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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/JCH44.v1.2>

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)

Journal for Contemporary
History
2019 44(1):26-46

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THE EFFECT OF THE 1978 CASSINGA RAID ON THE BORDER WAR

Abstract

The article analyses the importance of the South African Defence Force's attack on a SWAPO base at Cassinga, Angola on 4 May 1978. It was one of the most militarily, politically, and symbolically decisive days of the Border War. Cassinga became a symbol both to Namibia's liberation movement and South African soldiers, and both groups commemorate the event each year.

The article explores the tactical and political causes and circumstances of the raid and gives a detailed account of the military operation. Operation Reindeer, as the attack on Cassinga was called, had important military consequences, and very significant political repercussions. This study considers these effects with the help of media responses to the event (South African, British and Polish newspapers) as well as the reactions of politicians on both sides of the conflict. The claim by the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) that Cassinga was a refugee camp raised a storm of controversy. This article addresses the controversy and attempts to clarify who actually inhabited the base at that time.

Keywords: Cassinga, Border War, SADF, SWAPO, PLAN, guerrilla warfare, refugee camp, massacre

Sleutelwoorde: Kassinga; Grensoorlog; SAW; SWAPO; PLAN; guerilla-oorlog; vlugtelingkamp; menseslagting

1. INTRODUCTION

Cassinga, a mining town in Angola, became a hot topic in the international arena in May of 1978. On 4 May 1978, the South African Defence Force (SADF) carried out their first paratroop operation against

the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) inside Angola. This raid, at the mining town of Cassinga (alternatively spelt Kassinga), 250 km across the Angolan border, was one of the most daring and controversial events of the twenty-eight-year long conflict that in South Africa is known as the 'Border War' ('*Grensoorlog*' in Afrikaans). Cassinga soon became a hot topic of discussion in the international arena and for the last three decades, the raid has continued to raise emotional, albeit contrasting responses from black Namibians and white South Africans. To Namibians, Cassinga signifies the dreadful price they had to pay to gain their independence; to many white South Africans, Cassinga is synonymous with a brilliant military manoeuvre; a day to celebrate a victory and to remember all fallen paratroopers.

According to Gary Baines, the border conflict (1966–1994) led to the conscription of about 300 000 white men.¹ Since South Africa's transition to a majority-rule democracy, the actions of these soldiers have been criticised and their sacrifices have never been truly acknowledged. A good example of the public's reluctance to appreciate these soldiers is the controversy surrounding the Wall of Names in Pretoria's Freedom Park, which was completed in 2004. The monument 'pays tribute to those who died during the conflicts that shaped present-day South Africa.'² However, the names of the SADF members who had fallen during the Border War were not included as it was argued that they had fought against liberation movements. This omission shows how some (most!) South Africans view the Border War today.

Only 25 years have passed since the end of the border conflict and published material on this subject is still relatively limited. One of the best-covered episodes of the war is Operation Reindeer, during which SADF forces destroyed SWAPO bases in southern Angola. Among these bases was Cassinga, whose military importance, distant location, and the ambiguous status of its inhabitants, accounted for the raid on the town becoming the most publicised event of the operation, both in the days following the attack and in the years to come. This study focuses on whether or not the outcry caused by the assault reflects its actual political and military significance in Namibia's struggle for independence.

Though it is often difficult to evaluate an event's historical importance, the consequences of the raid at Cassinga approximate its significance. It is therefore imperative to explore the rationale behind South Africa's decision to attack, the nature of the camp at Cassinga, and the reaction of the international community to the raid.

McGill Alexander's master's thesis, 'The Cassinga Raid', and Jan D. Breytenbach's article, 'Airborne Assault on Cassinga Base, 4 May 1978', provide

1 G Baines, "Blame, Shame or Reaffirmation? White Conscripts Reassess the Meaning of the 'Border War' in Post-Apartheid South Africa", *InterCulture* 5(3), 2008, p. 215.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

the necessary material to analyse the events of 4 May from the South African perspective. Alexander's dissertation is a valuable source because it is the only study focused on Cassinga that is based on documents held in the military archives in Pretoria. Breytenbach's account of the raid is reliable because he was in charge of the ground assault. An article by Christian A. Williams, 'Remember Cassinga? "An Exhibition of Photographs and Histories"', is the main source used in identifying who really lived in the town at the time of the attack. His research is based on material from South African and Namibian archives, as well as interviews. Steven Mvula, a Namibian human rights activist, published a list of questions addressed to SWAPO regarding the inconsistencies in their public statements on the events at Cassinga. Though it is a rare (if not the sole) Namibian voice calling on its liberator to come clean on the history of Cassinga Day, his article has not yet been referenced in any other work on the topic.

This work compiles sources from both countries to form as objective a presentation of the topic as possible. The analysis of the international reaction is mostly based on African and European media reports. Polish newspapers provide a glimpse into the Communist Bloc's portrayal of the conflict in Africa. Combined, this evidence allows for an impartial assessment of the significance of the Cassinga raid.

