

THE CASSINGA RAID

by

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STATEMENT

I declare that *The Cassinga Raid* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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SUMMARY: THE CASSINGA RAID

In 1978 the SADF carried out an airborne assault on Cassinga in Southern Angola. The South Africans claimed that Cassinga was a key SWAPO military headquarters, training camp and logistic base. SWAPO claimed it was a refugee camp and that the approximately 600 people who died in the attack were innocent civilians. The SADF said it had dealt SWAPO a significant military blow; SWAPO said the SADF had carried out a brutal massacre of old people, women and children. This dissertation focuses on the military dimensions of the raid, examining first the military situation in southern Angola and northern Namibia at the time, then looking at Cassinga itself before reviewing the airborne capability of the SADF, considering the decision that was made to launch the attack, describing the planning and preparations, the actual assault, a Cuban counter-attack and the extraction of the South African paratroopers. It concludes with the propaganda claims of both sides before assessing the military significance of the action.

Key Terms

Cassinga; raids; airborne assault; vertical envelopment; paratroopers; parachute operations; refugees; civilian massacre; insurgency; guerrilla warfare; border war; Sun Tzu; Breytenbach, Jan; Hamaambo, Dimo; Viljoen, Constand; SADF; SWAPO; PLAN.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Appendix A: List of Abbreviations

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

On 4 May 1978 (Ascension Day) the South African Defence Force (SADF) carried out raids on several objectives inside Angola. Most significant of these was a deep penetration airborne assault on the former mining town of Cassinga. The events of that military action have remained, even more than two decades later, embroiled in heated controversy. This controversy is epitomised by the nature and the meaning of opposing remembrance celebrations conducted annually to commemorate those who died at Cassinga.

The South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), at the time a liberation movement fighting for Namibia's independence from white South Africa, has remained unswerving in its propagation of the raid on Cassinga as a heinous atrocity on a refugee camp: a deliberate and brutal massacre of innocent women, children and old people by callous, racist thugs. With Namibian independence in 1989, SWAPO became the new government and 4 May was proclaimed Cassinga Day and declared a public holiday. Annually, this day commemorates the catastrophic loss of life of Namibians during the assault on the town,¹ and has come to be a memorial to all Namibians who died in the liberation struggle.² Other former liberation movements such as South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) have been vociferous in their support of SWAPO's commemoration of this day.

Predictably, those who carried out the raid have put forward a very different version. Former SADF general officers, South African National Party government officials of the time and proponents of the *apartheid* regime contended equally vociferously that the raid was a legitimate military attack on a significant military target which was seen as posing a serious threat at that time.³ Every year after the raid the paratroopers of the SADF held a memorial service or parade to commemorate "Cassinga Day" and to honour those paratroopers who fell during the raid. In time, Cassinga Day came to commemorate all fallen SADF paratroopers, even those who had died on other occasions.⁴ With the formation of the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in 1994, the paratroopers continued to celebrate Cassinga Day with a memorial parade every year until this made headlines in 1996 and the Chief of the SANDF was called on to explain such an action while the Minister of

1 Annemarie Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p.5. On the 20th anniversary of the Cassinga raid, Namibia held an official commemoration ceremony in Windhoek at which the Deputy Prime Minister, Hendrik Witbooi, was reported as describing the attack as "brutal, inhuman and uncivilized", *vide* "Namibia remembers horror of Cassinga", *Pretoria News*, 6 May 1998.

2 Heike Becker, "Remembering Cassinga", *Sister Namibia*, Vol 10, No 3, 1998, p. 7.

3 Message sent by the South African government to the United Nations, the text of which was released to the media by the South African Department of Foreign Affairs and was published by numerous South African newspapers on 5 and 6 May 1978. These included the *Rand Daily Mail*, *The Star*, *The Citizen* and the *Natal Mercury*.

4 *The Significance of Cassinga Day*, explanatory summary contained in programme for Cassinga Day Parade held by 44 Parachute Brigade: undated, but probably about 1990. The same summary, dated 4 November 1991, is contained in an Information Brochure on 44 Parachute Brigade.

Defence apologised to the government and the people of Namibia.⁵ Still, the paratroopers quietly went on holding their annual low-key commemorations of the event until this was discovered and thwarted by the then Minister of Defence, Joe Modise, in 1998.⁶ His Deputy, Ronnie Kasrils, was very outspoken in his condemnation of the paratrooper custom.⁷ However, the Legion of Associated Airborne of the Republic of South Africa (LAARSA), a private association of old paratroopers, stubbornly continued in subsequent years to commemorate Cassinga Day in honour of their fallen comrades.⁸ The controversy simmered on. Even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, in its *Report*, stated that “in human rights terms, the SADF raid on Cassinga, which killed over 600 people, is possibly the single most controversial external operation of the Commission’s mandate period.”⁹

In view of the fact that the old SADF is now no more than an historical curiosity and that the paratroopers to whom Cassinga remains significant are a small and dwindling group, the polemic surrounding the raid could be seen as merely academic. The victors of the liberation struggle, whose refrain is now the official voice, appear to have triumphed in their version of the events. Those who espouse the SADF version are largely seen as discredited adherents of a regime based on lies. Further contention could therefore be brushed aside as being irrelevant. And yet, even a quarter of a century after the raid, the subject still cannot be broached without eliciting strong opposing emotions.

Seen from the military perspective, it certainly cries out to be broached because the raid holds an undeniable fascination. It is distinctive in several respects in the annals of airborne operations. The size and composition of the force used, the distance and terrain over which the operation was conducted, the location of the objective, the risk involved, the manner in which air support was employed, the Cuban counter-attack, the airborne extraction of the force and the preponderance of citizen soldiers employed all create considerable interest in the raid when studied as a military action. More significantly, the utilisation of paratroops in an essentially strategic and independent role marks the raid as a truly classic airborne operation which reveals a grasp of the potential of the vertical envelopment concept comprehended by only a few military commanders. Similarly, the successful application of the principles of surprise and maximum firepower over such a strategic distance by a force of the size that was used compels the serious student of military strategy to examine the planning and execution of the operation in detail.

5 “Meiring to clarify ‘celebration’ of SADF raid”, *The Star*, 4 June 1996, and “SA to say sorry celebrating defence force raid”, *The Star*, 6 June 1996.

6 “Modise squares up to elite army unit”, *Pretoria News*, 27 May 1998.

7 Address delivered by Ronnie Kasrils at an SA Army Seminar held at the NG Church Synod Centre in Pretoria on Thursday 11 June 1998, during which he referred to the “appalling atrocities” committed by the paratroopers at Cassinga, condemned the commemoration which had been planned by 44 Parachute Brigade for Sunday 3 May that year (but cancelled at the last minute because of his intervention) and threatened dire consequences if such a commemoration was ever planned again. No official commemoration was ever held subsequently.

8 *Legion of Associated Airborne RSA*, Newsletter, May 1999, where the thinly disguised event was described as a Commemoration for Airborne Soldiers Serving In Notable Gallant Action. By the year 2002 the commemoration was again openly being referred to as “Cassinga Day” by LAARSA (Newsletter, February 2002).

9 *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa Report, Volume 2*, p. 46.

This martial significance of the raid makes the military analyst reluctant to dismiss the SADF version out of hand. Yet the SWAPO version diminishes any alleged achievement on the part of the SADF and reduces the raid to an appalling action not worthy of any acclaim whatsoever. The difficulty which this contention creates for the military historian is that a study of the military operation carried out by the SADF could be seen to countenance the SADF version and dismiss that of SWAPO. Equally, political historians examining the impact of the raid on the Namibian liberation struggle could be seen to reflect a total rejection of the SADF version in favour of SWAPO's claims. A third and apparently suppressed or ignored viewpoint could come to light by social historians examining the effect of the raid on the local Angolan population resident at or around Cassinga at the time. Alternatively, this third approach could reinforce one or the other of the above opposing perceptions.

The political and social dimensions of the raid cannot be divorced from the military issues, and as this dissertation is concerned primarily with the latter it is faced with the objectivity dilemma which this poses. The dilemma, however, has to be faced with the acknowledgement that it is not the purpose of this dissertation to resolve it, nor to endorse one or the other contention. Rather, this research is concerned with the military difficulties encountered by those who initiated the operation: the SADF. Any raid is a difficult military operation requiring extraordinary martial skill. The unique demands of this particular raid made it especially difficult.

Sun-tzu (c. 500 BC), the Chinese master strategist and general of the Era of the Warring States, reputedly wrote *The Art of War*, (*"Ping-fa"*), probably the first and still regarded in military circles as one of the greatest works dedicated to the theory of war and strategy. His insistence on taking political considerations into account during the waging of war has greatly influenced modern strategists, whilst the tactics he propagated were successfully employed by the Chinese against the occupying Japanese forces in the Sino-Japanese War of 1937 - 1945¹⁰ and later also by the Chinese Communists against the Chinese Nationalists as recently as the civil war in China during 1946 – 1949.¹¹

One of the axioms of Sun-tzu encapsulates the essential elements of a raid:

“You may advance and be absolutely irresistible, if you make for the enemy's weak points; you may retire and be safe from pursuit if your movements are more rapid than those of the enemy.”¹²

Herein lies the greatest difficulty: correctly identifying and striking the weak points, then withdrawing rapidly afterwards.

Chang-yu, a Chinese philosopher, historian and commentator on *The Art of War* in the late Sung Dynasty (c. 1000 AD), paraphrased Sun-tzu's words unwittingly to provide an airborne solution, a full millennium ahead of his time, to this age-old quandary faced by those planning to carry out a raid:

“Come like the wind, go like the lightning”¹³

10 Lynn Montross, *War Through the Ages*, p. 877.

11 Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla*, pp. 255 and 261.

12 Major General Lo Shun-te (ed.), *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, p. 139 and Peter G. Tsouras, *Warriors' Words*, p.408.

In the Twentieth Century, the prominent military historian and strategic theoretician, Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart, in considering the intellectual application of battlefield manoeuvre, expounded the strategy of the indirect approach. He saw this as manifesting both a physical and a psychological dimension:

“... a move round the enemy’s front against the rear has the aim not only of avoiding resistance on its way but in its issue. In the profoundest sense, it takes the *line of least resistance*. The equivalent in the psychological sphere is the *line of least expectation*. They are the two faces of the same coin, and to appreciate this is to widen our understanding of strategy.” (*Strategy*, 1954)¹⁴

On the strategic level of military operations, a raid is sometimes the best way to accomplish this indirect approach. But in carrying out a raid, the raider has to first identify the enemy’s weak point, then find the fastest and most unexpected way of getting there, encountering the least possible resistance on the way and thereby inflicting the maximum psychological dislocation. Finally, after completing his mission on the objective, the raider will have to withdraw so rapidly that the enemy is unable to recover and pursue him.

The problem, then, in the case of the Cassinga raid, is to establish whether the concept of vertical envelopment was an appropriate response to the prevailing military situation. Was this airborne assault on SWAPO’s rear in fact directed at a weak point following the line of least resistance and the line of least expectation, and was the withdrawal one of sufficient speed?

VIABILITY OF RESEARCH

The viability of conducting research into this problem is considerable, though not without some difficulties. In his case study on Cassinga as an example of the problems encountered by a military historian, Professor Leo Barnard identifies specific difficulties:¹⁵

- a. The deliberate action of the South African government not to keep the public informed of the overall course of the undeclared war in Namibia/Angola.
- b. The suppression by the SADF of uncensored memoirs, diaries and photos from the war.
- c. The unavailability of classified documentation from SADF archives.
- d. The failure of the SADF to compile an accurate, consolidated record.
- e. The absence of any SWAPO records.
- f. The absence of any other consolidated, non-South African documentary material.
- g. The unwillingness of SWAPO individuals to provide interviews.
- h. The highly emotive connotation which Cassinga has for most Namibians.
- i. The refusal of SADF sources to acknowledge anything but the military side of the raid.

13 Tsouras, *Warriors’ Words*, p. 398.

14 Quoted in Tsouras, *Warriors’ Words*, p.355. Own emphasis is added to highlight this dissertation’s argument.

15 Leo Barnard, “Die Gebeure by Cassinga, 4 Mei 1978 – ’n Gevallestudie van die Probleme van ’n Militêre Historikus”, *Historia*, May 1996, pp. 88-99.

I believe that I have been in a position to overcome all but the difficulties listed which relate to SWAPO and non-South African material.

The military archives held by the SANDF's Documentation Services in Pretoria contain the official documentation of the SADF involvement in the raid. Though most of this is classified, as a researcher with the necessary level of security clearance I have been able to gain access to much of this material, particularly as a serving officer of the SANDF. Having served in a combat capacity in the former SADF throughout most of the conflict, I also have reasonable first-hand knowledge of the general course of the war. In addition, with the advent of democracy in South Africa and the ANC victory at the polls, much of what was considered highly classified by the former government is no longer seen as posing any threat to the security of the state. Its value has therefore become purely historical. The first ANC Defence Minister of South Africa, Joe Modise, in fact stated during his term of office that the time had come to grant access by the general public to all official documentation in the archives relating to Cassinga. Furthermore, a decision has been taken by the authorities to consider the declassification of all archives older than 20 years.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the sheer quantity of documentation at the military archives which now has to be vetted for declassification, and the small number of counter-intelligence officers available to undertake this task have made it an enormously lengthy process.

Nevertheless, the Defence Intelligence Sub-Division Counter-Intelligence, Directorate Departmental Security, especially Lieutenant Colonel Pieter de Waal and Warrant Officer Class 1 Suzette Pëtersen, have very kindly made the declassification of documents dealing with Cassinga a priority, as a special concession to my research. For this I am very grateful to them. Also to Ms Louise Jooste, in charge of the SANDF's Documentation Services, and her exceptionally helpful archivist, Mr Steve de Agrela, who always went out of his way to satisfy my often-insatiable demands to find various documents. Ms Jooste has been most accommodating to the difficulties of conducting research in Pretoria whilst being resident in Port Elizabeth, which I have greatly appreciated.

These military archives serve as a primary official source of information on SADF involvement at Cassinga. They include the minutes of planning sessions, official written orders and instructions, aircraft flight plans, bombing missions, transcriptions of radio messages, log books, aerial and other photographs, debriefing reports, lessons learned, load manifests, signals, correspondence and reports. However, it must be remembered that even declassified military documents are "masked" to exclude the declassification of specific aspects deemed by Counter-Intelligence to be too sensitive for release. This masking usually entails the blocking of the release of the names of individuals.

First-hand accounts of the raid have been obtained from interviews conducted with many of the paratroopers who participated as well as with some of the pilots of the aircraft which dropped them and of the helicopters which extracted them. Access was also granted by some individuals to written accounts, diaries and notes recorded by certain paratroopers. Many photographs and some documents were released to the media at the time of the raid, by the South African authorities, in an

16 Discussions with Ms Louisa Jooste, in charge of the SANDF's Documentation Services, during research into former SADF archives.

effort to verify their version of events. These were copied and fell into the hands of many paratroopers, some of whom were in turn prepared to give me copies.

Newspapers, both South African and international, gave the raid considerable coverage at the time, while subsequent accounts have been published in popular magazines and books. More scholarly works have generally only touched on Cassinga, although there are a substantial number which have done so. It has been possible to trace most of these through the Unisa Library, and in this regard the Subject Librarian, Ms Mary-Lynn Suttie, has been of invaluable assistance.

Some of the key figures on SWAPO's side who were at Cassinga during or shortly after the raid now occupy positions of importance in the Namibian Defence Force. Efforts to trace and contact them proved unsuccessful, and the SANDF's Counter-Intelligence Sub-Division would not permit contact to be made through the South African military attaché in Windhoek. Contact with the Secretary of Information and Publicity at the SWAPO Head Office in Windhoek merely resulted in a referral to the National Archives of Namibia. However, it soon became clear that an actual visit to the archives would be necessary in order to search for information, and such a visit simply was not possible. This is most unfortunate, as the archives in Windhoek might conceivably house some documentation which could shed light on the SWAPO version of events. Libraries and research centres at various universities in South Africa and abroad are able to provide information and the Unisa Library has been of inestimable value in assisting in this regard. International organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United States (US) Library of Congress must certainly have some archival information. Frustratingly, these organisations have, for various reasons, proved difficult to access. UN agencies in South Africa consistently refer the researcher to the UN web site, which goes back no more than seven years. There is therefore no record readily available of events which took place a quarter of a century ago. However, Mr Sean Newman of the Information Resource Centre at the Embassy of the United States of America in Pretoria was wonderfully helpful. He went to great lengths to trace and provide copies of documents in the US which proved quite useful.

The Mayibuye Archives of the Robben Island Museum, housed at the University of the Western Cape, were able to provide some documentation from SWAPO sources, though these were all secondary, printed items. Ms Leah Phayane was particularly helpful in finding documents in the absence of an archival database. Throughout the research for this dissertation, however, a constant frustration has been the vacuum of quidditative SWAPO sources or evidence regarding the origins of the camp at Cassinga, its construction and its nature and purpose. Fortunately, Dr Jeremy Silvester of the University of Namibia was able to provide translated transcripts of interviews with SWAPO survivors of the raid on Cassinga. These went some way towards addressing the imbalance of sources, though the apparently low level of the interviewees within the SWAPO hierarchy at the time of the raid made their testimonies of limited value in providing answers to some of the controversial questions. The National Archives of Namibia were able to provide photographs at a

cost, and it was possible to get the Commander of the Army of the Namibian Defence Force to agree to complete a questionnaire. These have gone some way towards restoring the balance.

The governments of both Angola and Cuba must have relevant material at their disposal, though neither has shown any willingness to make this available. I was able to conduct an interview with the Angolan Defence Attaché in Pretoria, Lieutenant General J.J.A. da Silva ("Mayunga"), who would not answer questions himself, though he undertook to obtain answers for me from Angola. This, unfortunately, did not happen. Many efforts to make contact with any official at the Cuban Embassy in Pretoria proved fruitless: I could get no further than the receptionist. Sources for embarking on research into the historical problem have therefore been in existence, if not always easily accessible. Disappointingly, therefore, some of these sources did prove inaccessible to me, especially in terms of the time that would have been necessary to conduct the research as well as the travelling expenses that this would have entailed. In this regard it was not possible for me to visit Namibia or Angola.

Finally, there are people still living in and around the remains of Cassinga who would remember the raid very vividly. Being, as they were, the neutral victims of a conflict of which they were not a part (the inevitable civilian population displaced and terrorised by every war), they provide a unique source for any historian. The military historian especially, faced with the dilemma of diametrically opposed, politically loaded versions, has the potential in this source to assemble a third, less radical and more human version of what has remained an enigmatic event. Sadly, the recent civil war in Angola and its legacy of landmines has made access to these people both risky and uncertain, and Angolan visa and customs restrictions have made travel to do some research *in loco situ* well-nigh impossible.

FORMULATION OF THE HYPOTHESIS

Despite the fact that considerable effort has gone into tracing primary sources on the SWAPO side, the very nature of a political liberation struggle and the constitution of a guerrilla army are such that documentary records are virtually non-existent. It has therefore been necessary to rely on subsequently published accounts, SWAPO documents that had fallen into SADF hands and to a lesser extent on personal interviews with participants. Sadly, the distance between Port Elizabeth, where I live, and Namibia as well as the passage of time since the events took place have made it extremely difficult to trace participants, especially the rank-and-file guerrillas or refugees of that time.

Accordingly, it has been inevitable that the bias of evidence available has been towards the SADF side and this has channelled the emphasis towards analysing the South African rather than the SWAPO dimensions of the raid. This has necessarily also impacted on the shaping of the hypothesis.

In formulating an hypothesis for research on this raid, the military historian can scarcely avoid the polemic posed by the principal contenders and the concomitant issue of the credibility of the military claims. Proving one or the other version at this juncture is hardly a feasible possibility, so the hypothesis needs more realistically to rest upon those military aspects beyond dispute. Essentially,

these are that an airborne assault operation was carried out, that most of the paratroopers involved were not professional soldiers and that a battle, which included a Cuban counter-attack, did take place. Also, that Cassinga was largely destroyed and that the South Africans withdrew back to Namibia on the same day.

The hypothesis which has thus been formulated and upon which the research for this dissertation is founded, is therefore that a parachute raid on Cassinga was the only way that the SADF could strike that objective without encountering major resistance *en route*, that the objective itself was a strategically weak point in SWAPO's defences, that the raid was totally unexpected by SWAPO and its allies, and that the subsequent extraction of the paratroopers from the objective area was so rapidly executed that SWAPO and its allies were unable to react effectively to the raid.

To establish or falsify this hypothesis a number of factors are examined. These factors are supported by and drawn from the hypothesis and each one is investigated to determine its relevance, accuracy, veracity, justifiability, the good faith of participants and other applicable and measurable aspects based on available sources. The chapters of this dissertation are formed from these factors.

The factors which have been identified (and therefore the research chapters of this dissertation) are the following:

- The Military Situation in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia.
- The Nature and Defensibility of Cassinga.
- The SADF's Airborne Capability at the Time of the Raid.
- The Decision to Carry Out the Raid.
- Planning and Preparations for the Raid.
- The Airborne Assault on Cassinga.
- The Cuban Counter-Attack and the Paratrooper Extraction.
- Repercussions of the Raid and the Politics of Propaganda.

They are deliberately discussed in the above sequence in order to commence with the broad military picture so as to contextualise the events which took place at Cassinga. Accordingly, the military situation in southern Angola and northern Namibia on the eve of the raid is examined first, as this helps to paint a picture of the opposing forces, their deployments and capabilities, their respective strategies and the terrain and weather conditions in which they were operating.

By then funnelling the discussion to Cassinga itself it becomes possible to focus on the objective of the raid. At the same time, however, this is also the object of the controversy. The discussion of the nature of Cassinga at the time of the raid must therefore necessarily be open to some conjecture. However, at least some of this conjecture is rejected or confirmed as subsequent chapters unfold. The defensibility of Cassinga is more easily established and this is more crucial to the hypothesis.

Attention is then switched to the SADF's airborne capability and its development in order to present the force which was employed against the objective. In doing so, an historical synopsis of the development of both the South African airborne forces and the thinking of the SADF towards the concept of vertical envelopment is given. This is important because it explains how the raid came to be carried out largely by older, part-time citizen soldiers rather than by professional paratroopers or young conscripts.

The decision to launch an airborne assault is examined next. A deliberate raid of this magnitude had never before been undertaken by the SADF and it is necessary to understand the circumstances, both political and military, which led to this decision. Because of the high risk involved in such an operation, and given the cautious nature of the political leadership of the time under premier John Vorster, it is also useful to gain some insight into the key role-players in the military hierarchy who were vital to the execution of the raid. This contributes towards an understanding of how such a raid came to be carried out. A brief background sketch of the most influential South African military personalities is therefore included in this chapter.

The planning and preparations for executing the raid are then discussed, more particularly because the attack on Cassinga was the only part of the overall operation which made use of Citizen Force soldiers. All the other actions utilized national servicemen or regular soldiers. The Cassinga raid therefore was the only one which necessitated a call-up of participants and required their refresher training. Again, some attention is given to personalities amongst the senior tactical commanders, as this was of enormous significance to the course of events both during planning and rehearsals as well as during the raid itself.

Only then is the actual airborne assault addressed in an effort to unravel the most confusing events of the raid. This includes a piecing together of the extraction of the paratroopers by helicopter, as well as of the Cuban counter-attack. International reaction to the raid and the attempts by both South Africa and SWAPO and its supporters to manipulate the perceptions of the raid, then form the ultimate and ongoing phase of the operation, the action having shifted totally from the military to the political sphere. Finally, the aftermath and results of the raid are considered in order to formulate a conclusion based on the hypothesis of this dissertation.

Throughout, it needs to be remembered that Operation REINDEER entailed more than just the raid on Cassinga. In effect there were three separate operations, one on Cassinga by the paratroops, one on the Chetaquera complex by a mechanised force and the third on the Dombondola complex by a light infantry force on foot. Although they were under one overall command and their aims were linked, this dissertation deals only with the first.

EVALUATION OF LITERATURE AND SOURCES CONSULTED

A critical evaluation of the reliability of the literature and other sources which have been considered relevant to my research is included here as a prelude to the body of the research findings. The

literature provided a theoretical basis for the research, so its evaluation during the compiling of the dissertation has been regarded as vital.

As a serving general officer in the South African National Defence Force with a Top Secret security clearance I have had very open access to the classified military archives. Much of the information which I obtained from these archives has proved invaluable for this dissertation, although it has only been possible to utilise that which Defence Counter-Intelligence has been prepared to de-classify. I have also consulted widely in the available literature on the Cassinga raid, although most of this literature is for popular consumption, with very little of genuine academic value. Similarly, newspaper accounts at the time of the raid often verged on the hysterical and certainly showed a notably partisan bent. However, much has been gleaned from secondary sources of a more academic nature, not written specifically about the Cassinga raid but containing incidental references to it or elaborating on the social and political circumstances under which the raid took place.

A severe shortcoming in researching records has been the apparent absence of anything written by SWAPO or SWAPO-sympathisers about Cassinga prior to the raid having taken place. If such documentation could have been traced it would have provided important verification of the deluge of claims made subsequent to the raid. The South African military archives, on the other hand, have yielded considerable detail contained in intelligence reports and summaries compiled prior to the raid and on which the raid was in fact based.

Similarly, official documentation of classified reports, evaluations, debriefings and lessons learned from the raid have been detailed and numerous in the SANDF archives, covering the SADF participation. But no official SWAPO documentation in like vein has been traced, other than what has been found in SADF possession. Although this source for such SWAPO documents immediately places a question mark on their authenticity, it is feasible that they could have been acquired through intelligence agents. Nevertheless, their content is as far as possible always tested against the other sources.

In my background reading I found it necessary to delve quite deeply into the history of airborne operations and the development of the military concept of vertical envelopment. Though these aspects do not form part of the Cassinga raid, they do have a direct bearing on how the raid came to be planned and executed as it was. A fuller understanding of airborne operations as a specialist form of warfare was thus essential in order to grasp the essence of the nature of the Cassinga raid whilst doing research into the details of the raid.

Extensive reading on other, similar airborne operations carried out by different countries has made it possible to draw comparisons and thereby better evaluate the raid on Cassinga. Again, such operations do not form part of this dissertation, but their examination has provided valuable background information. The publications consulted for this reading are therefore included in the Source List.

The basis of SWAPO's strategy for the liberation of Namibia could be traced to the Selected Works of Mao Zedong as well as other revolutionary writings included in the Source List. The SADF strategy, on the other hand, was drawn from the classical counter-insurgency works of Lieutenant Colonel John J. McCuen and Sir Robert Thompson, both of which were required reading for senior SADF officers. All of these have therefore also been consulted and included in the source list.

Documents containing the names of SWAPO individuals, especially of guerrillas, are sometimes confusing because of the practice amongst liberation armies to allocate "combat names" or a *nom de guerre* to each individual. Sometimes the combat name is used and in other instances the actual name might be used. As a result, there may be two separate, unconnected references to the same person, but the researcher would have no way of knowing this.

The various sources are specifically discussed here under the same headings which have been allocated in the Source List at the end of the dissertation in order to group them by type for easier reference.

a. **Published Sources: Books**

A number of books were consulted to provide background information on the concept of vertical envelopment and its development, particularly during the Second World War. Most of these were, from a military point of view, quite authoritative and written by professional soldiers with impeccable credentials. Those covering the continued development and modification of the concept in the post-war decades were not always of the same standard. Many had been authored by journalists or popular writers, more concerned with the spectacular than with accurately recording or analysing the airborne operations in question. Nevertheless, factual issues such as dates and places, and in some cases results, were confirmed from these.

Also consulted were numerous books which provided contextual information as background to the raid itself and for the gradual militarisation of South African white society, the politicisation of the SADF and the development of the insurgency war in Namibia. The influence of the military on white South Africans and the political nature of the SADF had to be considered in attempting to explain what happened at Cassinga. Yet both these issues are beyond the scope of this dissertation, and remain a fallow field for future research.

A considerable collection of general South African history works had to be examined because of the dearth of detailed material or specific studies available about societal militarisation and military politicisation during the 1950s. Predictably, although the general works are largely credible and of good repute, they yielded little by way of analysis of the particular subjects concerned. Fortunately, from the 1960s onward a great deal more was available and the works Frankel¹⁷ as well as Cock and Nathan¹⁸ were able to provide interesting perspectives.

17 Philip H. Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*.

18 Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan (eds.), *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa*.

Many of the South African publications which appeared prior to 1994 are unashamedly biased in favour of the *apartheid* government. Consequently their portrayals of the SADF are often one-sided. They have nevertheless been valuable in providing insights into the white South African psyche at the time and their references to dates and occurrences have generally been very accurate. Where possible, their interpretations have been compared with opposing views and where the facts remain in dispute, this has been noted. Steenkamp has written fairly extensively on the Cassinga raid and appears to have obtained much of his information from SADF participants.¹⁹ Neither he nor Heitman,²⁰ another pro-SADF writer, seem to have had access to official documentation though.

Equally, however, most of the British and American works dealing with Africa which appeared over the same period have been products of the liberal establishment. They have therefore been highly critical of the South African government and the SADF. The publication edited by Carter and O'Meara is a typical example of this, as is Deutschmann's collection of interviews, speech extracts and agreements reflecting the standpoints of Fidel Castro and others prominent in the Cuban hierarchy.²¹ Also serving to balance the preponderance of pro-SADF secondary publications is the collection of research papers edited by Johnson and Martin.²² In this league, Hanlon's book reflects an inexplicable shortcoming: whilst it carefully documents almost every incursion carried out by the SADF, it is strangely silent about the year 1978 and in no way even alludes to the Cassinga raid, despite describing how the mine was bombed in 1982 and the town occupied by South African troops in 1983.²³ Perhaps the most scholarly and therefore most objective of the works dealing with Namibian independence is the valuable publication by Leys and Saul, with several in-depth contributions by academics who have specialised in Namibia.²⁴ It has been particularly useful in providing insights into SWAPO internal politics in exile.

Very little seems to have been written about Cassinga by participants in the action coming from the liberation movements, and where something has appeared in print it has seldom been endorsed by SWAPO or the ANC. Kobo's memoir, for instance, describes his time in Cassinga and how he experienced the raid.²⁵ Yet he makes no reference to refugees in the town. It is therefore probably not surprising that his book was not met with much enthusiasm by the ANC. Whether this makes his recollection unreliable though, is open to question. Nevertheless, his book does contain some glaring errors, particularly geographical and technical errors, which do make its reliability questionable. Kobo's claim to have been an *Umkhonto weSizwe* guerrilla though, makes his views interesting and topical.

19 Willem Steenkamp, *Borderstrike! and South Africa's Border War*. Also "Politics of Power – the Border War" in Al J. Venter (ed.), *Challenge*.

20 Helmoed-Römer Heitman, *South African Armed Forces and South African War Machine*.

21 Gwendolen M. Carter and Patrick O'Meara (eds.), *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis* and David Deutschmann (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa*.

22 Phyllis Johnson and David Martin (eds.), *Destructive Engagement: Southern Africa at War*.

23 Joseph Hanlon, *Beggar your Neighbours*, especially pp. 157-160.

24 Colin Leys and John S. Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*.

25 Joseph Kobo, *Waiting in the Wing*.

Carrying far greater authority is Peter Katjavivi's historical work on the resistance movement in Namibia.²⁶ As a senior SWAPO official at the time of the Cassinga raid he provides a striking insight into SWAPO's thinking and point of view. Unfortunately, as he was not himself at Cassinga, his approach tends to be a view of the bigger picture with only passing and peripheral references to the events of the raid.

On the other hand, some publications expounding SWAPO's version of events have appeared. Though not written by participants, they do purport to draw on the experiences of participants. Understandably, such works are openly supportive of SWAPO and quite virulently antagonistic towards the SADF and particularly the paratroopers. Chief amongst these is Annemarie Heywood's publication, produced by the National Archives of Namibia. Heywood has examined much of what was written about Cassinga by both sides. Her work is sub-titled "An Investigation of the Records," but draws almost exclusively on secondary sources.²⁷ Other pro-SWAPO publications and articles were found in the Mayibuye Archives of the Robben Island Museum at the University of the Western Cape. They included the *Namibia Dossier* and a Fact Paper on Southern Africa entitled *Remember Kassinga* published by the International Defence and Aid Fund in London.²⁸ Pagano's photographic essay,²⁹ based on a visit he paid to Cassinga two days after the raid, includes a preface in which he describes the events, apparently from stories recounted by survivors. This is certainly of some value, though its credibility is called into question by its technical errors, the high level of emotion apparent in its wording and some obvious untruths.

Recently, a number of books for popular consumption dealing with both the South African special forces and the paratroopers have made an appearance. Two of them, the one by Els and the other by Paul, both touch on the Cassinga Raid.³⁰ Both of them, however, appear to use as their only sources the notorious "bar room stories" so beloved by paratroopers the world over. Both publications contain numerous factual inaccuracies and blatant untruths and neither is in any way reliable as a source in itself. They are in any case more anecdotal than historical.

b. **Encyclopaedia, Yearbooks and Commemorative Publications**

Whilst generally appearing to be very accurate, these sources provided almost no detail and were only convenient in verifying broader issues and international events.

c. **Journals and Periodicals**

Military and popular periodicals have provided superficial background, particularly regarding post-Second World War airborne operations. However, it has been academic journals which have reflected serious thought and analytical views on the Cassinga raid itself and the events and

26 Peter H. Katjavivi, *A History of Resistance in Namibia*.

27 Annemarie Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*.

28 *Namibia Dossier*, International University Exchange Fund, Geneva, 1979 (Mayibuye Archives Centre, Box: Namibia: General 102) and "Remember Kassinga", *Fact Paper on Southern Africa No 9*, International Defence and Aid Fund, London, 1981 (Mayibuyes Archive Centre).

29 Gaetano Pagano, *The Kassinga File*.

30 Paul Els, *We Fear Nought but God*, and Mathew Paul, *Parabat*.

circumstances surrounding it. Unfortunately, they have not addressed the military dimensions of the raid.

Periodical publications of the liberation movements have proved a useful source of information on the SWAPO version of events during the raid on Cassinga. These have included *Omkeer*, “an uncensored resistance magazine for white South African soldiers and draftees” produced by SWAPO, as well as the ANC’s organ, *Sechaba*. These were both available at the Mayibuye Archives of the Robben Island Museum at the University of the Western Cape.

Book reviews have served to throw a fresh light on certain publications. In this regard, the review of Annemarie Heywood’s *The Cassinga Event* by Professor Christopher Saunders has been particularly useful in identifying hitherto unexplored aspects and which has questioned some views about the raid.³¹ These questions have been especially instrumental in leading certain lines of research and it is hoped that at least some of them have been addressed, if not fully answered.

d. **Official Publications**

The publications of the US Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth are highly professional and profoundly researched, although their material does not relate directly to the Cassinga raid. They have, however, been extremely useful in making comparisons between the Cassinga raid and other airborne operations.

e. **Military Manuals and Training Handbooks**

These have been most helpful in establishing exactly what the military approach should have been and what was accepted practice within the military at the time. They have also made it possible to determine exact technical information regarding aircraft and military parachuting.

f. **Newspapers**

Perhaps predictably, most South African newspapers reflected the militarisation of white society in the country in their response to and recording of the raid. They generally printed what the government and SADF spokesmen told them with very little contrary comment. Their interviews with other individuals were quite useful, though they tended to concentrate on the bereaved family members of paratroopers killed in action rather than on actual participants.

Newspapers from abroad, on the other hand (perhaps equally predictably), reflected international aversion to the *apartheid* régime and were almost universally condemnatory of the SADF action. Interviews by these newspapers tended to be with SWAPO survivors of the raid and comment largely corresponded with the SWAPO line.

More recently, South African newspapers commenting on Cassinga Day celebrations have tended to follow the line of the SWAPO or the ANC government; even those papers which appeared to support the SADF version at the time of the raid.

31 Christopher Saunders, “Cassinga”, *Southern African Review of Books*, September/October 1994.

g. **Published Archival Sources**

Of inestimable value have been the *Debates of the House of Assembly* (Hansard), which have reflected government views and deceit, as well as giving some indication of official opposition, not always shown in the media. They have also been a source of what must be accepted as reasonably accurate data and of what was actually said in Parliament by politicians.

h. **Unpublished Archival Sources**

The SANDF Directorate of Documentation Services, which houses all SADF (including Union Defence Force) archives (except personal files) in its repository in Schweikert Building, Visagie Street, Pretoria, has yielded a wealth of detailed documentary sources. These are all boxed and filed according to the SANDF filing system and are readily available provided the necessary security classification is held by the researcher and Defence Intelligence has granted access to the files concerned. The personnel working at the Directorate are extremely helpful and have willingly assisted in tracing documentation where they were permitted to do so, saving many precious hours of research time. Unfortunately, the Counter-Intelligence Sub-Division of the Defence Intelligence Division will only allow documentation which has been declassified to be quoted or copied for research purposes. Those counter-intelligence officers tasked with scrutinizing documents for declassification are woefully few in number and monumentally overworked. This has placed a brake on access to certain items.

Official documentation is understandably often brief and lacking in details. Nevertheless, its greatest value has been its reliability in verifying facts or perceptions. There has been no cause to doubt the veracity of most of these documents and no evidence was noted of them having been tampered with in any way. It was often possible to cross-check many documents appearing in one file with those of another file from an entirely different military section in order to confirm with reasonable certainty the truth of the contents. Of great value has been the collection of reports of battalion, company and platoon commanders who jumped at Cassinga and which were written a day or two after the operation.

One document which should have provided much accurate information is the monograph "Operasie Reindeer" by C.J. Nöthling. Dated June 1978 and written by an official military historian it would seem to have had the purpose of consolidating a record of events for archival preservation. Though the writer quite clearly had access to official documentation at the time and seems to have conducted interviews with key participants, and though his product was classified as "Secret", it evidences critical shortcomings which call its credibility into question. Most serious of these is the dearth of references to substantiate the events recorded and the claims made. But there are also some blatant mistakes and inaccuracies as well as an apparent lack of understanding of the tactical and technical military issues. Accordingly, it is a work which requires careful counter-checking.

A cause for concern has been the apparent shortage of files on Cassinga before the raid amongst the former Military Intelligence Division's group of archives. It has not been possible to ascertain

whether some files were never deposited in the archives (which would have been an illegal action) and were either destroyed or deposited elsewhere (also illegal), or whether very few such files ever existed (a highly unlikely possibility, given the information the SADF had obtained on Cassinga). It has been suggested by individuals at the present Defence Intelligence Division that a take-over of most intelligence tasks which was apparently engineered by the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) at one stage under the Vorster regime could explain this dearth of information. This, however, would be a whole new field of research.

Another difficulty encountered in working through SADF archival documents is the constant references in most documents to other documents. However, the other documents are frequently not included in the same file and it has, on occasion, proved impossible to trace them. Nevertheless, it is felt that, other than in the case of the possibly “missing” Intelligence files, these are unlikely to throw any significant fresh light on the research for the dissertation.

i. **Newsletters, Information Sheets and Miscellaneous Documents.**

Often extremely subjective and “gung-ho”, the newsletters have nevertheless been helpful in gauging the attitudes of some participants which in turn pose the question: “Do military units like 1 Parachute Battalion attract aggressive individuals, or does the training they offer turn merely adventurous young men into aggressive individuals?”

Some newsletters appear to provide an outlet for the braggart, whilst information sheets and brochures are often no more than propaganda leaflets. However, also included under this heading are certain loose documents which have been encountered in the course of research, the authenticity of which cannot be vouched for. One of these is a report apparently compiled for the SWAPO Central Committee³² which, if it is genuine, could only have fallen into the hands of the SADF through a highly placed informer. Its origin could not be established, but it gives a tantalising view of the raid from a claimed SWAPO perspective. In essence, its contents differ only from other SWAPO statements in terms of the numbers of PLAN defenders of Cassinga and their make-up. The document was never made public by the SADF, which tends to enhance its credibility, as to have done so would possibly have compromised whoever might have provided it. The author of the report, P. Nanyemba, was in all likelihood the SWAPO Secretary of Defence, based at the PLAN Defence HQ at Lubango. If so, then he was probably not at Cassinga during the raid and his report would have been based on the accounts of survivors.

j. **Academic Theses and Dissertations**

These proved of use on peripheral matters and as conduits in tracing primary sources which might otherwise not have come to light. The dissertation of Louisa Jooste on FC Erasmus has been of great value in assessing the thinking and motivation of this Minister of Defence who played such a fundamental role in establishing the foundations for the South African Defence Force’s subsequent

32 Comrade P. Nanyemba “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”, (Strictly Confidential).

expansion as a conscript organisation.³³ That of LJ van Wyk on the history of 1 Parachute Battalion, unfortunately, evidenced numerous inaccuracies and unconfirmed information.³⁴ Many of the sources he used also appeared suspect and the description of the Cassinga raid appears to be based largely on interviews with individuals who were not even at Cassinga.

k. **Private Papers and Diaries**

A few individuals have granted access to notes, written orders, letters and even an occasional document which, it was claimed, was brought back from Cassinga. These include a jaded, somewhat racist collection of cartoons produced by an artistic paratrooper and bound into a stapled volume called "The Cassinga File".³⁵ During the years after the raid copies of this unsavoury collection were apparently distributed to many paratroopers who participated at Cassinga.

These documents, mostly never meant for the eyes of anyone other than their compilers or a few other trusted members, shed an interesting light on the racist attitudes and approaches of some individuals and describe something of the psyche of at least a few of the young men who were citizen-soldiers, yet at the same time élite paratroopers. The Personal Report and Observations of Gerber are in a separate class and reflect a sober though subjective effort by a participant to record his experiences while they were still fresh in his memory. As such, they are much like a diary, and Gerber's seniority in the Composite Parachute Battalion's organisation make them of exceptional value.³⁶

l. **Photographs and Film Material.**

Frequent references to a film made of Cassinga prior to the raid by Swedish journalist Per Sanden were encountered. However, the film itself could not be traced. One source³⁷ indicates that the film, which was apparently screened on BBC Television during May 1978, and included an interview with captured South African prisoner-of-war, Sapper Johan van der Mescht, portrayed the military activities of SWAPO. Sanden was said to have spent two months in Angola on the assignment and to have estimated that there were between 7,000 and 10,000 SWAPO guerrillas under arms in the various base camps he visited and that the largest of these camps accommodated 1,500 guerrillas.

Photographs of Cassinga after the raid were found in many publications, but no copies could be obtained other than by copying the pages on which they appeared. However, the Namibian National Archives were able to make some photographs available electronically. The History Department of the University of Namibia confirmed that the National Archives of Namibia do have copies of films in video format, made by SWAPO, of Cassinga after the raid. Some of the footage was apparently taken from a film made a few days after the raid by a Swedish photographer. The University of

33 Louisa Jooste, *FC Erasmus as Minister van Verdediging, 1948 – 1959*.

34 L.J. van Wyk, *Die Geskiedenis van 1 Valskermbataljon, 1961 – 1984*.

35 D.F. van Wyk, *The Cassinga File*.

36 Cmdt Lewis Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga. Gerber was the Officer Commanding 3 Parachute Battalion and was appointed as Second-in-command of the Composite Parachute Battalion for Operation REINDEER.

37 "Van der Mescht on TV", *Sunday Times*, 7 May 1978.

Namibia have not been able to trace the original film, nor do their historians have any knowledge of the film said to have been made before the raid.³⁸

Prior to the raid, one paratrooper who was a photographer by profession was given a 16mm ciné camera and a still camera to take with him when he jumped into Cassinga. He was ordered to record images of what took place. The man appointed to carry out this task, Mike McWilliams, claimed during an interview conducted with him, to have used the opportunity to take along an additional still camera of his own.³⁹ He certainly had a considerable amount of photographic material of the raid in his possession and allowed much of it to be copied. However, he claimed that all the negatives which he had, had been lost when he had lent them to another paratrooper for making prints. It is of course possible that he never had photographs of his own and that those he allowed copies to be made of had originally been prints of the official SADF photographs he had taken. He could have assisted in the development of the photographs just after the raid in order to identify what he had photographed and merely made himself extra prints at the time. All this, however, is merely conjecture regarding the sources of the photographs.

Some paratroopers who were traced during the research had copies of the photographs in their possession, but the original negatives were never found. Yet many of the photographs had appeared in the newspapers, so they may have originated from the SADF's public relations sources. Almost all of those paratroopers who had prints allowed them to be copied but in many instances definition was lost in the process and the quality of their photographs was in any case mostly bad. Unfortunately very few action photographs were discovered, most of the pictures having been taken after the paratroopers had occupied the town. Several were obviously posed, but others showed captured weapons, prisoners, trenches, the notorious anti-aircraft guns and the effects of the aircraft bombing as well as the burning of buildings by the paratroopers. It was possible to verify background structures in the majority of these pictures with those on aerial photographs taken before and after the raid. This made it possible to pinpoint fairly accurately the location of most of the pictures.

McWilliams claims that he handed the official cameras and films back to the military authorities at the end of the operation.⁴⁰ Many of the photographs apparently taken by McWilliams are held by the SANDF's Documentation Service, who allowed prints to be made from the negatives. However, the 16mm film footage could not be traced, nor could all the photographs. It is clear that there were other photographs, as newspapers carried such pictures taken during the raid and released by the SADF just afterwards. Many paratroopers also recalled having been shown the film at a paratrooper reunion some months after the raid and the film was, according to official minutes, shown at a debriefing conference. A few photographs were discovered lying loose inside some SADF files. They were unfortunately not labelled or categorised, though they appeared to have been taken at Cassinga.

38 Telephonic conversation with Dr Jeremy Silvester, History Department, University of Namibia on 01 October 2002.

39 Interview with Mike McWilliams on 12 June 1995.

40 Interview with Mike McWilliams on 12 June 1995.

The Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC) was able to provide aerial photographs taken of Cassinga before, during and after the raid and these proved vital in identifying defensive works, verifying other photographs and in tracing the course of events as related by various participants. It is also possible, with the benefit of hindsight, to identify the probable sites of the anti-aircraft guns which had been missed by the aerial photography interpreters. The personal assistance of the Chief of the South African National Defence Force, General Sphiwe Nyanda, in granting me access to the photographs at JARIC is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks also to Lieutenant Colonel J.J. Botha, second-in-command of JARIC, for arranging the printing of the photographs and especially Captain Piet Roos who spent hours with me, studying and interpreting aerial photographs through a stereoscope at JARIC.

m. **Personal Interviews**

In this category are included numerous interviews with SADF participants and planners. The reliability of many of those interviewed could be called into question as there is no doubt that some lower ranking individuals have romanticised their own parts and the regular re-telling of “war stories” in pubs and at paratrooper get-togethers over the years have inevitably resulted in certain embellishments to their tales. At the same time, however, other individuals have shown greater reticence to discuss what took place and when they have it has come across most convincingly. Many of those interviewed were candid and straightforward, leaving no reason to doubt their integrity. This applied particularly to the senior and general officers. Information obtained through interviews with paratroopers is vast and it was necessary to only select what was regarded as relevant to the dissertation. As a result there are numerous interviews which were not used as references, although they served to confirm other statements and to provide more of a “feel” for what took place.

Interviews on the SWAPO side are for the most part transcripts of those made by people not connected with the research for this dissertation. They have been conducted with both civilian and military survivors, but unfortunately not with any senior SWAPO officials or commanders. This has prevented the formulation of a proper military perception of the raid from the SWAPO side. Contact was made telephonically with Major General Martin Shalli, Commander of the Namibian Army, who, though he claims not to have been at Cassinga during the raid, was a senior member of PLAN. He was not prepared to answer questions over the telephone but did agree to completing a questionnaire for research purposes, which was sent to him by facsimile. Shalli was recorded on certain of the documents claimed by the SADF to have been recovered from SWAPO, as the Secretary of the PLAN Military Council, so his views are significant. Sadly, he was not willing to provide the names and contact numbers of SWAPO officials in charge of Cassinga who might still be alive today.

Generally, the line has been followed that statements made during interviews needed to be corroborated by separate, unconnected interviews or by documentary confirmation where they affect the line of research. Where this has not been possible it is indicated as such. In other cases, where it has not been crucial to the accuracy of the research line, uncorroborated extracts from interviews

have been used to attempt to capture the atmosphere, the emotions and the conditions at specific points in the narrative of events. An interesting phenomenon has been the attitudes of former SADF members interviewed towards the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its aftermath. Many interviews used were conducted during a separate research project into the history of the South African paratroops carried out during the period 1989 - 1993. There having been no TRC at the time and the National Party Government still having been in power in South Africa, those being interviewed showed little inhibition in recounting their roles in the raid. However, in approaching people for interviews in more recent years there has been a decided reluctance apparent by some of them in their providing answers to questions. It has almost been as if there is a distinct suspicion that they might be the targets of some "war-crimes witch-hunt" and that they are wary of saying anything that might be interpreted as incriminating to either themselves or to others. Whereas participation in the Cassinga raid was considered an almost heroic asset under the previous governmental dispensation, it would appear to now be regarded by some as a heavy liability, not to be shared indiscriminately with the wrong person.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Undertaking a research project of this type is necessarily demanding, especially if it is done in one's "spare" time. The unpredictable nature of soldiering makes it difficult to work to a set routine when it comes to part-time studies. Nevertheless, the SANDF has been supportive and encouraging and I would be failing in my duty if I did not mention the understanding shown by my immediate superiors, Lieutenant General Godfrey Ngwenya and Major General Daniel Mofokeng. Also the personal interest and assistance of the Chief of the SANDF, General Sipiwe Nyanda.

I owe a word of special thanks to my supervisor, Professor Greg Cuthbertson and my joint supervisor, Dr Alex Mouton. Their patience with my frequent delays has been commendable and their guidance, advice, criticism and encouragement have surely saved me much otherwise wasted time and probable embarrassment or even worse, particularly when I moved off at a tangent or my wording was unnecessarily scathing.

Without a proficient and professional typist, word-processor and computer-manipulator my task would have taken twice the time, as my skills are sadly lacking in this regard. I must therefore express a singular word of gratitude to Ms Kae Colley for her expertise, long-suffering understanding, willingness to type at odd times and at short notice and her re-drawing of the poorly-reproduced sketch map used in Chapter 5.

To all the soldiers, especially the paratroopers, who so readily gave their cooperation, I owe a special debt of gratitude. As someone who has been an active paratrooper for 35 years I have a deep regard for the men who wear the red beret of the airborne soldier. I learned my soldiering in their hard and select crucible. Not all that has emerged from my research has been complimentary towards the paratroopers, but as a former member of the SA Army College's Directing Staff I knew that improvement in my students came only by being brutally frank with them.

My wife Anne and my youngest daughter Christine are the ones who really sacrificed during the past few years, as I had to withdraw myself from their company for long periods. My deep and sincere thanks to them for understanding the importance of this task to me and supporting me through difficult times. Finally, my thanks to God for the strength, health, ability and opportunity to have done this research.

CHAPTER 2

THE MILITARY SITUATION IN SOUTHERN ANGOLA AND NORTHERN NAMIBIA

Appendix A: Map of Southern Angola and Northern Namibia

By the late seventies South Africa's international isolation was gaining momentum. The escalating process has been described as follows: "The Sharpeville incident of 1960 and the banning of the ANC shortly thereafter, marked an intensification in calls for coercive action against South Africa. A UN General Assembly resolution in November 1962 called on member states to break diplomatic relations with South Africa, to ban that country's ships, to refuse landing rights, and to terminate trade. The Soweto riots of 1976, the death of Steve Biko and the banning of black organisations in October 1977 resulted in the UN Security Council's imposition of a mandatory arms embargo on South Africa".⁴¹ Within the country there was a reaction to counter the effects of this growing isolation, including the consolidation of the South African armaments industry by the establishment of Armscor.⁴² For Pretoria, the arms embargo was a serious diplomatic blow. It was an unprecedented non-use of the habitual Western veto in favour of South Africa.⁴³ The labour strikes of the early 1970s and a declining economy between 1974 and 1978, together with the ANC's first guerrilla actions and the newly-elected President Jimmy Carter of the USA's pressure for changes in *apartheid* and a settlement in Namibia all contributed to a sense that white hegemony in South Africa was under siege.⁴⁴ This intensification of economic and political isolation essentially coincided with the intensification of the "border war" on either side of the Angolan/Namibian frontier.

The demise of the Portuguese colonial empire and the hurried withdrawal of Portugal from Angola in 1975 had left an unresolved internal political situation in the former colony. South Africa's foray into the Angolan civil war which erupted in this vacuum had resulted in a militarily tense situation on either side of the Angolan/Namibian border. Internationally, South Africa's withdrawal from Angola in 1976 was seen as a military defeat. The whole South African intervention had "killed Prime Minister B.J. Vorster's *détente* initiative, in which he was trying to gain support from conservative African governments."⁴⁵ Consequently, the beleaguered white government of South Africa articulated, in the 1977 Defence White Paper, the concept that the country was facing a "total onslaught" from beyond its borders, to be met with a "total national strategy".

In line with this, after South Africa's withdrawal from Angola during March 1976 there was a considerable increase in the SADF forces deployed in northern Namibia. Prior to the South African

41 D. Geldenhuys, "The Political Prospects for Sanctions: Interaction of International Pressures and Domestic Developments" in D. Willers and S. Begg (eds.), *South Africa and Sanctions: Genesis and Prospects*, p. 30, quoted in Koos van Wyk, "State Elites and South Africa's International Isolation: A Longitudinal Comparison of Perception", *Politikon*, June 1988, pp. 63-64.

42 Cock and Nathan (eds.), *War and Society*, p. 222.

43 Denis Herbstein and John Evenson, *The Devils are Among us*, p. 30. Anglin describes it as "the first intimation of Western willingness to appear even slightly more responsive" to supporting coercive measures against South Africa. Specifically, he singles out "South Africa's major trading partners". *Vide* Douglas Anglin, "The Frontline States and Sanctions Against South Africa," in Robert E. Edgar (ed.), *Sanctioning Apartheid*, p. 256.

44 Joseph Hanlon, *Beggar your Neighbours*, p. 7.

45 Hanlon, *Beggar your Neighbours*, p. 7.

military expedition into Angola during the latter half of the previous year, the force levels had been low, although there had been a steady build-up along the northern Namibian border. SWAPO's insurgent war had commenced as early as 26 August 1966, when a small group of guerrillas had been routed by a mixed force of South African paratroopers and policemen who carried out a helicopter assault on their base at Ongulumbashe in Ovamboland.⁴⁶

In the intervening years there had been numerous skirmishes and landmine incidents along the border and in June 1973 the SADF had formally and officially taken over the responsibility for border security in northern Namibia from the South African Police.⁴⁷ The Angolan civil war of 1975/1976 had resulted in a sharp increase in military activity and the greater force levels after South Africa's withdrawal from Angola meant that there was a rapid growth in military infrastructure in northern Namibia. The international recognition of the marxist MPLA (*Movimento Popular para a Libertação de Angola*) as the government of Angola, bolstered by Cuban forces⁴⁸ and Soviet support, meant that SWAPO no longer had to launch its insurgent incursions from distant Zambia. The movement could now operate directly from Angola, so it was not long before a network of SWAPO insurgent bases was established in the south of that country.⁴⁹

According to Barnard, South Africa's 1975/1976 adventure into Angola (Operation SAVANNAH) germinated two opposing processes that inexorably lead to the raid on Cassinga. The first was the image of defeat created internationally by South Africa's withdrawal from Angola. This fostered a burning desire in certain quarters of the SADF to recover lost military prestige. The second was the occurrence in southern Angola of a military vacuum, which was rapidly filled by SWAPO forces.⁵⁰

SWAPO, with its lines of communication now shortened by many hundreds of kilometres and with a friendly government to its rear, was able to commence its incursions right from the Namibian border directly into Ovamboland.⁵¹ This was the most populous part of Namibia and therefore also the most important from the point of view of the insurgents. "The mass of the people," taught Mao Zedong, "is the richest source of the immense power to wage war."⁵² The insurgent could melt into the population when pursued, but could also influence the population to support his ideological position. The 56,000 square kilometres of Namibia known as Ovamboland contained 46% of the country's population. It was therefore equally important to the South African government to keep the insurgents out of Ovamboland.

46 SA Army Publication : *Lesse en Foute in die Bekamping van Terrorisme in Suider-Afrika*, p. 13. Also SANDF Archives, Interim Report: Operation BLOUWILDEBEES. Details corroborated from interviews with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), Colonel Tommy Renfree (retired), Brigadier Kaas van der Waals, Commandant Wouter Hugo and Commandant J.P. Snyman, all of whom participated in the operation.

47 SANDF Archives, GOC JCF Gp, File no, 201/4/10, Operation BARUTA/FOCUS, Vol. 4.

48 David Deutschmann (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa*, p.80. In a speech on 26 July 1976, Fidel Castro stated that Cuban military units and weapons to support the People's Republic of Angola from outside aggression would remain in Angola "as long as it is necessary".

49 Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966-1989*, pp. 60-61.

50 Barnard, "Die Gebeure by Cassinga", *Historia*, p. 90. See also Chester A. Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, p. 56.

51 Elizabeth S. Landis and Michael I. Davis, "Namibia : Impending Independence", in Gwendolen M. Carter and Patrick O'Meara (eds.), *Southern Africa : The Continuing Crisis*, p.166.

52 Mao Tse-tung, *On the Protracted War*, p.126.

Given the nature of the terrain, this was a well-nigh impossible task. Ovamboland is a flat, sandy tableland. For the most part it is completely featureless. It is not unusual for a 1:50,000 map to have only one, or even no contour line showing the vertical interval. The gradient varies from 1 in 2,500 to 1 in 5,000. Set at an average of 1,100 meters above sea level it is bounded in the west by the arid and rocky Kaokoveld and the Cunene River. To the east are the Kavango River, the Kalahari Desert and the Okavango Delta. South lie the Mangetti dune fields, the Etosha Salt Pan and the Tsumeb Hills. To the north is Angola, with nothing to indicate the international border except a “cutline” – a perfectly straight two-track road bulldozed through the bush for a distance of some 450 kilometres along the line of latitude 17°23'23.73” South.⁵³

Ovamboland, thus, extends topographically across the international border, although the region known by that name exists only in Namibia. The Angolan portion forms part of the province of Cunene. The colonial powers that had drawn the boundary lines as a result of the Berlin Conference in 1884-85 had done so quite arbitrarily. No account was taken at all of the composition or geographic dispersion of indigenous communities. The Ovambo people are spread fairly evenly through the region, except for the drier part in the west. When the Portuguese and the South Africans finally settled the hitherto vague border through Ovamboland in the 1920s, it was probably the most arbitrary yet. It was not unusual to find members of the same family divided by the imaginary line which denoted the border between two former colonies. In Ovamboland, some members of the family were therefore Angolan and others were Namibian. But before the coming of the soldiers and the construction of the “cutline”, this made no difference to family or social life. People moved back and forth over the border, unaware that they were even doing so.⁵⁴

The arrival of the South African military saw the establishment and depopulation of a one-kilometre ribbon of no-man’s land called the Jati Strip south of the cutline. The local people were forbidden to enter this strip on pain of being shot dead. Anyone caught there would be arrested, incarcerated and interrogated. Mines were laid and patrols conducted, turning the quiet rural area into a war zone.⁵⁵

At night bands of SWAPO insurgents would slip silently from Angola over the cutline and disappear into the dense bush of the strip of no-man’s land. From there they would melt into the *kraals* of Ovambos inside Namibia, usually welcomed as liberators by the people, who were often from their own communities. Those who did not welcome them were quickly coerced into supporting them anyway, if necessary at the point of a gun, as is the universal tactic in all insurgency campaigns.⁵⁶

These bands of insurgents would fan out across Namibia’s Ovamboland, a countryside of *oshanas* (large, grass-covered, saucer-like depressions, filled with water during the rainy summer months), *omarumbas* (dry river beds) lined with trees, scrub-covered sand and dotted with clusters of *makalani* palms. They would move from one traditionally stockaded collection of huts to another, spreading

53 *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, Vol 8, pp. 412-414. Also Heitman, *South African Armed Forces*, p.184.

54 Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p.12.

55 Landis and Davis, “Namibia”, pp. 155 and 166. The existence of the strip is confirmed in Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p. 1 and by Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p. 222.

56 Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, p.39.

their message of liberation from the white South African intruders, seeking intelligence of security force movements and habits and intimidating all those who did not co-operate fully.⁵⁷

Hiding their weapons and uniforms in the bush they would become part of the local community until they had identified a target, and would then go out and lay an ambush, plant a landmine or launch an attack.⁵⁸ Local supporters helped to hide their tracks and conceal their weapons and assistance also came from churchmen and small shop owners.⁵⁹ At times they would penetrate further south, beyond Ovamboland and into the white farmlands where they would sabotage railway lines, attack isolated farmsteads or intimidate farm workers.⁶⁰

The SWAPO insurgency campaign was a classical one. Trained in many communist countries such as the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, North Korea, Cuba, East Germany and other Eastern Bloc states as well as Egypt, Ghana, Tanzania and Algeria, the SWAPO leaders were inculcated with the strategy and tactics which had been applied by the Communist Chinese against the Nationalists in the late 1940s, and by the Vietnamese against the French in the 1950s and the Americans in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶¹

Making good use of a host country (in this case, Angola), SWAPO skillfully exploited the chaos that accompanied and followed the Angolan civil war. Though SWAPO's headquarters were at that time in Lusaka,⁶² their operations were mainly conducted from the guerrilla bases that were set up in southern Angola. From these, as well as other bases that remained in southwestern Zambia, SWAPO incursions into Namibia now increased significantly. "Land-mine explosions, ambushes and exchanges of fire between small groups had become everyday occurrences, with both SWAPO and the South African government issuing sporadic accounts of military action."⁶³

According to Steenkamp,⁶⁴ SWAPO was now in a stronger military position than ever before. Insurgency could at last be undertaken in earnest because the movement finally had that *sine qua non* for such a war: a safe border behind which it could withdraw. It could now set up a forward infrastructure for command and control, training, administration and logistic support so as to launch its guerrillas southwards across the border whenever it chose.

57 Olga Levinson, *Story of Namibia*, p.84; Heitman, *SA Armed Forces*, p.148.

58 Sir Robert Thompson describes this stage of insurgency as follows: "The guerillas are now operating within the population, and this is the period when one can apply Mao Tse-tung's dictum that the guerilla must be to the population as little fishes in water. The population is not only providing the guerilla with his food and intelligence, but giving him perfect cover and concealment. Dressed as a peasant, the guerilla, except when he is carrying arms, is indistinguishable from the rest of the people. In fact, he can be both a peasant by day and a guerilla by night." (Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, p. 34).

59 Susan Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means - SWAPO's Liberation War", in Colin Leys and John S. Saul (eds.), *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 29.

60 John Reed, *South African Defence Force: Commitment to a Common Cause*, p. 35; Heitman, *SA Armed Forces*, p. 148.

61 Peter H. Katjavivi, *A History of Resistance in Namibia*, pp 84-85. Willem Steenkamp, "Politics of Power – The Border War", in Al J. Venter (ed), *Challenge: Southern Africa within the African Revolutionary Context*, p. 185. The influence of the writings of Sun Tzu on Mao Zedong when formulating his ideas on guerrilla war (ideas espoused by virtually all African liberation movement armies) is outlined in Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, p. 15.

62 Landis and Davis, "Namibia", p. 165.

63 Landis and Davis, "Namibia", p. 166.

64 Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 60.

Nevertheless, the Angolan civil war had brought sizeable problems for SWAPO. The organisation's leaders in Lusaka were seriously affected by Zambia's heavily pro-UNITA (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*) leaning. Many northern Namibians had strong ties with their Angolan kinsmen in UNITA. The guerrillas now operating from Angola were faced with the effect this was having on their activities because of the UNITA-South African collaboration.⁶⁵

By early 1978 SWAPO's well-developed network of bases in southern Angola was located principally opposite the Namibian area of Ovamboland. The main axis of SWAPO's insurgency had now clearly shifted to this area from the Eastern Caprivi. The People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), as SWAPO's armed wing was known, was operating almost with impunity from inside Angola. This, despite frequent minor incursions by the South Africans into Angola to attack SWAPO bases once they had been identified.⁶⁶

The South Africans erected a two-meter high barbed wire fence along the 450km cutline, but this did not discourage the SWAPO incursions.⁶⁷ Throughout 1976 and 1977 there had been continual incidents, with many skirmishes, both within Namibia and along the border where SWAPO inflicted several casualties on the South Africans simply by firing across the border at passing patrols. On 31 March 1977 the Defence White Paper released in the South African Parliament gave casualty figures for the two-year period starting 1 April 1975. These were that a total of 231 insurgents, 33 security force personnel and 53 of the local population had been killed in fighting in Ovamboland, Kavango and East Caprivi.⁶⁸

South African intelligence reported in October 1977 that there were about 300 SWAPO insurgents active in Ovamboland at any given time with another 2,000 just across the border in Angola and about 1,400 in Zambia. "Contacts" between insurgents and security forces were taking place at a rate of about 100 a month.⁶⁹ Some popular sources claimed that "at its peak in the mid-late 1970s, SWAPO may have been able to field as many as 14,000 terrorists, although many of that number might have been under training and ill-prepared for active service."⁷⁰

The quality of the insurgents, which the South African forces were encountering, was showing a marked improvement by early 1978. They were using more sophisticated weaponry such as mortars and seemed to have larger numbers of land mines at their disposal, which they had become far more adept at employing. The South Africans put this down to the effect of Cuban instructors provided through their Angolan allies, the MPLA.⁷¹ It seems likely though, that the emphasis placed by SWAPO on the education of all their cadres recruited as fighters could have had a lot to do with

65 Landis and Davis, "Namibia", p. 165.

66 Landis and Davis, "Namibia", p. 165.

67 Joseph Kobo, *Waiting in the Wing*, p. 137.

68 Donald Prosser, "Government Warns on Terror inside SA's Borders," *Eastern Province Herald*, 1 April 1977.

69 Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p.70. A "contact" was the term used to describe an exchange of fire between insurgents and security forces (essentially, a skirmish).

70 Reed, *SADF Commitment*, pp.31-32. Seegers, *The Military*, p. 223 gives estimates for the strength of PLAN (SWAPO's armed wing) in 1978 as variously 10,000 and 16,000.

71 Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p.71.

this.⁷² The actual organisation of SWAPO's military wing, PLAN, early in 1978, is difficult to ascertain. No doubt the SADF's Military Intelligence Division had a breakdown based on their sources, but records of this have not been traced. SWAPO writings during the war were understandably vague on details. Certainly a Military Council had been set up in the early 1970s, which included the commander of PLAN, the political commissar, the chief medical, logistics and intelligence officers and senior field commanders. But SWAPO gave no indication of the location of its field headquarters, though it admitted that its logistical supply centres were in Angola.⁷³

By 1978 SWAPO had a large number of forward operational bases, most of them not particularly large, all along the Angolan side of the border with Namibia. They were often within 20km of the border. It was from these that the guerrillas launched their almost constant incursions into Namibia, tying up many hundreds, even thousands, of South African troops who were bent on annihilating these bands of insurgents. According to Brown, "groups of fighters operating in northern Namibia could easily resupply from bases a day's march at most from the border."⁷⁴ Further complicating the military equation was the growing presence of considerable numbers of Angolan FAPLA troops. (FAPLA: *Forças Armadas Populares para a Libertação de Angola*, the armed forces of the MPLA) and Cuban military units, also in bases interspersed amongst those of SWAPO. In fact, in many instances they shared bases and facilities. It was even claimed by some that the ANC of South Africa had elements of MK (*Umkhonto weSizwe*, their armed wing) in this mix.⁷⁵ Certainly MK basic training camps were set up in Angola after 1977 and they made provision for defence against attacks by UNITA as well as, after 1980, by the SADF.⁷⁶

South African military intelligence reports put the figure of MPLA/Cuban forces deployed in southern Angola at approximately 11,000, of which 2,000 were Cuban.⁷⁷ Establishing the order of battle of the forces deployed north of the border with Namibia presents serious difficulty, as besides the FAPLA and Cuban elements, there were also substantial numbers of militia (*Organização de Defesa Popular* – ODP) and border guards (*Tropa para a Guardar a Fronteira Angolense* – TGFA), organised along military lines and with their own chains of command. The 23-odd battalions identified in southern Angola by South African military intelligence therefore probably included no more than nine or at the most 12, which were conventional FAPLA/Cuban infantry battalions. This is deduced from 5 Infantry Division, with its headquarters at Lubango, which appeared to consist of three brigades (see maps at Appendix C to Chapter 3), which is consistent with Soviet doctrine,⁷⁸ followed almost slavishly by both the MPLA and the Cubans. The brigades, again in accordance with Soviet doctrine, would each have had three infantry battalions, though there could have been as many as four. All the brigades, although infantry heavy, included armour, artillery and anti-aircraft elements.

