 40000 in the south of the country (30000 FAPLA soldiers were also there). The Cubans concentrated up to 600 tanks and over 1000 anti aircraft systems there (from Fidel Castro's speech on a rally on the 2nd of December 2005).

sitting here if the Cubans hadn't supplied us. Thirdly, I wouldn't be sitting here if the Cubans hadn't fought for Angola. Here are three factors. And when the Cubans withdrew from Angola in 1990, the government of Angola gave their officers fans as decorations. What a nightmare!!!

– What did they give the Cuban soldier?

– Nothing. It was such a fraud!! It was such an inconsiderate attitude towards the Cubans, who had lost in Angola 15000 men killed, wounded or missing. At the withdrawal of the Cuban armies from Angola, my friend was present. You may well imagine – a Cuban officer of the rank of major departs but he gets a fan for his service in Angola. And what is this worth? Absolutely nothing. And what type of behaviour is this? Is it normal?

– What were the causes of the Angolan defeat in 1987?

– One can talk much and for a long time about the reasons of defeats. The Soviet military advisors (in particular Generals Gusev and Ryabchenko) conducted this operation very ably – everything worked out beautifully. But the problem was that they planned the campaign in such a way as they were accustomed always to doing it, that is for Soviet soldiers. A Soviet soldier would have carried it out. But in fact it was carried out by Angolan soldiers. Cuban soldiers or our own soldiers would have carried this out without any problem. But as I already mentioned, the Cubans told our generals, “wait – what are you doing, on whom are you relying? You must rely on these (Angolan) soldiers”. But our officers already provided a time frame – to fulfil objectives by a certain time, to depart by a certain date for such and such a line. This was, of course pure fantasy. And the Cubans warned us not to do this. But our advisors did not listen.

The Angolan army at that moment was already, of course, sufficiently strong to execute its operational tasks, rather well prepared and, with the help of its Soviet specialists, well supplied with war technology and weaponry. Despite all the nuances and blunders in the training of its staff, to which with

I already referred, the Angolans were prepared to fight, could fight (and actually did fight) quite successfully with UNITA, and the Angolan army's morale was already sufficiently high. At the beginning of the operation, there was even a moment when it seemed as if UNITA was on the edge of defeat, some more efforts and victory was near.

But then the South African army involved itself¹⁸.

The Angolans were afraid to fight against them and were not particularly able to do so. The "Buffalo" battalion in general aroused in them a panic-like fear. I pointed this out in my diary. Although when we found ourselves encircled, the Angolans, were able to satisfy themselves that the "Buffalo" soldiers were, after all, not that awful, only then to die from the bullets.

Returning to the Cubans, one can add that they fought very competently in Angola. In practice, they did not trust the results of the Angolan intelligence service, organised their own special units, made out of Cuban negroes, which patrolled the Angolan territory, the jungles and savannahs and collected the necessary reconnaissance information, plus out of the way reconnaissance from the remote interior.

¹⁸ In western historiography the unsuccessful Angolan offensive "Towards October" in September-December 1987, and the later South African offensive on Cuito Cuanavale is called the "General Shaganovitch Offensive". In the opinion of the western political scientists and historians "General Shaganovich was a famous chemical expert, who conducted a chemical war against the poor UNITA and South African troops." It is of interest that a general with this surname never even existed! And in dozen of historical books you have this nonsense written! Infantry Lieutenant-General Vasilii Shahnovich was the chief military adviser in Angola in 1977-1980. After his return from Angola he served as the deputy head of the Higher Officers Courses "Vystrel" near Moscow. Died in 1984. Colonel-General Konstantin Kurochkin, former First Deputy Commander of the airborne forces, was the chief military adviser in Angola in 1982-1985. After General Kurochkin the chief military adviser in Angola in 1985-1987 was Lieutenant-General of the airborne forces Leonid Kusmenko, whereas the failed operation "Towards October" ("Greeting October") was planned by infantry Lieutenant-General Petr Gusev (he was the chief military adviser in Angola in 1987-1990) and his head of staff Major-General of the airborne forces Ivan Ryabchenko (note by ed.-comp.).

The Angolans, themselves, had also their own out of the way reconnaissance information. It was, for example, the 29th brigade at Soyo in the north where they trained such troops. Then they moved on to the rear of the enemy, including UNITA and the South African armies, so as to execute their stipulated assignments and gather information.

The Cubans did not trust the Angolans, did all their business on their own. The only organisation with which the Cubans were very much in contact was SWAPO. As I already mentioned, with SWAPO were our Soviet advisors who very much admired the members of SWAPO, their training and their efforts to learn the skills of warfare, their readiness to execute instructions and their ability to execute orders, etc.

For example, they assigned SWAPO the task of blowing up a bridge in Namibian territory. They went and blew up the bridge. On the way back, their group ran into some sort of ammunition dump. They blew up this storehouse, assembled there a portable radio station, "Rakal" and brought other necessary apparatus. But they fulfilled these tasks spontaneously, without having to be told by anyone else.

Near Lubango, there was a big centre for the training of SWAPO members, where our own advisors and specialists also worked. About the SWAPO fighters, I can only speak in the most positive way. They came to us, and I, myself, met SWAPO fighters many times, together with our own specialists (and I worked with them several times).

There was an interesting case, when, in 1997, I served in Angola, by then with the forces of the UN and found myself in a company of Namibian peacemakers, and one Namibian captain (formerly a SWAPO fighter) recognised me from the year 1986.

The training and spirit of SWAPO could in no ways be compared to the Angolan forces. It was a simple fact that the SWAPO fighters very seldom let themselves be made prisoners. Only if they were badly wounded, suffered shell shock, etc. Usually if SWAPO fighters perished, they did so with several

South Africans. And the UNITA troops were simply afraid of SWAPO.

The Cubans maintained close relations with the members of SWAPO, conducted joint operations, and there is the concrete example when, as I already mentioned (March, 1988) massed together in the province of Cunene 1500 (600–800) tanks, including tanks from Angola, SWAPO and Cuba.

- Tanks and not armoured troop carriers?

