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David Mannall, *Battle on the Lomba 1987: The Day a South African Armoured Battalion Shattered Angola's Last Mechanized Offensive—A Crew Commander's Account*. Solihull, UK: Helion, 2014. Pp. xxxiii, 246. ISBN 978-1-909982-02-4.

Review by W. Martin James, Henderson State University (jamesm@hsu.edu).

This book is the personal account of a South African soldier who, during his mandatory national service, was involved in Operation Modular<sup>1</sup> in the Battle of Lomba River in 1987. The Angolan government, headed by the ruling party Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola<sup>2</sup> (MPLA), was attempting to destroy the main base/capital of the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola<sup>3</sup> (UNITA) at Mavinga/Jamba in the southeast corner of Angola near the border of South-West Africa (present-day Namibia). At the time, South Africa had jurisdiction over the territory under a League of Nations mandate and had refused to acknowledge the United Nations termination of that mandate in 1966. Consequently, the South African Defense Forces (SADF) had several large bases along the Angola/South-West Africa border. These were used for operations against the Southwest Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), a group fighting to oust South Africa from South-West Africa. The bases were also staging points for SADF deployments against Angolan government troops because the MPLA government had pledged to assist SWAPO and South Africa's African National Congress by allowing them to maintain training facilities in southern Angola.

The military wing of the MPLA, the Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola<sup>4</sup> (FAPLA), assisted by Cuban combat troops and advisers from the Soviet Union, had previously assaulted Mavinga/Jamba in 1985 only to be repulsed by UNITA's Forças Armadas de Libertação de Angola<sup>5</sup> (FALA), substantially assisted by the SADF. The rout was so devastating that the South African military commanders assumed another attack would never occur. However, after a year of regrouping and rearming, FAPLA, with their Soviet advisers and Cuban troops, again tried to oust UNITA from Mavinga/Jamba.

David Mannall was seventeen when called for his two-year mandatory enlistment period. Originally he was selected to be an officer in a tank squadron, but a disciplinary matter reduced him to a noncommissioned officer, commanding a Ratel.<sup>6</sup> By the Battle of the Lomba, he was commanding Charlie Company with twelve Ratel Armored Fighting Vehicles (AFVs) armed with 90mm cannons. The main opponent was FAPLA's elite Forty-Seventh Mechanized Battalion, equipped with Soviet-built T-54 Main Battle Tanks. SADF commanders were confident, especially in southern Angola, that the Ratels would only encounter small-arms fire, not Soviet tanks.

The Ratel, a lightly armored but highly maneuverable vehicle, was designed for mobility in the thick bush territory of southern Africa. Bullets and shrapnel bounced off it, but it was vulnerable to rocket-propelled grenades, antitank weapons, and tank guns (3). "The Ratel AFV was ... a six-wheel 18 tonne straight six, 12 litre turbocharged beast ... designed to carry up to 12 soldiers, and was designed with ... an 81mm 'soft-top' mortar launch platform, and for direct combat, the 90mm and 20mm variants. The 20mm was a belt-fed rapid-fire weapon that could easily puncture light armour" (81).

The 1987 battle was comparable to the 1985 clash except that now FAPLA/Cuban pilots controlled the skies with their MiG-23 fighters and Sukhoi fighter-bombers, and the newest version of the Soviet surface-

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1. Also spelled "Modular."

2. Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola.

3. National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.

4. Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola.

5. Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola.

6. *Ratel* is Afrikaans for honey badger, an animal known for its ferocious defensive abilities.

to-air missile—the SAM-8. South Africa could not afford to lose any more of its irreplaceable French-built Mirage fighter-bombers<sup>7</sup> (4). In addition, during 1986, the Soviet Union had pumped one billion dollars of military equipment into Angola, and Cuban leader Fidel Castro had inserted more combat troops into the south of the country.

The FAPLA-Cuban-Soviet battle plan—Operação Salutando Outubro (Operation Greeting October)—called for a total of eight brigades to attack Mavinga/Jamba from different directions. The Forty-Seventh and Fifty-Ninth would flank the objective from the east, while the Sixteenth and Twenty-First established a safe crossing over the Lomba. Mannall's unit was assigned to the SADF Sixty-First Mechanized Regiment with orders to stop FAPLA's Forty-Seventh Brigade. This meant that Charlie Company would be facing Soviet-made T-54 tanks without benefit of the South African Olifant battle tanks still based in South Africa.

