

THE BATTLE OF CASSINGA, 4 MAY 1978: A HISTORICAL REASSESSMENT

PART 1: THE COURSE OF THE BATTLE AND ENSUING CONTROVERSY

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The battle of Cassinga between paratroopers of the South African Defence Force (SADF) and elements of SWAPO on 4 May 1978 was shrouded in controversy right from the start. These military hostilities in the south of Angola occurred against the background of specific events in South-West Africa (now Namibia). In this article, the controversy is examined in detail. The importance of oral tradition/accounts, currently the subject of discussion in South African historiography, is acknowledged in this article via verbatim transcriptions of interviews with the commander of the South African Parachute Brigade, Maj.-Gen. MJ du Plessis and other relevant role-players.

1. THE BATTLE

The battle of Cassinga on 4 May 1978, whichever way one chooses to look at it, was one of the most controversial military clashes during the course of the Border War fought in northern South-West Africa (SWA) and southern Angola during the years 1966-1989. The events of that day evoked an enormous response from the various role-players and observers in SWA and South Africa. The controversial nature of the assault on Cassinga demands a periodic review of the battle and the context within which the battle took place.

This article focuses mainly on four important aspects of the battle of Cassinga. Firstly, attention is briefly paid to the factors that gave rise to the battle. Secondly, the South African operational plan is discussed. In the third place, the different

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versions of the battle are considered. And finally, in Part 2, SADF soldiers who took part in the battle are interviewed in an effort to obtain greater clarity on a number of controversial issues and give voice to personal impressions and experiences.

The run-up to this military operation has been discussed in a number of publications. A short summary will provide the reader with a contextual framework to enhance his/her understanding of the battle.**

During the years 1976-1978, PLAN's military activities in the northern areas of SWA revealed an aggressive and defiant attitude. For instance, PLAN fighters started crossing the SWA border in groups of 80-100 men, and easily penetrated the so-called white farming areas (situated behind the red line). Murders became increasingly commonplace, and included the killing of Toivo Shiyagaya, Minister of Health and Welfare of the Ovambo Tribal Government, and Clemens Kapuu, leader of the Hereros. SWAPO also scored a significant psychological victory when they took Sapper Van der Mescht of the SADF prisoner, and whisked him off to Angola. This was followed by the "kidnapping" of a teacher and a number of pupils from a school in central Ovamboland.¹ The attitude of SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma whilst being interviewed by the SABC gave the distinct impression that the organisation was not interested in a negotiated settlement, but simply wanted to score a final military victory. This tied in with the actions of SWAPO. The thrust of Nujoma's argument as broadcasted on SABC TV was as follows: "The question of black majority rule is out. We are not fighting even for majority rule. We are fighting to seize power in Namibia..... We are revolutionaries."²

At the beginning of 1978 the situation in SWA, in a nutshell, was as follows: SWAPO's violent actions were tainting its image, and the organisation was beginning to lose credibility in the West.

** The reader who would like more information on the controversy surrounding the attack on Cassinga may consult various sources. A few of them are: D Herbstein and J Evenson, **The devils are among us. The war for Namibia** (London, 1989); A Heywood, **The Cassinga event** (Windhoek, 1994); J Breytenbach, **They live by the sword. 32 Buffalo Battalion - South Africa's Foreign Legion** (Alberton, 1990); **Learn and Teach**, Special Edition on Namibia, No. 4, 1989; J Geldenhuys, **Die wat wen – 'n Generaal se storie uit 'n era van oorlog en vrede** (Pretoria, 1993); Peter Stiff, **Nine days of war. South Africa's final days in Namibia** (Alberton, 1991); W Steenkamp, **South Africa's Border War, 1966-1989** (Gibraltar, 1989); Joseph Kobo, **Waiting in the wing. The electrifying true story of a bishop who was once in the military wing of the ANC** (Milton, s.a.); Peter Stiff, **The silent war, South African recce operations, 1969-1994** (Alberton, 2004); M Alexander, **The Cassinga raid**, unpublished MA-thesis (UNISA, 2003).

