

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

PART 2: INTERVIEWS WITH TWO SADF SOLDIERS

Leo Barnard*♦

Below is an edited transcript of the late Sgt. Maj. M Fougstedt's interview with Maj. Gen. MJ du Plessis, commander of the SA Parachute Brigade who also took part in the assault on Cassinga.¹

GEN. DU PLESSIS'S VERSION OF WHAT HAPPENED AT CASSINGA

- Q.** *Can you tell us something about your involvement in the events leading up to the battle of Cassinga on 4 May, 1978?*
- A.** First of all, let me say something about the establishment of 44 Parachute Brigade in the capital of the Free State, Bloemfontein. The Brigade consisted of 1 Parachute Battalion as the permanent force unit, as well as 2, 3 and 4 Parachute Battalions, which were citizen force units. 2 and 3 Parachute Battalions had already been established, and 4 Parachute Battalion - as well as an Artil-

* Department of History, University of the Free State. E-mail: barnards.hum@mail.uovs.ac.za. The author wishes to thank the following persons, among others, who made essential contributions towards the creation of this article via interviews, oral accounts and written documentation: Maj.-Gen. MJ du Plessis; Col. Johan Blaauw; the late Sgt-Maj. M Fougstedt; and Frans Botes.

♦ It must be stressed that the views expressed by the two South African soldiers are their own. They took part in the South African assault on Cassinga and this article expresses their reminiscence of what happened on that day, 4 May 1978. Much has been written on this battle, but an official history is still missing. Questions still to be answered are inter alia: why was Col Jan Breytenbach officiated as the officer commanding this assault, while at least two Brigadiers (Hannes Botha and MJ du Plessis) took part; and Gen. Viljoen arrived during the battle; why nothing is being said of Col James Hills (a paratrooper) who was in charge of the Helicopter Administration Area? Other role-players to be consulted before a comprehensive history can be put together could be: the pilots of all the aircraft that were involved; the senior officers that took the decisions and directed the assault; all the people who were involved with the training, medics, the paratroopers on the ground, etc. This article is just an effort to fill some of the gaps that still exists as far as the South African assault on Cassinga goes.

¹ Tape recording of an interview the late Sgt-Maj. M Fougstedt conducted with Gen. MJ du Plessis on 26 September 2005. Interview adapted and edited by Leo Barnard.

lery element, a Sapper/Engineer element and a Signal element - were in the process of being established. Then, they gave me Col. Jan Breytenbach as Brigade Colonel, as well as Anton van Graan and a lady typist. These were the Brigade, here at Free State Command.

Q. General, when and how did you learn about the attack on Cassinga?

- A. Early in 1978, Gen. Viljoen phoned me and told me to go to Pretoria. When I arrived, he told me everything was in a state of utter chaos. That's when we started talking about Cassinga. Speaking broadly, he said that Cassinga was the logistical headquarters of Swapo in Angola, and the SADF wanted to attack it. He had instructed Jan Breytenbach to draw up plans and call up troops, and then to train them to attack Cassinga. And then, when they had their first training session in Pietersburg, chaos ensued. The reason? No administrative work was done: Jan Breytenbach had called up the troops in a hurry.²

Q. Were there any other problem areas at that stage?

- A. The paratroopers had been called up without completing the required administrative processes. He told them to come, and they had to report for duty. He gave field promotions, as he called it: lieutenants were made captains, and captains were made majors to take command, corporals were made sergeants - he gave them all field promotions. Why, I've never seen anything like it! That was his way of thinking, you know: we'll deal with the problems later on. And chaos reigned. That's when Gen. Viljoen called me and said, Du Plessis, you take over this whole operation right now.³ Take all the troops to Bloemfontein, make a fresh start with their training, with the planning, and we'll see what happens from there. So, I went back to Bloemfontein and we got the staff we needed. We transferred the troops - who had already reported for duty - to Bloemfontein, because old Jan (Col. Breytenbach) had figured out a good plan to attack Cassinga - a plan we adapted a little.