- Tanks to be exact.

- But how many armoured troop carriers?

- God knows!

- And what were the actions of the Cuban special-purpose forces?

- The Cubans sent their special-purpose forces to the rear of UNITA and South African troops with concrete instructions – to blow up such-and-such ammunition dump, to destroy now this or that objective. Thereupon they returned absolutely tired because of fatigue – it was evident that they had then had to walk 100 kilometres until the helicopter would pick them up, but more often they simply managed under their own steam. The Special Forces fairly often consisted of Cuban negroes. They reported that more than once they had met up with American special forces. And if the group of special forces had various tasks to accomplish, then they would peacefully disperse, greeting each other and waving at each other off.

- And if there was a common task?

- For the special purpose force of any state, there is an unwritten law – if they meet during a battle the special purpose force of the enemy, and if their commander throws away all his weapons and goes to the enemy only armed with a knife or an engineering shovel, then his group and the enemy will do the same. And if anyone should make one single shot, even from a pistol, then his group must leave the field of battle in disgrace. Such were the distinctive rules.

- What was the state of the American special purpose forces?

– They were technically well equipped but weak in morale. Here is one interesting story. Nine Cubans, all taught by Soviet instructors, came to the job, and they were met by 20 Americans. These behaved rudely, figuring that they could easily prevail over the Cubans and hand-to-hand fighting broke out with knives and engineering shovels. Soon, the remaining Americans (only several survived) ran away while the Cubans, all to a man, were wounded but remained alive and victorious.

– How were the Cubans as fighters?

– As I have already said once before, If there had been no Cuba, Angola would long ago have perished. And why? – because the Cubans followed one particular order more than any other – “Fidel Castro willed it”, and that was it.

Here is a captured South African tank in the photograph – it was a press conference. I have a cassette where the whole conference was recorded. Fidel Castro – he was a first class speaker (I somehow was present at a meeting with him at the Cuban embassy – it was in 1989). At that time, he said literally the following – that in this battle of the 11th March, 1988, at Cuito Cuanavale, the South African air force was not able to operate because of exceptionally bad weather conditions. But, on the other hand, South African tanks flew in the air. Beautifully said? He had in mind that at the time of the attack, five South African tanks of the “Olifant” class had, one after the other, been blown up by mines. Four tanks were turned into flat cake – but the fifth was dragged over to our side by the Cubans.

– How did it happen?

– The situation was such, (as I have already mentioned) that in the Angolan army there were many traitors. That is, those who transmitted information. And the freshest information was for UNITA. Well, it was enough to say that the first cousin of Pedro Antonio Pedale, the minister of defence, was working in the UNITA chief of staff.

In our 21st brigade, the chief of operational services, an Angolan, was a traitor – we saw through him literally within

two weeks. And thanks to this traitor, UNITA and the South Africans knew practically everything about the Angolan units, their movements, their weapons their fighting morale (if there was any such), their plans, their tasks, etc.

If the Angolan brigade went on the defensive, then it mined the fields in front of it, naturally. The maps of these mined fields very often turned up in the hands of the enemy, and the South Africans, therefore, moved through the minefields and attacked the Angolan brigades.

The Cubans involved themselves in this, also mining the fields while their maps gave other (false) indications. The South Africans calmly moved on, considering as usual that they had cleared the area of mines and... «flew into the air».

At the same time, the Cubans succeeded in seizing a South African film of this battle on March 11, 1988: the South Africans were moving in their tanks, and playing on harmonicas. And suddenly, one after the other were blown up and the tanks flew in the air (as Fidel Castro put it) – and the South African cameraman didn't even get to switch off his camera. It was all imprinted in the film.

Furthermore, in obtaining all these forged maps of mined fields, about which I have already spoken, the Cubans persuaded our advisors to have the Angolan brigades operate with Soviet and Cuban advisors. And after it the things became very successful indeed.

In the first place, the Cubans did not have the tolerance we did. Because we acted with persuasions and exhortations – “Yes, you must do such and such.” With the Cubans, everything was simpler – “if you haven't done it, you'll be punished”. And these would be punished with whatever came in handy. I don't want to suggest that the Cubans practiced the beating of Angolans.

The Cubans were splendid fellows – the Spanish language, after all, is similar to Portuguese. They were able to persuade the Angolans that these were not correct, and as I already said, after that it was possible to do with the Angolans anything they liked.

With the Cubans, for example, everything was clearly organised.

Cuban helicopters came to us in Cuito Cuanavale. They brought equipment, produce, cigarettes, writing materials, new groups of soldiers. And then helicopters flew back. Of course, a crowd collected right away. The Cubans collected first in turn, the wounded and sick Cubans, Soviets and Angolans. Then they took their own troops and, of course, the Soviets. That is, we came in the first series.

And only after this, if there was still space remaining in the helicopter, did they take on the Angolans who were not sick or wounded. Therefore, a huge Cuban stood at the entrance of the helicopter. And if there was any problem, «used force».

Some our advisors tried to say, “Why did you act this way?” At this comment, a perplexed Cuban looked at our advisor and said – “and what else? Tell me how, and I will then do it”.

Besides, the Cubans concluded their own affairs in a very clear manner and severely asked the Angolans about the fulfilment of those tasks assigned to them.

The Cubans directly participated in the Angolan general staff in the working out of all operations. And there and then on the job, they showed these same Angolans how one ought to do something, how one ought not to do something and also persuaded our own Soviet advisors to adapt to the local conditions. “Adapt yourselves to the cadres with which you work but don’t judge the situation as if it were the Soviet Union”.

It is necessary to say that after its arrival in Angola, little Cuba lost 15, 000 men, killed, wounded and missing in action. We lost in Afghanistan 15 000 of our Soviet troops killed but that was us, while Cuba was only a small state.

And of course, they simply did not understand that relation of Gorbachev’s to the Cubans. Because the Cubans, responding to our order or request (the so-called “request – order), moved into Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia, and into Kampuchea, Vietnam and Nicaragua, and any other place. “Please” said the Soviets, “the Cubans moved wherever Fidel Castro ordered them”.