¹ SL Barnard, 'n **Historiese oorsig van die gewapende konflik op die noordgrens van SWA/Namibië, 1966-1989**, *Acta Academica*, 23(1) March 1991, pp. 116-7.

² Steenkamp, pp. 8-9.

This growing scepticism about SWAPO's intentions was reinforced by the fact that the organisation established large camps in southern and central Angola where men and women received military training, where recruits received weapons, ammunition and supplies, and where children who had been kidnapped or volunteered to join SWAPO, received training. One of the largest bases of this kind was Cassinga, a former iron-mining town situated approximately 250 km from the northern border of SWA. The camp commander was Dimo Amaambo.³

Internal problems with Andreas Shipanga,⁴ among others, contributed to SWAPO coming across as rather defensive. The SADF's attack on Cassinga provided SWAPO with a much-needed stimulus to seize the initiative once again and portray the SADF as the aggressor.

In South Africa, the military began to pressurise the government for permission to execute cross-border/pre-emptive/hot pursuit operations. They wanted permission to attack SWAPO bases north of the SWA border in order to destroy/limit the organisation's capacity to wage war. This would get rid of the negative image the SADF had of itself after Operation Savannah, which was that of a "loser". Attacking SWAPO bases would shift the military theatre to southern Angola and enable the SADF to crack down on PLAN infiltrators in SWA with greater ease. This was the main argument put forward by many senior officers in the SADF.

The SADF awaited the South African government's decision on this matter with great anticipation. At the end of 1977, Prime Minister B.J. Vorster held a meeting with his advisers at his Oubos holiday cottage, and then gave the go-ahead for cross-border military operations in Angola. The result of this decision was the planning and eventual execution of Operation Reindeer. The operation would consist of three phases: phase 1 would entail an attack on Target Alpha (Cassinga) by paratroopers supported by the Air Force; phase 2 would involve an assault on Target Bravo (Chetequeta) by mechanised armoured units; and phase 3 would take place in the eastern sector (in the vicinity of Oshana, Efith, Mulemba, Omepepa, Mamulandi, etc.). This area was within 50 km of the border, and the operation would be carried out mainly by members of 32 Battalion.⁵

The attack on Cassinga was initially planned for 1 May 1978, and it was clear that very thorough preparations (including practising/simulating the whole operation)

³ CJ Nothling, **Operasie Reindeer**, June 1978, pp. 6-7.

⁴ See Sue Armstrong, **In search of freedom. The Andreas Shipanga story** (Ashanti Publishing, Gibraltar, 1989).

⁵ Personal collection, tape recording of interviews with Col Johan Blaauw and Maj.-Gen. MJ du Plessis. See also: Peter Stiff, **The silent war. South African Recce operations** (Galago, Alberton, 2004), pp. 33-4.

were needed. Due to a security leak, a decoy plan had to be implemented. Accordingly, Operation Kwiksilwer was scheduled to take place near Kimberley. The paratroopers and members of other participating units were led to believe that they were taking part in normal military exercises in preparation for a large operation within the country. Whilst the military forces were preparing for Operation Reindeer - which referred to the planned attacks on Target Alpha and Target Bravo - politicians were still arguing about the precise date on which the attacks should be carried out. At this stage, the United Nations was still meeting in session, discussing the five Western Powers' settlement proposals for SWA. Some South African politicians thought that 1 May was not an acceptable date to launch the attack, and proposed 4 May as an alternative date. Despite the reservations expressed by Lieut.-Gen. Constand Viljoen, chief of the South African Army, it was decided to launch the attack on 4 May 1978.⁶

