

# AIRBORNE ASSAULT ON CASSINGA BASE, 4 MAY 1978

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## 1. THE STRATEGIC ENEMY SITUATION

By the end of 1976 the mandate the RSA held over SWA/Namibia had already been withdrawn by the UN General Assembly. Simultaneously SWAPO had been recognised, by the Assembly, as the “sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people”. This obviously meant that, with SWAPO now taking up a “legitimised” aggressive posture, surrogate Cuban military advisors and civil administrators could “legitimately” deploy with SWAPO to make sure that Sam Njoma and his SWAPO hierarchy adopted the Russian Communist line for the “liberation” of SWA. Afterwards the same recipe would be followed for the “liberation” of South Africa except that MK guerrillas would take over the baton from SWAPO’s PLAN forces.

Obviously the RSA government could not accept the unfolding of such a scenario but, at the same time, the relatively small economy also could not go on to fight off the threat for years. A political solution had to be found while the RSA military forces still had the initiative. Thus there came into being a somewhat reluctant commitment by the RSA, sponsored by the so-called group of five Western Nations, the UK, USA, Germany, France and Canada, to go for independence by the end of 1978, preceded by the first democratic elections ever in the history of SWA. This initiative was passed as Resolution 435 by the UN assembly.

So the RSA and SWA/Namibia had to start organising from scratch for such an election in that parties had to be formed to contest constituencies with the winner forming the national government. There would be a cease-fire during which the SADF would withdraw from SWA, leaving 1 500 troops behind, while UN forces and administrators would oversee the probity of the election process while maintaining security during the whole exercise. The Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) formed a block of smaller parties which, electorally, became a threat to SWAPO. Internal SWAPO was controlled by the militant external SWAPO organisation and, therefore, refused to take part in the elections since, according to Sam Njoma, SWAPO had already been accepted by the UN as SWA/Namibia’s *de facto* government - so why bother with an election?

The five “Western Concerned Nations” and the RSA, however, pressed on with their intentions which did not suite SWAPO, Cuba or Russia since the possibility

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of SWAPO being defeated in the polls was too ghastly an outcome to be ignored. Therefore it was decided by Russia/Cuba/SWAPO not only to boycott the elections but to stop it from taking place by causing mayhem on a massive scale through an equally massive incursion into Ovamboland by 2 000 to 3 000 (perhaps more) armed guerrillas. They could easily disappear among the Ovambos, if given half a chance, since the vast majority of guerrillas were Ovambos anyway. Once inside the country it would become an extremely difficult operation to keep them away from the locals who they would have begun to intimidate on a scale never before seen in Ovamboland.

Meanwhile, anticipating the undermining of the election process, several politically important targets were identified and removed through assassination. Thus the Minister of Health of Ovambo was killed on 7 February 1978. This was followed by the killing of two subheadmen on 3 and 5 March respectively. A major setback to the upcoming elections was suffered when Paramount Chief Clemens Kapuuu was shot by two SWAPO assassins in Katutura Township. He was the favourite candidate for Namibia's first president and thus a thorn in the flesh of Sam Njoma. This was followed by the attempted murder of the Minister of Justice for Ovambo.

Meanwhile SWAPO was concentrating an almost overwhelming force of guerrillas in operational bases from about 20 to 50 km across the SWA/Angolan border, at least four in the west, with Chetequera as the main base, three more satellite bases in its vicinity, and another main base in the east at Eheke (Dombondola) with an unknown number of satellite bases to support the main eastern base.

The whole was commanded and controlled from the SWAPO/PLAN tactical head quarters (Tac HQ) at Cassinga, 250 km north of the SWA/Angolan cut line. This Tac HQ also accommodated well over 1 000 protection and also reserve forces plus extensive logistics installations such as weapons warehouses, explosives and ammunition magazines, warehouses for clothing and rations, repair facilities such as workshops, a vehicle park and a hospital/clinic. It also acted as a transit camp for guerrillas deploying from a main training base near Lubango, forward to the operational bases in the so-called western and eastern fronts. Cassinga was the location where the overall PLAN commander, Dimo Amaambo, and his staff could be found.

The SADF, saddled with the mission to maintain law and order in the operational area, was faced with the difficult decision to strike pre-emptively at all these concentrations, including the heart of SWAPO's upcoming insurgency, which was Cassinga, before the guerrillas could scatter and disappear among the Ovambo citizens of SWA/Namibia. Militarily this was obviously the way to go.

## **2. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

But the RSA government had another problem. What would the re-action of the world, and particularly the five Western Nations, be if an operation on a massive

scale, as would certainly be required, would be launched when they, in partnership with the RSA and SWA/Namibia, were preparing the political climate for an election towards the end of 1978?

Over to John Vorster, Prime Minister of South Africa. He went into dithering mode much to the annoyance of PW Botha, the Minister of Defence.

It was expected that civilians would be present, particularly in Cassinga, mostly as volunteers to the SWAPO cause but also as “abductees” from Ovamboland. Thus 119 school children and one teacher were abducted from St Mary’s Mission school during February 1978 and a bus, with 70 commuters between Ruacana and Oshakati, was hijacked by SWAPO and taken to Cassinga during April. At this stage there was no concrete evidence that Cassinga was a refugee camp, neither by claims made by SWAPO, nor by MPLA or even by the UNHRC. It could have been registered as a refugee camp with the UNHRC of course but it deliberately also contained a Tac HQ for PLAN’s top command structure as well as extensive logistics and defensive facilities. In other words the designation “Refugee Camp” was deliberately misused to “camouflage” the true nature of Cassinga and also to provide a “human shield” for what was essentially a military establishment.

Thus the abductees were forcibly removed from families, school and communities to become refugees against their will. The school children had to fill the empty desks in a “refugee” school which had already been built and St Mary’s was the ideal source for such a forcible removal because this Anglican mission station was adamantly opposed to the presence of RSA security forces anywhere in SWA/Namibia. Surely these children could not have wanted to escape from intolerable conditions within their Anglican Church School while leaving their mummies and daddies behind? But they were readily available for the taking because St Mary’s would not raise a squawk in protest, especially not to the international press.

### **3. OPERATION BRUILOF BECAME REINDEER**

Meanwhile the planning staff at Army and Air Force HQ’s had gone into overdrive for what was initially called Operation Bruilof. This overall plan catered for the deployment of at least five battle groups on three distinct operational fronts. Three of them were aimed at the so-called Chetequera group of bases while one was committed to Dombondola (Eheke) base and its satellites while a composite parachute battalion was, eventually, given the mission to destroy the Cassinga Tac HQ, logistics, R and R and transit facilities for SAWPO guerrilla forces. This meant, of course, that all combatants, of course including commanders, resident in Cassinga, were to be destroyed.

This article will focus on the airborne assault component of the overall Reindeer operation.

