

# Operation 'Modular': Angola 1987

## Scenario #1: First Clash On The Lomba 9/10 August 1987

*A Battlefield: WWII (Modern Mod) Scenario*

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*Adapted From an Original Scenario Concept by Johan Schoeman*

### **Scenario Overview**

In 1987, some of the largest battles to take place on the African Continent since the end of World War were fought in Angola, between the Marxist Angolan government forces ('FAPLA'), backed by the USSR & Cuba, and Jonas Savimbi's UNITA movement, backed by the South African Defence Force. These battles went almost entirely unreported in the West. On the few occasions where they were reported, the Cuban and Soviet line was taken uncritically, describing the Great Victory of Cuito-Cuanavale.

While most press organisations in West chose to repeat the official Soviet line (South Africa being a far greater evil than the USSR in their eyes), the truth was far more complex and was certainly a long way removed from the Soviet claims. This fact was realised all too well by military observers in the Warsaw Pact and NATO – the Soviet-equipped, Soviet-supplied, Soviet-trained and Soviet-led, heavy mechanised forces of FAPLA, with Cuban-supplied air superiority, had been comprehensively beaten at the tactical level by inferior numbers, employing only light armour, highly-mobile light infantry tactics and equipment that was mostly militarily obsolete due to anti-apartheid UN arms embargos.

The Cold War had turned very hot in one small corner of Africa and the USSR had lost... And it wasn't even fighting NATO.

Consequently, the campaign of 1987 had military repercussions that extended well beyond Angola: its effects were felt in the collapse of the USSR, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the attendant crisis of confidence in the Russian armed forces. They were also felt in the form of new post-Cold War doctrines of rapidly-deployed, 'lean' light armoured forces: these concepts were most readily accepted by NATO governments who were eager to reap the 'Peace-Dividend' and saw the South African model of fast-moving, hard-hitting, light armoured forces as being a credible, and above all, cheap alternative to expensive, heavy armoured forces.

However, the purpose of this article and scenario is not to examine politics, prejudice or post-Cold War doctrine. My intention is to examine the military and tactical problems experienced in the latter, high-intensity stages of the long Angolan Civil War. I want to examine primarily, how a lightly-armoured, light infantry force can overcome an enemy that is superior in numbers, materiel and air power, using superior tactics and training.

### **Historical Background**

The background to the war in Angola is complex in the extreme and would take several pages of closely-typed text to even scratch the surface, so I'm not going to attempt that here.

Suffice to say, South Africa in 1987 still held possession of South West Africa (modern-day Namibia) and the South African Defence Force (SADF) had been fighting the SWAPO insurrection there since 1975. Angola meanwhile, was in the hands of the Marxist MPLA, which provided SWAPO with shelter, training and materiel and enabled SWAPO to launch annual raids into South West Africa.

Consequently, the South Africans had built up extensive defence forces along the border and regularly launched operations (or 'Externals') of their own, deep into Angola – either to destroy

SWAPO training facilities to stop the infiltrations before they started, or in hot pursuit of SWAPO groups as they fled back to the safety of Angola following an attack.

By 1985, South Africa had grown increasingly exasperated, as internationally-brokered deals such as the Lusaka Accords only seemed to encourage further SWAPO attacks. The South African administration decided upon a new policy of directly hurting the MPLA in an attempt to discourage them from supporting SWAPO. The best way to do this, it was decided, was to throw South Africa's military weight behind Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebel movement in Angola.

UNITA had originally been backed by the Chinese when it was an anti-Portuguese revolutionary movement, but times change, and by the late 1980s it was fighting the Soviet-backed MPLA administration and was consequently supported by Ronald Reagan's USA, which supplied UNITA with training, funds and the latest NATO weapons such as Stinger SAMs and Milan ATGMs.