The attack on Cassinga can briefly be described as follows: As a result of the military exercises performed at De Brug (a training centre near Bloemfontein), eight transport planes were available at the Air Force base just outside the city. Four C130 and four C160 aircraft with 498 paratroopers on board left Bloemspruit Air Force Base on 3 May 1978 from 16:00, taking off at 15-minute intervals. They were on their way to take part in the largest airborne operation since the Suez Canal crisis.⁷ The fact that the troops were transported from their base at Tempe to the operational area with hardly a moment's notice can be ascribed to the highly secretive nature of the operation. At 20:00 that evening of 3 May, all eight transport aircraft with their cargo of paratroopers landed safely at Grootfontein in SWA, from where they were to leave early the next morning to launch the attack on Cassinga.⁸

In the meantime, the helicopters that were to be used for the withdrawal of the troops from Cassinga had arrived at a number of different bases in northern SWA, in order to attract as little attention as possible. On the evening of 3 May 1978, at 19:00, the entire helicopter fleet of five Super Frelons and 15 Pumas was gathered at Omhuni, ready to begin with the operation early the next morning.

From the perspective of the SADF, the attack on Cassinga on 4 May 1978 unfolded in the following manner: As planned, four Canberra bombers took off from Waterkloof Air Force Base at 05:19, en route to Rundu. From there, they would go straight for the target. Each of the Canberras carried 300 Alpha cluster bombs. A Buccaneer with 72 x 68 mm missiles took off from Waterkloof Air Force Base at

⁶ Personal collection: interviews with Generals Ian Gleeson, MJ du Plessis and Bob Rodgers.

⁷ **Paratus**, November 1992, Patratroopers: a special breed of men.

⁸ Personal collection: interviews with Colonels Johan Blaauw, Jan Breytenbach and Piet Nel.

04:38 en route to Grootfontein to provide vital air support at the scene of the battle (Target Alpha - Cassinga) after refuelling. A little more than an hour later, at 05:43, five Buccaneers carrying a total of 36 x 450 kg of bombs left Waterkloof en route to Target Alpha.

The planners of the attack on Cassinga took a last-minute decision to make use of fighter planes during the attack. An interesting story is associated with this decision. After the planning of the operation had been finalised, it became clear that fighter planes did not form part of the strategy.

The chief of the South African Air Force (SAAF) at the time, Lieut.-Genl. Bob Rogers, insisted that fighter aircraft should feature in the planning. "Just to make sure - like taking out an insurance policy", were his prophetic words. And indeed, the Mirages played an important role in the attack on Cassinga, especially when they came to the rescue of the troops.⁹ It was probably no coincidence that the call sign of the Mirage IIIC fighter planes that took part in the battle was SANLAM 1-4. Four Mirages, each armed with two Sidewinder missiles and two 30 mm cannons, left their home base on 3 May at 14:30 and flew via Grootfontein to Ondangwa. They wanted to be as close to the border as possible in case their assistance would be required.

A Bosbok aircraft was used as "Telstar" during the course of the attack. It circled the scene of the battle at high altitude and had a senior army officer, Maj. Archie Moore, on board.¹⁰

A number of Pumas and Super Frelon helicopters also played a role in the attack on Cassinga. Like the other Air Force crew members who participated in the battle, the chopper pilots arose early on the morning of 4 May 1978. At 05:45, two Puma helicopters under the command of John Church left Omhuni for a position approximately 22 km east/southeast of Cassinga. Church's instructions were to secure an area that would be known as the HAA (Helicopter Administrative Area). This would be the place where the main helicopter force could safely wait until they had to evacuate the paratroopers from Cassinga. The Helicopter Administrative Area had the interesting call sign of Whiskey 3. Church was also instructed to set up a mobile TACAN beacon to be used by the Air Force as a navigation aid for their final approach to Cassinga.¹¹

⁹ Personal collection: interviews with Lieut.-Gen. Bob Rogers and Maj.-Gen. Ollie Holmes.

¹⁰ Personal collection: interviews with Maj.-Gen. MJ du Plessis.