72 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, p.91.

73 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, p.90.

74 Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means" in Leys and Saul (eds.), *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 29.

75 Kobo, *Waiting in the Wing*, p.133.

76 Howard Barrel, *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle*, pp. 42-43.

77 INTREP 16/78 dd 9 March 1978, enclosure in file MV/48/3, Vol 17, Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No. 157.

78 *Doctrina del Enemigo Convencional*, p. 45.

According to the intelligence map showing estimated deployments in southern Angola at 1 March 1978, (see Appendix C to Chapter 3), the brigade headquarters were located as follows:

- a. 1 Infantry Brigade at Roçadas, its constituent battalions probably those based at Roçadas, Calueque, Ondjiva and Namacunde. This brigade would therefore form the first line of defence, blocking access along any road from Ovamboland into Angola.
- b. 2 Infantry Brigade in depth at Matala, with its constituent battalions probably those based at Matala, Lubango, Moçamedes and Cuvango.
- c. 3 Infantry Brigade at Menongue, responsible for operations in the southeast of Angola, with its battalions probably those at Menongue, Caiundo, Cuito Cuanavale and Mavinga. This was the traditional stronghold area of UNITA.

For SWAPO, the “safe haven” of Angola was, therefore, not necessarily as secure as some may have presumed. The Angolan civil war had continued after South Africa’s withdrawal in 1976, and was to smoulder for decades. UNITA, particularly, actively opposed the MPLA government. In reality, the vast deployment of MPLA/Cuban forces in southern Angola was there as much to counter UNITA rebels as to deter a South African incursion. Prior to the civil war SWAPO had maintained friendly relations with UNITA. Political fortunes had changed and UNITA, the enemy of the MPLA who were “hosting” SWAPO, had now perforce become SWAPO’s enemy. This development was added to the imbroglio that was southern Angola.⁷⁹ At the time South Africa, although maintaining close liaison with UNITA, was only very infrequently providing direct military assistance to the movement.⁸⁰

The Namibian side of the border was no less densely sown with military forces. The SADF had established, during its ill-fated incursion into Angola in 1975/76, a headquarters known as 101 Task Force, under the command of a major general, as the field headquarters in overall command of Operation SAVANNAH (the South African code-name for the operation).⁸¹ After the South African withdrawal, the headquarters of 101 Task Force was based at the town of Grootfontein in northern Namibia. This was a railhead and logistic base, with a large hard-surfaced airfield, and was located about 240km south of the border. Although the 101 Task Force headquarters was closed down in January 1978, it was in fact reactivated under the name “SWA Tactical HQ” for the duration of Operation REINDEER in May of that year.⁸²

In 1978 this headquarters had two operational areas under its command: 1 Military Area (1MA) and 2 Military Area (2MA). 1MA had its headquarters in Rundu and was responsible for conducting SADF operations in Kavangoland and the Western Caprivi. The Eastern Caprivi fell under 13 Sub-Area, technically a sub-division of 1MA, but in fact operating as a separate command.⁸³

79 Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Namibia : Political and Economic Prospects*, p.16. Also Jan Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, p. 120 and Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, pp. 86-87.

80 Peter Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 201-203. also Jeremy Grest, “The South African Defence Force in Angola” in Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan, *War and Society*, p. 124.

81 F.J. du T. Spies, *Angola : Operasie Savannah, 1975-1976*, p.155.

82 *Oorlogsdagboek: SWA Tak HK (Ops REINDEER)*, 29 April – 8 May 1978, Archive OD – 1968, Box No 467.

83 “Waardeering oor Pantser Kar Behoeftes en Ontplooing in 101 Taakmag”, SANDF Archival Group 101 Taakmag, Box No. 57, File “Operational Planning”, G/PLANS/2, Vol 2.

SADF operations in Ovamboland and the Kaokoveld were the responsibility of 2MA. Although these Military Areas were geographically defined as being inside Namibia, they in fact conducted all SADF activities inside Angola opposite their defined Namibian areas. Ovamboland had been subjected to an ongoing state of emergency since February 1972, and in 1976 both Kavangoland and the Caprivi were also placed under emergency legislation. As Ovamboland is the most densely populated part of the country, this brought about 55% of the total population under the restrictive legislation.⁸⁴

Commanded by a colonel, 2MA was organised along the lines of an infantry brigade. For this purpose Ovamboland was divided into four immense battalion areas:⁸⁵

- a. 51 Battalion with its headquarters at Ruacana in the west.
- b. 52 Battalion with its headquarters at Ogongo.
- c. 53 Battalion with its headquarters at Ondangwa.
- d. 54 Battalion with its headquarters at Eenhana in the east.

The brigade headquarters of 2MA was at the town of Oshakati, some 40km from Ondangwa. The latter centre was of particular importance because just outside of the town was a large airfield that the South Africans developed into a major air force base. It was also where the logistic infrastructure for 2MA was located.⁸⁶ In later years 2MA was re-named Sector 10 and the rank of its commander was upgraded to that of a brigadier. From time to time, especially towards the end of South Africa's occupation of Namibia in 1989, various additional units were placed under operational command of Sector 10 and it eventually became known as 10 SA Division in 1988.⁸⁷

In 1978, however, 2MA was a relatively simple organisation based on the four infantry battalions, with a small engineer capability, a squadron of armoured cars and a few old anti-aircraft guns. Although the headquarters of each battalion was permanent, their constituent companies were not. These were rotated in from battalions in South Africa to serve three-month tours of operational duty. Sometimes these companies came from battalions of national servicemen in South Africa, but just as often they were from Citizen Force regiments or Commando units. These were reserve force units whose officers and men had initially been conscripted for a year of "national service" and were now completing their subsequent annual obligations. For them to be called up for three months of operational service was a major disruption of their civilian careers and family lives.⁸⁸

During 1977, according to Rotberg, approximately 47,000 soldiers were mobilised for service in Namibia. Given the small white population of some 4 million at the time, this placed a disproportionate burden on that sector of the South African inhabitants and was a significant drain

84 Rotberg, *Namibia*, pp. 14 and 16.

85 PHR Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag*, pp. 12 and 14.

86 Heitman, *SA Armed Forces*, p.192.

87 "Operasionele Plan Op AGREE "(Uiters Geheim), Appendix C (SA Leër en SWA GM ontpleoiings), File H LEËR/D OPS/304/1/3 – AGREE (Uiters Geheim), SANDF Archival Group Diverse, 11 Box No. 100.

88 Paul L. Moorcraft, *Africa's Superpower*, p.187.

on the country's economy, even though rotation was taking place.⁸⁹ At any given time during the years of 1977 and 1978, the total number of South African troops deployed in northern Namibia, including Air Force and logistical support elements, was probably around 6,000 or 7,000, based on the operational organisation that existed. This could probably be increased by another 2,000 or so if policemen and para-military "homeland guards" are included. However, if Rotberg's figure is to be taken, and divided by four to cater for the quarterly rotations, the total could have been just over 11,000. This would have been very close to the numbers deployed on the Angolan side of the border. Unfortunately, figures were never released by the SADF and totals could not be ascertained from available records.

In addition to its four infantry battalions, 2MA had a company of paratroopers based at the Ondangwa Air Force Base. With a normal strength of about 128 all ranks, these troops were employed in a "Reaction Force" role, based on the "Fire Force" concept instituted by the Rhodesians in their counter-insurgency war.⁹⁰ Though very much more static in their application than the Rhodesians were, the SADF used the paratroopers as an air-mobile reserve, responding to "contacts" which occurred between insurgents and the patrols from the four battalions. The paratroopers would be flown to the scene of the contact by helicopter to either reinforce the infantry patrol or to follow up the insurgent group if contact had been broken.⁹¹ This meant that the Ondangwa Air Force Base needed to have helicopters on constant standby for such operations. The Air Force helicopter crews and the paratroopers lived in close proximity to one another on the base, and developed a high level of co-operation.⁹²

The paratroopers always had a 22-man "Hawk Group" (*Valkgroep* in Afrikaans) on standby. Commanded by a 2nd Lieutenant and with a platoon sergeant as the second-in-command, the rest of the group, or "hawk", consisted of two 10-man sections, each under a corporal. This "hawk" would be lifted in two Puma medium helicopters and the force would be accompanied by at least two light Alouette III helicopters. One of these would be fitted with a 20mm automatic cannon as a doorgun, and would play the role of "gunship", providing close air support (covering fire from the air). The second, fitted with a much lighter twin barrelled 7,62mm machine gun, would be the "command ship". Inside it, riding as a passenger, would be the paratroop company commander (normally a major) or his second-in-command (normally a captain). This officer would then run the operation from the air, using radios to relay his commands. He would position five-man "sticks" or complete 10-man sections where he needed them, leap-frogging and shuttling his force until he was able to box in and annihilate or capture the insurgents.⁹³

89 Rotberg, *Namibia*, p.16.

90 Brigadier General M. Alexander, *South African Airborne Operations*, pp.12-16.

91 1 Valskermbataljon Beplanningsriglyne, Opleiding en Operasionele Staande Orders en Werksprosedures, Seksie 10: Reaksiemag (Prosedure en Aanwending).

92 P. Coetzee and T. Fourie, "They Spell Death to the Terrorists", *Paratus*, August 1977.

93 2nd Lieutenant M J Boon, *Airborne COINOPS: The Vertical Envelopment Concept Applied to Rural Counter-Insurgency Operations in Featureless Bush Terrain*, staff paper drawn up at 1 Parachute Battalion, Tempe, in 1978.

The standby hawk was rotated on a daily basis, and as soon as it was activated a second hawk would automatically come on standby in case the helicopters needed to return to collect additional reinforcements. In later years, the second hawk would fit parachutes and be lifted in an old Dakota C-47/DC-3 fixed wing transport aircraft, simultaneously with the heli-borne hawk. This would enable the commander to immediately parachute additional sticks into any area where he may have needed them.⁹⁴ In addition to the helicopters and the Dakota, the Ondangwa Air Force Base had jet fighter/bomber aircraft available for interdiction, bombing and strafing missions and additional close air support of ground troops. The base was surrounded by sand embankments, protected by anti-aircraft artillery and missiles and had sandbagged revetments for housing the aircraft.⁹⁵

It is important to understand that the South African military organisation in northern Namibia was designed for operations against the SWAPO insurgents. It had no capability to take on the conventional MPLA/Cuban forces across the border and made no attempt to display any such aggressive tendencies. Equally, the MPLA/Cuban conventional forces were deployed primarily to counter UNITA, and merely kept a wary, defensive eye on the South Africans across the border.

For both the SWAPO insurgents and the SADF the climate and the weather in northern Namibia and southern Angola played a critical role in influencing their operations. The summer months brought regular, heavy thunderstorms that filled *oshanas* and *omarumbas* with water and produced verdant, dense vegetation. This provided succour to the insurgents, enabling them to travel vast distances on foot, assured of plentiful water and a ready supply of food from the crops of the local inhabitants. It also meant that the thick bush was an easy refuge when a hiding place was sought and the daily, late afternoon downpours guaranteed that all *spoor* would be washed away in the deep Ovamboland sand.⁹⁶

For the soldiers, the rains often made it impossible to operate with vehicles. Sandy tracks were turned into muddy quagmires and the ever-present threat of landmines, easily concealed in mud or sand, made vehicle operations a nightmare. The lush vegetation made it a simple matter for SWAPO bands to lay ambushes at points where vehicles would be most vulnerable.⁹⁷ In the winter, when conditions were often less favourable for the insurgents, soldiers were more mobile, able to patrol at will in their heavy four or six-wheel drive vehicles.

Although the universal terms applied by the SADF to describe SWAPO and the activities of SWAPO were “terrorists” and “terrorism”, there can be little doubt that the counter-insurgency measures adopted by the SADF were, in the eyes of the local inhabitants, as closely akin to terrorism as anything done by SWAPO. Individuals and groups of soldiers who ignored or deliberately flouted instructions to treat people humanely exacerbated the situation, as in any war. There were reports of security forces being guilty of breaking into homes, beating up residents, shooting innocent people,

94 1 Valskermbataljon Beplanningsriglyne.

95 Heitman, *SA Armed Forces*, pp.66, 95 and 199.

96 Heitman, *SA Armed Forces*, pp.148 and 184-185. Also Seegers, *The Military*, p. 223.

97 2 Military Area Operational/War Diary for 1977 and 1978, File 2 MA/514/2/81, SANDF Archival Group 2 MG Oorlogsdagboeke, Boxes 152 and 527.

stealing and killing cattle, pillaging stores and *cuca* shops, raping young girls and enforcing the curfew rule mercilessly under pain of death, even in cases of severe illness or childbirth.⁹⁸ And of course there were the brutal interrogations of suspects.⁹⁹

After the SADF's withdrawal from Angola in March 1976, the South Africans had embarked on a period of consolidation. Military analyses of the campaign revealed glaring equipment shortcomings.¹⁰⁰ Shocked at the realisation that their armament was more than 20 years out of date, a frantic programme of development was embarked on. The encounters with Cuban forces equipped with relatively modern Soviet weaponry, coupled with the reality of the UN arms embargo, meant that South Africa would need to become self-sufficient in artillery, armoured vehicles and mine-protected vehicles before any major confrontation from across the borders could be met. Shortcomings had also been identified in the senior command and staff duties training of South Africa's officers, and there were significant changes taking place in the curriculum presented at the SA Army College in Pretoria.¹⁰¹

In the meantime though, SWAPO was stepping up its insurgent campaign in northern Namibia. Emboldened by South Africa's withdrawal from Angola and bolstered by their new "safe" haven inside that country, right on the doorstep of Ovamboland, there were growing numbers of guerrillas active inside Namibia.¹⁰² To counter this, the SADF not only established the already described military infrastructure inside the territory, but commenced with "shallow operations", just across the border inside Angola. There the situation remained fluid and confused, and it was not difficult for black, Portuguese-speaking troops such as those in the subsequently well-known 32 Battalion, to further the SADF's interests there. Dressed in a camouflaged uniform resembling that of the former Portuguese colonial army, these soldiers could pose as UNITA or any other forces, attacking forward SWAPO bases and harassing the guerrillas while they were preparing for incursions into Namibia.¹⁰³

Similarly, the SADF's special forces carried out many small operations against SWAPO in southern Angola during this time.¹⁰⁴ At times the paratroopers at Ondangwa were called on to provide reinforcements to both 32 Battalion and the special forces for these operations.¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, by early 1978 it was clear that these harassing operations were not having the desired effect. SWAPO was succeeding in steadily increasing its insurgent activities, particularly in politicising the local population in Ovamboland. The organisation had established an effective command and

98 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, p.89.

99 Personal Diary of Major Lew Gerber for the period 13 May – 5 August 1976, entry dated 25 May 1976.

100 Evaluation of Operation SAVANNAH by Directorate Operations Evaluation and Doctrine, dd 27 April 1976, File HS/11/3/14/2 (Top Secret), Enclosure 5c, SANDF Archival Group HVS, Box No 40. Also document "Op SAVANNAH": Nabetrugting en Regstellingsaksies: 5 Maart tot 19 April 1976, File in SANDF Archival Group "Aanvullende Dokumente", Box No. 84.

101 Colonel McGill Alexander, *Register of Officers who have Successfully Completed Senior Staff Training (1927 Onwards)*, pp. 6-7.

102 Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 60.

103 Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, pp. 120-122

104 Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 192-193.

105 Personal Diary of Major Lew Gerber, entries dated 13, 15, 16 and 19 June 1976 and 8, 10 and 17 July 1976. Also interview with Captain Jeremy Wiley at Ondangwa, January 1977. Wiley was commanding D Company, 2 Parachute Battalion at Ondangwa at the time.

control system, a logistic back up and good training capability.¹⁰⁶ Angola, according to Crocker, had opened itself up to hostile actions from South Africa: “By offering SWAPO a new headquarters and extensive base facilities, the Luanda regime made itself an irresistible and obvious target for the South African Defence Force, the region’s most powerful military establishment.”¹⁰⁷

On the greater international stage, this confrontation along the Angolan/Namibian border was having wider repercussions. The events during the Angolan civil war of 1975/76 had brought the Namibian situation into sharp focus. As early as 30 January 1976 UN Security Council Resolution 385 had been adopted, demanding that South Africa withdraw its administration of Namibia and that elections, under the supervision and control of the UN, be held in order to lead to the institution of a democratic government in an independent state. South Africa ignored this, and went ahead with its own process towards an “independence” which it could control.¹⁰⁸ Also in 1976 the UN General Assembly had endorsed SWAPO as “sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people,” adding this to what Crocker describes as “a long history of pro-SWAPO pronouncements and activities” which “severely compromised the United Nations’ standing as a decolonising agent.”¹⁰⁹ This view by an American diplomat is not surprising, given that in both 1975 and 1976 the then permanent Western members of the Security Council (France, the United Kingdom and the United States) had vetoed resolutions characterising South Africa’s occupation of Namibia as a threat to international peace.¹¹⁰ Yet the Western powers were anxious to initiate a negotiated, peaceful settlement for Namibia’s independence and to this end the five Western members of the Security Council (the US, UK, France, Canada and West Germany) converted themselves in 1977 into the so-called “Contact Group of Western Nations”. The continued Cuban presence in Angola, it seems, played no small part in this initiative. American President Carter’s secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, was managing the US obsession with Fidel Castro, and he wrote of this period: “The more intense the conflict in Namibia became the greater the risk that the South Africans would carry the war more deeply into Angola, thus increasing the possibility that the Cubans would be engaged directly in the fighting”¹¹¹. Negotiating with Pretoria and the Front Line States, or FLS (Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia), the efforts of the “Western Five” resulted in the “Western settlement proposal” of April 1978, which was later to be endorsed as UN Security Council Resolution 435 in September that year.¹¹² Nevertheless, the diplomatic process was awash with suspicion. SWAPO or FLS sympathisers frequently referred to the “Western Five” disparagingly as “The Gang of Five”.

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106 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson, 16 January 2003. Gleeson confirmed that at the time that HQ 101 Task Force was being closed down towards the end of 1977, the shallow incursions by 32 Battalion were no longer having the desired result and that SWAPO insurgents were being increasingly successful.

107 Crocker, *High Noon*, pp. 55-56.

108 Phyllis Johnson and David Martin (eds.), *Destructive Engagement*, p. 116.

109 Crocker, *High Noon*, p. 39.

110 Kader Asmal, “The Role and Status of SWAPO in International Law” in Brian Wood, *Namibia 1884 – 1984*, p. 650.

111 Herbstein and Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us*, p. 30.

112 Crocker, *High Noon*, p. 37.

113 Herbstein and Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us*, p. 31.

By April 1978 the South African Prime Minister, B.J. Vorster, had warily accepted the principle of elections in Namibia with some UN involvement. But to get to even that point had involved travelling a long and rocky road: there had been major disagreements during negotiations on control of the electoral process, the size and nature of the UN military and administrative presence during elections, the withdrawal of South African troops, the issue of political prisoners and the status of the port of Walvis Bay. When the Western Five had put forward revised proposals in October 1977, they were rejected by both South Africa and SWAPO. After further amendments, final proposals were presented to the UN Security Council on 10 April 1978. On 25 April South Africa had formally accepted these settlement proposals “in principle”. Yet only nine days later South Africa would launch the raid on Cassinga and other bases.¹¹⁴

The SADF stance at the time is reflected in the views of Constand Viljoen, then the Chief of the South African Army and subsequently Chief of the SADF.¹¹⁵ His feelings were that prior to 1977/1978 SWAPO had failed to create an image in the world that it was a prominent and successful liberation movement. However, with the sudden increase in momentum of political developments following UN sanctioned settlement talks by the Western Five with South Africa,¹¹⁶ SWAPO realised the need to enhance its prestige, particularly in the military field. There was a need to appear to “occupy” parts of Namibia as this would give it greater status internationally and provide it with stronger bargaining power in pending negotiations. This, according to Viljoen, is what motivated the intensification of its military operations inside Namibia. There was an increase in incursions from Angola and in the murder of locals in Ovamboland suspected of collaborating with the security forces. The first political assassinations (e.g. Minister Toivo Shiyagaya on 7 February 1978 and Chief Clemens Kapuuu on 27 March 1978) began to take place.

Viljoen also felt that the Turnhalle talks set up by South Africa to find an “internal settlement” were seen by SWAPO as a major threat and that SWAPO was determined to undermine the image of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) which had been formed in 1977. An intensified insurgency campaign would do just that. Yet the chairman of the DTA, Dirk Mudge, was to say that he saw Operation REINDEER as a major blunder (“*groot flater*”) on South Africa’s part.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, Jannie de Wet, the former Commissioner General of South West Africa, was, according to Viljoen, most anxious to prevent SWAPO from projecting an image of strength. The destruction of some vital SWAPO infrastructure was seen as the means of bloodying SWAPO’s nose before this could happen.

That the South African military chiefs (especially Viljoen who had a clear understanding of where the guerrillas drew their support from) should have been concerned, is apparent from the words of Peter Katjavivi: “SWAPO’s ability to sustain and expand its armed struggle against South Africa’s rule has

114 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, pp. 115-119.

115 Interview with General C.L. Viljoen on his farm Bet-El in the Ohrigstad district on 2 May 2002.

116 Herbstein and Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us*, p. 31.

117 At van Wyk, *Dirk Mudge*, p. 115.

boosted its standing in the eyes of Namibians throughout the country. The impact of this on political developments should not be underestimated.”¹¹⁸

In a military appreciation of the situation in Namibia,¹¹⁹ dated 1 April 1978 and carried out by the Chief of Staff Operations, the highest operational division in the SADF at the time, the next few months were seen as critical.¹²⁰ This document spelt out that the military actions of SWAPO had notably improved in the past year. SWAPO was clearly capable of acting in the “traditional terrorist manner”, but also where necessary to act more aggressively and in larger groups with the required firepower and mobility in a reasonably effective way. SWAPO, claimed the document, had established a considerable number of bases in southern Angola from which it conducted military operations across the border as well as doing limited training and delivering logistic support. SWAPO actions north of the border were displaying a tendency to make more use of conventional weapons.

In sharp contrast to this, it was stated in the document, the SADF had concentrated over the past few years on “counter-terrorist” actions and had to a degree fallen into the rut of carrying out specific, elementary actions because it was seldom possible, and was in any case not permitted, to employ the full military potential of the Army and the Air Force against targets. It was further stated that it was militarily unacceptable to allow SWAPO to be trained in safe areas north of the border in order to concentrate for attacks on South Africa in northern Namibia. More than 50% of SWAPO’s activities in Namibia, it was claimed, took place in the immediate border areas. The initiative, it was emphasised, therefore remained in the hands of the “terrorists” whilst the SADF was compelled to merely react.

The document went on to point out that according to C SADF Operational Instruction 3/78, Chief of Staff Operations was responsible for the initiation of operational and contingency plans for targets deeper than 50km inside Angola, whilst the Chiefs of the Arms of Service (in this case the Army and the Air Force) would initiate planning for anything less than 50km. Most of the forward operational bases established by SWAPO were within the 50km limit. Operational planning, training, logistic second line support as well as overall command, control and co-ordination of all the insurgent activities in Ovamboland, would, however, have had to be done from a central point further back.

According to the Division Military Intelligence there were only two main SWAPO bases located deeper than 50km inside Angola: one at Lubango and the other at Cassinga. The base at Lubango (previously known as Sá da Bandeira) was located 270km north of Ruacana and was intermingled with the town. Although little information was available about the base, it was apparently shared with the Cubans and the MPLA. As there was a restriction on the SADF prohibiting them as far as possible from contact with either of these forces, Lubango was not regarded as a suitable target at

118 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, pp.87-88.

119 “Appreciation” is the military term used to describe a detailed study of a tactical military problem with a view to finding a military solution. According to the *Military Dictionary of the SA Defence Force*, p. 30, “Appreciation” is defined as the “logical process of reasoning by which a commander considers all conditions, possibilities and circumstances affecting the situation and arrives at a decision as to the course of action to be taken in order to accomplish his mission”. The US and NATO equivalent is an “Estimate”.

120 *Waardering: Vernietiging van SWAPO Basisse*, SADF File HS OPS/310/4/KOSTUUM, Enclosure dated 1 April 1978 and addressed to Chief of the SADF.

that stage. Although the SADF saw both Lubango and Cassinga as operational PLAN headquarters, with the latter as the “forward” HQ, being much closer to the identified insurgency area of central Ovamboland, SWAPO propagated a different viewpoint in later years. The only operational HQ, it was claimed, was at Lubango.¹²¹

Cassinga base, located 260km north of the border and separate from any forces allied to SWAPO, was seen by the SADF as a far more feasible target than Lubango. The overall commander of Operation REINDEER, Major General Ian Gleeson, explained in an interview that the benefits to be gained from destroying Cassinga were, from a military perspective, enormous. Besides the destruction of SWAPO’s operational command and control centre as well as its logistic support line, thereby clearing the area north of the border of insurgent activity, it would regain the initiative which the SADF had lost since the setback suffered at Eheke.¹²²

Maintaining the initiative is a crucial principle of counter-insurgency war, and it was inevitable that the SADF would address this requirement. But it was not simply a military requirement. In the overall scheme of things, the cause that the South African government was promoting was coupled to the Cold War, and it was necessary to show progress in the fight for the West against Communism. This was particularly so because the South African government regarded itself as in the front line of the battle. A military success, it was probably reasoned by the politicians, would do this. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa summed this up very well when it recorded in its final report that the “South African government’s security strategy was shaped by the doctrines of pre-emptive interventionism and counter-revolutionary warfare.... For the leadership of the government and the SADF, the war in Angola and other conflicts across the region were good and just wars, part of the West’s resistance to a perceived Soviet global offensive.”¹²³

DEDUCTIONS

From this discussion it is clear that the geographical and demographical area spanned by Angola’s Cunene Province and Namibia’s Ovamboland formed the crucible in which the insurgency war between SWAPO and South Africa was being fought. The forces deployed on either side of the border appear to have been approximately equal in numbers, though there were probably more in Angola than in Namibia. In addition, those inside Angola were far more heterogeneous than those in Namibia in terms of composition, nationality and command and control structures. The military situation in Angola was also far more complex than that in Namibia, with an ongoing civil war between the governing MPLA and the rebel UNITA movement, the involvement of the Cubans on the side of the MPLA, and with SWAPO, supported by both the MPLA and the Cubans, conducting

121 Jeremy Silvester, “Cassinga Revisited – Picturing the Past”, *The Namibian Weekender*, 7 May 1999.

122 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson (retired) on 16 January 2003. The disaster at Eheke occurred on 28/29 October 1977, when a group of special forces paratroopers were parachuted into Angola to attack a SWAPO base called “Eheke” or “Heque”. Faulty intelligence, poor Air Force navigation and questionable decisions by their higher tactical headquarters caused the operation to go wrong, and the South Africans suffered severe casualties, losing seven men killed in action or dying of wounds, and suffering many wounded, all of them highly trained specialist commandos. It was a serious psychological defeat for the SADF from which, according to Gleeson, they needed to recover. (*Vide* Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 193-201 and Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, pp. 160-162.)

123 *TRC Report*, p. 43.

its insurgency campaign across the border into Namibia. South African forces, however, were hampered by reliance on conscripts and reservists whose lengthy absences from South Africa caused a significant drain on the economy, and whose regular rotations disrupted the continuity of the counter-insurgency campaign. Though SWAPO had, at most, perhaps 3,000 armed insurgents in the operational area, there appeared to be only a few hundred inside Namibia at any given time. To counter them, South Africa had probably deployed in excess of 7,000 troops.

The South African paratroopers, used in an air-mobile reaction force role, became experienced at operating with the Air Force and gained considerable expertise in the execution of small scale, low intensity airborne operations. Many of them were exposed to action against SWAPO insurgents and were therefore not strangers to combat situations. Equally, the SWAPO guerrillas, living constantly under conditions of civil war inside their host country of Angola, their forward operational bases frequently harassed by South Africa's special forces and 32 Battalion and their cadres engaging South African forces in Namibia in firefights almost daily, rapidly became battle-hardened veterans.

Climate and weather in Ovamboland favoured the insurgents in the summer and the South African soldiers in the winter. However, the Air Force Base at Ondangwa provided the South Africans with an all-weather forward airfield close to the Angolan border, with all the back-up and logistic services to maintain considerable numbers of aircraft, especially helicopters. SWAPO, on the other hand, had succeeded in seizing the initiative in the insurgent war by operating extensively inside Ovamboland supported by an effective logistic back up from inside Angola and with bases in that country within easy reach of any insurgents needing to flee from Namibia if security force action became too hot.

On the political level, SWAPO was making a concerted effort to be seen as an effective liberation movement with a successful military record, whilst the South Africans were anxious to regain the initiative and give SWAPO a bloody nose. Militarily, SWAPO was acquiring conventional capabilities, whilst the SADF was losing its already limited conventional capacity's edge. The SADF therefore felt a need to hit SWAPO hard where it would hurt, not only at its forward bases near the border, but also further back where the damage would have a more lasting, strategic effect. The most feasible target for such a strike was located at Cassinga.

An attack by the SADF on SWAPO bases close to the border could be launched overland. However, any attempt to do so on a deep objective like Cassinga would require a sizeable conventional force that would be largely road-bound by the terrain and vegetation. It would also probably have to fight its way to the objective and back again because of the preponderance of hostile forces in the region. The SADF did, however, have the means and the experience to consider an airborne option for such a deep strike.

CHAPTER 3

THE NATURE AND DEFENSIBILITY OF CASSINGA

- Appendix A: Aerial photographs of Cassinga taken before and during the raid.
- B: Photographs claimed to have been taken inside Cassinga before the raid.
- C: Maps showing SADF Military Intelligence Estimate of MPLA/Cuban Military Deployments in Southern Angola: 1 March 1978.

Cassinga (sometimes misspelled “Kassinga”¹²⁴) was a small mining town in southern Angola. It was located in Huila province¹²⁵ on the dirt road running northwards from the Namibian border at Oshikango, through Ondjiva (formerly Vila Perreira d’Eça), Evale, Mupa, Cuvelai, Techamutete and on to Cuvango (formerly Artur de Paiva), where the railway line from the port of Namibe (formerly Moçamedes) passed on to Menongue (formerly Serpa Pinto). Cassinga was about 75km south of Cuvango and some 260km north of the Namibian border, situated 15°08’ south and 16°04’ east.¹²⁶ A branch-line of the railway extended to a point south of Cassinga, passing far to the west of the town, but this had not been in use since mining had been terminated. It would appear that the branch-line had existed to transport ore from the actual mine, which seems to have been closer to Techamutete than to Cassinga.¹²⁷ This is substantiated by Pagano, who describes Cassinga as having originally been “inhabited by a few thousand Angolans, mostly workers at the iron mines in Techamutete 16km away. The mines, once owned by Krupp and Japanese steel interests, never resumed work after the war and so Kassinga, with its three or four brick houses and hundreds of straw and adobe huts, had remained an empty town.”¹²⁸

The countryside around Cassinga is generally even and sandy, covered with scattered bush and scrub interspersed with many sparse trees. There are a few low, rocky hillocks in the vicinity and the ground slopes gently westward towards the stream known as the Culonga River, which curves around the little settlement. In places this river has extremely steep banks, and its width is often between 10 and 20 metres. At some sections it fans out into several narrow distributaries for a hundred metres or so, and at others it flows around islands. The banks are covered with riverine vegetation. (See the aerial photographs at Appendix A to this Chapter). The Culonga is a tributary of the far more substantial Cunene River, but at Cassinga it is often quite dry in the winter months.

124 Perhaps because the mines in the area had originally belonged to the German firm Krupp (*vide* Pagano, *The Kassinga File*, second unnumbered page), the name was spelled in the German way with a “K”. However, the letter “K” is virtually unused in Portuguese, and today the version “Cassinga” is officially accepted in both Angola and Namibia (see maps of Angola and the public holiday “Cassinga Day” in Namibia). Early SWAPO documents often used the “K”, despite a concrete name post in the town spelling it with a “C” (See photographs taken in Cassinga during the raid at Appendix C to Chapter 7, page 7C-4). In the indigenous Namibian languages the letter “K” is common, so it may have been a natural tendency for Namibians to favour its use.

125 Mikhail Vyshinsky, *Southern Africa: Apartheid, Colonialism, Aggression*, p.172.

126 *Illustrated Atlas of South, Central, East Africa*, p.28.

127 Some sources indicate that Techamutete was the actual mining town and that it had initially been named “Cassinga”. (“Plea to UN”, *The Citizen*, 6 May 1978 and “SA Message urges Big Five to Act”, *The Star*, 5 May 1978). When it was renamed Techamutete” (sometimes called “Otchamutete”, and with other variations), apparently the much smaller settlement to its north, beside a water installation in the Culonga River, adopted the name “Cassinga”.

128 Pagano, *The Kassinga File*, second unnumbered page.

The Culonga River runs less than a kilometre to the west of Cassinga.¹²⁹ May is the end of the rainy season, but during that month the Cunene and its tributaries still carry a substantial amount of water.¹³⁰

According to Hanlon, the iron-ore that was mined at Cassinga made the mine “probably the most important economic installation in southern Angola”¹³¹ Iron-ore from Cassinga is also listed by Vyshinsky, a Russian jurist and anti-apartheid activist, as one of the commercial activities in the Huila province which was of great economic importance to southern Angola.¹³² The mine had been established during the Portuguese colonial era, but, like much of Angola, was badly damaged during the 1975-76 civil war and South African incursion. Mine officials and management had fled at the time of the Portuguese withdrawal and the mine had not operated since then. Under the Portuguese, the Cassinga mining operations had formed an important link in the southernmost of Angola’s four development chains, each strung out along a good road or rail link from the hinterland to a commercial harbour, in this case Moçamedes, which was renamed Namibe by the Angolans.¹³³

The local population eked out a living on fields cleared from the bush close to the Culonga River, where they planted *mahango*,¹³⁴ a type of millet. Some kept a variety of scrawny livestock: cattle, goats, donkeys and chickens. The sandy soil and sparse ground vegetation were not conducive to animal husbandry. Buildings in the town were typically Portuguese colonial: white walls with red tiled roofs; wide and cool verandahs with roof arches supported on simple but appealing pillars; low windows with wooden shutters and wooden doors set back into attractive archways.¹³⁵

The town was spaciouly spread out, with wide, sandy roads, generous gardens and ample specially planted shady trees to offer shelter from the searing summer heat. The main road through the town was lined with tall bluegum trees. It was not really large enough to be called a town; “village” or “hamlet” would probably have been a more accurate epithet. There were probably no more than about thirty permanent buildings in Cassinga, offices and houses combined.¹³⁶ Many of these had been taken over by the local population after the mine officials had departed, and of course like all rural African towns, it was flanked by collections of indigenous-style huts. According to a SADF operational appreciation of Cassinga, dated 1 April 1978, these were located mainly to the north of the town.¹³⁷

129 Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p.15.

130 *Military-Strategic Study of Angola*, SANDF Documentation Service, p.72.

131 Hanlon, *Beggar your Neighbours*, p.160.

132 Vyshinsky, *Southern Africa*, p.171.

133 *Military-Strategic Study of Angola*, p.4.

134 The crops planted around Cassinga are variously described by survivors of the raid as “maize” (transcript of an interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998) and as “sugar cane” (transcript of an interview with Maggy Amutenya in 1998). Although *mahango* was the staple crop in Owamboland, including southern Angola, it is quite feasible that the camp at Cassinga could have had other crops planted. Certainly photographs taken by the paratroopers during the raid show crops in the background which could well have been maize. A SWAPO account of the raid on Cassinga refers to “the big maize field” (see *Massacre at Cassinga*, p. 20).

135 Photographs taken at Cassinga before, during and after the raid (see appendices).

136 Aerial photographs of Cassinga taken prior to the raid (see Appendix A to this chapter).

137 *Waardering: Vernietiging van SWAPO Basisse*, HS OPS/310/4/KOSTUUM (Uiters Geheim) dd 1 April 1978, p.5.

Mining towns are seldom attractive places, and southern Angola is not a spectacular part of the country. The dry climate, the tropical heat and the harshly reflective white sand causes vegetation to droop and the people to feel listless. The scorching African sun drives man and beast into the shade of the straggly trees by day, only to be attacked by the hordes of ever-present sand-flies and other irritating insects which frequent the cool shadows.

But by May the season had turned. The winter had started and the heat was no longer as unbearable. Nights were sometimes quite chilly and the daytime shadows began to lengthen much earlier. The heavy summer rains were ceasing and soon the trees would begin to lose their leaves. The sparse grasses between the scrub would turn hard and yellow and would soon disappear completely,¹³⁸ while the mud would harden in the rutted tracks.

About the topography, vegetation and climate of Cassinga there has been little dispute. Establishing the facts is not difficult. But it is the nature of the SWAPO camp at Cassinga that elicits heated emotion, and the defensibility of that camp was largely dependent on its nature and composition. For the purposes of this dissertation, therefore, both versions are portrayed and some reference has been made to the documents alleged to have been captured at Cassinga by the SADF before making general deductions regarding the camp's defensibility.

THE SWAPO VERSION

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Area Office in Brazzaville produced a report, just two days before the raid on Cassinga, on a visit to SWAPO refugee centres in Angola during April.¹³⁹ This report is frequently cited to back up SWAPO claims. The delegation which carried out the visit was under the leadership of a Mr Mostefaoui, the UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa, and included Ibrahim Fall, the Representative for Central Africa at Brazzaville (and author of the Report), and Amaro de Pombal, Assistant-Administrator of Programmes in Luanda. This three-man mission's objectives were summarised as examining:

- “- developments in the utilisation of the first UNICEF assistance allocation for Namibian refugees in Angola;
- evaluation of the number of refugees, their needs and living conditions in resettlement centres.”¹⁴⁰

The centres visited by the mission included Cassinga, where they were shown around by a four-man team comprising “Dimo AMAMBO, Chief Commander of PLAN (military section of SWAPO), Greenwell MATONGO, in charge of political affairs in PLAN, Andrew DAVIS, Education and the Chief Medical Assistant.”¹⁴¹

138 *Military-Strategic Study of Angola*, pp. 24-26.

139 I. Fall, *Report on a Mission to SWAPO Centres for Namibian Refugees in Angola from 10 to 14 April 1978*.

140 Fall, *Report on Mission*, p. 1.

141 Fall, *Report on Mission*, p. 3. The Commander of PLAN's name is spelled variously AMAMBO, AMAAMBO and HAMAAMBO. However, the last of these is mostly used on documents where he has signed his name, and appears to be the version subsequently used by the Namibian Defence Force.

Cassinga was described as “becoming the first centre for grouping and sorting of refugees,”¹⁴² and the refugees were assembled for counting by the mission. Their numbers were put at between 11,000 and 12,000 people, but “invalids at the health centre were not taken into account here..., nor were the armed ‘freedom fighters,’ who were certainly numerous and who were responsible for protecting the areas surrounding the camp.” The report goes on to say that adolescents, children and infants constituted the majority of the refugee population, possibly as much as 70%. “The remainder of the population, that is to say 30% is comprised essentially of adults with very few elderly persons. Both men and women are clearly guerrilla-fighters acting as senior staff and providing protection for all the refugees.”¹⁴³

The mission’s report makes no secret of the presence of military personnel at Cassinga, of the “military determination” of the camp’s inhabitants and of the presence of the “war wounded and some young people showing traces of burns.”¹⁴⁴ In the main though, it deals almost exclusively with refugee matters, verifying and confirming or agreeing with SWAPO’s claims regarding the numbers and the conditions of refugees needing UN assistance. The report therefore substantiates that there were large numbers of refugees at Cassinga, but it does not explicitly deny that the centre was also used for military activities. On the contrary, it implies as much, and goes as far as to define the SWAPO refugees as being in a different category to those the UN is accustomed to dealing with. “One is struck by their physical, moral, political and military determination... their speeches, their songs, their processions, the defence of their camps and the organisation of their health services, their education and sanitation...”¹⁴⁵ All this corresponds precisely with the Maoist blueprint for a guerrilla army. The one difference (and the point which qualified any member of SWAPO living outside Namibia as a refugee) was that this guerrilla army, if indeed it was one, was in exile. Mao envisaged all this taking place within the country of the guerrillas, forming part of the “liberated areas.”¹⁴⁶ What casts further doubt on any claim that Cassinga was solely a refugee camp is the fact that the report quite clearly states that the SWAPO contingent accompanying the UNICEF mission at Cassinga was led by the commander and the head of political affairs of PLAN, which would have been somewhat incongruous if it had not been a PLAN establishment.

Unfortunately, most of the other documents that could be traced detailing the SWAPO version of what the camp at Cassinga consisted of, were written after the raid of 4 May 1978. They are, furthermore, mostly secondary, published sources, written by people who are openly sympathetic to SWAPO, and who had not visited Cassinga before the raid. The first accounts were in the newspapers, which appeared in the days immediately following the raid. These were not the South African newspapers, which trumpeted the SADF version, but rather those of the international press.

142 Fall, *Report on Mission*, p. 5.

143 Fall, *Report on Mission*, p. 6. The reference to “very few elderly persons” was subsequently ignored in SWAPO claims, which focused on “women, children and old people”. For an explanation of the excessive figure of ‘11,000 to 12,000 people’, see Footnote 176.

144 Fall, *Report on Mission*, pp. 6, 7 and 11.

145 Fall, *Report on Mission*, p. 7.

146 Mao, Tse-Tung, *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*, Vol III, *Selected Works*, p. 85. Mao states that the revolutionary forces “must build the backward villages into advanced, consolidated base areas, into great military, political, economic and cultural revolutionary bastions, so that they can fight the... enemy who utilises the cities to attack the rural districts.”

Mr Peter Katjavivi, the SWAPO Secretary for Information and Publicity at the time, was reported immediately after the raid, to have described Cassinga as a “kindergarten-type settlement” populated by refugee women and children from Namibia.¹⁴⁷

Radio broadcasts around the world carried similar descriptions in the following days. “News of the African World”, a BBC programme, reported Sam Nujoma, the President of SWAPO, on 6 May 1978, as addressing the United Nations Security Council and claiming that the targets of the South African force had been women and children. Another BBC programme, “Postmark Africa”, referred to Cassinga on 28 May 1978, as a “refugee camp”.¹⁴⁸

Radio Deutsche Welle, in its “Bulletin of African News” on 5 May 1978, reported the Angolan News Agency (ANGOP) as saying that the South African attack was aimed at “a Namibian refugee camp at Cassinga, an important mining town”.¹⁴⁹ On the *Voice of America* Sam Nujoma was reported on 9 May 1978 as claiming that “the attack was on refugee camps and that 600 people, mostly women and children and old men, died in the raids.”¹⁵⁰ *Radio Moscow*, on 5 May 1978, described Cassinga as a populated centre with a nearby camp of Namibian refugees containing several thousand old men, women and children.¹⁵¹ Likewise, *Radio Angola*, on 8 May 1978, spoke of “a refugee camp in the Angolan town of Cassinga”.¹⁵² This description was echoed, in the wake of the attack, by *Radio Zambia*.¹⁵³

In the weeks, months and years after the raid on Cassinga various documents and publications appeared on the subject, and many of these added to the SWAPO version of what Cassinga consisted of prior to the attack. Pagano, in his introduction to a photographic essay on the aftermath of the Cassinga raid, states that “the government of the Peoples (sic) Republic of Angola had turned Kassinga over to SWAPO who needed a transit camp for the many Namibian refugees escaping terror in their country and seeking safety in free Angola. Located 260km north of the border inside Angola, it was considered a safe place. At the beginning of May 1978 Kassinga was inhabited by about 3,000 refugees, mostly young people, including students and families with many children waiting to be sent to schools in Angola or abroad, or to some more permanent resettlement area.”¹⁵⁴ The *Namibia Review*, produced by the Students’ African Movement, in an article on Cassinga, reproduced an extract from *Africa* No. 82 of June 1978, entitled “Behind the Carnage at Cassinga”,¹⁵⁵ in which it gave the following description:

“SWAPO insists that Cassinga was a refugee settlement, holding 4,000 – 5,000 Namibians, mostly women, children and old people, and that it contained a clinic,

147 AAP – Reuter, “West condemns Angolan raid”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 1978.

148 Extracts from radio transcripts contained in *Media-analise tov die SA Weermag*, “Media Teikenontleding: Operasie Reindeer”, p.44.

149 *Media-analise*, p. 46.

150 *Media-analise*, p. 52.

151 *Media-analise*, p. 57.

152 *Media-analise*, p. 62.

153 *Media-analise*, pp. 68 and 76.

154 Pagano, *The Kassinga File*, second unnumbered page.

155 *Namibia Review*, (undated), Robben Island Museum – Mayibuye Archives Centre, File: Namibia: General 102.

agricultural equipment, a sewing factory and a garage. There were no military installations and no more soldiers than a small unit designated to protect the settlement.

This has been confirmed by independent sources including a Swedish TV journalist, Per Sanden, who has recently completed a film on SWAPO which includes footage of Cassinga before it was destroyed.”

The film referred to could unfortunately not be traced and viewed for research purposes. However, an SADF opinion on what the film portrayed was that it showed a considerable number of women armed by SWAPO and undergoing military training.¹⁵⁶ In the same *Namibia Review* there appears a “News Report” by Richard Walker, New York. In it he describes the Cassinga camp as “about two years old, standing in open bushland on top of a low sandy hill”.

SWAPO itself produced a booklet in June 1978, published in Stockholm, where it gave its own version of what took place on 4 May 1978. Although the booklet contains some glaring inaccuracies and blatant exaggerations, it does say that those at Cassinga were “hundreds of Namibian women, children and old people”, that the South Africans “conducted a cold-blooded massacre of unarmed Namibian men, women, children, bed-ridden patients and aged people at Kassinga Refugee Camp” with a population of 4,098 and consisting of a camp clinic, accommodation for patients, a camp garage, a camp office and a food storage room as well as a school and a kindergarten. It also claims that “the only soldiers who were in Kassinga were a small (300 men) camp defence unit. This was a small group of lightly armed PLAN cadres...” and “two anti-aircraft guns”.¹⁵⁷

At a press conference in Cuba in 1978 during the 11th World Youth Festival, Nujoma referred to “the enemy attack on SWAPO of the Namibian refugee settlement at Kassinga”, adding that “It is true the Settlement was inhabited by more than 4,000 people mostly women and children.”¹⁵⁸ Katjavivi addressed the World Conference for the Eradication of Racism and Racial Discrimination in Basle, Switzerland, held from 18 to 21 May 1978. Here he spoke of “the civilian settlement of Namibian refugees at Cassinga”. This settlement, he said, had always been a civilian one, containing “a school, a clinic and agricultural projects but no military installations and no combatants of the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN).”¹⁵⁹

A year after the raid, SWAPO’s mouthpiece, *Namibia Today*, published a commemorative article which described Cassinga as containing “hundreds of Namibian women, children and aged people”, and spoke of the “unarmed Namibian men, women, children, bed-ridden patients and aged people of Kassinga Refugee Camp”. It quoted reporters who had visited the site the day after the raid as describing the ruined “camp clinic”, “main school building”, “library” and “dormitories”.¹⁶⁰ The Angolan

156 Report on Operation REINDEER sent to all South African Military Attachés abroad, dd 25 May 78, Enclosure 115 of File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol. 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129.

157 *Massacre at Cassinga*, pp. 3, 4, 13, 19 and 20.

158 “Sam Nujoma Speaks”, *Sechaba*, 4th Quarter, 1978.

159 “Atrocities”, pp. 97-98, *Namibia Dossier*, International University Exchange Fund, Geneva, 1979 (Robben Island Museum – Mayibuye Archives Centre, Box: Namibia: General 102). Katjavivi’s full address, issued as a SWAPO statement, is published here.

160 “Kassinga Remembered”, *Namibia Today*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1979, pp. 4,5 and 13.

government had, as early as 25 July 1979, presented a report to the United Nations (UN Document S/13473) detailing acts of aggression against the country by South Africa between 26 March 1976 and 11 June 1979. It described the attack on Cassinga as being carried out on “a Namibian refugee camp” whose occupants were “mainly women and children.”¹⁶¹

On the occasion of the second anniversary of the Cassinga raid, the SWAPO Central Committee issued a strongly worded, almost vitriolic statement in which it repeatedly referred to the “unarmed Namibians” who had died at Cassinga, calling them “our innocent people” consisting of “hundreds of men, women and children”.¹⁶² *Omkeer*, a magazine which was surreptitiously distributed to South African national servicemen as part of the End Conscription Campaign, in 1981 described Cassinga as having been “a refugee camp, in which about 1,000 unarmed people, mainly women and children were housed. They had fled Northern Namibia and the terror that South African attacks were creating on them.”¹⁶³

In a publication produced by the International Defence and Aid Fund in 1981, Cassinga is described as follows:

“At the time of the raid, Cassinga was SWAPO’s main transit centre and settlement for Namibian refugees in southern Angola. It accommodated over 4,000 people in disused mine buildings and tents and was equipped with a clinic, a school, a library, a kindergarten, a sewing factory, food stores, and facilities for repairing trucks and other vehicles. A limited force of armed personnel was maintained at the settlement for defensive purposes but there were no military installations as such.

The majority of the Namibians at Cassinga were young people, teenagers and children. Most of them had been at the camp for only a few days or weeks. Because so many of the refugees had only very recently escaped across the northern Namibian border into exile, many of them had not been trained in even the most basic techniques of self- defence, in the event of a surprise South African attack.”¹⁶⁴

What is significant about this description, written three years after the raid, is that, for the first time, an admission was made by a source other than SWAPO that there was “a limited force of armed personnel” at Cassinga at the time of the raid, though there had been, as has been seen, references soon after the raid of “a small unit designated to protect the settlement”.¹⁶⁵

Ten years after the raid an article appeared that again referred to the “mostly women and children” who had been killed in the “raid on the refugee camp”. It claimed that “photographic and documentary evidence indicated that most of the victims were women and children, many of them killed and injured after the raid by the anti-personnel mines scattered by the SADF as they withdrew with their prisoners.”¹⁶⁶ No further description of the actual camp is given. Victoria Brittain, at about the same

161 Johnson and Martin (eds.), *Destructive Engagement*, pp. 92-93.

162 “Do not forget Cassinga”, *Namibia Today*, Vol. 4, No. 5/6, 1980.

163 “Namibia: the Future – War or Peace”, *Omkeer*, Winter 1981, p.6.

164 “Remember Cassinga,” *Fact Paper on Southern Africa No. 9*, International Defence and Aid Fund, London, 1981, p.30 (Robben Island Museum – Mayibuye Archives Centre).

165 *Namibia Review*, (undated), Robben Island useum – Mayibuye Archive Centre, File: Namibia: General 102.

166 “The Cassinga Raid: A Grim Symbol of Apartheid Violence”, *South African Outlook*, Vol 118, No 1403, May 1988, pp. 67 and 70.

time, described Cassinga as “SWAPO’s main transit center and settlement ... in deserted bush country. There were 4,098 refugees from Namibia living in iron mine buildings, and tents. The refugees were men, women and children...”. She adds that “Kassinga’s modest facilities, provided by the UN refugee agency UNHCR and Angola, included a school, a sewing factory and truck repair works. There was no military camp. The refugees had built on this fragile normality ordinary small dignified lives and a thriving sense of community.”¹⁶⁷

Katjavivi, in his *History of Resistance in Namibia*, first published in 1988, described Cassinga as the main SWAPO health and education centre in Angola,¹⁶⁸ and also as a “Namibian refugee settlement.”¹⁶⁹

The only attempt by pro-SWAPO sources seriously to describe Cassinga as it may have been on the eve of the raid seems to be contained in Heywood’s book. Yet even here, the description focuses more on the occupants than on the infrastructure:

“Cassinga is situated 250km inside Angola in Huila Province. In colonial days it had been a small mining town built around a deposit of high grade iron ore, and consisted of a sprawl of houses and mine buildings more or less following the course of the Cubango (sic) river less than a kilometre to the west. Around the core of sound buildings left standing when mining was abandoned, SWAPO had established a large transit and training camp for Namibians who had left their houses or schools to seek a better life within the liberation movement. There were women and children here, and adults too old or unfit for active combat; but most were teenagers in search of educational opportunities... . Between 3,000 and 4,000 people appear to have been assembled here in a semi-permanent community of exiles with its constituent population in continuous flux. There was an intermittent stream of new arrivals while small contingents left once they had been assigned. The camp was under strict military control and was run on military lines... .

The camp appears to have been guarded by a unit of 200 – 300 armed cadres who had at their disposal two anti-aircraft guns... .

There can be no doubt at all that — the presence of armed men and young men and women undergoing training notwithstanding — ‘Moscow’ [SWAPO’s code-name for Cassinga] was a relocation centre and that, although all able-bodied adults were, by their very commitment to the SWAPO cause, clearly guerrillas, Cassinga was not primarily a PLAN establishment”.¹⁷⁰

For the first time the words “transit” and “training” are used to describe the role of the camp. Also significantly, figures are coupled to the “armed cadres”, and the presence of the anti-aircraft guns is acknowledged. Yet, as has been seen, SWAPO itself had acknowledged the presence of the anti-aircraft guns and given a figure of 300 PLAN cadres as early as June 1978 (in the emotionally charged initial claims there was a flat denial of any PLAN elements whatsoever having been present – see statement by Peter Katjavivi, footnote 159). A strength of 200 – 300 would indicate either a

167 Victoria Brittain, *Hidden Lives, Hidden Deaths*, pp. 21-22.

168 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, pp. 109-110.

169 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, p119.

170 Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, pp. 15-22.

very strong company or an under-strength battalion having been deployed to protect the camp. There is also an admission here that, technically at least, everyone in the camp was a guerrilla.

The "transit" aspect of Cassinga was given more substance in an interview, apparently with a survivor of the raid, in 1991, in which it was said that "a number of United Nations Institute for Namibia (UNIN) graduates had arrived from Lusaka only days before the attack... and a number of candidates selected to attend UNIN that year died there, too."¹⁷¹ He described the function of Cassinga as the processing of people newly arrived in exile, as well as those SWAPO members who were in transit to and from other countries via Angola.

The refugee refrain continued, but little was said regarding the facilities at Cassinga. "Men, women and children, as well as a handful of PLAN guards"¹⁷² merely served to emphasise that this had not been a military base. Twenty years after the raid, Cassinga was referred to in commemorative articles in Namibia as a refugee camp, no longer as a counter-argument to the SADF claim, but as a matter of course: there was no longer any question about the issue and the statement no longer required justification because it was accepted as fact.¹⁷³ At the same time though, so was the "handful of PLAN guards".

Nevertheless, the continued tales of survivors, even twenty years after the event,¹⁷⁴ make it impossible to refute the claim that there were refugees at Cassinga. One survivor who was interviewed in 1998, claimed that he first went to Cassinga "in 1976, the year Cassinga was established." Although himself a trained SWAPO freedom fighter at the time, he described the settlement as "a transit camp for the people who came straight from home. It was made mainly to accommodate women, children and the aged." He gave the camp population as "about 4,000 people." In explaining his own presence there as a combatant, he claimed to be part of the military administration: "Although Cassinga was a camp for civilians, defence measure was necessary in the war situation to protect the civilians from being attacked by the enemy. A defence of 30 trained combatants and 2 anti-aircrafts was rendered to the camp. There were two offices in the camp. One office was for the whole administration of the camp or the civilian administration and the other was for the defence matters [note: this survivor claimed to have been "the secretary of Commander Pondo, responsible for recording defence matters" and later became secretary for the whole camp]. There were also two leaders, Dimo Amaambo and Greenwell Matongo, but they were mostly concerned with high decision making."¹⁷⁵

Dr Jeremy Silvester of the University of Namibia has recorded, as recently as 1999, that:

171 Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means", referring to an interview with Simon Zhu Mbako in 1991, in Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 29.

172 Herbstein and Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us*, p. 31.

173 Becker, "Remembering Cassinga", p.6.

174 Ruusa Naango-Shaanika, "Remembering Cassinga" and "A Sister Who Died Too Young", *The Namibian*, 30 April 1998.

175 Transcript of an interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji at Okahandja Military Base, Namibia, in March 1998. The figure of only 30 armed combatants is sufficiently suspect to be discounted. Even pro-SWAPO sources put the figure at 200-300, and 30 would in any case be no more than a token for protecting 4,000 civilians in an active war zone.

“...a delegation from Unicef who visited Cassinga a month before the attack reported that (on the basis of counting those lined up at a parade in their honour) there were 11,000 – 12,000 residents in the camp. Whilst this figure may reflect the gathering of some people from neighbouring camps for the occasion, it now seems clear that there was also a partial evacuation before the attack on 4th May. The number of people in the camp at the time of the attack is now commonly agreed to have been between 3-4,000.”¹⁷⁶

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, in its *Report* published in 1998, stated that human settlement in the Cassinga area had grown considerably in the period between Angola’s independence and the SADF raid. It described Cassinga as follows:

“The site was allocated to SWAPO by the Angolan government in 1976, after an appeal for help to cope with an inflow of thousands of refugees. Under SWAPO’s control, the abandoned homes in the village had been converted into offices, a kindergarden and primary school, a clinic, a sewing facility and storage and vehicle repair workshops. New permanent structures had also been erected, plots cultivated and a set of defensive trenches dug. SWAPO had also installed two anti-aircraft guns in the centre of the village, and the camp contained a self-defence unit of approximately 300 male and female PLAN cadres.”¹⁷⁷

Major General Martin Shalli, Army Commander of the Namibian Defence Force and a senior member of PLAN at the time of the raid on Cassinga, confirmed that SWAPO first obtained use of Cassinga as a transit facility in late 1976. He states that SWAPO needed such a facility “not close and not too far from the border” to receive and transfer Namibian refugees. It was, claims Shalli, used as a refugee reception centre, processing and sending refugees on to various destinations the world over for educational purposes and in some cases for guerrilla warfare training. He says that no significant military force existed at Cassinga as there was a deliberate effort to keep the place “as demilitarised as possible”, though in retrospect this may have been an error and there is still considerable debate over the issue in SWAPO ranks today. He vehemently denies that Cassinga was a headquarters of PLAN.¹⁷⁸

And yet, in a complete contradiction of the official SWAPO claims, a former guerrilla of the ANC’s *Umkhonto weSizwe* who owned to having been based at Cassinga at the time of the raid, described it as “the main SWAPO command post in southern Angola” in which there had been a “buildup of supplies for an obvious SWAPO infiltration campaign.”¹⁷⁹ Although this source may be questionable, not carrying the endorsement of the ANC, the credibility of some of the pro-SWAPO claims about Cassinga are even more dubious. Pagano, for instance, in a publication of the International University Exchange Fund in Geneva, with a foreword by Shapua Kaukungua, the Chief Representative of SWAPO for Western Europe, states that “We arrived at Kassinga at noon on May 6. After a few hours filming and photographing and also interviewing survivors, we had no doubt left

176 Silvester, “Cassinga Revisited”.

177 *TRC Report*, p. 50.

178 Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003.

179 Kobo, *Waiting in the Wing*, pp. 133 and 139. Kobo implied that Cassinga was part of the supply route for SWAPO-ANC camps near the border and claimed that his job was supervising the route (p. 133). However there is no evidence that the ANC had any camps close to the Namibian border at the time. Nevertheless, Kobo speaks of Cuban instructors at Cassinga and of arms dumps (p. 139).

about the nature of this camp – strictly a refugee camp without any military installations. We can witness that Brigadier Botha’s statements about ‘bunkers’ and trench systems at Cassinga are completely without foundation.”¹⁸⁰ The aerial photographs of Cassinga taken by the SAAF (Appendix A) quite clearly give the lie to this categorical statement and create a credibility crisis with SWAPO claims in similar vein. The doubts cannot be removed, that SWAPO was attempting to cover up or conceal the extent of its military presence at Cassinga.

One SWAPO survivor of the raid, a trained and experienced PLAN guerrilla, described how, after operations along the Namibian/Angolan border throughout 1977, he was sent to Cassinga to receive treatment for and recover from a wound received in battle with the South Africans. This indicates that Cassinga was used to provide a medical facility to the military arm of SWAPO.¹⁸¹ A document that the second-in-command of the composite parachute battalion that carried out the raid claimed to have brought back from Cassinga supports this possibility. It is a list of “Rules and Regulations for Our Clinics” on a PLAN letterhead, signed by the Secretary of Health and Social Welfare, Dr Iyambo Indongo and the Commander of PLAN, Dimo Amaambo.¹⁸²

However, to summarise the generally accepted SWAPO version of the nature of the camp at Cassinga, it could be said to have been a transit camp for Namibian refugees, most of who were women, children and old men. It accommodated people who had fled from their homeland of Namibia in the face of the oppression of the occupying South African forces. The facilities at the camp included a clinic, a school, a sewing factory, a vehicle repair workshop, a kindergarten, a food store and agricultural implements. In later years this version was modified somewhat and the “transit camp” became a “semi-permanent community of exiles” where “training” was done, including, it seems, some military training. The community consisted of 3,000 to 4,000 people, including a camp guard unit of between 200 and 300 SWAPO soldiers. It may have accommodated considerably more people shortly before the South African raid and was certainly a very large human concentration.

THE SADF VERSION

In considering the SADF version of the nature of the Cassinga camp, a deliberate effort has been made to examine sources extant before the raid took place. Source documents in the archives of the former SADF are manifold, and include detailed descriptions of Cassinga prior to the raid, compiled by the Military Intelligence Division. As would be expected of documents making up a “target dossier”, these emphasise the military obstacles and resistance likely to be encountered during an attack.

In a top secret document consisting of a briefing on the necessity for deliberate military operations against SWAPO in Angola, and with the words written across its first page in the characteristic hand

180 Pagano, *The Cassinga File*, second unnumbered page.

181 Transcript of an interview conducted with Moks Shisvute, Cassinga survivor, on 29 May 1998. Interestingly, Shisvute claims to have remained at Cassinga until the raid, in the capacity of camp secretary, registering and administering all incoming and outgoing inhabitants of Cassinga. This is exactly what another survivor (also a guerrilla) claims to have been doing (*vide*, transcript of interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998).

182 People’s Liberation Army of Namibia, “Rules and Regulations for Our Clinics”, dd 29 August 1976.

of the then South African Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, *“Terug aan Genl Malan – Persoonlik. PWB”* (Back to Gen Malan – Personally. PWB), Cassinga (code-named Alpha) is described as *“n groot SWAPO basis geleë 260 km Noord van die grens. Dit is die operasionele militêre hoofkwartier van SWAPO vanwaar alle operasies teen SWA beplan en die uitvoering gekoördineer word. Vanaf die basis word alle voorrade en wapentuig na die basisse verder vorentoe voorsien. Hier vind ook opleiding plaas. Kortweg is dit seker die belangrikste basis van SWAPO in Angola. Die naaste Kubaanse basis is 15 kms Suid van Alpha.”*¹⁸³

(a large SWAPO base located 260km North of the border. It is the operational military headquarters of SWAPO from where all operations against SWA are planned and their execution co-ordinated. From this base all supplies and armaments are provided to the bases further forward. Here training also takes place. In short, it is probably the most important SWAPO base in Angola. The nearest Cuban base is 15km South of Alpha).

The Military Intelligence Division must have provided the basis for this description. Their information would have been derived primarily from signals intelligence in the form of intercepts of MPLA, Cuban and SWAPO radio traffic as well as the interrogation of captured SWAPO guerrillas. It is doubtful that intelligence operatives would have been deployed covertly that deep inside Angola and none of the available literature on South African special forces indicates that they ever carried out any clandestine reconnaissance of Cassinga.¹⁸⁴ But there was certainly detailed aerial photographic reconnaissance, at high altitude, of the camp, and this revealed considerable detail (See Appendix A). In the hands of well-trained and experienced air-photography interpreters the images produced by the Canberra aircraft's high resolution cameras could yield a great deal of information which could be confirmed by radio intercepts and prisoner interrogations.¹⁸⁵ That the SADF did have an advanced electronic warfare capability, including the ability to intercept radio transmissions, is borne out by the transcript of an MPLA message sent from Luanda to Lubango on 29 April 1978.¹⁸⁶ It is also possible that an informer inside SWAPO was providing South African Military Intelligence with information on Cassinga.

One of the documents providing the most detailed information on Cassinga available to the SADF prior to the raid, is the top secret military appreciation¹⁸⁷ on the destruction of SWAPO bases, drawn

183 *Voorlegging oor die Noodsaaklikheid van Oorwoë Militêre Operasies teen SWAPO in Angola*, pp. 3 and 4, SADF file CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), Enclosure 44. It must be assumed from the comment written on the first page of this undated document that it had been prepared by General Malan (then the Chief of the SADF) or his staff for presentation to the Minister of Defence.

184 In fact, it is not impossible that the South African special forces may have carried out such a reconnaissance. A former PLAN official certainly claimed that there had been some indications of this around Cassinga (Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003).

185 Discussions with Lieutenant Colonel J.J. Botha at Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC) on 15 August 2002 and 12 September 2002, as well as the study of Cassinga aerial photographs through a stereoscope with assistance of air photography interpreter Captain Piet Roos of JARIC on 12 September 2002.

186 Signal from 237 Troop, 2 Signal Regiment to 1 MA, 2 MA, C SADF 3, SWA Comd, NLC and C Army (D Ops), dd 30 April 1978, File CS Ops/310/4 REINDEER, Enclosure 7.