After all this, to break relations with Cuba would have been simply incomprehensible.

Just at this time, we went into their embassy to copy a film about Cuito Cuanavale. And the embassy lads said to us – we somehow don't understand all this attitude of a new Russian government to us. In their voice, resentment and bewilderment could be heard.

– Some more words about the Cubans

– The Cubans were our brothers and we became acquainted with their officers in Angola who sometimes provided us with drinking bouts. They considered themselves fortunate simply to render us assistance. Any holiday presented itself as an interesting moment – examples were the 9th of May, 1st of May, 7th of November, 23rd of February. We, Soviets, would receive an order from our Higher Command – to raise our vigilance, to avoid consumption of liquor, to post sentries, to occupy defensive positions, so to speak, etc.

The Cubans regularly received liquor by transport – ordinary, not homemade whisky and gin (“Havana club – that fetid rum). But very little rum actually came – basically mostly whisky. Most interestingly, bottles came by the litre, and for every four soldiers – for the soldiers, not the officers! And in observance of holidays.

Well, the Cuban tactical group was certainly worth it. They somehow needed to observe a holiday. Everything was clear – the sentries were at their posts . . . A bottle for every four soldiers arrives. But if more arrived, then a litre bottle went to every two soldiers. And very often, there was the scene of our sitting among ourselves in the dining room – a car would arrive, accompanied by uneven steps, indicating that the Cubans had already arrived, drunk.

“They climbed out”.

“Geronimo!”

“It's me – why?”

“Do you want to drink?”

I answered, “And what's this?”

“They sent us whisky”.

The Cubans, themselves, arrived, and they were well aware of our Soviet “problems” with drinking.

“Yes, we know all about your Soviet rubbish”.

One Cuban usually made fun of me, saying: «Once again, a telegram had come urging you to “raise your vigilance”?

Yes, it came indeed!

“Now let’s raise but ... our glasses”.

And he set a bottle on the table. “Let’s raise our glasses”.

I exclaimed, “Well, a bloody agent provocateur!”

Well, this was how things were – that is, we lived in harmony with the Cubans. They were somewhat at a distance from us – we were 13 kilometres from Cuito-Cuanavale while they were 25, or 12 kilometres away from us.

– And how were the Cubans as fighters?

– The Cubans fought very well. But when, in 1975, the Cubans routed the Zaireans, it was all reported as a great victory for the Angolan army, even though the Cubans were present. Fidel Castro said, “Forward, lads,” and they scattered the column of Zairean troops, coming from the north and sprayed them from BM-21 (“Katyusha”) multiple rocket launchers. They simply wiped them out with raw firepower, so that there was no one there who remained intact. Yet it was said “these Angolans are fine chaps”, etc., etc.

In 1977, there was introduced a holiday carnival, under the slogan, “From Cabinda to Cunene, one people, one nation.” This was when the Cubans wiped out a South African military column in the province of Cunene, in the south of Angola. They wiped out everything in sight, and went as far as hand-to-hand fighting. The Cubans simply beat the shit out of the South Africans. And thereafter, for 15 years, this festival/carnival was observed. “A great victory for FAPLA!” But FAPLA was, for the most part, simply not there – you couldn’t even pick up their scent.

The Cubans did everything of any importance!

To summarise, I want to point out one thing – if it had not

been for Cuba, Angola would have ceased to exist very soon – Angola would have simply been wiped from the face of the earth. It would have been – as in the case of Namibia from 1915 to 1990, a territory occupied by South Africa. Alternatively, perhaps Zaire would have marched in from the north, and seized the oil-rich districts of Angola.

Addenda:

The then commander of the South African defence forces (SADF), General Geldenhuis, in his memoirs, Jannie Geldenhuis, *A General's Story. From an era of War and Peace*, Johannesburg, 1995 writes on pp. 222-223:

“The results of the fighting between September 1987 and April 1988 were as follows:

Cuban-Fapla forces (Damage done by SADF and Unita)		SA Defence Force (Damage done by Soviets ¹⁹ Cuban and FAPLA)	
Tanks	94	Tanks	3
Armoured troop and combat vehicles	100	Ratel infantry fighting ²⁰ vehicles	5
BM21/BM14 MRLs		Casspirs	3
D30/M-46 guns ²¹	9	Rinkhals	1
TMM mobile bridges	7	Withings	1

¹⁹ Only 6–12 soviet military advisers, specialists and military interpreters took part in hostilities in every FAPLA brigade. Two (three) of them (one Colonel, one Second-Lieutenant and may be one Soldier) lost their lives (were mortally wounded) in 1987–1988 near Cuito Cuanavale. Cubans confirmed the lost of 39 military personnel (note by ed.-comp.).

²⁰ What about AML-60 and AML-90 lost by SADF in Angola in 1987–1988? How many? (note by ed.-comp.).

²¹ Geldenhuis lumps together standard gun D-30 (range 15.5 km), old BM-14 MRL (range 9.5 km), standard BM-21 MRL (range 20.5 km), long-range gun M-46 (range 27.5 km). But BM-21 and M-46 could not parry G-5 and G-6 range (39–47 km) because the new rockets for BM-21 MLR (range 40 km) were introduced only in 1998 (note by ed.-comp.).

Logistic vehicles	389	Kwevoel (Last five all vehicles)	1
Artillery, rocket and missile systems	15	Radars	5
23-mm anti-aircraft guns	22		
MIG21/23 combat aircraft	9	Mirage F1 fighter aircraft (one as a result of enemy action, one as a result of an accident	2
		Bosbok light reconnaissance aircraft ²²	1

On the Cuban-Fapla side 4785 men were killed in action. These are confirmed figures²³ and do not include the deserters, the wounded and those who died of their wounds later. The real figure is probably a few thousand more. On South African side 31 men were killed in action. This is the real figure²⁴. Six more of our troops of malaria...²⁵

The author commentaries, made on September, 2003

– As far as concerns the number of killed and wounded, given in the above table, I doubt their accuracy. Thus, just during the period of my service in the 21st FAPLA brigade, not less than four South African Mirage-type aircraft were shot down, as well as one reconnaissance plane and two helicopters.