Q. How many men reported for the training exercises?

- A. Approximately 300 Citizen Force members.⁴

² Gen. Constand Viljoen was the officer commanding the South African Army at that time.

³ Col Jan Breytenbach was the commander on the ground of the parachute assault on Cassinga.

⁴ 370 South African paratroopers took part in the battle at Cassinga, while 128 paratroopers were on standby in case they were needed.

Q. General, please tell us something about the training of the South African Citizen Force paratroopers for the attack on Cassinga.

- A. We pitched camp in the General De Wet training area outside Bloemfontein, and remained there. At the same time, another big operation was being executed at the Army Battle School at Lohatla. We called the troops under this pretext: they were going to take part in a joint operation with the Army Battle School near Kimberley. The paratroopers were going to jump at Lohatla as part of their training. And they didn't even know where they were going; they were told about a base attack somewhere to the north of Kimberley. The following is an interesting aside: while we were training the troops, two of the commanders, Monty Brett and Lew Gerber, came up to me and told me they've had it up to here with this fooling around - why should they be there with the troops? Company commanders should be able to handle it. Four companies were to take part in the fighting, led by two commandants (Lt. Colonels) and one major, and there would also be one platoon consisting of national servicemen, under the command of (at that time) Lt. Johan Blaauw.

Q. Why were some of the senior officers opposed to the training at Lohatla?

- A. They wanted to go home, as this second round of training was exactly like the previous one, and the same people were involved. And remember, they were Citizen Force members. So I told them: "Guys, these are not training exercises, this is the real thing, we're not playing around. I can't say anything about where and how, but stick around. This is no game." The guys were very surprised, they couldn't believe it. I told them they were going to get a chance to jump operationally, even though they were commandants (Lt. Colonels) providing leadership at company level. If they didn't feel like it, I would take company-level commanders with me. They wanted to jump, they were unanimous about that - no, hell, they wanted to go. So I told them that's fine with me, but you have to keep your traps shut. Let me put it this way, they did a great job planning the attack on Cassinga. Cassinga was to be attacked by two companies that would strike northwards from a starting position to the south of the base. A third company would be dropped to the north of the town, and would be used as a stopper group. A platoon jumping to the west would close the third side of the quadrangle, and a platoon jumping to the east would close the entire quadrangle. In other words, there were to be three companies and two platoons. The plan was as follows: we go in with three C-130s and two Dakotas.⁵ We board the planes here (Bloemfontein), fly to Grootfontein, sleep

⁵ According to the SAA's official version, no Dakota aircraft were used during the operation. See pp. 4-5 of this article for the official version of the attack.

there and take off the next morning so that we will be at Cassinga at exactly 8 o'clock. In other words, we would take off at 4-5 o'clock in the morning, jump when we arrive at Cassinga, and attack the place. In the meantime, the helicopters would fly in and create a base about 30 km from Cassinga. The base would be secured by members of the Reconnaissance Commando. The reason for the temporary base was the shortage of helicopters; we didn't have enough of them to evacuate all the paratroopers from Cassinga at the same time.

Q. You're talking about helicopters - Pumas at that time. Did you only use Pumas?

A. There were only Pumas.⁶ All the helicopters together could carry no more than 150 people. After the battle, we would call in the first batch of helicopters, which would then take half of the troops to the rendezvous (temporary base) and leave them there. They would then go back and take the rest of the troops, including the wounded and the dead, directly to Rundu.⁷ Or to Oshakati... no, to Rundu. Then they had to go back to Rundu to pick up the rest of the troops. That was the complete withdrawal plan. We planned to be self-sufficient for three days with regard to food and ammunition, in case anything went wrong. Some helicopters were on standby in case extra ammunition had to be flown in. Taking the initial planning into account, we had enough ammunition. We thought we would be able to keep fighting for two or three days. Actually, we had to carry a bloody lot of ammunition...each of us had 300 rounds, and you had to jump with it and carry it on your back for three days.

Q. General, as an infantryman I'm interested in the type of weapons the South African assault force used during the fighting.