187 See footnote 119 for a definition of the military term “appreciation”.

up by the Chief of Staff Operations and submitted to the Chief of the SADF on 1 April 1978.¹⁸⁸ This document divided its description into five sections which are summarised as follows:

- a. The Role of Cassinga for SWAPO. The Headquarters of PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia – the military wing of SWAPO) was in Cassinga from where its commander, Dimo Amaambo, planned and co-ordinated the execution of all operations inside Namibia from a central operations room. Logistic planning and the provision of supplies, weapons and ammunition to insurgents operating in central and eastern Ovamboland were undertaken from Cassinga. Medical treatment of the seriously wounded, repair of equipment as well as the assembling of newly trained insurgents on their way to bases in the East and West Cunene provinces all took place in Cassinga. It also served as a resting place for insurgents needing to recuperate after incursions into Namibia. The importance of Cassinga was seen as lying not merely in the presence there of a large number of insurgents but also in the functions being carried out. The destruction of the Cassinga base, it was claimed, would cause a major disruption of SWAPO's operational activities as well as its logistic systems for a period of at least six months. It was also seen as a means of negatively influencing the morale of SWAPO insurgents. In addition, an attack on Cassinga was seen as offering an opportunity to destroy or capture valuable documents and equipment as well as to take some senior prisoners-of-war.
- b. The Location and Vulnerability of Cassinga.
 - i. Due to its location 260km north of the border, it was stated that the defensive systems around the base were not directed at a fixed defence, although the trench system was in the process of being extended considerably (see aerial photographs at Appendix A to this chapter). It was doubtful whether the occupants of the base were really expecting an attack, so surprise was possible.
 - ii. As a result of air photographs and the roads in the area, the location could be accurately determined and Cassinga could easily be recognised from the air. Target identification for Air Force operations would be easy, making it possible to utilise the then available air weapons to maximum effect. There was no indication of anti-aircraft weapons (although during the attack the paratroopers were to encounter anti-aircraft guns).
 - iii. Cassinga was too far north of the border to be reached by South African vehicles or artillery, so a ground attack would have to be preceded by an air bombardment.
 - iv. Due to the construction (huts, tents and a few fixed buildings) and the design of the target it was seen as suitable for an attack with the available air weapons.
- c. The Occupants of Cassinga. The numbers of insurgents in Cassinga was given as "varying between 300 and 1,200 terrorists and an unknown number of armed women terrorists". The numbers present in the base were said to be dependent on the completion of the training of insurgents further north in Angola and/or other countries. Their numbers grew each time a fresh batch of newly trained insurgents arrived. The details of the training cycle were not known by South African military intelligence. The average number of insurgents in Cassinga was seen as difficult to estimate, but it was felt that aerial photographs to be taken immediately prior to D-day might indicate

¹⁸⁸ *Waardering: Vernietiging van SWAPO Basisse*, SADF File HS OPS/310/4/KOSTUUM (Top Secret). Also contained in File CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), as Enclosure 40.

further detail. A limited number of local inhabitants had been identified as living north of Cassinga, but not in Cassinga itself. This would mean that “only SWAPO terrorists and their followers (*aanhangers*)” would be encountered in the target area.

d. Intervention by the MPLA and Cubans

- i. The document pointed out that only 15km south of Cassinga at Techamutete there was a base accommodating MPLA and Cuban troops. The most recent information available (dated 31 October 1977) gave the strength of the Cuban garrison as 144. They were said to be conducting operations against UNITA in the area east and south of Techamutete. No operational cycle was known regarding these activities, however. The presence or absence of Cubans could therefore not be determined. The presence of tanks in the base had also been reported, but again more accurate information would have to be dependent on aerial photographs immediately prior to D-day.
- ii. It nevertheless had to be accepted that intervention by the MPLA and the Cubans was indeed a likelihood. Provision would therefore have to be made in the operational plan to prevent this by including an anti-tank capability and by the attacking force spending a minimum of time in Cassinga.

- e. Enemy Air Capability. Available intelligence at the time indicated to the South Africans that there was no early warning or interception radar in the area around Cassinga that would be able to pick up low-flying aircraft. Confirmed intelligence had, however, shown that in the MPLA/Cuban/SWAPO actions against UNITA use was made of both attack aircraft and armed helicopters. Although the possibility of enemy air attacks on the South Africans was small, it could therefore not be excluded.

The operational instruction initiating Operation REINDEER for the Army elements participating, and issued by SA Army Headquarters on 21 April 1978 was addressed to the commanders of both the Eastern and the Western Sectors of the operation planned for southern Angola. Cassinga was the main objective of the Eastern Sector Commander, an appointment made purely for the duration of the operation (although ultimately a Central Sector was added, solely responsible for Cassinga). It gave the strength of “Alpha” as varying up to 1,400 men and the armament deployed there by SWAPO as consisting of 82mm mortars, RPG 7 anti-tank launchers (hand-held rocket propelled grenades) and small calibre weapons.¹⁸⁹

The Parachute Brigade Operational Order for the assault on Cassinga, dated April 1978, contained considerable detail on the nature of the camp, clearly derived from intelligence reports received via Army Headquarters from Military Intelligence. It described Cassinga as a concentration and rest area accommodating between 300 and 1,200 SWAPO “members”. It goes on to state that it is the military headquarters of SWAPO (PLAN) from where their leader Dimo Hamaambo plans and co-ordinates his operations against SWA. The SWAPO members are housed east of the Artur de Paiva/Techamutete road in huts and tents while the SWAPO HQ is in a well-built house in the central part of the town, with a jail just behind it in which SWAPO prisoners are held. A large number of SWAPO prostitutes and an unknown number of armed women terrorists are also sheltering in Cassinga. Housing consists of a combination of grass-roofed huts, marquee-type tents and

¹⁸⁹ SA Army HQ Ops Instruction H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER (Top Secret) dd 21 April 1978, Appendix A, SANDF Archival Group Supplementary Documents, Box No 31, File Op REINDEER.

permanent buildings. Otherside the road, towards the west is the house of Hamaambo, and just to the west of that the hospital, as Cassinga is also the main medical centre for treating seriously wounded terrorists. In addition, it is the collection point for terrorist recruits before sending them through to training centres at Lubango and Luanda. Furthermore, it is the assembly point for freshly trained terrorists prior to routing them to bases in the East-West Cunene province. Cassinga is subordinate only to SWAPO's defence headquarters that is located at Lubango. Control of SWAPO's transport means is centralised at Cassinga, as is its main repair depot. Planning, control, co-ordination and intelligence for SWAPO operations are conducted from here and logistic planning and supply of bases in the East Cunene province of Angola and of insurgents operating in Ovamboland is done from Cassinga. Besides the two parade squares and the weapon training area, practical weapon training takes place in the area along the dry riverbed east of Cassinga, where infantry and mine-laying refresher courses are presented. There is a likelihood that personnel mines will be encountered, but there is no indication of heavy guns or infantry support weapons.¹⁹⁰

The clearest evidence in support of the SADF version of the nature of Cassinga is to be found in the aerial photographs of the camp, taken on the eve of the raid (see Appendix A). Although these do not indicate whether buildings are military headquarters or merely civilian administrative offices, they do reveal a vast array of sophisticated defensive trenches and bunkers. These were situated so as to almost encircle Cassinga and they included access and communication trenches, revetments and observation points as well as forward foxholes. If they had been merely for protection, as opposed to defence, these works would have been more accessible to the camp inhabitants, not all on the outer perimeter with clear fields of fire in front of them, and there would have been more bunkers than trenches. The trenches were constructed to accommodate upwards of 500 defenders, possibly as many as 1,500 and in the days leading up to the raid had shown a spurt of development and extension. This would indicate a defensive force of at least a battalion, which would seem rather a large element to guard a refugee camp. To defend an important operational headquarters or a logistic base, on the other hand, this would be quite realistic.

A sketch map attached to a memorandum from the Chief of the Army to the Chief of the SADF (see Appendix A to Chapter 5) and which is clearly derived from aerial photographs, gives an interpretation of the layout of Cassinga upon which all planning for the raid appears to have been based.¹⁹¹ The map indicates local population living in buildings to the north of Cassinga, but other than that it identifies parade grounds, weapon and military training areas, a headquarters complex, living areas for insurgents under training or in transit, vehicle parks, a vehicle workshop, a hospital and wards, logistical stores, fuel, oil and lubricant stores, a helicopter landing pad, a gaol, a brothel and the house of Dimo Hamaambo (Commander of PLAN) and Greenwell Matongoh (Political Commissar). There is no reference to civilian refugees.

190 1 Parachute Brigade Opso 1/78 OPS/309/1/B/1 REINDEER (Top Secret) dd April 1978. The information contained in this Opso appears to be almost word-for-word the same as that in a Memorandum from C Army to C SADF, headed "DIE ROL VAN CASSINGA IN DIE MILITÊRE AANSLAG TEEN SUID-WES AFRIKA," Reference H LEËR/309/1 (Top Secret) dd 8 March 1978 and signed by Lt Gen Viljoen. This document is to be found in a SANDF Archival Folder marked "Cassinga", but which is unreferenced.

191 Appendix A of Memorandum from C Army to C SADF, *ibid.*

The TRC conceded that “it is clear that from the SADF’s perspective, Kassinga was a military facility rather than essentially a refugee camp or refugee transit facility, as SWAPO has always claimed. The photographic evidence shown to the Commission at the SADF archives suggests a military dimension to the camp.”¹⁹² Nevertheless, the TRC was hesitant to accept this evidence as decisive, stating that it cannot “be taken as conclusive evidence that Kassinga was a military base. In the context of the ongoing war in Angola, some defensive fortification of any SWAPO facility, whether civilian or military, would have been standard practice.”¹⁹³

A notable and perhaps to-be-expected tendency, which has emerged since the publication of the findings of the TRC, has been the selective use of these findings by certain writers in a bid to substantiate their own viewpoints. As most of what has been written about Cassinga has favoured the SWAPO version, a perception may have been created that the TRC rejected out of hand the SADF version, which certainly was not the case.¹⁹⁴

It had been recommended by the South African Defence Headquarters, based on various factors, that the raid should be carried out on 28 April 1978 or as soon after that as possible.¹⁹⁵ As the yet-to-be-decided D-day drew nearer, Military Intelligence provided updates on the situation in Cassinga. In an intelligence report (INTREP) numbered 37/78, dated 01 May 1978 and sent to the offices of the Minister of Defence, Chief of the SADF, Chief of Staff Operations, Chief of the Army and Chief of the Air Force, the following was stated:¹⁹⁶

- Information indicated that there was a large number of armed “terrorists” at Cassinga during the middle of April.
- Cuban instructors living in the base are running the SWAPO training (see photographs at Appendix B).
- The presence of Cubans in Cassinga is confirmed by Cuban radio traffic from and to the base.
- It is known that considerable expansion of Cassinga’s defensive systems is taking place (see trenches on aerial photographs at Appendix A).
- On aerial photographs dated 29 April 1978 a total of 455 moving persons could be counted.
- An estimate of the numbers in Cassinga would be 1,000 – 1,500 “terrorists” and recruits, and about 50 – 100 Cubans.

192 *TRC Report*, p. 49.

193 *TRC Report*, p. 49.

194 Terry Bell, *Unfinished Business*, p. 66. Bell ignores any TRC findings which could in any way vindicate SADF thinking at the time, and focuses only on those findings which would be seen to favour SWAPO.

195 Appreciation to Determine the Most Suitable Date for Operation REINDEER (Top Secret), reference MI/309/4/REINDEER dd 24 April 1978, contained in file HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER, Vol. 1, SANDF Archival Group CS Ops (Gp 5), Box No 121.

196 Top Secret Signal WF/054/ April 1978, in file CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), Enclosure 11.

On 3 May 1978, when it had already been decided that the attack would take place the next day, the Chief of Staff Operations issued a supplement to SADF Operational Instruction 8/78 with the above information, but adding that a possible camp for recruits had been located north of Cassinga.¹⁹⁷

Nowhere in any of the SADF documents which could be traced in the archives is there any reference to “refugees” or in fact to civilians of any sort within the confines of Cassinga, except where the Parachute Brigade Operational Order does refer to “*n groot getal SWAPO prostitute en ’n onbekende getal gewapende vroue terroriste*”.¹⁹⁸ (a large number of SWAPO prostitutes and an unknown number of armed women terrorists). All local Angolan inhabitants are said to be living outside of Cassinga. It has not been possible to ascertain whether the Military Intelligence Division was feeding through selected information on Cassinga and deliberately withholding details of a civilian presence in the camp. The apparent absence of Military Intelligence files on Cassinga prior to the raid has been the obstacle in determining this. The only available intelligence reports on Cassinga to be found in the archives are those included in the Operations Division’s files. These would have been provided to Operations by Military Intelligence.

However, an interesting discovery in the SANDF’s archival repository at the Directorate Documentation Services was an unreferenced folder marked “Cassinga”, which contained a number of loose documents. As far as could be ascertained from the archivists, it seemed that some years earlier an outside researcher had gathered copies of documents on Cassinga within the archives, with the intention of accessing them for research purposes once they had been declassified. However, this researcher (a woman, whose name could not be provided to me) never returned to consult the collection of documents. It would seem that the documents had been taken from a Top Secret SA Army file (309/1). Defence Counter-Intelligence very readily agreed to declassify these documents for my research.

One was a copy of a document headed “The 8th Minutes of the Military Council”, dated 04/01/1977, noted as having taken place at “Mongolia” (Efitu) and signed by the Secretary (“Shalli”) and the Chairman (“Dimo”) of the Military Council. It carries the stamp of “SOUTH WEST AFRICA PEOPLES ORGANISATION (S.W.A.P.O.) OF NAMIBIA. COMMANDER PEOPLES LIBERATION ARMY OF NAMIBIA (P.L.A.N.) ARMED FORCES”. The document lists those present by names that identify them as almost all being well-known guerrilla commanders. In the document there is one reference to “Moscow CHQ” as being required to provide supplies to five different active guerrilla areas. Another reference speaks of all fronts forwarding problems and requirements to the CHQ.¹⁹⁹ That this document was appended to a South African Army document dated 8 March 1978 is evidence that it was in the possession of the SADF prior to the Cassinga raid. It is also an indication that SA Military Intelligence was accessing some SWAPO documentation of a classified nature at the time.

197 Top Secret Signal D OPS/2030 dd 03 May 1978 in File Op REINDEER, Archival Group Supplementary Documents, Box No. 31.

198 1 Parachute Brigade Opso 1/78.

199 The 8th Minutes of the Military Council, Reference Number 0077/MC, dd 04/01/1977, appended to Memorandum from C Army to C SADF as Appendix B, reference H LEër/309/1 dd 8 March 1978, in SANDF Archival Folder marked “Cassinga”, but unreferenced. “Moscow” was the SWAPO code-name for Cassinga.

Another document appeared to be an interrogation report, showing answers to previously formulated questions, and dated June '77. It is in questionnaire format, the answers handwritten (apparently by the interrogator), and is formulated to obtain information about bases. The base which has its name written across the top of the report is "CHQ CASSINGA". It is described as lying ± 15 km NW of Samtete (Techamutete), covering an area of ± 3 km x 3km, with a strength of 7,000 and its type being "CHQ's" and "*Opleidingskamp*" (Training Camp). The vehicles are described as two 5-tonne Mercedes Benz trucks, two Land Rovers and one commissariat Jeep.

Buildings are described as "*Geboue in die Sentraal: Commanding House in gebou van hom is daar kombuis, ammunisie depot en voedsel magsyn. Geboue wat uitsteek*". (Buildings in the Central: Commanding House in his building there is kitchen, ammunition depot and foodstuffs magazine. Buildings that are prominent). The river is said to flow from the northwest to the southeast of the base, with mealie fields beside the river. An ammunition storage point is close to the clinic, both small arms and heavy arms are found in the base and two guards are posted at each entrance. Six-man patrols are sent out at 5 o'clock every morning, MPLA (FAPLA), Cubans and other foreigners visit the base, while SWAPO instructors conduct training in regular warfare over a six-month period. The names of various SWAPO military officials in the camp are listed, with the commander given as "Roger" and the political commissar as "CPC of PLAN Greenwell Matongoh." Two sketch-maps are attached, one being a very rough but recognisable representation of "CASSINGA CHQ's", dated June 1977.²⁰⁰

If these documents are genuine, then they would constitute some evidence that the South African Military Intelligence did have a strong indication that Cassinga was in use as a military base, though not necessarily solely as such.

The role of the Military Intelligence Division in identifying Cassinga as a vital base in SWAPO's military campaign remains obscure, precisely because the relevant files have not been uncovered by my research. Should these files have been shredded or "spirited away", it undoubtedly casts a dark shadow of doubt on the credibility of the SADF claims regarding Cassinga. Yet it is not only intelligence files on Cassinga that could not be traced: there appeared to be few intelligence files on many of the operations carried out by the SADF. This raises the possibility that these files are held in a repository other than the SANDF's Documentation Services, which would be highly irregular. More likely is that a wholesale destruction of Military Intelligence files was undertaken at the time of the ANC victory at the polls in 1994.

This possibility is substantiated by Ronnie Kasrils, the first ANC Deputy Minister of Defence in his autobiography, where he described his first few days in office: "I personally went through the database at Military Intelligence HQ. Cueing in the names Tambo and Slovo produced hundreds of pages of their statements and speeches. Personal data that once had been painstakingly collected about

200 Questionnaire headed "*Geliewe die Volgende Vrae te Stel aan Onderwerp wat Betref alle Basisse Waarvan Onderwerp Weet*" (Kindly Put the Following Questions to the Subject Concerning all Bases about which the Subject knows), with the words "CHQ CASSINGA JUNE '77" scribbled across the top, in SANDF Archival Folder marked "Cassinga", but unreferenced.

them, or anything else of significance, had been wiped out from the computers and said to no longer exist. This was not particularly helpful in terms of confidence building.”²⁰¹

If this was so, it is plausible to surmise that at least some intelligence files on Cassinga were destroyed together with everything else in this desperate purge of documentation.

One of the two intelligence officers who jumped at Cassinga related how he compiled a file of all the documents about the Cassinga raid after his return to Pretoria and then handed them, with a copy of the film which had been taken during the operation, to “the archives”.²⁰² In my research, however, I was unable to trace such a comprehensive collection of source material. The absence of a minutely catalogued database, the complexity of the military filing system and the vast amount of material held in the archives make it quite possible for files to appear to have gone missing if the researcher does not have the exact reference number under which they have been stored. It is also so that, unlike computer data which can be summarily wiped out by the press of a button, the system of transferring and registering classified files makes it highly unlikely that anyone could make them disappear without any trace in the record books.

This leaves two possibilities: either the file is in the archives, still waiting to be traced; or no such file was ever handed in. Either way, the credibility of Military Intelligence is seriously called into question, leaving the doubt that they knew about the civilian presence at Cassinga and that they were deliberately concealing it from the operational planners. According to Ian Gleeson, who was the overall SADF ground commander for the operation, most of the intelligence came from the SAAF aerial photographs.²⁰³ The SAAF Operational Order for Operation REINDEER in fact states that Cassinga and the other bases “have been identified by means of air photography.”²⁰⁴

Of course, it is possible, in the shadowy world of intelligence operations, that the absence of documentation on sources providing details of Cassinga could be linked to the protection of the identity of a key informant. The copy of the minutes of a meeting of the PLAN Military Council could only have fallen into the hands of the SADF through an informant. Certainly Major General Shalli, who was Secretary of that very Military Council, refers to attempts by South Africa to infiltrate agents into Cassinga as well as to the presence of small SADF reconnaissance parties in the area of Cassinga prior to the raid taking place.²⁰⁵

It does seem apparent from the available archival documents, that the operational planners, from the Chief of the SADF, through the Chief of Staff Operations, the Chiefs of the Army and the Air Force, the Parachute Brigade Commander right down to the Parachute Battalion Commander, were all convinced that the objective they were attacking at Cassinga was a critically important and purely military installation. General Constand Viljoen, who was Chief of the Army at the time of the Cassinga

201 Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, p. 381.

202 Interview with Colonel L.C. Odendaal on 15 February 1995.

203 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson (retired) on 16 January 2003.

204 SAAF Operational Order: Op REINDEER.

205 Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003.

raid, stated emphatically when asked during an interview, that he never saw any intelligence report that described the settlement as anything other than a military base.²⁰⁶ This is substantiated by the *Report* of the TRC, which states that “all the planning documentation, including aerial photographs, would indicate that the SADF command was convinced that Kassinga was the planning headquarters of PLAN, and thus a military target of key importance.”²⁰⁷

206 Interview with General C.L. Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

207 *TRC Report*, p. 53.

THE CAPTURED DOCUMENTS

After the conclusion of the raid on Cassinga the SADF alleged that the paratroopers had brought a number of documents back, and that these contained irrefutable evidence that Cassinga had been a military base. Some of these documents were released to the media at the time, and some surfaced only many years later. If the documents can be taken to be genuine, they do throw further light on the nature of the settlement at the time of the raid. The Nanyemba report states that “All the files from comrade Dimo’s office were taken by the enemy. This means that virtually 75% of the Party information is in the hands of the enemy.”²⁰⁸ Affording the documents further credibility was an appeal after the raid to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Liberation Committee by Peter Mueshange that SWAPO be provided with modern weapons, especially in the area of anti-aircraft defence. A substantial reorganisation of the guerrilla war was necessary, because “the enemy succeeded in capturing some important documents in the two camps and this has placed him in a position to know some of our strategic and tactical plans as well as targets of immediate attack”.²⁰⁹

Immediately following the raid it was reported in newspapers that South Africa had revealed certain of these documents to the Western Five and the UN and that these were partly responsible for the relatively muted reaction from President Carter of the USA and British Foreign Secretary Dr David Owen, as well as the low-keyed wording of the resolution on South Africa’s military action which was tabled before the Security Council of the UN.²¹⁰

At the time, the media appeared to make more of the linking by the captured documents of SWAPO to the assassinations of Minister Toivo Shiyagaya and Chief Clemens Kapuuu than of the military nature of Cassinga.²¹¹ In the days and weeks that followed, much was said of the documents, but very little seems to have been produced for the public and the media to view. In fact, a week after the raid, in a signal to SWA Command, the SADF Chief of Staff Operations expressed the satisfaction of the Chief of the SADF with the handling of the media, but cautioned that a low profile should be maintained and that no further details of the captured documents should be released.²¹² However, the day after the raid it was reported from the military headquarters that had commanded the operation that all documents and films which proved that Alpha (Cassinga) was a military camp had, on the instructions of Defence Headquarters, been sent to Pretoria for use by the Minister of Defence.²¹³ That same headquarters (SWA Tactical HQ) had sent a signal late on the night of the raid, after all the paratroopers had returned to Namibia, stating that they had brought back from Cassinga four trunks full of documents, a cursory examination of which had revealed much

208 Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”.

209 “Swapo call for rockets”, *The Star*, 24 June 1978.

210 *Sunday Times*, 7 May 1978, “Secret Swapo papers haul.”

211 *Rapport*, 7 May 1978, “Juigbrief in Angola oor Kapuuu.” Initial classified SADF reports on the contents of the captured documents confirmed evidence of SWAPO involvement in the planning of these assassinations. *Vide* signal from SWA Command to Chief of the Army dd 5 May 78 in File MI/310/4 REINDEER, Vol 1 (Top Secret), Archive MID/MI Group 6, Box No 129.

212 Signal from C SADF 3 to SWA Comd, DGBS/332/MEI 78 dd 11 May 78 (Secret), enclosure 29, file CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret).

213 Signal from SWA Tac HQ to SWA Comd, OPS(BS)/124/MAY 78 (Top Secret) ref SWA/309/1/REINDEER, dd 5 May 78, File KMDMT SWA OPS, 309/1 REINDEER, Vol 2, (Top Secret), Archive ‘Aanvullende Dokumente’, Group OD-1968, Box No 8B.

information of tactical military importance, including proof of SWAPO involvement in political assassinations and plans to activate the Kaokoveld as an insurgent area.²¹⁴ These were certainly not documents one would expect to find in a refugee camp.

A memorandum dated 8 June 1978 and forming a provisional evaluation report of the documents seized during Operation REINDEER, produced by the intelligence staff of South West Africa Command, stated the following:

“Volgens ‘n aanvraag na uitrusting vanaf Cassinga na Lubango gedateer 18 Jan 78 het SWAPO beplan om duisende rekrute gedurende 1978 op te lei, en in aksie na SWA te stuur.”²¹⁵

(According to a requisition for equipment from Cassinga to Lubango, dated 18 Jan 78, SWAPO planned to train thousands of recruits during 1978 and to send them into action to SWA).

This indicates that Cassinga, if not already a guerrilla training camp, was intended to become one.

A file from the Ministry of Defence contained photostat copies of documents captured at SWAPO's Moscow Base (Cassinga).²¹⁶ These included several from Vietnam Base (Chetaquera), one addressed to “The Commanding HQ, Cassinga” and another “To the Chief of Intel. & Rec.” Reports on the assassinations of Shiyagaya and Kapuuu were both written under the address of “P.L.A.N. Moscow”. A monthly report on arrivals at Cassinga, dated 31 August 1977, lists a total of 667 “recruits” as having arrived at Cassinga that month. This includes 358 males, 77 females and 232 minors. This brought the total in the camp to 1,608: 880 males, 354 females and 315 minors plus 59 “M. Crew lorries”. The question is, are these guerrilla recruits or refugee recruits? The rubber stamp on the document reads “PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY OF NAMIBIA – PLAN”, and is signed “Assistant Camp Secretary Moks Shivute.”²¹⁷ Another document, “The Annual Political Report 1977” is written under the address “The Command Post, Moscow” and is dated 27 January 1978. It has two signature blocks, one for Greenwell Matongoh, Chief Political Commissar, and the other for Dimo Hamaambo, Commander of the Armed Forces, but is signed only by the latter. The report refers to

214 Signal from SWA Tac HQ (Ondangwa) to GOC SWA, INL/108/04 MAY 78 (Secret), Enclosure 98 of file D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Vol 1, (Top Secret), Archive ‘Aanvullende Dokumente’, Group OD-1968, Box No 8B.

215 *Aanvraag: Voorlopige Evalueringsverslag van Buitgemaakte Dokumente: Operasie REINDEER*, (Confidential), Enclosure 9 of file KMDMT SWA/309/1 REINDEER (Secret), Vol 1, Archive “Aanvullende Dokumente”, Group OD-1968, Box No 8B.

216 “Photostats of Documents Captured at SWAPO Moscow Base”, a collection of documents contained in File MV/77/1, Vol 4 (Top Secret), Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No 188.

217 The veracity of the document is confirmed by a transcript of an interview with Moks Shivute (or Shisvute), held on 29 May 1998, in which he states that he “was appointed as a secretary of the camp, dealing with recruitments and registration of all the incoming comrades....”

an adult school in Cassinga to teach literacy to the PLAN cadres.²¹⁸ In bemoaning the shortage of “political instructors”, the document states: “In Cassinga with average of 1,500 cadres at all time has only 4 political instructors.” In yet another document, purporting to be notes taken at a parade in Cassinga of an address by “MCC and Youth Leader, Cde Ndali Kamati,” and dated “14/02/1978, Moscow”, it is stated that “95% of PLAN membership are ‘Youth’ fighting the boer youth determined to eliminate and defend exploitation, respectively.”

Extracts from other SWAPO documents purported to have been seized at Cassinga and which are quoted in Walker’s book, are all headed “Moscow” and “PLAN” or “The Commanding Post HQ’s” and one is addressed to “The Regional Commanders, The Regional Staffs and Fellow Combatants of PLAN”. Another, dated 03/03/1978 is headed “Minutes Taken during the Time of the Visit of the President of SWAPO, Comrade Sam Nujoma, at Moscow.” This is an address to “the people and all the members of PLAN, who have rendered excellent service for the cause of the struggle on the battlefield.” It goes on to urge PLAN to “fight to liquidate the Boers” and to “use your guns against the enemy but also for the Black Boers and the reactionaries”.²¹⁹

If these documents are valid, and the evidence points to most of them being genuine, they are clear evidence that Cassinga, although it may not have been an exclusively military base, most certainly housed SWAPO guerrillas and played some significant command and control role in the PLAN structure.

DEDUCTIONS

The topography and climate of Cassinga and its surroundings during the month of May were conducive to both land and air operations. The Culonga River to the west, however, did present a significant obstacle for any force attempting to attack Cassinga from that direction. Based purely on available documentation describing the place as it was prior to the raid, it is not possible to state incontrovertibly what the nature of Cassinga was. Certainly SWAPO had a vested interest in propagating that it was a refugee camp. This would place SWAPO in a very positive light in the eyes of the world as an empathetic organisation providing succour to innocent refugees who had fled from a brutal, racist occupation of their land. It would also portray the SADF as a heartless military

218 “Cadre” is a word much used in revolutionary organisations. Its earlier, collective meaning of a group of activists in a communist or other revolutionary organisation has gradually been replaced by an individual meaning, largely due to the writings of Ernesto “Ché” Guevara in his articulation of the Cuban Revolution under Fidel Castro. Guevara defined a cadre as “an individual who has reached a sufficient level of political development to be able to interpret the general directions issued by the central power, to assimilate them, and to transmit them as ideas to the masses. Besides this, he must perceive the people’s wishes and deepest motivations. He is an individual of ideological and administrative discipline, who knows and practices democratic centralism and knows how to evaluate the methodological contradictions in the method so as to take maximum advantage of their multiple facets. In production, he knows how to practise the principles of collective discussion, personal decision, and responsibility. His faithfulness is proven, and his physical and moral courage is equal to his ideological development, so he is always ready to face any struggle and to give his life to the Revolution. Furthermore, he is capable of self-analysis, which allows him to make necessary decisions and practise creative initiative, while maintaining discipline.” He then went on to identify political, military and economic cadres (Ché Guevara, “The Cadre, Backbone of the Revolution”, in *Venceremos!*, pp. 296-298). Guevara plainly saw the cadre as a carefully selected leader within the revolutionary movement. In the context of the Southern African Liberation Struggle, particularly within the Zimbabwean, Namibian and South African liberation movements, the word “cadre” came to be applied to all freedom fighters, regardless of whether they were leaders or followers (see, for example, Mwezi Twala, *Mbokodo*, pp. 24, 27, 49, 52, 55, *et al*; Alejandro Ezcurra Naón and Luis Daniel Merizalde, *SWA/Namibia: Dawn or Dusk?*, pp. 178, 187 and 192; Martin Rupiah, “Demobilisation and Integration: ‘Operation MERGER’ and the Zimbabwe National Defence Forces 1980-1987”, pp. 27, 38, 39 and Tsepi Motumi and Andrew Hudson, “Rightsizing: the Challenges of Demobilisation and Social Reintegration in South Africa”, p. 115, in Jakkie Cilliers [ed.], *Dismissed*).

219 General Sir Walter Walker, *The Bear at the Back Door*, pp. 157-160.

machine, indiscriminately slaughtering hundreds of women, children and old people who had been helplessly trapped in a cauldron of death, in a place where they had felt safe and secure. Yet available documentation propagating the SWAPO version was mostly compiled after the raid, which casts some doubt on its veracity as a source of what Cassinga was used for before the event.

Nevertheless, Cassinga was located in an area riddled by civil war. There were ongoing military operations all around by the MPLA/Cuban forces on the one hand and UNITA on the other. The maps reproduced at Appendix C to this Chapter show the appreciation by the SADF Military Intelligence of the MPLA/Cuban military deployment in southern Angola as at 1 March 1978. The Intelligence Report (INTREP) of which these maps form a part indicates a total deployment of approximately 11,000 MPLA/Cuban troops in southern Angola. The force was said to comprise about 2,000 Cubans, and 9,000 Angolan troops.²²⁰ There were also reports that major MPLA/Cuban offensive operations had been launched against UNITA far to the east of Cassinga during March 1978.²²¹ Whatever the nature of Cassinga, it would have been suicidal for SWAPO, as a close ally of the MPLA, not to have a viable defensive force at the camp under such volatile circumstances.

Conceivably, there is a fundamental error to be identified in categorically classifying any guerrilla camp as either “military” or “civilian”. The nature of a guerrilla or insurgency war is such that the two are inextricably intertwined. Thompson, in his celebrated work on insurgency, outlines the strategic aims of the guerrilla phase of an insurgency. He gives the political aim as gaining control over the population and the military aim as neutralising the government’s armed forces, yet he emphasises that the military is always subordinate to the political.²²² This interaction is reflected in Mao Zedong’s principle of establishing strategic bases where the revolutionary forces “must build the backward villages into advanced, consolidated base areas, into great military, political, economic and cultural revolutionary bastions.”²²³ Katjavivi explains how this was done by SWAPO, emphasising that “we don’t divorce military from political matters – it is always politics which leads the gun.”²²⁴ In describing the SWAPO logistic supply centres and combat units in Angola, he goes on to state that:

“There is a division of labour, with specially trained units taking on the various tasks – medical, education, sports, repairs (of shoes, clothing, radios), etc. The medical and educational facilities are extremely important – the former for obvious reasons for any organisation engaged in an armed struggle. ... Discussions and lectures are also organised by the political commissars. Men and women receive the same training and work and fight side by side in mixed units in PLAN. There are also women commanders, although not without some problems at times. The fighters are ordinary members of SWAPO who volunteer to join PLAN. They are Namibians who feel they cannot any longer put up with conditions under South African rule. They leave their jobs, their villages, their schools, to seek better opportunities outside the country. Some

220 INTREP 16/78

221 INTREP 21/78 dd 23 March 1978, enclosure 74 in file MV/48/3. Vol 17, Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No 157.

222 Thompson, *Communist Insurgency*, pp. 29-30.

223 Mao Tse-tung, *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party, Vol III, Selected Works*, p. 85, quoted in John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War*, p. 13.

224 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, p. 90.

are already committed to partaking in the armed struggle; others join in after they have left the country."²²⁵

At the very least, this implies a blurred differentiation between military and civilian activities, with all such activities probably supporting both.²²⁶ It also creates a total ambiguity between the concepts "refugee" and "military recruit". The UNICEF *Report on a Mission to SWAPO Centres for Namibian Refugees in Angola from 10 to 14 April 1978*, quoted earlier in this chapter, needs to be seen in this light.

The SADF documents, equally, show a fundamental weakness regarding their credibility in that they do not reveal the source of their information on the nature of Cassinga, other than oblique references to the interception of radio traffic from the base and more direct references to aerial photographic interpretation. There is no evidence in the available intelligence reports to suggest that South African intelligence operatives had actually visited Cassinga or had it under surveillance. Neither is there ever any reference to informers who may have been recruited from inside or around Cassinga, although this would have been the normal intelligence practice.²²⁷ The existence of certain SWAPO documents in SADF possession does imply that there was a high-level informer though. The veracity of the descriptions of the nature of Cassinga, however, cannot be established beyond all doubt. Nevertheless, one cannot discount the importance of what could be established from the aerial photographs of the camp. These reveal an extended and very sophisticated defensive system, including a vast trench network designed specifically for defence and not merely for protection. The other matter, which indicates that more intelligence must have been available to planners, is the timing for the attack. Gleeson, the overall commander for Operation REINDEER, is quite emphatic that the whole plan was based on the 08h00 daily muster parade.²²⁸ This time could only have been provided by intelligence sources that knew the detail of the routine at Cassinga.

The difficulty of unreservedly accepting either the SWAPO or the SADF version is reflected in the compromise conclusion adopted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "Kassinga was thus both a military base and a refugee camp. It housed a considerable number of combatants, including senior officers. It also housed considerable numbers of civilians."²²⁹ The argument that Military Intelligence deliberately misled the South African commanders and subsequently destroyed incriminating files is feasible, but it is not totally convincing. Leys and Saul, for instance, claim that Dimo Hamaambo "had even set up a PLAN Command Headquarters (CHQ) at Cassinga, in southern

225 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, p. 91.

226 Counter-insurgency doctrine emphasises the avoidance of civilian casualties (Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, p. 138). Aware of this, the insurgent will readily create conditions where the "security forces" are faced with a dilemma. The tendency by the security forces is then to place the blame for the deaths of civilians on the insurgents where the civilians have been incorporated into a guerrilla camp and the camp is attacked by security forces. In the case of Cassinga, Brown countered this by stating: "It could be argued that SWAPO should not have combined military and refugee centres, but at that time the notion of an unprovoked attack into Angola - let alone 250km into that country - was unthinkable." (Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means", in Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 29). Doubtless the SADF would have rejected the claim that it was "unprovoked", and the location of Cassinga in what was in effect a "war zone", together with South Africa's history of intervention in Angola, make Brown's contention questionable. The extent of the defences around Cassinga would in any case tend to negate this thinking.

227 In a questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli, Army Commander of the Namibian Defence Force, on 16 April 2003, he noted that there had been attempts by South Africa to infiltrate agents into Cassinga and that there had been indications of small reconnaissance parties in the area.

228 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson on 16 January 2003.

229 *TRC Report*, p. 50.

Angola, by 1976".²³⁰ This was the year that the facilities at Cassinga had been made available to SWAPO, although the same source adds that by 1978 it "had also become a reception and transit camp for the continuing flow of exiles."²³¹ If Cassinga was in fact initially established as a military HQ and remained such, it would conceivably have remained a target for the South Africans.²³²

Regarding the defences of Cassinga, its location made it militarily not viable to attempt to carry out a raid on it with mechanised or armoured forces. The 260 km that it was distant from the Namibian border meant that its occupants would have ample warning of the approach of such a force, enabling the camp to be vacated well before any attack could take place. In addition, the distribution of MPLA and Cuban forces along any approach route and the ongoing civil war with UNITA would have meant that any such force would probably have had to fight its way to Cassinga. (See Appendix C to this Chapter). An airborne approach was therefore a logical solution as it enabled all obstacles and resistance to be bypassed and provided both speed and surprise to the arrival of such a force.

The terrain around Cassinga favoured a defence of the town. Being on a slight rise, any attacking force would have to fight uphill to get there. Furthermore, the Culonga River formed a natural obstacle to the west, southwest and northwest. The open *mahango* fields between the town and the river deprived any attacking force of cover from the west and gave the defenders an open field of fire, although photographs indicate that the *mahango* stood quite high at the time of the raid. The trench system apparent on the aerial photographs is extensive and well developed and shows that defenders could have pinned down attackers from several directions. However, there were directions that were not sufficiently covered by trenches, particularly to the south. Presumably this was because an attack from that direction was not anticipated due to the presence, just 16 km to the south, of an armoured MPLA/Cuban garrison. There is also a gap in the trench system on the western side of Cassinga. The extent of the whole trench system would indicate that it was developed to be manned by a large number of defenders, possibly in excess of 500.

A shortcoming in the trench system was the absence of a second line of trenches. There are, however, communication trenches shown on aerial photographs, running back into the town from the main defensive trenches and enabling reinforcement or rapid changes in the disposition of defenders to take place. A further shortcoming in the whole defensive system was the apparent absence of significant numbers of really heavy weapons providing direct or indirect fire on an attacking force. As the actions during the raid revealed, however, there were in fact anti-aircraft guns at Cassinga. Yet South African Military Intelligence had failed to identify their presence. Photographs taken by South African paratroopers during the raid show amongst the captured weapons an 82mm B-10 recoilless anti-tank gun (see Appendix C to Chapter 7, page 7C-6) and debriefing reports by paratroopers

230 Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 53.

231 Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 63.

232 According to Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 55, "Cassinga had been PLAN's Command Headquarters since 1976; after the May 1978 attack, in which Hamaambo escaped but a number of his staff died, new Command headquarters were established successively at Cahama, Shitumba, Mongwa and elsewhere, but each one was attacked until Hamaambo was finally driven to relocate his headquarters near [Secretary of Defence] Nanyemba's Defence HQ outside Lubango." This would certainly indicate that South African Military Intelligence was onto Hamaambo and was hounding him and his headquarters relentlessly. Understandable as this was, it would serve to further question the wisdom of SWAPO combining a military and a civilian establishment.

describe coming under fire from a B-10 and RPG-7 rocket launchers, overrunning several positions in which B-10 guns were found and also at least one 82mm mortar and some 12.7mm heavy machine guns.²³³ One photograph taken by SWAPO after the raid of the ruins to which one of the buildings was reduced, clearly shows the barrel of a ZPU 14.5mm anti-aircraft gun protruding from the rubble (see Appendix B of Chapter 9, page 9B-3). This indicates heavier direct fire support, while intelligence reports before the raid did make mention of 82mm mortars.²³⁴ Again, the absence of indirect fire support from artillery could be ascribed to the proximity of the allied conventional force at Techamutete, or to the fact that SWAPO was not, at that stage, yet able to field much heavy weaponry.²³⁵

Photographic evidence seems to indicate that the occupants of Cassinga were further developing the defensive system with some urgency. One 400 metre long trenchline shows a marked improvement between 1 April and 29 April, and further development over the five days between 29 April and 4 May (see aerial photographs at Appendix A). It would seem that the defences of Cassinga were based on an anticipated ground attack and not an airborne assault. The buildings, installations and encampments were all compactly situated in close proximity to one another and there did not seem to be any integrated anti-aircraft defences. In fact, the anti-aircraft guns which the South Africans were unaware of were possibly intended for use in ground defence as well as air defence, hence their location on the western side of the camp, where the trench system evidenced significant gaps. Nevertheless, as a military objective, Cassinga was well suited to an airborne attack, based on the information available to the SADF.

Perhaps because South Africa's airborne capability was as yet unknown to SWAPO, never having been employed during the 1975/76 incursion into Angola (where all South African operations were conducted by motorised columns over very long distances), it did not occur to them, or the MPLA or the Cubans that paratroopers might be used. Whatever the reason, Cassinga presented SADF planners with a textbook target for an airborne operation, despite the high risk that such an operation would entail.

An airborne force would therefore best carry out any raid on Cassinga, not least because such an option was apparently not expected by SWAPO.

233 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Reports by Anti-Tank Platoon Commander and No 4 Platoon Commander.

234 SA Army HQ Ops Instruction H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER (Top Secret) dd 21 April 1978, Appendix A, SANDF Archival Group Supplementary Documents, Box No. 31, File Op REINDEER.

235 Interview with Colonel J.D. Breytenbach on 26 January 2003. Breytenbach is adamant that SWAPO was not yet fielding heavier weaponry at that stage of the war, and that 82mm B-10 guns, 12.7mm heavy machine-guns and 14.5mm anti-aircraft guns were the upper limit of what SADF elements encountered in any contacts with SWAPO at that time.

CHAPTER 4

THE SADF'S AIRBORNE CAPABILITY

- Appendix A: Photographs of SAAF Aircraft.
- B: Photographs of SA Army Paratroopers and their Weapons.
- C: SA Army Parachute Forces in April 1978.
- D: SAAF Assets for Airborne Operations in April 1978.

The South African airborne forces did not have a long, illustrious history like their counterparts in the British, United States, Canadian or Indian armies. During the Second World War, when most of these countries established their parachute units, the Union Defence Force never managed to field a true airborne element. However South Africa, did in a sense, pioneer the concept of vertical envelopment amongst the Allies. As early as 25 June 1940, before any Allied airborne operations had ever been considered and barely a month after the Germans had astounded the world by their revolutionary use of airborne troops in the invasion of the Low Countries, the South Africans carried out an airlanded exercise. Using eight Junkers Ju-52 aircraft taken over by the South African Air Force from South African Airways, a company from the Transvaal Scottish regiment was flown from Swartkop Air Station to Pietersburg and back again, practising the seizure of an airfield.²³⁶

On 1 July 1940 the 6th SA Infantry Brigade was tasked to train two battalions as “airborne troops” to carry out an airlanded operation if necessary, to seize Lourenço Marques (today’s Maputo) should the Germans attempt to occupy Delagoa Bay.²³⁷

The two battalions were fully trained as airlanded troops and all technical details were carefully worked out.²³⁸ Of course, the airborne occupation of Lourenço Marques was never necessary, but it says much for the thinking of the South African military that such an audacious operation was even considered at a time when airborne actions had not even begun amongst the Allies.

Ultimately, South Africa established a Paratroop Company as part of the Air Force on 1 August 1943.²³⁹ Although volunteers were recruited and put through a rigorous programme of commando-style training,²⁴⁰ the company never actually parachuted. A critical manpower shortage for the 6th South African Armoured Division, due to go into action in the Italian campaign, forced the military authorities to disband the SAAF Paratroop Company and use its men to reinforce the Division.²⁴¹

236 File G2/1/11 “Movement of Troops by Air Exercise”, dd 26 June 1940, and file DGS/967/1 “Report on Exercise carried out by A Coy 1 TS on 25th June 1940”, Archive CGS, Group 2, Box No 539.

237 Brigadier F W Cooper, DSO, *The Police Brigade*, pp. 16-17.

238 File G2/1/11 “Employment of Aircraft with Police Battalion”, dd 12 July 1940, Archive CGS, Group 2.

239 File “Paratroop Training”, Enclosure 38 dd 30 July 1943, Archival Group CGS (War), Box No 351.

240 Commandant O. Baker, “These were the First of the Springbok Paras”, *Home Front*, June 1990, pp. 6-7. Also interviews with Ossie Baker, who was second-in-command of the company.

241 File “Paratroop Training”, Enclosure 51 dd 25 November 1943 and Neil Orpen, *Victory in Italy*, p.8.

Subsequently a considerable number of individual South Africans, mostly officers, volunteered for service with the British Airborne Forces. The majority of these served with the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade Group in Italy, southern France²⁴² and Greece.²⁴³ Others served in airborne units that would today have been classified as “special forces”.²⁴⁴ At least seven South Africans participated in the ill-fated airborne assault at Arnhem by the British 1st Airborne Division in September 1944.²⁴⁵ Some South Africans serving with the Royal Marines were parachute trained and most of these were dropped behind Japanese lines in the Far East theatre of operations.²⁴⁶ But at the end of the war, though there were probably as many as 100 South Africans with first hand knowledge and experience of parachute operations, South Africa had no collective pool of this knowledge and no airborne unit in its order of battle. Even more, it did not have the technical expertise to train or equip paratroopers.

This situation prevailed for 15 years after the conclusion of the Second World War. But by then the international stage had undergone some radical changes and South Africa’s position on that stage had altered drastically. Smuts was gone, the National Party was in power, Afrikaner nationalism was riding a high wave, the suppression of black nationalism had begun and the cornerstone legislation for *apartheid* had been laid.²⁴⁷ In September 1958 H.F. Verwoerd became Prime Minister of South Africa and wasted little time in articulating his vision for a strictly segregated country. Not only was there a hardening of internal black resistance to the white government but also “the South African government’s suppression of nationalist movements and its determination to proceed with apartheid legislation aroused widespread opposition in the international community.”²⁴⁸ The pre-independence rumblings in the rest of Africa were beginning to impact on South Africa.²⁴⁹ A laager mentality was increasingly manifesting itself among the white rulers.

When the question of introducing paratroops into the SADF was discussed at a General Staff Conference on 4 May 1958 (ironically, 20 years to the day before the Cassinga raid) it had to be held in abeyance because of economic constraints. However, a decision was made to consider budgeting for the introduction of paratroops sometime in the future.²⁵⁰

242 Jennifer Crwys-Williams, *A Country at War 1939 – 1945*, pp. 377-380.

243 Interviews with Nate Vogelman, MC on 13 August 1991 and Bill Bramwell on 2 September 1991. Both were South Africans who jumped into Greece on this operation.

244 Major General D.L. Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide*, pp 162, 188-190; Major Jack Gage, *Greek Adventure*, p.12, corroborated from the personal file of Major J.H. Gage, MC in SANDF personnel records; Barry Pitt, *Special Boat Squadron*, and Maj H.K. van Noorden, “The Paratrooper – the Mobile Soldier *par excellence*”, *Commando*, September 1960, pp. 4-7; *The Old Mooi*, Newsletter of the Potchefstroom College Old Boys’ Society, February 1972, October 1986 and October 1987; interview with Colonel Tommy Renfree on 28 July 1990 (Renfree served with M04); interview with Major General “Pik” van Noorden on 12 February 1990 (Van Noorden served with Force 136).

245 Correspondence with Mr K. Phillip Reinders and Dr A. Groeneweg, corroborated in the Order of Battle for Operation MARKET GARDEN set out in C. van Roekel, *Who was Who During the Battle of Arnhem*.

246 G.F. Jacobs, *Prelude to the Monsoon* and interview with Major General “Pik” van Noorden on 12 February 1990. Van Noorden was one of those parachute-trained Royal Marines.

247 William Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa*, pp. 137-158.

248 B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies, *South Africa in the 20th Century*, p. 359.

249 J.D. Fage, *A History of Africa*, p. 487.

250 File KG/GPT/3/1/6 (Confidential), Enclosure 3 dd 4 May 1958, Archive Group Kommandant-Generaal.

In 1959 the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland decided that advice on paratrooping techniques would be sought from the United Kingdom with a view to forming a mobile paratroop commando force. The unrest during that year had seen sabotaged bridges, road blocks and airfields littered with petrol drums, boulders and tree stumps causing isolated outposts to be cut off for up to two weeks. It had been shown that lorried infantry, and even air-transported infantry could not be delivered where they were needed in Africa's lands of poor infrastructure. Ultimately, this was to lead to the establishment of a squadron of the Special Air Service in Rhodesia.²⁵¹

The happenings north of the border were not lost on South Africa. On 24 July 1960 the Commandant General of the SADF issued instructions for an investigation to be done into the training of one of the Mobile Watch units in parachuting.²⁵² It was the year of the Sharpeville shootings and tension in South Africa was growing. On 27 September 1960 a carefully selected group of 15 officers and men left South Africa for the UK to undergo parachute training with the Royal Air Force.²⁵³ Under command of Commandant W.P. Louw all the South Africans gained their parachute wings and then the majority went on to qualify as parachute instructors while two were trained to pack parachutes, one (a pilot) studied dropping techniques and one (a doctor) examined the medical side of parachuting.²⁵⁴ The training of Louw and his aspirant paratroopers caused an outcry in the British liberal press. It coincided with the annual conference of the Liberal Party at Eastborne, and party leader Jeremy Thorpe and Alan Paton from South Africa strongly condemned their training.²⁵⁵

On their return to South Africa towards the end of December 1960 this nucleus of trained specialists founded the new parachute unit in Tempe, Bloemfontein.²⁵⁶ In terms of SADF Order 74/61 of 12 May 1961, 1 Parachute Battalion officially came into being on 1 April 1961,²⁵⁷ just two months before South Africa became a republic.

By 1968 universal white male conscription for one year had been introduced (the so-called "National Service").²⁵⁸ This resulted in a sudden expansion of South Africa's standing forces and 1 Parachute Battalion was soon up to strength with full-time soldiers (there was seldom a shortage of volunteers for the paratroops). However, an important limitation that plagued the unit throughout the years of conscription was the fact that it had to both train and deploy its soldiers operationally. As there were two "intakes" of conscripts each year at this time (one in January, the other in July), one half of the battalion would be regarded as trained and ready for operational employment while the other half was still under training and not deployable. The unit could therefore never deploy as a complete

251 File KG/GPO/3/2/24/1, Vol 2, Enclosure 14A "Besoek aan RRAF Salisbury", dd 14 July 1961, Archive Group Kommandant-Generaal.

252 File KG/GPT/2/2/1/5, Enclosure 11, dated 24 July 1960, Archive Group Kommandant-Generaal.

253 Personal diary of Air Corporal G.J. Leibbrandt.

254 Major J.J. Malan, *Verslag oor Suid-Afrikaanse Valskermopleidingskursus by Nommer Een Valskerm-opleidingskool, Abingdon, Berkshire, Engeland, Gedurende Periode 27 September – 22 Desember 1960*, pp. 3-5.

255 Francis Boyd, "Astonishing Decision. Training S. African Paratroops", *Evening News*, 30 September 1960; Gordon Greig, "Paratroops Arrive and Start Row", *Express*, 1 October 1960.

256 File G/SD/3/1, Vol 1, Enclosure 1, dd 28 February 1961, Archive Group 1 Para Bn, Rack 17, Box No. 5.

257 File AG 560/6/7/32, "Organisation and Establishment Tables: Army: Infantry: 1 Parachute Battalion", Archive AG/HWA, Group 3, Box No 213.

258 Helmoed-Römer Heitman, *South African War Machine*, p.12.

battalion and had to be content with “posting off” companies to be employed by others, resulting in them rarely being used as paratroopers, but rather as ordinary infantry.

Nevertheless, 1 Parachute Battalion had its work cut out handling the many conscripts passing through its lines, and was no longer able to administer the vast and growing numbers of trained reservists who had a compulsory annual training commitment. Accordingly, on 1 June 1971, the first reserve (or Citizen Force) parachute battalion was established.²⁵⁹ Styled 2 Parachute Battalion it was, like all SADF Citizen Force regiments, composed solely of reservists, from the Officer Commanding the unit down to the last rifleman. There were no professional soldiers in the unit, and although many were very dedicated to the cause of soldiering they all had full-time civilian jobs. As far as possible, they would attend the unit’s annual three-week training camp, occasional weekend exercises or parades and some of the officers did administrative work for the unit in the evenings. Promotional courses, usually presented at Infantry School in Oudtshoorn and normally of three weeks’ duration, had to be attended by those wishing to progress to higher rank. This often meant that the individual attending such a course would not be able to spare the time to attend the unit’s annual camp that year.²⁶⁰

Adding to the difficulty of making the new parachute battalion militarily functional was the fact that its members were scattered throughout South Africa, that its headquarters were in Bloemfontein and that its Officer Commanding and most of its other key officers lived in Pretoria or Johannesburg.²⁶¹ The situation improved somewhat when the battalion headquarters were moved to Pretoria.

The numbers of young conscripts volunteering for service in the paratroops was so great, and the percentage of these young men passing the tough selection course and qualifying as paratroopers was so high that 1 Parachute Battalion was soon feeding more of these trained soldiers into the reserves at the end of their year of National Service than what 2 Parachute Battalion could accommodate. It was therefore decided in 1977 to establish a second reserve battalion and 3 Parachute Battalion came into being on 1 May of that year, with its headquarters in Johannesburg.²⁶² South Africa now had three parachute battalions – one full-time unit manned by young conscripts of about 18 or 19 years of age, and two part-time reserve units, manned by older men, all civilians, with ages varying between about 20 and 30 (the compulsory period of service in the Citizen Force after completion of a year of National Service was, at the time, ten years²⁶³). At that point there were no

259 “Die Geskiedenis van 2 Valskermbataljon sedert Stigting tot 1985”, 2 VALSK BN/514/2/1/9 dated October 1985; see also historical summary attached to Annual Historical Report for 1 Parachute Battalion, 1978.

260 This was standard practice in all Citizen Force units in the SA Army at the time. The efficacy of the Citizen Force relied strongly on an ethos of volunteerism stemming back to British colonial days. This was significant, as the Citizen Force formed the vast bulk of the SA Army’s manpower resources (see Heitman, *SA Armed Forces*, pp. 21, 29-30), and was to play a crucial role during the Cassinga raid.

261 Letter 1 Para Bn/G/SD/3 dd 21 December 1972. Also 2 VALSK BN/514/2/1/9, “Die Geskiedenis van 2 Valskermbataljon Sedert Stigting tot 1985”, dd October 1985.

262 Newsletter from 2 Parachute Battalion dated August 1977.

263 *Hansard*, Vol 19, House of Assembly Debates, 1967, column 2698. The Defence Amendment Bill had abolished the ballot system for military training and replaced it with a National Service system which rendered all medically fit white male citizens of South Africa liable for military service. This would entail an initial period of 12 months’ service for privates and 15 months for officers and non-commissioned officers, with subsequent periods of service extending over a term of 10 years in the Citizen Force and 20 years in the Commandos. From 1977 the initial period of service was extended to 2 years and standardised for all ranks.

supporting parachute units such as artillery or engineers and no capability existed to drop vehicles or heavy weapons by parachute. (See Appendix C).

The South African Air Force (SAAF), however, had a considerable airlift capacity. When 1 Parachute Battalion had been formed in 1961, the only aircraft available from which parachuting could be done were the venerable transport aeroplanes known as the Douglas Dakota DC-3 (C-47, in military parlance). These were veterans of the Second World War, which, when fully fuelled could carry fewer than 20 paratroopers each, although for short distance where a lesser load of fuel was required as many as 25 paratroopers could be transported, without equipment.²⁶⁴ Generally though, the Dakota was regarded as too slow, small and short-ranged for modern operational paratrooping, allowing limited flexibility in planning. Nevertheless, South Africa was reputed to maintain the largest remaining military fleet of these aircraft in the world.²⁶⁵

But in January 1963, almost two years after the establishment of 1 Parachute Battalion, the SAAF had taken delivery of its new transport aircraft: the Lockheed Hercules C-130B.²⁶⁶ Seven of these large, modern aircraft were acquired from the Americans for 28 Squadron,²⁶⁷ and each was able to carry 64 fully equipped paratroopers a distance of some 3,300 km.²⁶⁸ In theory, at least, this gave South Africa the capability to do a long-range parachute operation with 448 men, almost a full battalion, in one “lift”. In practice, however, all seven aircraft would rarely be available simultaneously due to servicing, availability of air crew and other commitments.

In 1970 South Africa’s airborne capability received yet another boost. A total of nine Franco-German Transall C-160Z transport aircraft were purchased for the SAAF.²⁶⁹ Although not capable of the range and payload of the Hercules, the Transall could, like the Hercules, accommodate 64 paratroopers,²⁷⁰ though these could only be flown a distance of some 1,175km.²⁷¹ As the two aircraft types were closely compatible as regards flying speeds, rate of climb and service ceiling,²⁷² this gave the SADF the ability, in theory, of projecting a parachute force of 1,024 men over a distance in excess of 1,000km in a single lift. This would amount to a battalion and a half.

In the field of helicopters, too, South Africa was in a very favourable position. The SAAF had acquired its first helicopter, an American Sikorsky S-51, in 1948. Two others followed it. These were replaced in 1956/1957 by three much larger Sikorsky S-55 helicopters, which were supplemented by eight

264 *Standing Procedures for Parachuting in the SADF*, (Provisional), p.301.

265 “Gooney Birds still making flying history”, *The Daily News*, 19 December 1985.

266 “Historic Memories”, *Ad Astra*, December 1994, p. 29.

267 Dave Becker, *75 Years on Wings of Eagles*, p. 174.

268 William Green and Gordon Swanborough, *Military Aircraft Directory*, p. 127, and John W.R. Taylor, *Jane’s All the World’s Aircraft 1976-77*, p.320.

269 C.J. Nöthling and Dave Becker, *The Pride of the Nation*, p.21; Green and Swanborough, *Military Aircraft*, p. 134; *Balance Militar 1983-84*, November 1983, p. 85.

270 *Standing Procedures for Parachuting*, p. 401.

271 Green and Swanborough, *Military Aircraft*, p. 134.

272 Green and Swanborough, *Military Aircraft*, pp. 127 and 134.

French Alouette II helicopters in 1960/1961.²⁷³ In December 1960 and January 1961, during the unrest in the East Pondoland portion of the Transkei territory, both these newer helicopter types were used to deploy troops, some of them the newly-trained paratroopers who had just returned from England.²⁷⁴ From 1962 the SAAF began to take delivery of its initial batch of 33 of the ubiquitous Alouette III. Large numbers of these helicopters were ultimately taken into service by the SAAF, but like their predecessors they could only lift a few soldiers at a time. However, in 1967 the first medium helicopter, the French SA321L Super Frelon was delivered, with 20 French SA330C Puma helicopters following in 1970.²⁷⁵

By the late 1970s, the SAAF had in their inventory close to 100 Alouette IIIs, 12 Super Frelons and about 30 Pumas²⁷⁶. The Alouette III could lift a maximum of six passengers, the Super Frelon 15 and the Puma, depending on whether it was the “H” or the “L” model, 12 or 16 respectively. All this, however, was subject to how much equipment the passengers were carrying and the altitude at which the aircraft were operating.²⁷⁷ Soldiers heavily laden with weapons, ammunition and personal equipment severely limited these aircraft because of their restricted payloads, and an area like Ovamboland and southern Angola, with an average height above sea-level of over 1,100 metres, placed a further restriction on helicopter capabilities. For example, whilst the Super Frelon was an extremely efficient helicopter at sea level, it could not match the payload of the Puma in Ovamboland, despite being a larger aircraft.

The greatest limitation, however, was the availability of trained helicopter crews and aircraft not grounded for their routine services or for repairs. Helicopters were also required for constant use in the search and rescue role along South Africa’s coastline, for assistance to the South African Police for fighting crime and for training. Therefore, at any given time, relatively few of the total on inventory were available for military operations. (See Appendix D).

Apart from the men and the means to carry out airborne operations, the South Africans were also in the process of building up their operational airborne experience. The so-called “Border War” or “Bush War” had commenced as early as 1966, and the paratroopers had been there. Even as the International Court of Justice at the Hague, in the case brought against South Africa by Ethiopia and Liberia challenging her legal right to administer South West Africa (as Namibia was still known at the time) and accusing her of various malpractices, handed down a surprise judgement in favour of South Africa on 18 July 1966²⁷⁸, SWAPO had already infiltrated its first group of insurgents into Ovamboland where they proceeded to set up a clandestine base.²⁷⁹

273 Becker, *75 Years*, pp. 91 and 102.

274 Situation Reports: Battle Group Alpha, Operation SWIVEL, Archive Group C Army, Box No 575.

275 Becker, *75 Years*, pp. 102 and 108.

276 *Balance Militar*, p. 85.

277 Green and Swanborough, *Military Aircraft*, pp. 202-203.

278 Reg Shay and Chris Vermaak, *The Silent War*, pp. 156-157.

279 Interim Report: Operation “BLOUWILDEBEEES” (Top Secret), dd 7 September 1966, pp. 2-3.

As the International Court of Justice made no ruling on the issues dealt with in its judgement, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 2145 (XXI) on 27 October 1966, declaring that South Africa's mandate over the territory, awarded by the League of Nations in 1921, was terminated and that the UN assumed direct responsibility for the territory until it attained independence. This the South African government refused to accept, just as it refused to accept the UN's renaming of the territory Namibia on 12 June 1968.²⁸⁰

But already, the war had started. On 26 August 1966 a helicopter assault was carried out on the SWAPO base at Ongulumbashe in Ovamboland. Two insurgents were killed, 10 were captured and four escaped. Though it was a police operation, SAAF Alouette III helicopters were used and the policemen were trained by a small group of paratroopers from 1 Parachute Battalion. The paratroopers also participated in the operation, under the command of Captain Jan Breytenbach, who would later command the assault on Cassinga.²⁸¹ For the paratroopers it was the first taste of an airborne operation. There was more to come. From the beginning of September to the end of November 1967 paratroopers deployed with the South African Police in the Zambezi valley of Rhodesia, again masquerading as policemen.²⁸² It was the time of *Umkhonto weSizwe's* attempt to infiltrate through Rhodesia to South Africa.²⁸³ The South African Prime Minister, B.J. Vorster, announced in a speech at Brakpan on 8 September 1967 that South African Police detachments had been sent to Rhodesia to help the Rhodesian security forces in dealing with insurgents "who originally came from South Africa and were on their way back to commit terrorism in South Africa".²⁸⁴

A similar situation arose along the South West African border with Angola and Zambia. The police were being deployed there in increasing numbers after Ongulumbashe and the paratroopers and other army personnel were being sent to train and reinforce them.²⁸⁵ But until then only a handful of Permanent Force officers and NCOs had been involved. Suddenly it changed. In October 1967 a complete company of paratrooper conscripts was flown to Rundu on the Angolan border for a few weeks of patrolling to deter insurgents.²⁸⁶ By December of that year an intelligence report had been received in South Africa from Washington that a Pan-Africanist force might attempt a military intervention in Namibia to force the South Africans into an international confrontation. Airfields were seen as prime objectives of such a force, particularly at Windhoek, Katima Mulilo, Rundu, Ondangwa, Grootfontein and Tsumeb. On 9 December 1967 South African troops were flown up to defend all those airfields, with a company of paratroopers deployed at Eros Airport in Windhoek. The intervention never materialised, but the paratroopers remained on alert for several weeks.²⁸⁷

280 *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia, Vol 17*, p. 300.

281 Interim Report, *loc cit.* Also interviews with Brigadier Kaas van der Waals on 28 November 1991, Colonel Tommy Renfree (retired) on 28 July 1990 and Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 28 December 1990, all of whom participated in the operation.

282 File BGG/301/15, (Top Secret), "Personeel Gesekondeer aan SAP", Vol 1, dd 31 August 1967 to 3 Jul 1969, Archive Group BGGGM.

283 Barrell, *MK – The ANC's Armed Struggle*, pp. 20-23.

284 Michael Morris, *Terrorism*, p. 40.

285 File BGG/301/15, *loc cit.*

286 Interview with Major General "Buddy" Ferreira and Brigadier Gert Nel on 26 February 1991. Ferreira was the company commander and Nel the battalion adjutant at the time.

287 Files HVS/203/6/2 Vol 1, Operasie DIKMELK, Enclosures 1, 5, 12, 15, 28(c) and 29 and HVS/201/4/2 DIKMELK, Archive Group HVS.

In October 1968 the paratroopers of 1 Parachute Battalion were tasked with establishing a semi-permanent company group base at Katima Mulilo in the Eastern Caprivi Strip.²⁸⁸ For the next two years there was almost always a company of paratroopers deployed in the Caprivi, which was where most of SWAPO's insurgent activity took place. This was due to the Portuguese occupation of Angola forcing the insurgents to operate from bases in Zambia. The insurgency activity in the Caprivi was in any case low-key and accompanied by very little violence.²⁸⁹

From 1971, however, there was an increase in insurgent ambushes, the laying of landmines and even attacks on South African Police bases.²⁹⁰ It soon became clear that the police were unable to handle the situation, and after several disastrous setbacks at the hands of SWAPO insurgents the responsibility for border security was transferred from the police to the SADF in April 1973.²⁹¹ SADF deployments increased accordingly, but so did SWAPO incursions. SWAPO declared 1974 "the year of the kill",²⁹² and after the April *coup d'état* in Portugal the decolonisation negotiations in Angola and other colonies began.²⁹³ In the ensuing state of flux that prevailed in Angola, SWAPO began to take the initiative. A large group of SWAPO guerrillas, estimated by Portuguese intelligence sources at 200, was identified moving from Zambia, through southeastern Angola, towards the Caprivi Strip.²⁹⁴ The SADF's 1 Parachute Battalion was instructed on the morning of 4 June 1974 to carry out a parachute drop that night at Bwabwata, just inside Angola. A company of paratroopers was flown directly from Bloemfontein to Bwabwata and a second company was flown up the following day and dropped at Kongola, in the Caprivi. The action had the desired result, and the insurgents dispersed and disappeared. It had been the first parachute operation to be carried out by the South Africans.²⁹⁵

A month of hectic operational activity followed, with the paratroopers working in conjunction with special forces commandos inside southeastern Angola. Several "contacts" with SWAPO guerrillas took place with intense fire-fights resulting in the deaths of several guerrillas and one special forces commando. The latter was the first soldier of the South African Army to be killed in action since the Second World War.²⁹⁶

For the next year, companies from 1 Parachute Battalion were deployed for operational tours of up to three months at a stretch in the Caprivi Strip.²⁹⁷ As Angola descended into chaos on the eve of the civil war, the country's liberation movements squared up against one another while the Portuguese,

288 File HVS/203/6/5 Vol 1, Operasie CRACKER BOX, Enclosure 1, Operations Order 1/68 dd 24 October 1968.

289 Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 22.

290 *Die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag in Suidwes-Afrika, 1969-1973*, Archive "Miscellaneous", Group 2, Box No 78, Section A, Chapter 3, pp. 44, 46, 72-74, 94-98, 101. Also Al J. Venter, *The Zambesi Salient*, p. 46.

291 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, p. 22.

292 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, p. 40.

293 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, pp. 30-32.

294 File Army HQ/G/Ops/3/3 FOCUS, Vol 8 (Secret), Enclosures 12 dd 1 June 1974 and 22 dd 4 June 1974.

295 "Untried Troops have First 'Jump'", *Eastern Province Herald*, June 1974. Also interviews with Colonel James Hills on 24 April 1990, Commandant E.P.K. Ferreira on 19 April 1990 and Major General J.P.M. Möller on 29 August 1990. These officers all participated in the drops.

296 File Army HQ/G/Ops/3/3 FOCUS, Vol 4 (Secret), Enclosures 14 dd 21 June 1974, 20 dd 24 June 1974 and 12 dd 24 June 1974, Archive H Leër, Box No 16.

