

THE CONTROVERSY OF THE BATTLE OF CASSINGA. DOES THE MEDIA PROVIDE THE FINAL ANSWER?

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The military hostilities during the years 1966 to 1989 between the military forces of South Africa, the former South West Africa and Unita on the one hand, and Cuba, the Angolese forces and PLAN (People's Liberation Army for Namibia), the military wing of SWAPO, on the other hand, were popularly known as the Border or Bush War. Other authors referred to it as the battle for the independence of Namibia. During these hostilities, the Battle of Cassinga was one of the most decisive battles, especially in respect of military, political and social aspects.

Twenty-five years after this battle, it is still of the utmost importance that it is seen in the right perspective. The controversy of the events will, despite the media's efforts to get to the truth, still for years hold the attention of historical researchers.

The Battle of Cassinga took place against the above-mentioned background on 4 May 1978 between elements of the South African Air Force as well as a parachute force and elements of PLAN. Cassinga, formerly a mining village, was used by SWAPO as a basis and was situated about 300 km north of the Namibian border.

In this paper the focus will mainly be on three principal moments: The controversy over the Battle of Cassinga, its interpretation by the media as well as probable reasons for the way in which the media handled it.

From the moment that the Battle of Cassinga took place, it was shrouded in controversy. There were two clearly divergent viewpoints as to what had happened on that day, the 4^h of May 1978, at Cassinga. A few statements in authoritative publications are conclusive proof of this.

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In 1985, **The voice of Swapo - 25 Years of heroic struggle** reported inter alia:

"It is by far the worst atrocity yet, South African troops massacred Namibian refugees at Kassinga, Southern Angola, many of them children, women and old people, killing over 600 and wounding over 400."¹

Barbara König held the following viewpoint in her book, **Namibia - The ravages of war**:

"In May 1978 a refugee settlement at Kassinga in Southern Angola was bombed by the South African forces and troops massacred over 600 refugees and wounded over 1 000."²

In an editorial of **Comrade**, the official organ of the SWAPO Youth League, the references to the attacks of the South African Defence Force (SADF) are even stronger:

"When the last chapter of our people's long and bitter national liberation struggle is finally written, the Cassinga massacre of May 4, 1978 will stand out as the most unforgettable event

On that day, jet bombers and helicopter gunships of the South African occupation army cold-bloodedly murdered about 1000 innocent and unarmed civilians in Namibian refugee camps in southern Angola

The Wanton Bombardment of Cassinga began at 7h15 am. Huge fragmentation (sic) bombs were dropped. The Mirage jet bombers instantly killed and maimed a large number of the population. The racist soldiers indiscriminately opened fire, shooting (sic) at everyone and everything within range..

The Kassinga Massacre is a very unforgettable (sic) episode in the Namibian people's struggle."³

¹ Nanam, **The voice of Swapo - 25 Years of heroic struggle**, 19 April 1985, p. 16.
² Barbara König, **Namibia - The ravages of War. South Africa's onslaught on the Namibian people** (London, 1983), p. 54.
³ **Comrade**, the official organ of the SWAPO Youth League, No.3, May 1988.

In a special edition of **Learn and teach** on Namibia, the following arguments are relevant:

"On the 4th May 1978 Kassinga camp, the main refugee camp in Angola (of SWAPO) was attacked by the SADF from the ground and from the air. The results were terrible.

After the planes had fired rockets and dropped explosives and fragmentation bombs as well as paralysing gases, the paratroopers landed and during the six and a half hours that the attack lasted gave full vent to their basest instincts, massacring the terror-stricken population in cold blood."⁴

Even the clergy had a specific viewpoint of what had happened on that fateful day. Pastor Hendrik Witbooi made the following remarks in Windhoek during the decennial commemoration of the events at Cassinga:

"This is one day that should be engraved on the hearts of every true Namibian - our youth and mothers shot down in their prime."⁵

In a very interesting work on Cassinga, the author Annemarie Heywood, draws her own conclusions:

"The rest of the day (4 May 1978) was a nightmare of destruction and inhuman carnage. The terrible noise in the air did not cease until late in the afternoon, when the last South African helicopter had departed. The orderly camp had been turned into a churned field of shreds and smouldering rubble. Hundreds of torn and mutilated bodies, many of them women and children, were all that remained of the bustling life of that morning"

AND

"If one considers the speed of modern communication and the readiness of correspondents to cover dramatic events of national importance almost anywhere on the globe, it is astonishing (and disastrous in its consequences) that it should have taken 5 days for the world to read details of another version altogether [the version of the SADF]: the raid and massacre experienced from the ground; gassing and gunshot wounds

⁴ **Learn and teach**. Special edition on Namibia. No.4, 1989, p. 22.