¹¹ Personal collection: interviews with Brig.-Gen. John Church and Col Johan Ströh.

The rest of the helicopter force, consisting of Super Frelons and Pumas, was led to the HAA by Johan Ströh. On board were soldiers who would provide protection, drums containing extra fuel and six medical staff members.

This was how the Air Force prepared for the attack on Cassinga.

Early on the morning of 4 May 1978, four C130s and four C160s, carrying paratroopers, took off from Grootfontein and headed for Cassinga. At the same time, all the other participants/elements also swung into action. Two C160s with 128 paratroopers on board broke away from the rest of the strike force.

At 08:02 on the morning of 4 May 1978, the attack on Target Alpha (Cassinga) began. The Canberras, which led the attack from north to south, dropped their load of 300 Alpha bombs on the target. According to the pilots' own evaluation, not all the bombs exploded, although the target was thoroughly covered. The Canberras then immediately left the scene of the battle and returned to Grootfontein to refuel and rearm.

On the tail of the Canberras, the Buccaneers swooped down on Cassinga, also along a north-south axis. Three of the Buccaneers, carrying a load of 28 x 450 kg of bombs, began their attack on Cassinga. One of the other Buccaneers attacked a complex northwest of Cassinga. The smoke and dust produced by the Alpha bombs dropped by the Canberras created visibility problems for the Buccaneers. Nevertheless, the pilots thought that the target was covered reasonably well, although the northwestern complex escaped unscathed. After the initial attacks, the Buccaneers withdrew from the battle scene but remained in the vicinity in case the need for air support should arise.

The final airstrike, closely following the attack by the Buccaneers, was carried out by two Mirage IIIC's. At this stage, only two minutes of the attack had passed and the time was 08:04. Ollie Holmes, commander of the Mirages, remembers vividly how he had to dive diagonally from behind the leading C130 to find the target. Since the No. 2 Mirage's first attack on the transport park had been unsuccessful, Holmes attacked the target a second time. Like the Canberras and Buccaneers, the two Mirages then withdrew to be on standby.¹²

Within moments after the bombers and fighter planes had left the battle scene, the transport aircraft began dropping the 370 paratroopers. Four of the aircraft dropped the main assault force along a north-south axis on the western side of Cassinga,

¹² Personal collection: interviews with Maj.-Gen. Ollie Holmes.

while the two remaining aircraft dropped smaller strike forces and stopper groups to the south and north of the base. The dropping of the paratroopers went according to plan, although the aircraft to the west of the base were unable to see a signal marker for a number of reasons. This resulted in the paratroopers being dropped about three seconds late.

Partly for this reason, the paratroopers did not land where they should have, and they were therefore unable to deploy as planned. Many of them either fell into the river or landed on the western side of the river (i.e. the wrong side of the river). The paratroopers thus had to regroup before the attack could go ahead, and the commander of this assault force, Col Jan Breytenbach, also had to change the axis of his attack.¹³ It should be borne in mind, however, that the entire assault force at Cassinga was under the command of Maj.-Genl. MJ du Plessis. He parachuted into Cassinga with his men and took an active part in the fighting.

It took longer than an hour for the troops on the ground at Cassinga to regroup before the main strike force could begin its attack. In the meantime, the northern part of the assault force, and especially Lt. Johan Blauw's stopper group, was encountering very strong resistance from the enemy. Only with the greatest difficulty could the platoon proceed with its attack in a southerly direction. When the main assault force joined the battle, full-scale fighting broke out on the ground, and the paratroopers had to fight fiercely to advance from one goal to the next. There are two important reasons why the enemy resisted the attack so tenaciously. Firstly, the PLAN fighters used 14,5 mm and 23 mm anti-aircraft guns against the ground forces. In this role, the weapons proved deadly and made the going much tougher, with the result that Target Alpha (Cassinga) could not be captured nearly as quickly as initially planned. Secondly, the PLAN fighters were exceptionally brave. PLAN fighters manning the anti-aircraft defences were simply pushed out of the way as soon as they had been killed, and replaced by their comrades who were determined to keep on fighting.¹⁴