297 File Army HQ/G/Ops/3/3 FOCUS, Vol 9, (Secret), Enclosures 85 dd August 1974 and 102 dd 01 August 1974. Also *Die Volksblad*, 31 August 1974 and A Company 1 Parachute Battalion Operational Diary 22 August – 25 October 1974.

anxious to avoid being involved, did nothing.²⁹⁸ South Africa nervously watched developments from the Namibian border, lashing out at any attempt by SWAPO to exploit the situation, like an irritated spectator swatting flies. At times, the paratroopers were the fly-swatters, as was the case in July 1975 when a group of South African-led counter-guerrillas was boxed in and besieged by a SWAPO force in the “V” formed by the confluence of the Kwando and Luiana Rivers in southeast Angola. A platoon of paratroopers parachuted from a Dakota aircraft to successfully relieve them.²⁹⁹

When South Africa intervened militarily in the Angolan civil war a few months later, the paratroopers were used extensively throughout the adventure, but never in an airborne role.³⁰⁰ This, despite the campaign having presented numerous ideal opportunities to drop paratroopers. In fact, the paratroopers were never even grouped as a reserve to employ in this role should the need arise. Instead, they were divided into companies and even platoons or sections and allocated to various battle groups all over Angola,³⁰¹ in a flagrant contradiction of the principles for the employment of paratroopers.³⁰² SA Army tactical doctrine of the time stated clearly “*daar (moet) een lugstormmag bevelvoerder wees, wat verantwoordelik is om die opperbevelvoerder of senior grondmagtebevelvoerder te adviseer*”,³⁰³ (there must be one airborne force commander, who is responsible for advising the supreme commander or senior ground forces commander). There can be no doubt that the intention here is to group and control airborne forces at the highest operational level. The doctrine nowhere advocates the “penny-packeting” of paratroopers as occurred during Operation SAVANNAH in 1975-1976. However, the paratroopers gained considerable combat experience in what was the first real conventional campaign of the “Border War”. And this had brought them to the position where they were subsequently deployed as a “Fire Force” at Ondangwa. From 1976 onwards the Citizen Force parachute battalions were scheduled to call up companies for 90-day periods of operational service, usually relieving companies of 1 Parachute Battalion as the “Fire Force” at Ondangwa.³⁰⁴

By early 1978 it had become apparent that the SA Army’s three parachute battalions needed a higher headquarters to co-ordinate their activities and to provide them with proper command and control in operations. Until then, 1 Parachute Battalion had fallen directly under Army Headquarters for its operational employment, although as a unit “in location” of Orange Free State Command the latter headquarters had in fact controlled every facet of the battalion excluding training policy and operational deployments. This meant that the battalion was responsible to OFS Command for administration, logistic and technical support, financial management, ceremonial matters, guard

298 W.S. van der Waals, *Portugal's War in Angola 1961-1974*, p. 257.

299 Interview with Commandant Johan Blaauw on 20 July 1990. Blaauw commanded the platoon that jumped.

300 Fred Bridgland, “Angola and the West” in *Challenge – Southern Africa Within the African Revolutionary Context*, by Al J. Venter (ed.), p. 134.

301 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, pp. 98, 206, 216, 217 and 218; Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, pp. 48 and 64; Sophia du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola*, pp. 76, 97, 150, 152 and 207.

302 M. Tugwell, *Airborne to Battle*, p. 336.

303 *Infanterie*, SA Army College précis, GT/3/1/1 dated July 1976, p. 26.

304 Interview with Commandant Ian Ritchie (retired) in Johannesburg on 5 February 1992. Ritchie was the Officer Commanding 2 Parachute Battalion in 1976. Also, diary of Major Lewis Gerber, 13 May – 5 August 1976.

duties and base protection, travel and subsistence, salaries, movement authorities as well as all sport and recreation.³⁰⁵

The two Citizen Force battalions, however, like most of the conventional Citizen Force units, fell under 1 SA Corps. The Corps comprised two divisions, 7 Infantry Division and 8 Armoured Division, but other than the divisional headquarters and their constituent brigade headquarters, these formations consisted only of part-time reservists who would have to be mobilised before they could go over to action. The two parachute battalions were “corps troops” and as such did not belong to either of the divisions. Rather, they were available to the corps commander to employ where and how he saw fit, as a sort of “fire brigade”. But they too, had first to be mobilised before they could be employed.³⁰⁶ When both battalions were mobilised in March 1978 for an operation that was subsequently cancelled and replaced by Operation REINDEER, command and control problems immediately became apparent. As a direct result of this, the Chief of the South African Army, Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, instructed that an investigation be instituted for the establishment of a parachute brigade headquarters which could in future exercise command over the parachute battalions and also see to parachute training, equipment and parachute operations in general.³⁰⁷

On 11 April 1978 the Chief of Army Staff Operations, Major General Ian Gleeson, addressed a memorandum to Brigadier M.J. du Plessis, the Officer Commanding Orange Free State Command. The minute was headed “Planning Directive: 1 Parachute Brigade”.³⁰⁸ In it, the need was spelt out for a parachute brigade to form an Army element capable of rapid action anywhere inside and, if necessary, even outside South Africa. Du Plessis was earmarked by Chief of the Army as the first commander of the new brigade, which would be an independent formation, falling directly under Chief of the Army. The role of the new brigade was given as “rapid deployment against enemy actions, bases and/or lines of communication, especially in isolated areas”. The three parachute battalions were to form the core of the brigade’s combat element, with 1 Parachute Battalion held permanently in a state of operational readiness. It was envisaged that artillery, anti-aircraft and engineer units would be added to the brigade.

On Monday, 17 April 1978, the Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, announced in Parliament during his budget speech that certain expansions and extensions were to take place in the Army. These included the establishment of a parachute brigade at Bloemfontein.³⁰⁹ Botha said that,

“With a view to the important part played by practical mobility in a large country such as South Africa, it is necessary to expand the parachute capacity of the South African Army. Recent reorganisation and retraining of Citizen Force parachute battalions was

305 Files 1 Para Bn/G/PLANS/2/5 (Secret), Enclosure 5, dd 30 September 1966 and 1 Para Bn/A/ADM/1/2 (Confidential), Enclosure 7, dd 27 September 1973. With regard to all the issues mentioned, 1 Parachute Battalion had to deal with or through OFS Command, as evidenced by this correspondence at the time.

306 Memorandum from Officer Commanding 44 Parachute Brigade to BGS, 44 VALSK BDE/514/2/9/1 dd 4 March 1985.

307 Minutes of a Debriefing Conference held at Army Headquarters on 20 March 1978, H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 ALG (Geheim) dated 28 March 1978.

308 Memorandum from C Army S Ops to Brig M.J. du Plessis, SM (Confidential) dd 11 April 1978, no reference number.

309 “New Officer for Parachute Brigade”, *The Friend*, Wednesday 19 April 1978.

the first step in this direction. It must be possible for paratroopers to be called up at short notice and to act effectively when that happens. In order, on the one hand, to establish a large full-time parachute capacity and, on the other hand, to obtain a larger Permanent Force involvement, 1 Parachute Battalion at Bloemfontein is being expanded... . Furthermore, it is intended to establish a full-time parachute brigade headquarters at Bloemfontein as formation headquarters for this mobile reaction force of the South African Army.”³¹⁰

Three days later, at Defence Headquarters in Pretoria, it was publicly announced that the Officer Commanding Orange Free State Command, Brigadier M.J. du Plessis, would in addition to his current appointment, become the first commander of the new parachute brigade.³¹¹ The three existing parachute battalions would henceforth be brigaded together to form the nucleus of his new command.³¹² A spokesman from Defence Headquarters was quoted as saying,

“The SADF is involved in a counter-insurgency struggle characterised by border infiltrations of the enemy. Thus it has become necessary for the SADF to have at its disposal a force that can curb border violations immediately and at the place at which they occur. The establishment of a parachute brigade headquarters is part of the Defence Force’s scheme to enhance its strategic mobility and to shorten the reaction time of its forces.”³¹³

Though not yet formally named, the new formation had been referred to as “1 Parachute Brigade” in the memorandum from General Gleeson.³¹⁴ However, when Chief of the Army made a formal submission to the Chief of the SADF in August that year requesting the establishment of the formation,³¹⁵ it was called “44 Parachute Brigade”, and this is what it ultimately became. It was only days before the Cassinga raid was due to take place that the announcements regarding the establishment of a parachute brigade were made. Only the brigade commander had been identified, so there was, as yet, no question of a brigade headquarters with all the necessary staff existing in time for the raid.

DEDUCTIONS

The concept of “vertical envelopment” by means of an airborne operation had, in South Africa, germinated during the early years of the Second World War. Though South Africa had never fielded any airborne units during that conflict, many individuals from its armed forces had served in the British Airborne Forces. During the immediate post-war years the decline in the Defence Force had resulted in no airborne capability being established, but with the rise of internal political dissent and international animosity during the early *apartheid* years, a parachute battalion was formed in 1961. With the increase in conscription two additional parachute battalions, consisting of reservists, were

310 *Hansard*, Monday 17 April 1978, column 4817.

311 “Reorganisation for Parabats”, *The Citizen*, 21 April 1978.

312 “New Parabats Taking off for Exercise”, *The Friend*, 21 April 1978.

313 “Para Brigade for the Army”, *The Cape Times*, 21 April 1978.

314 Memorandum from C Army S Ops dd 11 April 1978.

315 Submission from C Army to C SADF (Confidential), C ARMY/D PLAN/502/1/1/D511 dd 14 August 1978.

later established. The acquisition of considerable large transport aircraft and medium helicopters served to substantially enhance the SADF's airborne capability.

The South African paratroopers were directly involved in low-intensity combat operations from the very start of the protracted "Border War" and some of these were airborne operations. Though mainly helicopter operations, there were some parachute actions, resulting in a modicum of operational airborne expertise being built up. However, it was only in April 1978 that a start was made on establishing an overall parachute headquarters. Prior to this there seemed to be either a reluctance to use the paratroopers in their specialist role, or an ignorance of how to employ them, as was evidenced during the 1975/1976 incursion into Angola, which had presented some ideal opportunities for their application.

The SADF therefore had an airborne capability of three infantry battalions, though two of these were reserve units subject to the vicissitudes of availability of all reservist soldiers. The other battalion consisted of conscripts at different stages of their initial military service and thus not all at the same level of training. Not all of its companies could therefore be deemed fit for operational service. There were no artillery, no anti-aircraft and no engineer forces trained as paratroopers, although there were a few individuals, and there was no proper airborne logistic back-up in existence.

The South African experience of airborne operations was limited to small-scale, low-intensity actions, their combat capability was limited to that of the infantry, they had no other fire or logistic support, no planning capability above that of battalion and not one of the three battalions could guarantee a full strength for an operational deployment. It would seem unlikely that the formation of the parachute brigade had anything to do with the intended raid on Cassinga because its directive was issued too late to form a proper headquarters in time for the raid. In addition, the announcement by the Minister of Defence was made during his budget speech; the appropriate occasion to do so, but a scheduled occurrence that could hardly be arranged especially to coincide with a military operation tied to expediency. Lastly, the announcement concerning the parachute brigade was but one of several major developments in restructuring the SADF which were addressed at the time, all of which were included in the Minister's speech.

The SADF could carry out an airborne operation of limited means and limited duration, provided that offensive air support and a rapid withdrawal were guaranteed. The airborne force could not be expected to hold ground for any length of time. In short, such an operation would need to be a raid against an objective which would not offer heavy resistance, or where surprise could be guaranteed.

CHAPTER 5

THE DECISION

Appendix A: Annotated Sketch Map of Cassinga.

Though the general officers in the SADF saw the need to strike a telling blow across the Angolan border against SWAPO, there was clearly less enthusiasm from the ranks of their political bosses. They were doubtless wary of a repetition of South Africa's disastrous involvement in the Angolan civil war of 1975-1976 and were reluctant again to offend the international community by an "occupation" of Angola. Certainly the South African Prime Minister, B.J. Vorster, "had painful memories of how the political failure of *Operation Savannah* had destroyed years of covert effort that he had put into reaching a form of *détente* with neighbouring states."³¹⁶

Yet on 29 December 1977 a momentous political decision was taken which would have far-reaching consequences for South African military strategy. On that day five key people met with Vorster in his seaside holiday home in the quiet, tiny hamlet of Oubos on the southern Cape coast. They were the Minister of Defence (P.W. Botha), the Minister of Foreign Affairs (R.F. "Pik" Botha), the Chief of the South African Defence Force (General Magnus Malan), the Secretary of Foreign Affairs (Brand Fourie) and the Chief of the South African Army (Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen). The subject of this very secret meeting was the negotiations around South West Africa (Namibia) and specifically the need to hold an election in the territory on South African conditions. Recent discussions with the Western Five Contact Group were considered in detail and the Minister of Foreign Affairs stated his conviction that SWAPO would not agree to the South African conditions, making the actual issue one of when South Africa would break off negotiations with the Five and how the break would be effected to ensure that South Africa received the greatest possible sympathy.³¹⁷

The Minister of Defence emphasized the importance of a political victory in any election in Namibia, and by this he quite clearly meant a victory at the polls by the DTA (Democratic Turnhalle Alliance). In order to win the political battle in Ovamboland (the most populous part of Namibia), he pointed out, the Ovambo people would need to be convinced of which side was the strongest. Political success in Ovamboland therefore depended on military success. P.W. Botha felt that SWAPO now needed to be dealt a blow and that the SADF should be given the right to go into Angola effectively and to sort out SWAPO bases once and for all ("*... om effektief in te gaan en klaar te speel met basisse.*"). A cautious agreement with the principle of such action resulted in strong arguments in favour of the suggestion being put forward by both the Chief of the SADF and the Minister of Defence. The Prime Minister placed certain restrictions on such actions, seeming to display an almost nervous reluctance, and eventually the following three points were agreed upon and approved by Vorster:³¹⁸

316 Willem Steenkamp, "Politics of Power – The Border War", in Al J. Venter (ed.), *Challenge: Southern Africa within the African Revolutionary Context*, p. 196.

317 *Notas oor Vergadering te Oubos – 29 Desember 1977* (Top Secret), p. 2, unreferenced SWA file in SANDF Archives. Viljoen, probably because he was the junior member of this select gathering, kept and signed these minutes, dated 4 January 1978.

318 *Notas oor Vergadering*, pp. 4-6.

- a. That at this stage preferably clandestine operations with 32 Battalion and 31 Battalion be carried out in such a way that the minimum risk exists for POWs to be taken or that operations can be traced back to the SADF.
- b. That, after formulation of a policy, limited hot pursuit operations (“*hakkejagoperasies*”) would be possible.
- c. That open operations, such as an attack on a base, must always first be presented to the Prime Minister for his approval before any action is taken, so that the timing and effect on the political and diplomatic situation can be considered.

The decision extracted from Vorster was monumentally significant, militarily. His endorsement of the principle to mount cross-border attacks heralded the start of the first large-scale “external operations” since the withdrawal from the Angolan civil war in March 1976. Henceforth, such operations would characterise South Africa’s conduct of the war. Vorster, however, had made it very clear that any such operation would have to first be sanctioned at the highest possible political level.³¹⁹

Two months later, on 27 February 1978, Malan submitted a request to the Minister of Defence to launch an attack on five SWAPO base complexes in Angola that had been identified by means of aerial photography. Four of these complexes were between 8 and 39km from the Angolan/Namibian border. The fifth complex was Cassinga.³²⁰

Malan pointed out the growing military capability of SWAPO, its persecution of its insurgency war from Angola with impunity and increased aggressiveness, the perception in Africa that South Africa had employed its full military potential during the incursion into Angola in 1975/76 and had been found severely wanting and the recent build-up of anti-aircraft guns and missiles by Angola. The employment of small groups from 32 Battalion inside Angola was becoming increasingly difficult because of the surprising fire-power and tactical discipline of SWAPO. The large numbers of SWAPO insurgents operating in groups inside Angola were also limiting the actions of UNITA. All of this, said Malan, was because the SADF was being compelled to fight with its hands tied behind its back.

It was therefore necessary, continued Malan, to deal a blow to the military potential of SWAPO, especially its leaders, by hitting its logistic and base facilities before the envisaged election in Namibia, thereby upsetting its chances of success in the military field. Recent attacks by the Rhodesians into Mozambique (dealt with later in this chapter) were cited as examples of the advantages to be gained from using all forces, including the Air Force, to hit large SWAPO bases. This would compel SWAPO to divide its forces into smaller bases spread throughout the area, which would have a negative effect on its logistics, control, defensive measures and morale. It would also make it difficult for Cuban instructors to get to all the SWAPO recruits for training, while the fragmented deployment of SWAPO would enable UNITA to act more effectively against smaller SWAPO groups and bases. He stressed that 32 Battalion would again be able to continue its shallow clandestine reconnaissance operations with smaller SWAPO forces to face it.

319 Major C.J. Nöthling, *Operasie Reindeer*, p. 5, quoting Lieutenant General Viljoen, the Chief of the Army, in a memorandum addressed to the Chief of the SADF, reference 309/1/3 Reindeer, Vol 1C, dd 23 March 1978.

320 Letter from Chief of the SADF to the Minister of Defence, headed “MILITÊR POLITIEKE SITUASIE IN SUIDWES-AFRIKA”, HS OPS/301/2 dd 27 Feb 78 (Top Secret), in SANDF Archival Folder marked “Cassinga” but unreferenced.

Malan argued, furthermore, that the employment of a large number of South African troops with fire support from both bombers and artillery would limit South African casualties to a minimum. SWAPO, he felt, would be too sensitive to acknowledge large-scale losses and would not readily admit to South Africa having the military power to attack it on all its fronts.

Whilst Malan admitted that such an operation would provoke an international outcry and place great diplomatic and political pressure on South Africa (he equated it to pressure placed on Israel during the 1973 Middle East War), he felt that this could be overcome by a well co-ordinated “civic action” (propaganda) programme. He dismissed the Western Five, stating that although South Africa’s actions towards them had been as reasonable as could have been expected, the arms boycott was in any case imposed and the USA government had recently announced an even stricter imposition of the boycott.

Malan foresaw that, in the event of the operation being approved, it would take place between 20 and 27 March 1978, because three to four weeks were required to complete the planning and preparation. He recommended that all five complexes be attacked over a very short period, that maximum fire-power from both the Army and the Air Force be used together with the largest possible forces from both services, that the operation last for a maximum of four days and that it be repeated after six months in the event of SWAPO subsequently returning to the base areas in large numbers.

P.W. Botha wrote his comments on Malan’s document: “*Gaan voort met beplanning soos bespreek en die paar voorbehoude deur my genoem.*” (Carry on with planning as discussed and the few conditions named by me). These conditions appear to be contained in the additional comments which are written alongside the text of the document: that the envisaged four-day duration of the operation was too long, as the UN must not request that South Africa withdraw from Angola; and more significantly, that an attack on only four of the base complexes was approved, that on Cassinga being turned down. The reason given was concern that aircraft might be shot down.

This first operation to receive conditional political approval was code-named BRUILOF (“Wedding”). It was scheduled to take place in late March 1978 and was intended to destroy six SWAPO forward operational bases forming the complex at Chetaquera, some 25km north of the Namibian/Angolan border. Two mechanised/motorised battle groups were to be used to do this, and it was envisaged that 3 Parachute Battalion would carry out an airborne attack on one of the bases, while 2 Parachute Battalion would be dropped to form cut-off groups that could prevent any guerrillas escaping from other bases once the attacks took place.³²¹ There is, however, some evidence to indicate that even at this stage, Cassinga may have been one of the intended objectives. In which case, it would have

321 Nöthling, *Operasie Reindeer*, p. 6; Steenkamp, *SA’s Border War*, p. 74; Willem Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 16; Diary of Commandant Lew Gerber (Officer Commanding 3 Parachute Battalion), 6-17 March 1978. Gerber’s diary throws more light on the proposed operation than do any of the other sources, though it is clear that even he was not fully aware of all the details.

been the base that was earmarked for 3 Parachute Battalion to attack.³²² If so, the generals must have persuaded Botha (who must in turn have persuaded Vorster) of the viability of this, because initially Cassinga had been expressly excluded.

Viljoen, the Chief of the Army, had certainly not given up on Cassinga after Botha's initial rejection of the place as an objective. In a memorandum addressed to Malan, dated 8 March 1978, and headed "*DIE ROL VAN CASSINGA IN DIE MILITÊRE AANSLAG TEEN SUID-WES AFRIKA*" (THE ROLE OF CASSINGA IN THE MILITARY ONSLAUGHT AGAINST SOUTH WEST AFRICA) he had made a reasoned appeal for reconsideration.³²³ Viljoen pointed out that the Commander of PLAN, Dimo Hamaambo, had his headquarters at Cassinga, from where he planned and co-ordinated the execution of all operations against South West Africa (Namibia).

He went on to list the executive functions of the headquarters in Cassinga in a very succinct and convincing manner:

- a. The planning, control and co-ordinating of all operations against SWA, including the intelligence aspect.
- b. The logistic planning and physical provisioning of SWAPO bases in the Eastern Cunene province of Angola.
- c. The planning and provision of supplies, weapons and ammunition to insurgents operating inside central and eastern Ovamboland in SWA.
- d. Co-ordinating the logistic supply to insurgents in the West Cunene province, though the actual supplies came from Lubango via Roçadas.
- e. Maintaining the main medical centre at Cassinga for the treatment of seriously wounded insurgents.
- f. Cassinga was the assembly point for insurgent recruits before processing them to training centres at Lubango and Luanda.
- g. It was also the assembly point for freshly-trained insurgents prior to their being routed to bases in the East and West Cunene provinces.
- h. Infantry and mine-laying refresher courses were presented at Cassinga.
- i. The control of SWAPO's transport assets was centralised at Cassinga, and the main repair depot was located there.

Viljoen reminded Malan that Cassinga was subordinate only to SWAPO's Defence Headquarters at Lubango. He indicated that the numbers of insurgents inside the base were constantly varying

322 Appendix A to the minutes of a debriefing conference on Operation REINDEER [*"Notule van 'n Konferensie gehou by Leër HK om 09H00 op 18 Mei 1978 om Nabetrugting te doen oor Op REINDEER"*, dd 22 May 1978, H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER (Secret), File 309/1/3 REINDEER, Vol 1, Archive Group H LEËR (DLV), Box No 85] refers to provisional planning for an attack on Alpha which was subsequently scrapped because of security and other considerations. This could be a reference to the aborted Operation BRUILOF. Gerber too, in his diary during the preparations for BRUILOF, writes "3 Para Bn has got the plumb (sic)", referring to the pending operation (entry for 9 March 1978). Conceivably, this could have meant Cassinga. The debriefing conference minutes' appendix also indicates that the initial call-up of the paratroopers (presumably for BRUILOF) was done before the planning for the operation had been completed and final approval obtained. This is acknowledged in the minutes as having been a mistake. Furthermore, Jan Breytenbach, in his top secret debriefing report dated 9 May 1978 and included in a volume of Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, states that it had already been decided to attack Cassinga Base and Chetaquera during March 1978, and that the call-up of paratroopers that month was for this purpose.

323 Memorandum from C Army to C SADF, reference H LEËR/309/1 dd 8 March 1978 (Top Secret), in SANDF Archival Folder marked "Cassinga" but unreferenced.

between 300 and 1,200, but there were a large number of prostitutes as well as an unknown number of women insurgents as well. He emphasised that there were no local Angolans living inside Cassinga, the nearest being several kilometres north of the base. He was also at pains to describe the defences of Cassinga, as a result of its distance from the Angolan/Namibian border, as being very limited, whilst the MPLA/Cuban forces at Techamutete were engaged in operations against UNITA. The strength of the Cubans in Techamutete was given as 144 on 31 October 1977.

To bring home his point Viljoen attached a detailed sketch map of the layout of Cassinga (See Appendix A to this chapter), and requested that even if a joint Army/Air Force attack was not approved, at least an Air Force strike should be considered. Ultimately, his plea must have been successful, though the paratroopers had already been called up for Operation BRUILOF, and in fact had reported two days before Viljoen had penned his plea. It is possible that the approval for the raid on Cassinga was given while the paratroops rehearsed for Operation BRUILOF.

Both 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions were called up, and a total of almost 1,360 paratroopers reported on 6 March 1978. It was a phenomenal response, particularly given that the men, all civilians, were given only two weeks' notice. Nearly 1,600 call-up instructions had been sent out and Army Headquarters had expected only 500 to report.³²⁴

Colonel Jan Breytenbach, at the time the Senior Staff Officer Operations at Northern Transvaal Command in Pretoria, was placed in overall command of the two battalions and they carried out an intensive week of training and rehearsals in the northern Transvaal, including two battalion-sized parachute drops, using up to eight C-130/C-160 aircraft simultaneously.³²⁵ But the whole operation was suddenly called off and all the paratroopers were sent home. It seems there had been a security leak, apparently the result of so many paratroopers who were university students, being suddenly and urgently called up in the middle of a semester. Lewis Gerber, Officer Commanding 3 Parachute Battalion, claimed that professors at the Afrikaans universities had been making enquiries to friends who were cabinet ministers, and that embarrassing questions were being asked which had blown the security around the preparations.³²⁶ Yet, fortunately for the paratroopers, the aborted operation had given them a golden opportunity to identify many shortcomings in their organisation, equipment and training, and these were all addressed with the utmost urgency. This was largely due to the personal involvement of the Chief of the Army, who attended the debriefing meeting.³²⁷

All indications are that the operation was not, in fact, cancelled, but merely postponed. This is because Operation REINDEER turned out to be the same operation, but was a more ambitious undertaking, precisely because it now included Cassinga (if, in fact, BRUILOF had never included this objective). The operation would now no longer use the paratroopers to attack SWAPO forward

324 Minutes of a Debriefing Conference held at Army Headquarters on 20 March 1978, H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 ALG (Secret), dated 28 March 1978. Also Diary of Commandant Gerber 6-17 March 1978, entry for 6 March 1978.

325 Diary of Commandant Gerber 6-17 March 1978 and interview with Colonel Breytenbach on 29 December 1990.

326 Diary of Commandant Gerber 6-17 March 1978, entry for 13 March 1978. Gleeson confirmed that there had been a security leak, but recalls that it was due to one of the civilian secretaries of a general officer at Army Headquarters speaking to other civilians [interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson (retired) on 16 January 2003].

327 Minutes of a Debriefing Conference dated 28 March 1978.

operational bases close to the border: this would be left to the ground forces. Instead the paratroopers would be used to carry out a deep strike with the strategic intent of crippling SWAPO's ability effectively to wage its war for a significant period.³²⁸ That, at least, was the military view. It was to be a classic employment of paratroopers; the ultimate exploitation of their military potential.

However, before considering how this military decision came to be made, it is necessary to examine some of the key personalities behind the decision in order better to understand its dynamics. Employment of the paratroopers in their primary role had largely been neglected until then, partly due to relatively few opportunities (other than Operation SAVANNAH) arising, but also because of the calculated risk always associated with a parachute operation, and a dearth of senior officers in key appointments who had a clear understanding of the potential of vertical envelopment as a means of gaining tactical initiative and achieving strategic objectives.

In 1978, for the first time since the insurgency war in Namibia had intensified, there was a paratrooper who had risen to a crucially important appointment in the SA Army and who understood and believed in the value of airborne operations. Lieutenant General Constand Laubscher Viljoen, the Chief of the SA Army, was born on 28 October 1933 in the rural area of Standerton. His twin brother went on to become a distinguished theologian and academic, but Constand Viljoen opted for a military career after spending a year in the newly established Military Gymnasium in 1952.³²⁹ In 1954 he graduated from the University of Pretoria with a B Sc (Mil) degree under the Military Academy system instituted by the Minister of Defence, F.C. Erasmus, in 1950. He was awarded the Sword of Honour as the top cadet officer.³³⁰ Commissioned into the South African Artillery (Field), where he served in 4 Field Regiment, he was subsequently selected as *aide-de-camp* to the Governor General of the Union of South Africa and served in this capacity during 1957 and 1958. Thereafter he returned to the artillery and was a gunnery instructor at the School of Artillery and Armour in Potchefstroom.³³¹ While occupying this appointment he attended the prestigious Staff Duties Course at the South African Military College in Pretoria during 1960-61. It was an exceptional course in that it produced the largest crop of general officers of any of such courses presented. On the course with Viljoen were Major Bob Rogers (destined to be Chief of the South African Air Force at the time of the Cassinga raid), Captain Magnus Malan (Chief of the SADF at the time of Cassinga) and Captain C.J.J. Boshoff (Chief of Army Staff Logistics during the raid).³³² All were to play a vital role in the raid 17 years later and there can be little doubt that the bonds of friendship normally forged on a Staff Course came into play in the run-up to and during the operation.

328 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 16. Also Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, pp. 24-26. Heywood claims that SWAPO intelligence had learned of the plan for Operation BRUILOF. However, she erroneously states that the operation was already imminent in December 1977 with the troops already called up, when it was shelved, only to be resurrected in late February 1978 as Operation REINDEER. She links this directly to the breakdown of the "proximity talks" in New York on the implementation of Namibian independence, which the South African Minister of Foreign Affairs had walked out of. Based on the mobilisation dates of 2 and 3 Parachute Battalion for "Exercise ROOIVALK" (the cover name for Operation BRUILOF), it seems more likely that, if anything was initiated by the breakdown of those talks it would have been BRUILOF and not REINDEER.

329 Ian Uys, *South African Military Who's Who 1452-1992*, p. 256 (appended erratum list).

330 *Military Academy, 1950-1975*, pp. 5, 8, 10, 44, 79 and 80.

331 Uys, *Military Who's Who*, p. 256.

332 Alexander, *Register of Officers*. p. 42.

In 1963 Viljoen found himself commanding a battery of 4 Field Regiment and eventually went on to become the Officer Commanding the School of Artillery. In 1967, while serving as the Colonel “G” (Operations and Intelligence) at Headquarters, Orange Free State Command in Bloemfontein, Viljoen completed the tough and physically demanding parachute course at 1 Parachute Battalion.³³³ As a 34-year old colonel, Viljoen found himself pitted against young men whose average age was about 19 or 20. But as an ascetic, non-smoking teetotaler, who had always made a fetish about personal physical fitness, he had no difficulty in qualifying. A small, wiry yet compact man who was seldom not on the move, Viljoen acquired the name of “*Stofstrepie*” (Little Dust Trail) from his subordinates. He seemed to tear through bureaucracy and indolence, leaving a dust trail behind him, scattered with startled and bemused staff officers.³³⁴ At the time that he had been a regimental officer, only infantrymen were being trained as paratroopers as South Africa had no airborne artillery. But Viljoen was serious about soldiering, and finding himself stationed at a headquarters almost alongside 1 Parachute Battalion, he quickly availed himself of the opportunity to qualify himself and learn something at first hand of a form of warfare which clearly intrigued him. This, despite his seniority in rank at the time.

During 1968 Viljoen was appointed Officer Commanding the SA Army College, where he personally oversaw a radical reorganisation of Staff Duties training for those attending the Army’s top course. He instructed in the concept and tactics of modern mobile operations.³³⁵ On leaving the College he became the Director of Artillery before his promotion to brigadier and appointment as the Army’s Director of Operations. He occupied this key post during the period that the insurgency war along the northern Namibian border began to intensify, and he initiated South Africa’s first operational parachute drops in June 1974.³³⁶ He continued to be an ardent and enthusiastic advocate of the operational employment of paratroopers, although the growing low intensity conflict on the border did not always lend itself to this form of warfare. Nevertheless, his subsequent appointments were to be characterised by a fine grasp of the concept of air mobility in military operations.

At the time of South Africa’s foray into Angola during the civil war of 1975-1976, Viljoen had been promoted to major general and was Director General Operations for the whole of the SADF.³³⁷ This placed him at a military-strategic level where he was significantly distanced from the tactical issues within the Army, over which he would have had no influence at that time. This goes some way towards explaining why the paratroopers were never used in their primary role during the SAVANNAH campaign. Had Viljoen been involved in the tactical level of the operation he would almost certainly have seized the opportunity to concentrate the paratroopers and use them in an airborne role. During the closing stages of the campaign he took over as the General Officer

333 Course group photograph of *Course 47V: Basic Parachute Jumping Course : 6 May – 24 May 1968*, framed and fixed to the wall of the Parachute Training Centre in Tempe, Bloemfontein.

334 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 20.

335 Alexander, *Register of Officers*, p. 5.

336 File Army HQ/G/OPS/3/3 FOCUS, Vol 6, Enclosure 16 dated 10 April 1974 and Vol 7, Enclosure 7 dated 13 May 1974. Also interview with Major General J.P.M. Möller on 29 August 1990.

337 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, p. 64.

Commanding 101 Task Force,³³⁸ the specially created headquarters to oversee all South Africa's military operations along and beyond the northern Namibian border. But by then it was too late: the offensive phase of the campaign was over and the SADF was commencing its withdrawal from Angola.³³⁹ The opportunities to use paratroopers had passed.

Nonetheless, Viljoen immediately instituted the heliborne paratrooper reaction force at Ondangwa, the start of the "Fire Force" concept in the Namibian insurgency war.³⁴⁰ He personally ran certain high-density operations in Ovamboland where he made intense use of the concept, establishing his tactical headquarters at the airfield right next to the paratrooper base.³⁴¹ When Viljoen became Chief of the Army in September 1976, he had first-hand operational experience of the paratroopers and there can be little doubt that they formed an integral part of his aggressive approach to mobile warfare. Although he was by no means obsessed with airborne operations (his operational vision was far wider, encompassing the whole spectrum of military capabilities), he fully recognised the value and the place of airborne forces. Viljoen himself said, "Operations were always my strong point. All operations. I loved operations. I saw the potential in all forces, including paratroops. I was always thinking about how best modern military potential could be used in Southern Africa. Deep objectives were ideal for parachute forces."³⁴²

As Chief of the Army, Viljoen's Director of Operations was Brigadier J.P.F. (Hannes) Botha. A Military Academy B Mil graduate from the University of Stellenbosch, Botha had been a Springbok rugby flanker in the early sixties.³⁴³ He had also served at 1 Parachute Battalion in the first few years of its existence, where he had been in charge of parachute training.³⁴⁴ Though it had been a long time since he had had anything to do with the paratroopers and though he had no operational experience, Botha's early association made him one of the "airborne brotherhood" who would readily accept Viljoen's desire to use the airborne concept. But despite the SADF having had the right men heading the Army for an airborne raid on Cassinga to take place, they had to get past the politicians. Striking an objective that deep inside Angola had serious political implications. Vorster himself, though not one to shirk a decision, was notoriously cautious.³⁴⁵ P.W. Botha, the Minister of Defence, on the other hand, was known as a "hawk". From the very start of his term as Minister he had sought to extend the power and influence of the military under his leadership,³⁴⁶ and he was to take this much further after he became Prime Minister in September 1978.³⁴⁷ The symbiotic relationship between Botha and

338 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, p. 277.

339 Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, p. 269.

340 Interview with Commandant Ian Ritchie (retired) on 5 February 1992. Ritchie commanded the first company of paratroopers to be used in this role.

341 Diary of Major Lew Gerber 13 May – 5 August 1976, entry for 24 May 1976.

342 Interview with General C.L. Viljoen (retired) on 2 May 2002.

343 *Military Academy 1950-1975*, p. 71.

344 Framed photographs of former commanders at the Parachute Training Centre, Tempe, Bloemfontein, where Captain J.P.F. Botha is indicated as having commanded the Parachute Training Centre during 1966 and 1967.

345 Terry Eksteen, *The Statesmen*, pp. 112-138; Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 5 and *SA's Border War*, p. 71.

346 Jan J. van Rooyen, *P.W. Botha – 40 Jaar*, p. 107.

347 Johnson and Martin (eds), *Destructive Engagement*, p. 181. See also "Profiel: P.W. Botha", *Info Bulletin*, No 91/7, SADF 30 August 1991.

his military chiefs, forged during his twelve-year tenure as Defence Minister up to the time of the Cassinga raid, had assured a high level of mutual understanding and perception.³⁴⁸

The intermediary between Botha and the Army was the Chief of the Defence Force, General Magnus Malan. Born in 1930, he matriculated at Dr Danie Craven's Physical Training Brigade in Kimberley in 1948. He was from a politically influential family, his father having been a Member of Parliament for the National Party,³⁴⁹ and in 1950 he joined the Permanent Force. He graduated from the University of Pretoria with a B Sc (Mil) degree in 1954³⁵⁰ and was commissioned into the SA Marine Corps. When it was disbanded a year later he was transferred to the Infantry Corps. He took over from Constand Viljoen as *aide-de-camp* of the Governor General and in 1962, having completed his Staff Duties Course, was sent to Fort Leavenworth in the USA to attend the US Army Command and General Staff College. After a subsequent period of duty seconded to a US Army Mechanised Division, he returned to South Africa to rocket through promotions and occupy choice appointments: Officer Commanding South West Africa Command (1966), the Military Academy (1968) and Western Province Command (1972). In 1973, at the age of 43, he became a major general and the Chief of Army Staff, shooting past many officers who were his seniors of many years and who were veterans of the Second World War. After only a few months he was promoted to lieutenant general and appointed Chief of the Army in the same year. It was clear that Malan had caught the eye of the Minister of Defence (who doubtless would have known his father well in pre-war political circles). The young general oversaw the SA Army's involvement in the period of increasing insurgency war on the northern Namibian border as well as the 1975-1976 incursion into Angola. On 1 September 1976 he was promoted to full general and appointed Chief of the SADF.³⁵¹ Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) his meteoric rise, Malan had never been directly exposed to operational decision-making and he had none of the lower-level command experience and carefully honed military professionalism of Viljoen.

He was no favourite of the paratroopers, as he had crossed swords with them in the past when their flamboyant or over-boisterous behaviour had irked his conservative sense of propriety.³⁵² Nevertheless, he had been hand-picked by Botha and believed that the successful prosecution of the war in Namibia and Angola was vital. He also understood and agreed with the need to carry out the raid on Cassinga. This is clear from the documentation that passed between him and Botha prior to the raid.³⁵³ Just who was responsible for first putting forward the idea of an airborne assault on Cassinga is, however, not clear. Nöthling claims that it was Viljoen ("*Kort na die afstel van dié operasie [BRUILOF] het lt-genl Viljoen voorgestel dat 'n aanval op Cassinga gedoen word daar die*

348 Philip H. Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, pp. 34, 171.

349 Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p. 37.

350 *Military Academy 1950-1975*, pp. 6 and 79.

351 "Generaal Malan neem afskeid", *Info Bulletin*, No 91/7, SADF, 30 August 1991.

352 Interview with Major General "Buddy" Ferreira on 26 February 1991 during which he described an incident when Malan was the Officer Commanding South West Africa Command in 1967, and "Valkerm omvou generaal", Hoofstad, 21 July 1973, where another incident is described which left Malan looking rather undignified in public.

353 For example, the annotated *Voorlegging oor die Noodsaaklikheid van Oorwoë Militêre Operasies teen SWAPO in Angola*, File CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), Enclosure 44.

vyand nie so iets sou verwag nie” – Shortly after the postponement of this operation [BRUILOF], Lt Gen Viljoen suggested that an attack on Cassinga be carried out, as the enemy would not expect such a thing),³⁵⁴ though he gives no reference for this claim. This is very likely, as it is in line with Viljoen’s intense and aggressive interest in the nitty-gritty of operations and his propagation of the airborne concept. If he did not initiate the idea, he was certainly going out of his way to propagate it.

The viability of a deep airborne strike had only recently been illustrated by the Rhodesians in their assaults on Chimoio and Tembue during Operation DINGO on 23 and 26 November 1977. Using six Dakota aircraft and 42 Alouette helicopters supported by more than 20 bombers and ground-attack aircraft, they had dropped 145 paratroopers and 40 heliborne troops, first on Chimoio, the enormous alleged ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) operational headquarters and complex of guerrilla training and staging camps some 90km inside Mozambique, and three days later on Tembue, another alleged staging base much further north, some 225km from the border.³⁵⁵ Due to the element of surprise, these assaults resulted in some 1,200 insurgents being killed and the bases being destroyed, whilst the Rhodesians lost only one paratrooper.³⁵⁶ Some reports gave the ZANLA casualties as over 2,000 killed, and although there were claims that most had been women and children, international reaction was generally muted. The raids, not surprisingly, had a huge impact on the collective psyche of the ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) leadership.³⁵⁷

Quite plainly Viljoen was aware of these raids and their results. As Chief of the Army he would have been kept very much up to date on the war in progress in South Africa’s northern neighbour, and he personally visited Rhodesia on occasion to acquaint himself with the situation there.³⁵⁸ This again is in keeping with Viljoen’s hands-on approach to soldiering. His very practicality no doubt set his active mind thinking of the SADF’s potential to substantially surpass the magnitude of the Rhodesian raids. A deeper raid onto a larger objective could conceivably deal an even greater blow to the insurgent organisation that South Africa was opposing.

Viljoen’s approach perhaps epitomises the role of the professional soldier in structural violence. This general had a reputation as one who cared for his men, who was understanding and who treated others with respect. Personally, though he was often impetuous in his tendency to make quick decisions, he was not given to violence nor to displays of temper.³⁵⁹ Yet as a soldier he was trained in the application of military force. When required to employ that force he did so, unhesitatingly and effectively to achieve his aim. As the Chief of South Africa’s Army he was directly involved in determining the military strategy required to resolve an essentially political problem. He claims to

354 Nöthling, *Operasie Reindeer*, p. 6.

355 Cole, *The Elite*, pp. 169-189.

356 David Cauter, *Under the Skin*, p. 140.

357 Paul L. Moorcraft and Peter McLaughlin, *Chimurenga!*, p. 194 and Cole, *The Elite*, p. 188.

358 Moorcraft *et al*, *Chimurenga!*, pp. 164-165. Viljoen is shown in conversation with the Rhodesian Air Force and Army Chiefs, photographed at an airfield inside Rhodesia.

359 Personal observations of Viljoen’s behaviour as a general, when I, as a very junior officer, encountered him on various occasions.

have realised at an early stage that there was no military solution to the problem.³⁶⁰ He therefore saw his role as one of winning time for the politicians to find a political solution. Strategically, it meant hitting SWAPO where it was most likely to paralyse the organisation for the longest possible period of time. This would give the South Africans the initiative and provide the politicians with the time needed to negotiate from a position of strength. Accordingly, Viljoen saw Cassinga as a vital point in SWAPO's military strategy, and he believed that its destruction would be a body blow to SWAPO, which it would be difficult for the organisation to recover from. This would require violent action, and the distance and intervening obstacles compelled him to consider an airborne option. No doubt the success of the Rhodesian raids served to reinforce his conviction that such an option was extremely viable, despite the risks it would entail.³⁶¹

From the side of the SWAPO protagonists the argument is usually advanced that the raid on Cassinga was a purely political decision. There is no argument that it took place at a politically sensitive time (see Chapter 2). It has been shown that by early January 1978 the "proximity talks" in New York had begun, with members of the Western Five shuttling between SWAPO and South African delegations, as South Africa refused to talk directly to SWAPO. When the talks broke down in February with South African Foreign Minister "Pik" Botha's walk-out, he declared that certain aspects of the proposals that had been made "would be totally unacceptable and so dangerous that there is a serious danger of people in the territory being overrun and being governed by a Marxist terrorist organisation."³⁶²

Botha's melodramatic grandstanding led to frantic further activity by the contact group made up of the Western Five. A delegation of their leaders, under US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, flew to South Africa to discuss the matter with the government. Then, on 25 April 1978 the South African government announced that it accepted their proposals for a settlement in Namibia.³⁶³ SWAPO had never been comfortable with the role of the Western Five in the negotiations. It regarded their actions as bypassing the UN and as being biased in favour of the South Africans. As the talks progressed, SWAPO had become increasingly suspicious, sensing that the South African strategy was to sow distrust in the minds of the SWAPO leadership, ultimately manipulating them into breaking off the talks and thereby leaving the impression that it was only the South Africans who were serious about finding a settlement. Accordingly, SWAPO harboured deep reservations about the Western Five proposals. The very day before South Africa's acceptance announcement, 27 leading members of SWAPO's internal wing had been arrested in Windhoek. The timing was interpreted by SWAPO as an attempt to provoke them into rejecting the talks and the proposals.³⁶⁴ Heywood implies that Vorster's acceptance of the Western Plan was also designed to intimidate SWAPO into negative

360 Hilton Hamman, *Days of the Generals*, pp. 55-56.

361 Interview with Gen C.L. Viljoen (retired) on 2 May 2002.

362 Johnson and Martin, *Destructive Engagement*, pp. 116-117. David Soggot, *Namibia: the Violent Heritage*, gives a good rendition of the political wrangling that took place over this time. See pp. 226-232. A US perspective of the role of the "Western Five" is to be found in Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, pp. 37-43. Given the discussions at Oubos on 29 December 1977 (*vide Notas oor Vergadering*) where the South African strategy for this meeting was considered, it is very apparent that this was probably seen as the opportunity to find the excuse to break off negotiations.

363 David S. McLellan, *Cyrus Vance*, p. 98.

364 Soggot, *Namibia*, pp. 226, 227 and 231.

reaction. By this action Vorster had gained for himself credibility in the world at large: "With one single masterstroke international sympathisers had been swung towards a seemingly transformed South Africa, while SWAPO had overnight been placed into the position of a petulant *enfant terrible* if it should react impulsively."³⁶⁵

On 28 April, during the 9th Special Session on Namibia of the UN General Assembly, Sam Nujoma, the President of SWAPO, addressed the Assembly and affirmed SWAPO's agreement to the requirements of Resolution 385. But he remained cautiously suspicious of the plan offered by the Western Five. Judging by the international media reports as late as 2 May, South Africa still very much held the diplomatic initiative.³⁶⁶ It seems strange that she was prepared to relinquish that initiative to again become the bully-boy in the eyes of the world by launching an aggressive lightning strike deep into Angola against SWAPO. Though Heywood is adamant that "the massacre was planned with brutal cynicism to forestall a breakthrough in negotiations with the United Nations which might have led to free and fair elections in Namibia,"³⁶⁷ the view of the South African military was, perhaps predictably, very different. For the generals it seems, an imminent settlement of the Namibian issue was highly unlikely at that time: an unrealistic and idealistic pipe-dream of the Western Five.³⁶⁸ And it needs constantly to be borne in mind that a military strategy as well as a politico-diplomatic one was being followed by both SWAPO and South Africa, the former strategy supposedly subject to the latter.

According to Constand Viljoen, SWAPO had, throughout the negotiations involving the Western Five, been trying hard to gain political initiative through its increased military actions (see Chapter 2 p. 37). Though there had been a high level of insurgent activity at the time of the "Oubos Meeting", it had shown a steady decrease during the first part of 1978.³⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the SADF regarded it as a high frequency of incidents when compared to those of previous years, particularly when, during April 1978, there was again an increase, and the Minister of Defence's office was reminded by Military Intelligence that Sam Nujoma had, in the previous four months, emphasised the intended intensification of the armed struggle. He had stated that the political/diplomatic struggle only supports the armed struggle. Military intelligence went on to say that there had been unconfirmed indications of a SWAPO arms build-up in southern Angola while the USSR and Cuba had recently promised increased support for the liberation of Southern Africa.³⁷⁰

365 Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p. 63.

366 Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p. 65.

367 Heywood, *the Cassinga Event*, p. 70.

368 Interview with General C.L. Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

369 "Terrorisvoorvalle in SWA: Okt 77-Mei 78," Appendix A to *Military and Intelligence Situation in SWA and Angola: 1 June 78*, MI/203/4/4501 (Secret), dated 1 June 1978, File MV/48/3 (Top Secret), Vol 17, Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No 157. A graph shows the last three months of 1977 as reflecting 13 cases of intimidation, 94 landmine incidents and 75 skirmishes or "contacts". For the first three months of 1978 the figures are 15 cases of intimidation, 51 landmine incidents and 54 contacts. (*Belangrikste Insidente Sedert Januarie 1978*, document contained in file HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER, Vol 2). This document does not list security force clashes with SWAPO guerrillas but does include incidents involving civilians. There are three political assassinations, two murders, one abduction of a family, two abductions of busloads of people, four mine deaths and six injuries and two deaths of children from a hand grenade. Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, pp. 74-75 mentions over 20 clashes between the SADF and PLAN resulting in the capture of one South African, the deaths of eleven and the deaths of 39 guerrillas and one civilian member of the local population between January and May 1978.

370 Signal WF/904/29 April 1978 (Secret) from C SADF 2 to Mil Secr (Cape Town), File MV/48/3 (Top Secret), Vol 17.

Viljoen claimed that there was never any question of carrying out a raid to provoke SWAPO into withdrawing from negotiations: rather it was an effort to show them up as militarily weak and incompetent. The idea of an attack on Cassinga, says Viljoen, was not a political decision: it was a military proposal. Viljoen saw Cassinga as a vital point in SWAPO's strategy and was adamant that the base had to be destroyed if South Africa was to regain the initiative in the insurgency war. He stressed that it had been very difficult to get Vorster and his cabinet to agree to the raid.³⁷¹ In line with this, Saunders points out that the South African parliamentary record shows that even the Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, was unhappy with the plan and had only reluctantly gone along with the decision to accept it.³⁷² Interestingly, however, Van Wyk claims that the South African cabinet was divided fifty-fifty over the envisaged attack on Cassinga. Botha, states Van Wyk, brazenly came out with the offer that, should the attack be a success, the cabinet could take the credit; should it fail, he would resign. Vorster's response to this was a sharp rebuke: "*Ek is die eerste minister, nie jy nie. En of dinge goed gaan of sleg, ek vat die uiteindelijke verantwoordelikheid*", (I am the prime minister, not you. And whether things go well or badly, I take the ultimate responsibility). Vorster then decided, against the view of Foreign Minister Pik Botha, to carry out the raid.³⁷³

Viljoen identified the Minister of Economic Affairs, Owen Horwood, as having been particularly opposed to the idea of a deep raid into Angola. He voiced fears of an economic backlash and a fall in the value of the South African currency. Viljoen felt that in the event the raid had had the opposite effect: it showed South Africa as being a strong country so investor confidence grew. Viljoen claims to have threatened to cancel the whole operation unless the attack on Cassinga was approved. He regarded it as crucial to the military strategy at the time that a truly telling blow be struck against SWAPO, and he considered Cassinga the ideal target to achieve this. Only to have attacked those bases just across the border would not have been worth the effort as that would not have had a lasting effect on SWAPO's operational capability.³⁷⁴ Whether Viljoen's belligerent attitude could in fact have prevailed against strong-willed individuals such as John Vorster, P.W. Botha and Magnus Malan is a moot point. However, he was himself a powerful personality and respect for his professionalism as a soldier was widespread. When he spoke on the military situation he did so with authority and even Malan, who had been an Officer Cadet with him in the early 1950s and who had been his class mate on the Staff Course in the early 1960s, would have been acutely aware and perhaps a little in awe of the operational insight of this one-time winner of the Sword of Honour who had shown him the ropes when Malan took over from him as the Governor General's ADC back in 1958.

Nevertheless, Viljoen's immediate bosses, Malan and Botha, most definitely had sufficient information in the form of intelligence reports and operational appreciations to be fully aware of the military situation themselves. They must have had some propensity to approve the raid. What could

371 Interview with General C.L. Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

372 Christopher Saunders, "Cassinga", book review in *Southern African Review of Books*, September/October 1994.

373 Van Wyk, *Dirk Mudge*, p. 115.

374 Interview with General C.L. Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

be unearthed in the Defence Force's archives certainly indicates no aversion to the raid going ahead. The Top Secret document giving the briefing for the necessity of deliberate military operations against SWAPO carries numerous annotations in the hand of P.W. Botha that indicate an unconditional acceptance of the principle of carrying out the attacks.³⁷⁵ Though the document lacks a date, it appears to be introducing the reader (the Minister of Defence) to the need for an attack on target Alpha (the South African code name for Cassinga). This would date it prior to the decision being made to attack Cassinga. Botha notes that the raids "will also be good for other people in Southern Africa" (*"Dit sal ook ander mense in Suider-Afr goed doen"*). The document assures him that no civilians will be encountered at the objectives, but goes on to warn that the execution of the raids ran the risk of international criticism and UN and Security Council actions which could lead to intensified sanctions. A further possible disadvantage could be revenge action against South African prisoners-of-war held by SWAPO. Botha corrected certain terminological definitions (clandestine operations, hot pursuit operations and deliberate operations) that he felt were not in line with the "Oubos decision", but he returned the document to General Malan without noting any reservations about the operation.

Viljoen feels that the South African military had a far better grasp of the political implications of such an attack than did the politicians. According to him the generals knew that SWAPO would never agree to a settlement at that time. Even then the SADF chiefs were saying that they were, through military action, only gaining time for the politicians to achieve a political settlement. He believed that it was not a situation in which a military solution could be found.³⁷⁶ The Cassinga raid was thus seen by Viljoen (and presumably other SADF chiefs) as a means of delivering a significant blow to SWAPO's military campaign, thereby allowing the politicians breathing space to reach a political solution. He is adamant that the generals did not believe that their political bosses were on the verge of reaching that solution at the end of April 1978.

Whatever the case, there is a substantial body of opinion, even outside SWAPO's ranks, which showed distinct suspicion at the timing of the raid on Cassinga. The United States's Cyrus Vance wrote, some five years later, that he questioned South Africa's sincerity in trying to negotiate an acceptable settlement. He argued that, given the magnitude of the raid, the South African government must have been fully aware of its preparations even as Vorster was agreeing to the proposal of the Western Five.³⁷⁷ Certainly Vorster, in the discussions at Oubos, had reserved the right to personally sanction every cross-border operation precisely because he wanted to consider its effect on the political and diplomatic situation.³⁷⁸ The view from inside SWAPO was that "the attack on Cassinga...seems clearly to have been an attempt by South Africa to get SWAPO to reject the proposals or delay in responding to them." Hence SWAPO's agreement to the proposals despite

375 *Voorlegging oor die Noodsaaklikheid van Oorwoë Militêre Operasies teen SWAPO in Angola*, File CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), Enclosure 44.

376 Interview with General C.L. Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

377 Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices – Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy*, p. 305

378 *Notas oor Vergadering*, p. 6.

the raid.³⁷⁹ SWAPO was certainly nervous about South Africa's military intentions at the time. As late as 24 April 1978 (just 10 days before the raid was carried out), Nujoma, in his address at the opening of the 9th Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Questions of Namibia, had stated:

“... we have gathered irrefutable evidence through our own sources inside Namibia and from combatants of PLAN of an extensive enemy military build-up and activities in Namibia.”³⁸⁰

He went on to warn that this was part of a two-pronged strategy by the South Africans to frustrate and suppress the aspirations for independence of the Namibians and to “undermine the stability, peace and territorial integrity of the neighbouring independent African states.” South Africa, he warned, had continuously used Namibia as a springboard to commit wanton aggression against the People's Republic of Angola and the Republic of Zambia.

Whatever the reason for the raid, the decision, as will be seen, both whether and when to launch the attack, remained in the balance right up to the last, impacting negatively on both security and morale amongst the South African forces. The South African cabinet, it seems, were jittery throughout, with neither the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence nor the Chief of the SADF quite at ease about the planned operation. In the meantime the campaign of “climate creation” (*klimaatskepping*) had been embarked on by the South Africans. An SADF signal indicated that Botha and Malan were unhappy about the lack of substance in this “climate creation” and were unconvinced about its effect in the light of the acceptance by South Africa of Western proposals on 24 April. Indications were that the operation would be postponed by 48 hours while further “climate creation” took place.³⁸¹

This involved priming the media by providing them with a steady stream of propaganda about SWAPO's insurgent activities. Such information was designed to convince the public that SWAPO's “terrorist campaign” was escalating to a totally unacceptable level. The intention was to make the raid, when it eventually did take place, justified in the eyes of the public.³⁸² The whole “climate creation” campaign though, went much further than the media releases of the SADF's Military Intelligence propaganda arm (known as Communication Operations, or “Comops”). It extended to the political and diplomatic level with indignant protests being made by South Africa in international forums and was part of the greater South African effort to constantly show SWAPO up in a poor light (for example, Foreign Minister “Pik” Botha's walkout from the “proximity talks” arranged by the Western Five in New York in February 1978). So far did this “climate creation” go that some events along the northern Namibian border were deliberately twisted by the SADF to give the impression that SWAPO was inflicting more damage than was actually the case.³⁸³ Though no evidence of inter-

379 Katjavivi, *Resistance in Namibia*, p 119.

380 *Massacre at Cassinga*, p. 11. During his closing address to the General Assembly on the final day of the Special Session, 3 May 1978, the day before the raid on Cassinga took place, Nujoma stated that “SWAPO... will persevere and intensify the armed liberation struggle” (“SA message urges Big Five to act”, *The Star*, 6 May 1978).

381 File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Vol. 1 (Top Secret), Enclosure 26, Signal from C Army to Tac HQ Ondangwa, dd 30 April 1978, Archive “Aanvullende Dokumente”, Group “OD 1968”, Box No. 83.

382 Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p. 73; Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 31.

383 Nöthling, *Operasie Reindeer*, p. 7. An instance is described where two special forces soldiers died in an explosives accident and this was coupled to a completely unrelated incident on 28 April 1978 where two SWAPO insurgents were killed.

departmental co-ordination has been found to support this, it seems reasonable to assume that the SADF's Military Intelligence and the South African Department of Foreign Affairs were orchestrating their efforts. The dovetailing of their actions could hardly have been a coincidence at that crucial stage in the run-up to the raid. This once again raises the question of the absence of integrity of Military Intelligence, and perpetuates the shadow of doubt cast over their portrayal of the nature of the camp at Cassinga.

The decision to carry out the raid on Cassinga, however, had been made in principle, probably sometime early in April 1978. It now remained for the Army and the Air Force to finalise their planning, for the troops to be mobilised and for rehearsals to take place.

DEDUCTIONS

Towards the end of 1977 the South African military had managed to persuade their apparently reluctant political masters of the need to strike insurgent liberation movements such as SWAPO inside their neighbouring host countries. Though this was done by emphasising the political value of such actions in achieving political objectives during the envisaged elections in Namibia, the SADF aim appears to have been to pre-empt guerrilla incursions. The first such strike planned had to be cancelled due to security leaks, but the reservist parachute units intended to be used were as a result better able to prepare themselves for subsequent deployment. The paratroopers, it was felt, provided a significant "deep strike" capability, so in a revised plan they were allocated the objective of Cassinga. This was largely due to the Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, who was an enthusiastic proponent of aggressive pre-emptive action and therefore of the concept of vertical envelopment. He seems to have been principally responsible for persuading the Chief of the SADF, General Magnus Malan, and the Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, to agree to an airborne assault on Cassinga.

Politically, South Africa's co-operation in the settlement initiative of the Western Five had placed it in a favourable light internationally on the eve of the planned raid on Cassinga. The raid itself was seen by SWAPO as aimed at provoking them into withdrawing from the negotiations of the Western Five, but the SADF insisted that it had a primarily military aim and that the decision was not prompted by political considerations. Whatever the reasons, South Africa embarked on a campaign of "climate creation" in an effort to prepare the South African public and the world for the intended raid, despite continued uncertainty by the government politicians. The SADF was ready and anxious to launch Operation REINDEER by the end of April 1978 and although political approval had been given in principle there remained an apparent element of doubt in the minds of the political masters in government.

CHAPTER 6

PLANNING AND PREPARATIONS

- Appendix A: Organigramme of the Army Forces employed in Operation REINDEER.
- B: Organigramme of the Airborne Force used for Operation REINDEER.
- C: Air Force Contingent used for Operation REINDEER.
- D: Organigramme of the Composite Parachute Battalion used for the Airborne Assault on Cassinga.
- E: Allocation of Paratroops to Aircraft

For Operation REINDEER an *ad hoc* command and control organisation was set up for the duration of the offensive. The old 101 Task Force Headquarters, established during South Africa's intervention in the Angolan civil war, had been disbanded as recently as January 1978.³⁸⁴ The last General Officer Commanding the Task Force had been Major General Ian Gleeson, who had become the Chief of Army Staff Operations in Pretoria.³⁸⁵ As such, he was Viljoen's right-hand man and handled all the SA Army's operational matters.

It had been felt that, with operations restricted to the Namibian side of the border except for occasional shallow incursions of short duration, the headquarters of 1 and 2 Military Areas could handle the command and control in the so-called "operational area" without the co-ordinating role of the Task Force HQ. Both now fell directly under the command of the General Officer Commanding South West Africa Command, at the time Major General Jannie Geldenhuys.³⁸⁶ But with the decision to carry out Operation REINDEER it was immediately apparent that the level of command of 2 Military Area (opposite whose area of responsibility the raids were to take place) was too low for an operation of that magnitude. Yet the Headquarters of South West Africa Command in Windhoek were too far away to effectively exercise command over the operation. It was therefore decided to establish a temporary tactical headquarters at the Ondangwa Air Force Base and Gleeson who, as Chief of Army Staff Operations had been involved in the initial planning, was appointed to take overall command of the operation³⁸⁷ (see Appendix A to this chapter). For him it was a sudden return to the stamping grounds he had left barely three months earlier. According to Geldenhuys, Gleeson and his fellow Air Force and Medical Service commanders were appointed, because they had been

384 Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag*, p. 30.

385 *Notule van Konferensie Gehou by Leër HK*, H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 ALG (Secret) dd 28 March 1978.

386 Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA Gebiedsmag*, p. 30. Also Jannie Geldenhuys, *Dié wat Wen*, p.47.

387 *Oorlogsdagboek: SWA Tak HK (Ops REINDEER)*, 29 April – 8 May 1978, Archive OD – 1968, Box No 467. In an interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson (retired) on 16 January 2003, he confirmed that his appointment was largely due to his knowledge of the area and the situation as a result of his recent stint as the GOC 101 Task Force. Geldenhuys, on the other hand, was brand new in the job as GOC SWA Command and had none of the "feel" for the operational situation that Gleeson did. Similarly, the return of Colonel "Blackie" de Swart as the commander of the Air Force component for the duration of the operation was based on his recent tenure as OC 301 Air Component.

involved in the initial planning which had ultimately led to Operation REINDEER.³⁸⁸ Presumably this referred to Operation BRUILOF.

The objectives Gleeson had to attack were spread over a wide area that was divided into three “sectors”, and a force was allocated to attack the objectives in each sector.³⁸⁹ The Western Sector was made the responsibility of the Officer Commanding 2 Military Area, Colonel André “Kat” Liebenberg. He had a total of nine SWAPO forward operational bases to attack, including the largest one, code-named “Bravo” by the South Africans and “Vietnam” by SWAPO. To do this he had at his disposal a composite mechanised battle group called “Juliet”, equipped with the new Ratel infantry combat vehicles and Eland armoured cars and supported by 5.5 inch medium artillery. Battle Group Juliet was commanded by Commandant Frank Bestbier, a long-time paratrooper and veteran of the Angolan civil war.³⁹⁰ Liebenberg also had three motorised combat teams mounted in Buffel mine-resistant vehicles, with some armoured cars and also supported by artillery.

The Eastern Sector was allocated to the Officer Commanding 32 Battalion, Commandant Gert Nel, another paratrooper of long standing.³⁹¹ He was given some 18 small bases to attack and destroy and provided with a heliborne reserve of two paratrooper hawk groups as well as artillery support. His battalion would be moving mainly on foot, under command of his deputy, Commandant Eddie Viljoen, with transport by helicopter when these were available.

The Central Sector was allocated to the newly-announced, but yet-to-be-established parachute brigade under Brigadier M.J. du Plessis, and he would have only one objective: the largest of them all, code-named “Alpha” by the South Africans, “Moscow” by SWAPO, but soon to be known to the world by its actual name of Cassinga. The series of raids was planned to take place in three consecutive phases: first the paratroopers would attack and destroy Alpha at first light; then the mechanised battle group would attack Bravo, while two of the motorised combat teams could hit smaller bases; lastly, the infantrymen of 32 Battalion would move across the border and spend three days attacking and destroying the smaller bases in the east.

At 07h30 on 29 April 1978, according to the War Diary of SWA Tactical HQ, Major General Gleeson and his staff arrived at Ondangwa from Windhoek and opened the Tactical Headquarters. At 12h30 the same day they were joined by Lieutenant General Viljoen, the Chief of the South African Army. Except for his foray to the battlefield on 4 May 1978, he would remain at this Tactical Headquarters where the tactical decisions were made, until the conclusion of Operation REINDEER.³⁹² It seems that the intention had been for Operation REINDEER to take place between 24 April and 27 May 1978. Working within these parameters an intelligence appreciation dated 24 April 1978

388 Geldenhuys, *Dié Wat Wen*, p.73.

389 SA Army Operational Instruction H LEëR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER (Top Secret), dd 21 April 1978, Enclosure 3 in File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive “Aanvullende Dokumente”, Group OD – 1968, Box No 83. This document provided the details of the sectors and the allocated force levels.

390 Du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola*, p. 80; Breytenbach, *Forged in Battle*, p. 63.

391 Interview with Brigadier Gert Nel on 26 February 1991.

392 *Oorlogsdagboek: SWA Tak HK, loc cit.*

recommended that the operation be launched on 28 April, or as soon as possible after that, but preferably before 1 May. Based on this, the Defence Force Chief of Staff Operations recommended to the Chief of the SADF that D-Day be 1 May 1978.³⁹³

For the Citizen Force paratroopers who had been sent home on Friday 17 March 1978 after the abortion of Operation BRUILOF,³⁹⁴ Operation REINDEER began barely five weeks later when they were called up again. On 18 April they received telegrams instructing them to report on 22 April for a four-week training camp to last until 19 May.³⁹⁵ This time no university or college students were called up,³⁹⁶ and the call-up took place under the cover-story of a large divisional exercise, fortuitously being held over the same period near Kimberley, and code-named "KWIKSILWER".³⁹⁷

The decision had been made that only one battalion of paratroopers would be used in Operation REINDEER, not two as had been envisaged for Operation BRUILOF. But the call-up for BRUILOF had depleted the available forces. Very few civilian employers were prepared to release their paratroop employees for a second stint of military service at such short notice and after having barely returned from their previous "camp". In addition, the embargo on the call-up of full-time students further cut down on the numbers of paratroopers who could be called up. A composite battalion would therefore have to be put together from 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions.

But who would command this unit?

It was precisely at this tactical level that the paratroopers arguably had their greatest asset in a hardened and experienced combat commander. Jan Breytenbach was the eldest child in an old, liberal, Cape Afrikaner family. Born in Bonnievale in 1932, he was one of four remarkable siblings. His younger brothers each achieved fame in their chosen fields: Breyten became a renowned Afrikaans author and anti-apartheid activist who was imprisoned by the Nationalist government; Cloete became a photo-journalist who produced many photo-essays and books on Africa. Their sister Rachel became an academic at Rhodes University.³⁹⁸

But Jan chose soldiering. He entered the newly established Military Gymnasium in Pretoria in 1950, joined the Permanent Force as a Cadet Officer and was Constand Viljoen's senior by a year at the SA Army College.³⁹⁹ Certainly, they came to know one another well at the time. He was awarded the Sword of Honour in 1953 and commissioned into the SA Armoured Corps. Disillusioned by the political meddling of Defence Minister F.C. Erasmus, he resigned and joined the Royal Navy in 1956.

393 Enclosure 42 of file CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER, Vol 1, Archive HS Ops, Group 5, Box No 121.

394 Diary of Commandant Lew Gerber, entry for 17 March 1978.

395 Copy of telegramme received by Staff Sergeant N.O. Grobler.

396 *Noutie van 'n Konferensie Gehou by Leër HK*, dd 28 March 1978, *loc cit*.

397 Top Secret signal from Lieutenant General Viljoen to General Malan, H LE&R/928/APR 78 dd 14 April 1978, Enclosure 2, file CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret). Allegations that Exercise KWIKSILWER was especially arranged as a cover for Operation REINDEER can be discounted. There is no documentation to support this view, and there certainly would have been, had the allegation been true. An exercise of the magnitude of KWIKWILWER has to be budgeted for and scheduled at least a year in advance, and the call-up of Citizen Force soldiers was normally done three months in advance.