[I don't wish to insult General Geldenhuis, respected not only by his compatriots but also by his former enemies, but he

²² General "forgot" to mention South African helicopters and AMLs. Why? (note by ed.-comp.).

²³ "Confirmed figures" include loses of FAPLA figures counted by UNITA. These (UNITA) figures were usually about 35–40 times higher than in reality (note by ed.-comp.).

²⁴ About 40 South Africans killed and 280 wounded in 1987–1988? These figures are incorrect, but South African military archives are still unavailable (note by ed.-comp.).

²⁵ Jannie Geldenhuis. A General's Story. From an Era of War and Peace. Johannesburg, 1995. P. 222–223.

cites, to put it mildly, incorrect data about the losses of the South African army, in particular the aircraft. Thus, he does not introduce the heavy losses of UNITA (hundreds of them perished every day during major battles near Cuito Cuanavale in March 1988), but only those of the South African army (SADF), a formation of only 40 men. Moreover, he, intentionally or unintentionally, lumps together FAPLA with the Cubans, and, added to this, doesn't even remember SWAPO – three very big differences as concerns their levels of preparation and ability to fight. And he minimises the fact that the threat of Fidel Castro to seize the whole Namibia resolved the war's outcome, because he had, by March, 1988, overwhelming quantitative and qualitative military superiority, both in land and in the air²⁶.

Thus, in answer to the question, how much time would the Soviet or Cuban armies have needed to expel the South Africans from south Angola, if they had been there instead of the Angolan armies and launched an attack from September, 1987, Lieutenant Colonel Igor Zhdarkin answered, "At most a half year – comment from Dr Gennady Shubin.]

- Igor, did the Angolans use the T-34 tanks at Cuito-Cuanavale or only the T-54b, T-55 and T-62?
- The T-34s were dug in for the defence of the airfields.
- When, for some time after Cuito, you served as an interpreter in a tank school, did they prepare the Angolan crews for the T-54 or the T-55?
- For the T-55b.

²⁶ SADF were defeated by Cubans in several little-known battles after Cuito Cuanavale in April – June 1988. SADF started to blow bridges on Namibian border after Cuban offensive from Southern Angola (Kahama) (600–800 tanks and 30000 military personnel) and had two choices – to be kicked out from Namibia by Cubans or to sign the agreement and agree with Namibian independence. South African political and military circles signed the agreement and declare themselves the political and military winners. In reality the agreement was signed, which required the withdrawal of the South African forces from Angola in return for the gradual withdrawal of the Cuban forces from Angola (note by ed.-comp.).

- Did the Cuban special forces meet the American Special Forces only in Angola or also in Namibia?
- Only in Angola.
- Who commanded the Cuban forces at Cuito-Cuanavale?
- Brigadier General Ochoa²⁷.
- For the benefit of the cows “speaking Portuguese”?
- It was in 1986. I don’t remember the month but it was at the beginning of the rainy season. A commission arrived to visit us in the 19th brigade, composed partly from the district and partly from Luanda, headed by Colonel Mishchenko, secretary of the Party organisation, the CBC and C (the Soviet military councillors and specialists) in Angola. They made an inspection of the military service, they passed through the defence positions, and even visited a minefield (at the initiative of the same Mishchenko).

Naturally, in the opinion of the high command, everything about us in the 19th brigade was “bad”, even “very bad”!!! At the evening assembly, Mishchenko announced all those claims, and there remained nothing for us to do except humbly to agree, in that, as is well known, the commander is always right!

But on top of everything, a completely unexpected question was asked by the inspector-engineer: “And, by the way, didn’t you mine your mission at night?” We were all somewhat stunned by such a question. Finally the chief of our group, Lieutenant-Colonel Konstantinovich exclaimed:

“But, excuse me, what for?”

“What for?” – the inspector-engineer was genuinely surprised – “for your own security. At night you place the mines, in the morning, you take them away. It’s all so very simple”.

²⁷ Upon returning to Cuba the hero of the war in Ethiopia (Ogaden, 1978) and in Angola (1987–1988), the Cuban Brigade General Orlando Ochoa Sanchez, who effectively waged the battle of Cuito-Cuanavale, was sentenced to death in 1989, officially for participation in the drugs trade (note by ed.-comp.).

“You see, the civil population lives around here – the cows and goats roam, sometimes even without any supervision”.

“So what, after all, you write signboards in Portuguese. For example – ‘watch out for mines’, etc...”

I was then only a young Lieutenant and until now, they had not let me speak, but, hearing such “wise suggestions”, I lost patience and blurted out, “But of course, and then the cows will go and read the signboards in Portuguese?!” If it would be possible to burn a man to ashes by means of a glance, then from Mishchenko’s own glance, I truly would have turned just into a heap of ashes.

– How were the mines maintained?

– In general, the mines were stored sufficiently sensibly, with attention to measures of precaution, but it was another matter as to how they were maintained.

I forgot to say that at the time of this commission’s arrival, we, in addition, conducted our “journey” through the mined field, established in front of one of the battalions of our brigade. Having just come from Luanda, colonel, the inspector-engineer (a specialist in military engineering problems), decided to find out the condition of mines in the minefield, and proposed to walk through it so as to verify the situation. Reacting to such a proposal, the eyes on the forehead of Major Durdenko, the advisor to the battalion commander, just stuck out (and, frankly speaking, so did those of the rest of the staff, both Soviet and Angolan). But, as they say, there is nothing for it, if the chief wishes to do it – well then, all the rest wish to do the same. We all moved in single file and I placed myself at the very end. As we were walking, the newly arrived engineer exclaimed, “Well where these mines are – I don’t see them!” Finally, he had almost stepped on one of them when the local district engineer, named Ignatiev, held him back. The inspector-engineer was very pleased to see a mine and proposed to Durdenko to verify the condition of this mine. Durdenko of course refused. The inspector began to assure him that it was not frightening. The main thing, as he said, was not to put pressure on the lever.