After a couple of hours of fighting, the paratroopers gained the upper hand to a large extent, and clean-up operations could begin. At this stage (12:10), the paratroopers at Cassinga requested that five of the Pumas waiting at the Helicopter Administrative Area (HAA) (Whiskey 3) be dispatched to evacuate some of the soldiers. Soon afterwards, a further six Pumas flew to Cassinga to help to transfer more than 200 troops to the Helicopter Administrative Area. One thing is certain -

¹³ Personal collection: interview with Col Jan Breytenbach.

¹⁴ Personal collection: interview with Johan Blauw. See also mini-thesis: FW Mostert: 'n Kritiese evaluering van Operasie Reindeer: die militêre optrede van die SAW by Cassinga in Angola, May 1978, UOFS, 1993.

getting the troops on board did not go as smoothly as planned. After hours of heavy fighting, the South African soldiers were tired and somewhat confused. It was drilled into them to board only a specific helicopter. When it turned out that the helicopters were not landing simultaneously at the predetermined spots, the troops began climbing into the first helicopter they could find in order to be evacuated as quickly as possible from the battle zone.¹⁵

Included in the first batch of troops to be flown out of Cassinga were nine wounded soldiers. All were taken to the HAA (Whiskey 3). Here all the helicopters waited for the go-ahead to evacuate the remaining paratroopers from Cassinga.

Not long after the first ten helicopters had moved some of the troops to the HAA, a new threat appeared from the south, suddenly and completely unexpectedly. This very nearly had catastrophic consequences for the entire operation. Just after 13:00 that afternoon, Cuban and MPLA armoured cars and tanks were spotted on their way from Thechamutete in the south to Cassinga. The anti-tank platoon, strategically placed to the south of the base, was unable to halt the advancing column. Without further ado, the Mirages and Buccaneers were hurriedly summoned to rejoin the battle.

It was at this point in time that one of the many heroic deeds of the border war took place. Major Andries Marais was a Buccaneer pilot who took part in the attack on Cassinga that day. While he was involved in another mission, he heard of the crisis that was threatening the lives of the remaining paratroopers. He received permission from the operational centre to abort his mission and attack the advancing armoured force. After having destroyed a couple of enemy tanks and killed a number of men with deadly efficiency, his supply of ammunition dried up. It was at this stage of the battle that some of the enemy tanks came so close to the South Africans that they represented a serious threat to the safety of the paratroopers. Marais, who still had enough fuel left to remain in the area, started performing mock dive attacks on the enemy forces. This slowed down the tanks to such an extent that the troops were able to reach the northern part of Cassinga, where they were evacuated by helicopters. This act of courage by Marais, which entailed swooping down on the enemy and flying right over their armoured vehicles with screaming engines, literally at tree-top level, won him the **Honoris Crux** medal. The navigator, Lt. Ernest William Simon (Ernie) Harvey, was awarded the MMM.¹⁶

¹⁵ Personal collection: interviews with Brig.-Gens. John Church and HAP Potgieter, Colonels Johan Ströh and Polla Kruger.

¹⁶ Personal collection: interviews with Lieut.-Gen. Ian Gleeson and Brig.-Gen. Blackie de Swardt.

It is difficult not to exaggerate the real danger the troops and helicopters were exposed to at that stage of the battle at Cassinga. Despite the fighters' and bombers' efforts to ward off the enemy attack, the armoured force advanced to within shooting distance of the boarding zone and, in fact, started firing at the helicopters. Under these hair-raising conditions, the troops were crammed as rapidly as possible into the choppers, which then took off as soon as they could. The reigning chaos resulted in a completely unorganised and uncontrolled boarding process. Some of the helicopters were totally overloaded; for instance, one of the Super Frelons struggled to get into the air with its heavy load and finally succeeded in taking off, but with the upper half of a tree entangled in its undercarriage. Some of the other helicopters, in contrast, left the battle scene carrying virtually no troops.

