

UNITA Forces In The 'Border War' (Angola & South West Africa)

1980 to 1989



UNITA TO&Es (v.1.0) For 'Modern Battlefield'

By R Mark Davies

These TO&Es are intended for use with Fire & Fury Games' 'Battlefront: WWII' tactical game system and you will need to buy the original rules before you can play the game. The prototype unit cards referred to may be downloaded for free from www.fireandfury.com and corresponding FAPLA and SADF cards and TO&Es can also be found there, as can playtest rules for fighting post-WWII conflicts. These resources are provided free of charge and may be reproduced for personal gaming use. Copyright remains that of the author and of Fire & Fury Games.

For an explanation on how to use these TO&Es, see page 57 of the Battlefront: WWII rule book.

Any questions or items for further discussion can be posted either on the main Battlefront: WWII discussion forum, or the Modern Battlefield sub-forum, both of which are on the website.

Historical Background

UNITA (The National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola) was formed in 1966 by a Maoist revolutionary by the name of Jonas Savimbi. UNITA quickly rose in power to become one of the three main resistance movements against Portuguese colonial rule; the other two being the Soviet-backed communist MPLA and the right-wing FNLA. UNITA had its power-base in the rural east of the country and largely through tribal loyalty, was thought to enjoy the support of nearly 50% of the population.

However, UNITA's rivals held considerable potential political power: the FNLA enjoyed the support of the landowning classes and the MPLA had solid backing from the large half-caste community in Angola's coastal ports and cities, as well as firm financial support from Cuba and the USSR. UNITA had China's moral support, but this relationship was somewhat distant and lacking in cold, hard cash and weapons.

In 1974, following a military coup in Portugal, the colonial administration suddenly collapsed, leaving the indigenous populations of Mozambique, Guinea and Angola scrambling for power as the Portuguese empire imploded. The FNLA was Portugal's (and the West's) preferred successor, but the MPLA were very quick in gaining their own international support and in 1975, 5,000 Cuban troops landed in Angola to install the MPLA as Angola's new administration. The USA, while giving vocal support to the FNLA, was unwilling to commit troops in the immediate aftermath of Vietnam and it was left to South Africa to put troops into the country. UNITA meanwhile, finding itself quietly dropped by China (who didn't want to offend the USSR by opposing the MPLA), now entered into an unholy alliance with South Africa and the FNLA in an attempt to block the MPLA.

However, despite a lightning march of 1,000 miles by three South African Defence Force (SADF) battlegroups, the Cuban/MPLA forces decisively crushed the FNLA and seized control of the economic heartland of Angola. Thus, the MPLA became the de facto Angolan government and turned its attentions to crushing UNITA, who were now pushed back into their eastern heartland, but who continued to fight back. South Africa meanwhile, after a year supporting UNITA's guerrilla war, came to realise that a UNITA administration was no more preferable to an MPLA one. Indeed, UNITA had publicly made known its desire for an independent South West Africa (SWA or 'Namibia' – governed by South Africa since 1918) and the SADF now had its hands full fighting a new guerrilla war against the Soviet-backed SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation), whose PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia) guerrillas had begun striking into SWA from their new bases in MPLA-controlled areas of Angola.

With the loss of South African support, UNITA now found a new ally as the Reagan administration came to power in the USA. Committed to indirectly fighting world communism wherever it was found, Reagan began sending large quantities of aid to UNITA in terms of weapons, training, materiel, intelligence, political support on the international stage – and cold, hard cash. Renewed offensives against UNITA by FAPLA (the new, Soviet-trained and equipped armed forces of the MPLA government) were soundly defeated and UNITA even managed to expand its territory. During the early years of the 1980s, increasingly sophisticated weaponry found its way to UNITA via the CIA and FAPLA soon began losing aircraft to Stinger SAMs and tanks to MILAN ATGMs.

The South Africans meanwhile, had found considerable success in their strategy of 'External' operations into Angola, in which SWAPO-PLAN base areas were destroyed, along with FAPLA and Cuban regular military forces who attempted to protect SWAPO.

Political success finally accompanied military success following Operation 'Askari' in 1983/84, when the MPLA was finally brought to the negotiating table following FAPLA's catastrophic losses. The Lusaka Accord was signed between South Africa and the MPLA, which guaranteed that SADF forces would withdraw to SWA, in return for a cessation in cross-border infiltration by SWAPO-PLAN and the establishment of a bi-partisan Joint Monitoring Commission (JMC) to patrol the border.