2. THE ATTACK ON CASSINGA

The necessity to attack the Cassinga base was first pointed out to then Minister for Defence Pieter Willem (P.W) Botha by ex-Chief of the SADF General Magnus Malan on 27 February 1978. At this time, the political situation of South West Africa (SWA) was dominated by the Turnhalle Conference and the ongoing attempts of the Western Five (USA, Canada, United Kingdom, France and West Germany who together took on the role of the arbiter) to begin negotiations between the South African government and SWAPO. The military leaders understood that they also had a role to play; 'We knew we had to prevent military adventures and violence from becoming a means to seize power or unduly influence political decisions,' said former Commander of the South West Africa Command, General Johannes Geldenhuys.³ According to McGill Alexander, at the end of 1977, ex-Prime Minister Vorster agreed that 'external operations' – large-scale attacks across the Angolan border – would prevent SWAPO from attracting support in Ovamboland; therefore, the Ovambo people would vote for the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance in the South Africa-controlled elections.⁴ Malan's plan to deal SWAPO a striking blow involved attacking five base complexes during

3 Geldenhuys, cited in Hilton Hamann, *Days of the Generals* (Cape Town: Struik, 2008), p. 71.

4 EGM Alexander, "The Cassinga Raid" (Master's thesis, University of South Africa, 2003), pp. 80–81.

a four-day period at the end of March. P.W. Botha accepted the idea partially; he demanded that the operation should be shorter and not include Cassinga (for the fear of having aircrafts shot down).⁵ However, Lieutenant-General Constand Viljoen, then Chief of the South African Army, was convinced that the base must be targeted in order to significantly weaken SWAPO. He made his case in a memorandum devoted entirely to the importance of Cassinga, which was subordinate exclusively to the Defence Headquarters at Lubango.

Viljoen's argument included the following points:

- Cassinga was the headquarters of Dimo Hamaambo, then Commander of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN).
- It was the planning, coordinating, training, and control centre in southern Angola.
- Weapons, ammunition, and other supplies were distributed from there.
- It was an assembly point for recruits before their training in Lubango or Luanda, and for insurgents returning after training.
- Transport assets were controlled and repaired there.
- The main medical centre was located in the complex.⁶

Military intelligence reports from April stated that there had been an increase of SWAPO activity (an unconfirmed arms build-up) in southern Angola. They also reminded that the USSR and Cuba had promised to provide the movement with more support.⁷ Therefore, it was imperative to strike SWAPO where it would immobilise them. Viljoen persuaded the cabinet, and despite ex-Foreign Minister R.F. 'Pik' Botha's opposition, the prime minister gave permission to attack Cassinga.

According to McGill Alexander, the overall plan for Operation Reindeer was as follows:

[F]irst the paratroopers would attack and destroy Alpha [Cassinga] at first light; then the mechanised battle group would attack Bravo [Chetequera], 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.⁸

5 Alexander, p. 82.

6 Memorandum from C Army to C SADF, reference H LE&R/309/1 dd 8 March 1978 (Top Secret), in SANDF Archival Folder marked "Cassinga" but not referenced, cited in Alexander, 'Cassinga,' p. 83.

7 Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 91.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Cassinga was the main objective and 377 paratroopers were sent in under the command of Colonel Jan Breytenbach.⁹ Prior to the jump, the Air Force (SAAF) dropped anti-personnel bombs, high explosive (HE) bombs, and HE fragmentation shells on the camp.¹⁰ The next stage of the assault was to 'box' SWAPO by placing stopper groups to the north, east and south of the base. Companies A and B, which were to land between the town and the river, were ordered to move in from the west and clear the camp.¹¹ However, the airdrop did not go as planned.

Colonel Breytenbach published an article 'Airborne Assault on Cassinga Base, 4 May 1978' in the *Journal for Contemporary History* in which he relates the role he played in the planning and execution of Operation Reindeer. Breytenbach's recollections of the battle are trustworthy because, as the commander, he had an overall picture of the assault. Also, since he knew the plans for the attack, he can compare them with the reality on the ground and provide an explanation for the discrepancies between the two.

As mentioned, the operation did not go according to the plan. Breytenbach attributed the first difficulty – the dispersal of the paratroopers upon landing – to visibility problems following the bombing and the use of an incorrect scale during air photograph interpretation. JARIC (Joint Air Reconnaissance Interpretation Centre) stated that the scale was 1:250 000, but it was in fact 1:125 000; therefore the drop zone was half the expected size. This created enormous difficulties for the pilots and soldiers on board the four C130s and one-third of the assault companies A and B found themselves on the opposite bank of the Culonga River.¹² The two C160s, which came next, were more successful in dropping their soldiers accurately on the northern and southern perimeters of Cassinga. However, these paratroopers also encountered obstacles. For example, Johan Blaauw's and Piet Botes' platoons descended upon buildings and had to clear houses, bunkers and trenches in order to arrive at their assigned stopper positions, from which they would hinder the enemy's escape. Communication between the men on the ground and the headquarters was also impeded as a result of the soldiers' displacement.

Breytenbach considered his position and the amount of time that had elapsed due to the prolonged regrouping and altered the axis of the attack. Instead of moving from west to east, the soldiers entered Cassinga from the south and followed the town's main street, which ran north. Fighting ensued between the South Africans and the inhabitants of Cassinga who had positioned

9 There is an ongoing debate about who was in charge of the assault. Leo Barnard states that Major-General M.J. du Plessis was the overall commander. See L Barnard, "The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A Historical Reassessment", *Journal for Contemporary History* 31(3), December 2006, p. 137.

10 Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 144.

11 J Breytenbach, "Airborne Assault on Cassinga Base, 4 May 1978", *Journal for Contemporary History* 34(1), February 2009, p. 147.

12 Breytenbach identifies the river as "Colui"; nonetheless, other sources speak of "Culonga".

themselves in the trenches. Resistance was strong because 'the alpha bombs were not nearly as effective as they were cracked up to be. Neither were the thousand-pounder bombs with their contact fuses, since all they achieved was to blow massive craters into the soft soil with the explosive force wasted upwards instead of outwards as was expected.'¹³

Extraction turned out to be an issue as well. Breytenbach points to Brigadier M.J. du Plessis' 'usurpation of command'¹⁴ as the main cause of the dangerous chaos accompanying the process of leaving Cassinga. Breytenbach also writes:

Cmdt Blikkies Blygnaut, saddled with the task to ensure an orderly extraction, was forced by Brig Du Plessis to dash around grabbing paratroopers irrespective of company or platoon organisations and to stuff them into choppers that had suddenly landed on the wrong LZs [landing zones] because their designated LZs were still under fire.¹⁵

While the South Africans were being extracted, a more serious danger than the disorder created by Du Plessis awaited the remaining soldiers. The attack did not go unnoticed by the Cuban battle group stationed in Tetchamutete, 20 km to the south. In his plans, Breytenbach had acknowledged the possibility of their involvement; he ordered the anti-tank (AT) platoon to position itself on the road leading to Cassinga and to delay any Cuban intervention. However, Du Plessis countered that plan ordering the AT platoon to retreat to the entrance of the town. This decision prevented an early ambush of the oncoming mechanised column and 'a terrific barney had broken out within 200 meters of my [Breytenbach's] HQ position.'¹⁶ Nevertheless, South African troops received air support in the form of a Buccaneer and Mirages that bombarded the enemy tanks, BTRs and BRDMs.¹⁷ 18 helicopters arrived on the scene and extracted the remaining paratroopers.