Durdenko explained in a very «popular way», with the use of specific Russian words, that he could only with difficulty imagine such a lever.

Finally, Ignatiev unscrewed the lever and everybody could see that inside the mine there was water, moreover little rust. “See this here”, the inspector exclaimed – and all because the mines have not been maintained in the proper manner!”

From his words, it was understood that the Angolans, together with our advisors, should regularly conduct similar «trips» over the minefield, unscrew the levers and service the mines. But how exactly the Angolans could be driven into the field, he didn't explain.

Following his order, Ignatiev, the district engineer, remained with us after the commission's departure, in order to inspect the military engineer property (the mines, first of all), and also to conduct some studies with the Angolans. Ignatiev (unfortunately, I forgot his patronymic) appeared very calm, composed person, without any pretences. We became fast friends with him, particularly when he realised I was serving in the sapper corps. Therefore, I worked with him for over two weeks.

And, frankly speaking, there was a lot of work. There were very few competent engineers in the brigade, and the Angolans did not possess any specific knowledge about this problem. All mines, as well as their fuses were verified, and also places and means of their maintenance. In addition, we showed how to charge the fuses: wind them up like alarm clocks, press on the levers and they are ready for action. The Angolans liked all this very much. Several of them spent half a day with us, “playing with alarm clocks”. Moreover, we repeated several times that they shouldn't throw mines around as if they were watermelons, that they should be careful. Otherwise, one never knows, if not being accurate, they could blow themselves up.

But, as they say, what we had warned about, turned out to be. We were sitting at home in the mission, apparently resting after dinner. Suddenly in the distance, in the direction of the

brigade, there was a powerful explosion so that the ground shook under our feet. Ignatiev and I looked at each other, suddenly understanding everything, rushed into the car and drove off to the brigade. There it was explained to us that several Angolans were loading mines into a storage places – in effect a large dugout. One Angolan stood in the very deep of the storehouse near some mines, while another was in the centre of the dugout, and a third stood at the entrance. A fourth provided the mines and stood outside. But they tossed the mines to each other as we had advised them against, namely as if they had been watermelons. Evidently, someone failed to catch it, and the storehouse was almost full... As a result, sadly, out of all four, they found only the boot of that Angolan who had stood outside.

– What was the “punishment” of the operational section chief of the 21st brigade’s for his betrayal?

– When we were already on the defence, covering Cuito-Cuanavale, (after all those reversals of fortune with the encirclement), and a new commander for the operational section was sent – unfortunately, I forgot his name. He was always very courteous with us Soviets, several times invited us to small celebrations on the occasion of this or that local anniversary, constantly consulted us on the most varied issues, demonstrated feverish activity and devotion to the “cause of the revolution”.

On the other hand, from the time of his arrival, a number of our groups fell into the ambushes of UNITA and the South African army. And the South Africans began to hit our positions much more accurately than before, as well as the command point of our brigade. On the whole, the impression arose that they were always relatively well informed about our movements and intentions. As a result it generally appeared that this comrade was simply a traitor who, on the sly, informed the enemy about everything possible. His «punishment» was severe. He was taken away from our brigade and sent to the rear, somewhat farther away from the front.

– What was the situation when you handed over the coordinates of your 21st brigade, after which the South Africans began to hit you with greater precision?

– Being all the time on the move (on operations), we went from place to place and whenever we would occupy a fixed position, naturally, we would communicate our coordinates to the military district base. Of course, in the beginning this was done by the Angolans (the brigade command), but, apparently, they did this inaccurately because, during the bombardment by the South Africans, the shells fell inaccurately – many over flew the target or did not reach it. Our Mikhailych was a very scrupulous man and he always took full responsibility for a situation. He determined the coordinates and transmitted them precisely, in contrast to the Angolans. Evidently, in the district (Cuito-Cuanavale), within the Angolan command, there were traitors who, upon acquiring the coordinates, transmitted them to the enemy. Because our coordinates were more accurate, the result after we had transmitted them, the South Africans began to hit our brigade more accurately. Naturally, we discovered this very fast and Mikhailych raised this issue at various levels, several times, but no measures were taken.

– Did you like the South African G-3 rifle?

– Maybe it played here a role to which I had already become acquainted, dealing with the Kalashnikov automatic. The G-3 is practically 50% made out of plastic. The frame with its breech is to the left (and not to the right as with the Kalashnikov automatic). Moreover, it is located there where the front end in the AK is located, which is unusual.

When my cartridge was jammed inside the G-3, out of habit, I (as in the Kalashnikov automatic), began to pull the breech aside and it and broke. I thought with horror that suddenly this could happen, and in combat! I was pleased that this G-3 could easily and quickly be unpacked (pull out the pins and find fragments of the rifle in your hands). It was, for example convenient for cleaning and carrying in ones bag. It was, for its part, comparatively light, but, as I heard and read, rather unpredictable,

in contrast to the AK for which it was all the same whether you laid it in the sand or in the water.

– They used the floating tank (PT-76) in Angola, but did they use it at Cuito-Cuanavale?

– I saw the PT-76 more than once in Angola. It was standard military equipment of FAPLA reconnaissance units. For example, during our first year, a number of PT-76s were in the reconnaissance company in the 19th brigade at Mulondo (the 5th military district). At Cuito-Cuanavale, I didn't see them, although it is possible that they were in neighbouring brigades – I can't say exactly. But in any case, it was difficult not to notice this tank since it was different from other armoured devices.

– Did they use airborne military vehicles (BMD-1) in Angola?

– Indeed, they did inasmuch as BMD-1 was compact and very effective. Maybe Angolan special troops and deep reconnaissance troops were equipped with such vehicle²⁸. The Cubans certainly used it in Angola. But I never saw it personally.

– Did they use self-propelled artillery installations?²⁹

– Apparently not. In any case, I didn't have occasion to see it.

– Did the Ilyushin-18 or Ilyushin-62 take off and land in Angola?