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However, in the time-honoured tradition of communist 'negotiations' SWAPO was just buying time to rebuild its strength and had absolutely no intention of keeping to the terms of the Lusaka Accord. Now that the SADF was south of the border, SWAPO-PLAN detachments had no problem avoiding the JMC and launched the most devastating season of raids into SWA that had yet been seen. Before long the South Africans had had enough and resumed 'External' operations. The failure of the previous strategy of direct pressure and engagement with the MPLA resulted in a new strategy – 'He Who Is My Enemy's Enemy Must Be My Friend' – and SADF units were sent once again to directly support UNITA in the field, with South African artillery, ATGMs and air power being instrumental in the defeat of FAPLA's 1985 & 1986 offensives against UNITA. As it happens, UNITA was already fighting SWAPO-PLAN, whose three new regular infantry brigades were now fighting in Angola's civil war against UNITA, rather than against the SADF.

By 1985 UNITA's forces numbered some 65,000 men (37,000 Guerrilla Forces and 28,000 Regular Forces), who were well-motivated, were reasonably well-organised, were reasonably well-trained (well enough to repeatedly defeat the considerably better-equipped FAPLA) and were remarkably well-equipped from captured stocks of weapons and equipment (supplemented by some NATO technology and large quantities of captured FAPLA materiel now handed over by the SADF).

By 1987, Moscow was growing increasingly frustrated and impatient at the MPLA's lack of results, despite considerable investments by the USSR in terms of men, weapons and money. Their anxiety was increased by Fidel Castro's private concerns about the casualties Cuban forces were taking year on year – Angola was becoming Cuba's own Vietnam, with Cuba playing the part of the USA! Consequently, Moscow appointed a Soviet general, Shaganovich, to lead FAPLA in the final campaign that would defeat UNITA and establish Angola firmly as a Soviet satellite.

In August 1987, Shaganovich launched five FAPLA brigades against the UNITA stronghold of Mavinga – the largest operation of its kind seen in Africa since the end of World War II. This was a set-piece attack as dictated by Soviet doctrine; spearheaded by armour, artillery, air power and mechanised infantry, under an umbrella of the latest Soviet SAM technology – supplied by the USSR, trained by the USSR, and now led by the USSR. The Cold War had suddenly turned very hot indeed.

The South Africans responded with Operation 'Moduler', which was initially a battalion-sized counter-attack, but rapidly became a full brigade-level operation once the size of the FAPLA force was identified. The brigade group was inserted into crumbling UNITA lines along the Lomba River and met the FAPLA forces head on – successfully stopping and trapping FAPLA's 47th Mechanised Brigade in its own bridgehead.

The SADF 20th Brigade now moved to crush the FAPLA forces alongside a UNITA group of four battalions (3rd Regular, 5th Regular, 13th Semi-Regular and 275th Special Forces Battalions) led by one Colonel Tarzan! In the consequent attack the FAPLA 47th Brigade was annihilated, the 59th Brigade was grievously wounded and the other three brigades were heavily damaged. The FAPLA/Soviet offensive was completely defeated and the follow-up operations by UNITA resulted in the main FAPLA base at Cuito Cuanavale being besieged and considerable gains throughout Angola.

In 1989 UNITA finally reached an accord with MPLA from a position of considerable strength – fourteen years of civil war and fighting a super-power had not broken UNITA and peace (albeit a fragile one) had finally broken out in Angola. Soon afterwards, South African administration of SWA came to an end when SWAPO won the first free elections held in the country (but not before SWAPO-PLAN had prematurely broken yet another ceasefire in an attempt to militarily swing the election result...). With the liberation of the new Namibia, Fidel Castro was able to claim a 'victory' and could withdraw his 50,000 men from Angola without losing face. Soon afterwards, the USSR also folded and the MPLA lost its main backer – things were looking even rosier for UNITA.

However, the MPLA still held the economic heartland of Angola, while UNITA's only source of income was through illegal export of diamonds, which was being steadily eroded by international efforts to halt the trade. With the demise of the USSR, the USA was no longer interested in UNITA's problems and simply wanted a permanent solution to the war. UNITA's problems intensified even further when the Mandela administration came to power in South Africa. Mandela's ANC was a long-standing ally of SWAPO and the MPLA and as a result any support for UNITA disappeared instantly.