I was SSO Ops Northern Transvaal Command when I received an unexpected call from Gen. Viljoen, Chief of the Army, to report to his office immediately. There I received the most astonishing mission of my whole career, namely to take command of a composite battalion of paratroopers made up from CF members and to destroy SWAPO bases just across the SWA northern border, inside Angola, by means of parachute assaults. The troops had already been called up to report to a way-out military base called Letaba ranch. The name of the operation was Operation Bruilof.

Due to a suspected security breach Bruilof, however, was called off to be resuscitated less than a month later as part of Operation Reindeer which was seemingly an expanded version of the first operation. The target too had changed for the paratroopers, to the immensely more important and more difficult one of Cassinga, 250 km north of the SWA/Angola cut line. The troops were recalled to the colours to report to a much more secure base on the western extremity of the De Wet (De Brug) training area.

#### **4. THE ENEMY AT CASSINGA**

Cassinga was probably occupied by about a thousand guerrillas in transit, in various stages of training, re-training and/or to enjoy a spell of R and R (rest and recuperation). It was defended by an elaborate system of thousands of meters of fighting trenches and bunkers, as could be seen on air photos taken by our own Canberras. This defensive system covered all approaches but with some gaps on the western side. In the middle of the base was a very prominent parade ground where muster parades was always held at 0630A to 0700A every morning. Bishop Kobo (formerly MK Captain Joseph Kobo), who was seconded to this SWAPO base by MK, confirmed with me that there was no refugee camp, that Cassinga was the HQ of PLAN's overall commander, Dimo Amaambo, that it was the main logistics base for stocking up forward SWAPO bases for the upcoming mass incursion and that a Capt. Estaban, a Cuban officer, was the leader of a small group of Cuban advisors posted to Amaambo's HQ to assist with planning and stocking up on logistics for the coming offensive. There was also a Russian contingent of advisors present. So obviously the guerrilla offensive in the near future was to be coordinated by a strong Russian/Cuban advisor team which certainly was not there to assist with the handling of "refugees" from SWA/Namibia.

Down the road, about 20 km away at Tetchamutete, was a Cuban battle group equipped with tanks, BRDMs (Armoured Cars), BTRs (Armoured Personnel carriers) and FAPLA lorried infantry. I estimated that they could intervene in the fight in about three hour's time which meant that we would have to be out and away by at least 1100B. This meant that we had to look upon our attack as an in and out airborne raid of maximum destruction. It also influenced the composition of my own

battle group in that I would have to deploy a strong anti-tank (AT) platoon equipped with RPG7 rocket launchers and GPMGs (machine-guns) to delay an attacking force for long enough for us to get away.

It was reported that there was a brigade based at Jamba (not Savimbi's Jamba) about 50 to 60 km to the north. They too could intervene, but not as quickly as the Tetchamutete battle group.

## **5. JOINT PLANNING BETWEEN ARMY AND AIR FORCE**

There followed a series of interservice planning sessions between the Directorates of Army and Air Force Operations with Brigadier Hannes Botha and I on the army's side of the table and Colonels Earp and Blackie de Swardt, plus a sequence of squadron commanders, on the Air Force side of the table. This was joint planning at its best with very fruitful results.

Obviously paratroopers, without planes to jump from, to call on for extraction or that can give the operation the air-strike support it will always need, will be relegated to glamorous duties such as guards of honour for visiting heads of state - good to look at, but otherwise card-board images of a tough breed of combat soldiers. This requires an air-mindedness which I, to my disappointment, found lacking in too many airborne qualified senior officers. General Viljoen, a gunner it should be added, and Brigadier Hannes Botha were exceptions, thank goodness.

The air-movement plan had to be synchronised so that the different types of aircraft, all flying at different speeds and altitudes to get to Angola a 1 000 or more miles away, would have to arrive in the correct sequence and at precisely the right time over the target area. The Canberras and Buccaneers had to leave Waterkloof at precisely the right time to arrive north of Cassinga at the right moment to begin a bombing run in at P Hour minus about 15 minutes, P Hour being the moment the first paratrooper stepped out of the leading plane into its slipstream. The Mirage 111s had to get airborne from Ondangua at precisely the right moment to slot in behind the Buccaneers to carry out their strafing runs on their allocated targets within Cassinga. It should be added that their "time spent over target" was severely proscribed by their limited endurance. They could not loiter over the target, therefore, while waiting for the other strike aircraft to pitch up all the way from Waterkloof. The para-dropping C130s and C160s had to get airborne from Grootfontein and carry out their respective run-ins with the green light coming on in the lead aircraft within seconds after the last Mirage 111 had pulled out of its strafing attack. The whole sequence of timings and movements were worked backwards from the vital P Hour all the way to "wheels in the well" times back in Waterkloof, Grootfontein and Ondangua for the various types of aircraft. And the P Hour was determined by the routine of SWAPO/PLAN to form up on parade from about 0630/O700A before

commencing the day's allocated work and camp routine. Thus the most casualties would be achieved by the strike aircraft when everybody was out in the open, away from trenches and bunkers... . Thus the P Hour of 0801B (South African time) which was the same as 0701A (Angolan time).

Of course elasticity was built into the whole air-movement plan through previously established orbiting points, towards the end of the flights for each type of aircraft, in order to do some further fine tuning for arrivals over Cassinga. This was where Cmdt James Kriel, the MAOT team leader, came into his own as an experienced airman.

The target would have to be softened up by a preliminary bombardment to induce enough of a shock effect on the enemy that would debilitate them to such an extent that they would not re-act quickly enough to exploit the vulnerability of the paratroopers still under canopy, or while still grouping on the DZs into combat organisations and while command and control was still being established. It should be noted that the paratroopers were jumping within easy range of enemy small arms fire, not to mention machine-guns and AA weapons.

The air-strike plan was therefore designed to lift just before P Hour, i.e. the actual jump, in a matter of seconds in order to keep the enemy's heads down in the trenches in expectation of more to come. The four Canberras were first in the bomber stream, each armed with 300 Alpha bombs which, reportedly, had a devastating shrapnel effect. Five Buccaneers were next in line, each armed with eight x thousand-pounder bombs to create a shock wave and a blasting effect to take structures down. The four Mirages were each armed with 30 mm guns which they used in strafing specific targets. Buccaneer No. 5, armed with 78 AT rockets, would remain behind to act as top cover for the paratroopers by keeping the mechanised column from Tetchamutete at bay should they decide to push their luck by coming to the aid of their SWAPO comrades sooner than I had expected.

The Mirages were also armed with sidewinder air-to-air guided missiles to shoot down interfering enemy fighters which would, of course, be a real danger to the lumbering C130s and C160s especially while still loaded with paratroopers. Mig 21s had suddenly been relocated to two forward airfields at Menongue and Lubango, thus the presence of the Mirages which were invited to the party only at the last moment. This also explains the presence of a DC4 flying a race-course track pattern at some height just above the cut line. On board were some Chilean Spanish-speakers who could eavesdrop on the Spanish chatter between Cuban pilots and controllers on their fighter control net. They acted as an early warning to the whole operation with the Mirages at immediate readiness to be scrambled to intercept Mig 21s and to shoot them out of the skies before any damage could be done to our ground and air forces.