– Advisors, specialists and interpreters flew in on Ilyushin-62s or Tupolev-134s. They transported materiel, it seems, on ships or on Ilyushin-76s. The Ilyushin-18 was of course used by the Cubans. This plane was very convenient for transport of personnel. In 1997 I even had the occasion to see how the Romanian contingent of the UN forces flew in on an Ilyushin-18. Evidently our country used to sell these planes to many of our allies.

²⁸ Correct.

²⁹ Small bunch of SU-100 (self-propelled artillery installations) was used in Angola in 1976–1981 (note by ed.-comp.).

– What about the “Unimog” car in which they transported UNITA forces?

– The first time I heard about it was from that same UNITA soldier which we took into captivity (the reconnaissance spotter). I, myself, never had occasion to see it, even in a photo. But after this event, I heard several times how others referred to it.

– And what about the shot down Mirage – wasn’t there Soviet equipment on board?

– The question of Soviet equipment on board of the South African Mirage airplane remained unresolved. Whether the South Africans removed equipment preserved intact from some downed Soviet-manufactured plane, flown by Angolan pilots, or whether they purchased it somewhere (but where?), attracted by the widely known, excellent quality of its performance, in general all this has remained unexplained.

– How much did they, at the Cuito Cuanavale headquarters, understand the situation at the front?

– In fact, at Cuito Cuanavale headquarters, it is possible that they did understand the situation (no doubt the Soviets understood it exactly). But while they argued about it, discussed it and took decisions (the Angolans loved to talk and consider a question from all points of view, as they were wont to say), the actual situation continued to change so that their decisions and instructions reached us somewhat late, by which time already a different decision was necessary. Furthermore, the Angolans did not always report the situation objectively. They hid certain things while they feared to report others. Therefore, the Senior Soviet Advisor of the military district and the Soviet command demanded from us to report the situation objectively and efficiently, hiding nothing – something which we in fact tried to do. But then our advisors went to the Angolans and began a very long discussion there, which I have already mentioned. All this influenced very negatively upon the general situation and, in particular, upon the situation at the front.

– And what about “as FAPLAS Gloriosas?”

– This term was constantly used in the mass media of

Angola, in all official documents, and in every speech. Naturally, all FAPLA's victories, achieved with the help, for example, of the Cubans, were attributed to "as FAPLAS Gloriosas". Perhaps, by the way, this was necessary for the raising of the morale of the Angolan armed forces, so as to enable them at last to believe in themselves and to stop being afraid, even of UNITA. We often joked, particularly after any unsuccessful measures by the Angolans, this was the achievement of "os Macacos Gloriosos" ("the Glorious Monkeys").

The most interesting fact is that first time I heard that expression "os Macacos Gloriosos" not from the Soviets who served in Angola but from one Angolan – the chief of Angolan unit in the armed forces. We sat with him listening to the news from the Angolan radio and it transmitted the bravado information concerning the FAPLA victories. That Angolan chief, having heard "as FAPLAS Gloriosas" cursed and said: «What a fuck – "as FAPLAS Gloriosas"!? "Os Macacos Gloriosos!"». The matter was that right before it one of FAPLA combat operations (where that Angolan took part) had been overburdened. Listening to his words I didn't know what to say or what to do.

- Old weapons – a mortar of 1939 vintage

- One of the Angolans (an officer) read in a technical description of mortar M-39 [82 mm] that it was first released in 1939, and he began scornfully to say that here in Angola they [the Soviets] "throw away" their old clothes.

Our advisor, hearing this, asked me to translate just the following: "the year 1939 does not mean 'old clothes', but rather that the mortar is so effective that until today, it is used in the Armed Forces of the USSR and excellently proves itself, and it is as yet not known when it will be withdrawn from production". After such a rebuke, the Angolan apologised, saying that he had not known this. After it he recalled the T-34 tank which had been used still in the Great Patriotic War and which until today was used in Angola, for example, in guarding airfields.

– Apropos the fact how you “fed the clothes lice in the trenches”

– We had to experience all this on our own back. The point was that, as we bitterly joked, the South African bombardments continued 25 hours out of 24, so that there was no way we could wash ourselves normally with hot water. We had to hurriedly wash ourselves with only cold water. And when we already stood at the Miane river (end of October-beginning of November), our technician, Sasha Fatyanov, (while we were sleeping together under an armoured troop carrier), suddenly asked me, “Igor, don’t you have any feeling that someone is running around your body?” I had been having that very feeling in fact for the past few days and I thought about lice. This sensation was already familiar to me, inasmuch as when I had been serving in the Siberian military district (as a soldier), in our garrison we had such a problem with lice and struggled against them.

On the whole, when Sasha Fatyanov and I checked our clothes, we found many of them in the folds and wrinkles of our clothes, as Sasha Fatyanov called them – the most common, «standard» clothes lice. Therefore, we had to destroy that shit – the combat situation at that time was just like a sort of calm. We boiled the water and washed ourselves well, and yet our clothes still had to be burnt, even though the Africans begged us not to burn them, saying that they would very well be able to soak them in kerosene. Yet we decided not to take risks inasmuch as the Africans also slept next to us under the armoured troop carrier and we didn’t want to pick up things again.

– Did the bombardment on December 25, Catholic Christmas, hit all the kitchen utensils – for food as well as for liquor?

– The 25th of December is considered by the Angolans as a holiday – not only because of Christmas, but also as Family Day. Naturally we counted on the good will of the South Africans hoping that they would not spoil such holidays. But already at 8 o’clock in the morning, at breakfast time, so to

speaking, they launched eight shells on the Commanding Post of our Brigade. All day, they fired at us more than 120 shells from 125-mm guns. Just between 17:00 and 18:00, 85 shells were fired. The entire day, there was firing to the point of physical exhaustion. When finally, the bombardment ended, we came to our improvised kitchen and discovered that all the kitchen utensils, the crockery, the table, the tarpaulin, and the water-filled barrel had been pierced by the fragments – this, by the way, was told to our Command by Mikhalych in his December 26 telegram. When we decided at least to «drop off» – to drown our sorrows in drink, our technician, Sasha Fatyanov suddenly revealed to us that the canister with our «fire-water» had been perforated right in its bottom by the shell fragment and all the hooch had run out. This was just too much!!!