Within a few years UNITA had fragmented and its members had descended into banditry, desperate for control of the diamond fields. FAPLA resumed military operations against them – this time using chemical weapons. UNITA was quickly defeated as a regular military force and the remaining fragments were ruthlessly hunted down – ironically some of this work was done by former SADF soldiers working for security companies (i.e. mercenary armies) such as 'Executive Outcomes', who had been employed by the MPLA government to secure the diamond fields. Before long, Savimbi was dead and UNITA was finished. After twenty years, the Angolan Civil War was finally over.

UNITA Military Organisation

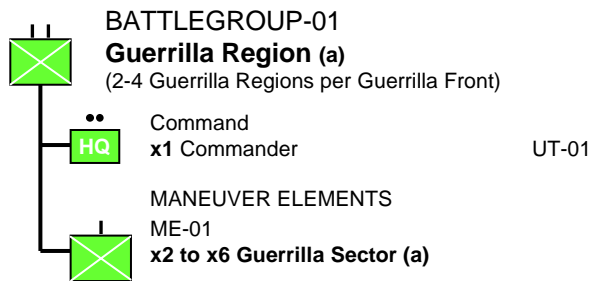
The most remarkable thing about UNITA is that it survived for so long with almost no external sources of supply beyond that which they captured from FAPLA. FAPLA by comparison, had a constant stream of Soviet and Cuban ships and aircraft, supplying millions of tons of weapons and materiel, not to mention up to 50,000 Cuban troops in Angola. UNITA's remarkable ability in returning captured vehicles and weapons into service resulted in distinctly unorthodox and ad hoc unit organisations!

Among the Regular Forces, here seems to have been very little permanent tactical organisation above that of the battalion. UNITA battalions were intended to be light, mobile and independent formations – striking out of the bush at an enemy's flanks and rear. They were not intended for conventional operations against a heavily mechanised enemy, though often did remarkably well when forced into such situations (particularly when bolstered by SADF artillery or US weaponry). Sometimes battalions could be grouped together under a single senior officer (such as Colonel Tarzan mentioned above at the Lomba River), or a South African Brigade, but there was no permanent UNITA regiment or brigade structure.

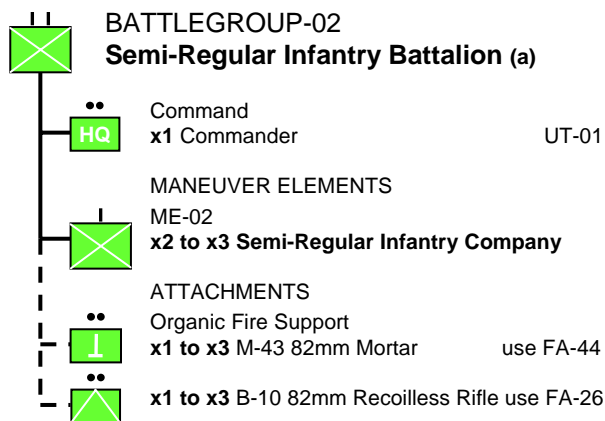
Consequently, the TO&Es given here are only the loosest possible guide and could equally reflect almost any poorly-equipped African army or well-equipped guerrilla force of the period. UNITA organisation could vary wildly from one year to the next, though they were undoubtedly at their most organised and effective during their 'golden age' of 1985 to 1989, which is the 'snapshot' period I have taken for these TO&Es.

While we have provided a basic core of UNITA unit cards on the website, captured vehicles and weapons are simply represented by the existing FAPLA cards, as they are identical in all respects – even in appearance. This saves repetition and webpage space!