A. We had the ordinary fold-up butt R1, as well as RPG rocket-launchers and twin mortars, namely 80 mm mortars. That's all the weapons we had, except for a couple of landmines.

Q. What role did landmines play in this airborne operation?

A. Look, a squadron of Russian tanks and troop carriers was based at a small mining town (Thechamutete), about 30 km to the south of Cassinga. Part of our plan was that a team of engineers would jump with us, and they would then

⁶ According to the official version of the event, Puma as well as Super Frelon helicopters were used to evacuate the paratroopers after the fighting had been over.

⁷ The withdrawal ended at Ondangwa.

close the camp that included the road coming from the mining town. They would then mine the road and lay an ambush, their RPGs at the ready.

Q. Who would be responsible for laying this ambush?

- A. The engineers, as well as some of our own troops. RPGs were to be used for this purpose. The engineers would focus on completing two tasks: they had to mine the road, and they had to blow up the weapons on the vehicles in the base. Blowing up the vehicles would be easy; all they had to do was place a fuse in the petrol tank and ignite it. But the weapons, the anti-aircraft cannons and SWAPO's other systems would have to be physically blown up, using explosives. And then the platoon would have to lay an ambush for the enemy tanks, or whatever would be coming down the road. We didn't think there was a strong possibility of this actually happening, since we would jump at 8 o'clock and the job would be finished by 11 o'clock. We basically believed that if everything went according to plan, the operation would be completed within three hours. And we thought that they wouldn't just jump into their vehicles and race to Cassinga during those three hours. First, they would have to find out what was going on, and then they would have to give orders for the tanks to travel 30 km to Cassinga. So, we thought the enemy would be unable to reach us within three hours - by then, according to our planning, we would be long gone.

Q. General, what kind of information did you have on Cassinga before the start of the operation?

- A. Very good information. The recces (Reconnaissance Commando) had been there, and we also had some aerial photographs. We had excellent aerial photographs of Cassinga, which clearly showed the system of trenches.

Q. Would it have been possible to complete an operation of this magnitude within three hours - given the fact that it would be an airborne operation executed hundreds of kilometres inside enemy territory?

- A. We planned to finish within three hours before withdrawing. Something went wrong with the operation - we were dropped inaccurately. Look, the planes were all coming from different directions, and all of them had to be at a specific point at a specific moment. First, let me tell you: I was in charge of the whole operation, and my general (Viljoen) asked me, what about Jan

Breytenbach?⁸ So I told him, it's ok - I'll take him with me as my second-in-command, since he had planned the whole operation. So, I placed him in command of the two companies that would attack from the south. Monty Brett's company would be dropped to the north of Cassinga, and his stopper groups would close the gaps on that side of the town. Johan Blaauw's platoon of national servicemen would be dropped to the west of the base, and serve as a stopper group before joining the attack. The companies to the north and west of the town were to cut off all the enemy's escape routes on those two sides of the base. Two companies, attacking from the south, would then launch the assault. There's a road running from north to south through Cassinga. This road would be the axis of attack between the A and B companies. So, we had to jump in such a way that A company would land to the left of the axis, and B company to the other side. And the aircraft that had to give the signal, the "green on – jump", was the leading C-130, which had to use the north/south road as the most visible landmark. That would be the sign to jump. The truth only emerged later, after a few beers - although the Air Force denied it at first.⁹ Look, the Buccaneers and Mirages launched an air strike at exactly 8 o'clock; they came in from all sides and bombed the place to pieces. It was split-second timing; as soon as they withdrew, we had to jump. So, when we were approaching the target, this guy was so fascinated by the Mirages dropping bombs that he never looked at his landmark. When it finally clicked, he was already 600 yards beyond the road. Only then did he switch the green light on, and only then did the assault force jump. The result was that the assault force landed hundreds of metres from where they should have. For instance, Johan Blaauw and his platoon landed right on top of the enemy. The main assault force jumped when they were over the river instead of the road. Half of my company jumped when they were to one side of the river, and the other half when they were to the other side. The other stopper group completely missed their target, and landed about 600 yards from where they were supposed to close a gap. Monty Brett also landed much too far to the east, which left a huge gap. As a result of this chaos, the fighting couldn't begin immediately since we first had to get the guys through the river. In the meantime, Johan Blaauw and his platoon, who had landed on top of the enemy, were involved in one hell of a fight. They were busy cleaning up, while we were struggling to get through the river. I was in the bloody water. My radio operator, Sgt. Maj. Blom, was on the other side of the river, so I had no radio communication. Fortunately, Jan Breytenbach had his own radio equipment and he had landed on this side of the river. So, he