The whole operation depended, however, on a rapid extraction after the deed had been done. At that distance the only means available was by helicopter if sufficient numbers of them could be mustered. The size of the raiding force was determined by the restricted capacity of the choppers and the fact that not more than two lifts could be recovered from the Cassinga battlefield, because choppers were not allowed to overfly north of the SWA/Angolan cut line. Neither were choppers allowed to fly in such a large formation at night. This restricted my assault element to 370 paratroopers, because only 18 helicopters could be mustered, but I could still have a reserve paratroop company standing by in Ondangua. It was therefore somewhat of a pain in the neck to muster 18 choppers from all over the RSA and to fly them in to the operational area without attracting the attention of SWAPO sympathisers. Small flights of choppers were, therefore, independently infiltrated to Rundu, 500 km east of Ondangua, over a period of days using false flight plans.

The choppers would deploy into a Helicopter Administration Area (HAA), 20 km east of Cassinga, under command of James Kriel, the head of MAOT (Mobile Air Operations Team), who would also assist in providing terminal guidance for all sorts of planes closing in on Cassinga. The choppers would wait in the HAA until called to extract the first lift of paratroopers back to the HAA followed by the second lift back to Eenhana in SWA. The first lift would then also be brought back from the HAA to SWA/Namibia.

During this planning phase I had, of course, with the assistance of Hannes Botha and Gen. Gleeson, arrived at an assault plan. It has always been a principle of mine that before an enemy force can be destroyed it must first of all be found, which had been brilliantly achieved by (then) Col Chris Thirion and Cmdt 'Saay' Saayman and their teams from Military Intelligence in Pretoria and Grootfontein, before it can be fixed in place by manoeuvring, usually, towards achieving a double envelopment or by backing them up against a natural obstacle from which there was little chance of escape. The paratroopers had, of course, the ability to execute a "vertical envelopment" by ignoring any enemy forces on the way towards a selected target by simply flying over all enemy deployments. Once on the ground, however, paratrooper mobility will always become a most pedestrian affair which means that serious attempts should be made to hem the enemy in from all sides, to ensure maximum destruction during the parachute drop itself.

After studying the available air photos carefully I decided that two rifle companies would assault the base from west to east, two rifle companies would take up firing positions on the other three sides, while an AT (anti-tank) platoon would deploy as a delaying force about 500 to 1 000 meters south of Cassinga to stop or delay any attempt by the Tetchamutete/Cuban battle group from coming to the assistance of their SWAPO comrades. I would also have a 60mm mortar platoon deployed to give us additional combat power.

With this plan reasonably “firmed up” after much discussion, I then went to 28 Squadron to plan, together with Col. Harry Gilliland and his more senior aircrews, the parachute dropping plan. We were using the same annotated JARIC air photos I had used to plan my assault. These were scaled at 1:250 000 by JARIC (Joint Air Reconnaissance Interpretation Center). What we did not know then was that the barely long and wide enough DZs (Drop Zones) of 1 200 by 600 meters were only 600 by 300 metres, obviously not long or wide enough for dropping paratroopers, because the scale was not as indicated by JARIC but, in reality, much smaller at 1:125 000!

Three C130s, with Gilliland in the lead plane, would drop Alpha and Bravo Companies plus the mortar platoon along the DZ on the western perimeter of Cassinga. This was between Cassinga and a substantial river looping from the north in a bight through southwest and then south, wrongly interpreted to be about 800 meters west of the town, and finally southeast around the southwestern edge of Cassinga to resume its onward journey to the distant Cunene River. Simultaneously Jan Delpont would drop Charlie Company from his C130 along the eastern perimeter as stoppers. One C160 would drop two platoons, one from Delta Company and the other from 1 Parachute Battalion along the northern perimeter of Cassinga, while a second C160 would close the gap to the south by dropping the rest of Delta company, as stoppers, and the AT platoon with the latter hastening to take up a delaying position to the south and to plant AT mines to slow down a possible Cuban relieving force.

We also selected Initial Points (IPs) on the DZs which basically are points on the ground where the No. 1 paratroopers in all sticks should land. (28 Squadron got quite serious about IPs since this, according to them, is the spot the first “meat bomb” should hit the ground. They fancied themselves as bomber pilots rather than transport pilots!) From the location of the IP the RP (Release Point) is calculated which is a point in the air where the first paratrooper should step into space to, hopefully, execute a landing on top of the IP. I saw a bush track on the air photo running away at right angles to the North-South run in of the C130s which could be used to assist Harry in accurately determining the exact moment he drew level with the RP. But a glance at the date convinced me that this would not be a practical proposition since the photo was taken at the end of the dry season and May was right at the end of the rainy season. Thus the track would not be visible because of the summer foliage. I therefore suggested a timed run from the moment the C130s crossed the river loop to the northwest of Cassinga.

The assault plan has already been briefly discussed and it will become clearer when I discuss the execution phase lower down. Perhaps the most important plan was, however, the extraction plan which was also the most risky one. Obviously the paratroopers had to be got back to safety as soon as possible after the mission had been completed. Thus we started juggling, in conjunction with James Kriel and 19 Squadron Commander (Puma choppers) and his senior pilot, individual chopper

loads, timings and LZs (Landing Zones). The sequence of extraction would be Alpha and Bravo companies with the mortar platoon to the HAA, when called upon to do so by me personally, with the second lift, after a rapid turn around, lifting out Charlie and Delta companies, the AT Platoon, the wounded and the Command element straight to Eenhana across the cut line in Ovamboland. They would then turn around to fetch Alpha, Bravo, the MAOT and Capt. James Hills and his paratrooper protection element from the HAA.

Finally there would be a Cessna overhead Cassinga from P Hour until bingo state fuel (or until shot down!), with Cmdt Archie Moore on board to help me get control over my scattered troops after the jump and to bring me up to date with the latest enemy dispositions on the ground. It was also to act as Telstar (radio link between me and Reindeer Tac HQ).

## **6. COMBINED TRAINING**

Of course I had to commute regularly between Pretoria and De Brug where my troops were concentrated and under training for the operation. The planning could not be finished in one session, thus my presence was required in Pretoria also, since intelligence changed daily and some unforeseen problems or information kept on coming in. Finally these very detailed and interlocking sets of plans were sold to Generals Viljoen (Army) and Rogers (Air Force). Presumably they sold it to Gen. Malan and Mr PW Botha.