Just then, the brigade commander arrived, learned about our grief, and offered his help. A soldier brought spirits from the brigade commander's reserve stock and we at last relaxed.

– And how did you amuse yourselves – playing cards, checkers, and backgammon?

– Cards, checkers, and backgammon – we played everything. Naturally, there were few entertainments and to say the truth we did not have enough time for all those things. Of particular interest was that I did not become a master in backgammon according to the normal rules– but perhaps I simply didn't want to. But our artillery specialist (Sushchenko) and our technician (Sasha Fatyanov) were simply masters at the game and played together constantly. As far as cards are concerned, these people constantly played «King», the so-called “officers' preference”. With us at Cuito, there stayed grand masters in the game of “preference”, for example, Colonel Nikolai Vladimirovich Zinoviev – our chief specialist. I served in the Air Defence Brigade at that time. In the beginning, he won everything he could (although, on the whole, we always played for cigarettes). Later on, out of the goodness of his heart, he would begin to hand these cigarettes out. He just couldn't stand to see how people were torturing

themselves without cigarettes. I too tried to play, but this somehow didn't attract me, even though I had a few times played and people were saying that I had the gift for all this, that this gift should be developed, etc.

– How did your diary miraculously survive – tell us in greater detail how you burned up the documents, how close you came to destroying your diary.

– When we had been caught in the encirclement at the banks of the Ube River, we began to burn all documents which could attract any interest whatsoever for the South Africans and UNITA. But, to be honest, I still held out the hope that we would escape and extricate ourselves somehow. I burned tables of secret code, some circular instructions dealing with the organisation and conducting of service communication as well as some other papers, which Mikhailych had set aside for rapid destruction. As concerned the diary, Mikhailych said to me, "See for you, but if something happens, my orders were to destroy it!" To be fair, he evidently hoped for a better outcome and did not wish for me to destroy the diary, all the more as he had often helped me in its writing (he had given me indispensable data, had explained details dealing with materiel and weaponry, had counselled me on how best to represent this or the other event, etc).

– The notebook of secret telegrams was supposed to be destroyed!!!

Well I hid that notebook, I didn't burn it. When I had taken it all across the border, I placed the notebook and my diary down on the very bottom of my bag and wrapped them in several layers of paper. If someone would have informed the appropriate services that I was carrying such objects, they would have in fact found them on me, but no one informed, although some people knew about it.

– And what about the fate of H'Geleko, the commander of the 21st brigade?

– I only learned about the fate of Captain N'Geleko, brigade commander, from a South African book, when the

South Africans arrived at your South African institute. In this book, it was written that he had been killed by South African commandos³⁰ in Huambo, either in 1991 or 1992.

– How did you live in wigwams in 1983?

– In 1983, I lived in an Indian canvass tepee, assisting at an All-Union Pow Wow (or Indian Council), passing near the village of Kannelyarvi, near Leningrad. There were convened American Indian specialists from all over the Soviet Union. The small canvass town consisted of over 30 tepees. All these visitors were very fond of Indians, and, moreover, on a very serious, scientific level. I was nicknamed, “Black Moccasin” (after my predilection for black shoes).

– How about giving us more details about Geronimo (the dates of his life and his most important exploits – briefly)

– Geronimo, whose Indian name was “Goyatla”, came from a tribe of Apachee-Bedonkoye but after the Mexicans, during one of their raids, had killed his mother, his wife and his children, he had fled with the rest of his family to live among the Apachee-Chirikahua. For almost a year, Geronimo was in a trance as a result of his recent experiences and was virtually unable to do anything, went without food and barely avoided death, although he had until then been an excellent warrior and sportsman. But suddenly, after a year of such an existence, he had an apparition, endowing him with great strength and telling him that not one arrow or bullet would ever strike him, etc.

Geronimo was not leader in the ordinary sense of the word, but a “Warrior Shirt”, as it was called among the Indians. He was rather a shaman-prophet and a military leader. Chiefs turned to him for wisdom which would come to him in sudden visions. He was a brave and wise warrior, a careful and talented military leader, in whom people trusted completely and followed him in battle, not doubting but knowing that under his

³⁰ The most probably UNITA or South African mercenaries were involved (note by ed.-comp.).

command, they would be led to victory, which in fact usually happened.

For more than 20 years, neither the Americans nor the Mexicans could do anything to Geronimo. The Americans were finally able to capture him only with the help of a ruse. General Nelson Miles sent Lieutenant Charles Gatewood (a friend of Geronimo) with the message that the American government was willing to forgive Geronimo after he and the remainder of his warriors and their families would have spent two years in a Florida prison. After this, they would be allowed to return to Arizona. Geronimo trusted Gatewood (who, for his part, was not aware of the trick which had been prepared), and gave himself up. But the American government, naturally, did not fulfil its promise.

For their uncompromising resistance, the Chirikahua were punished more severely than any other United States Indians. All of them, even women and children were, for almost 30 years, remained prisoners of war, at first in Florida and Alabama and subsequently in Fort Sill in Oklahoma. In 1913, a place for the Chirikahua was selected in the Meskalero reservation in south central New Mexico. Some 23 of the survivors moved to Meskalero, while the remainder stayed at Fort Sill.

Geronimo continued to live another 22 years, at first in Florida and then in Oklahoma where he died and was buried. All the remainder of his life, he regretted the fact that he had believed General Miles. His sanctuary in the mountains of the Sierra Madre was in fact unreachable, neither for the Americans nor for the Mexicans. For example, take the campaign against the Apaches in 1883, when the American General, George Crook (the apaches called him "Nantan-Liupan", or "Captain Grey Wolf"), with more than 5000 soldiers of the regular army, several Mexican regiments and a company of Indian scouts, succeeded in storming the Sierra Madre. After one month of battle, the general's losses amounted to 1024 men at the same time as Geronimo lost all of nine of his warriors!