⁵ **Windhoek Advertiser**, 5 May 1988.

to the back of the head; the suggestion that the majority of the 700 dead are women and children."⁶

Denis Herbstein and John Evenson come to the same conclusion when analysing the attack on Cassinga:

"... South African paratroopers dropped onto a SWAPO refugee settlement at Cassinga, 200 kilometers 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."⁷

From the above it is apparent that the military hostilities at Cassinga on 4 May 1978 are regarded by at least a large part of the interpreters of the attack as being exceptionally emotional and one of the vital events during the long struggle for independence for Namibia. Practically no emphasis is placed on the military actions of the day, for in their interpretations the focus is shifted to what is regarded as the murder of innocent women and children who had found refuge in a transit camp in Southern Angola nearly 300 km north of the northern border of Namibia.

In none of the above-mentioned sources any mention is made of military activities during this time at Cassinga; there is no reference to defence systems such as an extensive system of trenches or any armaments for the protection of the SWAPO base at Cassinga. At the same time there is no reference to any military commanding structures or the probable commander of the base.

The sources state it quite clearly: By 4 May 1978 Cassinga was merely a transit camp of Swapo where elements of the SADF cruelly murdered innocent people during a military operation.

From other available sources concerning the same events, it however soon becomes clear that a totally different side of the story also exists. A few examples to support this point of view are the following:

⁶ Annemarie Heywood, **The Cassinga event and investigation of the records**, Windhoek, 1994, pp. 12-3, 92.

⁷ Denis Herbstein and John Evenson, **The devils are among us. The war for Namibia**, London, 1989, p. 31.

In **Paratus**, the official mouthpiece of the SADF, this report appeared in November 1992:

"Cassinga was at one stage the northern headquarters of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and became the battlefield in one of the South African Defence Force's toughest fights and the first full-scale paratrooper trans-border operation.

Cassinga in its yester-year was a colonial mining town dating back to the Portuguese period in Angola. The SWAPO forces decided to make Cassinga a headquarters (sic) and training camp because it was on a good main road, had a sound infrastructure, was small enough to be defended with bunkers and trench systems and, most important, it was far enough from their enemy at that time - the South Africans."⁸

Peter Stiff, a well-known military historian in Southern Africa, interprets the events at Cassinga as follows:

"The para strike against Cassinga went in on the 4^h May 1978, and although it turned out to be a tougher nut to crack than anticipated, it was a complete success. SWAPO lost over a 1 000 guerrillas, dead or captured, against South African casualties of four dead and eleven wounded."⁹

The logical question would be why the SADF, who carried out this attack, had specifically decided on Cassinga for the attack. The following argument, inter alia, served as basis for their decision:

"Cassinga's role in respect of SWAPO. The headquarters of PLAN (the military wing of SWAPO) is in Cassinga from where Dimo Amaambo, the commander, plans and co-ordinates all operations against SWA (Namibia) from a central operating-room. Logistic planning and the provision of supplies, weapons and ammunition to terrorists operating in Central and Eastern Ovamboland (in Namibia) are taken care of in Cassinga. Medical treatment of the seriously wounded, training, reparation of equipment as well as the gathering of newly trained terrorists on their way to bases in East and West Kunene Province (in Namibia), take place in Cassinga. It also serves as a resting place for terrorists. The

⁸ **Paratus**, November 1992, pp. 38-40.

⁹ Peter Stiff, **Nine days of war and South Africa's final days in Namibia**, Alberton, 1991, p. 16.

importance of Cassinga does not only lie in the presence of a large number of terrorists, but also in the functions which are performed there.