With no South Africans on the ground, the SAAF continued targeting Cassinga and the Cubans for the next four hours.¹⁸ The raid began at 0800 and lasted ten hours, with the last Buccaneer flying over the demolished Angolan town around 1830.

The SADF inflicted heavy casualties while suffering minimal losses themselves; 608 Namibians, 150 Cubans, and four South Africans (three killed in action, one missing- presumed to have drowned) lost their lives at Cassinga

13 Breytenbach, "Airborne Assault", p. 156.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

17 BTRs and BRDMs are armoured patrol cars.

18 Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 152.

that day.¹⁹ The attackers confiscated documents²⁰ but did not take any prisoners back with them due to the confusion surrounding extraction.²¹ Despite many deviations from the original plan, the raid was proclaimed a success. 'We had come to have a scrap with SWAPO and our mission to wipe out Cassinga, as a most important SWAPO installation, had been accomplished.'²² The overall objective of Operation Reindeer presented by the military had been to prevent a large SWAPO infiltration during the negotiation process. Lieutenant-General Ian Gleeson, who was the commander of the entire operation (at that time, he had the rank of major-general), summarised the impact of the raids in the following words: '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.'²³ In fact, the movement needed four months to recover from the assault.²⁴

Operation Reindeer was the first of many cross-border raids carried out by the SADF during the Border War. A question that presents itself is: why had the South African government felt comfortable breaking international law by violating Angola's territorial sovereignty? Were they not afraid of condemnation by public opinion and possible sanctions? Pretoria was highly criticised by the United Nations for its apartheid policies and for the illegal occupation of Namibia.²⁵ Its striving for an internal settlement did not improve South Africa's reputation in the eyes of the world, which expected the country to accept the Western Five's proposal. Even after the country agreed to negotiate with SWAPO, on 25 April, The UN General Assembly denounced Vorster's administration. Resolution S-9/2 of 3 May 1978 reaffirmed international support for SWAPO and its criticism of South Africa. It appealed 'to all Member States to render increased and sustained support and assistance to the South West Africa People's Organisation to enable it to intensify its struggle for the liberation of Namibia.'²⁶ It also condemned what the SADF would do the following day:

19 Breytenbach, "Airborne Assault", p. 163-164. The figure of Namibian dead was also a matter of dispute; a confidential SWAPO report put the death toll at 582, while the Angolan government placed the number at 624. See Alexander, "Cassinga", pp. 156-158.

20 Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 140.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

22 Breytenbach, "Airborne Assault", p. 159.

23 Interview with Lieutenant-General Gleeson on 16 January 2003, cited in Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 182.

24 Alexander, "Cassinga", footnote 890, p. 182.

25 The Security Council first declared South African administration of SWA illegal in Resolution 264 (1969), which was upheld by the International Court of Justice in 1971.

26 General Assembly resolution A/RES/S-9/2, 1978, <<http://www.un.org/en/sections/documents/general-assembly-resolutions/index.html>>.

The aggressive policies of the South African occupation regime in Namibia are further reflected in its repeated acts of aggression against, military incursions into, and violations of the territorial integrity of, the neighbouring States, in particular, Angola and Zambia, causing considerable loss of human life and damage to property.²⁷

The General Assembly proposed sanctions in the military, nuclear, and economic fields. As South Africa was already under an arms embargo imposed by the Security Council in 1977, the Minister of Economic Affairs, Owen Horwood 'voiced fears of an economic backlash and a fall in the value of the South African currency'²⁸ following the attack on Cassinga. Further infringement of international law could have resulted in the General Assembly's threat materialising in a Security Council's resolution. Why, then, was the operation not cancelled?

The most reasonable explanation is that South Africa was more concerned with its security than with its economy or reputation. A SWAPO build-up across the border posed a serious threat to the South African administration of SWA, and consequently to South Africa itself. According to Viljoen, the assault on Cassinga was 'a means of delivering a significant blow to SWAPO's military campaign, thereby allowing the politicians breathing space to reach a political solution.'²⁹ This accounts for the timing of the attack. Operation Reindeer can be considered as South Africa's attempt to gain the upper hand at the negotiating table. Both sides were ready to talk; however, both were ready to resort to force in case diplomacy failed. By destroying Namibian camps in southern Angola, the SADF aimed at removing the PLAN factor from the equation. SWAPO would not be able to request unacceptable (from the South Africans' point of view) concessions by threatening to use its militants. Nor would they be able to choose a violent takeover of the country over negotiations. The opinion that Operation Reindeer was meant to provide the South African government with leverage over SWAPO is supported by Viljoen's assurances 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.'³⁰

Nevertheless, SWAPO saw the Cassinga raid as a political undertaking: '[T]he massacre was planned with brutal cynicism to forestall a breakthrough in negotiations with the United Nations.'³¹ The following section analyses the reaction of the Angolan and Namibian leadership to the events of 4 May.

27 General Assembly resolution A/RES/S-9/2, 1978, <<http://www.un.org/en/sections/documents/general-assembly-resolutions/index.html>>.