We had already done several dry runs with 28 Squadron on De Brug, when I was finally told that the show was on and that we would attack Cassinga on 1 May 1978. I had an unexpected, very thrilling experience when the jet pilot, who flew me back to Bloemspruit in an Impala two-seater, gave me the controls, shortly after take off, all the way to Bloemspruit. So I indulged in some low flying all the way followed by aerobatics shortly before reaching Bloemspruit. My feeling of euphoria was, however, shattered when I joined my designated C130 in my allocated slot to complete my final journey into the concentration area by a full-dress rehearsal jump. I had asked Brig. Du Plessis to stand in for me as DZ safety officer on the ground. He, however, saw it fit to change the C130s around by switching DZs which resulted in both Alpha and Bravo companies, wrongly on the eastern side, and Charlie Company, wrongly on the western side, moving away from each other, after landing, and away from the target as marked out on the ground. What a cockup and not a good omen for the next jump which would be the real one.

I was furious with Du Plessis, but he blamed the 28 Squadron pilots who, as a consequence, did nothing to advance interservice relationships. Harry Gilliland was scathing in his response. “Can’t you pongos make up your bloody minds?” This

crotchety old bastard and I were very good friends, however, which gave us the right to be rude to each other.

Up till then we had been sticking to the deployment drills as required for an air mobile or parachute assault. The troops had initially been channelled through geographically selected assembly points under the control of Cmdts Monty Brett, 2 Para commander, and Lewis Gerber, 3 Para commander. They came by specially laid-on trains to a most remote siding from where they were taken by truck to the secured concentration area with strictly controlled access to only selected outsiders. Fortuitously another military exercise was to take place at Schmidt's Drift, north of Kimberley which we could use as cover to call up paratroopers who were, ostensibly, scheduled to take part in this field exercise but not before they had done some refresher training before they could jump into Schmidt's Drift to impress (or amuse) especially the military attachés from various countries.

For about three weeks we re-trained in clearing trench systems, buddy fire and movement drills, shooting of all weapons, including enemy weapons, physical fitness training, parachute jumping, grouping, chopper drills, mines and demolitions, radio communications and much more. I was particularly concerned that we must clear the aircraft in half the time usually permitted during a parachute jump. I wanted to cut the space between just landed paratroopers to 30 paces instead of the usual 60 paces. Finally we achieved this by abandoning the so-called shuffle step and the stand in the door stance inside the plane before being tapped out into fresh air by the dispatchers. We just ran out of the plane, while the dispatchers stood back and hoped for the best. Well, it worked like a charm and we reduced the interval to the one I wanted. The training cycle was completed by the end of April and we had to go into repetitive training mode while waiting for John Vorster to make up his mind.

## **7. ORDERS**

The Tac HQ for Operation Reindeer had already deployed into its JOC, which was based on AFS Ondangua in Ovamboland, not at AFS Rundu, as alleged by Brig. Du Plessis (which is 500 km further east in the Okavango). To prevent snoopers from Ovamboland (Sector 10) passing on information to the outside world all telephone communications into and out of Ovamboland were disabled by the authorities. The first of May came and went with the first attack date being cancelled through Mr Vorster's inability to make up his mind.

In the concentration area we were ordered to stand down. By this time the whole area had been isolated with nobody allowed to enter or depart which caused some hilarious situations when busybody rubberneckerers found themselves under virtual arrest in a most dreary place in which they did not really expect to spend any leisure time.

I had Capt. JC Odendaal, our Intelligence Officer, prepare a most magnificent sand model of the target area and I went through a rather dramatised verbal orders session with all my commanders down to platoon and, in some instances, even section levels listening intently while an unbelievable operation was unfolding, in miniature, right before their incredulous eyes. They were suitably impressed, of course, while it was also the first time they were told what and where the target was. That impressed them even more.

My briefing was attended by Brig. Du Plessis, commander of the OFS Command, and one of his staff. This was the first time he came face to face with what was basically my design for battle. During the planning cycle he never even came near any of the venues where we sweated away to churn out the various plans. His knowledge about the whole operation was, indeed, very superficial and so sparse to be almost non-existent. He did not even know that there was a plan called the “Extraction Plan” or what the parachute dropping and assault plans were and how each slotted into each other (*sic*).

Ominously Du Plessis took no notice of the fact that our own wounded would wait for the second extraction from Cassinga to Eenhana and that the first extraction choppers would bring in a souped up medical resuscitation team to tend to wounded already collected at the designated CCP (Casualty Collection Point). The CCP would, in fact, then be turned into a RAP (Regimental Aid Post - a small open air “hospital”).

Nevertheless Brig. Du Plessis, by this time, had already made up his mind “to sneak himself in as a Parachute brigade commander” (*sic*) and, for some strange reason, also as the Parachute battalion commander on the ground and in Cassinga without my knowledge, that of Gen. Viljoen, as confirmed by Viljoen to me some years later, or of Gen. Gleeson, joint commander with Blackie de Swardt of Operation Reindeer. He thus did away with my job, given to me by Viljoen himself, without me being any the wiser. Gleeson, like Viljoen, confirmed with me that he did not even want Du Plessis to jump into Cassinga because he considered him to be just “another rubbernecker who had no business to be there in the first place” (*sic*). (It should be noted that there was no Parachute brigade at the time.)

The second D-day came and we boarded our trucks to get to our waiting planes at Bloemspruit. We were told to disembark for another postponement, even before the trucks started up. This meant that very unhappy truck drivers were incarcerated with a bunch of stropky paratroopers for at least a night and a day.

Gen. Viljoen was at the Tac HQ in Ondangua by this time. He sent an ultimatum to government that the assault had to be launched by the paratroopers and the three “Chetequera” battle groups on 4 May or the whole operation would be cancelled by him. Security could no longer be guaranteed beyond that date. Prime Minister Vorster, pushed into a corner, relented and gave the green light.

## 8. OFF TO BATTLE

So during the afternoon of 3 May 1978 we once again got into our trucks and set off for AFS Bloemspruit where we found four C130s and four C160s, already chalk-numbered, waiting for us on the apron with their tail gates open to receive us. We emplaned our allocated planes, as per orders for every stick, and soon we were airborne for Grootfontein. The planes flew in two loose formations at height over Botswana with the intent that Botswana, or any other ATC personnel would only see one blip, for each formation, on their low-definition, long-range radars. We landed at Grootfontein well after dark and taxied to an isolated hangar where we disembarked for a meal and a final shut eye until about 0400 the next morning. The parachutes had already been laid out in port and starboard sticks for each plane load by Maj. Jos Rabie and his very efficient dispatchers.

The 18 choppers, MAOT, the souped up medical resuscitation team and the protection element had also concentrated at Omauni, just south of beacon 32 in SWA/Namibia, during the late afternoon of 3 May. They would fly into the HAA at day break the next morning.

Cmdt James Kriel, his MAOT and some protection elements flew in before first light to recce a suitable HAA about 20 km east of Cassinga. They nearly blundered into Cassinga itself but got away undetected to find a suitable place where James set up his TACAN beacon for the final homing in of the different flight series, according to the air movement plan, to arrive dead on time at their various points to commence their different run ins to execute their allocated missions.