⁸ No mention is made of the participation of Brig. Hannes Botha in this operation. To this day his role is not clear but his presence could have affected the command and control of the operation.

⁹ As a matter of course, the SAA ordered a full investigation of the incident. Possible explanations for the mishap are briefly set out in Appendix 1.

could communicate with the companies. One of Breytenbach's strong points was his ability to control a battle, and he quickly realised that we were too far beyond the departure line and started repositioning the guys. When heavy fighting broke out, it was already 9:00-9:30. Only then could we really start regrouping for the attack on Cassinga.

Q. Were there any losses during the descent?

- A. Yes, one guy, young Niemand. He's still gone - nobody saw him, he went into the river. He jumped just before I did, and I fell into the river. He probably landed in the river about 20-30 yards from where I went into the water. But I landed very close to a clump of reeds, a few metres from the river bank. He must have fallen into the water somewhat further away from the river bank, among the reeds - but he was never found.

Q. General, could you please describe the river (i.e. the Cubango river)?

- A. The river was quite broad, and quite deep, because I fell into the water near the bank and I could barely manage to keep my head above water. I was lucky to have landed so close to the side, otherwise I might have drowned. My parachute fell into a strong current, and started pulling me away from the river bank.

Q. Was the river flowing at the time?

- A. Yes, but I found myself in serious trouble. I had to perform swimming movements with both my hands to keep my head above water. As a result, I couldn't get rid of my parachute. You're carrying all your ammunition, all your food, all your weapons - a hell of a lot of weight. And you have a steel helmet on your head. Fortunately, while I was struggling, my feet found a stone and I stood on it. But at the same time, I had to keep swimming with all my power to stay above water. More than once, I caught hold of some reeds, but they broke off every time. Just then, two troops came running past, and I shouted at them. One of the guys held out his rifle and pulled me out. But young Niemand must have fallen into the river further away from the river bank, because he just disappeared and was never seen again. His brother was a commandant who died of cancer a year later; he was also a member of the Parachute Battalion. That was one of the tragedies that marred our attack on Cassinga.

Q. How many casualties did the paratroopers suffer during the attack on Cassinga?

A. Several soldiers were wounded, and four troops died during the fighting. Only Niemand couldn't be accounted for. The three dead paratroopers and the wounded were evacuated and taken back to SWA.

Q. General, what are the emotions one experiences during a battle of this nature? Television and films show a lot of shouting, hand grenades exploding and shots being fired. Was this the case when you (the paratroopers) were attacking Cassinga?

A. Let me tell you - SWAPO (the enemy) used anti-aircraft cannons. We also had a "spotter" plane; Archie Moore was in the Bosbok that circled above Cassinga and communicated with us. This enabled us to locate our own force's positions, as well as those of the enemy. And the enemy shot at him; the anti-aircraft guns kept us very busy. We could hear the anti-aircraft guns shooting like crazy, and later, when we captured those positions, it transpired that the weapons had been used against ground troops. There was a lot of hard fighting. Johan Blaauw actually landed at one end of several rows of trenches. I must say, those national servicemen were exceptionally well-trained. They fought along the trenches, and killed enemy soldiers as they went along. This attracted SWAPO reinforcements, who joined in the fighting, but Johan and his troops wrought havoc on them. Monty Brett also had quite a fight on his hands when SWAPO fighters ran right into them, just as we thought they would. They also killed many enemy soldiers. The attacking companies also encountered some resistance, but it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. The majority of the enemy soldiers tried to escape from Cassinga, and they ran into Monty Brett and his Citizen Force soldiers.