28 Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 92.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

31 A Heywood, *The Cassinga Event* (Windhoek: Archeia18, National Archives of Namibia, 1994), cited in Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 70.

3. INTERNATIONAL REACTION TO THE RAID AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The war could not be won by military will alone. Political and diplomatic victories were necessary, and they depended less on will than on skill, particularly in outwitting opponents in the battle to control public perceptions at home and abroad.³²

This is how Hermann Giliomee described the complexity of the entire Border War. The Cassinga raid is a perfect example of a military triumph, which was a political catastrophe, and thus a strategic failure.

The strategy for handling international inquiries concerning the assault was prepared by the SADF in the Psychological Action Plan. The recommendation was that the administration in Windhoek makes a vague public statement following the attack. South African Military Intelligence had reported:

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.³³

Consequently, the South Africans did not inform the public of having launched the operation and the Angolans were the first to announce the SADF's incursion to the world.

At 2100, Radio Luanda broadcast a Defence Ministry Communiqué, which ran as follows:

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.³⁴

Thus, SWAPO did not try to undermine the impact of the attack. Moreover, Angola labelled Cassinga as a Namibian refugee camp. This implied that the SADF

32 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), p. 578.

33 Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 160.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 161, footnote 769.

broke the Geneva Convention and that the battle was actually a massacre of civilian population.

On 5 May, Elisio de Figueiredo, the Angolan Ambassador to the UN at the time, requested that the Security Council convene an emergency meeting to discuss the 'aggression on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of [his] country, the People's Republic of Angola, committed by the illegal, racist, minority regime of Pretoria.'³⁵ A letter from Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, at that time the First Vice-Prime Minister of Angola, addressed to then UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, was attached to the written request of the ambassador. Dos Santos speaks of South Africa violating Angolan sovereignty and 'victimising Namibian refugees camped [in Cassinga].' The remaining targets of Operation Reindeer were not mentioned in the radio broadcast nor in the letter to the UN. Therefore, it is clear that SWAPO decided to focus the attention of the media and the politicians solely on Cassinga. This move may be interpreted as a means of covering up the extent of the military blow that PLAN suffered; hence the SADF's prediction that 'Angola/SWAPO may play down the effect of the operation'³⁶ was correct.

Having pronounced Cassinga a refugee camp, it is evident that SWAPO and Angola also promulgated a different version of events than the one South Africans accepted. The details of the raid have been altered throughout the years, nevertheless, the general message – Cassinga was a refugee camp and the attack a massacre of civilians – remains the same to this day. The following passage is an excerpt from an interview with Sam Nujoma, conducted in 2009.

Cassinga was a reception centre for our new arrivals, refugees who were leaving Namibia to join the struggle. It was given to us by President Agostino Neto of Angola. It was a reception centre. It used to be an iron ore mine. There were living quarters for the miners, so we used these as a reception centre for our new arrivals.

The Boers of course got wind of it. On 4 May 1978, the Boers first sent a wave of Buccaneer aircrafts over Cassinga. The first bombs they dropped were filled with poisoned gas, biological weapons, that destroyed the oxygen in the air and made our people to collapse. The Boers then sent a second wave of Mirage jetfighters to strafe the camp and set it ablaze. They then sent yet a third wave of helicopters that dropped paratroopers into the camp. They proceeded to shoot and bayonet our people who had not already died from the bombing.

35 Letter dated 5 May 1978 from the Permanent Representative of Angola to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/12690, <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/?ln=en>>.

36 Psyac Planning Directive No 3/78, reference HS OPS/310/4/REINDEER (Top Secret), 25 April 1978, Enclosure 24, File MI/310/4 REINDEER (Top Secret), vol. 1, Archive MID/MI, Group 6, Box No 129, cited in Alexander, 'Cassinga', p. 160.

. . . They killed more than 1 000 and injured many more. They even took some of our people away.³⁷

The South African Department of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on 5 May justifying the assault. The public was informed that two vital PLAN bases were targeted. In addition, Cassinga had various defence works, women wore uniforms and fought alongside men, and SWAPO fighters who were not killed were disarmed and released upon SADF evacuation. Moreover, the official statement explained that '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.'³⁸ Therefore, it cannot be said that South Africa denied shooting civilians. Nevertheless, they continued to emphasise that Cassinga was only a military base. In an article in *The Times* of 6 May 1978, David Spanier reports, 'The South Africans also captured quantities of SWAPO documents, some of which were shown to journalists to demonstrate that Cassinga was a military base and not a refugee camp as has been claimed by SWAPO and the Angolans.'³⁹ SWAPO officials, on the other hand, assured that Cassinga was only a refugee camp, 'defended by lightly armed guerrillas.'⁴⁰

Another theory exists on the true status of the camp's inhabitants. That is that Cassinga was a typical guerrilla community in which the difference between soldier and civilian was not visibly defined. Three sources that propagate this belief are an academic paper by Christian A. Williams, a press article by Steven Mvula, and a report of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Williams, from the University of the Western Cape, writes:

The dominant story of the 'refugee camp' does not begin to describe the collection of people, offices and practices that formed in and around Cassinga. At the same time, the apartheid government's claim that Cassinga was a 'military camp' is also misleading, obscuring salient qualities of this community.⁴¹

Williams based his research on South African and Namibian sources, including interviews with camp administrators conducted in 2007–2008. Consequently, it has been revealed that Army Commander Dimo Hamaambo had set up a military base in the uninhabited town two years before the attack.⁴²

37 Anon., "Sam Nujoma Speaks", *New African*, October 2001, p. 9.

38 Anon., "SA Message Urges Big Five to Act", *The Star*, 6 May 1978, cited in Alexander, 'Cassinga', p. 164.

39 D Spanier, "Angola Raid puts Namibia Peace Plan in Danger", *The Times*, 6 May 1978, p. 1.

40 S Mvula, "Remembering the Cassinga Massacre", *Namrights*, 17 May 2010, <<http://www.nshr.org.na/index.php?module=News&func=display&sid=1335>>.