South Africa had had dealings with UNITA during the late 1970s and it had always ended in tears, as UNITA actually supported the concept of an independent Namibia. However, by 1985 South Africa had tried every other route to victory against SWAPO and it was now decided that 'He who is my enemy's enemy must be my friend'. As a result of this policy, South African special forces, air power and artillery was instrumental in the defeat of a FAPLA offensive against UNITA in 1985.

Following FAPLA's heavy defeat in 1985 and resultant loss of Soviet-supplied materiel, Moscow was growing increasingly exasperated and made MPLA an offer they couldn't refuse – FAPLA would be massively resupplied for a renewed offensive, but this time a Soviet general (Shaganovich) would oversee all aspects of planning and execution.

By mid-1987 everything was in place. The SAAF had been virtually driven from the skies by a combination of dense Soviet radar and SAM coverage and a massive reinforcement of air power in the form of several squadrons of Cuban MiG-23s, which outnumbered and outclassed the SAAF's Mirage F1s. Under this air umbrella, seven heavy mechanised FAPLA brigades were assembled around the forward operating base of Cuito Cuanavale in the south-eastern Cuando Cubango province, with a further four mechanised brigades 200 miles north, at Luçesse in the eastern Moxico province. While the diversionary attack was launched from Luçesse, the Cuito Cuanavale brigades were to smash through UNITA's regular forces at Mavinga, seizing the all-weather airfield there and then using Mavinga as a stepping-stone to take UNITA's capital at Jamba and ending UNITA's insurrection once and for all.



### **FAPLA's 1987 Offensive & The SADF's Operation 'Modular'**

On 14th August 1987, FAPLA's offensive towards Mavinga rolled forward with four brigades (16, 21, 47 & 59) striking southeast from Cuito Cuanavale and two brigades (3 & 39) striking south out of Luçesse, some 200 miles to the north. However, FAPLA's logistical capability was poor and the brigades were soon crawling along at only 4km per day.

The SADF meanwhile, having been warned by UNITA and the Recce Commando special forces operating in the area, immediately began beefing up their support of UNITA forces near Mavinga. Operation 'Modular' had begun.

There were already some units on the scene – South African artillery were already supporting UNITA with a battery each of 127mm Valkyri Multiple Rocket Launchers (MRLs) and M5 120mm Mortars. These artillery assets were protected by detachments from the feared 32 'Buffalo' Battalion, which recruited secretly from Angolan émigrés. With the commencement of Operation 'Modular' these forces were soon joined by a battery of long-range G5 155mm guns, an Armoured Car Squadron from 61 Mechanised Battalion and a detachment from 101 Battalion. 101 Battalion was another unit famed and feared in equal measure for its counter-insurgency reputation – it was raised from the Owambo tribe of South West Africa, from which SWAPO also primarily recruited).

By the first week of September, an entire South African Brigade Group (20 Brigade) had been formed at Mavinga from 61 Mechanised Battalion, 32 Battalion and elements of 101 Battalion. These forces were divided into three battlegroups, designated 'Alpha', 'Bravo' and 'Charlie'. The three artillery batteries were formed into 20 Artillery Regiment. By this time, the four FAPLA brigades from Cuito Cuanavale had reached the Lomba River, which in itself, wasn't much of an obstacle, but it lay in a wide, swampy valley or 'anhara', which was a considerable obstacle to mechanised forces. By now, the FAPLA forces were under constant attack by the South African artillery during the day, while the SAAF braved the SAM umbrella to attack them by night. The MiGs meanwhile, made a severe nuisance of themselves, but caused very little actual damage to the South African forces.

It was soon learned that FAPLA's 47 Brigade, with a reinforced armoured element, was attempting to outflank the line of the Lomba by circling around the river's source, some 75 km west of Mavinga. However, it was making extremely slow progress and on 9th September, 20 Brigade learned from UNITA sources that FAPLA's 21 Brigade had established a bridgehead across the Lomba a short distance to the west of the South Africans.