The number of terrorists in Cassinga ranges between 300 and 1200 terrorists and an unknown number of armed female terrorists." (Translation.)¹⁰

The official viewpoint of the paratroopers who constituted the vital element of the SANDF's attack on Cassinga, confirms that the attack was no walk in the park:

"On the morning of 4 May 1978, South Africa's paratroopers descended. A force of 370 paratroopers jumped from four C130 Hercules and three C160 Transal aircraft over a SWAPO training base in the mining town of Cassinga, some 250 kms north of the Angola-Namibia border. Even before the paratroopers jumped, the smoke from the strike by air force fighter-bombers cleared, and the SWAPO terrorists opened fire.

The battle which followed was intense. The planners of the action, which was known as OPERATION REINDEER, had intended it to be all over in two hours. But six hours after the airborne assault had gone in, there were still paratroopers fighting on the ground."¹¹

Emotion creeps in when they declare that:

"Cassinga, to the South African Paratroopers, has come to symbolize the audacity, daring and aggression of the airborne soldier. Just as Arnhem has a special significance for the British Paratrooper, Crete for the German Paratrooper, Bastogne for the American Paratrooper, and Dien-Bien-Phu for the French Paratrooper, so Cassinga evokes a spirit common only to paratroopers in the South African Army. It symbolizes the willingness of the paratrooper to fight. It is fitting, therefore, that what has come to be known as Cassinga Day should be the day when fallen paratroopers are remembered. South African paratroopers died in action before Cassinga; many have died in action since Cassinga. Paratroopers from units other than the three battalions who took part in the Cassinga operation have since paid the ultimate sacrifice. Yet all paratroopers pay homage on Cassinga Day."¹²

¹⁰ Documentation Centre, SANDF, Pretoria, HS OPS, April 1978.

¹¹ **Paratrooper**, 1992, p. 4.

¹² **Ibid.**

General Jannie Geldenhuys, the then chief of the SADF, does not beat about the bush when he describes the events of 4 May 1978 at Cassinga:

"Reindeer (the code name for the attack on Cassinga) was executed on Ascension Day, 4 May 1978, and consisted of an air and parachute attack on PLAN's most important training and logistic support base at Moscow, the SWAPO name for Cassinga, 250 km North of the border..... The results are self-evident. It was a jewel of military expertise..."

And then Geldenhuys arrives at this conclusion:

"After more than a decade, Cassinga is still regarded in some circles as an atrocious extermination of innocents. In addition to allegations and counter-allegations the South African claim that it was indeed a military target, is substantiated by unadulterated aerial photographs showing the extensive entrenchments, as well as by the defenders' resistance which was so fierce and sustained that the paratroopers stayed much longer as had been planned (Translation)."¹³

Then Geldenhuys further argues that if atrocities were committed, it would have been impossible for any of the paratroopers to refer to the battle without repugnance.

Seen from the angle of the SADF and the military commanders, Cassinga was the main military camp of SWAPO from where military and logistic attacks were launched, and military training was done. In addition they were convinced that the system of trenches provided the base with an effective defence structure. The heroic way in which PLAN fighters, both men and women, defended the base, lead the South Africans to come to the conclusion that their reconnaissance and information were correct - it was no transit camp in which only defenceless women and children from Namibia had gone into exile to temporarily rest and recover.

For the military historian the question now remains: How can all the unanswered questions of the hostilities at Cassinga be answered? It is here where the media and their viewpoints must be called on for assistance.

¹³ Jannie Geldenhuys, **Die wat wen. 'n Generaal se storie uit 'n era van oorlog en vrede** (Pretoria, 1993), pp. 72-4.

As seen in the above-mentioned extracts and as can indeed be expected, the viewpoints vary considerably. The section of the media that supported SWAPO and its striving for an independent Namibia sharply condemned the actions of the SADF at Cassinga.

On 8 May, four days after the attack on Cassinga, 12 foreign correspondents accompanied Angolese government representatives on their flight to Cassinga. For the purposes of the paper it is sufficient only to refer to the report of Jane Bergerol of the British newspaper **Guardian News Service**.