41 C Williams, "Remember Cassinga? An Exhibition of Photographs and Histories", *Kronos* 36(1), November 2010, p. 213.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

However, very soon PLAN soldiers stationed at Cassinga were joined by exiles, whose presence accounted for the extension of camp administration.⁴³ After the establishment of a camp in Jamba, offices in Luanda, and the Defence Headquarters in Lubango, Namibians were directed to other places depending on the role they were to play in the liberation struggle.⁴⁴ In the weeks leading to the raid, there had been an unusually high number of civilians at Cassinga, probably due to the Jamba camp being overcrowded.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, PLAN had feared an attack and moved some vulnerable people seven kilometres north of the base.⁴⁶ Therefore, at the time of the attack, Cassinga was, in fact, a military base that provided Namibian refugees with shelter. Williams' article proves that both the SADF's and SWAPO's claims are only partly true.

Steven Mvula is a unique voice on Cassinga because he is a Namibian human rights activist.⁴⁷ In his press article, 'Remembering the Cassinga Massacre', he argues that SWAPO betrayed its people by denying PLAN's presence in the town and that the contingent was heavily armed. 'It is unfortunate that SWAPO has chosen, out of its own free will, to . . . hide the truth and propagate lies.'⁴⁸ Mvula addresses the claims that Cassinga was only a transit and refugee camp for women, children, and elderly Namibians and was defended by 300 lightly armed guerrillas who managed to kill 102 South Africans and shoot down three aircraft. Some of the questions put forward in the article are: Why did PLAN Commander Hamaambo have a house (which was destroyed) in a refugee camp? Why assert that only defenceless women and children were killed if men would have 'been the majority in any genuine transit camp'⁴⁹? Why were the guerrillas only lightly armed if the purpose was to defend the camp from the South African army? If they were in fact lightly armed, who shot down three enemy airplanes? The fifth inconsistency indicated by the author is the lack of proof to support SWAPO's claim that the SADF used nerve gas. In his conclusion, Mvula calls upon the ruling party to expose the whole truth surrounding 4 May 1978.

During 1995–96, the TRC also investigated the Cassinga raid. One chapter of the TRC report is devoted to South Africa's human rights violations outside of the country and Operation Reindeer was 'possibly the single most controversial external operation of the Commission's mandate period.'⁵⁰ It was stated that the SADF was aware of non-combatants living in the camp; thus, the use of fragmentation bombs

43 Williams, "Remember Cassinga", p. 221.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Dimo Hamaambo to the Commissar, 18 April 1978, cited in Williams, "Remember Cassinga?", p. 229.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Report*, vol. 2 (Cape Town: 1998), p. 46.

was a breach of humanitarian law. Nevertheless, it dismissed the claim that civilian clothing seen on photographs of the mass grave proves massacre: 'in a guerrilla camp, not all combatants would be wearing uniforms.'⁵¹ The raid on Alpha was not condemned as an indiscriminate execution of Namibian refugees. This is significant because the TRC was evidently biased against the SADF but did not succeed in proving that it was guilty of the supposed atrocity.

Though the TRC stated that the SADF knew of refugees living at Cassinga, McGill Alexander found a top secret document, which assured Botha 'that no civilians will be encountered at the objective'.⁵² In his dissertation, the SADF's assertion that it was only aware of the camp's military nature is accepted as true. However, the historian questions the integrity of Military Intelligence 'leaving the doubt that they knew about the civilian presence at Cassinga and that they were deliberately concealing it from the operational planners.'⁵³ It is possible that more files on Operation Reindeer, which could shed light on the SADF's knowledge of the number of non-combatants present at the base, have not yet been uncovered in the archives.

It is difficult to indicate the winner in the propaganda war that ensued. In order to analyse the international reaction to the events in southern Africa, two newspapers have been examined: the British newspaper *The Times* to portray the 'Western' stand on the issues, and the Polish *Trybuna Ludu* to represent the Eastern Bloc opinion. The article also refers to the South African Afrikaans newspaper, *Rapport*.

The Times published their first article on the raid on 6 May 1978. It informs the public that the British Foreign Office and the American Department of State 'conveyed [their] dismay to the South African Government and had asked for an urgent explanation.'⁵⁴ It goes on to say: 'it is felt that the chances of the Western plan for Namibia winning acceptance in the United Nations must be considered diminished now.' The article ends with a short report from New York City, where SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma declared "'hundreds of women, children and elderly' were killed in the Angola raid.' Though the article presents both viewpoints on the nature of Cassinga, it can be considered pro-South African because it focuses on the timing of the raid and its possible political consequences.

The same can be said about the 8 May article by Nicholas Ashford in Johannesburg. Cassinga is identified as SWAPO's main base and it is not associated with 'civilians' or 'refugees.'

51 TRC Report, p. 52.

52 Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 93.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

54 Spanier, "Angola Raid", p. 1.

There is little doubt that [the raid] was a military success from the South African point of view. According to the newspaper *Rapport*, quoting SWAPO sources, up to 1 000 SWAPO guerrillas were killed in the raid out of an estimated 3 000 to 5 000 guerrillas based in southern Angola.⁵⁵

In the article (in parenthesis) the author adds that the first ambassador of Angola to the United Nations Elísio de Figueiredo 'claimed that 504 Namibian refugees and 16 Angolan troops were killed.' The article concludes with the South African admission that 'women had died during the attack. [Brigadier Botha] claimed they had been wearing uniform.' Consequently, *The Times* depicted Operation Reindeer as a serious blow to PLAN and it refrained from labelling Cassinga as a refugee camp.

