

# Castro in the War Room: Tactical Advice to Angola

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This is the second of three extracts from an article by the noted Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a Communist, giving the first Cuban-authorized account of the Angolan civil war:

Fidel Castro himself was keeping up to date on the smallest details of the war. He was at the send-off for each troop ship, and before it sailed he would call together the combat units in the theater at the Cabana. He sought out the commanders of the special forces battalion that went on the first flight, and drove them to the steps of the plane in his Soviet-made jeep. It is probable that then and in every one of the other farewells, Castro had to hide an envy for those going off to a war he could not be in.

By then, there was not a spot on the map of Angola that he could not identify, not a quirk of the land that he did not know by heart. So intensely and meticulously did he follow the war that he could cite any statistic of Angola as if he were talking about Cuba. He spoke of Angola's cities, its customs and its people as if he had lived there all his life.

At the start of the war, when the situation was especially pressing, he stayed in the general staff command room as long as 14 hours at a stretch, without eating or sleeping, as if he were on the campaign.

He followed the progress of battles, using colored indicators on wall-sized tactical maps, and was in constant contact with the battlefield high command [of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, which Cuba had allied itself with].

Some of his reactions during those days of doubt reflected a certainty of victory, as when an UPLA unit was forced to dynamite a bridge to delay the advance of South African armored columns.

"Don't blow up any more bridges," Castro said in a message. "Otherwise you won't have any way to pursue them."

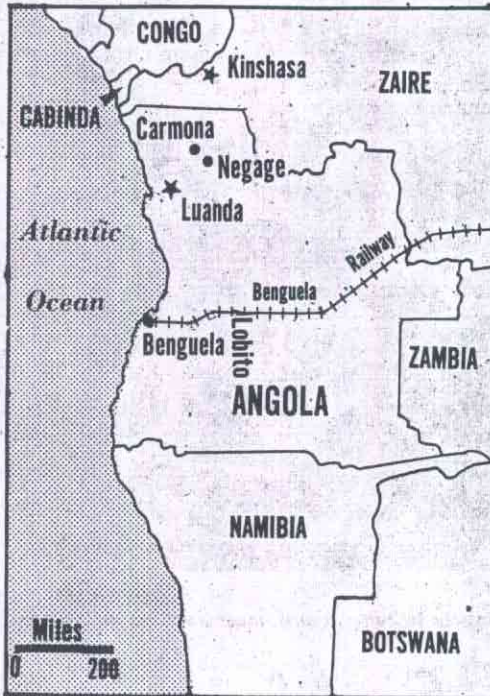
He was right: Only a few weeks later, the Angolan and Cuban engineering brigades had to repair 13 bridges in 20 days to catch the retreating invaders . . .

The difficulties of December were due in the first place to the tremendous firepower of the enemy, which by this time had received more than \$50 million in military aid from the United States. In the second place, they were due to Angola's delay in asking for help and the time it took to get the help to Angola.

Finally, they were due to the miserable conditions and cultural backwardness left by half a millennium of soulless colonialism. That, even more than the first two factors, posed the greatest obstacle to a decisive integration between the Cuban troops and the armed people of Angola.

In Angola, the Cubans found the same climate, the same vegetation, the same apocalyptic downpours and the same evenings fragrant with molasses and fruits that they were used to at home. . .

The Portuguese colonialists . . . had built beautiful, modern cities to live in, with air-conditioned glass buildings and stores with huge electric signs.



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100 But these were cities for whites, like those the grin-  
101 gos built around Old Havana . . . Beneath the mask  
102 of civilization lay a vast and rich land of misery:  
103 The natives' standard of living was one of the low-  
104 est in the world . . . Old superstitions not only com-  
105 plicated daily life, but also hindered the war effort.  
106 The Angolans had been convinced that bullets  
107 would not penetrate white skin, they feared the  
108 magic of airplanes and they refused to go into the  
109 trenches because tombs were only for the dead . . .

110 Angola was a dirty war in which one had to watch  
111 out as much for snakes as for mercenaries, as much  
112 for cannibals as cannonballs. A Cuban commander,  
113 in the midst of a battle, fell into an elephant trap.

114 At first, the black Africans, conditioned by gener-  
115 ations of resentment against the Portuguese, were  
116 hostile to the white Cubans. Many times, especially  
117 in Cabinda, Cuban scouts felt betrayed by the primi-  
118 tive telegraph of the talking drums, whose thump-  
119 thump could be heard for as much as 20 miles.

120 South Africa's white troops, who fired on ambu-  
121 lances with 140 mm. cannons, threw up smoke-  
122 screens on the battlefield to collect their white  
123 dead, but left the black bodies for the vultures . . .