The paratroopers “fitted chutes” at about 0400B, emplaned and got airborne from Grootfontein just before first light in four C130s and three C160s. The third C160 was loaded with paratroopers from E Company, kitted up to jump in to replace any other paratrooping aircraft should it pick up problems that would force it to abort the parachute jump. I could not afford to suddenly have a 64-man gap in my deployment on the ground. The fourth C160 flew with the rest of E company to Ondangua where they would remain on standby as a reserve until the end of the operation.

We crossed the cut line north of Omauni and made for an orbiting point due east of Cassinga on the Okavango River. The spare C160 peeled off at this orbiting point to fly to Ondangua so that the troops could join the rest of E company on standby as a reserve.

The rest of the choppers got airborne, from Omauni, for the HAA just after the parachute-dropping planes had passed over on their way to their orbiting point.

Gen. Viljoen was an unexpected passenger in one of these choppers. Meanwhile I was also aware that I had two brigadiers on board coming along for the ride. Hannes Botha came prepared to “slot some terts” and he asked and got my permission to jump in. He deserved that since he had played a pivotal role during

the planning cycle. Du Plessis just “foisted himself on us” (*sic*) and, as events would show, did not come to “slot terrs”. Neither did he deserve special treatment because he had contributed nothing, “a fat zero” (*sic*), to the planning of the operation. Gen. Viljoen informed me, many years later, that he had given both brigadiers permission to jump into Cassinga in accordance with his policy to let his senior officers also get a whiff of cordite and experience moments of angst on a battle field, but certainly not to exercise any form of command.

The air strikes went in as planned. Four Canberras flew line abreast to drop their Alpha bombs simultaneously, in a blanket pattern from north to south, followed by the Buccaneers, dropping their thousand-pounders in pairs, followed by the four Mirages which shot up the R and R area at the northwest corner of Cassinga. Surprise was complete. The parade ground was crowded with SWAPOs attending their morning muster parade. All the strike aircraft streaked off to Ondangua or Grootfontein, mission completed, just as the paratrooping aircraft hauled into sight to begin the parachute drop. One Buccaneer, however, stayed aloft above Cassinga, with rockets in its pods to give us immediate air-strike support should it be needed.

We ran in for the parachute jump at tree-top level having bled off extra time in our orbiting position. Harry took his three C130s in Vic Three formation from the north down the western side of Cassinga. Jan Delpont took his C130 down the eastern side. All four C130s hauled back to about 600 feet AGL, in steep climbs, causing the heavily loaded paratroopers to crash to the deck while already at action stations. Delpont, realising that something was seriously amiss with the length of the DZ, because he was overshooting his RP and IP, switched the green light on while still in the climb. Harry thundered on with his formation looking for the side marker Du Plessis had irregularly given him. The tremendous smoke, flames and dust from the bombardment would have obscured any side marker anyway. Furthermore the scene below transfixed Harry for a while so that the green light came on somewhat late. The two C160s, having had to wait for the C130s to disgorge all their paratroopers, were more or less on target, dropping their paratroopers fairly accurately to seal off the northern and southern escape routes.

SWAPO was already beginning to recover from the surprise bombardment or the AA defences had been missed by the preliminary bombardment. Flak from the ground was therefore, unexpectedly, reaching up at us while still under canopy. Many parachutes collected holes but neither parachute-dropping aircraft nor any paratroopers were hit with the exception, perhaps, of André Human from the mortar platoon. But a third of my assault companies were being dropped on the wrong side of the river towards the southwest. My H Hour of 0815B was going to be delayed because the grouping of the paratroopers was going to take far longer than expected. A very substantial river, the Colui, now had to be crossed before we could form up

in assault formation on the designated start line which was basically just short of the western edge of the Cassinga trench systems.

Archie Moore in his Cessna made some attempt in directing the troops to crossing sites and WO1 Erasmus did sterling work to get them across onto the east bank. But he left for Ondangua somewhat prematurely, not being able to communicate with me, and I fretted and fumed because the whole mission had to be wrapped up by midday. The rest of the Reindeer deployments were marking time until support aircraft, still involved with us, could be released to support their operations. I, therefore, decided to change the axis of attack from west to east to south to north, to save time, with the north/south main street becoming the axis of attack and the southern edge of Cassinga the new start line.

Fortunately I had the sense to keep my A53 radio on me so that I could communicate with my company commanders to build up a picture in my own mind about what was going on. Unfortunately I could not raise Lew Gerber, my second in command, who he had been detailed to coordinate the assault of A and B companies. I would therefore have to coordinate the assault of A and B companies myself. My HF set and its operator, Sgt Maj. Blom, had also disappeared which is not unusual in any parachute assault. It meant, however, that I had no direct communications with Tac HQ and specifically not with Gen. Gleeson, my immediate boss.

Gradually the picture became clearer. Monty Brett had moved his company northwards and was in the process of taking in stopper positions on the eastern flank as planned. Johan Blaauw landed with his platoon on top of and among substantial buildings at the northern entrance to Cassinga. He went into house-clearing mode straight away and also overran trenches and bunkers on his way to his stopper positions. He tied in his left flank with Monty's right flank and in the process he and Sgt Manderson discovered a deep communication trench leading northeast which was filled to the brim with escaping SWAPOs. The subsequent slaughter was horrific. Piet Botes, to the right of Johan Blaauw, came down with his platoon in the middle of the so-called veterans, R and R camp. Their battle started while the paratroopers were still under canopy. This base was quickly cleared and he too took up his designated stopper positions. D Company had landed where they should and without further ado Tommy Lamprecht set about attacking and clearing the so-called engineer's complex. The AT Platoon had set off down the road to Tetchamutete to plant mines and set up an ambush near a causeway about 800 to 1 000 meters away. They got involved in a firefight at the southern extremity of Cassinga which drew my ire since their mission was further south. In fact all of us got ourselves tangled up in numerous localised firefights with uncoordinated SWAPO groups as we all moved towards our various forming-up localities. The mortar platoon had lost half of its mortars in the river but, nevertheless, was ready on the Western DZ, under

command of the inimitable Piet (Graspol) Nel, to provide support fire on call with what they had left.

At about 0900B barely enough men could be mustered to commence the assault on the base, but I could wait no longer. I went with Gerrie Steyn and his A Company, on the left, to take and secure the sector of Cassinga west of the main road. Across the road Hugo Murray was pushing on with only two platoons (the third was still missing), to take his sector east of the main road. Everything went like clockwork, through the various enemy installations, until we got to the crossroads at the centre of town. The only problem we had, up till then, was from snipers potting at us from the dense foliage of tall blue gum trees lining the main road. But beyond the crossroads we ran into the fire from the AA guns used in the ground role and heavy small arms fire coming at us from an intricate trench system to our immediate front.

A Company's advance came to a full stop and B Company on the right had to follow suit in order to keep its left flank tied in with Alpha. Further advance would have exposed Bravo to crossfire from the left anyway. Steyn assured me that he could not move forwards or backwards. Alpha was well and truly pinned down. I tried to take out the AA gun position with mortar fire but as soon as one SWAPO crew was killed another would promptly replace it. This game of attrition was taking far too long, however.