The following day, however, the tone changed in an article in *The Times* by Michael Leapman in which he writes: 'SWAPO leader cancels meeting with West over South Africa raid.'⁵⁶ In the article, Leapman concentrates on the obstacles to Namibian independence as outlined in the Western Five's plan and summarises the events of the previous week: 'The plan was thwarted, however, by the raid by South African troops last week on SWAPO bases and refugee camps across the Angola border.' SWAPO's central committee is also quoted as saying, 'This barbaric attack on the Namibian civilian population of Cassinga is but the latest manifestation of a stream of measures of repression and victimisation against SWAPO members and supporters.' Leapman's failure to include the SADF's story of the operation in his article must be seen as a success for Nujoma's movement.

An article, which appeared in *The Times* on 10 May, depicted the South Africans in a very negative light. Bernard Cazaux, a French journalist, Jane Bergerol, a British reporter, and ten other foreign correspondents visited Cassinga on 8 May. They were accompanied by Angolan government officials who told them their version of the attack. It is, therefore, obvious why the articles written following the visit are more emotional and subjective than the previous reports. Cazaux's text was published in *The Times*, and reads as follows:

Foreign journalists were yesterday shown an open mass grave packed with decomposing bodies of 460 people who the Angolan authorities said were massacred by the South African troops during their attack last week on this mining town.

The dozen foreign correspondents flown to Cassinga by the Angolan authorities could make out the brightly coloured dresses of a large

55 N Ashford, "South Africa Unmoved by Censure over Raid", *The Times*, 8 May 1978, p. 6.

56 M Leapman, "SWAPO Leader Cancels Meeting with West over South Africa Raid", *The Times*, 9 May 1978, p. 1.

number of women among the dead, said to be Namibian refugees killed in the South African air and ground attack.

The Angolans are now describing the attack, which Pretoria said was aimed at a guerrilla centre SWAPO, as 'genocide'.

Another 122 bodies were buried in a separate trench. SWAPO officials said many other refugees had fled into the bush, where they had probably been killed by South African paratroops . . .

The children were just going to school when the first wave of Mirage fighter bombers swept over between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. last Thursday, eyewitnesses said . . .

An eyewitness said the South Africans forced survivors to help them embark the dead and wounded. Pretoria admitted to losing five men in the raid, but SWAPO officials said South African losses were at least 25 killed and more than 100 wounded.⁵⁷

Trybuna Ludu had informed the Polish public about Operation Reindeer on 5 May in a short article, 'The Attack of South African Regime's Forces on Angola.' The article does not acknowledge all of the bases destroyed during the assault but focuses exclusively on Cassinga. The last sentence of the article reads: 'the target of the attack was a Namibian refugee camp located in that city.'⁵⁸ Subsequent publications continued to repeat SWAPO's claims as indisputable facts; however, the article did relay the statements made by the South Africans:

South African regime's military operation against Angola is a clear violation of this progressive African country's sovereignty. The racist government officially admitted to having attacked Cassinga. Trying to justify this act of aggression, South African propaganda states that the target was a base of the national liberation movement – SWAPO.⁵⁹

Besides the emotional and clearly biased wording of these articles, the typical tendency of the 'people's republics' to convey condolences to fellow members of the Eastern Bloc is also present in *Trybuna Ludu*. The Polish Committee on Solidarity with Asian and African Nations issued a statement in which they voiced their concern at the Cassinga attack and affirmed their support

57 B Cazaux, "Hundreds Buried in Mass Grave at Angola Town after South African Raid", *The Times*, 10 May 1978, p. 7.

58 Anon., "Atak wojsk reżimu RPA na Angolę", *Trybuna Ludu*, 5 May 1978, p. 2.

59 Anon., "Atak lotnictwa i komandosów na miasto Cassinga: Zbrojna agresji RPA przeciw Angoli", *Trybuna Ludu*, 6–7 May 1978, pp. 1–2.

of Angola and the Namibian liberation struggle.⁶⁰ The SWAPO and Angolan ties with the Soviet Union and the communists' opposition to apartheid explains why SWAPO won the propaganda war in the Eastern Bloc.

It must be remembered that *The Times* and *Trybuna Ludu* are only samples representing the reaction of the international press. The bias of the Polish daily was surely present in other newspapers of the Communist Bloc. The mixed reports found in the British journal represent the dilemma of the Western countries concerning the situation in Africa. They acknowledged South Africa's role in containing the spread of communism on the continent; however, the strong opposition to apartheid prevented them from condemning the liberation movements in southern Africa. These two factors combined with the freedom of the press account for both viewpoints of the Cassinga raid being published.

The South African media understandably leaned towards the SADF version of the incursion. Leo Barnard provides some of the titles that were seen on the front pages: 'Praise for the South African Attack,' 'Weermag wys sy Ystervuis,'⁶¹ 'Captured Documents Tell Secrets of SWAPO . . .' and 'The Attack was Limited to Armed Soldiers.'⁶² However, unlike in communist countries where ideology dictated the media's perception of events, the press in South Africa did publish negative accounts of the Cassinga raid. For example, Jane Bergerol's report, which appeared in *The Star* and *Daily Dispatch* on 10 May.⁶³

Due to limited access to press contemporary with Operation Reindeer, it is necessary to render other academicians' judgments on which side of the conflict emerged victorious from the propaganda war. According to McGill Alexander:

[South Africa] lost a crucial battle in the propaganda war. Striking first in order to gain the initiative is a vital propaganda principal, 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'.⁶⁴

Vladimir Shubin, who shares the Namibian point of view, agrees with Alexander and writes: 'Pretoria tried to get a propaganda [victory], claiming that "Cassinga was the end of SWAPO". On the contrary, this massacre raised sympathy for SWAPO, both inside Namibia and in the international press.'⁶⁵ South Africa's failure was also admitted by the SADF four months after the raid:

60 Anon., "Potępienie agresji RPA na Angolę. Oświadczenie Polskiego Komitetu Solidarności z Narodami Azji i Afryki", *Trybuna Ludu*, 15 May 1978, p. 2.