Colonel Ferreira, commanding the South African 20 Brigade, ordered Combat Group 'Bravo' (consisting of HQ 32 Battalion, with one infantry company and the Antitank Squadron of 32 Battalion, plus two infantry companies of 101 Battalion) to mount a reconnaissance in force towards the FAPLA bridgehead and if possible, to destroy the FAPLA forces found south of the river...

### Terrain Notes



- The table measures 6 feet by 8 feet.
- The Lomba River is only passable to amphibious vehicles (Swim capability noted on their card). They cross in one turn, dependent upon a bog-down check.
- The light green area defines the boggy shallow flood plain ('Anhara') of the Lomba. It provides sparse concealment and reduces all movement by half. All vehicles and guns require a bog-down check.
- Within two inches of the river, the same concealment and movement limitations apply, but infantry must also now conduct a bog-down check.
- The brown area is one level higher than the anhara. Vegetation is classed as 'Brush', as per the rule book: Sparse concealment, half speed for guns & wheeled vehicles and full speed for all others.
- The dark green area defines the Bush. This is classed the same as Brush (above) though visibility is limited to 10 inches. ATGMs may not be fired through Bush, though SAMs and AA guns may engage aircraft from the Bush without restriction and at any range.

### Victory Conditions

- The scenario lasts 20 turns and Victory Points (VPs) will be totalled at the end of the scenario. Very simply, the side with the highest number of VPs is the winner. Note that South African public opinion is very sensitive to heavy casualties.
- Disregard the usual BF:WWII VP system and instead use the following:
- FAPLA gain 10 VP for each SADF element and 5 VP for each SADF vehicle destroyed or captured (it is body bags and South African public opinion that matters).
- FAPLA gain 2 VP for each UNITA element destroyed or captured.
- FAPLA gain 2 VP for each undisordered FAPLA element remaining south of the river.
- SADF/UNITA gain 2 VP for each FAPLA element destroyed or captured on the south bank or in the anhara.
- SADF/UNITA gain 1 VP for each FAPLA element destroyed north of the anhara.
- SADF/UNITA gain 1 VP for each UNITA element that survives.



### **Umpire's Notes**

- The game last 20 turns.
- The South African/UNITA player has the first turn.
- FAPLA's causeways and bridges are not placed on the table at the start. They may be directly spotted as for infantry in the open. Alternatively, they may be spotted when units are spotted moving on them.
- Note that FAPLA's second causeway & TMM bridge is a game-balancing feature. I leave it up to the umpire to decide when/if the FAPLA engineers ever complete it.
- FAPLA units may be allocated one Hidden Unit Marker for each ME or HQ Element.
- UNITA may be allocated two Hidden Unit Markers for their single ME.
- SADF units may be allocated two Hidden Unit Markers for each ME or HQ Element as they arrive on the table.

### **Sources**

**The War In Angola In Miniature** – Website by Johan Schoeman - <http://www.veridical.co.za>  
**Flying Columns In Small Wars** – US Military Case-Study by Major Michael F Morris USMC  
**Modern African Wars (3): South-West Africa** – Osprey MAA Book by Helmoed-Romer Heitman  
**South African Special Forces** – Osprey Elite Book by Robert Pitta & Jeff Fannell  
**War In Angola** – Military History Book by Helmoed-Romer Heitman  
**War In Angola** – Concord Photo History Book by Al J Venter  
**The First Rumble On The Lomba** – Web Article by Anon  
**Externals** – Series of Articles in 'Command Post Quarterly' by Greg Novak  
**The South African Bush War Webpage** – [http://www.geocities.com/sa\\_bushwar/](http://www.geocities.com/sa_bushwar/)

Plus innumerable web accounts of the 'Bush War'

## **First Clash On The Lomba – FAPLA Briefing**

FlashFlashFlash

0600080987

From: Lt Gen Shaganovich, GOC FAPLA Cuito Cuanavale Front

To: OC FAPLA 21 Mechanised Brigade

Situation (0600hrs 8 Sep 87):

The offensive against the UNITA base and airfield at MAVINGA is proceeding too slowly. Due to the failure of our four offensive brigades (16, 21, 47 & 59) to advance quickly, the light screen of UNITA battalions covering Mavinga has had time to fall back to a prepared line on the Lomba River. The twin assault by 3 & 39 Brigades in the north is similarly proceeding very slowly.