Her report on her experiences in Cassinga, which was also published in South African newspapers, was extremely negative:

"Unexploded fragmentation bombs still lie among the burned and blasted buildings of Cassinga - the village 290 km inside Angola, used as a SWAPO transit camp which was attacked by South African defence forces last Thursday.

Land mines laid at the entrance to the village camp forced us off the road into the bush.

The camp has 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.

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, blood-stained, they were the bodies of young girls, young men, a few older adults, some young children."¹⁴

Randolph Vigne cites Mishake Muyongo, the Vice-President of SWAPO at that stage, in an unpublished manuscript (1978) where he declares that the South African paratroopers searched specific houses of supposed executive members of SWAPO:

"There was a search for documents, but for the most part the objective seemed to be the killing of civilians, young and old, and the destruction of their homes and means of subsistence."¹⁵

The few other sources such as the **New Zürcher Zeitung** of 13 July 1978 in which "a usually excellently informed source, the **Angolan White Paper**" is cited, are mainly concerned with the losses which SWAPO, the Angolese as well as the Cubans sustained. A researcher finds the same state of affairs when he pages through the **Namibian Woman** (1988) or the **Africa Watch** that reported on the accountability in Namibia.

From the above it becomes clear that the description of the vast majority of the media of what happened on 4 May 1978 at Cassinga, was vague, ambiguous and without any real new information. Jane Bergerol's article is the only account of an eyewitness who arrived on the scene four days after the attack on Cassinga that sheds more light on the events. Her view is, however, highly emotional and concerns the hardships of the inhabitants during and after the attack on Cassinga. From a military angle the media made no contribution to clarifying the numerous questions and obscurities. They provide no information on the armament of the inhabitants of Cassinga, or on how many trained soldiers, men as well as women, were in the camp, or whether the camp was organised on a military model, whether any defence system (such as trenches) existed, who the commander or leader of the camp was, and whether there were bunkers with ammunition in Cassinga.

In short, because of the deficient information, the anti-Afrikaans Government media does not assist the researcher in getting any nearer to the answers to the above-mentioned questions.

¹⁴ Jane Begerol of the **Guardian News Service** as published in **The Star**, 10 May 1978. Cf. also **Daily Dispatch**, 10 May 1978; Heywood, pp. 46-7.

¹⁵ Randolph Vigne, **Cassinga**, unpublished manuscript article, 1978, as cited in Heywood, p. 47.

It is logical to now have a brief, but close look at the version of the pro-Afrikaans Government media. Some of the captions of the front-page reports that appeared after the announcement of the Battle of Cassinga, are already significant:

Largest paratroop operation since the Second World War

Praise for the South African attack

Masterly, says military

SA slaan diep in Angola

SA smashes SWAPO base

Weermag wys sy ystervuis

Captured documents tell secrets of SWAPO ...

The attack was limited to armed soldiers

In the **Sunday Tribune** of 7 May 1978, the military correspondent, Pat Taylor, elaborates on the attack of the SADF on Cassinga:

"A giant four-meter square portrait of SWAPO-leader Sam Nujoma, torn by hand grenade splinters and riddled with bullet holes, has pride of place at the military intelligence evaluation centre at Defence Headquarters in Pretoria today.

It was ripped from the wall of a building in SWAPO's Angolan base-camp on Thursday by triumphant South African Paratroopers after hours of hand-to-hand fighting with suicidal SWAPO guerrillas.

The crack unit was dropped over the camp nearly 300 km inside Angolan territory, at 8.00 on Thursday morning. The camp was code-named 'Moscow' by SWAPO.

Their attack was part of a carefully co-ordinated plan to wipe out terrorist strong points following a massive increase in SWAPO terror activities across the border inside South-West African Namibia."

As far as the fighting goes, the correspondent reacted as follows on a communicac of the SADF:

"Mortars immediately came into action as we began to deploy around the camp. Hand-held anti-tank weapons, similar to bazookas, were also used against us', said the Brigadier [Hannes Botha, spokesperson of the SADF].

But most of the fighting was confined to light weaponry - machine guns, assault carbines and hand grenades.