61 "Army shows its iron fist".

62 L Barnard, "The Controversy of the Battle of Cassinga. Does the Media Provide the Final Answer?", *Journal for Contemporary History* 29(3), January 2004, p. 194.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 193, footnote 14.

64 Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 160.

65 V Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War'* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), p. 226.

'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.'⁶⁶

Nevertheless, not everyone indicates SWAPO as the 'winner'. Annamarie Heywood believes that 'Cassinga became one more example of blame-the-victim history. The story was accepted, in whole or in part, by much of the world.'⁶⁷ Piero Gleijeses states, 'The massacre was reported for a day or two in the Western press.'⁶⁸ He annotates that he had examined various newspapers printed in the USA, Canada, Belgium, France, Italy, Germany and the UK, including *The Times*. However, in May, *The Times* published six articles in relation to the raid, the last one on 18 May.

It is important to point out that neither side had had a correspondent on site at the time of the attack; therefore, all media reports were based on the official declarations of either the SADF or SWAPO and the Angolan government. Without any third-party observers, it was inevitable that the event become a controversy.

The reaction of the press resembles the responses of the politicians to the Cassinga raid. The United Nations officially condemned South Africa at the Emergency Security Council meeting held on 5–6 May. The resolution adopted (unanimously) stated that the Council 'grieved at the tragic loss of human lives, including those of Namibian refugees in Angola, caused by the South African invasion'. It reaffirmed 'the legitimacy of [SWAPO's] struggle' and 'strongly [condemned] the latest armed invasion perpetrated by the South African racist regime against the People's Republic of Angola, which [constituted] a flagrant violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Angola.'⁶⁹ Vorster's government was also reprimanded for the 'utilisation of the international territory of Namibia as a springboard for armed invasions'.

Politicians of Western countries did not accept SWAPO's claims that Cassinga was not a military base. In an article from *The Times*, Dr David Owen acknowledged that 'South Africa had good reason to be worried about security in Namibia'. He suggested that 'the quickest way of ending violence was to have United Nations troops on the ground, patrolling the northern border, and

66 "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, cited in Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 160.

67 Heywood, cited in E Landis, "Review of Annemarie Heywood, *The Cassinga Event*" (Windhoek: Archeia18, National Archives of Namibia, 1994), *Africa Today* 43(1), January-March 1996, p. 102.

68 P Gleijeses, "A Test of Wills: Jimmy Carter, South Africa, and the Independence of Namibia", *Diplomatic History* 34(5), November 2010, p. 874.

69 Security Council resolution S/RES/428, 1978, <<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/resolutions>>.

for the people of Namibia to hold free and fair elections.⁷⁰ Former US President Jimmy Carter's comment regarding the military operation reflects the USA's unwillingness to acknowledge SWAPO's accusations that a massacre had occurred. He maintains:

The South Africans claim that it was just a retaliatory raid against the SWAPO forces who had invaded Namibia with small strikes, and they've claimed to have withdrawn and have not left any South African forces in Angola. So we hope it's just a transient strike in retaliation and we hope it's all over.⁷¹

It also showed disbelief that the incursion was only the beginning of a full-scale invasion as had been presumed by Angola. To quote Spanier's article yet again, 'Western diplomats are seriously concerned about the timing of the raid. While not disputing its military justification they fear it may harden SWAPO against accepting the Western proposals.'⁷²

The Western proposal for a peace settlement in the Namibian problem had been accepted by the South African government on 25 April; SWAPO, however, had not yet declared its decision whether to agree to it or not. A meeting between Sam Nujoma and the representatives of the Five was scheduled for 8 May, 1978. It was hoped that following their discussion in New York, SWAPO's leader would accept the initiative. However, Nujoma cancelled the meeting the day before and 'made it plain that his decision to return to Angola was taken as a direct result of the raid.'⁷³ Thus, the fears of Western diplomats were proven justified. '[Nujoma] left behind him an angry statement, which extinguished hopes, at least for the time being, that SWAPO would accept the five-power plan.'⁷⁴ According to Heywood, 'the massacre was planned with brutal cynicism to forestall a breakthrough in negotiations with the United Nation which might have led to free and fair elections in Namibia'.⁷⁵ This seems unlikely considering the South African politicians' hesitation before approving the attack. To counter Heywood's thesis, it may also be pointed out that:

After the raid, South Africa sent messages to the Western five and to Dr Kurt Waldheim, the United Nations Secretary-General, urging an early decision on the Western peace plan and calling on the

70 Spanier, "Angola Raid", p. 1.

71 "Informal Exchange with Reporters, Portland, Oregon, 5 May 1978, United States General Services Administration", *Public Papers of the President of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1978*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 855, cited in Gleijeses, *Test of Wills*, p. 874.

72 Spanier, "Angola Raid", p. 1. (emphasis, author).

73 Leapman, "SWAPO Leader Cancels Meeting", p. 1.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

75 Heywood, cited in Alexander, "Cassinga", p. 91.

international community to persuade SWAPO to cease 'further acts of violence against South West Africa/Namibia'.

Similar messages were also reported to have been sent to certain African countries including the black 'front line' states which until the attack had been advising Mr Sam Nujoma, SWAPO's leader, to accept the Western plan.⁷⁶

Ex-US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance also voiced his cynicism about South Africa's sincerity when accepting the Western Five's idea for Namibian independence: 'Given the size of the attack and the prior intelligence work and military planning required, it seemed that Pretoria must have been preparing the raid even as Vorster was agreeing to our clarified proposal.'⁷⁷ However, since the raid was approved in March and Vorster announced his acceptance of the plan at the end of April, it might be necessary to view the prime minister's political decision as a consequence of the military actions that were going to take place.