Q. Did the enemy flee the base in a disorderly manner, or did they retreat in an organised way, keeping their weapons with them?

A. Yes, yes, a lot of equipment was lying around, everywhere. Their information office and some other stuff were left behind intact. The four anti-aircraft cannons offered the most resistance. When they realised they couldn't hit the Bosbok high up in the air, they started using the cannons against the paratroopers on the ground. The enemy soldiers who manned these positions were well-trained, and fought very bravely. The SWAPO fighters repeatedly pulled their fallen comrades off the anti-aircraft cannons and fought on courageously.

Q. What about the emotional effects of the fighting?

- A. It was an emotional experience, and the fighting in the town itself was bad, with mortars being fired off all the time. Of course, there was a lot of shouting and noise, as should be expected from a battle of this magnitude. By the way, Mornay Coetzer of the SABC recorded some video footage, while many of us took photos with ordinary cameras. Many photos came out, but we weren't as successful as we had hoped to be.

Q. General, how were you armed personally?

- A. I had an HMK, which in army terms is known as an Uzi (9mm Carbine).

Q. Who was the overall commanding officer of this operation?

- A. Gen. Ian Gleeson in charge of Sector 10 - that was the name, I think - at that time. And he had overall responsibility for the two attacks on Cassinga, and the assault on the Bravo bases,[♦] which was led by Col. Frank Bestbier and was executed just across the border. He, Gleeson, monitored the attacks in his head office in Rundu, and Gen. Jan Geldenhuys was in charge of SWA Command at that time. Both of them were brigadiers. The idea was that the first wave of helicopters would take the troops to an RV, and then they would go back. The second wave would take out the remaining people, including the wounded and the dead. Because these men would go directly to SWA, in other words they're not going to the RV first, only to be flown out to SWA later; they're going directly to SWA. And that's what happened. Some sources say the wounded were taken out first. That's not true, they were taken out second, since this was the fastest way to get them to Eenhana¹⁰ where they would receive medical treatment; it wouldn't have made sense to take them to the RV (temporary basis) first. When we arrived at Eenhana that evening, we held roll call, and things were a bit chaotic, there was a lot of confusion. Some members of the assault force were there, but the choppers had to go back to the RV to fetch the rest. It was already late in the evening: when the other guys arrived, it was dark already. During roll call we discovered that one man was missing. It took us a while to identify the missing man as Rifleman Niemand. I think I've said it before: he jumped just before I did, and I'm 100% sure that he fell into the river just before I did. SWAPO never claimed to have found anyone, and his

[♦] According to a number of sources Gen. Ian Gleeson was not in charge of the Alpha and Bravo bases.

¹⁰ The official sources clearly state that the returning soldiers were transported to Ondangwa in northern SWA.

parachute was also never found. In any case, it only became possible at that stage to determine accurately how many paratroopers were killed or wounded at Cassinga. In spite of the confusion, it eventually became clear that Niemand was the only soldier who could not be accounted for. I don't think a search party ever went back, since it would have exposed too many people - searching for one man - to danger at that time.

Q. How did the Cassinga assault force demobilise?

- A. The day after the attack, we were flown directly to Bloemfontein. We went back to the Gen. De Wet training area, and there everyone was demobilised. We did all the organisational work, and I instructed the commanders to hand in all citations for bravery or meritorious service or whatever, before we dispersed. That was done. Two years later, I was somewhat surprised to receive another citation for bravery. At that time, I was working for the Head of the Army, and I was responsible for approving the citations for medals and submitting it to the Head of the Army. I raised an objection against the citation since it was submitted so long after the operation, and I couldn't quite recall the acts of courage described in the citation. But I was overruled, and as far as I know, the guy was awarded the **Honoris Crux**.¹¹ Anyway, the men were demobilised and disbanded. That was also the end of my commandership of the Parachute Brigade. Col. Jan Breytenbach was appointed acting commander until Col. André Bestbier was eventually chosen as the first commanding officer of 44 Parachute Brigade.