124 In Cuba, all the news coming from Angola was  
125 bad.

126 On Dec. 11, in Hengo, where the MPLA's armed  
127 South African invaders, a Cuban armored car  
128 with four officers in it set out along a path where  
129 some mines had been found.

130 Although four other cars had already passed  
131 through safely, the scouts advised against the route,  
132 which cut only a few unnecessary minutes off the  
133 trip. Ignoring the advice, the car was almost in-  
134 stantly blown up. Two special forces battalion com-  
135 manders were gravely wounded, and Commandant  
136 Raul Diaz Arguello—commander of international  
137 operations in Angola, a hero of the struggle against  
138 Batista and a man widely loved in Cuba—died in-  
139 stantly.

140 That was the bitterest news for the Cubans, but it  
141 was not to be the last. The next day came the disas-  
142 ter at Catufe, perhaps the worse set back of the en-  
143 tire war . . .

144 A South African column had managed to repair a  
145 bridge under the cover of the morning mists and  
146 had surprised the Cubans, who were in the midst of  
147 a withdrawal. The analysis of this defeat showed  
148 that it was due to an error on the Cubans' part . . .

149 On Dec. 22, at the closing of the party congress,  
150 Cuba gave its first official indication that it had  
151 troops in Angola.

152 The war was still not going well. Fidel Castro, in  
153 the closing speech, reported that the invaders in  
154 Cabinda had been defeated in 72 hours; that on the  
155 northern front the troops of Holden Roberto (leader  
156 of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola)  
157 who had been only 15 miles from Luanda on Nov.  
158 10, had been forced to retreat to more than 60 miles  
159 away; and that South Africa's armored columns,  
160 which had advanced more than 400 miles, had been  
161 blocked more than 120 miles from Luanda. The de-

tailed report was comforting, but it was far from a  
victory . . .

Cuban aid reached such a level that at one point  
there were 15 Cuban ships on the high seas bound  
for Luanda. The unstoppable offensive of the MPLA  
on all fronts turned the tide, once and for all, in  
its favor . . . In January, it was conducting opera-  
tions originally planned for April . . .

(With a great disadvantage in air power) Angola  
did have a squadron of Mig-17s with Cuban pilots,  
but these were held in reserve by the high military  
command to be used only for the defense of  
Luanda.

After mid-March, the South African troops began  
their retreat . . .

On April 1, at 9:15 a.m., the advance of the MPLA  
troops under the command of Cuban commandant  
Leopoldo Cintras Frias arrived at the dam at Rau-  
cana, next to the chicken-wire fence marking the  
frontier with Namibia. An hour and a quarter later  
the South African governor of Namibia, . . .  
accompanied by two of his officers, asked permission  
to cross the border to begin talks with the MPLA.

Commandant Cintras Frias received them in a  
wooden shed in the 10-yard-wide neutral strip  
between the two countries, and the two groups gath-  
ered around a large dining table . . .

Agreement took only two hours to reach, but the  
meeting lasted longer, for the South African gen-  
eral ordered a succulent dinner, prepared on the  
Namibian side. As they dined, he offered several  
toasts in beer . . .

Afterward, the program of the withdrawal of Cu-  
ban troops from Angola was agreed to by Castro  
and [Agostinho] Neto [leader of the MPLA] during  
their meeting March 14 in Conakry, after victory  
was achieved. They decided that the withdrawal  
would be gradual but that as many Cubans as  
needed would remain in Angola as long as needed  
to build a modern and strong army, able to guaran-  
tee the future internal security and independence of  
the country without outside help . . .

For security reasons, the Cuban press had not  
published any mention of the participation in An-  
gola. But, as usually happens in Cuba, even with  
military subjects as delicate as this, the operation  
was a secret carefully kept by 8 million persons. The  
first congress of the Cuban Communist Party, which  
was to be held late in December and which was a  
sort of national obsession all year, took on a new  
dimension.

The volunteer units were formed was private mes-  
sages to members of the first reserve, made up of  
all males between 17 and 25 and those who had been  
members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces. They  
were summoned by telegram to report to the appro-  
priate military committees, with no word of why  
they were called. The reason was so obvious that  
everyone who believed that he had military skills  
hastened to his military committee without waiting  
for a telegram. It took a great deal of effort to keep  
this mass concern from turning into a national dis-  
order.

Insofar as the emergency permitted, selection crite-  
ria were quite stringent. Not only were military  
qualifications and physical and moral condition  
taken into account, but also work background and  
political education.

Nevertheless, there were innumerable cases of  
volunteers trying to sneak through the filtering  
process. A qualified engineer tried to pass himself  
off as a truckdriver, a high official pretended to be  
a mechanic, a woman almost got away with passing  
herself off as a recent army recruit.

A youth who joined without his father's permis-  
sion met his father in Angola, because his father  
had also gone without telling his family.