398 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 28 December 1990. Also Chris Louw, "Profiel van 'n Vegsoldaat", *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, December 1992/January 1993, p. 12.

399 *Military Academy 1950-1975*, pp. 8 and 79-80.

Passing out as the best all-round midshipman he served in the Fleet Air Arm as an observer, flying from aircraft carriers and sailing all over the world. As such he participated in the airborne assault by the British on Suez.⁴⁰⁰

He married an English girl, but when South Africa became a republic in 1961 they returned to the land of his birth and he rejoined the SA Army, becoming one of the first South Africans to be trained as a paratrooper in the country. Breytenbach served in 1 Parachute Battalion for eight years. During this time he attended a ten-month Infantry Officers' Career Course at Fort Benning in the USA, where he was also able to jump with the American paratroopers while gaining insights into their tactical thinking and techniques.⁴⁰¹ In 1966 he commanded the paratrooper contingent that participated in the first action of the war in Namibia when a helicopter assault was carried out on the SWAPO base at Ongulumbashe.⁴⁰² The following year, with ten other South African paratroopers, Breytenbach attended the formidable Rhodesian Special Air Service (SAS) selection course followed by advanced SAS training.⁴⁰³

In 1969 he and three other hand-picked paratroopers who were under his command, were sent on a top-secret mission, masquerading as mercenaries, to assist the Biafrans in the Nigerian civil war. For his part in the war Breytenbach was decorated by the President of Gabon.⁴⁰⁴ This adventure led directly to the founding of South Africa's first special forces unit, 1 Reconnaissance Commando ("The Recces") with Jan Breytenbach as its commander.⁴⁰⁵ In this role he led clandestine operations into Zambia, Tanzania (raiding Dar-es-Salaam harbour from a submarine), Angola and Mozambique.⁴⁰⁶ The Recces underwent specialist attack diver training with the French Airborne at Ijaccio on the island of Corsica in the Mediterranean, and on 22 January 1974 Breytenbach and five of his Recces parachuted into Mozambique with 35 Rhodesian SAS paratroopers in an operation against ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) guerrillas only weeks before the *coup* in Portugal.⁴⁰⁷ It was the first operational parachute jump by South African Army soldiers since the Second World War.

When South Africa became involved in the Angolan civil war in 1975, Breytenbach was the first training team commander sent to assist the FNLA (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* – National Front for the Liberation of Angola). He formed a battalion of FNLA forces known as "Bravo Group" and led them as part of Task Force Zulu, participating in a phenomenal advance across southern Angola to the coast, then up towards Luanda, fighting one battle after another, first against

400 Commandant E.G.M. Alexander, Commandant G.K.B. Barron and Commander A.J. Bateman, *South African Orders, Decorations and Medals*, p. 119; Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 28 December 1990.

401 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 28 December 1990.

402 Interim report: Operation "BLOUWILDEBEES" (Top Secret), dated 7 September 1966.

403 Interview with Brigadier Frank Bestbier on 27 February 1991. Bestbier also underwent the training.

404 Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 27-33. Confirmed by interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 28 December 1990.

405 File G/OPS/2/1 (1 Recce Comdo), Vol 1 (Secret), Enclosures 9 and 22, Archive C Army Group, Box No. 650 and File 30, Reports, Archive K87/42, Box No. 226.

406 Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 44-54.

407 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 28 December 1990.

the MPLA and then against the Cubans. They spent months taking part in some of the heaviest fighting of the war. When the South Africans withdrew from Angola, Breytenbach brought Bravo Group with him and eventually engineered their absorption into the SADF as the notorious 32 Battalion.⁴⁰⁸ He commanded them for another year, conducting shallow counter-guerrilla operations into Angola, and then, in 1977 he was sent on the SA Army's Staff Duties Course.⁴⁰⁹

At the time of the Cassinga raid, therefore, Colonel Jan Breytenbach was probably the most experienced combat commander in the SADF. Certainly he was the most highly decorated soldier in the SA Army⁴¹⁰ and one of the very few to have first hand experience of parachute operations. He had an intimate knowledge of the fighting capabilities of SWAPO, the MPLA, the Cubans and many other forces in Africa. Given the pivotal role that the planned attack on Cassinga played in the SADF's overall strategy, the risks always associated with an airborne operation and the fact that it would be the first time that a strike of this nature was attempted by the SADF, the choice of a man like Breytenbach to command the parachute battalion would have been logical. Though a battalion commander would normally have been a lieutenant colonel (*commandant* in South African military parlance at the time) the circumstances could certainly have justified using a full colonel. Both Citizen Force battalions had commandants as commanders, but neither officer had ever been in high-intensity combat, both were part-time "weekend soldiers", and this was a very complex operation. In some quarters it was also said that their performances during the rehearsal for Operation BRUILOF were not considered satisfactory by Chief of the Army,⁴¹¹ but this is a moot point.

Personalities often play a disproportionate role in elite military units, and this was especially so in the South African paratroops. Such units tend to attract strong personalities and these invariably clash. The planning for the Cassinga Raid and the command and control set-up was a classic example of this. Breytenbach and the new Parachute Brigade commander, Brigadier M.J. du Plessis, had a relationship that made conflict inevitable.

Their paths had first crossed when they had been officer cadets on the same course at the Military College in the early 1950s. It would seem that even then the two had taken a dislike to one another. Breytenbach, as has been noted, passed out as the top cadet, winning the Sword of Honour in 1953. Du Plessis readily acknowledged that Breytenbach was "*n donderse intelligente bliksem*" (loosely, "a bloody intelligent bastard"), but that certainly did not endear Breytenbach to the man who was now his commanding officer.⁴¹²

Du Plessis didn't have Breytenbach's charisma, nor his vast operational experience. Much more conventional with a solidly conservative Afrikaner background, Du Plessis had attended school in the

408 The participation of Bravo Group in the Angolan civil war and the subsequent establishment of 32 Battalion, including the role played by Jan Breytenbach, are well documented in Spies, *Operasie Savannah*, Du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola* and Breytenbach, *Forged in Battle* and *They Live by the Sword*.

409 Alexander, *Register of Officers*, p. 63.

410 Alexander, *et al*, *SA Orders Decorations and Medals*, p. 119.

411 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

412 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

rural town of Rustenburg in the Transvaal. Commissioned in March 1953, he was one of only six second lieutenants in the then miniscule South African Infantry Corps. He spent an uneventful eight years stationed in Potchefstroom, serving in 2 Special Service Battalion, which became 1 SA Infantry Battalion, and was later appointed adjutant of 1 Mobile Watch. Always a keen sportsman, he represented South Africa in the pentathlon event at the 1958 Commonwealth Games in Cardiff, thereby gaining his Springbok colours.⁴¹³

In 1961 he had volunteered for parachute training on the first such course to be held in South Africa. As the senior officer on the course (he was a captain at the time) he carried out the first jump to be done by a South African-trained paratrooper, landing in the De Brug training area. It was on this course that he and Jan Breytenbach again met up. With them on the course was Hannes Botha, and all three officers went on to immediately qualify as parachute instructors.⁴¹⁴ Thereafter they served together at the newly-established 1 Parachute Battalion, with Du Plessis becoming second-in-command of the unit in 1964. Though Breytenbach was one rank lower than Du Plessis, having lost seniority due to his five-year stint with the Royal Navy, he enjoyed a particularly close relationship with the Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion, Commandant Willem Louw. Louw, in fact, had gone out of his way to recruit Breytenbach for the paratroops.⁴¹⁵ Du Plessis, on the other hand, was not a favourite of Louw's and the latter eventually had him transferred out of the unit when Du Plessis was the second-in-command and in line to become the next commander.⁴¹⁶

In 1967 Du Plessis was sent to Rhodesia with the first batch of South African policeman to be deployed there. Ostensibly the commander of the police company, Du Plessis was in fact training the police major to do the job.⁴¹⁷ It was a quiet three months during which they saw no action, and on his return Du Plessis received the surprising news that he had been promoted and appointed Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion. Now two ranks higher than Breytenbach and his immediate commander,⁴¹⁸ the antagonism between the two intensified, with Du Plessis finding Breytenbach's cavalier attitude towards administration and logistics quite unacceptable. After little more than a year, both Du Plessis and Breytenbach were transferred out: the latter went on to fight for Biafra and to found South Africa's special forces, while Du Plessis was promoted, established the Civil Defence College for women in George and later commanded first Eastern Province Command and then Orange Free State Command. During the last three months of Operation SAVANNAH, Brigadier Du Plessis was the Officer Commanding 2 Military Area, based in Oshakati. It was a role in which he was clearly uncomfortable, experiencing difficulty controlling his over-enthusiastic subordinate colonels, highly offended by the equipment and disciplinary bedlam that accompanied South Africa's withdrawal from Angola and disconcerted by the absence of clear orders from higher

413 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

414 Course photograph, *Parachute Jumping Instructors, Course IIV*, 29 January 1962 – 24 March 1962.

415 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990.

416 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

417 File BGG/301/15 (Top Secret), "Personeel Gesekondeer aan SAP", Vol 1, 31 August 1967 to 03 July 1969, Archive Group Joint Combat Forces, Box No 101.

418 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

headquarters, particularly Army Headquarters in Pretoria. Du Plessis regarded it as the most frustrating period of his life.⁴¹⁹ He was not one who thrived on the confusion of war, preferring the predictable and manageable order of the parade ground.

Operationally, then, Du Plessis had, on the eve of the Cassinga raid, three very quiet months in Rhodesia commanding policemen and three more months of chaotic administrative sorting out in Ovamboland as his only experience. He had never faced enemy fire. This was in sharp contrast to Breytenbach's past decade of almost constant combat exposure.

There are conflicting accounts of command and control appointments as well as the planning for Operation REINDEER, and this is not surprising given the antagonism that existed between the brigade and the battalion commanders. Du Plessis regarded Breytenbach as a "schemer" who worked behind his back; an incompetent commander who was reckless and brave but who had no feeling for his subordinates and who would not accept administrative or logistic responsibility.⁴²⁰ Breytenbach was equally disparaging about Du Plessis, referring to him by his nick-names of "*Dom Dup*" (Dumb Dup) or "*Dup Toonnaels*" (Dup Toenails) and describing his presence during the operation as "a bloody nuisance".⁴²¹

Du Plessis claims that Jan Breytenbach was tasked by the Chief of the Army to plan the assault on Cassinga and to train the troops for it. This was prior to the call-up of 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions for Operation BRUILOF. However, the confusion that reigned during this exercise disillusioned Viljoen. He decided that the commander must be a Permanent Force, or regular, officer, but not Breytenbach. He called Du Plessis in, told him that the rehearsal had been totally unacceptable and that he wanted him to take over the operation. He said he was happy with the plan, but that Du Plessis could change it if he wanted to. Viljoen, claimed Du Plessis, did not want Breytenbach near the troops. However, Du Plessis told him that he would need to discuss the planning which had already been done with Jan Breytenbach. When he brought Breytenbach in to discuss the details, the latter requested that he be permitted to participate. Initially Viljoen only approved his involvement in the training, but Du Plessis recommended that he be involved in the actual operation as he felt that his experience would be invaluable. Hannes Botha, the Army's Director of Operations, also asked if he could participate, and Du Plessis agreed, on condition that General Viljoen approved. Viljoen eventually agreed to both Botha and Breytenbach participating, but made it clear that Breytenbach could not be in overall command.⁴²²

Predictably, Breytenbach's version is somewhat different. According to him, Viljoen personally called him in and appointed him as the operation commander even before the Citizen Force paratroopers

419 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

420 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

421 Interview with Col Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990.

422 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

had reported for the Operation BRUILOF rehearsals.⁴²³ He gives no indication that he was ever relieved of this appointment and speaks of it as though it was synonymous with being appointed commander of the composite parachute battalion. The initial joint planning for the overall operation was done, claims Breytenbach, by the Army's Director of Operations (Brigadier Hannes Botha) and Colonel Harry Gilliland of the Air Force, together with their staff. This planning was done in consecutive sessions in Pretoria, before and during the rehearsals for Operation BRUILOF. Major General Gleeson, the Chief of Army Staff Operations and overall commander of Operation REINDEER, is adamant that Du Plessis was a low-key participant in the operation, even in the planning. He saw him as a "hanger-on".⁴²⁴

Gerber, one of the two Citizen Force parachute battalion commanders, recorded that he and the other commander, Brett, were summoned to the offices of the Chief of the Army ten days before their troops reported and given a briefing on the proposed operation before being instructed to immediately call up their battalions. During the next few days they attended two briefing sessions that were held in the Manhattan Hotel in Pretoria. These were handled by Colonel Jan Breytenbach and Commandant Gert Nel, the Officer Commanding 32 Battalion. Also present were a Major Chris Toosen to handle logistic issues, and, for a while, Commandant Eddie Viljoen, the second-in-command of 32 Battalion.⁴²⁵

Breytenbach, who was left to work out the details of the parachute assault, says that the plan was presented to Viljoen and the Army General Staff and accepted by them.⁴²⁶ In his description of the operation in the article he wrote about it 15 years later, Breytenbach outlines the key role that he played in the planning of the parachute assault and helicopter extraction.⁴²⁷ He makes no mention of either Botha or Du Plessis having had a part in this and never refers to Du Plessis being appointed over him. Only when describing how he allocated elements to aircraft does he very disparagingly mention the two brigadiers: *"Im letzten Moment mischten sich zwei Brigade – Generale ein, die gar nichts oder nur wenig mit dem gesamten Angriff zu tun hatten, jedoch ebenfalls ihren roten Eintrag im Sprungbuch haben wollten; sie schafften es, sich auch mit in dieses Flugzeug zu zwingen."*⁴²⁸ (At the last moment two brigadier generals interfered, who had nothing or very little to do with the actual attack, but who nevertheless were anxious to gain a red entry in their jump log-books;⁴²⁹ they managed to get themselves allocated to this aircraft too.) The aircraft referred to is the one that would be carrying the battalion headquarters.

423 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990. In an article he subsequently wrote for a German military magazine, Breytenbach was adamant that Viljoen had personally called him in and appointed him as the commander for the operation (*vide* Jan Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung auf Cassinga", *Barret Internationales Militärmagazin*, 3/93, May/June, p. 22.)

424 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson on 16 January 2003.

425 Gerber, Diary 6-17 March 1978, Prelude.

426 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), on 29 December 1990. This was confirmed in an interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson on 16 January 2003. Gleeson was on the General Staff at the time.

427 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barrett*, 3/93, pp 22-28.

428 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barrett*, 3/93, p 28.

429 Operational jumps are recorded in red ink in the jump log-books of paratroopers.

Though no documentary evidence of appointments for the operation could be traced, an Operational Order was typed under the name of “1 Parachute Brigade” and issued under the name of Brigadier M.J. du Plessis as Brigade Commander,⁴³⁰ and there exist numerous copies of a hand-written Operational Order signed by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach as Composite Parachute Battalion Commander, written in his hand.⁴³¹ This is a clear acknowledgement that Du Plessis was in overall command, while Breytenbach was his subordinate commander. Yet even in the brigade operational order, dated April 1978 (no specific date is given), the subordinate battalion that is tasked is 3 Parachute Battalion, which was under the command of Commandant Lewis Gerber. No mention is made of a composite parachute battalion. Equally, Breytenbach, in his battalion operational order, makes no mention of the brigade headquarters, other than on the distribution list which indicates that a copy of the order was to be sent to the brigade headquarters.

It is not clear at what point it was decided that 3 Parachute Battalion would no longer execute the operation and that a composite battalion would instead be formed. Though it appears that the numbers of paratroopers who reported after being called up were insufficient for either 2 or 3 Parachute Battalions to be brought up to full strength (despite Breytenbach’s claim that many reported who had not even been called up⁴³²), 3 Parachute Battalion did have its headquarters for the most part available. The normal practice would have been to merely reinforce 3 Parachute Battalion with elements from 2 Parachute Battalion. This makes it a distinct likelihood that the combat leadership experience of the two Citizen Force commanders was being questioned for an operation of this high-risk nature. Certainly Du Plessis claimed that Chief of the Army had been unhappy with their performance during the BRUILOF rehearsal.⁴³³ Yet even the Permanent Force Officer Commanding 1 Parachute Battalion, Commandant “Archie” Moore, was apparently not considered. There simply was no-one else with the proven combat leadership of Jan Breytenbach.

Du Plessis insists that Breytenbach was in command only of the two assault companies whilst he (Du Plessis) exercised overall tactical command on the ground.⁴³⁴ Breytenbach’s operational order, however, belies this. There can be no doubt that Breytenbach was the commander of the whole battalion and that he appointed his second-in-command to control the assault companies.⁴³⁵ Du Plessis was, equally undoubtedly, his immediate superior, but as brigade commander. Du Plessis himself admitted that the Chief of the Army had expected him to exercise his command from an airborne command post.⁴³⁶ It is not clear why he did not do so. It seems, given the size and the organisation of the under-strength parachute battalion, that Breytenbach was perfectly justified in his disdainful, virtually contemptuous remarks about the presence of two brigadiers amongst those who

430 1 Parachute Brigade Opso 1/78, OPS/309/1/B/1 REINDEER (Top Secret) dd April 1978.

431 Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78, OPS/309/1/B/1 REINDEER (Top Secret) dd 28 April 1978, File Kmdmt SWA Ops, (Top Secret) 309/1 REINDEER, Vol 2.

432 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired), on 29 December 1990.

433 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired), on 28 June 1995.

434 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired), on 28 June 1995.

435 Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78.

436 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired), on 28 June 1995.

jumped at Cassinga. Gleeson, in overall command of the operation, is emphatic that Du Plessis and Botha should never have been there. He describes them as wanting to go on a “partridge shoot”.⁴³⁷ Constand Viljoen, on the other hand, when questioned about their presence, stated that it was his policy to expose as many senior officers as possible to operational conditions.⁴³⁸ This must, however, be seen in the light of his own appearance on the battlefield at a time which was highly inappropriate.

At the lower level, the paratroopers who had been called up arrived in Bloemfontein on 22 August 1978, having travelled by train from Pretoria and Johannesburg and by air from Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth.⁴³⁹ As they arrived, their aircraft were met at Air Force Base Bloemspruit and they were driven in Bedford troop transporters directly out to Rheinholdtskop, one of the former farms comprising the General De Wet Training Area, commonly known as “De Brug”. The troop train travelled directly to Olienhoutplaas siding at De Brug, where it was met by Bedford trucks.⁴⁴⁰ By some accounts even more soldiers reported than had been called up, which would indicate that they had a fairly shrewd idea that this was more than just a training “camp”: according to Breytenbach they had deduced that there was an operation in the offing.⁴⁴¹ However, as has been pointed out, this claim is questionable.

The old, derelict farmstead at Rheinholdtskop was some 30km outside the city of Bloemfontein, in a westerly direction. It was occupied by the composite battalion headquarters, while the companies were accommodated in tents pitched in neat rows beneath the bluegum trees that surrounded the house. As the soldiers arrived they were issued with kit and allocated to their companies and sleeping quarters.⁴⁴²

Training commenced immediately,⁴⁴³ and there could have been little doubt in the minds of the paratroopers that they were being prepared for something big. Though he personally directed the training, Breytenbach was not there all the time. Both before the soldiers had reported and during their training he was commuting up and down between Bloemfontein and Defence Headquarters in Pretoria, a distance of 500km.⁴⁴⁴ Planning conferences with the SA Air Force were being held every two days.⁴⁴⁵

In accordance with the practice for an airborne operation, planning started with the objective to be attacked and was worked back to the actual launching of the operation.⁴⁴⁶ The extraction of the force

437 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson (retired), on 16 January 2003.

438 Interview with General C.L. Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

439 Signal from C Army to WP Comd, EP Comd, OFS Comd, NTvl Comd and Wit Comd (Confidential) dated 19 April 1978, File OFS Comd/308/1/1/B, enclosure 17.

440 Interview with Staff Sergeant Derek Hopkins (retired) on 19 June 1995; also signal from QMG to C Army, OFS Comd and NTvl Comd (Confidential) dated 20 April 1978, File OFS Comd 308/1/1/B, enclosure 19.

441 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990.

442 Interview with Staff Sergeant Derek Hopkins (retired) on 19 June 1995.

443 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p.22.

444 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p.22.

445 Report on Operation REINDEER by Col J.D. Breytenbach, Northern Transvaal Command, OPS/309/B/1 REINDEER (Top Secret), dd 9 May 1978.

446 Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Gesamentlike Oorlogvoeringhandboek, GWU 110 Deel 1, *Lugstormoperasies*, p.7-1.

to be used for the raid was therefore one of the first aspects of the operation to receive attention.⁴⁴⁷ There were sufficient C-130 Hercules and C-160 Transall aircraft to drop a full-strength battalion of paratroopers. According to the Establishment Tables of the time, the total combat elements of such a battalion, to be dropped into action, was in the region of 800, all ranks.⁴⁴⁸ The South African Air Force's seven Hercules and nine Transall aircraft, each able to accommodate 64 paratroopers, could have transported a total of 1,024 in one "lift". In fact, just 12 of those 15 aircraft would have been enough to transport a parachute battalion, including its reserve company. Another one or two could have been used to drop additional ammunition and supplies or heavy weapons if needed.

However, once the raid had been carried out, all those who had been dropped would have to be extracted. There was no serviceable airfield at Cassinga, so no airhead could be established enabling fixed-wing aircraft to land and collect the paratroopers. The objective was 260km inside hostile territory, so no ground force could link up with them to carry them back to safety. The area had Cuban and MPLA mechanised and armoured forces deployed across it in considerable numbers, so to walk back to Namibia after the raid was not feasible. This left only one option : extraction by helicopter.⁴⁴⁹

Yet this was where the shortcoming lay in the SADF's inventory. The SAAF, for various reasons, could only muster a total of 19 medium helicopters for the operation. These included six Super Frelons and 13 Pumas.⁴⁵⁰ The former, although much larger helicopters, were notorious for their poor cargo-carrying capacity at high altitudes. Cassinga was approximately 1,309 metres (4,295 feet) above sea level, and at this altitude each Super Frelon could lift only 12 men with their equipment. The Pumas were made of sterner stuff, but they were smaller helicopters and there were two variants used by the SAAF at the time: the older "H" model which, like the Super Frelon, could lift 12 troops, and the more powerful "L" model which could manage 16 soldiers.⁴⁵¹ However, with the distances involved and the equipment to be transported, it was more realistic to look at 10 and 12 respectively at that altitude. Allowing for one Puma and one Super Frelon to be held in abeyance as reserve aircraft, the remaining 17 helicopters could therefore lift a total of only about 230 people.

There were also the distances to be flown which had to be taken into consideration, requiring refueling by the helicopters. This meant that a Helicopter Administrative Area (HAA) would need to be established somewhere in the bush inside Angola so that fuel could be placed there.⁴⁵² But this in turn would necessitate a protection force to secure the HAA. The people making up these elements would have to be flown in and extracted. In addition, a medical team was needed in the HAA to deal with serious casualties and there was a requirement to bring back at least 16 prisoners-

447 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, 3/93, p.24

448 *Infanterie*, pp. 22-23 and Appendix D.

449 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, p.24.

450 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events : Operation REINDEER, LMH/S/309/4/REINDEER (Secret).

451 Interview with Commandant Charlie Luyt and Commandant Hugh Paine of the SAAF on 12 November 1993. Both of these officers, experienced helicopter pilots, flew in many operations during the war in Angola and Namibia, including Operation REINDEER.

452 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, p.24.

of-war from Cassinga.⁴⁵³ Accordingly, in order to execute the helicopter extraction a separate plan of some complexity had to be formulated.⁴⁵⁴ The upshot of this plan was that, if the helicopters flew twice, thus carrying out two extractions from Cassinga, a total of 377 paratroopers, 16 prisoners-of-war and about 2,000lbs (990kg) of cargo such as captured weapons and documents could be extracted. The force to be dropped could therefore not exceed 377 men – under half the strength of a complete parachute battalion.⁴⁵⁵

Such a small force, without any heavy weapons, would quite clearly be very dependant on the Air Force to provide it with the necessary fire-power should it run into strong opposition. In fact, the role of the Air Force was crucial to the South Africans throughout this operation.

Du Plessis, the brigade commander, divided the force at his disposal as follows (see Appendix B):⁴⁵⁶

- a. Brigade Headquarters. To Parachute into Angola with the assault force.
- b. Assault Force. Initially seen as 3 Parachute Battalion, this ultimately became a composite under-strength battalion of elements from 1, 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions.
- c. HAA Protection Force. This would be provided by two hawk groups of 1 Parachute Battalion.
- d. Reserve Force. Made up of a company from 2 Parachute Battalion.

To provide the necessary air support for the operation, the SAAF had to make photo-reconnaissance aircraft, bombers, ground attack aircraft/fighters, fixed-wing transports, light liaison aircraft, communications relay aircraft and medium transport helicopters available, as well as a Mobile Air Operations Team (MAOT) for air command and control purposes.⁴⁵⁷ The detailed Air Force contingent for the operation is set out at Appendix C.

The plan of the airborne assault, as outlined in Jan Breytenbach's orders, gave the composite parachute battalion's mission as "to attack and destroy the SWAPO base at Cassinga by means of

453 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events. The term "prisoners-of-war" is contentious, although it does appear, often in its Afrikaans version (*krygsgevangenes*) in many of the SADF documents. Technically, South Africa considered the insurgents to be "terrorists", and not combatants. That made them criminals, not soldiers. Those that were captured would therefore not be prisoners-of-war, but merely prisoners, with none of the rights that the Geneva Conventions would otherwise have entitled them to. SWAPO, on the other hand, saw itself as at war, so captured South Africans like Sapper Johan van der Mescht were considered "prisoners-of-war".

454 Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78, Appendix A: Extraction Plan.

455 In a booklet published by SWAPO shortly after the raid on Cassinga, and outlining SWAPO's version of events (*Massacre at Cassinga*, p. 1), Sam Nujoma claims that the South African combat force which attacked Cassinga consisted of "about two battalions, including mercenaries." Elsewhere in the same publication the number of paratroopers dropped at Cassinga is given as "1,500 men" (p. 16), yet they are said to have been dropped from only "four American-made C-130 Hercules troop carriers." These are wildly and laughably exaggerated claims, bereft of all technical credibility. To drop a force of 1,500 paratroopers, a total of at least twenty-four C-130 aircraft would be needed, not to mention the additional weapons and ammunition which it was claimed were also parachuted in (p. 16). On 25 July 1979, in a report presented to the UN by the Angolan government (UN Document S/13473), the South African force which attacked Cassinga was conversely described as "200 SADF paratroopers, assisted by two C-130 troop transport planes, 14 Alouette SA-300 and Puma helicopters, nine Mirage III aircraft and a number of smaller planes." *Vide* Johnson and Martin, *Destructive Engagement*, pp. 92-93. Again, the technical details are woefully inaccurate, as for even a force of 200 paratroopers at least three C-130 aircraft would be needed (in fact, as each aircraft accommodates 64 paratroopers, even these would be able to drop only 192 soldiers). Nanyemba ("Report on the Cassinga Massacre") also mentions four Hercules troop carriers, but describes the attacking force as "about one battalion, i.e. 1,500 combat men and 180 officers." This too, is technically ludicrous.

456 1 Para Bde Opso 1/78.

457 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

an airborne assault at 0800 on D-Day.⁴⁵⁸ The assault would be immediately preceded by an air strike. The ground operation was envisaged as taking place in four phases:⁴⁵⁹

- a. Phase 1. The parachute landing of four under-strength rifle companies, one independent rifle platoon, one mortar platoon and one anti-tank platoon in the Cassinga area, followed by their grouping, assembling and forming up for the assault on Cassinga.
- b. Phase 2. The assault on Cassinga by A and B-Companies while C and D-Companies and the independent platoon cut off escape routes by taking up stop-line positions.
- c. Phase 3. The clearing of the objective by A and B-Companies, the laying of mines, the collection of documents and selection of prisoners by intelligence personnel, the destruction of arms, ammunition, mines and explosives and the establishment of the extent of damage done to SWAPO and the greater area of Cassinga.
- d. Phase 4. The extraction of the battalion from pre-selected LZs by helicopter in two lifts, or "waves".

It is interesting to note the interpretations in what was seen as the "mission" for the operation at the various levels and by the different arms of service within the SADF. At the highest level, the Chief of the SADF's Operational Instruction gave the mission as:

*"Die SAW moet die militêre potensiaal en aansien van SWAPO verminder deur SWAPO terroriste en bepaalde basis fasiliteite in Angola te vernietig"*⁴⁶⁰ (The SADF is to reduce the military potential and status of SWAPO by destroying terrorists and specified base facilities in Angola).

The Chief of the Air Force, reacting to this instruction, gave his mission in the SAAF Operational Order as:

"To attack the enemy bases at Cassinga and Chetaquera with the aim of inflicting the maximum personnel and material losses on the enemy".⁴⁶¹

The Chief of the Army, also reacting to the Chief of the SADF's instruction, failed to give his mission in his own Operational Instruction. Instead he issued two complex missions, one to each "sector commander" and both of them containing a long list of guidelines that should have appeared elsewhere in the instruction. In essence, for the Commander Eastern Sector (which at that stage included Target Alpha or Cassinga) the mission boiled down to:

"Vernietig alle teikens in die Oostelike sektor" (Destroy all targets in the Eastern sector).⁴⁶²

458 Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78. According to File CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), Enclosure 40, the SA Air Force did not have the capability to carry out accurate night attacks, nor to drop paratroopers accurately at night. The operation therefore had to take place in daylight.

459 Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78.

460 SADF Operasie Instruksie No 8/78: Operasie REINDEER (Top Secret), reference HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER, dd 21 April 1978, in file OFS COMD/307/2/1 (Secret), Archive KMDMT OVS HK, Group 8, Box No 115.

461 SAAF Operational Order: Op REINDEER (Top Secret), reference, LMH/TS/309/4/REINDEER/3 dd 24 April 1978.

462 SA Army HQ Operational Instruction H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER (Top Secret), dd 21 April 1978, File Op REINDEER, Archive Group "Aanvullende Dokumente", Box No 31.

Reacting in turn to the Chief of the Army's Operational Order, the Parachute Brigade Commander (who had become Commander Central Sector, responsible only for Target Alpha), in his Operational Order, gave his mission as:

*"1 Valsk Bde sal vyandelike SWAPO basis te Cassinga om 08H00 op D dag aanval en vernietig".*⁴⁶³ (1 Para Bde is to attack and destroy hostile SWAPO base at Cassinga at 08H00 on D-Day).

Finally, the parachute battalion commander, reacting to this Order, gave his own mission in his Operational Order as:

"The composite parachute battalion is to attack and destroy the SWAPO base at Cassinga by means of an airborne assault at 0800 on D day."⁴⁶⁴

To carry out this operation Breytenbach composed his battalion as set out at Appendix D. Meanwhile, the final training of the troops continued. Having still been civilians just a few days earlier, the Citizen Force soldiers needed a lot of brushing up of their military skills. It would also seem that there were some difficulties being experienced in putting the required force of paratroopers together. As with any call up of reservists, a "weeding-out" process takes place before the soldiers can be employed: those who are medically unfit, those with social and psychological problems and those with applications for deferment due to vocational or other commitments have to be identified and considered. It appears that this also took place at De Brug, resulting in a depletion of the strength of those companies that had reported.⁴⁶⁵

When it was found that the force was short of a mortar platoon and a separate rifle platoon, these were obtained from the national service ranks at 1 Parachute Battalion. At the time 1 Parachute Battalion had only two companies that were operationally fully-trained : A-Company at the battalion base in Bloemfontein and B-Company which was deployed at Ondangwa in Namibia as the resident Fire Force.⁴⁶⁶ A-Company was the only company that could therefore be called upon to provide the needed reinforcements. These arrived in the form of a rifle platoon under Lieutenant Johan Blaauw, who had won the *Honoris Crux* decoration for bravery in Angola during Operation SAVANNAH in 1975, and a mortar platoon under Second Lieutenant Piet Nel. The young officers and NCOs and their even younger national servicemen were, it seems, a little awed at the appearance of all the hard-looking, swaggering *ou manne* (old men) in red berets.⁴⁶⁷ Ironically, however, it was the young national servicemen who were at a peak of physical fitness and hardened by four months of recent operational deployment (See Appendix C to Chapter 4), while many of the CF soldiers who they were so overawed by had not been in uniform for several years, and some had never even seen any action. Softened by civilian life, there were a considerable number who had failed to maintain the

463 1 Para Bde Opso 1/78.

464 Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78.

465 "The Battle of Cassinga," Newsletter of the Johannesburg Canopy of the SA Paratroopers' Association, August 1990.

466 Signal from 1 Para Bn to OFS Comd dd 29 May 1978, File OFS Comd/308/1/1 (Secret), Vol 1, Enclosure 14.

467 Interview with Warrant Officer Class 1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991. The inclusion of the two platoons of national servicemen is confirmed in Opleidingsverslag 5 Januarie 1977 Inname: A Kompanie 1 Valskerbataljon, dd 2 May 1979, 1 VALSK/308/3/1, File 1 Para Bn/308/3, Archive Group 3, Box No 54. The "red beret" (or more correctly, maroon beret) tends to be the headgear of paratroopers world wide. It is also worn by the South African paratroopers.

standard of physical fitness required of a paratrooper. This was to become apparent during the operation, to the disgust of General Viljoen (see Chapter 8, footnote 708).

The newcomers arrived at the field camp of Rheinholdtskop just in time to join the others on parade. They were addressed by Colonel Breytenbach. Until then the Citizen Force paratroopers had been training quite intensely without being aware of exactly what they were there for. Ostensibly at least, they remained under the impression that they were to take part in Exercise KWIKSILVER.⁴⁶⁸

Breytenbach now welcomed the newcomers and reminded the rest that they had been through a week of hard refresher training. Then, after first dramatically switching off the public address system to indicate that he did not want his words to carry beyond the confines of the isolated camp, he told those on parade that in two days' time they would be jumping more than 200 kilometres into Angola to attack SWAPO's main operational headquarters.

There was a deathly silence as Breytenbach paused. Most had suspected that they were preparing for an operation, but no-one had expected this!

Then pandemonium broke loose. Whooping war-cries, slapping one another on the back, jumping up and down with excitement, the paratroopers' emotions knew no bounds. This is what they had been training for all those years that they'd been called up to do annual camps. At last! A full-scale airborne assault: what every paratrooper dreams about from the day he volunteers for parachute training, but which very few actually experience.⁴⁶⁹ But the reality of what lay ahead still had to set in. Just then a droning sound became audible. The paratroopers stopped their cavorting and looked up. It was a formation of C-130 aircraft approaching low over the veld. With a roar they passed overhead, to the cheers of the animated paratroopers. No-one knew whether their arrival and timing was pure co-incidence, or whether Breytenbach had melodramatically orchestrated it.⁴⁷⁰

Thereafter training was tackled with renewed enthusiasm. The anti-tank platoon had been issued with Soviet RPG-7 weapons (Rocket Propelled Grenades) and tank mines. Most of them had never seen an RPG-7 before, and there was no-one available to train them in the use of the captured weaponry. The platoon sergeant, Derek Hopkins, who was an engineer by profession and a private pilot, cut open a rocket to ascertain how it functioned and then test-fired another. Realising that the weapon was robust and simple to operate, he conducted the training himself. Anti-tank tactics remained the same, it was merely a matter of mastering the unknown weapon. Crude but effective, Hopkins claims that he soon identified its weakness – deflection by wind. Utilising the winds that often swept the plains of De Brug, he trained his men with great emphasis on firing the hand-held, shoulder-launched weapon in a cross-wind.⁴⁷¹

468 "The Battle of Cassinga", *loc cit.*

469 The description of Breytenbach's announcement was given in graphic detail during the interview with Warrant Officer Class 1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

470 Tommie Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas".

471 Interview with Staff Sergeant Derek Hopkins (retired) on 19 June 1995.

The "mortar platoon", although well-trained riflemen with a perfunctory knowledge of mortars, had for the most part never been trained as mortarmen. The majority of 1 Parachute Battalion's mortarists had been granted an exemption from the second year of their national service in order to enter tertiary academic institutions. The platoon therefore had now to hurriedly learn the intricacies, in a matter of a few days, of providing indirect fire support.⁴⁷² The rest of the battalion took turns practicing house-clearing on an old, battered, stone farmhouse in the De Brug area, and trench clearing in self-constructed zig-zag trenches.⁴⁷³

Having already undergone refresher parachute training in the training hangar at the 1 Parachute Battalion base shortly after their arrival, the paratroopers now prepared for a rehearsal jump. According to Breytenbach, it signalled the start of the unhealthy command and control setup for the pending airborne operation.⁴⁷⁴ Breytenbach claims that Du Plessis briefed the battalion for the rehearsal jump while he (Breytenbach) was finalising the planning in Pretoria. He arrived back in Bloemfontein just in time to take part in the jump. Du Plessis, says Breytenbach, had muscled in on the training right at the end and had got the direction of the attack confused during his briefing to the troops prior to the jump. Whatever the truth, the rehearsal was apparently quite chaotic. Breytenbach was furious, as it was the only rehearsal they could fit in, and he and had a set-to with Du Plessis. The latter insisted, in response to Breytenbach, that the fault lay with the Air Force, who had dropped the companies incorrectly. Certainly there was much talk amongst the paratroopers about the difficulties the aircraft seemed to have in co-ordinating their very complex manoeuvres to drop the paratroopers in a "box" around the objective.⁴⁷⁵

In the meantime, the Military Intelligence Division in Pretoria had formulated certain "intelligence objectives" for the forces participating in Operation REINDEER to attempt to satisfy during the interrogation of any prisoners taken, the selection of documents and of equipment to be seized.⁴⁷⁶ These included:

- a. Where are South African prisoners-of-war (especially Sapper Van der Mescht)⁴⁷⁷ being held in Angola?
- b. What are the shortcomings being experienced by SWAPO in their military campaign?
- c. What is SWAPO's operational and political planning?

472 Opleidingsverslag 5 Januarie 1977 Inname: A Kompanie 1 Valskermbataljon, dd 2 May 1979.

473 Interview with WO 1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

474 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990.

475 Interview with WO 1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

476 Letter from Acting Chief of Staff Intelligence to Chief of Staff Operations, Chief of the Army and Chief of the Air Force, Enclosures 11 to 16, File MI/310/4/REINDEER dd 27 April 1978 (Top Secret).

477 At the time Johan van der Mescht, a national serviceman (conscript) was the only South African soldier to have been captured by SWAPO, though SA Military Intelligence may have regarded SWAPO dissidents or abducted Namibians as "South African prisoners-of-war". Steenkamp claims that the "paratroopers were given an extra task of great psychological importance: they were to liberate Sapper Johan van der Mescht... who was believed to be held in Cassinga" (*vide* Steenkamp, "Politics of Power – the Border War", p. 197, in Venter [ed.], *Challenge*). However, there is no documentary evidence of such a task being allocated or prepared for, and the very "intelligence objectives" listed above negate such a claim. It is also highly unlikely that the South Africans would have unleashed a heavy aerial bombardment on a centre if they suspected that their only captured white soldier was being held there. The story about the release of Van der Mescht is more likely to have been a figment of some paratrooper's over-productive imagination, although it seems the paratroopers were told to look out for him (handwritten orders attached to Gerber, Personal Report and Observations).

- d. What are the PLAN numbers, organisation, deployments (operational and training bases), armaments, especially anti-aircraft weapons?
- e. How are SWAPO's relationships with the MPLA, Cubans, Russians and East Germans as well as UNITA?
- f. What is the magnitude of SWAPO involvement in operations against UNITA?
- g. What is SWAPO's morale like? How are conditions in SWAPO bases?
- h. What are SWAPO's intelligence network details and priorities for activating areas in SWA?

Colonel Breytenbach issued his orders for the attack on 29 April 1978. He arranged for his battalion intelligence officer, Captain L.C. Odendaal, to prepare an old cowshed, one of the largest outbuildings on the farmstead, for this purpose. A sand model of Cassinga had been built and maps and aerial photographs were taped to the walls. Breytenbach himself had been closely involved in the construction of the sand model. A makeshift amphitheater had been fabricated inside the shed, enabling those being briefed to have a clear view of the model. In addition, signallers had strung up bare light bulbs every two metres to improve the visibility in the rather gloomy interior.⁴⁷⁸

Breytenbach's company and platoon commanders in turn each issued their own orders, based on those they had received from him, as the battalion went through its deployment drills. The handwritten orders of A-Company Commander, Captain Gerrit Steyn, appear to be the only ones, besides Breytenbach's, to have survived. Under his co-ordinating instructions Steyn specifies: "Geen kinders doodmaak nie, behalwe per ongeluk in kruisvuur beland", (No children to be killed, unless accidentally landing up in crossfire). Under the heading "general", Steyn goes on to elaborate: "*Moenie kinders skiet, indien moontlik nie. Pasop vir propaganda teen ons met doodmaak van prisoniers, KGs.*"⁴⁷⁹ (Don't shoot children, if possible. Watch out for propaganda against us with killing of prisoners, POWs).

Lodewyk Pietersen, a corporal at the time, recalled just how stringent the security at the field camp was. From the battalion commander down, no-one left Rheinholdtskop once the orders had been issued.⁴⁸⁰ Only Brigadier Du Plessis drove in and out. On 30 April 1978, the day after the orders had been issued, the battalion embussed into the waiting Bedford trucks, ready to be driven to the airfield at Bloemspruit on the other side of Bloemfontein. From there they would be flown to Grootfontein in the north of Namibia, where their final staging airfield was located.⁴⁸¹

While all this preparation was being finalised at the tactical level, the programme of "civic action" referred to by Malan (see Chapter 5, p. 82) when he argued back on 27 February 1978 for the launching of the attack, was being put into effect. On 25 April 1978 a Psychological Action Planning

478 Commandant Lew Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

479 Copy of handwritten operational orders for A-Company, Composite Parachute Battalion. The Battalion Second-in-Command wrote out the orders as Breytenbach issued them, and specifically recorded "Do not kill children", and also that patients in the hospital were not to be shot unless they were armed (Gerber, handwritten orders attached to Personal Report and Observations).

480 Some of the paratroopers claim that they did manage to sneak out of the camp, make phone calls and eat a last meal at a restaurant before their departure (Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas").

481 Interview with WO 1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

Directive was issued as a Top Secret document by the SADF.⁴⁸² Instructions were issued in this directive to develop suitable cover stories for operational preparations, particularly the emphasis of Exercise KWIKSILWER so as to draw attention away from the preparations for Operation REINDEER.

Whilst this was clearly an effective deception plan, most of the directive dealt with how the intended raid was to be justified by a build-up of publicity around an increase in border violations and attacks on SADF patrols and local population by SWAPO insurgents. Though it is not specifically stated that such incidents should be fabricated during the run-up to Operation REINDEER, it is made clear that “the key idea... is to create an impression of a resumption” of such activities by SWAPO. On D-minus 1 (the day before the raid), however, “a grave incident (real or imaginary)” was to take place. Such an incident, it seems, was never publicised in the event.

DEDUCTIONS

The command and control organisation for Operation REINDEER was not based on existing headquarters, but the senior commanders were well acquainted with the area and the operational situation. However, the parachute brigade tasked with carrying out the airborne part of the operation did not yet have a headquarters in existence. There were also insufficient paratroopers available for an existing battalion to execute the airborne operation, so a composite parachute battalion had to be formed from three different battalions, of men who had in many cases never worked together before and who were at different levels of physical fitness and military proficiency. The officer appointed to command it was the most experienced and successful combat soldier in the SADF: Colonel Jan Breytenbach. Nevertheless, there was a long-standing sentiment of animosity between him and his immediate superior, Brigadier M.J. du Plessis, the brigade commander. This led to differences of opinion and a clash of wills.

No clear instructions appear to have been given from the SA Army Headquarters to clarify command and control appointments within the brigade. Planning was apparently done mainly by Breytenbach, who had to tailor his force of paratroopers according to the restrictions imposed by the limited numbers of helicopters available for the extraction of the force at the conclusion of the raid. The relatively small size of the paratroop force required a significant and concerted Air Force fire-support effort.

A shortage of Citizen Force soldiers to make up the number of paratroopers required for the operation necessitated the inclusion of one mortar and one rifle platoon from the young national service conscripts of 1 Parachute Battalion. During the training for the operation, anti-tank and house-clearing tactics and techniques were emphasized, but when the rehearsal for the parachute drop was done the disparate organisation showed its weakness and the antagonism between brigade and battalion commanders became apparent in disagreements resulting from the confusion of the rehearsal.

482 Psyc Planning Directive No 3/78, HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER dd 25 April 1978, Enclosures 17-24, File MI/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret).

Detailed orders for the operation were given with stress being placed on not shooting children and not mistreating prisoners-of-war. Security at the field camp was tight right up to the point of departure to carry out the operation.

Though the composite parachute battalion was well-trained in the available time (barring the impossibility of bringing unfit civilians up to the required standard of physical fitness for a parachute operation) and provided with adequate air support, the unhealthy command and control friction pointed to a disaster in the making. An independently-minded and strong-willed commander such as Breytenbach should either have been given overall command of the airborne operation (ie as brigade commander) or his superior should have been given the full and unambiguous backing of the Chief of the Army.

CHAPTER 7

THE AIRBORNE ASSAULT

- Appendix A: Pre- and Post-Strike Annotated Aerial Photographs of Cassinga.
- B: Oblique Aerial Photographs taken During the Attack.
- C: Photographs taken by Paratroopers Inside Cassinga.

With the whole battalion embussed in the trucks on 30 April 1978, they waited for the convoy commander to give the order to move. Suddenly a staff car appeared, driving at speed down the track to the Rheinholdtskop farmstead. It came to a halt in a cloud of dust and Brigadier Du Plessis got out. Beckoning to Colonel Breytenbach, he took him aside into the house. When they emerged a short while later the annoyed Breytenbach ordered the troops to de-bus: the operation had been postponed for 48 hours.⁴⁸³ The taut, expectant paratroopers experienced that all-too-familiar mixed feeling of disappointment-*cum*-relief that accompanies every cancelled jump. Disgruntled faces betrayed their conviction: they didn't really believe that this operation would take place.⁴⁸⁴

The delay was indicative of the hesitant and uncertain attitude of the politicians to the operation. It would not be the only last-minute postponement. At Ondangwa Viljoen was champing at the bit and expressed his impatience in a signal ("*Dit wil my voorkom of besluitneming baie moeilik is*" – It would appear to me that decision-making is very difficult) which was addressed to Malan and others. If REINDEER was too big a step (for the politicians to take), suggested Viljoen, then a smaller alternative must be decided on very quickly.⁴⁸⁵ The next two days were devoted to further training by the battalion, but everyone felt it was no more than an effort to keep them busy. The training climax had already passed and it was difficult to maintain enthusiasm. Platoon commanders took turns visiting the model with their men, going over the details of their roles again and again.⁴⁸⁶ By now, the execution of the operation seemed to be seriously in jeopardy. Political reasons were being quoted as the reason for the delay being extended until 3 May 1978.⁴⁸⁷

At the end of the 48 hours the paratroopers were informed that the further daily of 24 hours had been imposed on the operation. A Canberra photo-reconnaissance aircraft had overflown Cassinga and they were told that aerial photographs had revealed additional tents having been pitched on the area designated to be the northernmost dropping zone (DZ) of the planned "box" to be thrown around the town.⁴⁸⁸ The tents were thought to be there to accommodate additional people for May Day celebrations, but there was uncertainty about this. SWAPO sources, however, throw a different light on this development. It would seem that the SAAF photo-reconnaissance flights during the previous

483 Signal from C Army to Tac HQ Ondangwa dd 30 April 1978, Enclosure 26, and Signal from C Army to 2MA dd 30 April 1978, Enclosure 25, File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Vol. 1 (Top Secret).

484 This description, with the emotions experienced, was given by WO1 L.C. Pietersen in the interview conducted on 14 October 1991.

485 Signal from Tac HQ Ondangwa to C SADF Cape Town, dd 01 May 1978, Enclosure 33, File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Vol. 1 (Top Secret).

486 Nöthling, *Operasie Reindeer*, p. 42, and Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

487 Signal from Tac HQ Ondangwa to SWA Comd dd 01 May 1978, Enclosure 35, File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Vol. 1 (Top Secret).

488 Aerial Photographs: Film No. 2238A dated 29 April 1978 (see Appendix A to Chapter 3, pages 3A-6 and 7).

weeks had not gone unnoticed by the authorities in the Cassinga camp. A Namibian survivor of the Cassinga raid recalled that “there was a proposal to move the people from the camp because the South African reconnaissance planes were detected in the area. ...An attempt was made to move out the groups most at risk – women, children and the aged. We could not move them far away from the camp because of the food shortage. We settled them at a place called Camp No 2 that was only 400-500 metres away from the main camp. ... It was fortunate that when the enemy attacked the main camp, it did not know Camp No 2, therefore the comrades who were there were safe.”⁴⁸⁹ The area identified by the South Africans as the camp for new arrivals was, according to aerial photographs, just 500 metres northwest of the main Cassinga compound and could therefore have been the same place. If so, the SWAPO claims that those “comrades” were safe are completely incorrect. This camp was singled out by the South Africans and very specifically targeted. So either the SWAPO sources did not have the facts, or this was not the same camp. Either way, the intelligence report received by the South Africans seems to have caused a slight change to the plan. D-Company's No 11 Platoon was now given an independent task to assault this camp before taking up its stop line positions. This task did not appear in Breytenbach's original orders, and no other written instruction to this effect could be found. But the task was very deliberately carried out.

What was conveyed to the paratroopers with far greater certainty was that on 1 May 1978 the Operations Division of Defence Headquarters in Pretoria had confirmed from the latest aerial photographs that the defensive works around Cassinga were being developed and that some 500 people within the complex had been identified as possibly being new recruits.⁴⁹⁰ On 3 May 1978, the day before the assault took place, SADF Military Intelligence indicated that these new recruits were possibly being accommodated in the new camp to the northwest of Cassinga.⁴⁹¹ A separate intelligence report issued on 1 May 1978 confirmed the presence of Cuban instructors in Cassinga, conducting the training of SWAPO recruits. Their presence had apparently been established from intercepts of radio traffic to and from the base. The numbers of SWAPO guerrillas in the camp was estimated as being between 1,000 and 1,500, with between 50 and 100 Cuban instructors to assist them.⁴⁹²

489 Silvester, “Cassinga Revisited”. This appears to be a quote from the transcription of the interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998. Another survivor, Maggy Amutenya, confirmed that the younger inhabitants of Cassinga, known as Pioneers, were moved into “a smaller camp, near the big one” shortly before the raid (translated transcript of interview with Maggy Amutenya in 1998). The establishment of a “side camp” for the women, children and aged people because of warnings of a South African attack are further confirmed in the transcript of an interview with Moks Shisvute, a PLAN guerrilla who survived Cassinga, held on 29 May 1998. However, in reply to a question as to whether SWAPO was expecting an attack on Cassinga by the SADF, Maj Gen Martin Shalli, Secretary of the PLAN Military Council at the time, replied, “Not really.” Yet he did admit that information and intelligence snippets pointed to that possibility, as South Africa had made attempts to infiltrate agents into Cassinga, there had been battle indications when SWAPO had detected small SADF reconnaissance parties in the vicinity of Cassinga and pro-SWAPO agents within the South African structures had provided them with intelligence reports. (*Vide* Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003). Certainly the frenetic development of the trench system around Cassinga in the month immediately preceding the raid indicates that something was expected (*vide* aerial photographs Film No 2231C, Negatives 003 and 004, dated 01 April 1978 as opposed to Film No 2238A, Negatives 0092-0102 dated 29 April 1978. Some of these photographs appear at Appendix A to Chapter 3).

490 Signal from C SADF 3 to Minister of Defence and C SADF in Cape Town, dated 1 May 1978, File CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), Enclosure 10.

491 Top Secret signal D OPS/2030 dated 3 May 1978 in file Op REINDEER, Archival Group “Supplementary Documents”, Box No. 31.

492 Signal from C SADF 2 to Mil Secr, C SADF (Cape), C SADF (Pta), C SADF3, C Army (D Ops), CAF, GOC SWA, dated 1 May 1978, File CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), Enclosure 11.

It seems likely that, though May Day could have had a direct bearing on the postponement, it was not the celebrations of that Socialist holiday that caused hesitation, but rather the extra precautions taken precisely because of a fear on the parts of the Angolans and their allies that their enemies may take advantage of those celebrations to attack them. On 29 April 1978 SADF signallers had intercepted a message from Luanda, sent by a Captain Neto to a Major Ivadi at the Regional Military Headquarters at Lubango, conveying an order from the Chief of the General Staff of the Angolan Army, placing all troops in the south of Angola on a 100% alert from 30 April until 3 May. This was probably a precaution for possible UNITA attacks during the celebrations.⁴⁹³

Whatever the case, the decision to postpone the operation was taken at a political level. A signal from Army Headquarters to General Viljoen, sitting at the Tactical HQ at Ondangwa, confirms that the Minister of Defence was the actual cause of the postponement, wanting the Chief of the Defence Force to give him a more detailed briefing on the situation so that he could better field questions after the event.⁴⁹⁴

While the politicians vacillated, the paratroopers waited, isolated on the cold, windy and dust-swept plains of De Brug in the Free State. Then, on the afternoon of 3 May 1978, their waiting suddenly came to an end. An extract from a signal indicates that the South African cabinet finally approved the total plan unanimously on the afternoon of 2 May 1978, expressing confidence in the SADF's success and accepting full responsibility for international repercussions.⁴⁹⁵ Gleeson recalls that when the signal came through to SWA Tactical HQ in Ondangwa, he and Viljoen were anxiously standing together at the telex machine to receive it. They had both been General Officer Commanding 101 Task Force and had both, according to Gleeson, "had experience of fighting the war with one hand tied behind our backs" because of the political restrictions imposed on them. Now they were both elated. It was the first time that unqualified political approval had been given to either of them to carry out a military operation.⁴⁹⁶

At 07h40 on 3 May 1978 General Viljoen issued the order: "Execute Operation REINDEER. D-Day Thursday 4 May 1978."⁴⁹⁷ That afternoon the paratroopers were finally driven to Air Force Base Bloemspruit where eight large transport aircraft were awaiting them: four C-130 Hercules' and four C-160 Transalls.⁴⁹⁸

At 16h00 they began taking off at 15-minute intervals, transporting 498 apprehensive paratroopers to the airfield at the SADF's large operational rear-area logistics base at Grootfontein in northern Namibia.⁴⁹⁹ As they flew the more than 1,300km over Botswana, the SADF Command and Control

493 Signal from 237 Troop, 2 Signal Regiment to 1 Mil Area, 2 Mil Area, C SADF3, SWA Comd, NLC and C Army (D Ops), dated 30 April 1978, File CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER, Enclosure 7.

494 Signal D Ops/377/30 April 1978 in File C ARMY/D OPS/309/1/3 Vol. 1A.

495 Enclosure 43, File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Vol. 1 (Top Secret).

496 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson on 16 January 2003.

497 Signal from Tac HQ Ondangwa to GOC SWA, dd 3 May 1978, Enclosure 44, File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Vol 1 (Top Secret).

498 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

499 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

Centre in Pretoria received confirmation that the weather would be favourable for REINDEER to take place the next day.⁵⁰⁰ Landing after dark, the aircraft disgorged their human cargo at an empty hangar where the paratroopers spent the night.⁵⁰¹ (See Appendix B to Chapter 4). General Gleeson, the overall commander of the operation, arrived to wish the paratroopers well before returning to his Tactical HQ at Ondangwa.⁵⁰² Few of the men slept that night: some repeatedly checked their equipment, stripped, cleaned and re-assembled their weapons; others read their Bibles; still others paged through girly magazines; everyone carefully checked their parachutes.⁵⁰³

At 04h00 on D-Day, 4 May 1978, the paratroopers began fitting their equipment, weapons and parachutes. Each man wore a web-belt and web-yoke to which were attached pouches with two days' dry rations, three one-litre water bottles, and ammunition pouches. In the two assault companies, each man carried ten 20-round magazines of ammunition for his folding-stock R1 7.62mm assault rifle. The others carried only seven magazines each, but with an additional 60 rounds of ammunition each. Each man also carried two M-26 high-explosive fragmentation grenades, whilst dispersed through the battalion were a total of 20 tank mines, white phosphorous grenades, various smoke grenades, PE4 plastic explosive and 10 anti-tank rockets for each of the twelve RPG-7 rocket launchers being taken along.⁵⁰⁴

Those carrying belts of machine-gun ammunition draped these over their shoulders, bandolier-fashion, whilst those carrying extra mortar bombs or anti-tank rockets attached these to their web-yokes. Over all this the main and reserve parachutes had to be fitted.⁵⁰⁵

The rifle or machine-gun was carefully strapped onto the side of each soldier, meticulously passing the sling over the shoulder and under the quick-release capewell of the parachute harness. Similarly attached were support weapons such as RPG-7s and company patrol mortar tubes.⁵⁰⁶ Those with bulkier equipment made use of Personal Weapons Containers (PWCs) to wrap it in and attach it as a separate bag to be suspended below them on a length of rope once their parachutes had opened. These included the Medical Officers (MOs) and Medical Orderlies (Medics) who had large medical or surgical bags, the regimental signallers who had heavy B-25 High Frequency radios, the mortar platoon with its twelve 60mm tubes, base plates and bipods and the anti-tank platoon with its additional rockets.⁵⁰⁷

In addition, each man carried a field-dressing and every third man carried a saline drip. At section, platoon and company level a first aid bag was also carried. Inevitably, most men thought they might just need a few extra rounds, so extra boxes of ammunition were squeezed into pockets wherever

500 Command and Control Centre Occurrence Log (Secret), Enclosure 32, File CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER.

501 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

502 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

503 Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas".

504 Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78.

505 "The Battle of Cassinga".

506 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

507 Commandant Lew Gerber, pocket notebook used during the operation.

possible.⁵⁰⁸ Every commander from section level upwards, carried a VHF (Very High Frequency) radio set known as an A-53.⁵⁰⁹ Finally, there was the heavy steel jumping helmet to be donned before emplaning.

The paratroopers boarded the aircraft in the dark and shortly after 06h00 they took off. Two of the C-160 Transalls in the eight-ship armada contained the brigade reserve: a 116-man company, ready to parachute in to wherever they were needed. One of these aircraft flew directly to Ondangwa where it landed, refuelled and took off again to hold at 10,000 feet (3,050 metres) above Omauni, just south of the border cutline, to be on immediate call. The rest of the reserve company in the other C-160 accompanied the armada from Grootfontein to above Omauni, where this aircraft broke away to also land at Ondangwa. It refuelled and at 09h30 took off to relieve the first aircraft on airborne standby. This relief system continued throughout the day. Also at Ondangwa was a ninth transport aircraft, the fifth C-160 Transall. It was the aircraft that was normally based at Grootfontein to do the “milk run”, delivering logistic supplies around the “operational area”. It had now been pressed into service to stand by with a load of second-line ammunition to be air-supplied to the paratroopers should they run low. The remaining six aircraft continued northward. Above the upper reaches of the Cubango River they also went into a holding pattern while they co-ordinated their time over target (TOT) with the strike aircraft.⁵¹⁰

The complex series of air movements required for the airborne attack had to be finely co-ordinated by the SAAF, and were recorded in minute detail with exact timings in their Record of Events as part of their debriefing document. According to this, the air movements were initiated by a Buccaneer armed with seventy-two 68mm rockets for close air support to the paratroopers at Cassinga. This aircraft took off from Air Force Base Waterkloof in Pretoria at 04h38 on 4 May 1978, to fly to Grootfontein for refuelling. It was followed by four Canberra bombers that also took off from Waterkloof, fully armed, at 05h19. The flight directly to Angola to carry out their bombing mission took them two hours and forty-three minutes. They were in turn followed by four much faster Buccaneers, which took off, also from Air Force Base Waterkloof, at 05h43. A sixth Buccaneer was briefly delayed at take-off by a brake-system malfunction.⁵¹¹ It was unable to catch up with the other four, and was thus not available for the initial air strike.⁵¹²

The next aircraft to become airborne had been the eight paratroop transports, but they had been followed at daybreak by the first helicopter movements. Already the previous afternoon a total of 19 helicopters (13 Pumas and six Super Frelons) had arrived from various bases on the dirt airstrip at Omauni.⁵¹³ At dawn on 4 May two Puma helicopters under command of Major John Church took off to fly to a clearing in the bush some 22km east of Cassinga where the Helicopter Administration Area

508 Gerber, pocket notebook.

509 Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78, Signals Appendix.

510 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events; SAAF Operational Order Op REINDEER.

511 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

512 File CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER, Enclosure 38: C SADF Command and Control Centre Operational Log (Secret).

513 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

(HAA) would be established. On board were Commandant James Kriel, the commander of the Air Force's Mobile Air Operations Team (MAOT) and his signaller, as well as Major James Hills, commander of B-Company, 1 Parachute Battalion, with one ten-man section of paratroopers from the two Hawk Groups he would be using to protect the HAA.⁵¹⁴ There were also six 200 litre drums of helicopter fuel.⁵¹⁵ In one of the two aircraft, adding greatly to the concerns of Kriel and Hills, was Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, the Chief of the South African Army. He seemed determined to see Cassinga himself.⁵¹⁶ The MAOT set up their radios and navigation aids at the HAA.⁵¹⁷

A little over an hour later, at 07h00, a further 15 helicopters (five Super Frelons and ten Pumas) under command of Church's deputy, Major Johan Ströh, departed from Omauni with the rest of the paratrooper protection element (31 men), six medical personnel, two more members of the MAOT and 86x 200 litre drums of helicopter fuel.⁵¹⁸ They landed at the HAA (code-named Whisky Three) where all the helicopters refuelled and waited to be called to extract the paratroopers. The location, selected from aerial photographs, was almost ideal for their purposes: it was isolated and deserted, despite the grass and other vegetation being higher than they had expected.⁵¹⁹ The two reserve helicopters remained at Omauni.⁵²⁰ From what emerged subsequently, it seems that there must have also been a TV cameraman who was flown in by helicopters, and it was certainly the intention to fly in an additional intelligence officer.⁵²¹

Already in the air at that time was a DC-4 Skymaster aircraft, fitted out for electronic warfare to monitor MPLA, Cuban and SWAPO radio traffic, to carry out radio jamming of their frequencies and to receive early warning of their air interdiction activities. Also to relay messages from forces on the ground to higher HQ and back again. This aeroplane held at altitude above the border cutline.⁵²² A light Cessna 185 spotter aircraft arrived over Cassinga as the strike went in. It orbited above the town, acting as a "Telstar" radio relay point and observation platform for the paratroopers once they were on the ground. The last aircraft to get airborne were two Mirage III CZs which, with their short ranges, had taken off from Ondangwa only minutes before the strike was due to go in.⁵²³ The decision to use the Mirages for the air-strike was made at a late stage in the planning. The SAAF Operational Order, dated 24 April 1978, makes no mention of them, so they were not tasked at that stage.⁵²⁴ The intention was to employ them only if necessary in the air interdiction role should Cuban

514 Interviews with Colonel James Hills (retired) on 1 January 1996 and Brig Gen John Church on 13 May 2003. The SAAF debriefing Record of Events gives their time of take off from Omauni as 05H45 and records that also on board was a portable directional beacon and tactical air navigation apparatus.

515 SAAF Operational Order Op REINDEER.

516 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 48. This is confirmed by Hills.

517 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

518 SAAF Operational Order Op REINDEER and interview with Brig Gen John Church on 13 May 2003.

519 Discussions with Brig Gen John Church on 13 May 2003.

520 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

521 SAAF Operational Order Op REINDEER.

522 Command and Control Occurrence Log.

523 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events. This document does not carry direct references to the electronic warfare and spotter aircraft, but these are mentioned by numerous other sources, including the Command and Control Occurrence Log.

524 SAAF Operational Order Op REINDEER.

or Angolan aircraft attempt to intervene in the operation. Gleeson certainly recalls an initial reluctance on the part of the Air Force to use the Mirages.⁵²⁵ In the SADF Operational Instruction initiating the whole operation, a specific prohibition was placed on the use of Mirage aircraft during the attack, and restricting their employment to air defence if necessary.⁵²⁶ However, given the target that they were ultimately allocated to attack within the objective area, it can be reasonably assumed that the late identification of the new "recruit camp" to the north-west of Cassinga itself was what prompted their employment in the ground-attack role.

The air-strike on Cassinga went in two minutes late.⁵²⁷ Flying north to south, the four Canberra bombers, in a double-pair formation, passed over the camp at 500 feet (154 metres) above ground level at precisely 08h02, releasing their deadly loads of 300 Alpha bombs each.⁵²⁸ These anti-personnel bombs consisted of a round, black, rubberised container about the size of a football, and filled with explosive and small steel balls, similar to ball-bearings. The bombs, primed on impact, bounced back into the air to detonate about 10 metres above the ground.⁵²⁹ Scattered across the length and breadth of Cassinga, they literally sowed havoc amongst the inhabitants. Though a substantial number of the 1,200 bombs failed to explode, the target area was "thoroughly covered" ("*deeglik gedek*").⁵³⁰

South African Military Intelligence must have provided the information that had led to the timing for the air strike, as the morning muster parade was in progress. According to a report attributed to SWAPO "most of the camp's 4,098 population (had) gathered at the usual morning meeting to be assigned daily work in the agricultural field or in the construction of shelters to accommodate the flow of SWA/Namibian refugees."⁵³¹ However, the SAAF Debriefing Report indicates that the bomber

525 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson on 16 January 2003.

526 SADF Operational Instruction No 8/78: Operasie REINDEER (Top Secret). No reason is given for this restriction. It can only be surmised that the sale of Mirage aircraft to South Africa by the French was on condition that they were not to be used in an offensive role. However, this does not explain their subsequent and eventual use in the attack, unless the South African authorities reasoned their way around this restriction. Whatever the reason, on 3 May 1978, just one day before the raid took place, the SAAF Headquarters issued an amendment to their Ops Order 2/78 in which four Mirage III CZ aircraft armed with Sidewinder missiles and cannon were instructed to depart for Ondangwa via Grootfontein. They were tasked to bring suppressive fire to bear on the north-western complex at Cassinga immediately before the para drop. Thereafter they were to be used primarily in the counter-air role, but the OC 301 Air Component was authorised to employ them as required, including in the ground attack role. *Vide* Amendment to Ops Order 2/78, reference LMH/TS/309/4/REINDEER/3 dd 3 May 1978, File Op REINDEER, Archive Group "Aanvullende Dokumente", Box No 31. After the raid France was probably the most scathing of the Western Five in its condemnation of South Africa. This was ascribed by some sources to its embarrassment at the constant references to South Africa's use of Mirages in the attack. France was at the time already under criticism for the deployment of bombers and troops in Mauritania and Chad ("France angry over Angola raid", *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 May 1978).

527 C SADF Command and Control Centre Operational Log (Secret), File CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER, Enclosure 32. An unsubstantiated SWAPO source (Nanyemba, "Report on the Kassinga Massacre") gives the time as "07.15 hours", but this could have been based on Alpha Time, which would have been an hour earlier than Bravo Time, the time zone used by South Africa.