Q. What is your last word on Cassinga?

- A. The assault on Cassinga will go down in the annals of the history of South Africa's paratroopers as an undisputed highlight. The men performed extremely well, and showed what they were capable of.

PARATROOPER FRANS BOTES'S VERSION OF WHAT HAPPENED AT CASSINGA¹²

It was Ascension Day, 1978. It was Thursday, 4 May, 27 years ago today. A lifetime. It was the greatest moment for us as paratroopers. It was the attack on Cassinga, as part of Operation Reindeer.

¹¹ Three members of the paratroopers' force at Cassinga were awarded the sought-after **Honoris Crux** medal. They were Cpl DP Engelbrecht and Riflemen DE Packham and JJ van der Merwe.

¹² Edited version of a letter by Frans Botes to Sgt-Majs. Mike Fougstedt and Rowley Medlin.

I don't want to talk about the bloody fighting. Every soldier (mostly Citizen Force guys) did much more than what was expected of him. They were simply excellent. I can still recall every moment with ease, and sooner or later I will put it all in writing. What concerns me now is what happened at the end.

Col. Jan Breytenbach asked me to deal with a tank that was firing at the helicopters while our troops were boarding them; I was to call in our fighter aircraft. Since I couldn't shoot and fight and operate the radio at the same time, I asked Johan Blaauw (a lieutenant at the time) to protect me while I communicated with the aircraft. He grabbed two soldiers and came with me. I directed an attack against a tank by calling in Dries Marais's Buc,¹³ and he knocked the bloody thing out a few metres in front of Piet Nel.¹⁴ (I wonder whether he would have attacked if he had known how close to the tank his own soldiers were?) The two Mirages then had to leave because of a fuel and ammo shortage. Dries kept attacking the tanks, but I didn't know that he had run out of ammo. Shortly afterwards, he also had to leave. And that's when the helicopters loaded with troops took off, and away they went. I was the only guy with a radio, but neither of my two radios could communicate with the choppers. Mine were shortwave, while the choppers used FM. Dries was no longer available on VLB frequency, so I couldn't talk to him either.

Johan Blaauw looked at me in a funny way, and I looked at him. And then we started running, straight towards the east where the bushes and swamp were. The Cubans were shooting at us from the south, about 200 yards away. The tank was moving, and its machine-gun kept firing at us. We were an easy target, running past the Cubans like that. I can still recall the feeling of running, the twigs and leaves falling around me as the bullets whizzed past my head, the bullets kicking dust all around my feet. You're waiting for that bullet, that lame, dead feeling, and you're running like hell.

From the corner of my eye I could see the Puma helicopter flying towards us, over the Cubans, banking sharply to the right, and right over the tank's nose, preparing to land. The chopper produced clouds of dust, which probably blinded the tank, and in that moment, when the gun fell silent, the chopper's wheels touched the ground and we jumped in, and away we went. But we couldn't just leave like that. Johan felt we first had to look for stranded paratroopers, and I asked the pilot to fly over the target zone one more time! "No problem!" came the answer over the headphones, and off we went! So we flew over Cassinga one more time, with all kinds of guys

¹³ Dries Marais was awarded the Honoris Crux medal for his acts of courage whilst flying a Buccaneer bomber.

¹⁴ A subsequent commanding officer of the Parachute Battalion who was murdered on the Witwatersrand.

taking pot shots at us, and we kept shooting back, returning fire through the open doors. So we sailed right towards the east, over the prisoners of war we left behind, who were now standing next to the graveyard, over the swamp. That was close! And that's when I discovered that the pilot's name was John Church. I asked him what had happened, why had he turned back? He didn't know, was his answer, he just had a feeling that he had to turn back to take a look. Take into consideration that this meant we had to fly to the emergency HAA (the temporary base), since there wasn't enough fuel to fly to Ondangwa. This was the last chopper to leave the battle area; the only people aboard the last flight to Ondangwa were the crew, Johan, our two troops and me.