The camp was extremely well defended. Trenches, bunkers and other fortifications hampered us all along the way', said Brigadier Botha. 'I could tell you, we had to bloody well fight for every foot of ground.'"

The same information, nearly to the letter, was carried by the media in South Africa and Namibia. Every word speaks of great praise, of high appreciation, of almost magical adoration of the actions of the air force and paratroopers at Cassinga. The different reports of the media indeed address military concepts such as, inter alia, when exactly the attack took place, precisely who carried out the attack (which elements of the SADF), which defence system the enemy had at their disposal, which weaponry SWAPO used during the defence of Cassinga and how heroic the defence by members of PLAN was. (There is, for instance, a description of how female soldiers, side by side with their male counterparts in the trenches, and with exceptional audacity and perseverance tried to resist the attacks on Cassinga by the South African soldiers.)

When one investigates this part of the coverage by the media a little further, it becomes clear that their reports were completely based on the official presentations/briefings by the SADF. Another practical example of this is the briefing of the media by a senior member of the SADF, Gen. Jack Dutton, a few days after the events at Cassinga. The reports that hereafter appeared in the daily and weekly newspapers, are almost a verbatim account of his official declaration.

From this it can be deduced that no military journalist of any newspaper witnessed the events at Cassinga on 4 May 1978.

For the critical researcher literally dozens of questions and uncertainties remain unanswered. The media slavishly recorded the viewpoints of the mouthpieces of the two different camps. Thereby no effort was made to have critical issues explained scientifically and proof provided concerning Cassinga.

It is important to notice the irony in the perspectives of the two governments - the apartheid regime before 1994 and the present regime (the government after 1994). While the apartheid regime views the Cassinga events as a victory, the present government is of the opinion that it was an "apartheid era crime"¹⁶ and a crime against humanity.

By 1996, eighteen years after the event, the controversy surrounding Cassinga again reared its head in earnest. On May 4, during a parade by 44 Parachute Brigade at Tempe, Bloemfontein, that was held in commemoration of the Defence Force's attack on Cassinga, Gen. Mos Grobler, (AFT) Commanding Officer of the OFS Command, stated "(dat) hulle nie net die operasionele oorwinning van Cassinga-dag gevier [het nie], maar ook kamerade wat op die slagveld gesneuel het onthou".¹⁷ The operation was described as one of the best parachute operations in history. The parade at Tempe was, however, described as "ill-advised and heartless"¹⁸ by other sectors. Mr Modise, Minister of Defence, said that action against the organisers of the parade would be taken and he demanded an apology for their "brutality".¹⁹

In an article titled *Die waarheid oor Cassinga - en los maar die askiese!*,²⁰ Col. Jan Breytenbach said that it was not true that "hundreds of innocent refugees" in Cassinga had died, and acknowledged that although there were women and children killed, they were the people who were abducted from Ovamboland by SWAPO against their will. Cassinga was the head military base of SWAPO in the south of Angola. He ended, saying: " Now a person wonders, and maybe an experienced soldier as Mr Modise or Mr Yengeni, could explain how on earth is it possible that a handful of innocent refugees could resist themselves in such a way?"²¹

The above-mentioned is also the opinion of the former paratroopers that participated in the Cassinga attack. Sen. Mark Wiley, who was part of Operation Reindeer, reacted to Mr Modise's allegations by saying: "Nonsense! I was at Cassinga. That was not a refugee camp."²²

¹⁶ **The Citizen**, 6 June 1996.

¹⁷ **Die Volksblad**, 6 May 1996.

¹⁸ **The Windhoek Advertiser**, 10 May 1996.

¹⁹ **Ibid.**

²⁰ **Rapport**, 16 June 1996.

²¹ **Rapport**, 6 June 1996.

²² **Die Burger**, 6 June 1996.

The argument on the other side of the coin was still raised and the opinion was that the attack on Cassinga was " a very brutal massacre of women and children in a SWAPO refugee camp in which hundreds of people were killed".²³ The attack on Cassinga was compared with the South African massacre at Sharpeville.