47 Mechanised Brigade (with 1 Tactical Group under command) has been dispatched on a long right hook around the source of the Lomba, thus to outflank the UNITA positions along that river. However, 47 Brigade are making very slow progress and we cannot wait much longer for them to outflank the UNITA positions in front of you and 59 Mechanised Brigade on your right.

16 Mechanised Brigade on your left (with 2 Tactical Group under command), has likewise made little progress in its direct advance towards Mavinga. UNITA holds strong positions covering the road bridges in the area and they are strongly supported by fascist artillery.

Despite the exaggerated claims of our Cuban airmen, the fascist air forces have not been driven from the skies. While the air situation is generally favourable, we are still a long way from gaining air supremacy. Meanwhile, the fascist artillery has not even been located, let alone silenced. I know that they are causing you enormous problems, but I must urge you to keep your forces concentrated and to keep your air defence troops vigilant.

The general situation then is this: your flanking brigades are making incredibly slow progress and UNITA resistance is crystallising along the Lomba River line. I therefore require your 21 Brigade to make an assault crossing at the earliest opportunity, to penetrate the centre of the UNITA line and then to turn left, to outflank Mavinga.

Mission:

You are to cross the Lomba River and are to penetrate the UNITA centre, with the intention of outflanking Mavinga.

Execution:

Your forces are listed at Annex A.

Friendly forces are: 16 Brigade (approx 20km distant on your left), 59 Brigade (approx 10km distant on your right, but separated from you by the Cunzumbia tributary) and 47 Brigade (approx 20km distant on your right and on the opposite bank of the Lomba). None of these brigades are in any position to support you. The air situation remains favourable and FAPA-DAA have promised you plenty of close air support. However, fascist air attacks are still sneaking through and the fascist artillery is incessant and seemingly untroubled by our air forces.

Enemy forces are known to comprise approximately six regular UNITA battalions, screened by UNITA and fascist special forces, performing reconnaissance in depth. No major fascist combat units have yet been encountered, though a fascist reconnaissance unit is operating approximately 40km west of 47 Brigade and appears to be mainly concerned with screening south of Cuito Cuanavale rather than interfering with our operations against UNITA. However, extremely efficient fascist artillery has been operating out of Mavinga for the last few weeks - initially MRLs, but now also 155mm guns.

Terrain is poor. The shallow 'anhara' of the Lomba is very boggy and unsuited to a mechanised assault. While many of your vehicles are amphibious, they would become bogged in the mud well

before reaching the river itself. You must therefore rely heavily on your engineers and the cover of darkness in order to build a causeway across the anbara that can take the weight of a TMM bridge-layer.

FAPLA 21 Mechanised Brigade Operational Diary Entry (0600hrs 10 Sep 87):

Our Engineer Company completed the 'corduroy' road across the anbara extremely quickly during the night of 8/9 Sep at the ruined village of Cariata. Once the TMM bridge was laid, the road was open for traffic the II Battalion was successfully across before the defenders knew we were there.

Fascist artillery has continued to fire speculatively into our positions throughout the day, but no guns have been directed at the bridge and nor have any directed at our bridgehead battalion. There has been some skirmishing with light UNITA forces, but so far so good.

Our engineers have now begun a second causeway across the anbara to allow a second TMM bridge to be laid. Our bridgehead is starting to expand, so we may soon be able to pass more units across to the south bank...