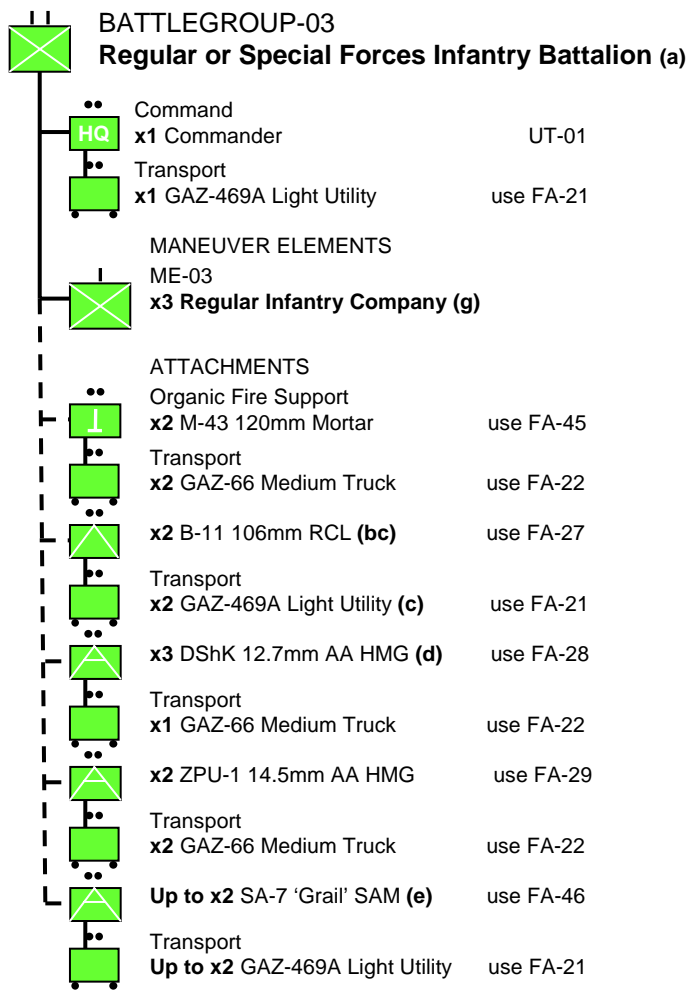
UNITA Battlegroups



(a) UNITA irregular forces were organised into Fronts, Regions, Sectors and Zones, which were roughly equivalent to Brigades, Battalions, Companies and Platoons in terms of size. When operating in MPLA territory, these organisations would conduct clandestine reconnaissance and guerrilla activity, or would support UNITA regular military forces when they were present. On UNITA's base territory, these organisations would function as local defence militia, as well as taking to the field in support of UNITA regular forces when on home turf.



(a) UNITA Semi-Regular Battalions were essentially reservist formations, primarily tasked with supporting the Guerrilla Forces, but also with supporting the Regular Battalions in the field when required.



(a) UNITA Regular Battalions formed the core of UNITA's standing army. The Special Forces Battalions were originally intended to be long-range reconnaissance units in the style of the SADF's 32 Battalion, but in practice were employed, organised, trained and equipped in exactly the same way as the Regular Battalions.

(b) From 1984: May replace each B-11 Recoilless Rifle with:
MILAN ATGM Team (cf) UT-04

(c) B-11 Recoilless Rifles or MILAN ATGMs may be fired from their vehicles when mounted.

(d) May replace all DShK 12.7mm Antiaircraft HMGs with:
x1 ZU-23-2 Twin 23mm Antiaircraft Gun use FA-33

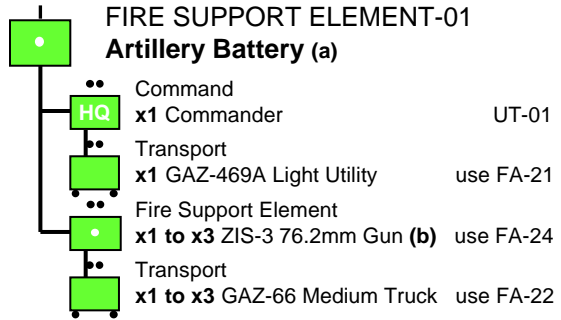
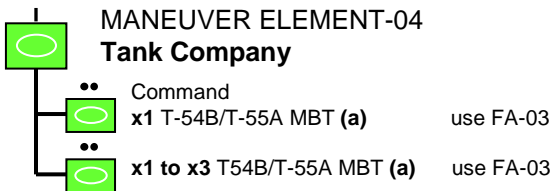
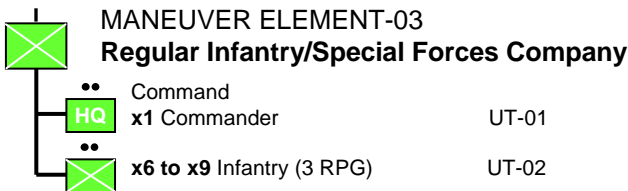
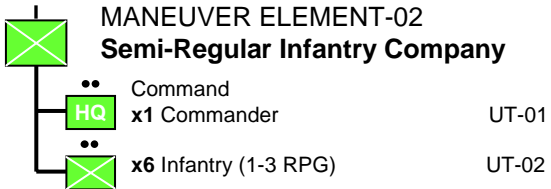
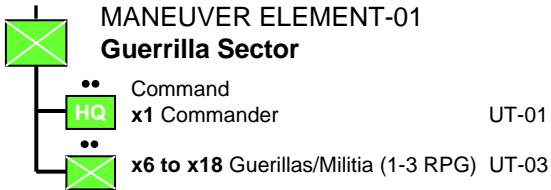
(e) From 1984: May replace each SA-7 'Grail' SAM with:
Stinger SAM Team UT-05