Meanwhile Tommy Lamprecht had been listening on the command net and he immediately reminded me that he was twiddling his thumbs at the southern extremity of Cassinga. "How about using Delta?" I immediately got Tommy forward and briefed him about the situation.

Without further ado Tommy and one platoon trotted off to my left to position themselves for approaching the AA positions from a flank. There followed a brilliant demonstration of gallantry under fire and the use of a small team to clear a trench system from a flank all along its length until the last enemy soldier had been shot or forced to surrender. One paratrooper was killed, unfortunately, but not before performing heroically to such an extent that a posthumous decoration was awarded.

Johan Blaauw had requested my permission to clear the trenches immediately facing him. This I gave and he soon, like Tommy Lamprecht, cleared from a flank in the direction of Tommy. The two clearing parties met in the middle and the AA guns were put out of action for good. Alpha too could at last move with more freedom to clear the trenches still occupied by SWAPO.

Monty's Charlie Company also had taken the bit between the teeth to clear the trenches to their front and to interdict the escape trench leading off to the northeast. Soon after the AA guns had been silenced the survivors were beginning to surrender in droves. But the death toll was horrendous. While advancing into Cassinga from the south, and with our stopper groups deployed on the northern escape route, we had driven SWAPO before us until they were all compressed within the northern

system of trenches. They had pulled women and children with them into the trenches and had, without shame or hesitation, used unarmed women as “bullet catchers” by pulling them across their own bodies as human shields.

Thus most of the civilians killed in Cassinga were killed in the trenches and not by the preliminary bombardment as alleged by some. I noted with considerable surprise that the supposed massive casualties inflicted on a dense gathering of SWAPOs on the parade ground did not materialise. As I went through I could only count three bodies, all of them SWAPOs, sprawled on its surface. Our unit photographer fortunately took a photograph of this which served to inform the Air Force that the alpha bombs were not nearly as effective as they were cracked up to be. Neither were the thousand-pounder bombs with their contact fuses, since all they achieved was to blow massive craters into the soft soil with the explosive force wasted upwards instead of outwards as was expected.

So, finally, after some very heavy fighting we captured the objective but much consolidation work still had to be done by the assault companies. This was where Brig. Du Plessis, “not having a clue about my design for battle” (*sic*), came on the air to inform me that he was calling in the first lift of choppers to extract half my battalion. I was astounded. Who the hell was he to interfere with my command? So somewhat snappily I informed him that he could not call in any choppers because Alpha and Bravo were still consolidating and we were still getting incoming fire into the extraction LZs. He ignored me and called them in anyway with the result that the sequence of extraction of my companies was muddled up which caused a disproportionate knock-on effect down the line.

Cmdt Blikkies Blignaut, saddled with the task to ensure an orderly extraction, was forced by Brig. Du Plessis to dash around grabbing paratroopers irrespective of company or platoon organisations and to stuff them into choppers that had suddenly landed on the wrong LZs because their designated LZs were still under fire. Thus Bravo and Delta, plus the mortars, were extracted instead of Alpha, Bravo and the mortars as planned, with each subunit allocated to specific choppers by chalk numbers. My two engineering officers who had to stay until last to destroy enemy weapons and equipment were forced into a chopper, with their unused detonators, by Du Plessis himself.

What I did not know, however, was that a worse crisis situation had already been inflicted on us. According to James Kriel, who later became Chief of the Air Force, and Sgt Maj. Blom, my HF operator who Du Plessis had “hijacked” from me, Du Plessis had personally ordered James at the HAA to send choppers immediately to recover our wounded back to the HAA. Of course James had no way of knowing what our situation on the ground was. Neither could he confer with me because Du Plessis had waylaid my HF set. We could have been under the threat of an immediate counter attack from some quarter to diverge so drastically from the casevac plan.

Two Frelons, whose pilots confirmed this aberration, were therefore sent to fetch the wounded from Cassinga and Gen. Viljoen, clearly alarmed at this urgent request, took the opportunity to fly into Cassinga himself.

My medical team, all of them non-jumpers, were scheduled to fly in with the first extraction lift to attend to my wounded and to accompany them with the second extraction back to Ondangua via Eenhana. So when the first extraction flew in the medics found an empty CCP with all the wounded in the HAA while they suddenly were in Cassinga 20 km to the west!! They started to treat SWAPO wounded instead while back at the HAA chopper crews were dashing around putting in drips into some badly damaged paratrooper bodies. James took the only step he could and that was to dispatch two Frelons all the way to Ondangua, 280 km away, to get my wounded paratroopers into the trained hands of medics.

A more serious spin off was that there was not going to be a quick turn round of choppers to lift out the remainder of the battalion within less than an hour. The other two choppers had to return first because James would, otherwise, not have enough lift capacity to get us all away to safety. We could not split the second lift either because the resulting stay-behind party would have been too weak to protect themselves even from reorganised SWAPO survivors still sculling around in the bush in the vicinity of Cassinga. We unknowingly started an unexpected waiting game, that was going to last at least two and half hours, while acutely aware of the fact that the Tetchamutete battle group was closing in on us. Of course Brig. Du Plessis did not even bother to inform me about this radical departure from my design for battle. “He knew damn well that I would have blown my top irrespective of his rank.” (*sic*)

I have always believed that any conflict on the battlefield revolved around a contest between commanders, one on each side of the fence. So far the opposition from my opposite number had been rather disorganised. I did not know at the time that Dimo Amaambo had fled the field of battle more or less at the time the first paratroopers tumbled from their airborne “taxis”. So there was no contest really but I failed to comprehend, until many years later, that I had been faced with deadly competition from within our own ranks, from a man who evidently believed that his status as designated commander of a future brigade, 44 Parachute Brigade, which only came into existence halfway through August 1978 anyway, gave him the authority to take over the command slot I had personally been handed by Gen. Viljoen, Chief of the Army.

I have very recently reconfirmed this command status between myself and Gleeson with both Generals Viljoen and Gleeson. Both told me that they had not given any command status to Brig. Du Plessis. I am hammering on this aspect because with Du Plessis unilaterally assuming command of the paratroopers in the field at Cassinga, the second most important principle of war, “unity of command”, had been seriously compromised by a man who seems to have no knowledge of

such principles. In most armies the usurpation of command would be a court martial offence, irrespective of the ranks involved, because the lives of my paratroopers and of SAAF aircraft and crews had recklessly and needlessly been endangered.

As if to underline his very serious breach of battlefield discipline, Du Plessis went even further by withdrawing my AT platoon, without informing me, from their delaying/ambush position, well south of Cassinga, back to the southern entrance to the town the moment he heard that the enemy was on its way to come and clobber us. I had deliberately deployed them there to give me time and physical space for the battalion to withdraw out of harms way should we be attacked by the Tetchamutete mechanised battle group. I knew nothing about this irregular redeployment of my AT platoon, however, and went blissfully about my business not knowing that a most serious, indeed a vital, breach had been opened in my defensive posture by Du Plessis.