### **Scenario Rules**

1. Secretly mark the location of the TMM bridge positioned across the Lomba. The bridge may not be placed within 18 inches of the western or eastern table edges. The corduroy causeway extends across the anbara, in a straight line, north and south of the bridge.
2. Secretly mark the location of the intended second bridge (limitations as above). Your engineers are already well on their way to completing the second causeway; you will be informed when the causeway is ready and it is then up to you to deploy your mobile TMM bridge. Note that the TMM bridge-layer only needs one action to deploy its bridge, though it may only deploy its bridge to the rear, thus necessitating an action in which to turn the vehicle around. Umpire's Note: Historically, the 21st Brigade only managed to get one bridge and causeway completed, so this option can be used as a scenario balancing factor – particularly if the South Africans manage to interdict the first bridge with artillery fire.
3. Roll 1 Average Die to determine how many Manoeuvre Elements (i.e. Companies) have already crossed the Lomba. These forces do not include the tanks of the 21st Brigade Tank Battalion, but may include any Brigade Attachment units listed in your orbat. Battlegroup HQ Elements count as companies.
4. Roll 1 Average Die to determine how many T-54 models from the Tank Battalion have already crossed the Lomba. You may decide whether or not the Battalion Commander has crossed and you may also attach any Brigade Attachment units listed in your orbat. The tank group that is not accompanied by the battalion commander may be considered to be a detached Tank Company ME – designate one tank as the ME Commander.
5. The forces diced for above may be deployed anywhere south of the river, but not within 12 inches of the southern table edge. All other forces are to be deployed in the bush north of the river.
6. No Random Shelling missions are permitted. All artillery fire must therefore be directed against Spotted or Suspected targets.
7. Multiple Rocket Launchers may not concentrate their fire. They are also not able to conduct Interdiction Fire.

## **First Clash On The Lomba – South African & UNITA Briefing**

0600090987

From: Colonel Ferreira, OC SA 20 Brigade

To: Commandant Hartsliet, OC Combat Group Bravo

Priority: General Sitrep

Situation (0600hrs 9 Sep 87):

FAPLA's offensive from Cuito Cuanavale is proceeding extremely slowly and it doesn't really say a lot for their military efficiency. Their four strike brigades (16, 21, 47 & 59 Mechanised Brigades) have only averaged 4km per day since they started their offensive last month, while we on the other hand, have deployed a full brigade group over 1,000km in the same time!

Their objective is now clearly identified as the main UNITA base at Mavinga. Its all-weather airfield is vital for FAPLA's strategic aims in their war against UNITA and would give them a forward operating base from which to launch the final killer blow against UNITA's capital at Jamba.

There is also a minor FAPLA offensive underway some 300km north of here – FAPLA's 3 & 39 Mechanised Brigades have moved south out of Lucesse, striking towards Cassamba and Luvuei, though UNITA is apparently holding them without much difficulty.

UNITA forces here meanwhile, have fallen back behind the line of the Lomba River. The river itself isn't wide or deep, but like all the rivers around here, it lies in the middle of a wide, shallow and extremely swampy 'anhara', which is virtually impassable even with Soviet amphibious vehicles.

FAPLA is attempting to fight a battle of manoeuvre, but they're at the wrong end of a 125km supply chain that is slowing them to a crawl. 16 Brigade has bypassed UNITA's stronghold of Cunjamba (on the Cuito-Cuanavale to Mavinga highway) and is advancing to Mavinga. However, it has several bridges to cross and all are firmly in UNITA's hands and are covered by our guns. 21 Brigade meanwhile, has moved up to the Lomba slightly to the west of us and seems to be holding, pending a long-winded right hook by 47 Brigade around the source of the Lomba. 59 Brigade meanwhile, seems to be maintaining liaison between 47 and 21 Brigades.

FAPLA's strategy therefore is clear: their intention is to roll up UNITA's left flank with 47 Brigade, then bring 59 & 21 Brigades across the Lomba to achieve a concentration south of the river, before striking west to Mavinga in concert with 16 Brigade striking from the north.

20 Brigade's intentions are therefore to defeat each of the FAPLA Brigades in detail before they have a chance to achieve the desired concentration south of the Lomba. Colonel Tarzan's UNITA forces, supported by our artillery and our limited air power, will attempt to contain each FAPLA Brigade, while 20 Brigade uses its high mobility to strike hard against each one in turn, starting with 47 Brigade.