The question now remains as to why the full truth about Cassinga, even after more than 25 years, is not yet made available to the researcher. The answer may be found in one of the following reasons, or a combination of them.

- ❖ No members of the media of either side involved in the Battle of Cassinga, was present. In the case of SWAPO, a few members of the media, definitely not including any from South Africa, were taken to Cassinga four days after the battle. For the critical researcher it remains questionable whether that which could be observed days after the events, can be a scientifically correct version. On the terrain, officers of PLAN briefed the media. This could mean that everything in the camp was not displayed - such as the defence systems which could vary from kilometres away to systems in the residential area of Cassinga; the armament of the defenders; the parade-ground which was, according to SA military observers, in the form of the outer boundaries of Namibia; etc. But at least some members of the media visited the terrain and reported on it.

From the side of the SA media, no military correspondent was present north of the border of Namibia when the attack took place. The SADF later said that there was no place for representatives of the media during the parachute operations. If it is taken into consideration that the parachute force of the SADF was so big that the available helicopters (Pumas and Super Frelons) could not evacuate them simultaneously, there can be some truth in the argument. The full truth is, however, that the SADF almost never took members of the media with them in any of their cross-border operations. In the few cases where representatives of the media were present during operations, they were in full uniform as members of the Citizen Force and therefore part of the military set-up of the SADF.

Members of the SA media thus mainly had to depend on information made available to them by the official channels of the SADF. This filtered information would certainly not assist in clearing up controversies about the military hostilities at Cassinga.

²³ **The Citizen**, 4 June 1996.

- ❖ Any critic could rightly ask whether an experienced military journalist would take any notice of official viewpoints on the events at Cassinga that were issued by the opposing groups. It is obvious that the answer would be no. The reason why military journalists could, for decades, not research the precise events in depth, can be found in the fact that Angola was plunged into a war situation for years. For a decade after 1978 there were hostilities between the SADF and Unita on the one hand and SWAPO, the Cuban forces and the Angolese government soldiers on the other. After Namibia's attainment of independence, a civil war still raged mainly in Southern Angola (thus Cassinga and its vicinity) between Jonas Savimbi's Unita movement and the Angolese government. Hostilities only officially ceased when Savimbi died.
- ❖ The negative attitude of some of the role players when approached to supply more information about the events also causes many questions to remain unanswered. The researcher, like many other journalists, made many efforts during the late eighties and in the nineties to obtain more information on the events at Cassinga from SWAPO. No one was prepared to grant an interview or supply more information by way of documents. Any questions about Cassinga were sidestepped in a somewhat hostile way or merely ignored. The fact that SWAPO probably does not have extensive source publications at its disposal, definitely did not simplify the matter.
- ❖ The other side of the coin is that information from the SADF-side is freely available. Not only are the more than 300 soldiers who took part in the battle, prepared to grant interviews, but useful information can also be obtained from members of the SADF (especially the pilots and crew of the aircraft who were involved) as well as senior officers who had planned the attack. A complete set of documents, of course reflecting only the SADF's viewpoint and actions, is available from the Documentation Centre of the SADF in Pretoria.
- ❖ After Namibia's attainment of independence in 1990, the attention of at least the SA media shifted completely away from Namibia and Southern Angola. South African society is not nearly as militarised as it was in the seventies and eighties. The interest in military affairs has thus faded and the events at Cassinga have been relegated to the past.

From the above it becomes clear that the media, from both sides, could not in any way succeed in clearing up uncertainties about the events at Cassinga. No clarifying, penetrating study on this issue has been completed to date. Until this is the case, one will have to depend on the official information that is available at the

SADF, as well as on personal interviews with participants in the military hostilities at Cassinga.

In his evaluation of the events at Cassinga, journalist Brendan Seery, ten years after the event, comes to the following conclusion:

"... while the raid did give SWAPO a bloody nose militarily, it also provided the emotional rallying point which the organization needed to stimulate its grassroots campaign at home, and to justify its international image as the 'sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people'."²⁴

A formal viewpoint of the media, yes, but still none of the controversial issues on Cassinga is in any way addressed.

²⁴ **The Sunday Star**, 8 May 1988.