From the time of Geronimo's surrender, after he had fled into the Sierra Madre mountains, it took still a very long time (up until the 1940s) dealing with Apache, Navaho and Comanche mutinies.

– From where did the nickname, “Geronimo” originate?

– The nickname, “Geronimo”, appeared accidentally in Angola in 1986. One of the Angolans could not pronounce my name, “Igor”. However much he tried, he didn't succeed. But he did manage to pronounce, “Geronimo”. The other blacks liked this and they asked me if I didn't object. I was somewhat taken aback by such coincidence (because I was very fond of American Indians) and agreed. From then on, I was practically always and everywhere introduced to strangers as “Geronimo” (although in front of them, I always gave also my official name, “Igor”). It was most interesting that strangers paused with pleasure at my other name, “Geronimo”. Almost all the military attaches with which I often work nowadays know me as “Geronimo”.

– When did you get married? When was your son born? And when did you mount him on a horse (in Cossack fashion)?

– My wife and I got married in 1988, within several months after my return from Angola. We baptised our son in October 1992 in the Gomel Old Believer Church (our son, Svyatoslav was born on January 9, 1992 – his Church name was Gregory).

On January 9, 1993, according to ancient Cossack custom, I mounted him on a horse (if the little boy cries, he will make a poor Cossack, whereas if he begins to laugh and seizes the horse's mane, everything is as it should be). Right away Svyatoslav seized the mane and giggled several times in a loud voice. Then I, myself sat behind him and transported him for several rounds.

– It so happened that practically all your ancestors had served in the armed forces and took part in the wars?

– You know I am originating from the **Cossack family** and according to our tradition military service is an important part of our life, let me say.

My grand-grandfather took part in the Russian-Turkish war (in the end of the 19th Century); my grandfather participated in the First World War. My father fought against fascists during the Great Patriotic War (Second World War). I am the veteran of two wars – in Angola and in Mozambique.

I hope that my son **Svyatoslav** will become an officer too.

APPENDIX I

The first head of a group of 40 Soviet military specialists and translators in Angola (starting in November 1975) was Colonel V.G. Trofimenko. And the first military adviser was Major-General I. Ponomarenko, who replaced Trofimenko (with his arrival the Soviet mission increased from 200 to 344 people). Lieutenant-General V.V. Shahnovich commanded the Soviet military advisers and specialists from 1977 to 1980. By this time their number had increased to over 500. Lieutenant-General G.S. Petrovsky headed the mission in 1980–1982 and General-Colonel K.Y. Kurochkin during 1982–1985. By this time the size of the mission had risen to over 2000 people and remained at that level until 1988. Lieutenant-General L. Kuz'menko [Kuzmenko] was the chief military adviser during 1985–1988 and Lieutenant-General P.I. Gusev during 1987–1990. In April-November 1990 this post was held by Major-General S. Surodeev and from November 1990 until 1992 by General-Lieutenant V.N. Belyaev. Under him the presence consisted of several dozen people. From 1992 his position was renamed as Chief Military Consultant of the Ministry of Defence of Angola. General V. Lebedev replaced him and occupied the post during 1992–1994.

In total there were 107 Soviet generals and admirals, 7211 officers, more than 12000 servicemen, and if you include the sailors, pilots of the military-transport aviation, aeromechanics, marines, then it will be no less than 30000 servicemen and 1000 civil specialists³¹.

³¹ Sergei Kolomnin, *Russian Special Forces in Africa*, 2005, p. 73–74, 99, 220–221.

Information from the guest page
of the Russian Association of the Angolan War Veterans
webpage

The chairman of the Council of the Regional public organization of the participants in the rendering of International help to the Republic of Angola – “The Union of Angolan War Veterans”, Colonel of the reserve Vadim Andreevich Sagachko writes [05.04.2007]:

...the six Cuban T-55 tanks, which I saw on the battlefield near Cuito-Cuanavale were hit by shaped charge projectiles and burned down together with the crews. And although the Cubans later recovered the remains of their tankmen, among the burnt cartridges we found human bone fragments. Tanks were stationed in defence, in trenches and the ammunition³² was completely used. The guys fought to the bitter end and it appears that they put the enemy out of their temper so much that they worked out the temper by shooting at point-blank at the already burned out tanks using grenade launchers – this is as in the turrets in some the tanks there were another 5–6 grenade launcher holes.

³² The ammunition of a T-55 tank consists of 43 100mm shells and 3500 cartridges for the two 7.62 mm PKT machine guns. The tank is manned by a crew of four (note by ed.-comp.).

³³ After defeating the angolans by the Lomba River, its troops advance toward Cuito-Cuanavale. Angola asks aid to the Cuban command, that sends advisors and some units to defend Cuito-Cuanavale. February 14, 1988 the SADF and the UNITA begin a heavy attack to the Cuito-Cuanavale defenses, supported by 100 armored of various types, among them 40 Olifants Tanks, and by this superiority of forces, they achieve to break the defense of the 59^o Angolan Brigade. To cover this place were urgently thrown the unique 8 T-55 Cubans in movement in Cuito, by the command of the lieutenant colonel Héctor Aguilar. They stop the South African, destroying 10 Olifants and 4 armored cars, and losing 6 T-55 (3 by anti-tanks rockets RPG, and 3 by the Olifants). The remainder of the Olifants retires behind march. In this collision die 14 of the 39 Cubans perished in the

Two destroyed Angolan T-54Bs stood nearby³³ in a mine field so we couldn't inspect it in detail. One of them had a burned out motor section and on the other the front right rollers were destroyed...

battle of Cuito Cuanavale, but this sacrifice went not in vain, therefore the attack of its T-55 saves the situation of the battle, that already was in crisis. This is the first collision in the war between Olifants and Cubans T-55, and is a victory for these, which would be the norm until the end of the war. Then comes the subsequent Cuban offensive toward the Namibian border, pursuing the defeated forces of the South African SADF, after which in June 27, 1988 South Africa asks for peace to Cuba. In this campaign the Cubans T-55 Cubans carried the main weight of the ground war... (Article "Cuban tanks" by Ryben in internet).