I'm cutting the story short now. When we arrived at Ondangwa late that night, the guys running the operation were already busy notifying Pretoria that Johan and I and the two troops were missing in action. There was an incredible sense of relief when we walked into the operations room. Both John Church and Dries Marais were awarded the **Honoris Crux** for their acts of courage at Cassinga. Both of them, in one way or another, contributed to saving my life. A coincidence? I don't believe so. Since I didn't know the Lord in those days, I didn't recognise Him. Only later on would I realise that the Lord saved me to serve His kingdom in other ways.

And recently it was 4 May again. I salute the men who were at Cassinga that day. There is a very special bond between all of us. Blikkies (Brandy 1), thanks for being with me. Johan, you and the two soldiers concerned are very dear to me. John, Dries, thank you for saving my life - I can't say it enough. Pappa Gholf (Piet Nel) - thank you for getting me out of a jam with your mortars. And then, Baas Jan - it was a privilege to serve under you. All the men of Cassinga, thank you. I feel honoured to have been there with you, to have been among very special men. Above all - thank you, Lord, for saving my life that day. Thank you for allowing me to experience it all.

I experience very strong feelings on 4 May, every year. Epping woods¹⁵ is just around the corner from us. I would walk to the woods (it's not far from us), and then I would sit there among the trees, enjoying the peace and quiet. And I would think about that day, 28 years ago: the men, the shots being fired. And I would think about God, who protected me on that day...

Brandy 2 (call signal of Frans Botes)
(Frans Botes - VLB).

¹⁵ Frans Botes now lives in England.

In conclusion:

Almost three decades after the battle of Cassinga took place, it remains embroiled in controversy. The foregoing interviews try to give voice to the feelings, the actions, the sorrow and the courage of the paratroopers. Of course, these are personal, subjective experiences. The interviews should provide the uninformed reader with a deeper understanding of the deeds of the 370 paratroopers who took part in the battle. For those men the experience would always be something totally unique - a famous battle that would go down in the annals of paratrooper history as a great event.

APPENDIX 1 - Controversy on the drop of the South African paratroopers on Cassinga.

The question remains why the Air Force didn't drop the paratroopers at the right spot. As mentioned earlier, the transport guys admitted that the paratroopers had been dropped a few seconds late, but a number of other reasons could also be advanced to explain this mishap. The drop zone, for instance, was much narrower on the western side of the target than the crews had been led to believe when they were briefed about the operation. The width of the drop zone was given as 800 metres while, in reality, it was considerably less than 500 metres. A minimum width of 700 metres is needed for four large transport aircraft flying in V-formation to drop paratroopers. The result of this oversight was that the soldiers in the plane flying furthest to the west would, in any case, have landed on the western side of the river, and would also have experienced great difficulty in rejoining the assault force.¹⁶

The men attending this briefing were also told that the paratroopers would all be dropped, one after the other, within a distance not exceeding 800 metres. This process was practised repeatedly by performing jumps at the De Brug training area. During practice sessions, the dispatchers were able to get all the paratroopers out of the aircraft within the stipulated distance. However, the attack on Cassinga represented a totally different situation: the dispatchers simply couldn't get the paratroopers out of the planes fast enough for them to fall in the targeted area.¹⁷ The protractedness of this process, as well as the curvature of the Cubango river to the east, contributed to the fact that a considerable number of paratroopers landed either in the water or on the western side of the river.

It should be clear that the landing process went awry because of the force of circumstance, of too many factors coming into play. After the soldiers had jumped from the transport aircraft, the planes flew back to Grootfontein in northern SWA to await news of the outcome of the attack.

¹⁶ Personal collection: interviews with several C-130 and C-160 pilots, inter alia Gilliland, Jones, etc.

¹⁷ According to Gen. André Bestbier, one of the dispatchers, at that time in the Flossie, has the following comment: "This is not true! In actual fact the aircraft were cleared quicker than in the rehearsals and the speed of clearing the aircraft does not have such a dramatic effect on the accuracy of the drop which in this case was the responsibility of the air crew of each aircraft! The direction of the run-in to the drop-zone as well as the release point is determined by the navigator and pilot."