(f) Al J Venter, in his book 'War In Angola', suggests that UNITA forces may also have had access to TOW ATGMs. However, his identification of weapons systems in photo captions is woeful and one of the photos clearly shows men carrying MILAN reloads.

(g) Up to **x1** Company may be motorised in a variety of captured softskins and AFVs:

GAZ-66 Medium Truck	use FA-22
ZIL-157 Heavy Truck	use FA-24
BTR-152 Armoured Personnel Carrier	use FA-09
BTR-60 PB Armoured Personnel Carrier	use FA-11

UNITA Maneuver & Fire Support Elements



(a) There was very little in the way of effective fire control. Most artillery fire would be limited to pre-planned barrages or pre-registered defensive fire targets or fired over open sights. However, the SADF did provide UNITA with considerable artillery support during the mid-late 1980s, so UNITA artillery could potentially be used with SADF FOs in some scenarios.

(b) May replace ZIS-3 field Gun with:
D-30 122mm Gun
BM-21 122mm Multiple Rocket Launcher

(a) Tank Companies varied wildly in strength and equipment – often being mixed. It depended very much upon the amount of captured material that was available (much of it coming from the SADF). May therefore replace some or all tanks with:

- PT-76 Light Tank use FA-01
- T-34/85 Medium Tank use FA-02
- SU-100 Assault Gun use FA-05
- BRDM-2 Armoured Car use FA-06

UNITA Unit Qualities

Experienced

Special Forces Battalions
Some Regular Infantry Battalions

Trained

The majority of Regular Infantry Battalions
Some Semi-Regular Infantry Battalions

Raw

The majority of Semi-Regular Infantry Battalions
Guerrilla Forces

UNITA Models, Uniforms & Painting

As with so many guerrilla paramilitary armies, dress and equipment could vary enormously within the organisation, with some units being very well equipped and regularly uniformed and others having not even the faintest semblance of uniformity.

As can be imagined, UNITA's guerrilla forces would wear anything they could get their hands on – a mixture of civilian dress, captured FAPLA uniforms, colonial Portuguese uniforms, Soviet and East German-supplied SWAPO uniforms and uniforms supplied by various Western backers. In essence, they would be virtually indistinguishable from SWAPO guerrillas and FAPLA ODP militia forces (which is handy, as the same figures can be used for both!). Weapons were almost universally captured Soviet weapons such as AK47, SKS, RPD and RPG-7. Peter Pig's 'AK47 Republic' range fits the bill nicely and virtually any models from the range can be used.

UNITA's Semi-Regulars, Regulars and Special Forces were quite well-equipped by the mid-1980s if photographic evidence is anything to go by. Combat fatigues were usually plain olive-green – a deliberate contrast to the Portuguese-style camouflaged uniforms of FAPLA and the 'Lizard' pattern camouflaged uniforms worn by the Cubans. The UNITA flag (see the article header) was also sometimes worn on the upper sleeve as an identifier. Headgear was usually a floppy, khaki bush hat, which was rather wider than the South African variety. However, olive-green peaked caps were also widely used (without the neck flap usually seen on FAPLA caps) and berets were sometimes seen worn by officers – Savimbi himself favoured one. Weapons were usually captured Soviet items, but large quantities of South African-derived R1 (FN FAL) and G3 rifles were also issued, as were weapons from US/NATO sources. A mixture of Peter Pig's 'Hardened Militia' and 'Professional' figures from the AK47 range would be ideal, together with figures mixed in from their Vietnam War Australian range. Viet Cong figures in slouch hats might also be useful.

In terms of vehicles and heavy weapons in 15mm, there is a wide selection available from companies such as Peter Pig, Skytrex/Old Glory, QRF and Quality Castings.