528 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events. The SWAPO booklet, *Massacre at Kassinga*, pp. 13-16, claims that the first wave of bombers consisted of "eight French-made Mirage jet fighters in pairs of four," and that they bombed "the usual morning meeting to be assigned daily work in the agricultural field or in the construction of shelters to accommodate the flow of thousands of Namibian men, women and children who have escaped from South African repression into Angola." Most SWAPO sources refer to Mirages, probably because the aircraft type is well-known internationally. There are some references to Buccaneers, but never to Canberras. As the SWAPO version doubtless comes from the accounts of survivors, technical details are bound to be inaccurate. An account in "Remember Kassinga - Testimony of a Survivor", *Remember Kassinga and Other Papers on Political Prisoners and Detainees in Namibia*, p. 30, states that "according to the official Angolan news agency ANGOP, the South Africans employed 12 Mirage jet fighters, four Hercules troop carriers and five helicopters."

529 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, 3/93, pp. 24-25.

530 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

531 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 49. Steenkamp may have obtained his figure from Nanyemba, "Report on the Kassinga Massacre", which states that "The official population of the Kassinga camp was reported to be 4,098 on the night of May 3rd, 1978. This number excludes the two groups which arrived that night by trucks". The figure, if not the document, could have been made available to Steenkamp by the SADF, as he was known to be very pro-SADF in his writing.

aircrews saw far fewer people on parade. Whatever the numbers, the overall commander of the operation, Major General Ian Gleeson, is adamant that the whole attack plan was based on the time of the daily morning parade.⁵³² Nanyemba's report claimed that "prominent cadres like comrade Haiduwa, Mbarangandja and Naikohole, the camp commander" were killed on parade by the first bombs.⁵³³

Immediately behind the Canberras came the four Buccaneers, doing a low-level strike, as theirs was a precision bombing run. The Buccaneers were carrying a total of thirty-two 1,000 pound (450kg) bombs. Three of the aircraft dropped their bombs down the length of Cassinga, also flying north to south. But smoke and dust rising from the exploding Alpha bombs obscured the vision of the pilots and navigators of the second and third Buccaneers, making precision bombing impossible. Most of the selected targets were missed, and several bombs were dropped too late, exploding harmlessly in bush to the south of Cassinga. A photograph apparently taken from the orbiting Cessna, showed the massive dust cloud thrown up by the explosions (see Appendix B). The three aircraft were carrying a total of 28 bombs, but only 26 were dropped, due to a bomb-rack malfunction.⁵³⁴ In their Debriefing Report the SAAF claimed that 24 of the 26 bombs landed in the target area. However, the post-strike aerial photograph showed only 23 bomb impact points having been identified, one of which lay outside of the general target area (See Appendix A). The fourth Buccaneer carried out a strike on the supposed "recruit camp" to the north-west of the town, but completely missed its target with all four the bombs it dropped. The Mirage pilots even reported some bombs as having landed west of the river.⁵³⁵ (See Appendix B, page 7B-1). If the SWAPO claim that this camp contained the "women, children and aged" was true, an accurate strike would have significantly increased civilian casualties. Nanyemba's description of the precision bombing was that "the second bomb struck and completely destroyed the hospital/clinic and the third was on the old house of comrade Dimo. The other targets were the old magazine, the garage, the office and the food storage room".⁵³⁶

The two Mirages, armed with two Sidewinder air-to-air missiles each as well as their 30mm cannons, dived down at the "recruit camp" only seconds behind the bombing Buccaneer. The first Mirage strafed the camp mercilessly with 30mm high-explosive fragmentation shells. The second did not fire, as the pilot could not identify the target, the tents being well-hidden in the bushes. Instead, it carried out a second attack and strafed the vehicle park.⁵³⁷

532 Interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson on 16 January 2003.

533 Nanyemba, "Report on the Kassinga Massacre".

534 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

535 File CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER, Enclosure 32. The pre- and post-strike annotated aerial photographs of Cassinga clearly confirm the inaccuracy of the Buccaneer strike (see Appendix A to this chapter).

536 Nanyemba, "Report on the Kassinga Massacre". An account of the raid from SWAPO's perspective, published in *Remember Kassinga*, p. 31, states that "fragmentation bombs were dropped on the meeting square by Mirage jets, killing large numbers of people including nearly all the medical staff and patients in the nearby camp clinic. The clinic itself, the garage, food storage room, offices and all other buildings were reduced to rubble." According to the paratrooper reports, however, the hospital/clinic was not destroyed, as it was where the battalion Tactical HQ and Regimental Aid Post were set up during re-organisation. It is also clearly visible and intact on the post-strike aerial photographs (see Appendix A to Chapter 3, pages 3A-8 and 9, and Appendix A to Chapter 7, page 7A-4).

537 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events. The time of the Mirage attack is given as 08H04.

Many of the 1,000 pound bombs from the Buccaneers did land inside the settlement of Cassinga, particularly to the east of the north-south axis road, and these caused widespread destruction amongst the tented encampments.⁵³⁸ The terror and panic amongst the inhabitants of Cassinga must have been frightening. A woman who claimed to be a survivor of the raid, only sixteen years old at the time, described how she experienced these initial moments when they were caught in the open at the morning parade:

"Our group was just next to the hospital and then everything started. Now we saw four plans (sic) coming this side. I never thought there was something like that. I didn't lie down. I ran into the hospital and stayed there for five minutes. I heard all over things burst, burst. There were bunk beds. I just saw the beds going into a hole. Luckily enough I was in the corner of a room. There was a small window... the late Cecilia Kalola pulled me through a small window. All of us (from the room) went through the window. When I went out I found people, some were cut, maybe on the head, some on the legs - some were already dead."⁵³⁹

Another woman who was a young girl at the time of the raid and who was, with her friends, making her way from the smaller camp outside of Cassinga to the field used as the parade ground in the town, described her horror:

"We were going to the field that morning to get the order of what to do that day. Then myself I saw four planes coming from the side of the camp hospital but I did not know what these planes were for. I was just standing still, not knowing what to do and then people started to run and I did not know why, then the planes started to bomb the hospital, still I was just standing. I was not alone but people around were running. When I saw the planes coming my way I lied down waiting for anything to happen because I realised that these people should be enemies, because they bombed the hospital. They threw a gas at us, then I started to fall asleep because of the gas, I woke up later, then ran into a room that was near the field. When I was going into that room I was passing by people who were already dead (shot) and the people I found in that room were already dead. There was a bed and I wanted to go under that bed but there were people dead in a pool of blood, then I just stood at the window watching, by then the camp was on fire."⁵⁴⁰

For the SWAPO soldiers in the camp the initial air-strike was no less frightening:

"In the morning of 4 May I knocked off from the night duty. I came to my room and listened at 8.00 news. That time all the people in the camp queued up in various platoons, moving towards the general parade that took place every morning at the same time. After the news, supposed it was 8.15-20, I took water and went behind my room to wash my face. I just heard the roaring of airplanes, then I heard the voice of

538 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events and Annotated Aerial Photographs (Appendix A).

539 Interview with Ruusa Naango-Shaanika, which appeared in *The Namibian* of 30 April 1998 under the heading "Remembering Cassinga".

540 Translated transcript of an interview with Maggy Amutenya in 1998. The description does show numerous discrepancies. For example the aircraft passed over the camp from north to south in a single swoop; they did not single out the hospital, but bombed the whole camp; in the initial strike it is unlikely that bodies would show evidence of having been "shot", as even the Mirages were using high explosive shells. There are also frequent references in SWAPO documents to gas having been dropped by bombers. However, SAAF records detail the precise ordnance carried and expended by each aircraft and there is no evidence of any such weaponry having been employed. Nonetheless, these descriptions could be explained by the frightening experience the young girl was going through, causing her to confuse certain memories. It is also possible that the burning of oxygen by all the exploding bombs, as well as the preponderance of smoke, dust and explosive fumes could have given the impression of gas. The SWAPO booklet *Massacre at Cassinga* speaks of "certain poisonous gas which rendered people to drop unconscious" (p. 1) and of "the use of certain poisonous gas which makes the stomach of the victim swell and to become unconscious" (p. 16). However, there is no reference to gas in any of the orders or instructions for the operation, nor to precautionary measures such as gas masks.

comrade Mbolondondo, “Airplanes! Airplanes.” I looked up, saw them from the southern direction, already dropping the bombs over our offices. I quickly took cover, the airplanes went to make a turn for the second bombing. I crept into my room and took my AK47 out. The camp office was already burning, completely destroyed. Half of my office collapsed. I quickly went in, took some documents with me. I took cover again when I saw the airplanes coming again. This time my office was heavily shelled. Other places too were destroyed. They dropped the gas bombs, many comrades inhaled this and no longer able to run. Some comrades ran and hid themselves in the trenches.”⁵⁴¹

After the air-strike the Buccaneer leader flew a circuit around Cassinga and reported that considerable damage had been done. Smoke, flames, dust, bodies and fleeing people could be seen everywhere.⁵⁴² The strike aircraft immediately headed south and by 08h30 they were all safely back across the Namibian border.⁵⁴³ The Canberras and Buccaneers landed at Grootfontein and the Mirages at Ondangwa.⁵⁴⁴

The account of the initial air-strike as it was experienced by SWAPO was told by Pagano, no doubt having been reconstructed from the tales of survivors. But as he had not been there himself (his account is second-hand and thus likely to have suffered in the retelling), and as the surprised Namibians must have experienced great confusion in the midst of their terror, many of the details regarding the sequence, the times, the number and the type of aircraft as well as the actions they carried out do not correspond with the SAAF’s coldly clinical and meticulously minuted Record of Events. Also, it seems that for many of those at Cassinga the words “Mirage” and “attack aircraft” were synonymous.

“At 7am on that tragic Thursday almost the whole population was gathered in the centre of the camp for the usual morning meeting. The flags of free Namibia and Angola had been raised, the children were marching off to school while work within the Camp and in the fields around was being assigned to various groups of refugees. Suddenly the dust flew up under a shower of bullets and many fell while the refugees started running in all directions... their screams of terror were drowned by the thunder of eight Mirages pulling out of their first dive.

The eight supersonic jets – you hear their roar only just after they have passed – had first descended on Kassinga in tight formation to concentrate the fire on the gathering. Then, as one survivor told us, ‘... the formation opened up as a fan into the deep blue sky...’ only to take a second dive and scatter fragmentation bombs over a wider area. On a third attack large explosive bombs were dropped on the whole

541 Transcript of an interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji at Okahandja Military Base, Namibia in March 1998. Again the reference to aircraft attacking from the south, and of gas bombs being dropped. This is in conflict with the official SAAF record, which also belies the claim that aircraft turned to carry out a second bombing run. As the plan was for the paratroopers to jump and attack minutes after the air-strike, it seems unlikely that gas would have been used, as there is no evidence at all that the paratroopers carried gas masks. Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”, describes the direction of the attack as coming from the north-west.

542 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 159.

543 File CS Ops/310/4/REINDEER, Enclosure 32.

544 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

camp. The fourth dive delivered mainly incendiary phosphorus bombs and soon the camp was a sea of flames."⁵⁴⁵

Meanwhile, inside the transport aircraft approaching the objective only minutes behind the strike aircraft, the apprehensive paratroopers were at "Action Stations". Peering over the heads of those in front of him, the second-in-command of the parachute battalion, Commandant Lew Gerber, could see the Angolan bush through the open door, sweeping past barely 200 feet (61 metres) below the aircraft.⁵⁴⁶ Flying tactically, the six vulnerable transport aircraft⁵⁴⁷ were almost literally skimming over the tops of the tallest trees in order to avoid detection for as long as possible. A minute and a half out, the Hercules and Transall aircraft, maintaining formation, pitched up steeply to the dropping height of between 600 and 800 feet above ground level.⁵⁴⁸ One of the despatchers described the tension and fear on the faces of the paratroopers in the aircraft and the nauseating smell of vomit as some threw up over others during the long, turbulent flight and sickening last-minute manoeuvres. Also how, on peering through the open side-door as the aircraft approached Cassinga he saw an explosion in the town and a mushroom-like cloud billowing upwards. He only realised they were under fire when he looked down and actually saw people in the trenches firing up at them.⁵⁴⁹

The formation had by now broken up: the three aircraft carrying the assault group continued in a V-formation on the north to south run-in at 800 feet; a fourth banked to the east to drop a stop line along that side of Cassinga also at 800 feet; the two remaining aircraft made wide, separate circles to approach from east to west, dropping the northern and southern stop lines at 600 feet and thereby completing the boxing in of the camp.⁵⁵⁰ But there were crucial mistakes in the parachute drop. The three aircraft dropping the two assault companies and the mortar platoon to the west, between Cassinga and the river, gave the green-light-on-to-jump signal too late. Breytenbach claims that he had wanted them to determine their "release point" by taking the time from when they overflew a bend in the Culonga River during their final run-in. He had been overruled by Du Plessis, the brigade commander, who had insisted that the lead aircraft pilot take his cue to switch on the green light from

545 Pagano, *The Kassinga File*, second unnumbered page. For the one hour discrepancy in time, see footnote 527 for the difference in time zones. The dramatic "air-show" description of the aircraft "opening up as a fan in the deep blue sky" is tactically unlikely, and according to SAAF records the only aircraft to carry out a second attack was one of the two Mirages, which was unable to identify its target during the first attack. The Mirages were not armed with bombs. However, in the confusion and terror of the strike, survivors no doubt mistook successive waves of aircraft as the same aircraft returning for subsequent attacks.

546 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga. The height at which they were flying in formation is given as 200 feet above ground level by the SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

547 Pagano's account speaks of "four C-130 transport planes" dropping 500 paratroopers in a wide circle around the camp (Pagano, *The Kassinga File*, second unnumbered page). Nanyemba also refers to "4 South Africa troop carriers (Hercules)... dropping paratroopers" ("Report on the Kassinga Massacre"). This is patently incorrect, as one C-130 aircraft carries a maximum of 64 paratroopers, so four would only have been able to drop 256. (*Standing Operating Procedures for Parachuting*, p. 4-1. See also Green and Swanborough, *Military Aircraft*, p. 127 and footnote no. 455). In fact, official SADF documentation makes it quite clear that six plane loads of paratroopers were dropped, so the absolute maximum number that could have been used in the attack was 384, if the helicopters could have extracted that many. Doubtless the fact that the aircraft approached from two different directions for their final run-in, using four different DZs, would have made it unlikely that any Cassinga survivor would have observed all six.

548 The normal dropping height would have been 800 feet above ground level, but on operations it was 600 feet. See *Standing Operating Procedures for Parachuting*, p. 1-6. The height for each aircraft has to be varied when a tight formation drop is carried out.

549 Interview with Colonel "Pale" van der Walt on 5 July 1994. Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas", confirms that the flight to the objective was exceptionally bumpy.

550 The different heights for different angles of approach were to ensure that there were no collisions in mid-air. The drop heights are confirmed in Appendix A to SAAF Operation Order 2/78. To many of those who jumped, the dropping height seemed much lower (Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas").

a side marker: a prominent point identified in the town of Cassinga.⁵⁵¹ In the event, the dust and smoke obscured the side-marker, so the pilot was late in giving the signal.⁵⁵² According to Mostert, Du Plessis insisted that the road running from the river to the centre of Cassinga had been the side-marker and that this had never been obscured. The reason he gave for the late drop was that the transport aircraft pilots had been thrown into confusion by the bombers diving through their formation as they overflew the DZ.⁵⁵³ This, however, is clearly nonsense as the bombing was already over before the transport aircraft appeared over Cassinga, and the transport pilots admitted to being unable to see the marker.⁵⁵⁴ In an interview, Du Plessis stated that the pilot of the lead aircraft subsequently admitted to him that he had been so fascinated by the spectacular effect of the air-strike that he missed the road that was the release point side-marker, and gave the signal a few seconds late.⁵⁵⁵ No doubt there is some truth in this, as it was the first time the crews of 28 Squadron were flying in action, and only one of the pilots had ever been under fire before (Major "Tinkie" Jones, a fighter pilot veteran of the Second World War and the Korean War). One of the paratroop despatchers, in fact, recounted how, just after the last paratroopers in his aircraft had been despatched, a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) exploded near the aircraft and he felt it lurch. The pilot immediately veered, and increased his speed, making it difficult for the despatchers to pull the empty parachute bags and static lines in through the door despite the powerful winch mechanism.⁵⁵⁶

Breytenbach, however, is convinced that the main fault lay with the air-photo interpreters who had provided an inaccurate scale for the aerial photographs used in planning. Based on the scale provided, the paratrooper planners had calculated the size of the selected DZ to be long enough to drop a full stick of 32 paratroopers from each door (2,825 metres) and wide enough for three aircraft in V formation to carry out the drop (700 metres). The actual dimensions of the DZ, claims Breytenbach, made it impossible for such a force to fit in.⁵⁵⁷ Careful scrutiny of the photographs used in planning indicate that Breytenbach is correct. The scale provided by the air-photo interpreters would have resulted in the DZ being 3,000 metres long and 600 metres wide. Re-assessing and correcting the scale, however, shows that the actual dimensions of the DZ were only 1,100 metres by 200 metres, making it hopelessly too small for the force being dropped. Nevertheless, the paratrooper planners are not bereft of all blame. Close examination of the aerial photographs shows that even if the scale that was given had been correct, a force of 192 paratroopers carried in three

551 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach on 29 December 1990. In an interview on 26 January 2003, Breytenbach pointed out a track to the north-east of Cassinga, running eastwards from the bypass road, as the marker which Du Plessis had insisted on. (See Appendix A to Chapter 3, pages 3A-3 and 4).

552 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

553 F.W. Mostert, *'n Kritiese Evalueering van Operasie Reindeer*, p. 24. Breytenbach, however, identified a rough track to the east of and at right angles to the main north-south road, just off the bypass road, as the selected side marker (interview with Col Jan Breytenbach on 26 January 2003).

554 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

555 Interview with Major General M.J. du Plessis (retired) on 28 June 1995.

556 Interview with Colonel "Pale" van der Walt on 5 July 1994.

557 Interview with Colonel J.D. Breytenbach (retired) on 26 January 2003. The dimensions for a DZ are set out in *Standing Procedures for Parachuting in the SADF, (Provisional)*, p. 203, the manual in use at the time. The criteria are listed as a length of 500 metres for the first paratrooper and an additional 75 metres for each subsequent paratrooper, while the width is 500 metres for a single aircraft and an additional 100 metres for each additional aircraft flying parallel to the first. A safety allowance of 250 metres prior to the "Impact Point" (estimated landing point of the first paratrooper) and 500 metres after the estimated landing point of the last paratrooper, should be made (pp. 202 and 210 and Appendix C). Obstacles, such as hills over 100 metres higher than the DZ, should not be closer than 8km away (p. 202).

C-130/C-160 aircraft, could have been dropped onto the selected DZ, but that the DZ did not conform to the laid down requirements in terms of under and over-shoot allowance, nor in distance from a water obstacle. The absence of a DZ Safety Officer in the form of a pathfinder on the ground during the drop meant that such a restricted and potentially hazardous

DZ should not have been selected, even with the scale provided, as it required a highly accurate drop. If any blame does lie with the air-photo interpreters or the pilots, therefore, it lies equally with the paratrooper planners. During a debriefing conference between the Army and the Air Force after Operation REINDEER (a conference which was attended by Breytenbach) the Air Force's Director of Operations, Brigadier Denis Earp, did point out that the DZ selected was too small for the number of paratroopers and aircraft involved, although his own DZ dimensions were also incorrect (700m x 1,000m).⁵⁵⁸

Whatever the reason, the paratroopers of A and B-Companies began jumping several seconds later than they should have done. (See Appendix C, page 7C-1). On the other side of Cassinga, C-Company left their aircraft at 08h09.⁵⁵⁹ Gerber recalls hearing a deep roar from the firing of an anti-aircraft gun as he descended.⁵⁶⁰ The paratroopers could tell they had been dropped at the wrong place: they were meant to be landing between the town and the river, but saw that they were coming down above and even beyond the river. They were at least two kilometres further south than they should have been.⁵⁶¹ Their difficulties were further exacerbated by a strong wind.⁵⁶² Breytenbach himself, probably the veteran of more parachute jumps than most of those participating in the drop, immediately noticed that the wind was driving the parachute canopies from the north-east (the direction of Cassinga relative to their exit position) to the south-west (across the river and even further from Cassinga). It was only because he was one of the very few paratroopers jumping with a steerable parachute that he was able to land on the east bank of the river.⁵⁶³

To the east, C-Company was also dropped very late, straddling the Cassinga-Techamutete road (which ran almost east-west at that point) and landing beyond a deep tributary of the Culonga River. Confused and disorientated amongst the tall trees, they engaged in sporadic fire-fights with the occasional insurgent who was fleeing through the bush, experienced some difficulty grouping,

558 *Notule van 'n Konferensie gehou by Leër HK om 14H00 op 23 Mei 1978 om saam met SA Lugmag Nabetrugting te doen oor Op REINDEER*, reference H Leër/D Ops/309/1/3 REINDEER (Secret), Enclosure 8 of File KMDMT SWA/309/1 REINDEER (Secret), Vol 1, Archive "Aanvullende Dokumente", Group OD-1968, Box No 8B. The pilots of the aircraft which carried out the drop claimed that they were told the DZ was 800 metres wide, but that it was actually only 480 metres wide, and that this caused the paratroopers to land on the western bank. They also claim that the Army assured them that a full stick of 32 troops out of each of the two side doors could be despatched within 800 metres, and that the bend in the river towards the east meant that, because the Army failed to do this, troops landed beyond the river and too far south (SAAF Debriefing Record of Events). If any Army officer did give the Air Force this assurance, he was certainly not a trained DZ Safety Officer and was not qualified to make such a statement. Equally, however, any C-130/C-160 pilot experienced in paratrooping should immediately have known that such a claim by the Army was arrant nonsense.

559 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, File STAM HK KMDMT N TVL/309/1/R1 REINDEER, Archive KMDMT N TVL, Group 8, Box No 857. Reports by C-Company Commander and No 7 Platoon Commander.

560 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

561 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Forward Air Controller.

562 Immediate signal from SWA Tac HQ Ondangwa to SWA Comd, OPS/033 May 78 (Secret), Situation Report sent at 08H20 based on radio message from Buccaneer leader, reference SWA/309/1 (REINDEER), File Op REINDEER, Archive "Aanvullende Dokumente", Box No 32.

563 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, 4/1993, p. 29.

became temporarily lost and finally got into their designated stop line positions only at 09h45.⁵⁶⁴ This was clearly too late to do what they had been dropped for, viz. to prevent any insurgents escaping towards the east.

To the north, the two independent platoons (No 9 and No 11 Platoons) had been dropped quite accurately. No 9 Platoon (the young national servicemen) came under some small arms fire as they descended and landed amongst tall trees and thick bush, making grouping difficult. With one man concussed from landing in a tree, the platoon moved towards its first objective: two houses beside the road running north from Cassinga, and believed to be occupied by Cuban officers.⁵⁶⁵ No 11 Platoon (also referred to as 42 Platoon in Breytenbach's report on the operation⁵⁶⁶) landed right on top of the "recruit camp" to the north-west of Cassinga (seemingly SWAPO's "No 2 Camp"). They had been meant to land a few hundred metres north of this camp and then to attack it after grouping and forming up. According to their commander, they initially experienced strong resistance, but this quickly disappeared and they soon overran the camp. He says that some children were found in the tents, but the paratroopers left them there. A total of 54 bodies were counted before the platoon took up its stop-line positions on high ground along the river bank. From there they were able to bring fire to bear on the constant stream of those attempting to cross the river to escape Cassinga towards the north-west.⁵⁶⁷

Along the southern leg of the base, D-Company was dropped about 500 metres too far south. Coming down under small-arms fire, they landed in wooded terrain, making grouping difficult.⁵⁶⁸ On the ground they drew sporadic fire amongst the trees, probably from SWAPO elements fleeing south after the air-strike.⁵⁶⁹ D-Company (in effect no more than a rifle platoon and the anti-tank platoon) then assaulted the small collection of buildings to the south of Cassinga that had been identified as SWAPO's "engineer complex" by Military Intelligence. Here they ran into elements of both B and C-Companies, due to the bad drop, and in the chaos that ensued the paratroopers were shooting at one another before this intermediate objective was finally taken. Ammunition stores in the complex began exploding and one of the paratroopers was wounded. Several insurgents were killed as the paratroopers came under RPG-7 fire, and after overrunning the SWAPO positions they came across a B-10 recoilless gun. D-Company then took up their stop-line positions to block off the southern escape route from Cassinga and the commander sent the anti-tank platoon to lay a tank ambush along the road coming from Techamutete.⁵⁷⁰

564 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Reports by C-Company Commander, No 7 Platoon Commander and No 8 Platoon Commander.

565 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

566 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach.

567 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by No 11 Platoon Commander.

568 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by D-Company Commander. Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas", emphasised the unusually hard opening shock when his parachute deployed. This indicates that the aircraft were probably flying faster than the standard dropping speed of 115 knots (*Standing Procedures for Parachuting in the SADF, [Provisional]*, December 1977, p.107). He confirms that they immediately drew fire in the air and that he could clearly hear the snap sound of bullets passing nearby. He also mentions the deep "doof-doof" sound of anti-aircraft gunfire.

569 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Anti-Tank Platoon Commander.

570 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Anti-Tank Platoon Commander.

Meanwhile, as the paratroopers sought to unravel the confusion caused by their inaccurate drop, the confusion inside their objective was even greater. A military survivor on SWAPO's side gave his impression of the reaction by the SWAPO guerrillas, describing the initial chaos, the impossibility of grouping as a fighting entity, the frantic rush for cover and how, like the paratroopers, SWAPO elements even fired on one another:

"The planes went on bombing all standing structures, walls and trees, and dropped the parachutes. Within the intervals, when after each bombing they fled away to make turns for another bombing, I was able to go a distance further and look for other colleagues such as Uhulu. We tried to shoot on the parachutes when they were dropping but they were far. We hid ourselves in the thick maize field. We saw the parachutes, a distance away, avoiding any closeness to the thick field, thinking that we might put a trap for them. They moved towards the trenches, bayonetting all the moving bodies on the way. We too moved to the trenches with an attempt to rescue our comrades likely to be captured alive. We opened fire to the parachutes. Unfortunately the comrades in the trenches were not well trained and some of them had guns. They too opened fire with some bullets zooming towards our direction. We could no longer advance with our attempt. The parachutes threw hand-grenades to us, and two comrades were injured. We carried them away to another side."⁵⁷¹

For the civilians inside Cassinga the confusion was, if anything, even greater. Accounts of those first two hours after the initial air-strike are graphic and reflect unbridled terror. Maggy Amutenya recalls:

"Later I realised that I should leave that room, because people in that room were dead and I did not know where to step because the blood was all over. I left the room and I was running not knowing where I was going because I did not know the camp very well. Where I went I found people with broken legs and arms and I did not know what to do. One person said: 'Although we are here, we will not go anywhere because the Boers are around the camp already.' We did not know what to do. I gave my jersey to one lady whose leg was broken to stop the blood from running. I gave up and lied down, but later I decided to go after the others."⁵⁷²

It is apparent that the difficulties of those paratroopers dropped north, east and south of the town were fairly quickly sorted out, with only C-Company having been dropped significantly far from their intended DZ. It would seem that this late drop did enable a considerable number of the occupants to escape towards the east before C-Company was able to get into position. C-Company elements in any case only discovered a long "escape trench" about 2 metres deep, running north-east from the perimeter trench, at about 11h00. They shot six persons moving along this trench, and concluded that many others must have escaped through it during the intervening three hours since the air-strike.⁵⁷³ The trench, surrounded by bushes and trees, is nonetheless clearly visible on the aerial photographs, but appears to have been overlooked in the South Africans' planning. The 200 metre long trench running in a perfectly straight line in a north-easterly direction from inside the camp and ending in the surrounding bush, may have initially been for the run-off of storm-water because the settlement was on high ground. At the time of the raid though, it was almost certainly an escape

571 Transcript of an interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998.

572 Translated transcript of an interview with Maggy Amutenya in 1998.

573 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by No 8 Platoon Commander.

route. According to Shalli the occupants of Cassinga had been prepared for “possible dangers and what things were required of them to protect themselves by way of escaping under various modes of attack by SA. And indeed this helped save many, many lives.” He described this precautionary measure as “an excellent foresight”.⁵⁷⁴

The major difficulty experienced by the paratroopers as a result of the drop, however, involved the two assault companies and the mortar platoon. Landing some two to three kilometres too far south and about 500 metres too far west, they were spread across both banks of the Culonga River, with several actually in the river.⁵⁷⁵ It took about an hour and a half to sort out the resultant confusion, rescue those who had landed in the river, get those on the western bank across the deep and swiftly flowing river,⁵⁷⁶ establish their position and form up for the assault. As it was, they were so far off position that they mistook for their axis of attack, a road about 500 metres south of the correct road. The light Cessna spotter aircraft, intended to assist with navigation and communication, was lost to the paratroopers early-on when it was chased away by the anti-aircraft fire.⁵⁷⁷ Ultimately, Breytenbach selected the main north-south road passing through Cassinga as his new axis of attack, attacking northwards instead of eastwards. Fortunately he had established good radio communications with all his companies, though he had been unable to make contact with the Cessna.⁵⁷⁸ The confusion being experienced by the paratroopers was apparently not noticed by the defenders, as Nanyemba describes the period after the drop merely as “these paratroops then sealed off Kassinga by planting landmines on all roads entering Kassinga.”⁵⁷⁹ One pro-SWAPO account of the raid claims that “further troop reinforcements were later landed at an airstrip which had served mining installations at Kassinga in colonial days. According to SWAPO a combat force of 1,500 South African troops was involved.”⁵⁸⁰ This can be totally discounted as, although there was an old disused airstrip at Cassinga, an examination of the aerial photographs taken at the time show it to be overgrown with vegetation and rutted with eroded pathways. In addition, the South Africans did not have the helicopters available to extract a force of that size.

The sixth Buccaneer was in the air above Cassinga by 08h30, armed with seventy-two 68mm SNEB rockets for close air support of the paratroopers on the ground.⁵⁸¹ All the aircraft that had participated in the initial strike had landed at Grootfontein or Ondangwa to refuel and re-arm for the strike on Target Bravo (Chetaquera), the objective of the mechanised force, or to be on standby should they

574 Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003.

575 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach.

576 There has been some contention in the available literature about whether the river was in fact shallow or deep, wide or narrow. Heywood highlights this apparent discrepancy (Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p. 46), but it is easily explained by a perfunctory examination of the aerial photographs taken of Cassinga on 4 May 1978. (See Appendix A to Chapter 3). The river was clearly flowing strongly, but was broad in places and in others it manifolded into numerous small distributaries flowing across apparently rocky ground. In places the banks are manifestly steep, but the dense riverine growth would hide its variable appearance from someone intent on crossing in a hurry. This detail is even more apparent when viewed through a stereoscope.

577 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990. Also Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

578 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach.

579 Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”.

580 *Remember Kassinga*, p. 31. See also footnotes no. 455 and 547.

581 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

be needed. By 09h45 a Canberra photo-reconnaissance aircraft was passing over, high above Cassinga, to record the effects of the air-strike.⁵⁸² (See Appendix A).

In the meantime, No 9 Platoon to the north of Cassinga had commenced their attack on the houses supposedly accommodating the Cuban officers. They were meant to receive supporting fire from the mortar platoon, but the inaccurate drop had caused the range to be too great. The French Hotchkiss-Brandt 60mm light mortar used by the South Africans had a maximum range of 2,000 metres, depending on the charge being used.⁵⁸³ The Cessna spotter aircraft, still in the area at that stage, reported that the bombs were falling short of their target by about 200 metres.⁵⁸⁴ The platoon commander therefore decided to attack without indirect fire support, and in the event encountered very little resistance and no Cubans.⁵⁸⁵ Unaware that the houses were already being cleared by the paratroopers, one of the Forward Air Controllers (FACs) with battalion headquarters, hearing that the mortar bombs were falling short, cleared the Buccaneer to do a strike on the houses without first consulting the battalion commander.⁵⁸⁶ The Buccaneer carried out its attack, accurately releasing 39 rockets⁵⁸⁷ at the house in which the paratroopers were still busy with clearing operations. Two paratroopers were wounded in this uncoordinated action before the Buccaneer was frantically called off.⁵⁸⁸

The main assault on Cassinga itself, by A and B-Companies, went in sometime between 09h00 and 10h00. Though no record of this time appears to exist, Breytenbach noted that it took about an hour to an hour-and-a-half from the time of the jump until the actual attack,⁵⁸⁹ and communications with Whisky Three (the HAA) were only established at 09h30⁵⁹⁰ (it seems unlikely that the assault would have taken place if these radio communications had not yet been established). Furthermore, C-Company, forming the eastern stop-line, was only in position by 09h45,⁵⁹¹ at about which time A-Company was observed moving through the objective area.⁵⁹² This delay of virtually two hours was due to the difficulty of grouping and forming up the assault force that had been scattered on both sides of the river and amongst rocky hillocks to the south.⁵⁹³ The accounts of SWAPO survivors confirm a delay before the ground attack went in. Ruusa Naango-Shaanika recounted how, after the initial air-strike: "...we went into the trench. We stayed there for two hours... maybe three to four

582 Command and Control Occurrence Log.

583 J.I.H. Owen (ed.), *Brassey's Infantry Weapons of the World 1950-1975*, p. 124. A battalion would normally use the 81mm mortar which has more than twice the range and terminal effect of the 60mm weapon, but weight and space constraints, especially in the aircraft, doubtless influenced Breytenbach in his decision to take along the lighter version.

584 Interview with Commandant Piet Nel on 14 October 1991. Nel, as a 2nd lieutenant, had been the paratrooper mortar platoon commander at Cassinga.

585 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

586 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990.

587 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

588 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

589 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach.

590 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

591 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by No 7 Platoon Commander.

592 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by No 8 Platoon Commander.

593 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by B-Company Commander and platoon commanders.

hours. Then we heard a voice saying 'People in the trenches, please leave the trenches (it was in Oshiwambo) because the Boers are being dropped now.' I was scared because the guns were firing all over. I thought how can I go out when the guns are firing. Before I left the trench I saw the Boers coming just into the trenches because from afar they had already started bayonetting people. They [the Plan fighters guarding the camp] fired some shots and then we ran to the bushes. Many people I ran out with were shot. Just on the way running to the river I saw the helicopters coming. Very, very near. Some were written 'A', 'B'.... The markings were red.... They were dropping people. So I ran quickly into the river."⁵⁹⁴

This account evidences numerous discrepancies (the paratroopers were dropped before, not after the delay, they were not dropped from helicopters, the helicopters were only called in after the attack and the helicopter markings, according to photographs, were white, not red). Nevertheless, these could be ascribed to the state of panic and high trauma that this young girl was experiencing at the time. It is possible that she only broke away and ran for the river after the assault was over (another hour-and-a-half, tying in with her suggestion of "maybe three to four hours") when the first wave of helicopters arrived to begin the extraction of the paratroopers. What is indisputable about her account is that there was a delay.

According to the debriefing reports of the operation, when the assault went in the two companies had not yet managed to group all their soldiers, but initially they in any case encountered very little resistance.⁵⁹⁵ (See Appendix C, pages 7C-2 to 4). They were, however, subjected to recoilless anti-tank gunfire.⁵⁹⁶ (See Appendix C, page 7C-6). It was only as they reached the centre of Cassinga that the paratroopers began to run into serious opposition from snipers in trees,⁵⁹⁷ groups of SWAPO attempting to break out⁵⁹⁸ and especially in the vehicle park.⁵⁹⁹ Houses and buildings were systematically cleared, but these appear not to have offered major resistance,⁶⁰⁰ with the exception of some huts close to the centre of town where light machine-gun and rifle fire wounded two of the paratroopers, one of them critically.⁶⁰¹ The Nanyemba report describes the defence of Cassinga with brevity, but in terms that have never been officially acknowledged by SWAPO: "Meanwhile our cadres started retaliating very bravely. Our ground force consisted of about 600 cadres, 300 of whom were fresh from the Hainyeko Training Centre. By 09.00 hours a fighter bomber of South Africans

594 Heike Becker, "Remembering Cassinga", p. 6. The SWAPO publication *Massacre at Cassinga*, p. 17, claims that "some females were first raped and then killed" by the paratroopers. However, no other references to this were encountered.

595 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by B-Company Commander.

596 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga. Also Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Report by Battalion Second-in-Command.

597 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by B-Company Commander

598 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by No 1 Platoon Commander.

599 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by A-Company Commander.

600 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

601 At van Wyk, *Honoris Crux: Ons Dapperes/Our Brave*, pp 84-90, and Ian Uys, *Cross of Honour*, pp 55-56.

was shot down by our men.”⁶⁰² Co-ordinating the progress of the two parachute companies through Cassinga seems to have been rather difficult, with the battalion commander apparently moving with A-Company to the west of the main road, while B-Company, to the right, moved much faster because they were experiencing less resistance. B-Company reported overrunning trenches, four covered bunkers, a 12.7mm machine-gun, an 82mm mortar and an RPD light machine-gun, all unmanned. The defenders had apparently already fled.⁶⁰³

Survivor Maggy Amutenya described the attacking paratroopers as “speaking Afrikaans” and saying “*Moenie skiet nie, vang hulle lewendig.*” (Don’t shoot, catch them alive”).⁶⁰⁴ This was in line with the paratroopers’ intention to bring back prisoners for interrogation.

Pagano’s very brief account of the actual fighting, apparently based on the stories of survivors, made the whole action out to be a very one-sided affair. He described the parachute drop all around Cassinga as designed to seal off the camp: “Evidently as many as possible of the fleeing survivors had to be rounded up and killed, and that is what happened: those who could run were shot on sight, those who were wounded were finished off with bayonets. Most of the survivors who were later interviewed in hospital were wounded in the back by bullet or bayonet. The 500 paratroopers met with considerable resistance, but were soon able to overpower the few SWAPO fighters who were present at the camp.”⁶⁰⁵

Another pro-SWAPO account made the battle even more one-sided, claiming that the South African force carrying out the attack consisted of 1,500 troops: “The South African troops proceeded to overpower the settlement’s defence unit and to overwhelm the rest of the refugee population, firing indiscriminately at everyone within range. Those who died at this stage were shot at point-blank range, many in the back, or in the head, or bayoneted. Many were killed as they tried to run away towards a nearby river or to escape in trucks. There is evidence that chemical weapons were also used by the South Africans, including inflammable phosphate liquid, teargas and possibly a form of paralysing gas.”⁶⁰⁶

From the accounts of the paratroopers it seems the fighting may well have been one-sided initially when there was doubtless still much confusion after the air-strike. It was only when they came up against the snipers and the anti-aircraft guns that the paratroopers seem to have encountered significant resistance; sufficient to bring their attack to a standstill. Just how many of these guns there

602 Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”. If these figures of PLAN defenders at Cassinga are factual, it would have been politically expedient for SWAPO to conceal them after the raid, given the results of the action. The figures certainly tie in with the extent of the defensive works around Cassinga (See Chapter 3, p. 55 and Appendix A). Of course, if the report is not authentic, the figures can be discounted. The claim to have shot down a SAAF aircraft can certainly be discounted, as SAAF records show that, although two Buccaneers were hit by hostile fire, no aircraft were lost during Operation REINDEER.

603 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by No 4 Platoon Commander.

604 Translated transcript of an interview with Maggy Amutenya in 1998. There are sources which claim that the paratroopers were also speaking Portuguese, the implication being that they included mercenaries, possibly whites who were formerly from Angola (“Cassinga and the Liberal Press”, *Namibia Review*, p. 51, Robben Island Museum - Mayibuye Archives Centre, File “Namibia - General”, Box No 102). This seems unlikely, as close scrutiny of the nominal roll for the extraction reveals only three names which could conceivably be Portuguese (Ferreira, Modena and De Sousa) and they were all allocated to different sections of the composite battalion (Appendix A: Extraction Plan to Opso 1/78 of Composite Parachute Battalion).

605 Pagano, *The Kassinga File*, second unnumbered page.

606 *Remember Kassinga*, p. 31.

were cannot be established with certainty from available accounts. Heywood refers to two anti-aircraft guns,⁶⁰⁷ and this is in line with the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and an admission by a former SWAPO guerrilla some twenty years after the event⁶⁰⁸ (in the emotionally charged statements immediately subsequent to the raid SWAPO never admitted to anything but unarmed refugees having been at Cassinga). A situation report (sitrep) sent by Chief of Staff Operations to the Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Chief of the SADF the day after the raid refers to three 14.7 machine guns being damaged by the South African forces.⁶⁰⁹ In his report written five days after the raid, Breytenbach speaks of B-Company being brought to a complete halt by the fire of two 14.5mm anti-aircraft guns being employed in the ground role.⁶¹⁰ Gerber refers to "12.5 and 14.7 heavy machine-gun fire" (he confuses the calibres, which are in fact 12.7mm and 14.5mm),⁶¹¹ and later is more specific, speaking of "two 12.7 heavy machine guns and the 14.7 AA gun."⁶¹² Most of the reports written by those who came under fire from the guns refer simply to "the machine-gun" or "an anti-aircraft gun". This is understandable, as they would not have differentiated between one or more such guns under those circumstances, and unless they were actually at the gun positions they would not have been able to confirm the number. However, Captain Tommie Lamprecht, who reported personally fighting his way along the trench leading to the guns,⁶¹³ specifically described the anti-aircraft position as he discovered it immediately after it had been overrun by the paratroopers:

*"Die masjiengeweer 'nes' het bestaan uit 2x 12.7mm masjiengewere wat gebruik word hoofsaaklik vir lugafweer doeleindes en 1 lugafweer masjiengeweer met dubbellope, vermoedelik 35mm kaliber. Al drie die masjiengewere was gemonteer op wiele wat kan platvou en as skietplatvorm gebruik kan word"*⁶¹⁴

(The machine-gun 'nest' consisted of 2x 12.7mm machine-guns used mainly for anti-aircraft purposes and 1 anti-aircraft machine-gun with twin barrels, presumably 35mm calibre. All three machine-guns were mounted on wheels which could fold flat for use as a firing platform).

Neither SWAPO, the MPLA nor the Cubans used 35mm anti-aircraft guns, but the SADF did. However, the 23mm Soviet ZU-23, used by all three of South Africa's adversaries in Angola, did

607 Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, p. 22.

608 *TRC Report*, p. 50 and transcript of an interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji, March 1998.

609 Signal from C SADF 3 to Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and C SADF dd 5 May 78, Enclosure 29-33 of File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box 129.

610 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach. However, in an article written 15 years after the raid, Breytenbach refers to "*drei 12.7mm schweren Maschinengewehren und einem 14.5mm Flugabwehrmaschinengewehr*" (three 12.7mm heavy machine-guns and one 14.5mm anti-aircraft machine-gun). See Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barrett*, 4/93, p. 31. In an interview with Breytenbach at Salem in the Eastern Cape on 26 January 2003 the 12.7mm machine-guns had increased to four. However, he remained adamant that the 14.5mm anti-aircraft gun had been the main bugbear.

611 The Soviet heavy machine-gun, used by almost all African liberation movements, was the DShK-38 of 12.7mm (0.5 inch) calibre [see D.H.R. Archer (ed.), *Jane's Infantry Weapons 1977*, p. 306]. This gun was primarily intended for use in the ground role, with a secondary anti-aircraft role. The Soviet 14.5mm ZPU-1 and ZPU-2, single or twin-barrelled anti-aircraft guns were much used for base protection by liberation movements [see Christopher F. Foss (ed.), *Jane's Armour and Artillery*, pp. 742-743].

612 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

613 Breytenbach confirmed that he had sent Lamprecht to clear the anti-aircraft positions (Interview on 29 December 1990). Also telephonic interview with Captain Tommie Lamprecht (retired) on 12 May 2003.

614 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by D-Company Commander. However in Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas", there is only mention made of one gun.

vaguely resemble the Swiss 35mm Oerlikon GDF anti-aircraft gun used by South Africa, although it was a far smaller and simpler weapon.⁶¹⁵ Its calibre could therefore easily be mistaken by an infantryman not familiar with anti-aircraft weapons, and especially by a citizen soldier who may only have seen his own side's guns from a distance and in passing. However, the reference to the folding wheels is most significant. The 12.7mm DShK-38 did not have folding wheels, but the 14.5mm ZPU-1 and the 23mm ZU-23 did (the ZPU-1 in fact had its wheels removed to enable it to stand on a three-point platform, the wheels usually pushed beneath the platform to keep them out of the way). This would imply that if there were three guns these were more likely to have been one 23mm and two 14.5mm anti-aircraft weapons, which is in keeping with the Soviet doctrine of never deploying solitary anti-aircraft weapons, and generally mixing their types.⁶¹⁶ This tendency became more apparent during subsequent South African cross-border raids into Angola.⁶¹⁷

Two photographs, purported to have been taken at Cassinga after the guns had been silenced, tend to reinforce this likelihood (see Appendix C, page 7C-13). One, in black and white, clearly shows a 23mm ZU-23 with empty shell-cases and other debris lying around it and a second gun partly obscured by bushes in the background. The second gun appears to be a 14.5mm ZPU-2 with twin barrels and wheels raised (not flattened) for it to come into action (the twin-barrelled ZPU-2 did raise its wheels so that it could utilise its three-point platform⁶¹⁸). The second photograph, in colour, shows what appears to be a 14.5mm ZPU-2 in firing position, partly obscured by bushes and with a *mahango* field and a row of excavated earth behind it. The 23mm gun is clearly in a prepared position, but the presence of several large, carefully cut poles lying around it are indicative of an effort to prop up camouflage in the form of nets or branches to provide cover from aerial observation. This could explain the failure of South African Military Intelligence to identify the guns.⁶¹⁹

Further emphasising the likelihood of there having been three guns is an extract from the diary of Jack Simons, an ANC instructor at Novo Catengue camp in Angola on 2 March 1979: "... [B]rought 3 anti-aircraft guns to reinforce our battery."⁶²⁰ In the prevailing military climate in Angola, such guns were usually deployed in threes. It is of course possible and quite feasible that, if one of the guns was a 23mm piece, it may have been put out of action during the air strike, leaving only the two smaller guns to keep firing. If the 23mm gun had been firing, it would in all likelihood have used high explosive (HE) rounds, and none of the paratrooper reports make mention of coming under such fire.

615 Foss, *Armour and Artillery*, pp. 649 and 660.

616 The Soviet doctrine for towed anti-aircraft artillery made provision for a six-gun battery (*vide* David C. Isby, *Weapons and Tactics of the Soviet Army*, pp. 220-225), which allowed guns to be deployed in either threes or pairs. However, in the liberation armies there was seldom a fully homogenous inventory of weaponry, and tactical adjustments had to be made accordingly.

617 During Operation SCEPTIC in June 1980, the typical SWAPO anti-aircraft position was found to consist of one ZU-2 23mm gun and two ZPU-1 14.5mm guns, each placed approximately 80 metres apart, on the points of a triangle (*vide* report *Operasie SCEPTIC: 10 Junie 1980* by Commandant J. Dippenaar).

618 Foss, *Armour and Artillery*, p. 661.

619 Jan Breytenbach, in an interview on 26 January 2003, was insistent that SWAPO was not yet using anti-aircraft guns of 23mm calibre in 1978. He states unequivocally that the largest anti-aircraft gun used at Cassinga was a 14.5mm, and that there was only one.

620 Thomas G. Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 714.

Whatever the fact, the reality is that anti-aircraft gunfire brought the paratrooper attack to a sudden stop. A-Company, on the left flank (at that stage, due to the scattered drop and grouping confusion, effectively little more than a platoon-strength of some 35 people), crossed the road beyond the vehicle park and approached the open *mahango* field, only to be pinned down by the anti-aircraft gunfire for the best part of the next two hours.⁶²¹

On the right flank B-Company had moved through the bombed tents and huts to the east of the main road, encountering light resistance⁶²² as the effects of the air-strike became ever more apparent with bodies lying around and damage visible on the roofs and walls of buildings.⁶²³ Briefly coming under fire from a B-10 anti-tank gun,⁶²⁴ they cleared several permanent buildings, uncovering a cache of some 300 mostly old automatic weapons, small arms ammunition and four boxes of RPG-7 rockets. There was also a room inexplicably filled with all sorts of shoes.⁶²⁵ According to Gerber, at about this time a toddler of about 18 months was spotted wandering around among the corpses of the victims of that morning's air-strike, apparently searching for its mother. The pathetic scene began to unnerve the paratroopers waiting outside under cover while a building was being cleared. Gerber therefore picked up the child and ran across to the deserted hospital where he found three little girls between the ages of 7 and 11, hiding under a bed. He left the child with them after giving them "some sodden glucose sweets".⁶²⁶ Shortly afterwards the company was brought to a stop by sniper fire emanating from several large trees with heavy foliage. Almost as if the snipers were directing the fire, the company suddenly found itself also a target for an anti-aircraft gun which opened up on them between the buildings to the west of the main road. Like A-Company, B-Company was now also well and truly pinned down.⁶²⁷

The dispersion of the two companies and their proximity to the guns made it too risky to bring in an air-strike from the circling *Buccaneer*.⁶²⁸ It appears that at one stage the situation was so critical that consideration was given to calling in the airborne reserve in order to have more troops available to deal with the guns. Inside the C-160 *Transall* holding far above the cutline, one of the despatchers approached the commander, Captain Wesley de Beer, where he sat strapped into his parachute, and informed him that they would have to jump. The command "Prepare for Action!" was shouted above the roar of the engines, but as the paratroopers were hooking up they were told to stand down again.⁶²⁹

621 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by A-Company Commander.

622 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Reports by B-Company Commander and No 4 Platoon Commander.

623 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

624 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga and Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by B-Company Commander.

625 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

626 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

627 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by B-Company Commander.

628 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by FAC and SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

629 Interview with Major Wesley de Beer on 29 June 1995.

On the ground, Breytenbach had ordered the commander of D-Company to take some men and attack the trenches on the west of Cassinga, working his way up to the guns.⁶³⁰ The company commander set off for the vehicle park with 20 men to form up for his attack. There they were surprised to encounter a large group of civilians clustered together, all of whom fled into the surrounding bushes as soon as they saw the paratroopers.⁶³¹ In the meantime, Breytenbach brought fire down on the guns from the mortar platoon as well as from every available patrol mortar in the companies.⁶³² D-Company Commander and his men launched their attack on the trenches leading towards the guns, two of them entering the defended works with grenade and rifle.⁶³³ When they entered the trenches they discovered a lot of civilians inside them. But there was heavy fire coming from the trenches, the assault companies were pinned down and the anti-aircraft guns had to be silenced. Under those circumstances they felt there was no question of being selective about fire. It was simply a matter of kill or be killed. As they advanced along the line of trenches they encountered fewer civilians, but the fighting intensified greatly. The women they met up with now were all combatants in uniform, and Lamprecht recalls lobbing a grenade into the next leg of the trench and seeing a woman's body blown right out onto the parapet. Clad in green fatigues, the whole front of her bloodied uniform was in shreds from the explosion,⁶³⁴ indicating that she may have tried to protect others from the blast.

Once B-Company had identified and eliminated the snipers to the east, they began to direct selective rifle and light machine-gun fire at the guns.⁶³⁵ To the north, No 9 Platoon cleared a bunker and some trenches, then began to clear the crowded trenches to the north of the guns, soon coming under the anti-aircraft gunfire themselves.⁶³⁶ But the net was closing around the guns. Each time the crew of one of the guns was wiped out by mortar, rifle or machine-gun fire from the paratroopers, those in the nearby trenches would replace them. Scrambling up to take their dead comrades' places on the guns, they would traverse them continuously, keeping up a constant barrage of automatic bursts in the direction of any paratrooper who dared to show himself.⁶³⁷ Within the trenches there was a savage close-quarter struggle, the paratroopers clearing one leg of the zig-zag ditches at a time, using grenade and rifle, while supporting fire was delivered from those outside.⁶³⁸ The horror of the

630 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990. Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas", claims that he twice volunteered to assist, as his company was, after all, the battalion reserve. It was only after his second request that Breytenbach called him forward.

631 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by D-Company Commander.

632 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach. A "patrol mortar" was a 60mm mortar tube, designed to be steadied by hand when it was fired, as opposed to the bipod used with a normal mortar. It was often less accurate at the longer ranges, but it could be operated by one man as opposed to two.

633 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by D-Company Commander. Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas", is critical of the troops who were "pinned down". He claims they could have assaulted the trenches in the same way that he did.

634 Telephonic interview with Captain Tommie Lamprecht (retired) on 12 May 2003. In his "Cassinga Notas" Lamprecht starkly describes how the deadly anti-aircraft gunfire initially prevented him from entering the trenches, killing one of his men right next to him as they rushed forward and holding them up for some time. He also describes the cowardice of most of his men in refusing to leave cover to join in the assault or to recover their wounded comrade in the face of the murderous fire. Once he and one other soldier had gained entry into the trenches he gives a frightful account of the bitter close-quarter combat which followed.

635 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by B-Company Commander.

636 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

637 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga. Also Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, 4/93, p. 31.

638 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991 and Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by D-Company Commander.

battle in the trenches must have been exacerbated by the presence of screaming women and children amongst the fiercely resisting guerrillas, as the accounts of survivors indicate that many of these had taken shelter in the trenches.⁶³⁹

There was no quarter in that confusion: all perished in the kill-or-be-killed mode that the paratroopers were in. An NCO in charge of providing supporting fire from outside the trenches with machine-guns recalled the terrible noise and disarray of the situation, with gunfire from both SWAPO and the paratroopers coming from the surrounding bush, from the trenches and from buildings; mortar bombs were being dropped around the guns from three sides; smoke, dust and cordite fumes drifted over the scene; shouting and screaming interspersed the explosions of hand grenades; and all the time there was the deep, ominous stutter of the anti-aircraft guns.⁶⁴⁰

The combined effect of the mortar fire and the bloody trench-clearing from two directions finally caused sufficient damage to the guns and attrition amongst their crews for them to be silenced.⁶⁴¹ Breytenbach says that the bodies of seven dead gunners were found behind the largest gun after the battle.⁶⁴² The fury of the battle around the guns had exacted a terrible toll: Steenkamp claims that the paratroopers counted 95 SWAPO dead lying in the trench.⁶⁴³ Two paratroopers had been killed and at least three wounded, including the battalion commander, Jan Breytenbach.⁶⁴⁴ (See Appendix C to Chapter 7, pages 7C-7 and 8, and Appendix A to Chapter 8, page 8A-2). In later years Breytenbach frequently referred to the unwavering bravery of the SWAPO gunners.⁶⁴⁵ meaningful acknowledgement indeed from an enemy soldier with his extensive combat experience.

After the fall of the anti-aircraft guns in Cassinga all major resistance to the paratrooper onslaught collapsed. The odd sniper still fired on the soldiers from concealed positions and a few small pockets of hopeless resistance were encountered, but on the whole the battle was over and the mopping up of the objective could commence. (See Appendix C, pages 7C-5 and 6). By then it was past midday⁶⁴⁶ and there was a nervousness apparent amongst the paratroopers. The first helicopter extraction should have taken place at 10h00.⁶⁴⁷

639 Translated transcript of an interview with Maggy Amutenya in 1998. Also Becker, "Remembering Cassinga".

640 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991. Ngodji's account confirms that the guerrillas were also firing on the trenches as the paratroopers were clearing them (transcript of an interview with Capt Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998).

641 Interview with Commandant Piet Nel on 14 October 1991; Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Reports by A-Company Commander, B-Company Commander, No 1 Platoon Commander and Report by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach. Nanyemba records that "Shortly after 15.00 hours our anti-air units were bombed and silenced. In this operation our brave combatants, a boy and a girl, who were operating the anti-air, were killed" ("Report on the Kassinga Massacre"). The time given by Nanyemba could not be correct, as the helicopters were called in at 12H10 according to the SAAF Debriefing Record of Events. They would not have approached Cassinga in the face of anti-aircraft fire.

642 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, 4/93, p. 31. Lamprecht, however, was struck by the absence of any bodies around the one gun he recalled examining after the battle (Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas"). He could not explain it, but it is possible that the gunners were pulled into the trenches as soon as they were hit and fell.

643 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, pp. 78-79.

644 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga; interview with Commandant Piet Nel on 14 October 1991; Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Report by No 2 Platoon Commander; Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, 4/93, p. 32.

645 Interviews with Col Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 30 December 1990 and 26 January 2003.

646 Debriefing Reports of Operation REINDEER, Report by D-Company Commander.

647 1 Parachute Brigade Opso 1/78.

The battalion second-in-command had, in the meantime, established the battalion headquarters and regimental aid post (RAP) beside the SWAPO hospital building, which was one of the least damaged structures. Due to the incessant sniping, he got the civilian women and children who had begun to emerge to form a human shield around the building. This stopped the sniping. The RAP was manned by two medical officers and a medical orderly who treated the wounded that were brought in. Though these apparently included some guerrillas with terrible, gaping wounds, priority treatment was reserved for the seriously wounded paratroopers.⁶⁴⁸ (See Appendix C, pages 7C-7 and 8). For the South Africans, highly sensitive to own casualties in operations and accustomed to the low-intensity, low casualty conflict in northern Namibia, the cost in terms of casualties was high, particularly as these were citizen soldiers who, two weeks earlier, were blissfully going about their civilian jobs. Three paratroopers had been killed, eleven had been wounded (two of them critically) and six had been injured during the parachute drop. Another one was to be discovered, after their extraction, to be missing, believed killed.⁶⁴⁹ SWAPO casualties could not yet at that stage be ascertained, but it was clear to the paratroopers that they had been massive and that their own losses paled into insignificance by comparison. The magnitude of the air-strike, its achievement of total surprise, and the concentrations of Cassinga occupants in the trenches that were systematically cleared by the paratroopers made heavy losses a strong likelihood in such an operation. The frequent references in the reports by paratrooper officers to civilians, including women and children, intermingled with the guerrillas during the fighting, would indicate that many must also have died in the heat of the battle.

Cassinga could not yet be considered secure, as there were still minor fire-fights between paratroopers and guerrillas erupting all over the shattered town. Breytenbach was attempting to re-organise his battalion,⁶⁵⁰ collect documents and prisoners and prepare for the helicopter extraction, which would have to take place in two waves. It was apparently at this stage that the brigade commander, Brigadier Du Plessis, who until then had played no part in the operation, received news of a radio interception warning of an approaching Cuban armoured force from Techamutete.⁶⁵¹ According to Breytenbach, he then had a heated altercation with the brigadier, who wanted to immediately call in the helicopters to commence with the extraction. Breytenbach insisted that a helicopter LZ first be secured and declared safe.⁶⁵² Breytenbach eventually consented to the helicopters being called in, and while those paratroopers designated to be extracted in the first wave moved to the selected LZ, the rest continued with clearing operations. The arms that had been used

648 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

649 Appendix C to Minutes of a Conference held at Army HQ at 09h00 on 18 May 1978 to do a Debriefing on Op REINDEER (Secret), Reference H LEeR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER, dd 22 May 1978, Enclosure 1, File CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Secret).

650 "Reorganise" is a military term used to describe the rapid checking of every subordinate element in terms of personnel, locations, ammunition and preparation to ward off a possible counter-attack, all done immediately after an attack in order to bring the commander up to date on the overall situation and to restore order within the attacking force.

651 Du Plessis and his brigade signaller were manning the rear link back to SWA Tactical HQ in Ondangwa. It is not known whether their B-22 High Frequency radio had direct communication with the HQ at Ondangwa, or whether they were relaying through the paratroopers at the HAA [Hills, their commander, confirms that he did have communication with both the Tactical HQ and Du Plessis – interview with Colonel J.R. Hills (retired) on 1 January 1996]. It is also possible that they were relaying through the Electronic Warfare Skymaster aircraft, holding above the Namibian/Angolan border. Gleeson, in any case, recalls that the communication link was not very good, and that he seemed to only receive worrying reports about paratroopers being dropped off-target and flanks coming under fire [interview with Lieutenant General Ian Gleeson (retired) on 16 January 2003].

652 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990.

by the guerrillas were collected into piles, while captured guerrillas were herded together for a number of prisoners to be selected to be taken back to Namibia.⁶⁵³ The house identified as the residence of Dimo Hamaambo yielded the most documents, including a number of photographs.⁶⁵⁴ The Intelligence Officer who conducted the search of the house felt that it was probably the actual SWAPO headquarters.⁶⁵⁵ An ammunition dump and underground bunker were discovered and blown up.⁶⁵⁶ One of SWAPO's PLAN cadres who was at Cassinga, however, claimed that the building containing their weapons, located on one side of the camp, only blew up after the extraction of the paratroopers, as a result of "the heat of the bombings."⁶⁵⁷

Had it been necessary for the paratroopers to be replenished with ammunition at this point of the operation, there would have been an additional problem for them to face. The C-160 aircraft that had been tasked to be on standby at Ondangwa to air-supply this ammunition to Cassinga, found on arrival that there was no ammunition prepared for air-supply. When the Air-Supply Unit eventually prepared the ammunition they did not have the correct technical equipment available, and the Air Force had to improvise on the system being used in order to ensure that the pallets would function correctly during the drop. This should have been an Army responsibility. When it came to loading the pallets, there was no-one to indicate the sequence in which they needed to be loaded.⁶⁵⁸

Fortunately for the paratroopers there was no call for this and the first wave of helicopters approached in two separate groups. The intention had been that eleven of the 12 Pumas in this wave would uplift 159 paratroopers, while the twelfth would be utilised for POWs and documents. They were then to return to Whisky Three, deposit their loads, refuel and wait to be called back to extract the rest.⁶⁵⁹ For reasons that remain obscure, the "Army Commander" (either Du Plessis or Breytenbach) initially only requested five Pumas.⁶⁶⁰ This could have been because there was still fighting taking place in the northern part of Cassinga,⁶⁶¹ and Breytenbach may have been reluctant to withdraw too many troops at that stage. Arriving at Cassinga with the first group of helicopters were two medical officers and four medical orderlies with all their field equipment.⁶⁶²

There was also a cameraman with a movie camera.⁶⁶³ Although it seems that seized documents were sent out with this wave (a subsequent signal makes mention of "four trunks full of

653 Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Report by A-Company Commander.

654 Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Report by B-Company Commander.

655 Interview with Colonel L.C. Odendaal on 15 February 1995.

656 Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Report by C-Company Commander.

657 Transcript of interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998.

658 Notule van 'n Konferensie gehou te Leër HK om 09H00 op 18 Mei 78 om Nabetragting te doen oor Op REINDEER, H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER, (Secret), File HS OPS/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 2, Archive HS Ops, Group 5, Box No 121.

659 SAAF Operational Order Op REINDEER.

660 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

661 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

662 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

663 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 26 January 2003. In some photographs taken during the raid, the long-haired cameraman, wearing a South African Army uniform, can be seen with a movie camera marked "SABC TV News". (See Appendix A to Chapter 8, page 8A-2). On the back of photographs supplied by the SANDF Documentation Service he is identified as "Sgt Tobie Steenkamp". He could have been a Citizen Force member of the SABC staff.

documents”⁶⁶⁴), a serious mix-up took place at this stage. Just how many paratroopers were extracted cannot be established, but the confusion of the drop had resulted in many sections and platoons still not having linked up properly. Some of those allocated to the first wave for extraction were therefore not yet in position. Provision had been made for the extraction of 16 prisoners in this wave, but they were not forthcoming. Their place, it seems, was taken up by nine wounded paratroopers.⁶⁶⁵ The battalion second-in-command recorded that he felt it urgent that the critically wounded be evacuated immediately. He therefore insisted that they leave on the first wave.⁶⁶⁶ This decision to go against the prearranged plan, though taken in good faith, could have had fatal consequences for the wounded men, for the medical personnel remained at Cassinga while the casualties were moved to the HAA, where there was no medical support. The helicopter air-crew had to treat them as best they could. The inexperienced efforts of some paratroopers to insert drips into their wounded comrades were both painful and unsuccessful.⁶⁶⁷ When the second group of six Pumas forming part of the first wave left Whisky Three at 13H00 to collect their passengers from Cassinga, they returned with one MO (doctor).⁶⁶⁸ The wounded paratroopers (with the exception of the one most critical) would only be transferred to Ondangwa late that evening. In the event they all survived. In the subsequent official report on the medical aspects of Operation REINDEER this decision was described as “a blessing in disguise, as the casualties had already left Cassinga by the time the Cuban armour tried to interfere.”⁶⁶⁹

It was not the only potentially crucial mistake to occur at this point. Two officers from the South African Engineer Corps had jumped with the other paratroopers that day. These two Sappers had been specifically tasked with conducting demolitions once the objective had been taken. This would have included heavy weaponry (such as the anti-aircraft guns), fortifications such as bunkers and buildings being used as headquarters and stores. It seems that these two officers did blow up some items, even possibly some buildings. But when the first helicopters arrived they disappeared with most of the explosives and all of the detonators. It was later established that they'd boarded the

664 Signal from SWA Tac HQ (Ondangwa) to GOC SWA/INL/108/04 MEI 78 (Secret), enclosure 98 of file D OPS/309/1 REINDEER, Vol 1 (Top Secret), Archive “Aanvullende Dokumente”, Group OD-1968, Box No 8B.

665 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events, which notes that the five helicopters were called in at 12H10. This concurs approximately with Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”, which states that “Shortly before 12.00 hours 5 South African helicopters (Pumas) came to pick up their dead and wounded. Our forces kept on fighting, making it hard for the enemy to pick up their people.”

666 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

667 Lamprecht, “Cassinga Notas”. In discussions with Brig Gen John Church on 13 May 2003 he described the efforts of the air crew in this regard.

668 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events. Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”, describes the arrival of the second group of helicopters as follows: “By 14.00 hours 2 more helicopters arrived to pick up more deads. At this stage some of our people were forced at gun-point to assist in loading dead and injured Boers. Quite many of our people were also forced into the helicopters. Among those missing and suspected to have been picked up by the Boers is comrade Nashilongo Taapopi, the Secretary of Youth.” It is possible that all six helicopters were not seen by Nanyemba, as they could have landed on several of the well dispersed landing zones. There is no record in SADF documents that prisoners were taken out by this group of helicopters. Nanyemba, of course, may not even have been at Cassinga and his report could have been based on the accounts of survivors.

669 Report on Medical Aspects of Op REINDEER, GG/310/4 REINDEER (Secret) dd 27 June 1978, Enclosure 9, File HS OPS/310/4 REINDEER (Secret), Vol 2, Archive HS Ops, Group 5, Box No 121.

helicopters and been flown back to Whisky Three.⁶⁷⁰ Something like this could only have happened if there was a breakdown in command and control.

Another passenger in the first wave of helicopters to Cassinga was Lieutenant General Constand Viljoen, the Chief of the Army. Ever dapper and bustling, *Stofstrepie* lived up to his name, setting off on a tour of the still smoking battlefield as soon as he'd alighted, brazenly displaying his gunner beret and rank insignia of crossed sword and baton with two castles. For Breytenbach, already burdened by two unwelcome brigadiers, "He was an extra pain-in-the-neck".⁶⁷¹

When asked during an interview whether he had seen evidence of refugees in Cassinga when he had joined the paratroopers, Viljoen was quite adamant: "No. It was clear that the occupants of the base had plenty of 'home comforts' in the form of female camp followers in the age-old military tradition, but I have no doubt at all that it was a military base. While I was there, there were constant explosions as the thatched roofs of huts were burning. It was ammunition hidden in the thatch. It was so bad that I had great difficulty hearing while I spoke to Jan Breytenbach and when I was speaking on the radio. I did see some young women, wounded, being treated at the medical post, but there were very few of them. I recall that one of them had part of her calf shot away."⁶⁷²

It is quite likely that there were very few civilians still around in Cassinga by the time that Viljoen got there. Gerber says that a number of them claimed to have been abducted by SWAPO and requested that the paratroopers take them back to Namibia. As this was not possible, all the civilians were released into the surrounding bush and told to make it back on foot or to link up with UNITA forces.⁶⁷³ Breytenbach too, referred to young Ovambo men and women who had been abducted by SWAPO to be turned into "terrorists". He describes a young girl, one of 72 who had been taken three weeks earlier in their bus from St Mary's Mission in Namibia, who pleaded with him, crying, to take her and her friends home in the helicopters. He had to refuse her request because no provision had been made for this, so all available space in the helicopters had been allocated.⁶⁷⁴ Photographic evidence certainly indicates that there were still civilians around when the paratroopers had finally taken Cassinga (See Appendix C, page 7C-12).