With great difficulty, all the helicopters eventually managed to leave the base and began heading for Eenhana, south of the cutline. After flying for a few minutes, they received a request via radio for a volunteer pilot to return to Cassinga to make sure that no paratroopers had been left stranded at the base. Since the evacuation had proceeded in an over-hasty and disorderly manner, which made it impossible to count the troops, there was a very real possibility that some of the paratroopers could have been left behind at Cassinga. John Church and "Hójan" Cronje immediately acceded to the request and turned back to Cassinga. While braving heavy enemy fire from the ground, Church flew over the target area a couple of times to ascertain that all the soldiers had been evacuated. As will become evident from the interviews, a few paratroopers (four, to be exact) had, in fact, been left behind. They were spotted, and quickly picked up. For this act of courage, performed under the most difficult circumstances and under concentrated enemy fire, Maj. John Church was awarded the **Honoris Crux** medal.¹⁷

However, the return of the helicopters carrying the second group of paratroopers to Eenhana did not signal the end of Operation Reindeer for the aircraft crews. After the troops had been safely off-loaded at Eenhana, the helicopter fleet refuelled and flew back to the Helicopter Administrative Area (Whiskey 3) to pick up the remaining paratroopers. It was pitch dark when the entire helicopter fleet carrying the remaining paratroopers, the soldiers providing protection and other military personnel finally left the Helicopter Administrative Area and headed for Ondangwa.

For the sake of completeness, the casualties suffered by the two opposing forces at Cassinga should be briefly mentioned: SWAPO lost ± 600 of its members at the base, while an unknown number were wounded. The armoured force manned by Cubans and MPLA soldiers lost 18 men, while 63 were wounded. An unknown

¹⁷ Personal collection: interviews with Gen. John Church and Col Hojan Cronje. See also: Ian Uys, **Cross of Honour** (Germiston, 1992), pp. 55-6.

number of armoured vehicles were destroyed and left burnt-out. The attacking force (SADF) lost three paratroopers, while one went missing - he probably drowned in the Cubango River. Eleven paratroopers were wounded¹⁸. With the exception of trooper Niemand, who disappeared in the course of the operation - his remains were never found - all the soldiers, including the wounded and dead, returned to their home base in Namibia.

2. THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THE BATTLE OF CASSINGA

From the moment that the Battle of Cassinga began, it was shrouded in controversy. Two divergent viewpoints exist as to what had happened on that day, the 4th of May 1978, at Cassinga. A few statements in authoritative publications shed some light on this issue.

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 (sic), Southern Angola, many of them children, women and old people, killing over 600 and wounding over 400."¹⁹

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

"In May 1978 a refugee settlement at Kassinga (sic) in Southern Angola was bombed by the South African forces and troops massacred over 600 refugees and wounded over 1 000."²⁰

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

"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

¹⁸ W Steenkamp, **Borderstrike** (Pretoria, 1983), pp. 102-3.

¹⁹ **The Voice of Swapo - 25 years of heroic struggle**, 19 April 1985, p. 16.

²⁰ Barbara König, **Namibia - The ravages of war. South Africa's onslaught on the Namibian people** (London, 1983), p. 54.

On that day, jet bombers and helicopter gunships of the South African occupation army cold-bloodedly murdered about 1 000 innocent and un-armed 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 Cassinga Massacre is a very unforgettable episode in the Namibian people's struggle."²¹

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

"On the 4th May 1978 Kassinga (sic) 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."²²

Even the clergy commented on 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."²³

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

"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

²¹ **Comrade**, the official organ of the SWAPO Youth League, No.3, May 1988.

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

²³ **Windhoek Advertiser**, 5 May 1988.