My intention had been to force the Cubans to deploy into assault formation when fired upon by the AT platoon, well short of my main deployments in order to clear the obstacle in their way, to go through the lengthy process of shelling suspected paratrooper deployments well south of Cassinga, all of this taking time while the AT platoon would rejoin us, hopefully leaving a tank or two “cooking off” in or near the minefield. Forcing a premature deployment on the enemy would give me the space and time which I could use very profitably to break contact with the enemy and to set off on foot towards the HAA while the choppers were made ready to come and pick us up somewhere along the line of withdrawal. Singlehandedly Du Plessis had wrecked the whole of my withdrawal plan which was aimed at saving our bacon if and when push came to shove. Worse still, in his very obvious lack of military common sense (*sic*), he seriously jeopardised the lives of my half battalion of paratroopers.

My first inkling of the Cubans about to make contact with us was when Sergeant “Hoppy” Hopkins reported that “a lot” of tanks could be heard to his front. I was quite sanguine about this “alarming” information because in my estimate the Cubans probably were still more than two km away. I made contact with James Kriel to be informed that the choppers, in retrospect probably the casevac choppers who had just returned from Ondangua, were still being refuelled. Our CAP top cover had to return to Ondangua to be available for the next phase of Operation Reindeer and reported, while on the way out, that a mechanised column, including tanks, were closing in on us from the south. There was no need to panic, I concluded, so I warned the AT platoon to stand by for a fairly imminent contact with a mechanised column.

Within minutes, however, there was a tremendous explosion right in the entrance to Cassinga. At first I thought it was a tank shell but more explosions followed in rapid succession which meant that a terrific barney had broken out within 200 meters of my HQ position. I was as angry as a snake and demanded from Lt Hough why the AT platoon had fallen back on Cassinga without my knowledge.

Hough was somewhat flustered so I decided to lay off and to concentrate in getting my half battalion out of harms way as soon as possible. We had come to have a scrap with SWAPO and our mission to wipe out Cassinga, as a most important SWAPO installation, had been accomplished. I also got into contact with Tac HQ at last, found Blom and my HF radio which had been commandeered by Du Plessis, and requested that a Buccaneer be sent post haste with AT rockets to get the tanks off our backs. I ordered A Company to the unit emergency RV at the eastern edge of Rennex, our eastern most LZ, and I requested the choppers to shake a leg since we were under threat of annihilation by a strong mechanised attack.

The AT platoon had meanwhile stopped the initial attempt by the Cubans to enter Cassinga, with some remarkable aggressiveness. A string of BTRs (Armoured personnel carriers) and at least one BRDM, an armoured car, came driving up the road crowded with Cubans sitting inside and on top of the vehicles apparently convinced that all the paratroopers had departed with the first extraction lift which they had probably viewed from a distance. They were anticipating a rapturous welcome by the SWAPO survivors of the battle, thus their waving of rifles in the air in anticipation of being the heroes of the day, riding bravely to the rescue of their SWAPO soul mates, almost like the US cavalry, when, suddenly from a well-laid ambush, RPG7 rockets ploughed into the sides of their armoured steeds with horrific results. The slaughter was immense. Two BTRs and one BRDM were shot out.

It also transpired later that the Cuban unit commander was shot dead when Hoppy, having shot out a BTR, with lavish recklessness and ill-judged overkill, put a second rocket into the back of his unfortunate victim as he was running for shelter inside the nearest building. The AT platoon was also equipped with a surfeit of GPMG machine-guns. These opened up on the survivors with gay abandon and, of course, with devastating results. This caused the Cuban advance up the middle of the main “drag” to be brutally stopped in its tracks.

The momentum of the mechanised assault had not been stopped, however, along the rest of the enemy front, although one tank belatedly came to grief on the minefield. Tanks and BTRs were beginning to manoeuvre eastwards to envelop our left flank and thus to cut us off from the last available LZ. We were badly outmanoeuvred, outnumbered and outgunned. All the Cubans had to do was to gather their shattered wits and nerve to launch a devastating mechanised assault on the 180 or so paratroopers, still inside the perimeter of a totally destroyed Cassinga, to wipe us all from the face of the earth and thus to score a victory that would reverberate all around the globe.

I decided, therefore, that I had no choice but to immediately break contact with the enemy by withdrawing on foot towards the HAA. My manoeuvre space had recklessly been sacrificed by Du Plessis when my AT platoon was withdrawn and the only course open to me was to hurry towards the northeast as fast as we could in

the hope that some manoeuvre space could be created by our sudden departure. The choppers, at this time, still were nowhere in sight.

I detailed A Company to be the advance guard while C Company and the AT platoon would form the rear guard. So I ordered Lew Gerber to get the show on the road “chop-chop” (in naval language) while ordering C Company to “hang in there” (in paratrooper language) by forcing the Cubans to slow down their momentum through a counter attack with RPG7s launched specifically at the tanks forming the spear point of their envelopment.

I also, urgently, requested James to cut short his refuelling process and to come and extract us literally from the jaws of a rampant mechanised attack by a Cuban battalion-sized force of tanks, BTRs, BRDMs, 14,5s, FAPLA lorried infantry and perhaps many more nasty things such as mortars and B10s.

But even more critically, the mechanised attack on my left flank, threatening to cut off our retreat towards the choppers coming in from the east, just had to be brought to a halt before they could overrun our only remaining LZ. And our top cover, the Buccaneer with its 78 AT rockets, had left the scene a good ten minutes before. So I shouted for air-strike support, via Frans Botes, from our Tac HQ in Ondangua. Major Dries Marais, intrepid Buccaneer pilot, had already refuelled and re-armed with, thank goodness, a mixture of AT and AP rockets, the latter useless against tanks. It was only at Dries’s stubborn insistence that AT rockets were also included. He was on his way to give Frank Bestbier a hand when he overheard my urgent request and without further ado he changed course for Cassinga while soliciting the Tac HQs sanction for this off the cuff change in his mission instruction.

At the same time Ollie Holmes was scrambled with a pair of Mirage 111s to come to our assistance. They, however, did not carry rockets but only sidewinder air-to-air missiles, which were useless against tanks, and ammunition for their 30 mm guns which would be particularly useful against BTRs and BRDMs.