The air situation remains poor, due to the massive influx of modern Soviet radar and SAM systems, allied to massive increase in Fidel's air power in the form of a large wing of MiG-23 ML 'Flogger' multi-role fighters. Nevertheless, while numerous, the MiGs don't seem to be achieving a great deal and are generally staying high, thanks to Ronald Reagan and the Stinger SAMs he's supplied to UNITA. Meanwhile the SAAF hasn't been driven completely from the skies – they're still managing to fly the odd strike during the day and are reasonably unchallenged at night.

FlashFlashFlash

1100090987

From: Colonel Ferreira, OC SA 20 Brigade

To: Commandant Hartslief, OC Combat Group Bravo

Priority: Flash

Situation (1100hrs 9 Sep 87):

Colonel Tarzan, commanding UNITA forces on the Lomba River line, reports that the UNITA 3rd Regular Infantry Battalion, holding positions approx 16km west of your position, is in contact with FAPLA forces south of the river, near the ruined village of Cariata.

It would appear that FAPLA's 21 Brigade has bridged the Lomba during the night and already has a battlegroup south of the river (tentatively identified as II Motor Rifle Battalion of 21 Brigade).

It is not yet clear as to whether this is a full brigade-sized assault crossing, or merely a reconnaissance in strength, but the chance to destroy at least a full FAPLA battalion is too good to miss.

Combat Group Bravo is therefore to reconnoitre the situation at Cariata with the utmost urgency, is to shore up the UNITA position and if possible, is to destroy the FAPLA forces found south of the river. All of 20 Artillery Regiment will be allocated to your support and SAAF support will be allocated as soon as it becomes available.

Mission:

You are to immediately reconnoitre and assault the reported enemy bridgehead, with the intention of preventing further reinforcement and then destroying all enemy units south of the Lomba.

Execution:

Your forces are listed at Annex A.

Friendly forces comprise elements of UNITA under the command of Colonel Tarzan – mainly from 3rd Regular Infantry Battalion. You are to be aware of the high potential for blue-on-blue incidents.

Enemy forces south of the Lomba are thought to be a full Motor Rifle battalion, complete with light armour and possibly tanks. In support is likely to be the full 21 Mechanised Brigade, comprising a total of three Motor Rifle Battalions, a Tank Battalion and an Artillery Battalion, plus Antiaircraft, Antitank, Recce and Engineer Companies. It is likely to have an enhanced antiaircraft capability.

The air situation is generally poor during the day, though improved during the night, when FAPLA's predominantly visual targeting systems are unable to acquire targets. Although the MiGs are highly active and make a lot of noise, they haven't been able to do any damage yet.

### **Scenario Rules**

1. The UNITA company may be deployed anywhere within 12 inches of the southern table edge.
2. The SADF commander has the first turn.
3. Starting on Turn 1, Combat Group Bravo may enter the table. The SADF commander must list the order, timing and location of entry for all his units before the start of the game.
4. Only one Infantry Company or Antitank Troop (2x Ratels) may arrive per 1/3 sector of the southern table edge in each turn.
5. Communications between UNITA and SADF forces are non-existent. UNITA forces may not therefore call for fire or air support from SADF assets and spotting information may not be exchanged. For example, if a friendly unit Spots an enemy unit, that enemy is normally Suspected to all other friendly units – but not in this instance.
6. No Random Shelling missions are permitted. All artillery fire must therefore be directed against Spotted or Suspected targets.
7. Multiple Rocket Launchers may not concentrate their fire. They are also not able to conduct Interdiction Fire.
8. The Ratel-ZT3s are pre-production prototypes and while highly potent, the missile system is unreliable. The ZT3 missile will have no effect if a '1', '2' or '3' is rolled during Fire Combat resolution ('1' or '2' for all other ATGMs or aircraft and '1' for all other forms of Fire Combat).