

Day of the Olifant

November, 1987

"In 1987, new South African tanks, acting in Angola against Soviet T-62 tanks, showed themselves very well, surpassing the enemy with better armor and a gun."

(c) a humorous Wikipedia article.

South African tanks in Angola and why they were used extremely rarely

South Africa had 87 Centurion Mk3 tanks and 116 Centurion Mk5 tanks, of which about 20 were converted to ARVs. In the early 60s, in South Africa was decided that these tanks are very old (and indeed why tanks, if there are such good wheeled vehicles!) and SADF should sell them somewhere. And they sold 100 tanks to Switzerland, and bought the planes with the proceeds.

But, in the exercises in the mid-60s, suddenly became clear that the offensive potential of the army decreased by 2 times (Who would have thought!). It was also found in South Africa that it was not possible to buy new tanks due to the arms embargo announced by imperialists from the UK. But there remained the opportunity to buy parts through other countries, which they did, but it didn't work out very well.

And just then the Portuguese imperialists left Angola and the country regained full freedom successfully plunged into the abyss of the civil war. And although South Africa and Angola do not have a common border, but SWA/Namibia, which was under the protectorate of South Africa, and Angola, have such a border. And in the wake of independence, because of this border, Namibia began to bring independence fighters from the SWAPO organization, of course, with the help of the concerned states of the socialist bloc.

Attempts by South Africa to replace the departed Portuguese in Angola were unsuccessful, but only led to even greater tension in relations now with the United States. On the other hand, it became clear that the allies of the freedom fighters based in Angola are increasing their supply of the most modern weapons. And the Angolan army, which was also not deprived of arms supplies, will help them. There was a clear prospect of major armed clashes involving a large number of armored vehicles, including tanks.

And here, South Africa had to quickly modify the remaining Centurions (about 30 pieces), equipping them with a new engine and FCS (it was still not quite Olifant). But, despite the fact that they initially, in the early 80s, were part of the 61th Mechanized battalion, which participated in almost all operations in the territory of Angola, tanks never went into battle! It turned out that tanks consume a lot of fuel (which created supply difficulties) and have a significantly lower moving speed compared to other wheeled units like APCs and IFVs. And instead of tanks, Ratel-90 was used, which did not have such disadvantages.

Calm before the storm

In the mid-80s, South Africa and Angola signed peace agreements, and the tanks went into storage. But work on the modernization of tanks did not stop, but rather, in cooperation with Israel, SA reached unprecedented heights. South Africa bought from Jordan about 200 Centurions Mk3 of varying degrees of validity, which were used to create a new tank. This, in fact, was an adaptation of the Israeli modification of Centurion, under African conditions. Also, the acceleration of work

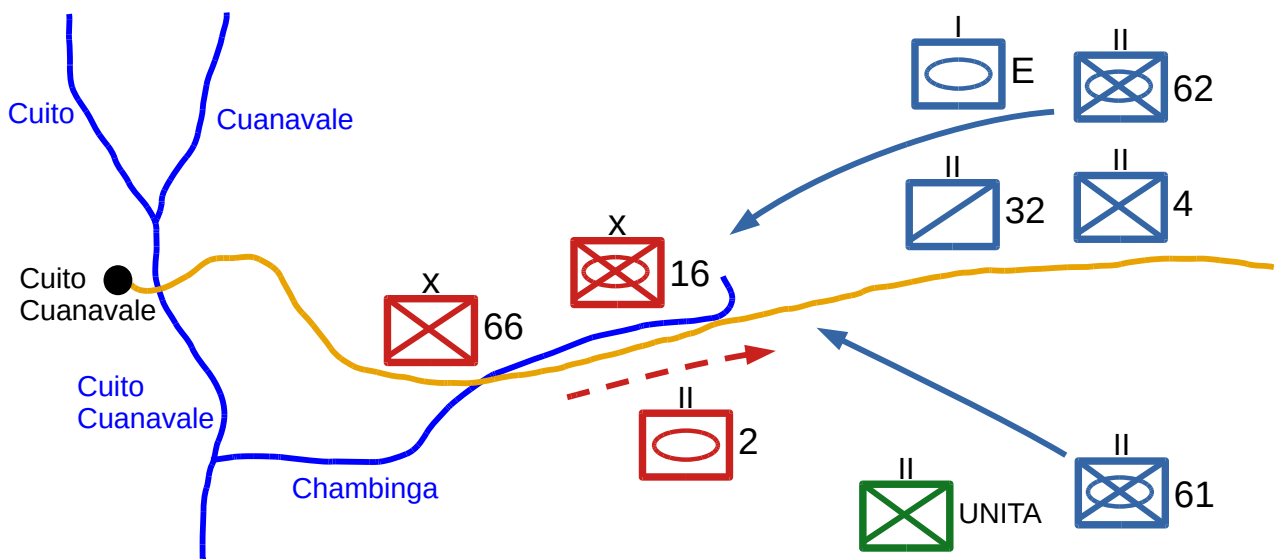
was greatly facilitated after the capture by the South African specialists the company of Polish made T-55 and their joint testing together with the Centurions.

As a result, the only one "real" tank in the SADF in the second half of the 80s, which was in service and fought, was the Olifant Mk1A. In the end, after several intermediate options, the Mk1A modification looked like this: the 83-mm gun was replaced by 105-mm, a modern FCS, night vision, a new radio communication system was installed, and the engine, transmission and brake system were replaced. The volume of fuel tanks has been expanded. To the delight of the South African tankers, it turned out that the tank, unlike Ratel, was not afraid of the most severe weapon that the enemy had - ZU-23-2. And only RPG-7 and T-55 are dangerous for it.

Despite all the successes of tank building in South Africa and confident statements for the destruction of dozens of tanks from Angolan-Cuban pilots, the first tanks of South Africa were transferred to Angola only in November 1987. Apparently, the economic crisis prevented the transfer of tanks earlier, the government did not allocate money for such dubious operations, burdened by logistics difficulties - tanks had to be transported from South Africa to the forward bases in SWA/Namibia, and then had to somehow make their way to the battlefields in Angola. A tank path passed through almost a third of Africa. It also turned out that on the treacherous Angolan soils, the tracks were very quick to grind and required regular replacement (it is not clear why the T-55 and even T-34 tracks did not grind so quickly), which further complicated the process.

A sound of thunder

Thus, only one squadron E of a tank regiment (12 tanks) came to participate in the final stage of Operation "Moduler (pic.1).



Pic.1 – First use of Olifant tanks

At this time, the enemy had:

- 1) A certain number of T-34-85, surviving after the battles of previous years, which were used to protect the rear bases.
- 2) About a hundred of T-55s (but about half have already safely lost), which were the main striking force of tank companies and tactical groups (the so-called separate tank battalions, apparently two or three companies in size).
- 3) And also, interesting modifications of the T-55AM, by which the Angolans will be dot the savannah near the end of war, in 1988, already sailed to Angola.

Despite the fact that the Olifants arrived by the time when the Angolan troops fled retreating, SA tanks had to fight with still remaining combat-ready Angolan brigade. As a result, one Olifant lost the rink and was evacuated. The Angolans lost almost all tanks and also began to retreat as other brigades. But to a greater extent this was not the merit of the newly arrived tanks, but rather the result of the cautious actions of the SADF and UNITA, and the extremely skillful actions of the Angolan side.