Ostensibly, the Cassinga raid did not have significant political implications because SWAPO did, in fact, accept the plan. Additionally, there were no economic consequences of the operation. 'The threat of intensified international sanctions because of South Africa's stand on Namibia did not materialise. Economically, South Africa recovered well after the Soweto uprising. Between 1976 and 1985 the fixed domestic investment from Europe doubled.'⁷⁸

Nevertheless, Operation Reindeer had significant military implications for both belligerents. Jorge Risquet, then head of the Cuban civil mission in Angola, told Sam Nujoma that since South Africa had not been punished for this first raid, she would continue to do so without fear of repercussions.⁷⁹ He was correct in his analysis as 'cross-border pre-emptive strikes became a way of life for the SADF and though the government and the Minister of Defence carried the ultimate responsibility for such operations, SADF commanders on the ground enjoyed a measure of independence.'⁸⁰ Between May 1978 and mid-1981 the South Africans launched numerous raids, among them Operation Saffron into Zambia and Operation Sceptic across the Angolan border.

In the initial aftermath of Operation Reindeer, SWAPO in Angola was weakened to such an extent that they could not launch a retaliating attack. However, later they did get a measure of revenge: 'In the early morning hours of 23 August 1978, SWAPO's revenge came in the form of a series of 122-mm

76 Ashford, "South Africa Unmoved", p. 6.

77 Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 305.

78 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p. 590.

79 History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archives of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, "Memorandum of Conversation between Jorge Risquet and Sam Nujoma", 12 May 1978, pp. 4-5, <<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117936>>.

80 Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, p. 73.

rockets fired from Zambian soil on the frontier town of Katima Mulilo at the eastern extremity of the Caprivi Strip.⁸¹ Ten South African soldiers were killed and ten more were wounded in the attack. The long-term consequence was improved planning of new bases. As Steenkamp reports: 'the insurgents responded by decentralising and staying away from the border area, even though this hampered their infiltration into SWA/Namibia. They also became expert at elaborate camouflage measures, along with a general movement underground.'⁸²

The presence of Cuban soldiers across the border continued to pose a threat to the SADF. According to Piero Gleijeses, South Africa's decision to strike so deep into Angola was one of the reasons that 'at Luanda's request, Havana . . . started sending reinforcements to Angola.'⁸³ Giliomee presents the difference in numbers throughout the years: 'the number of Cuban troops had increased from 13 000 in 1977 to 25 000 by 1983; in addition there were 5 000 military personnel from the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries.'⁸⁴

Willem Steenkamp highlights the changes visible within the South African forces as a direct result of Operation Reindeer.

The seeds were also sown, although not necessarily consciously, for a closer operational relationship between the Army and the SAAF at the sharp end. In the 1970s ground-air co-operation was not always honoured as much in the spirit as in the letter, in spite of pious protestations to the contrary; but by the end of the border war the 'brown jobs' and the 'blue plague' were working together in such harmony that on at least one occasion a helicopter pilot in a gunship directed ground troops during an attack in difficult terrain.⁸⁵

At the end of his chapter on the battle of Cassinga, Leopold Scholtz wondered 'Was Reindeer worth it?' His answer shows the complexity of the issue.

On the one hand, it can be reasoned that South Africa squandered a chance for peace, and that the result was a very difficult ten years of war, which brought enormous suffering and hardship. On the other, SWAPO's commitment to democracy was extremely doubtful, to put it mildly. It can be said that, by prolonging the war over another decade, the SADF bought time for a better and more durable peace to ripen.⁸⁶

81 L Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War 1966-1989*, (epub, Tafelberg, 2013), p. 106.

82 W Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!* 4th ed. (Pretoria: Butterworths, 1983), p. 721.

83 P Gleijeses, "Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988", *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8(4), Fall 2006, p. 114.

84 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p. 591.

85 Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 722.

86 Scholtz, *The SADF in the Border War*, p. 105.

The consequences of Operation Reindeer, and of the Cassinga raid specifically, included a long propaganda war, which continues to this day; postponement of negotiations by SWAPO leadership; and a change in the nature of both SWAPO and SADF strategies. It was partly due to this daring incursion, that Castro did not pull out of Angola and deployed more troops to support the MPLA.

4. CONCLUSION: UNRESOLVED ASPECTS OF THE CASSINGA RAID

The significance of Cassinga continues to be debated, mainly because of the still unresolved controversy surrounding the camp's status – it is highly unlikely that the question will ever be answered categorically. Participants, politicians and historians continue to discuss the topic in newspaper articles, academic papers, and books advocating either SADF's version, SWAPO's claims or that the true nature of Cassinga lies somewhere in between.

Regardless of this discussion, the death of civilians in the raid allowed SWAPO to use the attack as a symbol of South Africa's aggression and Namibia's sacrifice for independence. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge the event's emotional value; 4 May is celebrated as a national public holiday in Namibia.

The Cassinga raid was a major military undertaking, which was especially significant for South African paratroopers. Geldenhuys described the raid as 'a jewel of military craftsmanship.'⁸⁷ Even though it had a military impact by delaying PLAN's incursions into Namibia, Operation Reindeer did not alter the final outcome of the war. 'After Cassinga the 'bush war' became increasingly conventional, culminating in the Lomba River, Cuito Cuanavale and Calueque battles in 1987 and 1988.'⁸⁸ These successes did not prevent SWAPO from gaining power in an independent Namibia. It can be argued, however, that the military operations allowed South African politicians to transfer power to Nujoma peacefully. Therefore, the significance of the assault on 4 May 1978 was the prolongation of the armed conflict, which prevented the liberation movement from seizing power by force.

87 Geldenhuys, p. 93, cited in Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Report*, vol. 2, p. 44.

88 Breitenbach, "Airborne Assault", p. 22.