The South Africans employed nearly the same battle plan as during Operation Modular. UNITA forces combined with the SADF Thirty-Second Battalion disrupted the rear of the advancing column, making movement over the bushy, sandy terrain difficult. South African artillery, particularly the G-5 and G-6 howitzers, destroyed mobile bridges as they were laid down. FAPLA's Twenty-First Brigade managed to cross the Lomba, but could neither advance against SADF and UNITA forces nor retreat, because mobile bridges were instantly destroyed. Mannell's Charlie Company, along with other SADF units, battled FAPLA's Forty-Seventh Brigade north of the Lomba, destroying eighteen enemy tanks on 3 October. As the battlefield situation deteriorated, Soviet advisers fled, leaving FAPLA without any senior leadership. Chaos ensued and the FAPLA ranks began a pell-mell retreat back toward Cuito Cuanavale, leaving behind tanks, weapons, artillery, and the much sought-after SAM-8s. The United States was very keen to investigate the Soviets' newest surface-to-air missile system.

According to SADF figures, FAPLA lost 1059 dead and 2118 wounded, as well as sixty-one tanks and eighty-three armored vehicles. South African forces lost seventeen killed, forty-one wounded, and five armored vehicles. UNITA casualties are unknown. So comprehensive was UNITA/SADF's victory that SADF command decided to crush FAPLA and pursued its retreating column toward Cuito Cuanavale, thereby launching Operation Hooper. Charlie Company participated in the early stages of the pursuit before being withdrawn from the operational area. "The 3 October battle on the Lomba was such a decisive and humiliating defeat for the FAPLA it resulted in severe reprimands for both Cuban and Russian commanders who were replaced shortly afterwards; and it is rumored to have cost the top Cuban general his life,<sup>8</sup> although this was never acknowledged by the regime" (167).

Mannall is quick to acknowledge the contributions of FALA and SADF's Thirty-Second Battalion. The unit has a strange history. It was comprised of Angolan soldiers commanded by white officers. The Angolans had been a part of the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola<sup>9</sup> (FNLA). During the 1974–75 Angolan civil war, they were assigned to fight MPLA and Cuban forces in southern Angola. After a battlefield defeat, they fled into South-West Africa to surrender to the SADF, who initially had no idea what to do with the men. Col. Jan Breytenbach decided to use their combat skills and formed a unit eventually known as the Thirty-Second Battalion. Deployed primarily in Angola, it displayed combat skills that made it one of the most decorated units during the South African Border War. In its short, eighteen-year existence, the Thirty-Second received thirteen *Honoris Crux* medals for bravery.

The author admittedly discusses only his own role and that of his crew during Operation Modular. He says little about the rest of the battle except to quote the assessment of Army Chief Gen. Jannie Geldenhuis that "the battle on 3 October, causing the destruction of the 47th Brigade on the Lomba River, represents the single greatest victory in the history of the SADF!" (227). Naturally, the book is germane only to a specific part of the 1987 Battle of the Lomba River.

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7. South Africa had been under a UN arms embargo since 1963.

8. Presumably, Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez, executed in July 1989.

9. National Front for the Liberation of Angola.

On another level, however, the book is a compelling study of how young men trained, lived, and fought together, transforming from teenagers into top-notch soldiers. It should be noted that many of the young men had ambivalent feelings about fighting in a little known conflict so far from their homes. The political/military reluctance to expand the war was due in part to the media blackout of events in this theater of operations. Although antiwar sentiment was not as deep or widespread in the SADF, the attitudes of South African soldiers fighting in Angola and South-West Africa were similar to those of US soldiers in Vietnam in the 1970s.

David Mannall was born in England in 1968. That same year his family immigrated to KwaZulu-Natal. He chose to fulfill his mandatory two-year enlistment over serving time in prison or spending four years as a police officer. Today, he lives in London with his wife and two children. "I'm not a military historian, nor have I read other accounts for research, this is my story" (preface).