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 raid and massacre experienced from the ground; gassing and gunshot wounds to the back of the head; the suggestion that the majority of the 700 dead are women and children."²⁴

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

"... 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."²⁵

It is evident that the military hostilities at Cassinga on 4 May 1978 are described by a considerable number of commentators in exceptionally emotional terms. The battle is clearly regarded as one of the vital events during the long struggle for Namibia's independence. Practically no emphasis is placed on the military actions of the day. Instead, 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, almost 300 km north of the northern border of SWA.

In the quoted sources, there is no mention of military activities at Cassinga during the time under discussion; there are no references to the extensive system of trenches at Cassinga or the armaments used for the protection of the SWAPO base. At the same time, there are no references to any military commanding structures or the commander of the base.

²⁴ Annemarie Heywood, **The Cassinga event and investigation of the records** (Windhoek, 1994), pp. 12-3, 92.

²⁵ Denis Herbstein and John Evenson, **The devils are among us. The war for Namibia** (London, 1989), p. 31.

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

However, from other available sources describing the same event, it soon becomes clear that a totally different version of what happened on that day also exists. A few quotes expressing this alternative point of view are given below:

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."²⁶

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 4th 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."²⁷

The logical question would be why the SADF, who carried out this attack, had picked Cassinga. 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

²⁶ **Paratus**, November 1992, pp. 38-40.

²⁷ Peter Stiff, **Nine days of war and South Africa's final days in Namibia** (Alberton, 1991), p.16.

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 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 from 300 to 1200 terrorists and an unknown number of armed female terrorists" (Translation).²⁸

The official viewpoint of the paratroopers who constituted the vital element of the SADF'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 four C160 Transall aircraft over a SWAPO training base in the mining town of Cassinga, some 250 km 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 force had gone in, there were still paratroopers fighting on the ground."²⁹

Emotion creeps in when they declare that:

"Cassinga, to the South African Paratroopers, has come to symbolise 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 symbolises 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

²⁸ Documentation Centre, SANDF, Pretoria, HS OPS, April 1978.

²⁹ **Paratrooper**, 1992, p. 4.

the three battalions who took part in the Cassinga operation have since paid the ultimate sacrifice. Yet all paratroopers pay homage on Cassinga Day."³⁰

General Jannie Geldenhuys, the chief of the SADF at the time, 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 the 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 than had been planned (Translation)."³¹

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

The above-mentioned arguments are supported by the interviews the author of this article conducted with South African paratroopers who took part in the battle of Cassinga.³²

Seen from the SADF's perspective, Cassinga was the main military camp of SWAPO from where military and logistic attacks were launched, and where 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, led the South Africans to the conclusion that their reconnaissance and information were correct:

³⁰ **Ibid.**

³¹ Jannie Geldenhuys, **Die wat wen. 'n Generaal se storie uit 'n era van oorlog en vrede** (Pretoria, 1993), pp. 72-4.

³² Personal collection, tape recordings of interviews with, among others, Maj.Gen. MJ du Plessis, Ollie Holmes, Lieut.-Gen. Ian Gleeson, Brig.Gen. Blackie de Swardt, Cols. Jan Breytenbach, Johan Blaauw and Piet Nel.

Cassinga was no transit camp in which only defenceless women and children from SWA had gone into exile to temporarily rest and recover.

For the military historian, the question now remains: Can some of the unanswered questions pertaining to the hostilities at Cassinga be resolved by interviewing a number of the participants in the battle under discussion? This issue is addressed in Part 2.

3. IN CONCLUSION

It is a fact that the various role-players in the battle of Cassinga on 4 May 1978 hold widely divergent opinions regarding what really happened on that historic day.

A large percentage of today's Namibians see the battle of Cassinga as a watershed in the Liberation Struggle - an event that gave a fresh impetus to their cause. South African military personnel, on the other hand, regarded the battle as a magnificent victory - one of the best of the entire Border War.

One thing is certain: The last word on the battle of Cassinga on 4 May 1978 is yet to be written ...