Another of the senior officers told of his macabre encounter with a civilian. Brigadier Hannes Botha, having no role other than that of an observer, was walking around Cassinga during the reorganisation

670 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga. This was confirmed in the Army Debriefing [Notule van 'n Konferensie gehou te Leër HK om 09H00 op 18 Mei 78 om Nabetraging te doen oor Op REINDEER, H LEËR/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER, (Secret), dd 22 May 1978, Enclosure 4, File KMDMT SWA/309/1 REINDEER, Vol 1, (Secret), Archive "Aanvullende Dokumente", Group OD-1968, Box No 8B]. The demolitions that were carried out are listed as six vehicles as well as houses, while ammunition was blown up in explosions caused by setting buildings alight and using grenades. It is pertinently mentioned that SWAPO weapons were not effectively destroyed. No subsequent action appears to have been taken against the engineer officers for their dereliction of duty.

671 Interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach (retired) on 29 December 1990.

672 Interview with General Constand Viljoen (retired) on 2 May 2002.

673 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga. Breytenbach recounts a similar story in "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, 4/93, p. 33.

674 Breytenbach, "Gefechtssprung", *Barett*, 4/1993, p. 33. The hijacking of the bus in Ovamboland is well documented and was one of the long list of "incidents" used by SADF to justify the launching of Operation REINDEER ("Border violations forced SA to strike", *The Star*, 5 May 1978). A bus is visible in the vehicle park on aerial photographs of Cassinga, and there is a photograph of a badly damaged bus allegedly taken at Cassinga after the raid. (See Appendix B to Chapter 9, page 9A-4). It has a SWA registration number. The figure of 72 children varied, and in some accounts a lower figure was given.

and mopping up. While inspecting a trench filled with the bodies of SWAPO dead, he spotted a pair of tiny legs protruding from the grisly pile. Pulling some of the bodies aside he uncovered a baby girl, alive and unhurt. He handed her over to one of the women in the base.⁶⁷⁵

The paratroopers were burning every hut and tent that still stood and that would catch alight. (See Appendix C, page 7C-10). They blew up or booby-trapped boxes of ammunition, shot up or booby-trapped any vehicles which looked as if they might start⁶⁷⁶ and laid No 8 tank mines on the road entering Cassinga from the north.⁶⁷⁷ Nanyemba claims that “By 13.00 hours a second plane of the Boers was shot down.”⁶⁷⁸ There is, however, no evidence that any South African aircraft were lost, and by all South African accounts the anti-aircraft guns had been silenced by this time.

The delay in completing the raid caused by the inaccurate para-drop and the unexpected resistance put up by the anti-aircraft machine gunners must have produced concern amongst South African Commanders that the Angolan MPLA would react and intervene, either from the air or by land. The slowness of any reaction, especially from the relatively nearby base of Techamutete, was ascribed by the South Africans to the effectiveness of their electronic warfare interference from the aircraft maintained above the border for this purpose. This was seen to have caused major communications problems for the MPLA, the Cubans and SWAPO.⁶⁷⁹

DEDUCTIONS

It seems apparent that it was the intended raid on Cassinga that made the South African politicians more jittery than any other part of Operation REINDEER. Accordingly, there were repeated delays in the execution of the operation as particularly the Minister of Defence and his Defence Chief vacillated in the face of the international reaction they knew would result from this raid. A concerted effort was therefore made to build up a case to justify the raid by emphasizing SWAPO's aggression, largely through a campaign of “climate creation”.

There are indications that SWAPO was anticipating an attack of some sort, though probably not an airborne assault nor an air strike. There seems to have been some preparation made to reduce the effects of any attack. South African intelligence interpretation also concluded that there was a significant increase in the number of guerrillas inside Cassinga during the days immediately prior to the raid.

Nevertheless, surprise appears to have been achieved by the paratroopers, with their whole force being moved from De Brug, through Bloemfontein, to Air Force Base Bloemspruit and then flown the 1,300km to Grootfontein and spending the night there before flying to Cassinga, all without SWAPO being warned of their movements. The security measures of the South Africans, in concentrating and

675 “The One-day War”, *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1978.

676 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

677 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

678 Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”.

679 Report on Operation REINDEER sent to all South African Military Attachés abroad, dd 25 May 78, Enclosure 112 of File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129.

rehearsing near Bloemfontein and then moving by air and carrying out final preparations at night, helped to achieve this.

The paratroopers, though they had no heavy weapons, were extremely heavily armed in terms of the weapons and ammunition they carried and with which they jumped. Provision was made for a reserve of troops, airborne and on immediate call throughout the operation, as well as a reserve of ammunition to be air supplied if needed, and two reserve helicopters.

The air-strike was a finely co-ordinated movement, delivering an awesome total of 1,200 anti-personnel bombs, 30,000 pounds (13,500kg) of high-explosive bombs and a devastating two-aircraft strafing run with 30mm high-explosive fragmentation shells. Though many of the anti-personnel bombs failed to explode and several of the 1,000 pound bombs missed their targets, the strike sowed death, destruction and terror amongst the occupants of Cassinga. The parachute drop, with no-one controlling it from the ground, was very inaccurate, with most of the assault force landing on the wrong side of the Culonga River and the other elements being dropped late or on faulty bearings. The size of the DZ was wrongly calculated and was too small for the force that was dropped, causing dangerous dispersion of the paratroopers. The result was a delay of about an hour and a half after the air-strike before the ground assault could take place. This, together with the gaps around Cassinga caused by the poor parachute drops, probably enabled large numbers of the occupants to escape.

From the time of the drop until the assault force had moved about half way through Cassinga, there were numerous skirmishes between SWAPO and the paratroopers, but the latter experienced no significant initial resistance. Control and co-ordination of the paratroopers was sadly lacking and their actions were very disjointed. A combination of sniper fire and the SWAPO anti-aircraft guns produced the first real resistance, brought the momentum of the paratrooper attack to a standstill and supported a fierce defence from the trenches. It was over an hour before the guns could be silenced. This signalled the collapse of further meaningful resistance and enabled the paratroopers to take the town.

Many civilians were encountered by the paratroopers, including women and children. Some of these died in the fighting, particularly in the close quarter combat in the hotly contested trenches. Women in uniform were also encountered participating in the defence. The paratroopers collected weapons and documents, blew up ammunition and burned down whatever buildings they could. They also took about 40 prisoners. A failure in the plan occurred when the two officers who had been allocated the task of carrying out demolitions were extracted by the first helicopters to arrive. This meant that demolitions could not be completed. The wounded paratroopers were also evacuated to Whisky Three, while all medical support was brought forward to Cassinga, leaving the wounded, some of whom were critical, without any medical care for about an hour. The prisoners were not transferred to Whisky Three as planned, but the captured documents were.

CHAPTER 8

THE CUBAN COUNTER-ATTACK AND PARATROOPER EXTRACTION

Appendix A: Photographs Taken During the Cuban Counter-Attack.

The SADF Operational Instruction which had tasked the arms of service and staff divisions for participation in Operation REINDEER, had placed a specific restriction on engaging the Cubans or the MPLA in combat:

“Slegs SWAPO-terroriste, basisse en kommunikasie/logistieke lyne mag aangeval word. Kontak met MPLA of Kubane moet sover moontlik vermy word”⁶⁸⁰ (Only SWAPO terrorists, bases and communication/logistic lines may be attacked. Contact with MPLA or Cubans must be avoided as far as possible).

Clearly, however, this restriction no longer applied in the event of military intervention by forces from either of these two elements.

At about 13h00 the Buccaneer circling above Cassinga at that stage spotted the advancing column of vehicles on the road from Techamutete in the south. The pilot identified approximately 30 vehicles of various types before attacking them.⁶⁸¹ He fired 54 hollow-charge and anti-personnel rockets at the leading armoured personnel carriers, destroying three of them.⁶⁸² Its ammunition expended, the Buccaneer then had to return to Grootfontein. This left the paratroopers, who, due to the first extraction having been completed at that stage, numbered probably less than 200, on their own. The approaching column of Cuban armour, judging by its composition, appears to have consisted of an understrength mechanised infantry battalion reinforced by a company of tanks (about 400 men in total).⁶⁸³ Between them and the lightly armed paratroopers was the anti-tank platoon: 22 men with ten RPG-7 rocket launchers.⁶⁸⁴ Having planted five tank mines along the road, this little group waited in an ambush position. The leading tank (an old Soviet T-34/85) was disabled when it detonated one of the mines,⁶⁸⁵ and the first BTR 152 armoured personnel carriers were caught in the ambush. The paratroopers shot out four of them, killing most of those who managed to survive the anti-tank rockets as soon as they staggered out of the burning hulks. But the sound of more BTRs and tanks approaching was enough for them. Leaving about 40 dead Cubans behind, the paratroopers beat a hasty retreat to the LZ where Breytenbach was concentrating the remainder of his battalion for the final extraction, just east of Cassinga.⁶⁸⁶

680 Operasie Instruksie No 8/78: Operasie REINDEER.

681 Command and Control Occurrence Log.

682 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events. The entry indicates that the attack may have taken place at 12h30, but as it is ambiguously formulated, it seems more likely that the Buccaneer was over Cassinga at 12h30, and that the attack took place later. 13h00 would coincide with other descriptions.

683 A Soviet-style battalion would have consisted of about 35 armoured fighting vehicles and a tank company of 10 tanks. See *Doctrina del Enemigo Convencional*. Also Isby, *Weapons and Tactics of the Soviet Army*, pp. 79, 80, 109, 110.

684 Gerber, Pocket Notebook.

685 Interview with Staff Sergeant Derek Hopkins (retired) on 19 June 1995. Hopkins was the anti-tank platoon sergeant.

686 Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Report by Anti-Tank Platoon Commander.

The SWAPO version of the Cuban counter-attack, according to the Nanyemba report, was very similar: “At about 14.00 hours our Cuban friends wanted to assist our camp but they met with the enemy fire, destroying 3 Cuban troop carriers, i.e. 2 tanks and one armoured car, with bombs. In this operation our camp Secretary comrade Uhuru who took the message to the Cuban comrades, lost his life. 5 Cuban trucks detonated enemy landmines. Our friends were thus forced to find a different route to Kassinga.”⁶⁸⁷ Nanyemba, however, claims that at this time fighting was continuing inside Cassinga and that between 14H00 and 15H00 “a third enemy plane was brought down by our combatants.”

As the paratroopers hurriedly moved from the various parts of Cassinga where they had been when Breytenbach began to rally them, Gerber passed the body of a six-month old baby, dressed in a knitted, striped pink-and-white jump suit, lying beside the charred remains of a burnt-out hut. It was, according to Gerber, the only dead child he’d seen during the operation and he surmised that the mite had been a victim of that morning’s bombing.⁶⁸⁸ On the LZ there was near chaos: lower-level command and control had virtually broken down and the paratroopers were milling around in confusion. They could hear the explosions of the anti-tank platoon’s mines and RPG-7 rockets to the south⁶⁸⁹ and the dreaded word “tanks” was on everybody’s lips. Tanks have always been the nemesis of lightly armed paratroopers. The C-Company Commander was ordered by Breytenbach to form a defensive line with his company along the southern edge of the LZ, against the tree-line.⁶⁹⁰ Rushing around desperately and yelling at the paratroopers whose officers and NCOs appeared to have abdicated their responsibilities, his company second-in-command, who was also the embarkation officer for that LZ, finally got a very makeshift line into place while he struggled to get some semblance of order into the paratroopers arriving in dribs and drabs to be extracted. Amidst the confusion the paratroopers began to hear the low rumble of armoured vehicles’ engines, the clanking of metal tank tracks and occasional speculative fire by their machine-guns. Captain van Zyl, the embarkation officer, recalled how they wondered just what they were supposed to do with their rifles against this force, and consequently prepared for the worst.⁶⁹¹ The Cuban vehicles were old (the tanks were of Second World War vintage), but the paratroopers were just too lightly armed and vulnerable to stand any real chance against them.

Breytenbach had requested urgent close air support and had also ordered the helicopters at Whisky Three to return and extract his trapped paratroopers. But the Cuban armour was almost on top of them and there was no sign of any aircraft. He decided to withdraw into the surrounding bush and try to get to an emergency LZ.⁶⁹² General Viljoen, concerned now about the very real possibility of being captured, removed his badges of rank and his beret and hid them under a stone.⁶⁹³

687 Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”.

688 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

689 Interview with General Constand Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

690 Debriefing Reports for Operation REINDEER, Report by C-Company Commander.

691 Interview with Commandant J.E.H.T. van Zyl on 20 November 1993.

692 Breytenbach, “Gefechtssprung”, *Barett*, 4/93, p. 35.

693 Interview with General Constand Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

The anti-tank platoon had barely arrived at the LZ and strengthened the thin defensive line⁶⁹⁴ when a Buccaneer and two Mirages arrived almost simultaneously over Cassinga. (See Appendix A to Chapter 4, page 4A-3, and Appendix A to Chapter 8, page 8A-3). The time was about 14h20.⁶⁹⁵ Their appearance elicited a ragged cheer from the desperate paratroopers.⁶⁹⁶ One of the paratroopers' FACs then proceeded to skillfully direct strikes from the aircraft against the advancing Cuban armour.⁶⁹⁷ The delta-winged Mirages viciously strafed the armoured force with their 30mm cannons and soon six BTR 152 armoured personnel carriers were burning fiercely.⁶⁹⁸ (See Appendix A to Chapter 8, page 8A-4). But the 30mm incendiary shells had no effect on the tanks; they simply continued rumbling along the road. Fortunately for the paratroopers the Buccaneer was armed with 54 hollow-charge and 18 anti-personnel rockets. The huge grey aircraft arrowed down at the armoured column and released a salvo of 12 rockets at the leading tank. It erupted in a flash of black and orange, torn open by the hollow-charge rockets. Then it began to burn.⁶⁹⁹ A second attack by the Buccaneer destroyed another tank⁷⁰⁰ before the Mirages attacked again, strafing the bushes on the sides of the road where the BTRs had pulled off under cover. Running low on fuel and ammunition, the Mirages carried out a final attack about a kilometre further down the road, knocking out four more armoured personnel carriers, before heading back to Ondangwa.⁷⁰¹

All the aircraft had come under fire during every attack. It was probably only their speed that saved them from the manually-traversed anti-aircraft guns. The Buccaneer pilot identified a towed, twin-barreled 14.5mm anti-aircraft gun set up in the road near the tail of the column. Twice he dived through the stream of bullets before his rockets silenced the gun, destroyed its tractor and killed 12 Cubans.⁷⁰² His ammunition was now expended, but just then all 17 of the helicopters began to arrive at the LZ. They had left Whisky Three in the region of 14h10⁷⁰³ and must have waited for the air-ground attacks to be completed before coming in to land, so their arrival would probably have been at about 14h25. On board one of the helicopters was Rifleman Dale Packham, the most critically wounded of the paratroopers. The doctor with him, concerned about his chances of survival, wanted to get him to a hospital urgently, and the second wave of helicopters would be returning directly to Namibia with the paratroopers they were extracting. Ironically, he now had to first be flown from Whisky Three, back into the battlefield, before he could be evacuated.⁷⁰⁴

694 Debriefing Reports for Operation REINDEER, Report by Anti-Tank Platoon Commander; also interview with Commandant J.E.H.T. van Zyl on 20 November 1993.

695 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

696 "Cassinga, Episode 2", Newsletter of the SA Paratrooper Association (Johannesburg Canopy), October 1990, p. 6.

697 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga.

698 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

699 Van Wyk, *Honoris Crux*, p. 88, and Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 92.

700 Gerber, Personal Record and Observations on Cassinga. Confirmed by SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

701 Command and Control Occurrence Book; SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

702 Van Wyk, *Honoris Crux*, p. 88. The effect of the rocket attack is set out in the SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

703 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

704 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

But the badly-mauled yet persistent Cubans, until then not sure just where the South Africans were, now saw the helicopters flying in low over the trees and then all sinking out of sight in approximately the same area. This was a clear target indication and they immediately began moving through the bushes directly towards the LZ, delivering speculative fire as they advanced in formation. Unable to see them yet, the paratroopers could hear their gunfire and the sounds of their vehicles' engines and guessed that they weren't more than 200 metres distant.⁷⁰⁵ C-Company and the anti-tank platoon, covering the extraction taking place behind them, began to hear the vehicles crashing through the trees and bushes and saw branches and leaves falling from the trees directly in front of them as the machine-guns mounted on the armoured vehicles engaged in speculative fire in their general direction. Van Zyl instructed his men to fire into the bushes in front of them. The paratroopers opened up with a heavy volume of rifle and light machine-gun fire, also firing what few mortar bombs they had left. Unsure of just what lay ahead of them, the Cubans seemed to hesitate momentarily as their attack lost some of its momentum.⁷⁰⁶

This gave those on the LZ a little more time to scramble aboard the helicopters which were landing all over the open field. There was chaos on the LZ, as all semblance of the original extraction plan vanished. There were large letters in white marked on each helicopter so that soldiers allocated to them could find their aircraft. But there was no control. Except for C-Company and the anti-tank platoon forming the defensive line, there was now a complete breakdown in discipline amongst the paratroopers. Panic reigned as every man ran for the nearest helicopter and desperately scrambled aboard.⁷⁰⁷ Some helicopters were dangerously overloaded and people had to get out again before they could lift off. Viljoen, an ascetic disciplinarian and fitness fanatic, a non-smoking teetotaler who regularly jogged and exercised, was appalled at the paratroopers' performance: "There was no proper discipline. The paratroopers were not fit enough for the operation. I was disillusioned by their performance. One man was so exhausted when he was running to get to a helicopter that he collapsed right next to it and had to be picked up by his comrades and dragged into the aircraft."⁷⁰⁸

There were many stories which emerged of panic-stricken paratroopers racing frantically from one overloaded helicopter to another in their desperate effort to find a place,⁷⁰⁹ of overloaded helicopters unable to get into the air,⁷¹⁰ and of excess paratroopers and SWAPO prisoners-of-war being unceremoniously booted out by their fellow-passengers.⁷¹¹ It also seems likely that in that free-for-all panic that took place some paratroopers threw away certain items of equipment and probably even weapons and ammunition. This probably applied particularly to heavier weapons like mortar tubes and rocket launchers, especially if there was no ammunition left for them. Also heavy ammunition like belts of machine-gun rounds. Certainly Pagano's book has a photograph in it showing such

705 Interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

706 Interview with Commandant J.E.H.T. van Zyl on 20 November 1993.

707 Interview with Commandant Charlie Luyt on 12 November 1993. Luyt was one of the helicopter pilots.

708 Interview with General Constand Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

709 "Cassinga Episode 2".

710 Interview with Commandant Piet Nel on 14 November 1991.

711 Gerber, Personal Report and Observations on Cassinga, and interview with WO1 L.C. Pietersen on 14 October 1991.

items, as well as parachutes (see Appendix B to Chapter 9), and Nanyemba says that “a considerable amount of arms and ammunition was captured.”⁷¹²

When the counter-attack had started, Viljoen recalled, Brigadier Hannes Botha had shown him a group of about 40 SWAPO guerrillas, all of whom had been identified because of the clear bruise marks on their shoulders, indicating that they had recently been carrying heavy loads in packs on their backs. They had been selected to be flown back to Ondangwa as prisoners-of-war for interrogation. (See Appendix C to Chapter 7, pages 7C-11 and 12). But when it became clear that there would be no room for them in the aircraft, Botha asked if they should be shot. Viljoen’s response, in an interview, was: “I told him very emphatically that I would countenance no such thing, and ordered them to be released. They were.”⁷¹³

By then Cuban mortar bombs were exploding on the LZ between the helicopters.⁷¹⁴ Most of the helicopters had lifted off, and Van Zyl now ordered C-Company and the anti-tank platoon to withdraw. The men stood up and began moving backwards. As they did so they poured rifle and machine-gun fire into the line of trees behind which the Cubans were still hesitating. The paratroopers continued firing until they reached the helicopters, and some were still firing through the open side doors as the aircraft lifted off.⁷¹⁵ According to some reports the Cubans then emerged from the bushes, firing at the helicopters only a few hundred metres away.⁷¹⁶

Ngodji, one of the SWAPO guerrillas who survived the Cassinga raid and whose account has been recorded, described his impression of the Cuban counter-attack: “We heard heavy shootings from Ochamutete side. It was the Cubans who came to our help. They marched, shooting, towards the camp. When the parachutes noticed the oncoming Cubans, they ran to their helicopters that were just packed [parked?] at our parade. These helicopters were full of captured comrades. They [were] ready to take off because the Cuban fire had become unbearable to them. There was not enough space in the helicopters, and before they could take off they threw some of the captured comrades down [from] the helicopters. There were also stretchers in the helicopters. They threw some of them down and the helicopter[s] took off.”⁷¹⁷

The emphasis in this account is on the Cuban aggression and unrelenting advance, in the face of which the paratroopers panicked and ran. Technically, the account still evidences inaccuracies, as the second wave of helicopters was not waiting on the parade ground, loaded with prisoners. Though

712 Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”.

713 Interview with General Constand Viljoen on 2 May 2002. Although there are other references to 40 prisoners, documentation on the raid makes it clear that only 16 were to be selected to be flown out of Cassinga. That would have been the maximum number, without equipment, that a Puma model “H” helicopter would have managed.

714 Command and Control Occurrence Log; Breytenbach, “Gefechtssprung”, *Barett*, 4/93, p. 35.

715 Interview with Commandant J.E.H.T. van Zyl on 20 November 1993.

716 Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Reports by No 7 and No 8 Platoon Commanders.

717 Transcript of interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998. Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”, also refers to the stretchers, linking them to South African casualties: “The death toll of the enemy... is estimated at about 100 (one hundred) taken from the more than 100 stretchers captured by our combatants.” Gerber, in his handwritten orders attached to Personal Report and Observations, clearly states that the paratroopers took only seven stretchers with them into Cassinga.

some of the first wave landed on the parade ground, the second, according the official documentation already quoted, only arrived in the nick of time and all landed east of Cassinga.

However, Ngodji's account is tempered somewhat by his mysterious description of Cuban casualties: "There also was a setback on the Cuban side. The road from Ochamutete was heavily mined by the parachutes and the trucks carrying the Cubans who came to defend Cassinga detonated these landmines. Some trucks which had survived these mines drove on a tar-like substance, (napalm) which was spread on the road by the parachutes and sticks on the tyres. This substance exploded into flames once the trucks had stopped. The other problem was, while the Cuban trucks were detonating the landmines, an airplane was bombing them at the same time. It was only the Cubans who survived this tragedy, [who] came to our rescue."⁷¹⁸

Just what the strange substance was that was alleged to burst into flames, cannot be established. It seems highly unlikely that such a substance ever existed and this is more likely to be a description of vehicles detonating land-mines. However, it is clear that there must have been substantial casualties amongst the Cuban vehicles.

The Buccaneer pilot, his ammunition expended, identified two tanks in the vicinity of the LZ. One of them began shooting at the remaining helicopters,⁷¹⁹ so the Buccaneer dived at it, passing so low that he almost hit the trees. He repeated this several times, causing the tank to back off into the cover of the trees⁷²⁰ and allowing some helicopters, not too heavily loaded, to return and collect the last of the paratroopers.⁷²¹ Though so much had happened, the whole extraction operation was completed in only a few minutes of indescribable chaos and confusion. The C-Company Commander gives the time at which the helicopters finally departed from Cassinga as approximately 14H30. Nanyemba, however, states that "Our Cuban friends only arrived at Kassinga at 18.00 hours. Their arrival forced the enemy to retreat shortly there after."⁷²²

As he led the formation of 17 helicopters back towards Namibia, the commander, Major John Church, received a call from Kriel, the MAOT commander at Whisky Three. It was feared that some paratroopers might have been left behind. Although they were already some 10 minutes out, Church decided to return to Cassinga to carry out a search. Leaving the formation to continue south under his second-in-command, Major Johan Ströh, Church broke away and called for a volunteer to accompany him. Captain "Ho-jane" Cronje, a long-time friend of the paratroopers who had participated with them in many "Fire Force" operations, immediately rolled his Puma out of the formation and joined Church. When the two helicopters arrived over the smouldering ruins of

718 Transcript of interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998. In the SWAPO publication *Massacre at Cassinga*, p. 17, there is also a reference to the strange substance: "Those residents who attempted to escape by trucks or any other surface transportation were either killed, wounded or maimed as the vehicles ran over a sticky inflammable Phosphate liquid strategically spread by the sadistic enemy on the roads leading to and from Cassinga, and which caused vehicle tyres to burst into flames."

719 Interview with Commandant Charlie Luyt on 12 November 1993 and Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Report by Colonel J.D. Breytenbach.

720 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, pp. 95-96 and Van Wyk, *Honoris Crux*, p. 89.

721 Interview with Commandant Charlie Luyt on 12 November 1993.

722 Nanyemba, "Report on the Kassinga Massacre".

Cassinga they spotted a group of people huddled together near the old graveyard on the edge of the LZ from where the extraction had been carried out. There was no immediate sign of the Cuban armour. Closer inspection revealed that the group of people were not paratroopers: either they were those SWAPO members who had been taken prisoner but left behind during the extraction, or they were a group of frightened civilians. With Cronje keeping a look-out for danger, Church flew about four low circuits around Cassinga, searching for any sign of missing paratroopers. (See Appendix A, page 8A-5). He specifically recalls seeing the damaged bus in which children were allegedly abducted from Ovamboland by SWAPO. Suddenly Cronje spotted a Cuban tank, lurching out of the bushes on the southern edge of the LZ, close to the road. He radioed a warning to Church, who banked away as the tank fired a round from its main gun. The gun's elevation was too low and the round passed below Church's helicopter, exploding harmlessly against some high ground to the northeast. A final circuit convinced Church that there were no paratroopers left on the ground, and as he and Cronje were now too low on fuel to make it back to Namibia, they returned to Whisky Three.⁷²³

The other helicopters had in the meantime flown their paratroopers directly out to Eenhana, an SADF base in Namibia. These helicopters, according to the SAAF, carried 216 troops and six medical personnel.⁷²⁴ After refuelling and loading two 200-litre drums of fuel each, the helicopters returned to Whisky Three, 260km away. Church called in the reserve Super Frelon to accompany them with additional fuel for his and Cronje's Pumas, and to provide additional airlift out of Whisky Three. At Whisky Three the helicopters again refuelled and collected the remaining paratroopers, the MAOT and the protection force.⁷²⁵ Before their departure, the paratroopers hacked holes into the remaining drums of fuel that were to be abandoned.⁷²⁶ Having arrived just before dark, the helicopters took off again from Whisky Three in the gloaming, flying the last soldiers straight back to Ondangwa.⁷²⁷ Though it is not clear from documentation, this must have been when the wounded were finally brought out; certainly it was when the captured documents were transported to Namibia. According to the SAAF records, the helicopters carried four members of the MAOT, 42 protection troops, and 154 other paratroopers plus prisoners and captured material. However, the same document earlier stresses that the prisoners were never provided by the paratroopers, so this could have been an error, meant to refer to the wounded.⁷²⁸ Documentation on the results of the operation note that although approximately 120 men and 80 women were taken prisoner at Chetaquera by Battle Group

723 Discussions with Brig Gen John Church on 13 May 2003.

724 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

725 SAAF Operational Order Op REINDEER and discussions with Brig Gen John Church on 13 May 2003.

726 Lamprecht, "Cassinga Notas".

727 Debriefing Reports on Operation REINDEER, Reports by D-Company Commander, No 4 and No 5 Platoon Commanders. One of these gives the time of departure from Whisky Three as 18h30, while the other two give it as 19h15. A message received at the SADF Command and Control Centre in Pretoria from the Air Force indicated that the helicopters were airborne from Whisky Three at 19h20 (*vide* Command and Control Occurrence Log).

728 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events. Although provision had been made for flying out 990 kg of captured equipment, it seems that other than a few items of medical equipment, a few headgear, cleaning kit, ammunition, compasses and personal kit, the only valuable materials captured were the documents.

Juliet, none were brought back from Cassinga. A total of 75 were said to have been held at Cassinga, but were released during the Cuban counter-attack.⁷²⁹

Well after the last paratroopers had been lifted out of Cassinga that afternoon, at about 15h00, a lone Mirage III CZ arrived over the town. It carried out three strafing runs on the Cubans who were still for the most part in the road. It set one vehicle alight and shot up several others with its 30mm cannons before turning back to Ondangwa.⁷³⁰ By 15h30 another Mirage had replaced it, and this was soon joined by a Buccaneer. The Mirage carried out a strafing run with its 30mm cannons firing high-explosive incendiary and fragmentation shells. A truck moving south burst into flames before the jet attacked a building, drawing anti-aircraft fire in the process. It then returned to Ondangwa. The Buccaneer, firing rockets, also destroyed a vehicle and damaged a building. It then rocketed a group of vehicles about a kilometre south of Cassinga and elicited heavy anti-aircraft fire in so doing.⁷³¹

At 16h45 another Buccaneer arrived to relieve it. Spotting movement inside Cassinga, where the Cubans were searching through the smouldering ruins, the pilot surprised them by streaking in and firing hollow-charge and anti-personnel rockets. They destroyed a T-34 tank and two anti-aircraft guns, damaged a building and killed a number of personnel.⁷³² Both Cassinga and the Cuban counter-attacking force had now been finally shattered.

The only description that could be traced of Cassinga as it was allegedly found that afternoon by an Angolan relief force, was by the former MK cadre, Joseph Kobo: "It had been razed. Six months of logistics work had gone literally up in smoke. Thousands, millions of rounds of ammunition were still exploding as he sifted through. There were bodies everywhere, most of them African, most of them further blackened by flames. Charred papers were scattered in all directions, some still in the air. The downdraughts from the Pumas had fanned the fires. I saw bits of priceless documents, maps, information in tiny bits. More T-54s trundled in. A whole Angolan tank brigade had arrived, but too late. I saw a familiar box on the ground and whisked it away just before heavy tracks crushed it, though it could have been a booby trap. It was a harmless wooden box of cigars. They said '*Romeo y Julieta*.'"⁷³³

At 17h10 another Mirage strike was carried out and at 18h35, in the twilight, a Buccaneer destroyed a truck and an anti-aircraft gun.⁷³⁴ Between them, if the figures reported are to be believed, the paratroopers, the Mirages and the Buccaneers had effectively decimated a reinforced Cuban mechanised battalion that day. This included the destruction of four tanks, 17 armoured personnel

729 Signal OPS/121/05 May 78 (Top Secret) from GOC SWA to NLK, reference 309/1 REINDEER, Enclosure 97, File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive "Aanvullende Dokumenten", Group OD-1968, Box No 8B. Viljoen put the number of prisoners taken at Cassinga at 40 (interview on 2 May 2002), but provision had only been made to extract 16 on the helicopters (SAAF Debriefing Record of Events).

730 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

731 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events and Command and Control Occurrence Log.

732 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events and Command and Control Occurrence Log.

733 Kobo, *Waiting in the Wing*, pp. 141-142. The reliability of this description is open to question, as it contains obvious discrepancies. Nowhere else is there any reference to an Angolan tank brigade or of T-54 tanks arriving at Cassinga that day. Kobo also describes their advance from the north, under attack by South African Mirages. There is no reference to any such advance in the SAAF Record of Events which details every attack by every aircraft.

734 SAAF Debriefing Record of Events.

carriers, seven trucks and four anti-aircraft guns.⁷³⁵ If most of the vehicles were carrying troops at the time that they were destroyed, the Cubans must have lost in excess of 100 soldiers killed or very seriously wounded.⁷³⁶ Though most pro-SWAPO references to the counter-attack describe it as having been carried out by FAPLA or a combined FAPLA/Cuban force (Heywood, for instance, mentions 12 Angolan soldiers killed and 63 wounded, but makes no mention of any Cuban casualties⁷³⁷), initial reports intercepted by the SADF indicated that 16 Cubans were killed and 64 wounded.⁷³⁸ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission throws a fresh light on the Cuban intervention. The section of the Commission's Report dealing with Cassinga records that "according to information drawn from the Cuban archives, approximately 150 Cuban troops died in these attacks – the most serious casualty loss in their involvement in Angola."⁷³⁹ If this is so, Kobo's claim of a veil of secrecy regarding Cuban losses (footnote 736) becomes understandable. It also lends greater credibility to the reports of the casualties inflicted by the anti-tank platoon. Heywood does refer to three Angolan civilians being killed and fifteen being wounded. Shalli, however, is adamant that there were no Cubans or Angolans at all in Cassinga at the time of the raid.⁷⁴⁰ If this was so, then all Cuban and Angolan casualties must have been amongst members of the Techamutete armoured column and it is unlikely that they included civilians.

The next day the paratroopers were flown back to Bloemfontein. After another day to write reports and hand back equipment they were demobilised and sent home. Barely two days after the raid they were back at home for a weekend with their families before returning to their civilian jobs on Monday morning.⁷⁴¹

Their casualties, by all accounts, had been light. During the parachute drop there were six paratroopers injured, none of them seriously. One man went missing and was never found. He was later presumed dead and it is surmised that he may have suffered a parachute malfunction or he may have landed in the river and drowned. He was last seen in the aircraft, as he jumped. Twelve (some sources say eleven) paratroopers were wounded (two seriously, though all survived) and three were killed in action.⁷⁴² Less than 2% injuries on the drop, just over 1% killed and about 3% wounded were

735 One signal (from SWA Tac HQ to SWA Command, Secret OPS/155/05 MEI 78, enclosure 10, file SWA Comd OPS/309/1 REINDEER [Top Secret], Vol 2, Archive "Aanvullende Dokumente", Group OD-1968, Box No 8B) claims that the SAAF alone were responsible for the destruction of the four T-34 tanks, one anti-aircraft gun, seven BRDM armoured personnel carriers, five troop carriers (military trucks), two lorries on the road and 12 in the vehicle park, five soft-skinned vehicles (some with troops in them) and one ammunition carrier. Breytenbach, however, feels that SAAF claims were probably exaggerated, as he is convinced that different aircraft, attacking at different times, probably fired on the same vehicles, especially the tanks, thereby both claiming to have knocked out the same tank (interview with Colonel Jan Breytenbach [retired] on 26 January 2003).

736 Kobo, *Waiting in the Wing*, p. 142 mentions that he saw some whites amongst the dead in Cassinga, but that the Cubans clamped a veil of secrecy over information concerning their casualties. One Angolan message intercepted by the SADF spoke of 15 Cubans dead and 65 wounded (Signal Secret WF/276/09 MEI 78, from C SADF 2, File HS OPS/310/4 REINDEER, Vol 2, Secret). An earlier intercept spoke of eleven Cubans killed and 57 wounded, 29 seriously (Signal Secret 011/MEI/78 dd 5 May 78, same file).

737 Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*, pp. 36-37.

738 This is repeated in a SADF report on Operation REINDEER sent to all South African Military Attachés serving abroad, dd 25 May 1978. It also lists MPLA/Cuban combat vehicle losses as four T-34 tanks, eleven BTR troop carriers and seven soft-skinned vehicles, all shot out by the SAAF. *Vide* Enclosure 115 of File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box 129.

739 *TRC Report*, p. 51.

740 Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003.

741 Minutes of a Debriefing Conference, Enclosure 1 of File CS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Secret).

742 Appendix C to "Notule van 'n Konferensie gehou by Leër HK om 09H00 op 18 Mei 1978 om Nabetragting to doen oor Op REINDEER", Enclosure 1 of file H LEër/D OPS/309/1/3 REINDEER (Secret).

very acceptable casualties for any airborne operation.⁷⁴³ The SADF estimate of anticipated casualties proved very accurate.⁷⁴⁴ The official documentation in the SADF classified files leaves no reason to doubt the veracity of the numbers of casualties. Claims by Pagano that the paratrooper casualties were much higher because “they left 40 blood-stained stretchers at Cassinga when they were pulled out”⁷⁴⁵ can be discounted, as no airborne force of less than 400 men would parachute with so many unwieldy and space-taking stretchers, and there is photographic evidence that SWAPO wounded were also treated by SADF medical personnel. Some reports gave SWAPO officials at Cassinga some days after the raid as claiming South African losses to have been at least 25 killed and more than 100 wounded.⁷⁴⁶ However, as all casualties are named in lists in the SADF documentation, this too can be discounted. The helicopters would probably have carried stretchers, and these may have been ejected in the panic to make room for desperate paratroopers during the chaotic final extraction. But there would only have been one stretcher per helicopter.

Two other versions of the counter-attack, one by the Angolans and another by SWAPO, appeared in the wake of the raid. Neither appears to have been seriously propagated thereafter though. The Cubans never made an official announcement about it. In a radio broadcast two days after the raid, Radio Luanda told listeners in a communiqué from the Minister of Defence, Iko Carreira, that the South African operation continued until 10 a.m. when MPLA troops were given orders to advance to Cassinga. They came in from three directions but hit “obstacles” in the road. Sixteen soldiers were killed and 64 wounded, but their armed vehicles cut a path through the bush and reached Cassinga at 2 p.m. During the operation their anti-aircraft guns shot down a Mirage.⁷⁴⁷

The SWAPO version was given by Peter Katjavivi, SWAPO Secretary for Information and Publicity, to the World Conference for the Eradication of Racism and Racial Discrimination in Basle between 18 and 21 May 1978. It must be borne in mind that in the same statement Katjavivi categorically denied the presence of any military installations or PLAN combatants at Cassinga, so he needed to explain SWAPO’s other claims of “heroic resistance” and of having inflicted “heavy casualties” on the South Africans. He stated that “SWAPO responded to the enemy aggression a few hours after the beginning of the attack as soon as PLAN units could get to the scene. PLAN combatants inflicted heavy losses on the enemy – the South African occupation forces lost not less than 40 of their men – and also shot down three South African war planes.”⁷⁴⁸ However, almost three weeks after the raid,

743 The exact number of paratroopers who jumped at Cassinga is difficult to ascertain with absolute certainty. The six aircraft which dropped paratroopers were capable of carrying a total of 384 for an operation of that nature. There are, however, indications that the C-160 Transall aircraft (whose payload is limited by temperature and altitude) may have carried slightly fewer than the standard maximum of 64 paratroopers each. The *Parachute Jump Record Book* maintained at the Parachute Training Centre in Bloemfontein lists in its entry for 4 May 1978: “Cassinga, 364 troops with equipment.” This figure would have been taken from the load manifests completed by the despatchers when the paratroopers emplaned and can be regarded as accurate. Final figures would in any case have been determined not by the capacity of the transport aircraft, but of the helicopters used for extraction. References to “798 parachutes left by the South Africans” (*The Star*, 10 May 1978) would include reserve parachutes and would indicate 399 paratroopers. The SAAF Debriefing Record of Events states that helicopters extracted 216 paratroopers from Cassinga to Eenhana and then returned to Whisky Three to collect a further 154 paratroopers. But this total of 370 may not include the wounded and dead, and it is unclear whether it includes some of those who were flown into Cassinga by helicopter and did not parachute.

744 “Report Medical Aspects Op REINDEER”, dd 27 June 1978, Enclosure 9, File HS OPS/310/4 REINDEER, Vol 2 (Secret).

745 Pagano, *The Cassinga File*, second unnumbered page. See also footnote 717 for Nanyemba’s casualty estimate.

746 “460 in mass grave at scene of Angolan raid”, *The Star*, 10 May 1978.

747 “SA troops killed 600, claims Angola radio,” *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 May 1978.

748 “Atrocities”, p. 99, *Namibia Dossier*.

and at about the time that Katjavivi was making his claims, the SWAPO headquarters in Lusaka was reported as having disclosed that South African forces “destroyed more than 10 Cuban tanks and their crews... by rockets fired from South African jet aircraft”⁷⁴⁹ during the raid.

In their subsequent publication, *Massacre at Kassinga*, SWAPO modified Katjavivi's statement regarding PLAN involvement as follows:

"The truth is that the only soldiers who were in Kassinga were a small (300 men) camp defence unit. This was a small group of lightly-armed PLAN cadres which put up a heroically stiff resistance against the surprise attack by South African airborne battalion, supported by 8 Mirage fighter bombers and two reconnaissance planes. The anti-aircraft crew which was manning the camp's two anti-aircraft guns succeeded in shooting down three of the enemy planes, before being silenced some hours after the beginning of the bombing. They also kept sniping at the enemy soldiers who were busy trying to destroy all the camp property. It was these few but brave soldiers of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia who also killed about 102 of the attacking enemy soldiers and wounded many more others, whom the rounded up survivors at Kassinga were forced at gun point to load in each of the 14 Puma helicopters which came to evacuate the racist forces in the afternoon."⁷⁵⁰

No mention is made in this publication of the counter-attack, nor of any part played by either Cubans or Angolans.

DEDUCTIONS

A Cuban counter-attack from Techamutete caught the paratroopers unprepared and badly organised. Tactically, it was a poor decision to reorganise on the objective, particularly after the lengthy delays during the attack, even though this was part of the plan. It made the paratroopers vulnerable to the counter-attack that had been anticipated in the plan. It is also apparent that the reorganisation period was not properly utilised by the paratroopers, as they were by all accounts largely still disorganised when the counter-attack took place. It was only the timeous and effective actions of the anti-tank platoon and the SAAF strike aircraft that saved them. The final helicopter extraction, done under fire from the Cubans, was chaotic and characterised by poor battle discipline and a lack of physical fitness amongst the Citizen Force soldiers. Due to the disorganised departure of the paratroopers they seem to have taken no prisoners back to Namibia.

In the whole operation the paratroopers suffered three men killed, one missing, eleven or twelve wounded and six injured during the parachute drop. Cuban and Angolan casualties cannot be ascertained with absolute certainty, but there can be little doubt that the fact that the counter-attacking force was "mounted" (i.e. inside their armoured vehicles) and channelled by the road made them concentrated and vulnerable to anti-armour actions in a wooded and bushy environment. The South Africans were to suffer similar vulnerability when they resorted to mechanised operations in

749 “Cuban tanks ko’d”, *Star*, 21 May 1978.

750 *Massacre at Kassinga*, p. 20.

subsequent years.⁷⁵¹ The Cubans drove straight into the paratrooper tank ambush, apparently under the impression that the first wave of helicopters (which they had observed departing) had extracted all the invaders. The combined effect of the tank mines and the RPG-7 rockets with the element of surprise, caused them to suffer immediate and considerable casualties at the hands of the anti-tank platoon. Furthermore, the wooded terrain and the tributaries of the Culonga River that ran diagonally across the direction of the road, compelled their armoured vehicles to make use of the road. This in turn made them easy targets for air attack and the devastating hollow-charge anti-tank rockets fired by the Buccaneers, while the open-topped BTR 152 armoured personnel carriers were particularly vulnerable to the Buccaneers' anti-personnel rockets and the high-explosive incendiary rounds of the 30mm Mirage cannons. Cuban casualties must therefore have been considerable and it is not surprising that their figures were not made known at the time. It has also not been established beyond doubt that the counter-attacking force did include FAPLA elements, although some sources refer to this force as having been only FAPLA.

The greatest casualty figure, however, is that of the SWAPO victims of the attack. The exact number will probably never be known, as many of those who escaped into the bush were certainly wounded, and some of them, at least, would have died miserably in the trackless and waterless wastes far from any rivers. There is some consensus that the figure of those who died in or immediately around Cassinga is in the region of 600. Pagano gives the exact figures of SWAPO members inside Cassinga on the morning of 4 May 1978 as "3,068, of whom about 500 were children under 14". On 6 May, he states, the casualty toll was recorded as "582 dead and about 400 wounded. But many were still dying in various Angolan hospitals or being blown up on the thousands of anti-personnel mines the South Africans left scattered all over the camp area and its surroundings." He put the final figure of those who died at close to one thousand.⁷⁵²

It is around the SWAPO casualties and the figure of 600 that the great controversy of Cassinga has raged. "At Cassinga the SADF in one day killed the largest number of civilians during the war, more than 600 people by one count, symbolising for SWAPO the callousness of the SADF,"⁷⁵³ is how Seegers portrayed it. Brittain spoke of more than 600 Namibians being killed and 1,500 wounded.⁷⁵⁴ Elsewhere the references and descriptions follow similar lines: "...the Cassinga Massacre, remembering the 600 or more Namibians – mostly women and children – who were killed in the SADF raid on the refugee camp;"⁷⁵⁵ "... six hundred corpses and a thousand wounded lay amongst

751 When a South African mechanised battalion group attack on SWAPO's QFL base during Operation SCEPTIC in June 1980 failed to secure the base and the South Africans lost three Ratel Infantry Combat Vehicles and five soldiers, a dismounted company of paratroopers was sent in to complete the action and clear the objective. *Vide* Cmdt J.M. Dippenaar, *Operasie SCEPTIC* (Confidential).

752 Pagano, "The Kassinga File", second unnumbered page. According to the 1 Parachute Brigade Opso 1/78 the paratroopers were tasked to take a total of 100 personnel mines to Cassinga. These would probably have been the notorious "Claymore" mine, used principally to spring an ambush. But the Claymore was a bulky and heavy weapon which was somewhat complex to set up, and the order contains no instructions as to when they are to be used. This makes very little sense. In his orders, Breytenbach makes no mention of any personnel mines (Composite Parachute Battalion Opso 1/78), and as his were the orders given to the paratroopers it seems fairly certain that they did not take along personnel mines. However, many of the Alpha bombs dropped by the SAAF failed to explode, and these would have caused terrible personnel injuries had they exploded at a later stage with people in the vicinity. (See Appendix B to Chapter 9, page 9B-9).

753 Annette Seegers, *The Military*, p. 224.

754 Brittain, *Hidden Lives, Hidden Deaths*, p. 22.

755 "The Cassinga Raid: a Grim Symbol of Apartheid Violence", *South African Outlook*, May 1988, p. 67.

the smoking debris;⁷⁵⁶ “Up to 500 people, including over 100 children, died within hours and hundreds were wounded;”⁷⁵⁷ “South African paratroopers dropped onto a SWAPO refugee settlement at Cassinga, 200 kilometres inside Angola, and perpetrated the bloodiest massacre of the war, shooting over 600 unarmed men, women and children, as well as a handful of PLAN guards;”⁷⁵⁸ “Cutthroats of the South African army murdered more than 800 defenseless exiles.”⁷⁵⁹ “These are the statistics of the Kassinga massacre, 165 men killed, 294 women killed, 300 children killed and 200 people missing.”⁷⁶⁰

The above figures were all published for public consumption by pro-SWAPO authors or journals. If Nanyemba’s report (Strictly Confidential and for Central Committee Members Only) is authentic, it provides a slightly different picture:

“On the morning of 6th May, 1978 the death toll was recorded at:

196 women

221 men, that is 417 dead.

As the searching continued by the 7th of May the bodies of

51 women

96 men were discovered.

During the course of the day 18 more bodies were found, bringing the death toll by midnight of May 7th at 582.”⁷⁶¹

This reflects a figure of some 326 men and about 256 women and does not specify children. Though the numbers of men are greater than in other reports, the numbers of women are still exceptionally high for a purely military base, even given that SWAPO did have women trained as guerrillas. On the other hand, during the guerrilla war South African sources apparently never reported finding women combatants amongst insurgents encountered inside Namibia and it seems feasible that SWAPO would have utilised such women mainly to protect rear bases. It must not be forgotten though, that in terms of the guerrilla doctrine being followed by SWAPO at the time, no base would be a purely military base. One source mentions a number of “rehabilitees” (SWAPO cadres who had been involved in a mutiny in Zambia, put down by the Zambians) who had arrived in Cassinga just before the raid and many of whom were thought to have died during the attack.⁷⁶²

The TRC gives the official death toll (according to an Angolan government White Paper) as “159 men, of whom only twelve were said to be soldiers, 167 women and 298 teenagers and children –

756 Soggot, *Namibia*, p. 231.

757 “Cassinga Survivor – now Director of Catholic J and P in Namibia”, *South African Outlook*, May 1988, p. 73.

758 Herbstein and Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us*, p. 31.

759 Vyshinsky, *Southern Africa*, p. 81.

760 “Namibia: The Future – War or Peace”, *Omkeer*, Winter 1981.

761 Nanyemba, “Report on the Kassinga Massacre”.

762 Leys and Saul, *Namibian's Liberation Struggle*, p. 50.

a total of 624. In addition, 611 South West Africans were wounded in the attack."⁷⁶³ If the figure of just over 600 Namibians is accepted, the total number of people to die at Cassinga that day must have been close to 800, including Cubans, Angolans and South Africans. This was probably the greatest loss of life in any single action of the war which South Africa and the African liberation movements were engaged in between 1966 and 1989. Just how many were combatants and how many were civilians will probably always be shrouded in controversy and will depend on the sympathies of the claimants and the definitions used for "combatant" and "innocent civilian".

763 *TRC Report*, p. 52.

CHAPTER 9

THE POLITICS OF PROPAGANDA

- Appendix A: “The Thanksgiving of the Professional”.
 B: Photographs taken at Cassinga after the Raid.

The controversy surrounding the Cassinga raid has always been a moral and ethical one. The hypothesis of this dissertation, however, is concerned with strategic and tactical issues. Nevertheless, no analysis of the events at Cassinga on 4 May 1978 can surgically divide the social from the martial, particularly given the emphasis placed by the international community today on the social impact of military actions. The US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, with the widely-differing views regarding its moral justification and the vehement international reaction to the euphemistically termed “collateral damage”, is a graphic and topical example of this. The phenomenon is not new: no war has ever been waged without civilian casualties, yet the victor invariably justifies his actions. But modern technology and the role of the media has meant that today’s military commander cannot escape careful scrutiny by non-military spectators of his tactical decisions. People who are not trained in his profession, not subjected to the strain of combat conditions nor burdened with his heavy responsibility will pass judgement on his actions.

If this was due solely to the social impact of these actions, it would perhaps be acceptable, or at least understandable. But just as war has a social dimension, so it has a political dimension. And the social impact is usually seized on for political rather than humanitarian motives. The soldier may not be a politician, but he cannot avoid the political implications of his wartime role. “War”, wrote Clausewitz, “is a mere continuation of policy by other means... for the political view is the object, War is the means, and the means must always include the object of our conception.”⁷⁶⁴

It is precisely because of the inclusion of politics in war that military operations are fated to be controversial. It is the failure of the military to understand the need for subservience to the political objective, or the failure of the politicians to grasp the requirements for or implications of military actions, that lead to tension and sometimes confrontation between the two. Regardless of the true state of affairs, the soldier usually sees his motives as pure despite the bloodiness and distastefulness of the task he has to undertake, and in this he clings to a traditional concept of nobility associated with his profession (see Appendix A). At the same time the soldier often harbours a disdain for his political masters, seeing their readiness to change plans, statements and even principles as tantamount to betrayal and lacking in moral consistency. The exploitation of the social dimension of war in order to gain political ground will frequently debase a military action. This was certainly so in the case of the Cassinga raid. Reaction to the raid was immediate and far reaching, setting off a series of claims and counter-claims, clouding the events in emotional confusion and ultimately leading to an extended, decade-long political process, characterised throughout by further military action.

764 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 119.

Despite the recommendation in the SADF Psychological Action Plan that South Africa should be the first to release news of the raid to the public, specifically through the South West African Administration in Windhoek,⁷⁶⁵ this did not happen. In a media analysis made by the SADF after the operation it was stated that “political considerations militated against the RSA making the first announcement”, but that this was seen as having been a significant mistake. One of the lessons learned was listed by the SADF as “Events have confirmed that WE MUST SPEAK FIRST. Luanda’s first words to the world were that we had attacked a refugee camp. This is the version that was generally accepted by the foreign media.”⁷⁶⁶

Just what the “political considerations” were is not made clear. However, prior to the operation there was an indication from the South African Military Intelligence that SWAPO may be reluctant to acknowledge that they had been hit so hard so far inside their host country. This, it was felt would portray the South Africans as stronger than what SWAPO would want them to be seen as, and it would place SWAPO in an unfavourable light in the eyes of their principal sponsor, the Soviet Union. In the Psychological Action Plan it was stated that: “It is possible that Angola/SWAPO may play down the effect of the operation. Our initial statement should take this into account. The Minister’s statement should be held back so as *inter alia* to reply to any quick enemy reaction.”⁷⁶⁷

The South Africans, it seems, gambled on this possibility, and as a result lost a crucial battle in the propaganda war. Striking first in order to gain the initiative is a vital propaganda principle, but South Africa, having seized the initiative by carrying out a surprise raid, almost immediately lost it and was reduced to defending itself against the claims of “the enemy”.

The bitter undercurrent amongst senior military officers in the SADF at political decisions in this regard can be discerned in a signal from the Chief of Staff Operations to SWA Command and the Tactical HQ at Ondangwa, in which a taut acknowledgement is made that the opportunity to release the first information had been lost:

*“In opdrag word lae profiel verbandhoudend met geloofwaardigheid en eksterne reaksie gehandhaaf. Derhalwe is Min Verd se verklaring dringend gisteraand uitgereik na onderskepping dat Radio Luanda communicé uitgereik het... Dit word aanvaar dat pershantering aan u kant uiters moeilik is. Feit bly egter dat politieke oorwegings en waarderings deur betrokke ministers ons beleid deurgaans oorheers.”*⁷⁶⁸

(On orders low profile related to credibility and external reaction has been maintained. Therefore Minister of Defence’s statement was issued urgently last night after intercept that Radio Luanda had issued communiqué... It is accepted that handling

765 Psyac Planning Directive No 3/78, reference HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), dd 25 April 1978, Enclosure 24, File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129.

766 “Media Analysis: Operation REINDEER”, Appendix B to Summary of Final De-brief of Operation REINDEER, reference HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Secret), dd 30 August 1978, Enclosures 154-164, File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129.

767 Psyac Planning Directive No 3/78.

768 Immediate signal from C SADF 3 to SWA Comd and Tac HQ Ondangwa, DGBS/563 05 May 1978 (Top Secret), File Op REINDEER, Archival Group “Aanvullende Dokumente”, Box No 31. The word “waarderings” (appreciations) could well have been written in inverted commas, as no politician, unless he had been through an intensive and prolonged military training programme, would have been capable of making a military appreciation (see footnote no 119 for a definition of “appreciation”). The last sentence in this signal therefore drips with sarcasm.

of press on your side is extremely difficult. Fact is, however, that political considerations and appreciations by involved ministers dominate our policy throughout.)

The intercept referred to was a statement by the official Angolan news agency, ANGOP, denouncing a South African attack on a “Namibian refugee camp” at Cassinga, 250km inside Angola. It went on to describe an air and ground attack on a town deep inside Angola which had been heavily bombed. The agency said that South African paratroops based in Namibia had occupied the important mining town of Cassinga after attacking it. South Africa was accused of preparing “a new invasion of Angola”. In the statement the Angolan Defence Ministry said the attack began “at 6am this morning” and that waves of South African planes had been pouring out reinforcements at the town since then. However, the Ministry stressed that the Angolan armed forces (FAPLA) had taken “adequate measures” to combat the attack.⁷⁶⁹

The South Africans made haste to try and counter these claims, but the initiative had been conceded. The gamble that SWAPO would downplay the raid had been lost. The Angolan statement was issued internationally on the same day that the raid took place, but that night it was reported from London that the SADF would not confirm or deny the ANGOP report and refused to comment on it.⁷⁷⁰ This only served to further undermine the credibility of the South Africans

Clearly, the swift Angolan response to the raid and the claims that they made had caused consternation amongst the South African military leadership. The SWA Tactical HQ in Ondangwa received an urgent signal that night containing a request from the Chief of the SADF for information about soldiers thought to be missing in the operation, but more significantly, asking whether there had been women and children at Target Alpha (Cassinga) and if any of them had been killed.⁷⁷¹ Regarding the second query, the reply was: “*Daar was baie vrouens en kinders op Alpha en ‘n redelike getal is gedood. Onder die dooie vrouens het ‘n redelike getal uniforms gedra. Baie van die dooie vrouens was binne in die loopgrawe*”⁷⁷² (There were many women and children at Alpha and a reasonable number were killed. Amongst the dead women a reasonable number were wearing uniforms. Many of the dead women were inside the trenches). This vague, almost guarded answer could not have put the minds of the top brass at rest. In the psychological action guidelines issued the following day, senior and general officers were warned to avoid any reference to the media of

769 “S Africa defends lightning raid into Angola”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 May 1978; “Troops strike into Angola”, *Cape Times*, 5 May 1978; “Blits-aanvalle op Swapo-kampe”, *Die Burger*, 5 May 1978; “Paras holding bombed town”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 May 1978; “Paras hit Angola”, *The Natal Mercury*, 5 May 1978. The Angolan Defence Ministry Communiqué, signed by Commandant Iko Carreira (the Minister of Defence), was issued at 19H00 Alpha Time (20H00 Bravo Time, or South African time) on 4 May 1978, and broadcast on Radio Luanda at 21H00 Bravo Time, when it was intercepted by the SADF and transcribed in a free translation from Portuguese to English (enclosure in File MI/310/4/REINDEER, Top Secret, Archive AMI, Group 14, Box No 237). It reads: “Once again the racist troops of South Africa have attacked Angola. At 0600 today 4 May, South African paratroopers coming from occupied Namibia attacked the refugee camp of Cassinga after a bombardment by the South African Air Force. During the whole morning many paratroopers landed on the camp. This is another criminal attack against defenceless people, women and Namibian refugees, and is a preparation for a new invasion of Angola. International [adequate?] measures will be taken and FAPLA has already adopted the necessary measures to face the new aggression.”

770 “Paras holding bombed town”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 May 1978.

771 Immediate Signal Top Secret D OPS/409/4 May 78 from C Army to SWA Tac HQ Ondangwa, reference H LEëR/D OPS/ 309/1/3/REINDEER, Uncatalogued SANDF Archival Collection.

772 Signal Top Secret OPS/104/04 May 78 from SWA Tac HQ to C Army, reference 309/1 REINDEER, Enclosure 91, Archive “Aanvullende Dokumente”, Group OD-1968, Box No 8B.

casualties, especially amongst women and children, although “low profile” reference could be made to women in uniform shooting from trenches.⁷⁷³

When the South African reaction to the Angolan news of the raid appeared on the next day, Friday 5 May 1978, it was couched in terms that appealed to white South Africans but did nothing to allay international fears of unbridled aggression against its neighbours. South African newspapers over the next few days were filled with official accounts of SWAPO terrorism having escalated to the point where it was essential for the SADF to act in order to check it and to teach SWAPO a lesson. There were heroic tales of the bravery and daring of the paratroopers, and in an apparent attempt to touch the heartstrings of the rugby-mad white public an effort seems to have been made to turn Brigadier Hannes Botha into a cult figure for the purposes of the raid.

A specific request was made by the Chief of the SADF to the Chiefs of the Army and the Air Force to make Botha available, together with an English-speaking Citizen Force paratrooper who had also been at Cassinga, as “credible” persons, as well as a bilingual pilot who had participated at Cassinga. The request was sent out just after 09H00 on 5 May 1978 with instructions that they be at the office of the Chief of Staff Operations in Pretoria by 13H00.⁷⁷⁴

Though Botha had been no more than an unwanted passenger on the raid, playing no part in its planning or execution, he was now touted as the “commander” and attended a media-conference in Pretoria. The senior SADF spokesman was Lieutenant General Jack Dutton (the Chief of Staff Operations and a veteran of the Korean War), but it was Botha that the media wanted to photograph.

Reports in the Sunday newspapers that followed the media-conference made no mention of the English-speaking paratrooper or the pilot, but made much of the burly Botha.⁷⁷⁵ The *Sunday Tribune* enthused: “Brigadier Hannes Botha, a former Springbok rugby player and iron hard disciplinarian, led the attack on Base Camp Moscow. His account of the battle is vivid.”⁷⁷⁶ Botha gave a graphic description of events at Cassinga, referring to “my men, some untried in battle, (who) were magnificent.” The Afrikaans weekly, *Rapport*, displayed a photograph of Botha on its front page under the heading “*Ek was daar*”⁷⁷⁷ (I was there). The *Sunday Tribune* displayed two photographs of Botha, one with the caption “Botha the Springbok in 1960”, the second captioned “Brigadier Hannes Botha the fighting man”.⁷⁷⁸

But while South Africa worked on propagating its version of the raid at home, it was in the international field that SWAPO and the Angolans were entrenching their version. Radio Moscow described on 5 May 1978 how “racist butchers carried out a massacre in the town where there were

773 Exclusive Top Secret Signal DGBS/272/05 May 78 from C SADF 3 to C Army, CAF, SWA Comd and Tac HQ Ondangwa, Enclosure 9, File SWA Comd Ops 309/1 REINDEER, Vol 2, Archive “Aanvullende Dokumente”, Group OD-1968, Box No 8B.

774 Immediate Secret Signal OPS/263/05 May 78, Enclosure 16, File HS Ops/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 2, Archive HS Ops, Group 5, Box No 121.

775 It seems that the paratrooper and pilot were not included in the conference in the end (*vide* Gerber, Personal Report and Observations).

776 “Swapo terrorists fight to the death as Parabats swoop down”, *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1978.

777 “Duisend is dood,” *Rapport*, 7 May 1978.

778 “The One-Day War”, *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1978.

several thousand old men, women and children who had fled from the South African invaders.”⁷⁷⁹ The raid had taken place the day after the UN General Assembly’s 9th Special Session on Namibia had ended with a demand for South Africa’s unconditional withdrawal from Namibia and a recommendation that the Security Council institute compulsory economic sanctions, including an oil embargo, against South Africa.⁷⁸⁰ Now the Angolan ambassador to the UN, Elisio de Figueiredo, submitted a request from his government to the Secretary General, Dr Kurt Waldheim, for the Security Council to convene to consider the aggression against Angolan territory by South Africa.⁷⁸¹ A late-night meeting of the Security Council was called the same day (5 May 1978) where De Figueiredo told its members that 504 refugees and 16 Angolan troops had been killed in the attack,⁷⁸² and that “if necessary every man, woman and child (in Angola) will face the imperialist threat – we will lay down our lives.”⁷⁸³

Sam Nujoma, President of SWAPO, who was in New York for the recently concluded 9th Special Session on Namibia and the pending talks with the Western Five Contact Group, also addressed the Security Council. He called for a full arms, economic and oil boycott of South Africa, saying that “the international community should not be deceived that conditions exist for a negotiated settlement in Namibia.” Nujoma and De Figueiredo both claimed that South African troops had remained in Angola and had not withdrawn but were being reinforced.⁷⁸⁴

In a bid to regain some diplomatic initiative, South Africa sent a message to the five Western members of the Security Council and the UN Secretary General, urging that finality be reached as soon as possible in implementing the Western proposals for Namibia and that the international community insist that SWAPO immediately cease further acts of violence against the people they claimed to represent while delaying their reply to the proposals.⁷⁸⁵ The statement, which, in the light of the circumstances seemed somewhat contumelious, described and justified Operation REINDEER, saying that “the action taken had limited objectives and was carried out with limited forces, including black and white South West Africans. It was directed mainly at the two most important SWAPO headquarters used for operations against South West Africa.” It went on to describe Cassinga as “an extensive SWAPO military installation (that) contained formidable defence works such as trenches, bunkers and underground shelters.” Those people encountered inside Cassinga were described as follows: “The SWAPO personnel included women, in uniform, fully armed and actually fighting in the trenches. The dead included some of these. The personnel not killed were rounded up and disarmed. As they could not be evacuated, they were released when the

779 *Media Analise*, p. 57.

780 “Spoedsitting van VVO gevra”, *Beeld*, 6 May 1978; “Comment: Angola Raid”, *The Citizen*, 6 May 1978.

781 “Security Council”, *Cape Times*, 6 May 1978.

782 “Angola: SA is slammed”, *Sunday Times*, 7 May 1978.

783 “Boycott plea puts SWA plan in balance”, *Pretoria News*, 6 May 1978.

784 “Nujoma threatens strike on S. Africa”, *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1978 and “Boycott”, *Pretoria News*, 6 May 1978.

785 “End Swapo violence, UN told”, *Natal Mercury*, 6 May 1978.

South African group left. There were also a number of camp followers, including women, who apparently lived in the confines of the base. Some of them might have become casualties.”⁷⁸⁶

But South Africa’s efforts did not prevent the five Western members of the Security Council from endorsing a resolution of censure sponsored by the African and non-aligned states. The lengthy resolution, characterised by threat and condemnation, slammed South African aggression against Angola and resolved to meet to consider “more effective measures”, including punitive sanctions in the event of a repetition of the armed attack.⁷⁸⁷ Resolution 428 (1978) stated that these measures would be “in accordance with the appropriate provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, including Chapter VII thereof.” Invoking Chapter VII would require a finding of a “threat to peace” and would justify military intervention in Namibia.⁷⁸⁸

The resolution expressed grave concern over South Africa’s “violation of the sovereignty, air space and territorial integrity of the People’s Republic of Angola” and commended Angola for its “continued support of the people of Namibia in their just and legitimate struggle”.⁷⁸⁹ It also demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all South African forces from Angola.⁷⁹⁰ (It must be borne in mind that on 4 May 1978, the very day of the raid and only a day before the Security Council convened to discuss it, the General Assembly of the UN had passed a comprehensive “Declaration on Namibia and Program of Action in Support of Self-Determination and National Independence for Namibia”⁷⁹¹). However, despite the unanimity of the Security Council Resolution there was continued suspicion of the Western Powers and it seems that during the debate there were even insinuations that they may have colluded in the South African raid.⁷⁹²

SWAPO and the Angolans had, in the meantime, maintained the momentum of their diplomatic offensive, thereby continuing to retain the initiative. Sam Nujoma made full use of the fact that he was personally at the UN in New York at the time, and played to his international audience. He immediately let it be known that despite the “barbaric action of the racist regime in Pretoria” the talks about the Western plan for the independence of Namibia would continue.⁷⁹³ Stating that hundreds of women, children and old people had been slaughtered by the South Africans, Nujoma undertook to attempt where possible to continue to seek a negotiated settlement, but said that in the event of failure “the inhabitants of Namibia under the leadership of SWAPO would continue to intensify the

786 SA message urges Big Five to act”, *The Star*, 6 May 1978 and “Boycott”, *Pretoria News*, 6 May 1978. The text of this message was released to the media by the South African Department of Foreign Affairs on 5 May 1978.

787 “Oil threat as West joins UN censure”, *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1978 and “Angola: SA is slammed”, *Sunday Times*, 7 May 1978.

788 Carter and O’Meara, *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis*, p. 172. Although the resolution was only passed in the early hours of Saturday 6 May 1978, the debate commenced on the Friday night (“Big Five censure SA at the UN”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 May 1978).

789 Vyshinsky, *Southern Africa*, pp. 106-107.

790 “US Joins Censure of S. Africa”, *The Washington Post*, 7 May 1978.

791 Carter and O’Meara, *Southern Africa*, p. 172.

792 “Guerrillas Quit Namibia Talks, Citing Attack”, *The Washington Post*, 9 May 1978.