It just so happened that several urgent events began to manifest themselves during this hectic, final phase, but in the right sequence too, almost as if specially orchestrated by somebody who had an eye on the battlefield from a very lofty perch. West Matthewson from C Company shot out one tank with his last remaining rocket just as the Buccaneer arrived, followed by the Mirages. Dries Marais split up the targets leaving the remaining tanks for his AT rockets and requested Ollie Holmes to tackle the BTRs and BRDMs with their guns. He had taken on some BTRs and BRDMs with his rockets before the arrival of the Mirages, but could now concentrate on tanks only with his remaining rockets. He promptly destroyed two tanks but then ran out of ammunition. The Mirages climbed into the threatening BTRs and BRDMs which were getting too close to the paratroopers and the choppers. The latter had begun to land, as if on cue, just seconds before the Mirages and Marais, in his Buccaneer, arrived as Tac HQ’s hastily dispatched air-strike support. He ran

out of rockets and decided that he could achieve the same effect by threatening the remaining tank with some spectacular low flying. He thus frightened this tank into dead ground from where it could no longer get its main and machine guns to bear on the choppers which were beginning to land wherever they could.

By this time we had completed reforming for a withdrawal on foot north-eastwards and then eastwards towards the HAA, while hoping to meet the incoming choppers along the way. I was trying to take my half battalion around the tip of the outflanking enemy forces, which were still threatening to cut us off from safety towards the east, even while choppers were on their way to execute the mother and father of all hot extractions.

So just as the withdrawal was taking up an effective “break contact” formation, executed while already on the move, our light cavalry arrived, in the shape of 18 helicopters, which landed in our midst and, unintentionally, on an LZ that was already under effective enemy fire. There was no way in which we could reorganise our formation into chopper sticks. And furthermore, the intervention by Du Plessis earlier on, during our premature first extraction of the wrong companies at the wrong time, resulted in my two remaining rifle companies finding themselves allocated by duplicated chalk numbers to the same extraction choppers. Every two paratroopers thus had to compete for the same seat home to safety. Fortunately every “parabat” always had a somewhat surfeit supply of initiative and the chopper crews, themselves, had always been another breed of notorious improvisers. So they sorted things out to the entire satisfaction of all except the enemy, under much pressure it should be added, without waiting for orders from Blikkies, the emplaning officer, or from me.

Meanwhile, back in the centre of Cassinga, I was suddenly confronted with a most difficult situation. A girl, about 16 years old, clutching a small boy of about six by the hand and accompanied by about 20 or 30 of the abducted school children, approached me diffidently and asked me to take her, and the children, back to their mothers. They were some of the 120 abductees from St Mary’s mission school. I had to say “NO” because there were only enough choppers for my paratroopers. She turned away from me and began to cry. To this day I have been pestered by a sense of guilt, since it later transpired that one chopper, a Super Frelon, took off from Cassinga completely empty. It probably would have had enough space since most of the children were between six and 12 years old. These were not refugees. Nobody in the whole world will ever convince me that the tiny six year old boy, or any of his little mates, ran away from parents and school to a better life in Cassinga 250 km from home. To insist that this was so was, and still is, a cynical and cowardly display of political expediency to promote an infamously false justification for cruelly using vulnerable school children to score a propaganda victory by forcibly pushing “captured” pupils into filling up a still empty school in order to provide a cover for PLAN’s main Tac HQ, the “human shield” tactic brought to perfection.

We all got on board in good enough time while Dries Marais kept the last remaining tank at bay with all his rockets expended by extremely low dummy attacks. The choppers lifted off and departed with full loads for Eenhana. The chopper of Maj. John Church was, however, called back to Cassinga since a lone paratrooper had been spotted still on the LZ as the last chopper pulled out. It turned out that Sgt Manderson, for this was his identity, was not the only one. Maj. Frans Botes, my intrepid FAC who had been controlling close-air support missions, and two others, were also desperately canvassing for lifts home. So Church, supported by Hojan Cronje in a second chopper, picked up this last detachment of paratroopers while under heavy fire and brought them home. John Church and Dries Marais were awarded the *Honoris Crux* for their display of courageous ingenuity in ensuring a most successful “hot extraction”.

My half battalion was finally able to relax in Eenhana after a somewhat unexpected, gruelling and most dangerous final curtain call while the choppers went back to fetch the other half of my battalion from the HAA. The airborne assault raid and the whole of Reindeer had been totally successful. SWAPO’s attempted massive disruption of the election was turned into a massive defeat for Sam Njoma, SWAPO, the Cubans and the Russians. It was a strategic defeat from which none of these parties ever recovered in view of the fact that the Russian empire, which shielded them, was showing the first signs of a threatening implosion. In November 1988 SWAPO tried again in spite of a UN supervised cease-fire but then, too, they came a very bad second when the remnants of Koevoet and some SAAF gunships sorted them out. After Cassinga the Bush War became increasingly conventional, culminating in the Lomba River, Cuito Cuanavale and Calueque battles in 1987 and 1988.

The Cassinga raid was balanced on the edge of total disaster for quite a while however, mainly because, and unknown to me at the time, Brig. Du Plessis had intervened in my command structure by giving my own troops orders that conflicted with mine. This unpleasant situation very nearly led to a catastrophe. I had my job cut out to ward off a most serious disaster which could have a devastating and terminal effect on the whole Bush War and the political situation in SWA/Namibia and the RSA. Fortunately I worked with the SAAF, cool-headed as always, and paratroopers, innovative almost to a fault, which never failed to test my blood pressure to the limit. All fought with exceptional courage and in tandem with each other. The Cassinga battle became a text book example, *par excellence*, of how a joint combat service operation should be conducted.

Our casualties were light, three killed in action, one missing, believed killed (he most probably drowned in the Colui River because as a mortar man he was heavily weighed down with mortar bombs and at least half a 60 mm mortar) and about a dozen wounded. Human’s body was never found. Of the 12 or 15 wounded two or three sustained serious, life-threatening wounds. The enemy casualties the

day after the attack were confirmed to be 608 killed (through an intercept) with some 360 wounded. The TRC confirmed from material garnered from Havana's archives that 150 Cubans were killed during their counter attack.

What I did not know at the time, until I interviewed former Capt. Joseph Kobo, was that at least another battle group had sneaked up on us from the north, from Jamba in fact, which was poised to enter the battle from that direction, but were prevented from doing so because the FAPLA troops refused to get involved in what was, by all indications, a far too violent punch up for them. They were the ones to be first on the scene, after the paratroopers had departed of course, to give badly needed sustenance to the remnants of SWAPO and a thoroughly beaten Tetchamutete battle group.

SWAPO and its allies, having suffered a bitter defeat, tried hard to accuse the SADF of attacking a refugee camp. Thus they got in the first, subsequent propaganda, shots while our own COMOPS organisation had, with inconceivable stupidity, decided to react to the broad sides fired by SWAPO, the Cubans, the UN, the communist bloc, etc., instead of firing the first shots themselves. They had plenty of material to work from in the shape of a chopper load of captured documents but, whoever it was who controlled COMOPS, managed to convince our military and political bosses to only react to a backlash from the rest of the world.

Thus, not adhering to two principles of war nearly sank the operation and, in any case, turned an astonishing military accomplishment, carried out with remarkable audacity, into an accusation of a barbaric massacre of the innocents.

The first principle was the well-known one of "unity of command" and the second was "gaining and maintaining the initiative" by taking the offensive.