



A Review of: “War of Intervention in Angola Vol. 3: Angolan and Cuban Air Forces, 1975-1985”

by Adrien Fontanellaz, Tom Cooper and Jose Augusto Matos¹

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“(...) Cadets that came back to Angola [from USSR training] knew only how to take-off and land: they lacked even the knowledge necessary for us to then take over and further improve their skills. However, we had no time: we had to work them up and send them into combat operations against the guerrillas – under challenging geographic and climatic conditions, and in aircraft not designed for counter-insurgency warfare. Unsurprisingly, losses in pilots, aircraft and helicopters – most caused by pilot-errors, loss of orientation, and similar – were too much frequent.”

This is just one of the striking personal observations – this one from the Cuban Lieutenant-Colonel Manuel Rojas Garcia (p. 33.) – pointing to the major and systemic issues that characterized the Angolan Air Force and Air Defense Force (FAPA/DAA – Força Aérea Popular de Angola/Defesa Anti-Aérea) from its establishment until the mid-80s. These and other deficiencies led to several reorganization and build-up efforts of air defence capacities between 1983-1985, rendering the Armed Forces of Angola (FAPLA – Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola) one of the biggest in Africa, and its air defence system considered the most advanced in the continent by South African military intelligence by 1988.

The book *War of Intervention in Angola, Vol. 3: Angolan and Cuban Air Forces, 1975-1985* traces this journey of evolvement from the colonial beginnings in the late 1930s up to the mid-80s, building on the earlier Vol. 1 and 2. and presenting a great array of new insights. The reader can gain an overview of how FAPA/DAA was gradually set up and the myriads of challenges it faced along that way. The authors closely analyse the role, influence and changing – and very often conflicting – positions driven by political machinery of the main actors involved in this process, namely the USSR, Cuba and Angola. They also go a step further and provide a brief insight into the evolvement of the capacities of the enemy South African Defence Force and UNITA’s armed wing FALA (Forças Armadas de Libertação de Angola – Angola Liberation Armed Forces) to paint the whole picture.

¹ Fontanellaz, Adrien, Cooper, Tom and Matos, Jose Augusto, *War of Intervention in Angola – Vol. 3: Angolan and Cuban Air Forces, 1975-1985*, Africa at War Series, Helion & Company Limited, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-913118-61-7, pp. 72.

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The book spares no efforts to also give very detailed accounts of the major battles – including technical details of the military tactics, aircrafts and other ground-based air defence weapons used –, the outcome of which have proven the capability or, on the contrary, incapability of the FAPA/DAA. Personal accounts and anecdotes complement pure facts, corroborating the desk analysis and making it an easy and enjoyable read for both specialist military and non-military, ordinary readers.

The study reveals numerous little known or elsewhere little detailed facts. Among them, for instance, is that the FAPA/DAA dates back to the 60s (not 1975 as many claim) with a number of native and foreign pilots and ground crew already operating a sizeable fleet of transport aircraft at that time. *Chapter 2* is dedicated to the in-depth description of the follow-on developments between 1976 and 1979. As of early 1976, “*even two Angolan air forces came into being*”, one staffed by Portuguese and Angolans operating transport and light aircraft; and another one staffed by Cubans and operating Angolan-owned MiGs, Alouette II/IIIs and Mi-8 helicopters. A ‘fun fact’ from these early times included by the authors is that FAPA air strikes on UNITA camps by lighter aircrafts and helicopters were using 10-kilogram bombs made out of beer bottles (filled by the Cubans with home-made Napalm, p. 17.).

Less of an ‘entertaining’ (set of) fact(s) is the detailed account of how the 1983-1985 expansion, undertaken in response to the various problems caused by the outdated and inapt Soviet-manufactured aerial assets as well as training system, has proven to be a “mixed blessing”. The authors describe, among others, the forcible recruitment, rushed training and deployment to combat of infantry troops; the growing gap between officers versus lower ranks together with the mishandling of and lack of respect for the latter; the overstretched supply chains including for feeding the troops; the widespread corruption; and the large-scale defections. The hot and humid Angolan climate and bush terrain also took its toll on the condition of the already-limited truck fleet that was supposed to carry heavy weapons, ammunition and supplies. As the authors put, the FAPLA was an “*extremely fragile giant*”, and its “*sheer size (...) denied the force of quality, capacity, and capability, while becoming unsustainable for an already fragile economy, which was chronically short on skilled manpower*” (p. 57.). In the mid-80s, the Angolan government used up to 47% of the annual national budget for defence purposes only.

For expert readers (but equally for the interested, non-military ones), the book’s dedicated sections on some of the outstanding air- or ground-based air defence assets might be of particular value. Among others, the technical overview of the Soviet’s highly mobile novelty air defence system 9K33M Osa-AKM (SA-8b “venomous” Gecko), or the big, fast, heavily armed Mi-25 helicopter gunship for close-air support that impressed both the Cubans and Angolans. On the SADF’s side, the mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles, a trademark of their infantry formations during the “Bush war” or “Border war” (with Angola), as well as the Ratel (Honey Badger) infantry fighting vehicle, that had a new unique design with wheels, robust in size yet fast, mobile and easy to maintain. A similarly intriguing two-



paper are the closer study of the Soviet's threat perception vis-à-vis that of the West and how this has driven Soviet design philosophy in relation to combat aircraft over the years (p. 62.)

The great amount of rare (black-and-white) photos well illustrate some of the aircrafts and other weapons (some even in action) enhancing reader's experience. The text and photos are also complemented by maps and tables as well as a useful abbreviation list and notes section at the end for further details.

Upon reading, the book is, by no doubt, a unique source on the topic, based on multiple – Angolan, Cuban, Russian and South African – and rich sources. Both for the wealth of information and the concise and clear presentation, one can only recommend the volume especially for those interested in African and, more specifically, Angolan (and South African) military history.