793 “Spoedsitting in VVO gevra”, *Beeld*, 6 May 1978.

armed liberation struggle to ensure the total liquidation of the South African racist, illegal, colonial administration.”⁷⁹⁴

SWAPO was also quick to issue a statement from its headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia, saying that an unspecified number of women and children were killed and wounded in the raid. Angola’s Defence Minister, Iko Carreira, elaborated with the specifics, saying most of the victims were women, children and old people who had fled from Namibia to Angola, adding that there were some Angolan soldiers among the more than 600 dead and 420 wounded.⁷⁹⁵ By frequently repeating the numbers of the casualties and stressing that they were defenceless civilians (women, children, elderly people) a perception was being established which no amount of counter-propaganda on the part of the South Africans would change.

South Africa was on the defensive. The Secretary General of the UN, Dr Kurt Waldheim, deplored the raid and expressed his grave concern that it could have an adverse effect on the negotiations on Namibia. President Carter of the USA expressed his concern and his government requested an explanation from the South African government. The British Foreign Secretary, Dr David Owen, expressed dismay and called on South Africa not to make any more attacks into Angola. Canada told South Africa it was deeply concerned about the strike into Angola and France condemned the action.⁷⁹⁶ Yet Western condemnation was on the whole decidedly muted. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the raid had caused considerable consternation amongst the Western Five. Cyrus Vance reported that “The May 4 South African raid into Angola has set back our efforts to obtain SWAPO’s agreement to the contact group proposal. Mistrust has been intensified”.⁷⁹⁷

Non-Western reaction was predictably more heated. The Co-ordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Countries issued a statement strongly condemning South Africa. It called on the Security Council to impose economic sanctions as well as oil and arms embargoes against South Africa. The “unwarranted invasion” was described as further evidence of the determination of South Africa to “perpetuate its illegal occupation of Namibia and continue to use it as a springboard for aggression against independent neighbouring African states.”⁷⁹⁸ Subsequent events were to prove these words ominously prophetic.

But in South Africa the white public showed general euphoria about the raid, as evidenced by the dramatic newspaper headlines and the self-righteous, almost arrogant editorials and leader articles:

“SA SMASHES SWAPO BASE”⁷⁹⁹

“SA HITS ANGOLA”⁸⁰⁰

794 “Nujoma says talks will go ahead”, *The Citizen*, 6 May 1978.

795 “US Condemns Raid in Angola”, *The Washington Post*, 7 May 1978.

796 “Waldheim ‘gravely concerned’”, “US seeks explanation” and “Owen expresses Britain’s dismay”, *The Citizen*, 6 May 1978.

797 “Statement by the Secretary of State (Vance) before the Subcommittee on African Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, May 12, 1978”, *American Foreign Policy Basic Documents 1977-1980*, p. 1143.

798 “Waldheim ‘gravely concerned’”, *The Citizen*, 6 May 1978.

799 *The Citizen*, 6 May 1978.

800 *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 May 1978.

“PARAS HIT ANGOLA”⁸⁰¹

“TERROR BASES ARE KNOCKED OUT”⁸⁰²

“SWAPO BASES BLASTED”⁸⁰³

“SA LOSES FIVE IN RAID ON SWAPO”⁸⁰⁴

“ARMY WARNS SWAPO: WE’LL BE BACK”⁸⁰⁵

“THE ONE-DAY WAR”⁸⁰⁶

“DUISEND IS DOOD – SWAPO TEL SY LYKE”⁸⁰⁷ (THOUSAND DEAD – SWAPO COUNTS ITS BODIES).

“BLITS-TRIOMF”⁸⁰⁸ (LIGHTNING TRIUMPH).

“COMPLETE SUCCESS”⁸⁰⁹

“SUKSES TEEN SWAPO SOOS ENTEBBE”⁸¹⁰ (SUCCESS AGAINST SWAPO LIKE ENTEBBE).

The raid may have provoked an extraordinary late-night sitting of the UN Security Council on a Friday, but the South African parliament was unfazed by what had happened. Thursday 4 May 1978 had been a public holiday in South Africa (Ascension Day). That Friday parliament had not sat,⁸¹¹ apparently giving themselves a long weekend. On Monday 8 May that august body continued with its scheduled business, with no reference to the raid. Of far greater concern to South Africa’s politicians was the breaking “Information Scandal”. Speaking during the Committee Stage of the Appropriation Bill (Vote No. 9 – “Information”) on Tuesday 9 May 1978 in a debate totally dominated by the antics of the Department of Information, the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) MP for Bezuidenhout, Mr J.D. du P. Basson, made a passing and rather oblique reference to the raid: “Our country has never been in such a dangerous position as it does today. Our destruction is being sought. On and over the border of South West we are already involved in war. As far as I can see, the war has only started. At the moment war is only being waged against Swapo, and our troops have dealt them a grievous blow. Apart from Swapo, deadly forces are building up in Angola and in other neighbouring states – so we suspect – against us.”⁸¹²

It is evident that even the opposition in parliament found the raid justified and saw no reason to question it. In fact, in a statement by the PFP spokesman for defence, Mr Harry Schwarz, he said

801 *The Natal Mercury*, 5 May 1978.

802 *The Argus*, 5 May 1978.

803 *The Star*, 5 May 1978.

804 *Cape Times*, 6 May 1978.

805 *Sunday Times*, 7 May 1978.

806 *Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1978.

807 *Rapport*, 7 May 1978.

808 *Beeld*, 6 May 1978.

809 *The Natal Mercury*, 6 May 1978.

810 *Beeld*, 6 May 1978.

811 *Hansard*, No 13, 1-3 May 1978.

812 *Hansard*, No 14, 8-12 May 1978, Column 6450.

that the UN's condemnation should be rejected. "Is South Africa not entitled to protect its own troops against ambush and mine-laying by those who shelter across the border in Angola after they have perpetrated their cowardly acts?"⁸¹³

The South African government had won the propaganda battle in its own constituency. The country's voiceless black majority, in the wake of crushing of the Soweto uprising just two years earlier, was silent. But beyond the borders, where it ultimately mattered, it was a very different story. South Africa had not even requested to take part in the proceedings of the extraordinary meeting of the Security Council on the Friday night.⁸¹⁴ According to Cyrus Vance, the US Secretary of State at the time, the Front Line States and Nigeria had, prior to the raid, been bringing considerable pressure to bear on Nujoma to be less intransigent about the Western proposals for Namibia. The Angolans particularly had been making an exceptional effort to dissuade him from blocking the proposals. Now they were furious, and the Americans themselves were questioning whether South Africa was sincere about trying to negotiate an acceptable settlement.⁸¹⁵

Then, abruptly, and despite his initial assurances to the contrary, Nujoma and the SWAPO delegation that was in New York for the settlement talks, informed the Western nations of their withdrawal from the talks and returned to the SWAPO headquarters in Lusaka. The reason cited was the "grave situation" created by the South African attack with its "fascist troops" on its bases in Angola. The SWAPO Central Committee had therefore "decided to urgently recall SWAPO's negotiating delegation" from New York. Even this, SWAPO managed to turn into another act to gain further sympathy. Theo Ben Gurirab, SWAPO's observer at the UN, said the talks were indefinitely suspended because "we are at the moment busy burying the dead and attending to the wounded and the maimed. So we want to devote all our time at this point to the grave problems created by the attack on our civilian settlements by South African troops."⁸¹⁶ Such a statement was clearly designed to play on humanitarian sympathies and to garner further support. There certainly is no indication that the negotiating team subsequently went anywhere near Cassinga or any of the other bases that had been attacked.

The US State Department expressed its hope that SWAPO would return to the talks eventually and stressed that the talks had not been broken off, only postponed. It added that "we do not feel that the raid was justified under the circumstances."⁸¹⁷ Washington, according to reports, viewed the raid as a diplomatic and strategic mistake. Though clearly not convinced about SWAPO's claims that Cassinga had been a refugee camp (perhaps partly due to having been presented with some of the seized documents by South Africa⁸¹⁸) the Americans were questioning the wisdom of the action. "It

813 "Botha rejects UN charges", *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 May 1978. What Schwarz does not mention (perhaps because he did not realise it) is that the South Africans were themselves prolific mine-layers.

814 "Big Five censure SA at the UN" *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 May 1978.

815 Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 304-305.

816 "West plan for SWA in balance", *The Star*, 9 May 1978.

817 "Guerrillas Quit Talks on Namibia", *The Washington Post*, 9 May 1978. By the time this was being reported in the American papers, Nanyemba's "Report on the Kassinga Massacre" was being presented to the members of the SWAPO Central Committee, probably already including Nujoma who, according to the *Washington Post*, left New York late on Sunday 7 May 1978.

818 "Secret Swapo papers haul", *Sunday Times*, 7 May 1978.

may well have been a great military success, they argue, and it may even have been provoked, but its drawbacks could greatly reduce what advantages it might have had.”⁸¹⁹

Certain international military strategists disagreed. General Sir Walter Walker, the retired NATO Commander-in-Chief Allied Forces Northern Europe, “probably the greatest jungle fighter of the post war period” and the general who “had defeated Sukarno’s attempt to tear Borneo apart with guerrilla warfare and internal sabotage and terrorism”,⁸²⁰ who was the author of several books warning against Western complacency in the face of Soviet expansionism, subsequently endorsed the South African strike “as a soldier, not a politician”. He was adamant that intelligence showed that SWAPO was preparing for a large-scale incursion and that it was simply a question of who struck first. “From a strategic standpoint, there is no question that the timing was right.”⁸²¹ But people like Walker held no sway in international politics. Their views may have reassured the South Africans, but made no impression in any world forum.⁸²²

SWAPO had certainly gained the moral high ground as a result of its skillful handling of the South African raid in the subsequent propaganda war. The Western Five were in effect compelled to rebuke South Africa harshly, especially in view of SWAPO’s withdrawal from the scheduled talks and the obvious undermining which the raid had on months of Western diplomacy. Don McHenry, the US Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations, angrily made it known that the five-nation Western team had been “within a week” of gaining acceptance of their plan.⁸²³ During a later visit to South Africa and Namibia McHenry slammed South Africa again, saying that “The South African action in that attack went a long way to dealing a substantial blow to our efforts.”⁸²⁴

International aversion to South Africa and scepticism of its role in the Namibian settlement process grew even stronger in the next phase of the propaganda war, which was handled in a masterful way by SWAPO and the Angolans. This entailed a combination of the stories of survivors of the raid and stories by reporters who visited Cassinga a few days after the raid.

On 8 May 1978 it was reported that wounded Namibian refugees arriving at Luanda’s military airport had been describing the raid on Cassinga. “The soldiers came at us shooting at everyone” a woman told Jane Bergerol of *The Guardian* in London. “Many people ran into the river nearby.”⁸²⁵

819 “West plan for SWA in balance”, *The Star*, 9 May 1978.

820 Harold James and Denis Sheil-Small, *The Undeclared War*, pp. 46 and 193. Walker was awarded a DSO in the Burma Campaign against the Japanese in 1945, a Bar to the DSO when commanding his battalion against the communist insurgents in the Malayan Emergency in 1953, the CBE in 1959 during the same campaign, a second Bar to the DSO in 1965 when he was Director of Borneo Operations and General Officer Commanding all British and Commonwealth forces during the four year Indonesian Confrontation and in 1968 he was made KCB (dust cover, Walker, *The Bear at the Back Door*).

821 “Ex-Nato chief backs raid on Swapo bases”, *The Star*, 22 May 1978.

822 There may well have been tacit agreement with Walker’s viewpoint by some in the Western governments. However, under the circumstances it would certainly not have been prudent to voice those sentiments. Many years later someone who played a key role in the eventual Namibian settlement process, Dr Chester Crocker, wrote of this period: “By offering SWAPO a new headquarters and extensive base facilities, the Luanda regime made itself an irresistible target for the South African Defence Force, the region’s most powerful military establishment” (*High Noon in Southern Africa*, pp. 55-56). This comment implies a condonement of South African cross-border actions.

823 “West plan for SWA in balance”, *The Star*, 9 May 1978.

824 “McHenry slams SA on Angola Raid”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 May 1978.

825 “Refugee says SADF was ‘shooting at everyone’”, *The Star*, 8 May 1978.

It seems that on the day after the raid, 5 May 1978, the Angolans had flown a group of Luanda-based journalists to Cassinga.⁸²⁶ They must have landed at the airfield at Techamutete and were then driven to the actual site of the raid. The same Jane Bergerol was one of these, and she filed a report which was widely disseminated and which had extracts quoted in many subsequent publications, often not verbatim, but invariably focussing on her stark and moving description of the mass grave at Cassinga:

“Unexploded fragmentation bombs still lie among the burned and blasted buildings of Cassinga, the village 290km inside Angola used as a Swapo transit camp which was attacked by South African defence forces last Thursday. The main school building is open to the hot wind. Nearby, a group of more than 200 children, survivors it is claimed of more than 500 primary school children at the camp, watch from the shade of eucalyptus trees.

Cassinga lies on the brow of a hill, a small sandy village. Approaching it from the mining town of Tcamutete, we passed burned and blasted Angolan military trucks and armoured cars which had set out last Thursday morning to relieve Cassinga – and which had been picked off by South African Air Force Mirage fighter-bombers flying runs through the day.

Land mines laid at the entrance to the village camp forced us off the road into the bush. The camp had been almost totally destroyed. Three walls of the school remain standing. Inside is the rubble of home-made desks, English-language lesson books, exercises in Ovambo and English. Most of the children we saw were under 12 years old.

There were more than 600 dead, it was said. Over 100 died instantly on Thursday morning, we were told, as the Mirages made their first bombing runs. They are buried in a mass grave a few metres from the camp’s grassy centre where the boys and girls were assembled for their morning meeting when the Mirages appeared. As they scattered, four C-130 Hercules dropped hundreds of paratroops who encircled the camp and moved in, killing whoever they found in their path.

Survivors we talked to said that while the bulk were white South Africans, there were also white Portuguese among them, speaking Portuguese and other whites speaking a language the Namibians could not identify.

Paratroops moved in on trenches around the camp which had been dug two years ago when it was first set up. Swapo troops, who, we were told, were rushed to the camp after the attack to help evacuate the wounded, took us to the spot where a second mass grave had been dug. More than 15 metres long it contained, they said, 460 young people. First we saw gaily coloured frocks, blue jeans, shirts and a few uniforms.

Then there was the sight of the bodies inside them. Swollen, bloodstained, they were the bodies of young girls, young men, a few older adults, some young children.⁸²⁷

Bergerol’s report was widely used by the media, including the BBC.⁸²⁸ Another reporter was Sara Rodriguez, an American who, according to Richard Walker, sent her dispatch to the “radical *Guardian* newspaper in New York”. Her report coincided with Bergerol’s, describing the grave as “a

826 *Remember Cassinga*, p. 31. Some sources indicate that it was on 6 May 1978 (*vide* Pagano, *The Cassinga File*).

827 “SA bombs still lie unexploded in Swapo camp”, *The Star*, 10 May 1978.

828 “Cassinga and the Liberal Press”, *Namibia Review*, File: Namibia: general 102 (RIM – Mayibuye Archives).

terrible thing... brightly coloured cotton frocks of young girls, jeans, checkered shirts of the boys, a few khaki uniforms and the swollen bodies of the dead. The victims were mostly very young and had no defence."⁸²⁹ The description of the clothing of the victims was frequently repeated by SWAPO apologists.⁸³⁰

A photographer who accompanied the group wrote of the other, smaller grave having been covered the same morning, before they arrived at the scene, and containing the bodies of 122 children.⁸³¹ As a result, there appear to be no photographs of the bodies of children killed at Cassinga. Pagano's photos of the mass grave, however, are grotesquely horrifying (see Appendix B, pages 9B-6 and 7). Nevertheless, a detailed examination of the photographs indicates that the bodies are those of adults more than teenagers, though some of them are certainly young adults. The overwhelming majority of them are, in addition, men with only a few women who can be identified amongst them. Most of the men are wearing uniforms and there is little evidence of the "brightly coloured frocks", although several of the photographs are in colour.⁸³² The most widely used photograph is a black and white print, showing a woman's body with a dress on it prominently visible in the foreground, on top of a pile of other bodies.⁸³³ It was distributed by ADN, an East German news agency that claimed it had been taken by one of its photographers, and it did appear in some South African newspapers with the comment that "the picture has had a marked effect on public opinion in Western countries."⁸³⁴

Obviously, the whole repulsive idea of mass graves as a result of mass killings so graphically portrayed, further alienated South Africa from world opinion and stimulated much sympathy for SWAPO. The graves, according to General Shalli, were dug by SWAPO, using picks and shovels: a monumental task to have been done in one or two days, judging by the photographs which show a massive excavation looking as though it had been done by a machine. The diggers, says Shalli, worked in a fervour of patriotism, dedicating their task to those who had died and fueled by a hatred for those who had killed them and a determination to ultimately triumph in their struggle for the liberation of Namibia.⁸³⁵

A further tool used by SWAPO against the South Africans was the matter of the "Cassinga Prisoners" or "Detainees". All evidence indicates that, although some 200 prisoners were brought back from Chetaquera by Battle Group Juliet, not one was brought back from Cassinga.⁸³⁶ Certainly the officer

829 "News Report – Richard Walker – New York", *Namibia Review*.

830 Soggot, *Namibia: The Violent Heritage*, pp. 231-232.

831 Pagano, *The Cassinga File*, second unnumbered page.

832 Brown's contention that "photographs and videos of the mass graves at Cassinga show almost exclusively corpses of women and children" (Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means" in Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 30) is not substantiated by corresponding photographs. This, however, is not to say such photographs and film material do not exist. Efforts to find such explicit visual material have proved fruitless, with even photographs provided by the Namibian Archives being similar to those published by Pagano (see Appendix B, page 9B-7).

833 The photograph, besides appearing in Pagano's publication, *The Cassinga File*, features in Deutschmann (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa*, between pp. 42-43; *Namibia Today*, no 3, 1979, p. 13; *Dome*, Natal University Student Newspaper, undated, front page; *Sechaba*, Fourth Quarter, 1978, p.39; *Atrocities*, p. 95; *TRC Report*, Vol 2, Frontispiece; and on the front page of SWAPO's booklet *Massacre at Cassinga*. A slightly different photograph, credited to "MPLA-PT" appears in Johnson and Martin (eds.), *Destructive Engagement*, between pp. 170-171.

834 Unreferenced newspaper clipping, apparently from *The Citizen*, sometime towards the end of May or early June 1978.

835 Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003.

836 Signal OPS/121/05 May 78 (Top Secret) from GOC SWA to NLK, reference 309/1 REINDEER, Enclosure 97, File D OPS/309/1 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive "Aanvullende Dokumenten", Group OD 1968, Box No 8B.

who was in command of the helicopters that carried out the extraction, Major John Church, is quite adamant that no prisoners were brought back.⁸³⁷ The prisoners from Chetaquera, never as controversial an objective as Cassinga and one which elicited relatively limited response after Operation REINDEER, when compared to Cassinga, were apparently interrogated and then most of them were interred at Mariental in the south of Namibia. There they were held without trial under apparently appalling conditions for several years. Their plight became an international humanitarian issue, and despite not having come from Cassinga, they were dubbed the "Kassinga Detainees".⁸³⁸ No doubt because the name Cassinga had, since the raid, become internationally notorious as a symbol of the repression of the Namibian people, it became politically convenient for SWAPO and SWAPO sympathisers to couple the prisoners to this name, especially as they had in fact been captured on the same day as the raid on Cassinga, as part of the same operation. The story of the capture of these detainees was propagated as follows:

"The particular case of the Kassinga detainees highlights the terrible repression being perpetrated by the South African regime upon the people of Namibia. On 4th May 1978 South African forces attacked a refugee camp at Kassinga in southern Angola. The camp was bombed and strafed by Mirage planes, and over 700 paratroopers were dropped to kill those who tried to escape. The raid left over 700 Namibians dead, (300 of them children of primary school age) and many others seriously wounded. Almost 200 were captured and taken back to Namibia."⁸³⁹

Accuracy, it is clear, was blatantly sacrificed for effect in the propaganda war. Even when released former detainees told their stories, with no reference to Cassinga because they had simply never been at Cassinga, they were touted as "Kassinga survivors".⁸⁴⁰ The perfidy around the prisoners grew to the point that some SWAPO apologists, such as Brittain, perpetuated with great detail the impression that they had all been brought back from Cassinga. Describing the raid on Cassinga she stated, ten years after the event, that "soldiers bundled 118 people, including 40 women, into planes and took them back to prison and torture in Namibia. Refugees numbering 1,500 were left behind wounded."⁸⁴¹ The very specific figures that she used lent an air of authenticity to the claim, and the impression that the prisoners all came from Cassinga was further encouraged by other writers such as Deutschmann.⁸⁴²

But the authenticity has to be questioned in the light of documentary evidence, and the credibility of personal accounts becomes dubious, as they appear to embrace the politically motivated myths surrounding the prisoners. One such account was that of Willy Amutenya who was said to have arrived at Cassinga barely two weeks before the raid took place. "Injured by shrapnel Amutenya

837 Discussions with Brig Gen John Church in Pretoria on 13 May 2003.

838 "Political Prisoners and Detainees in Namibia", Background Information prepared by the Research and Information Department of the International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, London, January 1981, p. 12, Robben Island Museum - Mayibuye Archives Centre, Box "Namibia: General 102".

839 "Briefing Paper on Repression in Namibia and the Kassinga Detainees", undated but apparently compiled in 1980, Robben Island Museum - Mayibuye Archives Centre, Box "Namibia: General 102".

840 *Remember Kassinga*, pp. 35-39.

841 Brittain, *Hidden Lives, Hidden Deaths*, p. 22.

842 Deutschmann, *Changing the History of Africa*, p. xvii.

crawled into a trench and lay there till the killing was over. He lost his right arm and with 118 other prisoners of war was secretly imprisoned at Mariental, enduring harassment and constant beatings."⁸⁴³

Though everything else regarding the Amutenya story was probably true, the allegation that his capture took place at Cassinga could not be. And this must therefore call the rest of the story into question. This example serves to illustrate the difficulty for a researcher of accepting the claims made during the propaganda phase that followed the raid. But veracity of accounts aside, there is no doubt that South Africa, on the international stage, was losing the propaganda war. The Cassinga raid, with its horrific loss of life, had ironically become an unexpected windfall for SWAPO, who exploited it to the full. The word "Cassinga" had become, overnight, a rallying cry for the freedom struggle. Justifiably or not, it now epitomised the suffering and repression of the people of Namibia and it starkly portrayed the brutality, racism and imperialism of the South Africans.

Of course, South Africa embarked on this venture into the propaganda campaign at a distinct disadvantage (and the South Africans must have realised that a propaganda campaign was an inevitable outcome of the military campaign). Despite having held the diplomatic initiative during the Namibian settlement negotiations prior to the raid, South Africa had long been a pariah state on the world stage. World opinion was stacked against South Africa because of its *apartheid* policy and its illegal occupation of Namibia in contravention of UN resolutions. In addition, the launching of the raid on Cassinga, even though it was regarded by the SADF as a military target of key importance, was a violation of Angolan territorial sovereignty, while the use of fragmentation bombs on a target known to include at least some civilians "amounts to an indiscriminate and illegitimate use of force and a violation of Protocol 1 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949. The foreseeable killing of civilians at Cassinga was therefore a breach of humanitarian law."⁸⁴⁴

In this regard, Vyshinsky has argued that the South African political leaders of the time must bear an equal responsibility to those soldiers and airmen who planned and executed the operation: "Not only the executioners but also their superiors are responsible for each of the crimes. This principle is entrenched in the Charter and Judgement of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, and has been reaffirmed by the UN General Assembly." He went on to quote Article 7 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal and the findings of the Human Rights Commission of the UN, formed in accordance with Resolution 2(XXIII) of the UN General Assembly.⁸⁴⁵

A visit to Cassinga by a joint delegation from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organisation between 24 and 28 May 1978 (see Appendix B, page 9B-8) and its subsequent report served to further undermine South Africa's case. Although this visit took place three weeks after the raid, by which time all traces of military elements in the camp could have been removed and the mass graves had already been covered up, their report carried much weight

843 "Cassinga Survivor - Now Director of Catholic J and P in Namibia", *South African Outlook*, Vol. 118, No 1403, May 1988, p. 73.

844 *TRP Report*, p. 54. See also Jeremy Silvester, "Cassinga Revisited", *The Namibian Weekender*, 7 May 1999, p. 3.

845 Vyshinsky, *Southern Africa*, pp. 160-161.

amongst international bodies. The delegation was accompanied by a representative from the MPLA (Mr Mungo) and one from SWAPO (Mr Njamu) as well as an East German television team and it seems that they were shown around by one, Nanyemba, apparently the SWAPO's Secretary of Defence and author of "Report on the Kassinga Massacre". Their report spoke of the "extreme barbarity and spirit (of) systematic extermination and destruction against a population of refugees under UNHCR mandate and beneficiary assistance (of) UN specialised agencies." The report vouched for "the civilian character" of the population of Cassinga, described the destruction, the bomb craters, at least ten unexploded fragmentation bombs and went on to make a detailed request for material assistance for the survivors and all other Namibian refugees at camps throughout Angola, which it estimated as "30,000 persons of whom majority (are) children and women". Yet it also refers to the "high proportion of already limited number (of) Namibian cadres (who) died (during the) Cassinga attack." It is not clear what is meant by "cadres" in the report, but certainly in revolutionary/guerrilla parlance it refers to fighters (see footnote no. 218). It also notes that 28 out of 40 assistant nurses and four out of ten nurses had been killed.⁸⁴⁶

The seriously wounded from Cassinga were evacuated by Cuban or Angolan aircraft (probably from the airstrip at Techamutete, which aerial photographs indicate was serviceable), while the less seriously wounded were taken by road to various hospitals in Angola.⁸⁴⁷ The worst cases were treated at Luanda and Lubango, while a refugee site was set up at Lubango for those women and children not too seriously injured as well as the other survivors.⁸⁴⁸

This UNHCR/WHO appeal for assistance was the first of many which served to mould an image of SWAPO as a very worthy cause to donate to.⁸⁴⁹ This in itself was a welcome propaganda victory for SWAPO. Peter Katjavivi, in his address to the World Conference for the Eradication of Racism and Racial Discrimination in Basle, Switzerland between 18 and 21 May 1978, used the opportunity to make an impassioned and detailed appeal for aid.⁸⁵⁰ Shortly thereafter Sam Nujoma held a press conference in Cuba at the 11th World Youth Festival where he addressed, amongst many other issues, the Cassinga raid.⁸⁵¹ The raid seemed to have cemented a lasting bond between SWAPO and Cuba, because the latter subsequently established schools on its "Isle of Youth" for Namibian orphans, initially especially for those who had survived the Cassinga raid.⁸⁵²

The South Africans were forced to lick their wounds regarding the propaganda war. In a document summarising the final SADF debrief of Operation REINDEER in August 1978 an analysis of media reporting on the operation was done. This showed internal (South African) reporting to have been

846 N. Bwakira, J. Ortiz-Blasco and T. Sellström, Report: *Joint United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and World Health Organisation Representatives On their Visit to Cassinga and to the Namibian Refugees*.

847 Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003.

848 Joint UNHCR and WHO Report.

849 The Namibia Support Committee (Kassinga Emergency Appeal) was based in London (*Atrocities*, p. 96), and appeals were made by the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) (Briefing Paper on Repression in Namibia and the Kassinga Detainees).

850 *Atrocities*, pp. 99-102.

851 "Sam Nujoma Speaks", *Sechaba*, Fourth Quarter, 1978, p. 36.

852 Deutschmann (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa*, pp. 91, 101-104 and 145-150.

73% neutral, 14% negative and only 13% positive towards the South African raid in the week immediately following it. This shifted over the period 11-20 May 1978 to 53% neutral, 37% positive and 18% negative. The main points of criticism levelled by the South African media were the timing of the operation in view of the Namibian settlement negotiations and the adverse effect that it had on South Africa's international image and credibility. This adverse effect is reflected in the document's summary of the content of the international media.⁸⁵³

The document goes on to outline the numerous shortcomings in the South African military "psychological actions" and listed the following as "lessons learned":

- a. A tacit admission that the timing of the raid *vis-à-vis* the Namibian settlement negotiations was bad.
- b. An admission that information released to the media had been aimed at the South African public, and that this had not had the required impact internationally.
- c. The speed at which the raid was carried out and concluded was seen in a positive light (it was described as "rapid and clinically efficient"), thereby improving South African credibility regarding subsequent statements.
- d. The absolutely vital requirement was stressed of making the first announcement of a raid. Having conceded this to Luanda was seen as the reason why the version of Cassinga having been a refugee camp was subsequently accepted by the foreign media.
- e. Regarding media coverage it was pointed out that there had been a lack of independent and credible photographic coverage of the operation, insufficient clear photographic proof of the actual nature of the operation, no immediate briefing of media representatives by the operational commander, a failure to disseminate as much photographic material as possible to all media (especially foreign media) and no rapid briefing and provision of material to foreign diplomatic and military representatives.
- f. Care, it was felt, should in future be taken to prevent qualifying or descriptive statements being made about the operation by officers not authorised to do so.
- g. Finally, it was seen as crucial that the operation be "followed up" for at least seven to ten days by means of "media-feeding". This, it was felt, would "cover the critical period during which initial factual reporting shifts to speculation and comment. The aim being to prove afresh and by further evidence the real nature and purpose of the operation."

In spite of the apparent propaganda victory of SWAPO over South Africa in the aftermath of the Cassinga raid, however, it would be naïve to assume that the raid did not create major difficulties for SWAPO. Much of what happened in that organisation during the days, weeks and months following the raid was never made public, and remains largely a matter of speculation.

According to information gleaned by the South Africans from the documents seized at Cassinga, SWAPO enlisted more than 3,500 recruits for PLAN in 1976 and about 4,500 in 1977, while up to 30 April 1978 they had already recruited 2,400. This gave a total in excess of 10,000 in just over two

853 "Summary of Final De-Brief of Operation REINDEER", reference HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Secret), Appendix B, dd 30 August 1978, Enclosure 164 in File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129.

years. Yet doubt was cast on these figures as they also claimed that combat casualties were to the ratio of 9:1 in SWAPO's favour. For instance, the figures for 1977 were given as 76 PLAN fighters killed as against 550 South African troops. The South African statistics for that year were 170 SWAPO and 29 South Africans.⁸⁵⁴ A loss of South African troops as high as that claimed by SWAPO could never have been concealed from the South African public.

Even if the numbers are inaccurate or if large numbers were elsewhere undergoing training, it has to be accepted that the majority of SWAPO's active guerrilla combatants in Angola would have been deployed close to the Namibian border. In fact, some sources reported SWAPO officials from the headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia as saying that at least 1,000 of some 2,500 to 3,000 guerrillas in the border area were killed during Operation REINDEER.⁸⁵⁵ If anywhere near correct, such a loss would have been a major military setback for SWAPO, with close to one third of its guerrilla force wiped out.

In the wake of the raid South African Military Intelligence reported that the MPLA was busy collecting SWAPO survivors in the Western Cunene Province and in the region of Cassinga. They were being transported by trucks, buses and train to Lubango. FAPLA elements were deploying in SWAPO base areas in the Western Cunene Province. However, there were concerns because the MPLA was experiencing a food shortage for its own forces and could therefore not also provide for SWAPO. Also, FAPLA was worried about collecting armed SWAPO guerrillas as they were behaving in a totally undisciplined manner and firing indiscriminately at MPLA bases and aircraft. At Moçamedes (Namibe) the MPLA had confiscated SWAPO equipment and in the region of Beacon 8 on the border the MPLA chased a group of youths trying to enter Angola from Namibia back across the border on 7 May 1978.⁸⁵⁶

This friction between SWAPO and the MPLA is probably understandable in the light of the confusion that the raids must have caused throughout southern Angola. Though SWAPO had been the target of the South Africans, the day the raids had been carried out the South Africans had intercepted numerous messages placing MPLA and Cuban bases on alert and requesting the headquarters at Huambo to send Mig fighter aircraft to intervene. Emergency measures and curfews were now implemented after the raid. A suspicious reluctance on the part of SWAPO to disclose information about their bases or details of the attacks was said to have caused great dissatisfaction amongst the MPLA, who reported their intention to take action and to approach SWAPO bases ready for any eventuality.⁸⁵⁷

854 Report on Operation REINDEER distributed to all South African Military Attachés abroad, Reference MI/310/4, (Top Secret), dd 25 May 1978, Enclosure 119, File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129.

855 "Guerrillas Quit Namibia Talks, Citing Attack", *The Washington Post*, 9 May 1978, quoting a report in *Rapport*. The claim that SWAPO may have lost a third of its combat force also appears in a document in a file of the South African Ministry of Defence, Confidential Signal OVS/270/17 Jun 78, File MV/77/1, Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No 188.

856 "SWAPO: Huidige Militêre Situasië en Verwagte Optrede", Intelligence Report from Headquarters, SWA Command, (Secret), dd 23 May 1978, Enclosure 31, File 301 LK/S/204/2/2/1 (Secret), Archive 301 LK, Group 2, Box No 5.

857 Intrep 42/78 dd 9 May 1978, File MV/77/1, Vol 4 (Top Secret), Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No 188.

During the actual raids, it was found by South African Military Intelligence that the MPLA had experienced major problems with communication because of the South African electronic jamming that had been applied from the EW aircraft. As a result their forces could only be alerted to move to certain objectives late in the afternoon of 4 May 1978. Even then, there appeared to be a reluctance on the part of the MPLA to intervene and it was apparent that they were very reliant on Cuban support. In the two weeks following the raids it appeared that MPLA forces were holding SWAPO responsible for the raids being carried out, and that they were unhappy about SWAPO secrecy regarding the location of their bases, their activities and their deployments. Hence their efforts to collect as many members of SWAPO as possible in the border area, to group them at Lubango and to attempt to establish better control over the activities of SWAPO in their country.⁸⁵⁸

In the midst of this tension amongst allies in Angola, the South African politicians, apparently oblivious to the impact the raid had made on the rest of the world, convinced themselves that their actions against SWAPO had laid a strong basis for further political development in Namibia. They stated that as a result of the raid individuals previously siding with SWAPO were now distancing themselves from the movement and that the broad population no longer felt intimidated by SWAPO, so they were now ready to participate in a free election.⁸⁵⁹

Accordingly, on 24 May 1978 Prime Minister Vorster unilaterally announced that South Africa would begin preparing for a December election of a Namibian constituent assembly. These elections, Vorster said in Cape Town, would be held regardless of whether SWAPO participated in the Western settlement plan or not.⁸⁶⁰ On 20 June that year the South African government announced that it would begin registering voters the following week for the elections.⁸⁶¹ The Western Contact Group continued doggedly to try to get an agreement acceptable to both SWAPO and South Africa, but now, after Cassinga, it was South Africa who was the one who was seen to be intransigent as the negotiations see-sawed back and forth.⁸⁶²

On 29 September 1978 the UN, apparently exasperated with Pretoria's stalling, passed Security Council Resolution 435, calling for a cease-fire, the withdrawal of all but a token element of South African troops from Namibia and the establishment of a United Nations Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG), including 7,500 military peacekeepers to oversee elections.⁸⁶³ Negotiations continued without real agreement, Pretoria went ahead with the elections in December and a hardening of international attitudes towards South Africa increased. The war on the border between Namibia and Angola continued and intensified. The raid on Cassinga in May 1978 had, in a sense,

858 Report on Operation REINDEER distributed to all South African Military Attachés abroad, Reference MI/310/4, (Top Secret), dd 25 May 1978, Enclosure 119, File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129.

859 Article compiled by Mr Kowie Coetzee in File MV/77/1, Vol 4 (Top Secret), Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No 188.

860 Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 305.

861 "South Africa Signals Intent to Act Alone on Namibia Vote", *The Washington Post*, 22 June 1978.

862 Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 305-307.

863 Brittain, *Hidden Lives, Hidden Deaths*, p. 80.

prolonged the process. "For ten years after 1978 political direction of the war in Namibia was about gaining advantages and pressurising opponents. The independence of Namibia was conceded."⁸⁶⁴

Did the effect of the Cassinga raid really weaken SWAPO's military capability to the extent that South Africa could confidently assume she could, regarding Namibia, show intransigence with impunity on the international political and diplomatic level? There can be little doubt that initially at least, SWAPO's operational capacity was blunted. In the confusion that followed the raid it was believed by the South Africans and feared by SWAPO that the Commander of PLAN, Dimo Hamaambo, had perished in the cauldron of Cassinga, as for some days after the attack he was reported as missing.⁸⁶⁵ That he had been at Cassinga at the time of the raid has been admitted by a former senior member of PLAN: "Commander Dimo Hamaambo who was the head of PLAN and a small staff of his happened to be at Cassinga at the attack to co-ordinate and select those who wanted to undergo military training and this was an important recruitment task. This is what anybody else would have done. This does not mean that they were based there or in any way intended turning it into a military base or a logistics point. No justification for an attack. There was and still is no smoking gun."⁸⁶⁶ This is in direct contradiction to what the PLAN Chief of Staff and later Chief of Staff of the Namibian Defence Force, David Phillips Namholo ("Ho Chi Minh"), is reported as saying. According to Brown, he stated that Hamaambo was in fact based at Cassinga.⁸⁶⁷

Certainly for someone who just happened to be there, Hamaambo seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time at Cassinga. Both he and the political commissar of PLAN, Greenwell Matongoh (who was also initially missing after the raid) had been there when the UNICEF delegation had arrived in April 1978,⁸⁶⁸ and he is described by Ruusa Naango-Shaanika, a refugee who survived the raid as a 16-year old girl, as having addressed a big parade at Cassinga on Workers' Day, 1 May, three days before the raid took place.⁸⁶⁹ Ngodji, another survivor who was a PLAN guerrilla, describing the administration and authorities in the camp at Cassinga, stated that "There were also two leaders, Dimo Amaambo and Greenwell Matongo, but they were mostly concerned with high decision-making."⁸⁷⁰ It also seems that Hamaambo had a field, presumably for growing crops, at Cassinga, according to another survivor.⁸⁷¹ The South African Military Intelligence had identified one of the buildings in Cassinga as "Dimo's house", and this was where most of the documents were seized. The house was thought to have doubled as a headquarters.⁸⁷² According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: "It took just over an hour for the paratroopers to group together,

864 Annette Seegers, *The Security Forces and the Transition in South Africa: 1986-1994*, p. 25.

865 Intrep 42/78 dd 9 May 1978, File MV/77/1, Vol 4 (Top Secret), Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No 188 and Intrep 45/78 dd 11 May 1978, File HS OPS/310/4 REINDEER, Vol 2 (Secret), Archive HS OPS, Group 5, Box No 121.

866 Questionnaire completed by Maj Gen Martin Shalli on 16 April 2003.

867 Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means", in Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 29, in which she refers to an interview with Namholo in 1991.

868 Fall, *Report on Mission*, p. 3.

869 Naango-Shaanika, "Remembering Cassinga".

870 Transcript of an interview with Captain Mwaanga Paulus Ngodji in March 1998.

871 Translated transcript of an interview with Maggy Amutenya in 1998.

872 Interview with Col L.C. Odendaal on 15 February 1995. Odendaal was the battalion Intelligence Officer who jumped at Cassinga.

during which time many of Cassinga's inhabitants were able to flee to safety. These included most of PLAN's senior officers, including Dimo Amaambo."⁸⁷³

Hamaambo did escape,⁸⁷⁴ and went on to become the first Commander of the Namibian Defence Force after independence.⁸⁷⁵ But there were other setbacks suffered by PLAN as a result of the raid on Cassinga. Kobo, the former MK cadre who claimed to have been at Cassinga, described how he saw the loss:

"Objectively speaking, 4 May 1978 had been a disaster for SWAPO. That one day had done months if not years of damage to the organisation. It had burnt away nearly all the infiltration lines into Namibia. Some of the SWAPO groups on the far side of the border were cut off without resupply and there would be no quick way to re-establish contact."⁸⁷⁶

Yet a guerrilla army is a resilient organisation that relies not so much on infrastructure as on people and ideas. The South Africans saw the immediate effect of Operation REINDEER in a drastic decrease in insurgent activity in Namibia. By the middle of June 1978 there were no incidents at all taking place. But from July 1978 there was again a sharp increase in incidents that reached a high point in September 1978 and was maintained at this level right up to the South African-held elections on 22 December 1978. In SWAPO bases some 60km north of the border it was estimated that about 3,500 guerrillas were being supplied with major logistic support.⁸⁷⁷ The increased insurgent activity could not be hidden from the public, and it soon made headlines.⁸⁷⁸

The incidents of insurgency, though many, were all relatively small. But in the east of the "operational area", where SWAPO had bases beyond the Cuando and Zambezi Rivers in Zambia, the guerrilla camps had not been attacked and damaged. These were the camps that General Constand Viljoen had wanted included in Operation REINDEER but for which he had been unable to secure political permission (see Note 2 at Appendix A to Chapter 6). For the South Africans, it was going to be a rueful decision not to have followed Viljoen's strategy. Already, soon after the Cassinga raid, South African Military Intelligence was picking up reports that SWAPO was planning a revenge attack in the Caprivi Strip.⁸⁷⁹ It was even reported that SWAPO leaders in Zambia had taken an oath to exact vengeance for the South African raids. To their cost, the South Africans discounted any likelihood of action originating from Zambia, as it was thought that the Zambians, out of fear of actions by the SADF, would exercise a degree of control over SWAPO activities launched from their territory.⁸⁸⁰

873 *TRC Report*, pp. 50-51.

874 Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 55.

875 Brown, "Diplomacy by Other Means", in Leys and Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle*, p. 22. Also p. 59.

876 Kobo, *Waiting in the Wing*, p. 142.

877 "RSA Teen SWAPO Basisse" (Top Secret), Enclosure 30 in File HS OPS/310/4 REINDEER, Vol 2 (Secret), Archive HS OPS, Group 5, Box No 121.

878 "Guerrilla influx in Ovambo increases", *The Star*, 29 July 1978; "Growing number of South Africans affected by Swapo violence", *The Star*, 20 April 1979.

879 "SWAPO: Huidige Militêre Situasië en Verwagte Optrede" (Secret), SWA Command document, dd 23 May 1978, Enclosure 31, File 301 LK/S/204/2/1 (Secret), Archive 301 LK, Group 2, Box No 5.

880 Report on Operation REINDEER distributed to all South African Military Attachés abroad, Reference MI/310/4, (Top Secret), dd 25 May 1978, Enclosure 119, File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), Vol 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129.

But in the early hours of 23 August 1978 SWAPO carried out a stand-off bombardment on Katima Mulilo in the Caprivi Strip. About thirty 122mm rockets and a number of 82mm mortar bombs were fired from the Zambian side of the border into the civilian town and a nearby military base. Only two of the projectiles inflicted serious damage: one on a school in the black township, while the other demolished a barrack room in the military base, killing ten soldiers and wounding the same number.⁸⁸¹ The South Africans, who had been forewarned of the attack, reacted within minutes, crossing into Zambia in pursuit of the guerrillas. Over the next week forces poured in, sweeping 250km into Zambia,⁸⁸² and by the end of the operation a total of 16 insurgents had been killed.⁸⁸³

It had been SWAPO's boldest attack up till then, and it had inflicted the most casualties yet on the South Africans in one action. It was seen as a victory by the insurgents, and proof that the Cassinga raid had not crippled SWAPO's operational capability.⁸⁸⁴ But it also signalled the perpetuation of a series of blows and counter-blows across the border that would henceforth characterise the war. Almost every major SWAPO incursion would be countered by a SADF strike into Angola or Zambia, and often the South African strikes would be "pre-emptive", even before the intended SWAPO incursion had taken place. It was Cassinga, states Viljoen, with its strategic success, which determined the South African military strategy for the next decade: the concept of pre-emptive strikes.⁸⁸⁵ In fact, to the north of Ovamboland, SWAPO's heartland and the focus of its insurgent campaign, the guerrilla organisation had been dealt a sufficiently telling blow by Operation REINDEER for two years to pass before the SADF felt compelled to launch its next major cross-border attack in that area: Operation SCEPTIC, in June 1989.⁸⁸⁶

DEDUCTIONS

The raid on Cassinga was a classic example of the military failing to grasp the importance of the media during military operations. For the South Africans, efforts to manipulate the media and control their access to information backfired. For SWAPO, capitalising on the reluctance of the South Africans to take the media into their confidence by speaking to them first, it was easy to gain a sympathetic ear.

The South Africans made a crucial mistake when they gambled on SWAPO downplaying the raid because it would embarrass them that the South Africans were able to project force so powerfully. The South Africans were taken by surprise because they never anticipated the raid being turned into a massacre of civilians, whether in actual fact or through clever SWAPO propaganda. It seems apparent that for the South Africans the concept of ordinary Namibians fleeing the land of their birth to become refugees in Angola was quite incomprehensible. They appear to have truly believed that anyone who would voluntarily leave South African occupied Namibia could only be a "terrorist".

881 Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 80.

882 Annette Seegers, *The Military*, p. 224.

883 Steenkamp, *SA's Border War*, p. 83.

884 André du Pisani, *Beyond the Barracks*, p. 11.

885 Interview with Gen Constand Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

886 Dippenaar, *Operasie SCEPTIC*.

Except for a handful of abducted individuals, therefore, Cassinga could only have contained "terrorists". This shortsighted and mistaken view was to cost the South Africans dearly in the subsequent propaganda war. Furthermore, the South Africans underestimated the measure of political solidarity amongst SWAPO and its allies in the aftermath of the raid, and were faced with a united front of opposition regarding their version of what had taken place during the raid. Ultimately, SWAPO's host countries, Angola and Zambia, were not intimidated into curtailing the military activities of the liberation movement. Though there is strong evidence that the South Africans were genuinely surprised by the numbers of civilians they encountered at Cassinga, their efforts to downplay this were clumsy and ineffective. Obsessed with the white South African electorate's likely response to the raid, they attempted to turn rugby heroes into war heroes and tried to equate the raid to celebrated hostage-release airborne operations. Unfortunately, though they claimed there had been "hostages" at Cassinga, these were all left behind.

SWAPO and the MPLA, on the other hand, handled the news of the raid masterfully, playing to an international audience and both skillfully and rapidly entrenching the view that SWAPO had been the innocent victims of a deliberate, brutal massacre while Angola had been contemptuously invaded once again by the arrogant, racist South Africans. The passing of UN Security Council Resolution 428 censuring South Africa within 48 hours of the raid being carried out, confirmed South Africa as the perpetrators of a criminal act in the eyes of the world and was a major propaganda victory for SWAPO and its allies. The only redeeming action South Africa managed to take was to present the Western Contact Group with damning documents seized at Cassinga, implicating SWAPO in devious activities. Very little, however, was made of this.

By carrying out the raid South Africa also effectively inverted its position with that of SWAPO in terms of the settlement initiative of the Western Five. Whereas, prior to the raid, South Africa was seen as making concessions while SWAPO remained intransigent and inflexible, now South Africa had become the belligerent aggressor, providing SWAPO with every reason to withdraw from the negotiations. The South Africans had antagonised the Western Five Contact Group and jeopardised their credibility in future negotiations.

Whatever benefits were to be gained by the attack on Cassinga in prosecuting the South African military strategy for the war in Namibia (and the indications are that there were such benefits to be gained), were lost in terms of the wider political strategy working towards an ultimate settlement of the Namibian independence issue. In a sense, the Cassinga raid signalled the start of the dominance of the military over the political in South Africa. Perhaps this was in no small way due to the military having clear objectives, whereas the politicians, particularly regarding Namibia, were evidencing ambiguity and ambivalence as to where they were going.

SWAPO, in addition, succeeded in salutary fashion in playing on the natural emotions of ordinary people by optimally exploiting the issue of the mass graves at Cassinga. Using some graphic journalistic descriptions and a few starkly repulsive photographs that were widely distributed and published, a universal feeling of abhorrence towards the South Africans and empathy for SWAPO

was evoked. Though the photographs show corpses which are mostly wearing military uniform, and though no children appear in any photographs, the sheer horror of a pit full of grotesquely twisted and unnaturally rigid bodies is reminiscent of images of Auschwitz and Belsen after their liberation by the Allies. The photographs could, for that matter, even have been taken somewhere other than Cassinga, but the manner in which they were propagated meant that it would have made no difference: the world was appalled, and no-one was doubting SWAPO's word except the discredited South Africans.

So too, the world readily accepted SWAPO's labelling of the prisoners taken at Chetaquera as "Cassinga Detainees", and SWAPO was able to turn the setback of the raid to its advantage by raising its international profile and using the raid as a platform on which to launch massive appeals for assistance. All this enabled SWAPO to paper over or conceal immediate problems like the initial disappearance of the commander of PLAN, Dimo Hamaambo, the friction between itself and its allies on the ground and the disruption of its guerrilla campaign. SWAPO showed its resilience and strength by recovering sufficiently to resume its insurgency campaign in Ovamboland within three months at virtually the same level as before the raid even without its destroyed infrastructure, and by using its unaffected eastern bases in Zambia to launch a painful and humbling reprisal blow against a South African military base in the Caprivi less than four months after the Cassinga raid. Finally, South Africa's decision to go ahead with an election in Namibia in December 1978 without UN or SWAPO agreement and without consulting the Western Contact Group only served to further undermine South African credibility and further antagonise world opinion. South Africa may have won a battle at Cassinga, but she had lost the subsequent propaganda war.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

The Cassinga raid was referred to by some as "masterfully executed" and as "the largest parachute operation of its sort since the Second World War."⁸⁸⁷ Geldenhuys, the General Officer Commanding South West Africa Command at the time, later described it as "*n juweel van krygsvernu*"⁸⁸⁸ (a jewel of military craftsmanship). Viljoen, the Chief of the South African Army at the time, when asked during an interview more than two decades after the raid how he rated it as a military operation, replied, "It was one of the most typical airborne pre-emptive operations ever carried out anywhere. I believe it was an outstanding operation: well planned and well executed."⁸⁸⁹ Gleeson, in overall command of the operation, was asked during an interview how he rated REINDEER in terms of the overall course of the war. His reply was pragmatic: "Highly significant and a major setback for SWAPO, notwithstanding the subsequent propaganda. It helped to achieve what the SADF had set out to do: it set SWAPO back by several months."⁸⁹⁰ Breytenbach, the parachute battalion commander, claimed that it was "recognised in Western military circles as the most successful airborne assault since World War-2."⁸⁹¹

Yet all these participants had a vested interest in giving a glowing account of the operation. It is understandable that their views are necessarily subjective and couched in terms that would preserve their military reputations. However, the evaluation of the Cassinga raid must be done, in terms of this dissertation, in accordance with its hypothesis, which is that a parachute raid on Cassinga was the only way that the SADF could strike that objective without encountering major resistance *en route*, that the objective itself was a strategically weak point in SWAPO's defences, that the raid was totally unexpected by SWAPO and its allies, and that the subsequent extraction of the paratroopers from the objective area was so rapidly executed that SWAPO and its allies were unable to react effectively to the raid.

There were many parachute operations between the Second World War and 4 May 1978 that were much bigger than the one carried out at Cassinga. For instance, during the war in Indo-China between 1946 and 1954 the French conducted several hundred parachute operations, including at least 40 with a force exceeding 400 men. In fact several of them consisted of a force in excess of 1,000 paratroopers, and at Dien Bien Phu close to 8,000 men jumped before the French were finally overrun. The other operations included raids, attacks to occupy objectives, the capture of airfields, sweeps, reinforcement actions and the establishment of bases.⁸⁹²

887 Signal OVS/270/17 Jun 78, File MV/77/1 (Top Secret), Archive MVV, Group 4, Box No 188.

888 Geldenhuys, *Dié Wat Wen*, p. 73.

889 Interview with Gen Constand Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

890 Interview with Lt Gen Ian Gleeson on 16 January 2003. The original SADF estimate had been that it would cause major disruption for at least six months. In the event SWAPO was back to the same level of insurgency in four months.

891 Breytenbach, *They Live by the Sword*, p. 180.

892 Paul Gaujac (ed.), *Histoire des Parachutistes Français*, Vols 1 and 2; R.J. Bragg and Roy Turner, *Parachute Badges and Insignia of the World*, pp. 216-222.

In December 1948 a thousand Dutch paratroopers jumped to seize Jakarta airport in Indonesia,⁸⁹³ whilst during the Korean War the American 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team carried out two operational jumps, one with some 2,000 paratroopers and the second with almost 3,500.⁸⁹⁴ On 29 October 1956 the Israelis dropped almost 400 paratroopers at the Mitla Pass in Sinai,⁸⁹⁵ while one week later the British and French dropped a battalion each, totalling 1,100 men, at Suez in a combined airborne/amphibious operation against strongly held Egyptian positions.⁸⁹⁶ Jan Breytenbach himself participated in this operation, flying as a navigator in a British attack aircraft from a Royal Navy aircraft carrier.

In February 1958 the Spaniards dropped 448 paratroopers onto an insurgent stronghold in Spanish Morocco.⁸⁹⁷ The Belgians dropped three companies of paratroops from US aircraft and then landed three more on Stanleyville airport in the Congo in 1964 to rescue some 1,600 hostages from armed rebels.⁸⁹⁸ During the Vietnam War the South Vietnamese and the US carried out at least eleven parachute operations, three of them including 500 or more paratroopers. In 1974 the Turks dropped a parachute brigade on Kyrenia when they invaded Cyprus.⁸⁹⁹

In fact, only days after the raid on Cassinga, on 19 May 1978, on the other side of Angola at Kolwezi in Zaïre, a French parachute battalion dropped 500 paratroopers, followed by a further 250 the next day. They landed right on top of heavily armed rebels who had struck from Angola, where the MPLA had been giving them succour, and had seized Kolwezi in an operation which ironically mirrored the actions of the South Africans, though supported by the MPLA. The French, together with two Belgian parachute battalions that landed at the airfield, rescued some 2,000 hostages.⁹⁰⁰ The actions of the French and the Belgians were predictably seen by the Angolans and their Cuban allies as a threat, and a further justification for the growing numbers of Cubans in Angola.⁹⁰¹

From the foregoing it is quite clear that the raid on Cassinga was not a unique post-Second World War operation. It needs to be seen and judged in this context. Airborne operations, particularly in counter-insurgency wars, are not unusual. Generally, however, they are very small. The Cassinga raid was one of the larger ones, but by no means the largest. The distances involved were not especially great for a strategic operation like Cassinga. But the short duration of the raid, the rapidity of the extraction and the airborne nature of that extraction, all being done without employing an airfield, made the operation exceptional, and also highly risky.

893 Bragg and Turner, *Parachute Badges*, p. 217.

894 David Rees (ed.), *The Korean War*, pp. 51 and 66; Bragg and Turner, *Parachute Badges*, pp. 219-220; Billy C. Mossman, "Angels from Hell", *The Elite*, Vol. 6, Issue 63.

895 Matti Shavitt, *On the Wings of Eagles*, pp. 131-142; Ian Westwell, "Death in the Pass", *The Elite*, Vol 2, Issue 14.; Michael Orr, "The Israeli Attack on Sinai", in Sir Robert Thompson (ed.), *War in Peace*, pp. 104-105.

896 H.P. Willmott, "The Suez Fiasco", in Sir Robert Thompson (ed.), *War in Peace*, pp. 94-95; Gregor Ferguson, "The Paras Go In", *The Elite*, Vol 5, Issue 52.

897 Bragg and Turner, *Parachute Badges*, p. 224.

898 E. Genot, *Rode Mutsen, Groene Mutsen*, pp. 233-242; Lt Col Stephen D. Brown, "Destination Stanleyville", *Military Review*, March 1991; David Reed, *Save the Hostages!*, pp. 265-292; Maj Thomas P. Odom, *Dragon Operations*, pp. 95-114.

899 Bragg and Turner, *Parachute Badges*, p. 227.

900 Lt Col Thomas P. Odom, *Shaba II*, pp. 57-89; Jean Mabire, "Target Kolwezi", *The Elite*, Vol 3, Issue 28.

901 Deutschmann (ed.), *Changing the History of Africa*, pp. 33 and 86.

Given the concentration of FAPLA, Cuban and SWAPO forces spread through southern Angola, and the fact that the bush forced vehicular movement to be road-bound, there is no doubt that an airborne assault was the only way that Cassinga could be attacked over the distance of 260km. The size of the force required⁹⁰² meant that they could only be delivered over that distance by fixed-wing transport aircraft, and the absence of a serviceable airfield necessitated a parachute drop.

If Cassinga was indeed the headquarters, training facility and logistics base that the SADF claimed it was, then it was certainly a strategically vital point which was insufficiently defended, perhaps existing in a false sense of security because of its distance from the border and the proximity of allied armoured forces. The balance of evidence indicates that, although there were many civilians at Cassinga, it also housed, at the very least, SWAPO's military headquarters for southern Angola. It was, however, not of sufficient strategic importance for the raid to totally disrupt SWAPO's military capability for more than a few months. Nevertheless, SWAPO was dealt a blow which did slow down its escalation of the insurgency war in northern Namibia to the extent that it was two years before the SADF felt the need to carry out another really big incursion into southern Angola to again hit the SWAPO military operational headquarters (during Operation SCEPTIC). The sharp drop in insurgent activity in Ovamboland after Operation REINDEER (though only for a few months) is a clear indication that this activity had been initiated from Cassinga. Furthermore, the presence of PLAN commander, Dimo Hamaambo, at Cassinga, made it a strategic target, and he appears to have escaped with his life only by some stroke of luck. Perhaps the greatest blow to SWAPO therefore, would have been to the organisation's military prestige.

The raid was unexpected by SWAPO and its allies in terms of the exact day and the time. Yet an attack was certainly expected. SWAPO was aware of SAAF reconnaissance flights over Cassinga which had been increasing in frequency; there was talk of infiltration by South African agents; there had been signs of reconnaissance teams in the vicinity; women, children and the aged had been recently moved to another, less vulnerable camp; the occupants had all been briefed on how to escape in the event of an attack; and the defensive trenchworks had undergone rapid and recent development. It seems obvious, therefore, that if time allowed, the women, children and aged non-combatants (who should, in the first place, not have been in a camp that was known to be under threat of attack) would be the first to be evacuated, leaving the combatants to carry out the defence. Quite clearly the air-strike did not allow time for this and the bombs would have indiscriminately sown destruction. But the subsequent delay of about an hour and a half should have enabled many civilians to escape. Certainly it enabled the PLAN commander, Dimo Hamaambo, to get away.⁹⁰³

902 Standard military doctrine requires that for a force to attack a defended position, a ratio of 3:1 in the attacker's favour is necessary (Infantry School Company Commander's Aide Memoire, p. 36). If the numbers cannot be achieved, it is possible to overcome this by means of surprise, superior weaponry, greater fire-power, piecemeal attacks, and other such "force-multipliers". Therefore, if the PLAN military contingent at Cassinga was only 300-strong, as claimed by SWAPO, the paratroopers were still not strong enough to attack them frontally. However, the element of surprise and the heavy fire-power of the Air Force, particularly in the absence of artillery, would have restored this imbalance.

903 This is an important point, but one which will probably always be open to conjecture. If the civilians were, as Shalli contends, briefed on escape measures, those who survived the initial air-strike should, for the most part, have managed to escape. This is especially so as the faulty parachute drop left the "escape trench" without any paratroopers nearby. Those remaining in Cassinga once the ground attack started would then have been the "defence unit" of 300 or possibly more trained SWAPO soldiers (who would have slightly outnumbered the paratroopers) and those civilians too badly wounded or shell-shocked to try to escape. Though the civilian deaths from the air-strike would still have been high, this line of reasoning would lend greater credence to the paratrooper testimonies of a military battle to take Cassinga.

This was thus the point at which mistakes by the paratroopers began to cause them to deviate from Sun Tzu's requirements for a raid, preventing them from rapidly subduing their objective.

Firstly, there was the faulty drop that caused a crucial delay of at least an hour and a half in the envisaged timings. This not only gave the occupants time to recover, escape or prepare their defence, thereby forfeiting for the paratroopers much of the surprise that they were relying on, but the separation caused by the river resulted in disorganisation, disruption and a breakdown in command and control. The parachute drop is the specialty of the paratrooper and in this case it was not planned with sufficient care. The surprise factor and the power of the air-strike had given the paratroopers an advantage that was largely squandered. The amount of fire-power brought to bear by the Air Force was in every respect sufficient to suppress the anticipated resistance at Cassinga, seen as a purely military objective and given the light armament of the paratroops. But, as it appears the SADF did envisage some civilians, however few, being present, almost any amount of firepower would be regarded as excessive in terms of the Geneva Conventions.⁹⁰⁴

Secondly, the premature departure of the engineer officers responsible for demolitions as well as all the wounded paratroopers on the first helicopters to leave Cassinga meant that destruction of the weapons and other facilities could not be properly carried out, and that the wounded were left for an hour without medical care. This reflected the tenuous command and control on the ground and indicates that proper reorganisation was not done. Thirdly, and much more importantly, the reaction capability of the armoured unit at Techamutete was underestimated. The possibility of the delays that were ultimately encountered was therefore not built into the plan, and there was insufficient flexibility for the commander to alter that plan. This impacted heavily on the final part of the hypothesis.

The final extraction of the paratroopers from Cassinga was not executed rapidly enough, for although SWAPO was unable to react effectively, her allies in the form of the Cubans were. There was insufficient air cover available to halt the Cuban advance, only enough to delay it. This resulted in a panic amongst the paratroopers and an almost total disappearance of the already disjointed command and control of the force. The situation was exacerbated by the use of Citizen Force paratroopers, many of whom were physically and psychologically not fit enough for a military operation of this nature, and whose discipline failed at a critical time.

Twice there was a failure in command and control, on both occasions at a crucial point in the operation. Firstly just after the jump, prior to the start of the ground attack, when no communications could be established with higher or flanking headquarters (such as the MAOT) and companies were unable to group effectively for the attack. Some sections only joined their companies after conclusion of the attack. The second time was when the Cuban armour penetrated to the LZ as the extraction began and all order evaporated in a chaotic every-man-for-himself scramble. These failures can be ascribed to the absence of both a permanent, practiced airborne headquarters and a regular

904 It could be argued that the question of firepower and civilians is practically insoluble in any war. The US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 is a recent and topical example of how the avoidance of civilian casualties in a war-zone can only be guaranteed by avoiding a war.

parachute battalion where every man knows his comrades intimately, where all are on the same level of fitness and training and where they form an established team.

Nevertheless, the operation was, according to what it set out to do, a resounding success,⁹⁰⁵ and what could very easily have gone wrong did not. From a military point of view it was a daring, high-risk venture in the classic mould of an innovative airborne surprise attack. Casualties amongst the paratroopers were light⁹⁰⁶ and the only major failure in terms of the objectives set, was the inability to bring back prisoners. The massacre of civilians was most certainly an aspect that should also be seen as a "failure" in the operation. Documentary evidence indicates that the SADF grossly underestimated the number of civilians at Cassinga, and that the intention had never been to kill civilians, specifically not women and children. But the use of indiscriminate weapons such as aircraft bombs (at a time when "smart" bombs were not in the inventory) meant that, as in the Second World War, civilians were in the majority amongst the victims of a bombing raid. During the fighting, both civilians and guerrillas sheltered in the same trenches, making civilian casualties inevitable. Yet despite this dark blot on the operation, from a military perspective it remained an overall success. The reasons for the success can be ascribed to initiative and innovation on the part of certain of the paratroopers and maintenance of the aim by the commander as well as the vital role of the Air Force.

The actions of the D-Company Commander in clearing the trench to the guns, the actions of No 9 Platoon Commander in relieving the pressure of the guns by attacking from the north, the delaying tactics of the anti-tank platoon in the south, the actions of those defending the perimeter of the LZ during the final extraction, the daring persistence of the Buccaneer pilot when his ammunition had been expended and the coolness of the helicopter pilots under fire are some of the instances which rectified the mistakes of the operation. Indeed, the flexibility of the air plan and the effective command and control over the air assets could be seen as the strongest aspect of the operation.

Ultimately, therefore, the hypothesis can only be said to be partially proved, although the raid was technically a military success. Certainly it applied Liddell Hart's dictum regarding the indirect approach, as outlined in the introduction to this dissertation. And yet politically the raid could be seen to have been a blunder. The SADF had admitted that its timing was bad with regard to the Namibian settlement talks (Chapter 9). Viljoen stated categorically that the decision to attack Cassinga had been based on military and not political considerations (Chapter 5) and it did restore the tactical initiative in the war to the SADF. But this indicates a lack of political astuteness on the part of the South African Prime Minister for sanctioning the raid. He had allowed himself to be persuaded by his Minister of Defence and his generals, who did not believe that there was any chance of a settlement

905 The military "mission" for the operation, as spelled out in Chapter 6, included "reduce the military potential and status of SWAPO", "destroy SWAPO terrorists and base facilities", "inflict maximum personnel and material losses", "destroy all targets" and "attack and destroy the SWAPO base at Cassinga". In military terms, the mission was accomplished. Cassinga was never again used by SWAPO. Gleeson, the overall commander of Operation REINDEER, claimed that the intention had been "to set SWAPO back several months" (interview on 16 January 2003). This was realistic, as any experienced counter-insurgency soldier would know that, short of complete victory, this was the most that a single action could hope for.

906 It has been claimed that the low casualty rate was indicative of an absence of opposition. Yet parachute operations which are well-planned and which utilise surprise combined with well-trained and aggressive troops invariably reflect low casualties amongst the paratroopers. For example, in the Belgian assault on Stanleyville, defended by heavily armed and entrenched rebels who greatly outnumbered them, there were only two paratroopers wounded and one killed. When the French dropped on Kolwezi, again heavily outnumbered and faced by well-trained and experienced rebels, only five paratroopers were killed. In both cases, several hundred rebels were killed by the paratroopers.

being reached in Namibia at the time.⁹⁰⁷ It was, it would seem, precisely because the South African government believed that Cassinga was a purely military target, that they agreed to the raid. Because of this they never envisaged the world-wide condemnation that followed, and which was elicited largely by the apparently unexpected "massacre of refugees". Certainly there is no evidence to indicate that the raid was intended to ensure that SWAPO would not agree to the Western Five proposals. On the contrary, the South Africans believed that SWAPO in any case would never accept the proposals as they were. The significance of the Cassinga raid, therefore, lies far more in its innovative military conception and its heralding of a South African strategy of pre-emptive strikes than in its causing the continued South African political control of Namibia through a deliberate attempt at the thwarting of the settlement process. Yet the military doctrine of pre-emptiveness is disproportionately dependant on highly accurate intelligence, especially when civilians are under threat. This the Americans have discovered to their cost in Iraq.

There can be no doubt that the final word on Cassinga has not yet been spoken. The mass of documentary material available in the archives of the SANDF that it was not possible for reasons of space to include in this research project, could most certainly reveal further dimensions of the military facet of Operation REINDEER. The archives of the UN and of other international organisations should contain information of additional value to the social dimension of the raid. Many veterans and survivors who were not traced could throw a fresh light on what happened on that fateful 4th of May. Finally, a more transparent revelation of Angolan, Cuban and SWAPO records, as opposed to opinions and recollections, could certainly provide a broader and more balanced database for future research and contribute towards answering some of the questions which remain enigmatic.

It has been argued that Cassinga is still too recent an event in history to be studied objectively. Yet it seems foolish to wait until the passing of all participants before examining an issue. Yesterday, after all, is history. The words of Sir Percy Fitzpatrick are worth noting in this regard:

"Perhaps we are too near the events for anyone to achieve a comprehensive, impartial view; certainly I would not attempt it. Personal experience and intimate knowledge of many of the facts and many of the protagonists seem to unfit anyone for such a task. But if, of necessity, the broad canvas of real history cannot be completed by a participant while events are fresh and actors still alive, it remains desirable that details should be on record".⁹⁰⁸

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907 Interview with Gen Constand Viljoen on 2 May 2002.

908 Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, *South African Memories*, p. 25.